

CHAPTER 1

Family and Social Context

The firm Christian beliefs of John Wesley's parents prepared him to face a society that was becoming increasingly averse to Christianity. John acknowledged their formative role in shaping his views on faith from childhood, when, aged eighty-six, he asserted his life-long esteem for the Scriptures, the early Church Fathers, and the Church of England:

From a child I was taught to love and reverence the Scripture, the Oracles of God; and, next to these, to esteem the primitive Fathers, the writers of the three first centuries. Next after the primitive church, I esteemed our own, the Church of England, as the most scriptural national church in the world. I therefore not only assented to all the doctrines, but observed all the rubric in the liturgy; and that with all possible exactness, even at the peril of my life.¹

John had been admitted by his father to Communion when he was eight, and later believed (even if his detractors didn't) that he had pursued a path of consistent service to the Church. His words disclose his mature understanding that acceptance of the final authority of Scripture in matters of faith was instilled by his parents.

The views of his parents reflected their own religious roots. John's father, Samuel Wesley (1662–1735), though the son of a Dissenting preacher, had been ordained into the Anglican ministry in 1688. After two short curacies, with a naval chaplaincy

1. John Wesley, 'Farther Thoughts on Separation from the Church,' in *Selections from the writings of the Rev. John Wesley, M.A. Sometime Fellow of Lincoln College, Oxford*, ed. Herbert Welch (New York: Eaton & Mains, 1901), 209.

inbetween, his ministry began at South Ormsby in Lincolnshire in 1691. He was Rector of St Andrews, Epworth, from 1696 until his death. In 1722 he became, in addition, Rector of the nearby village of Wroot.

In 1688 Samuel married Susanna Annesley (1669–1742). Her father, Dr. Samuel Annesley (1620–96), was also a Dissenter, but Susanna joined the Church of England at the age of twelve. So, both of John's parents bequeathed to their children a firm independence of spirit and a deliberate adherence to the national Church. This is borne out by the fact that, of ten surviving children born to Samuel and Susanna, the three boys, Samuel (1690–1739), a High Churchman, and John and Charles all became Anglican clerics. Charles' career closely mirrored John's, he was successively an undergraduate at Christ Church, Oxford, a Church of England minister, a Church missionary to Georgia, and eventually a pioneer leader of Methodism.

Father

John's parents had very different personalities, but each pointed John towards the reality of the Christian faith in a way that left a lasting impression on him. John's father undoubtedly had eccentricities and flaws of character. He left Susanna for several months because she, loyal to the Stuarts, refused to say 'Amen' to his family prayers for the Prince of Orange, who had recently acceded to the British throne (King William III, r.1689–1702). Marital harmony was only restored after the accession of Queen Anne in March 1702, and John's birth was the result of it.

Samuel seemed temperamentally unable to regulate his family's finances prudently. But he demonstrated the robustness of his faith when a devastating fire seized the Epworth rectory (not for the first time) at midnight on 9 February 1709 while the family were in bed. After each family member had reached safety, with the six-year-old John snatched through his bedroom window just before the roof crashed in, Samuel called out, 'Come neighbours, let us kneel down; let us give thanks to God; he has given me all my eight children; let the house go; I am rich enough.'

With his house, furniture, library and manuscripts consumed by the flames, Samuel responded by penning the hymn that begins:

Behold the Saviour of mankind
Nail'd to the shameful tree!
How vast the love that Him inclined
To bleed and die for thee!²

Samuel's faith on his deathbed was impressed on John's memory. In a letter to 'John Smith'³ defending the Methodist claim that even ordinary Christians can experience an 'inward witness of the Spirit,' John wrote:

My father did not die unacquainted with the faith of the gospel, of the primitive Christians, or of our first Reformers; the same which, by the grace of God, I preach, and which is just as new as Christianity. What he experienced before, I know not; but I know that during his last illness, which continued eight months, he enjoyed a clear sense of his acceptance with God. I heard him express it more than once, although at that time I understood him not. 'The inward witness, son, the inward witness,' said he to me, 'That is the proof, the strongest proof, of Christianity.'⁴

Young John's understanding of salvation was moulded by his father, an orthodox High Churchman strongly influenced by Pietism. John printed his father's *Discourse on Baptism* word for word,⁵ in which his father taught that in baptism we are so far 'regenerate as to be grafted into the body of Christ's Church,' when 'a principle of grace is infused, which we lost by the Fall, which shall never wholly be withdrawn, unless we quench God's Holy Spirit by obstinate habits of wickedness.' 'We say not that Regeneration is always completed in this Sacrament, but that it

2. Tyerman, *Samuel Wesley*, 273–74. This is the only hymn by Wesley's father included in John Wesley's first hymn collection, *A Collection of Psalms and Hymns* (Charlestown: Lewis Timothy, 1737).

