March 21, 2007

Lessons from the life and ministry of
John Wesley

Who was he?

John Wesley was a British Evangelist in the 17th century. He (along with the assistance of his brother Charles) was the founder of Methodism. Although he never left the Church of England, his way of life and ministry values distinguished his ministry from the norm of the day. Wesley and his followers were known as Methodists by their methodical application of the scriptures and devotion to live holy lives. Through Wesley, England experienced a reawakening, as people sought out God in a fresh way. His message was simple—Justification by Christ through the testimony of the Holy Spirit.

Lessons from his life:

- **Conversion beyond vocation:** Though he had become a priest at a young age, Wesley points to May 24, 1738 on Aldersgate Street, as conversion to Christianity. Wesley's experience may be unique in that many people will have a vocation come out of a conversion experience, however, Wesley walked in humility as he had no shame confessing a conversion experience years after he was ordained. My faithfulness and discipleship are not as a result of my vocation. I can be a minister for years and have great impact and yet still feel distant from God. We need to nurture our walks with God and let that illuminate how we do our ministry.
- **Failure does not have the last word:** John spent some time in Georgia, a new colony, at the request of the governor of the colony. Although he went enthusiastically, he returned empty, depressed and defeated. In his words, Georgia was a failure. But this was not the end of the story, if anything, this experienced softened Wesley's heart to receive teaching and direction for his life.
- **Rule of life:** Perhaps the Methodists were a sort of Monastic movement. They were committed to a certain way of life (i.e. waking up at 4am to pray) and they followed certain rules to guide them. A rule of life in of itself will be rigid and pharisaic, but when we see it as a way of keeping us focused on the important, it can be liberating and a gift/grace of God. What are the ways that my life can be engaged with a rule that will keep me focused on God and focused on my responsibilities? Wesley's rule that I like:
    - *Begin and end every day with God*
    - *Be diligent in your calling*
    - *Employ all spare hours in religion, as able*
    - *Examine yourself every night*
    - *Avoid idleness*
    - *Resist the very beginnings of lust*
    - *In every act reflect on the end.*

- **Attention to personal life:** Wesley was married briefly but his wife left him. Not sure all of the reasons why his marriage failed, but it seems that his commitment to the ministry was at the cost of his marriage. When he got married, he believed that his call to ministry should not change one bit between being a single person or a married person. His marriage suffered and failed. It doesn't even seem like Wesley owned up to his contributions to the failure of the marriage. Our intimate relationships, especially family, are important to nurture. There will be seasons where ministry may demand more at the cost of our family, but those season should be brief and with full anticipation. I need to pay attention to my wife and my child and make sure that the ministry is not trumping the needs and pleasure of family.
- **Seek Mentors:** Wesley was shaped by many mentors, including his mother and the Morovians, German mission-minded Christians. The Morovians influenced his understanding of the gospel and his understanding of the ministry. If anything, his time in Georgia increased his connection to the Morovians. Without their influence, we would not have John Wesley's passion for revival. Who are the mentors in my life? What are the mentoring communities for me? (It's not just having specific mentors, but having entire communities that act as mentors)
- **Mentor People:** Wesley was sought as a mentor and at various points, he looked to influence people beyond the thousands who were hearing his message. He was key in calling George Whitefield to the US for ministry, and near his death, he was an encouragement to Wilberforce who would eventually be responsible in shutting down the slave trade in England.
- **Endure Persecution:** When the revivals really started to take off in England, Wesley's life was constantly in danger, as many mobs and protests broke out. He was persecuted both by common people and by the Church (of England) that would refuse to honor his calling. Persecution did not slow down his commitment to ministry. He endured persecution.
- **Leadership Development:** Wesley went back and forth in being good at developing leaders. During the beginning of his ministry, he was leading the Holy Club(s) at Oxford, where though the group would grow under his leadership, when he had to leave for various assignments, the grew shrank. Perhaps that experience motivated him to form the Methodist movement by giving more ownership and leadership to others. However, he still wanted to retain "final say." In ministry, it is essential to develop leaders that would thrive on their own.
- **Holiness:** In a society where most people do not have a value for holiness, Wesley chose to stand out as one who would pursue holiness in his life—not just by his actions, but also by his thoughts. His desire and pursuit of holiness tie to his rule of life. It is too easy to let sin rule our lives. It is too easy to pay attention to many things but not to pursue holiness in our lives.