INTRODUCTION

John Telford writes that “the opening paragraphs of his [John Wesley’s] ‘Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion’ are perhaps the finest epitome of the ruling purpose of the Great Revival.”¹ Wesley wrote “we see the numberless follies and miseries of our fellow-creatures. We see, on every side, either men of no religion at all, or men of a lifeless, formal religion. We are grieved at the sight; and should greatly rejoice, if by any means we might convince some that there is a better religion to be attained, -- a religion worthy of God that gave it.”²

John Wesley became one of the key revival leaders that God used during the first Great Awakening in Europe and America. Wesley, as we can see in his words above, understood that a powerful movement of God was desperately needed. Little did he know that in the coming decades, Wesley, along with a number of other great men of the Christian Church, would be used by God to bring about one of the most powerful Spiritual Awakenings in history. But before Wesley could be used by God for a time such as this, he first needed to experience his own personal Spiritual Awakening. He had to be transformed into the tool for revival that God had planned for him to be. Therefore, in this brief study our focus will be on the portion of John Wesley’s life where the Holy Spirit moved Wesley from a place where he struggled for the “assurance” of his own salvation, to a place where God used him during one of the greatest times of harvest for the Kingdom. This study will examine how, despite the fact that Wesley professed being Christian, by his own admission he would declare that prior to his “heartwarming” experience at Aldersgate in May of 1738, “he was not a Christian.”³ And before he could be used

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³ John Telford, The Life of John Wesley … Chapter 7, par. 13.
by God as a powerful instrument of revival, Wesley himself had to settle once and for all just how much he truly trusted Christ. Once Wesley finally “…renounce[d] everything but faith and [focused whole-heartedly to] get into Christ,” he could then, and only then, be used by God.

WESLEY EXPERIENCES A BLESSED ASSURANCE:

HIS PERSONAL SPIRITUAL AWAKENING

There seems little doubt when Fanny J. Crosby penned her Hymn, *Blessed Assurance*, in 1873, the assurance she felt when she wrote, “O what a foretaste of glory divine! Heir of salvation, purchase of God, Born of His Spirit, washed in His blood!,” described the inner peace she felt concerning her salvation in Christ. It was a peace and assurance that, although still in this world, she already had a home with Christ in glory. As the monumental year of 1738 began, it was this “assurance,” a clear and discernable inner peace, that John Wesley so wished he could find.

In January of 1738, during his return voyage from a less than successful time of ministry in the colony of Georgia, Wesley was desperately seeking a peace in his heart. On Monday the 9th of January, 1838, Wesley wrote, “I reflected much on that vain desire, which had pursued me for so many years, of being in solitude, in order to be a Christian. I have now, thought I, solitude enough. But am I, therefore, the nearer of being a Christian?”

If Wesley was no closer to the peace he sought as he pondered the promises of Christ he had read and seemingly understood from Scripture, but as of yet, could not honestly feel them within his heart, his lack of inner

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4 Ibid., Chapter 7, par. 13.
peace was about to given an even more powerful challenge. For just days after his entry above, the ship carrying Wesley back to England encountered a tremendous storm. Wesley wrote, “It blew a proper hurricane… the sea running (as they term it) mountain-high, and that from many different points at once, the ship would not obey the helm; nor indeed could the steersman, through the violent rain, see the compass.”

As Wesley reflected upon the storm a week or so later, he wrote of how during the storms most terrifying moments he had indeed cried out to God, finding, as the storm eventually calmed, that his spirit was revived. And, yet, despite his “revived spirit,” his internal storm still raged. This was apparent as Wesley wrote the very next day, January 28, 1738, “I went to America, to convert the Indians; but O! who shall convert me?”

But Wesley encountered something else aboard that ship, something that ultimately would help lead him to a greater peace than any calming of a great wind could bring. For on that voyage with Wesley were a number of members of the Church of Hernhuth. Hernhuth, or Hernhut, was the estate of Frederick Von Zinzendorf, and home of a group of Christians who became known as the Moravians. It was one particular Moravian, Peter Bohler, whom Wesley would meet just a little over a week later, and in who’s God given words and directions would eventually lead Wesley to that experience of “assurance” that he so desired. Bohler spoke of an “instantaneous faith,” whereby at once Wesley could have a full assurance that his salvation was a gift from God, and not something based upon his own works. And if Wesley’s trip to Georgia had taught him anything, it was that he was absolutely powerless to save anyone, including himself, by his own strength. Kenneth Collins described this view of instantaneous faith that Bohler spoke of as “grace… [that is] actual, not simply possible; grace… [that is] realized, not