3. Many identify 'John Smith' with Thomas Secker, Archbishop of Canterbury (1758–68).

4. Letter, 22 March 1748, WCAT.

5. John Wesley, *A Treatise on Baptism* (11 November 1756).

is begun in it.⁶ There is an echo of this teaching in John's May 1738 account of his own early spiritual state:

I believe, till I was about ten years old I had not sinned away that 'washing of the Holy Ghost' which was given me in baptism; having been strictly educated and carefully taught, that I could only be saved 'by universal obedience, by keeping all the commandments of God'; in the meaning of which I was diligently instructed.⁷

Mother

Susanna also strongly impacted her children with her robust piety. Replying later to a letter from John asking that she explain her approach to educating her children, she said:

No one can, without renouncing the world in the most literal sense, observe my method: and there's few (if any) that would entirely devote above twenty years of the prime of life in hope to save the souls of their children (which they think may be saved without so much ado); for that was my principal intention, however unskilfully and unsuccessfully managed.⁸

A few months later, she described to John the methods by which she had taught her children 'the principles of religion':

When turned a year old (and some before), they were taught to fear the rod, and to cry softly; by which means they escaped abundance of correction they might otherwise have had.... I insist upon conquering the will of children betimes, because this is the only strong and rational foundation of a religious education, without which both precept and example will be ineffectual. But when this is thoroughly done, then a child is capable of being governed by the reason and piety of its parents, till its own understanding comes to maturity, and the principles of religion have taken root in the mind.... The children of this family were taught, as soon as they could speak, the Lord's Prayer, which they were made to say at rising and bedtime constantly; to which, as they grew bigger, were added a short prayer for their

6. Samuel Wesley, *The Pious Communicant Rightly Prepar'd...* (1700).

7. Curnock, Vol. 1, 465.

8. Letter, 21 February 1732, WWEP.

parents, and some collects; a short catechism, and some portions of Scripture, as their memories could bear. They were very early made to distinguish the Sabbath from other days...⁹

Such was the lasting impact of this rigorous process that John still sought his mother's views when preparing for the Anglican ministry. Her own understanding of faith is shown by her reaction to receiving news of Charles' evangelical conversion, or his 'Day of Pentecost' as Charles termed it, on 21 May 1738:¹⁰

Blessed be God, who showed you the necessity you were in of a Saviour to deliver you from the power of sin and Satan (for Christ will be no Saviour to such as see not their need of one), and directed you by faith to lay hold of that stupendous mercy offered us by redeeming love. Jesus is the only physician of souls; his blood the only salve that can heal a wounded conscience. It is not in wealth, or honour, or sensual pleasure, to relieve a spirit heavy laden and weary of the burden of sin. These things have power to increase our guilt by alienating our hearts from God; but none to make our peace with him; to reconcile God to man, and man to God, and to renew the union between the divine and human nature. No, there is none but Christ, none but Christ, who is sufficient for these things. But, blessed be God, he is an all-sufficient Saviour! and blessed be his holy name, that thou hast found him a Saviour to thee, my son! O let us love him much, for we have much forgiven!

Yet, as she closed the letter, she revealed some spiritual perplexity – and incidentally gave more than a hint of the difficulties that her son John would later encounter when trying to harmonise his religious experience with his understanding: 'I would gladly know what your notion is of justifying faith, because you speak of it as a thing you have but lately received.'

Charles evidently replied that he had indeed only lately received it, for Susanna wrote back:

9. Letter, 24 July 1732, WWEP.

10. Charles Wesley, *The Journal of The Rev. Charles Wesley, M.A., sometime student of Christ Church, Oxford*, Vols. 1–2, ed. Thomas Jackson, 1849; (rpt. Stoke-on-Trent: Tentmaker Publications, 2002).

I think you are fallen into an odd way of thinking. You say that till within a few months you had no spiritual life, nor any justifying faith. Now this is as if a man should affirm he was not alive in his infancy, because, when an infant, he did not know he was alive. All, then, that I can gather from your letter is, that till a little while ago you were not so well satisfied of your being a Christian as you are now. I heartily rejoice that you have now attained to a strong and lively hope in God's mercy through Christ. Not that I can think that you were totally without saving faith before; but it is one thing to have faith, and another thing to be sensible we have it.¹¹

Susanna was perplexed by the concept of an instant reception of justification by faith. 'Instantaneous' faith would later perplex both John and Charles. Susanna's letter also distinguished between possessing saving faith and being aware of possessing it – a distinction John himself would later struggle with.

Society

The early eighteenth-century society that John was born into was disenchanted with the legacy of the Reformers and Puritans. Four factors in particular contributed to this.

1. Waning Puritan influence

Puritan influence was drastically weakened in England after the 1662 Act of Uniformity. This resulted in the ejection of between 1,800 and 2,500 men from the Church of England. Perhaps up to one half of these were ministers of Puritan conviction. While those ministers who decided to conform to the Act included some learned and pious men, and even a few of Puritan outlook including Edward Reynolds (1599–1676) and William Gurnall (1617–79), the spiritual vigour of the national church was much diminished. An Act of Toleration passed in 1689 allowed freedom of worship to Nonconformists within certain limits, but by then the Puritan movement was in eclipse.

11. Letters, 19 October and 6 December 1738, quoted in Arnold Dallimore, *Susanna* (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 1992), 159–60.