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7 Ibid., Vol. 1, 73.
8 Ibid., Vol. 1, 74.
simply imagined; and the process – however long or difficult – must eventuate in the appropriation of the actual grace and favor of God.”\(^9\) Furthermore, what Bohler asked Wesley to consider was that the peace of assurance Wesley so desperately sought, was a real promise found in Scripture. Telford wrote that “before the end of April he [Wesley] was convinced by B[ohler’s] views on the nature and fruits of faith were truly Scriptural. As yet he could not understand how it could be instantaneous, but, to his astonishment, the Acts of the Apostles showed that nearly all the conversions there described were instantaneous.”\(^10\)

It was this issue of “instantaneous” which John’s brother Charles and him would spend much of April and May of 1738 arguing about. “Charles Wesley was very angry, and told him he did not know what mischief he had done by talking thus.”\(^11\) No doubt the Holy Spirit was working on Charles as well, and after another illness, one that for a time seemed it might take Charles’ life, Charles himself began to also come around to more of what Bohler and the Moravians were encouraging them to accept. But as yet, neither John nor Charles had been able to feel in their hearts what they were slowly becoming convinced of concerning salvation within their heads. In John’s case, that was until Wednesday, May 24\(^{th}\), 1738.

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate-Street, where one was reading Luther’s preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation: And an assurance was given me, that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.\(^12\)


\(^10\) John Telford, The Life of John Wesley… Chapter 7, par. 7.

\(^11\) Ibid., Chapter 7, par. 8.

\(^12\) John Wesley, An Extract of the Rev. Mr. John Wesley’s Journal… Vol. 1, 103.
Wesley had sought an “assurance” of his salvation in Christ, and there is little doubt that is what he found it at Aldersgate that night. But even more than assurance, Wesley also found a new and amazing power in the freedom that he also experienced. Collins writes:

that Wesley’s own Aldersgate narrative does not simply highlight the element of assurance, but sees it in conjunction with the liberty of having been redeemed ‘from the law of sin and death… [and] as a matter of fact, in the days which immediately followed his Aldersgate experience, Wesley -- while not neglecting the importance of assurance -- underscored the theme of spiritual victory in a way that he had not done before.13

Wesley had finally gained the assurance he had sought, and in the process discovered a freedom over sin and death. Yet Wesley was still experiencing an internal struggle. So much of what he had been taught, and likewise had preached and taught others, still seemed to reign within him. This was especially true concerning what he had learned from someone Wesley considered a great mentor, William Law.14 Nevertheless, Telford wrote that “his [Wesley] mind was not fully at rest… [and] at last he made up his mind to visit the Moravian settlement at Hernhuth.15 Wesley’s visit to Hernhut in August of 1838, as Telford described, gave him a much increased confidence of his newly found faith. But the most important aspect of Wesley’s visit were the testimonies he heard from those whom he encountered. Many of these testimonies revealed to Wesley that others had experienced similar struggles, but who, as Wesley would come to accept, gave a genuine and sincere testimony to their full acceptance that Christ had indeed died, and because of Christ, they could have assurance of their own salvation.16

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14 Ibid., 64-54 and John Telford, *The Life of John Wesley*… Chapter 7, pars. 15-21. Wesley corresponded with Law over a period of time on particular issues raised by the Moravians.


Wesley had always given high regards to experience. Whether it was his own personal experience, or the experiences of those in whom Wesley deemed were genuine and sincere, Wesley believed that God had placed within the human mind enough logic and reason to weigh one’s experiences against Scripture. Regardless of how one views Wesley’s thoughts concerning experience, the experience Wesley would have when he return to Oxford, one could argue, was the final piece Wesley needed from God. For what Wesley had yet to experience was a real and genuine experience of the revival power of the Holy Spirit. And, just as was the case for the original disciples at Pentecost, “before the message could be proclaimed effectively, the messengers needed the Holy Spirit.”

The year of 1738 had been a year of internal struggle for Wesley. He had moved from a hopeless seeking of salvation by his own works, to a promise of assurance and power over sin and death. And with the turning of the calendar, a new year, and as history has shown us, an amazing harvest of souls was just on the horizon. For it was on the very first day of 1739 that the First Great Awakening would begin. John Telford wrote that “the great awakening was now to begin… [and when] Wesley returned from Hernhuth he found that the little Society in Fetter Lane had increased from ten to thirty-two members. Here on New Year’s Day, 1739, the

17 See the Asbury Bible Commentary, “The Place and Functions of Scripture, John Wesley.” www.Biblegateway.com (accessed 3/20/2014). According to Wesley, tradition represented the one source of religion other than Scripture that added substantively to Christianity. Scripture represents the primary substance of Christian belief and practice; tradition, reason, and experience represent complementary—albeit secondary—resources in the interpretation of Scripture. Yet tradition gives to us the canon of Scripture. It also gives to us the creeds and the earliest teachings of Christian antiquity, which provide the standards of orthodoxy.

Wesleys, Whitefield, Ingham, Hall, Kitchin, Hutchins, and some sixty other held a lovefeast.”

Wesley wrote of what happened next in his Journal.

About three in the morning, as we were continuing instant in prayer, the power of God came mightily upon us, insomuch that many cried out for exceeding joy, and many fell to the ground. As soon as we were recovered a little from that awe and amazement at the presence of his Majesty, we broke out with one voice, “We praise thee, O God; we acknowledge thee to be the Lord.”

**CONCLUSION**

Telford wrote that “in this way the year which saw the dawn of the Revival was ushered in. Oxford Methodism gave its name to the new movement, but it knew little about the righteousness of faith which the friends had at last attained. The preachers of the Evangelical Revival were able to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord” And as those preachers, which included John Wesley, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and armed with a message of assurance and freedom, the results would be astounding. Isaac Taylor wrote that:

No such harvest of souls is recorded to have been gathered by any body of contemporary men, since the first century. An attempt to compute the converts of Methodist Christianity would be a fruitless, as well as presumptuous undertaking, from which we draw back; but we must not call into question, what is so variously and fully attested, that an unimpeachable Christian profession was the fruit of the Methodist preaching in instances that must be computed by hundreds of thousands, throughout Great Britain, and in America.

God had taken Wesley, and the other leaders of the First Great Awakening, to a place they could have never reached by their own power. Wesley had gone from a failed missionary, seeming lost and bewildered, through a personal Spiritual Awakening like few others would ever come close to experiencing. And what were the results? “Charles Wesley was more impassioned as a preacher, Whitefield Was more vehement and exciting, but [John] Wesley [possessed a]

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19 John Telford, *The Life of John Wesley*... Chapter 8, par. 3.


21 John Telford, *The Life of John Wesley*... Chapter 8, par. 4.

calm and measured argument [as he preached], in which every word went home to the hearts and consciences of his hearers.”

John Wesley’s preaching possessed unique and charismatic responses by many who heard him. Many would fall to the ground and cried out in agony. Telford wrote, “there were no doubt that some cases were impostures,” nevertheless, Wesley came to the conclusion that “I let the matter alone; knowing this, that ‘if it be not of God, it will come to nought.’”

John Wesley was not the only individual that God used to usher in the First Great Awakening. And, as history has shown, he and other leaders, namely George Whitefield, did not always see eye-to-eye at every theological point or concern. Despite this, Kenneth Collins believes that all the elements each of these men brought were necessary “for promoting and sustaining the awakening that was soon to sweep across the land.”

Thus, in the pivotal year of 1738, John Wesley was transformed by the Holy Spirit from a spiritual failure, into a spiritual giant. His contributions to the First Great Awakening, as well as the Methodist, Wesleyan, Nazarene, and many other denominations and religious movements, is almost immeasurable. Nonetheless, without the power of the Holy Spirit, acting through and with a willing vessel, his efforts to lead others, and himself, to a blessed assurance of faith in Christ, would have been nothing short of futile.

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23 John Telford, The Life of John Wesley... Chapter 8, par. 12.

24 Ibid., 8, par. 12

25 John Wesley, An Extract of the Rev. Mr. John Wesley's Journal... Vol. 1, 173.

26 Kenneth J. Collins, A Real Christian: The Life of John Wesley... 66-70, where Collins describes Wesley and Whitefield’s Lutheran/Calvinist conflict over salvation, free grace, predestination, etc. See Isaac Taylor, Wesley, and Methodism... 41-54. Here Taylor discusses the Wesley/Whitefield dispute at length.

27 Ibid., 70.
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