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Precursors to Revival

Epworth

We often look at the Book of Revelation as a guide to the end times, but that's not really how or why it was written. Revelation was written near the end of the first century to seven churches in Asia Minor, which comprises much of modern-day Turkey. These churches had once been dynamic centers of Christianity. Among them was the church at Ephesus on the coast of the Aegean Sea. Paul lived in Ephesus for more than two years. John the disciple lived out his days in the vicinity of Ephesus. At least one early church tradition suggests that Mary the mother of Jesus spent her final years there as well. It was once a lively, passionate church.

By the time Revelation was written, Ephesus, along with some of the other churches of Revelation, had lost its vitality. Christ, speaking to the author of Revelation, noted that the believers in Laodicea had become “lukewarm” (Revelation 3:16) and the Christians at Ephesus had lost their first love (2:4). These Christians were busy, but their activities had not produced spiritual vitality. In Revelation, the Lord told them the key to their spiritual revival was to “do the works you did at first” (2:5).

This pattern of declining spiritual vitality was not unique to the churches of Revelation. We can see it throughout the Old Testament, as the Israelites pledged their devotion and allegiance to God, then gradually fell away. Crisis came, and they cried out for help. God delivered them, and once more they pledged their allegiance to God. But within a generation they fell away once more. The history of Christianity is much the same. Pastor Robert Robinson rightly captured this in his 1758 hymn “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing” when he wrote, “Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the God I love. . . .”¹

In my own life, even as a pastor, I’ve had seasons when I experienced spiritual burnout. In my flurry of activity I had stopped or greatly reduced the spiritual practices that can open our hearts to God’s Spirit. I had the outward appearance of spiritual vitality, but inwardly I felt empty. Sometimes I was so busy doing things pastors must do that I was not aware my spiritual vitality was waning. Yet often in those times I, or those closest to me, could sense a diminution of the fruit of the Spirit in my life. There was a reduction of “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23) in my heart, words, and actions.

I’ve visited many churches where the people seem to be going through the motions of Christianity but lack the fruit of the Spirit. To them I believe the Lord would say, “I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance. . . . But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.”

The early eighteenth century was a time when spiritual vitality was ebbing in many parts of the Church of England. As a young man at Oxford, John Wesley could feel it, not only in the church and university but in his own soul. He felt there must be more to the Christian life than what he knew. Wesley longed for something more. It was in his longing that the seeds of the Methodist revival were sown.

Responding to the Times

To understand John Wesley's thoughts and beliefs, we need to know something of the world into which he was born, for it was that world that shaped the Methodist movement.

For two hundred years leading up to Wesley's birth, Europe had been in the throes of religious conflict. In 1517, Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the doors of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. His protest against the practice of selling indulgences in the Catholic Church, and against a host of other common practices of the church at that time, set off a revolution. Lines were drawn between those who were loyal to the Pope and remained Roman Catholic, and those who joined Luther's protest and became Protestants.

In England, the more immediate source of conflict was the desire by King Henry VIII to produce a male heir. He sought to have his marriage annulled so that he could marry again, and when that effort failed he severed ties between the English church and Rome. By 1534, Henry had himself declared the Supreme Head of the Church of England, and by 1536 an act was passed to disband most of the monasteries and convents.

Though Henry's Church of England was no longer tied to the Roman Catholic Church, its theology and practice remained far more Catholic than those of the other Protestant countries at the time. But after Henry's death, his son Edward VI and Edward's advisors led the church toward a closer alignment with what was becoming mainstream Protestantism. This represented a significant shift in Christian practice in England. Edward died before his sixteenth birthday, and after some palace intrigue his half-sister Mary I came to the throne.

Mary I, a staunch Roman Catholic, restored the Church of England to Catholic doctrine and practice and to the Pope's authority. She ordered that prominent Anglican bishops and Protestant leaders in the church be put to death, mostly burned at the stake, for which she is forever

remembered as “Bloody Mary.” You can imagine the religious upheaval that this caused. Mary was succeeded by Elizabeth I, who ruled for nearly forty-five years. Elizabeth returned England to a firmly Protestant path. Her reign, as regards religion, is remembered for seeking compromise between various Protestant factions as well as an occasional nod to Catholic sensibilities.

Elizabeth died in 1603 and was followed by James VI, the king of Scotland, who also became James I, the king of England and Ireland. Like Elizabeth, James sought a balance between Catholicism and Protestantism. He supported a new translation of the Bible into English, which was formally known as the Authorized Version of the Bible but came to be known as the King James Version.

By that time, a movement had arisen among the more ardent Protestants, who came to be known as Puritans. Puritans opposed the vestiges of Catholicism in the church and believed the reformation of the English church had never gone far enough. James’s successor, Charles I, supported “high church” forms of Anglicanism, married a Roman Catholic, and in a host of other ways alienated Puritans and many others. During his reign the English Civil War broke out. In 1649, King Charles was executed, and England became a Commonwealth.

More religious upheaval followed, as the Puritans and their leader Oliver Cromwell enforced their strong aversion to anything Catholic. With Cromwell’s death in 1658, England had had enough of radical Puritanism, and Charles II, son of Charles I, was welcomed back as King of England in what became known as the Restoration. By 1662 the Church of England was restored, with its Book of Common Prayer, Articles of Religion, bishops, and other practices.

As part of the Restoration, pastors were required to submit to an Act of Uniformity. Over two thousand pastors refused to comply. They were forced out of their churches, forbidden from traveling within five miles

of their former churches, and prevented from teaching in schools. Even after the Restoration, conflict between the Church of England and its dissenters—the Puritans and later the Calvinists—continued, lasting into the eighteenth century.

Because of this two hundred-year period of religious upheaval, many among the English people had grown weary of religion. The Enlightenment, a movement in which reason and scientific rationalism raised questions of religious traditions and beliefs, was further eroding religious fervor, particularly in the universities. The waning of religious sentiment and the rise of Enlightenment philosophies provided a perfect seedbed for the eighteenth-century revival in which Wesley would play so prominent a part.

The Power of a Praying Mother

John Wesley was born in Epworth, England, on June 17, 1703, to Samuel and Susanna Wesley.² Epworth is a small town about 150 miles north of London and 130 miles south of the Scottish border. Downtown Epworth today looks very much like it did when Wesley was there. The Red Lion Inn, where Wesley stayed when he visited town after his father's death, is still open. The "market cross," upon whose steps John frequently preached, still stands. (Market crosses were erected in the center of most towns across England, in part as a visible reminder that Christ watched over the townspeople as they conducted their business.) The home where John Wesley grew up and the church where he was baptized remain as Epworth's primary tourist attractions.

John's father, Samuel, devoted nearly forty years to serving that church, St. Andrew's Church in Epworth. Portions of the building, which recently has been remodeled, are said to date back to the 1100s. Samuel baptized John and his siblings at the font in this church. You can still

see the chalice from which Samuel offered eight-year-old John his first Eucharist. After John's ordination, he served this same church as curate (essentially an associate) under his father. Samuel, after his death, was buried in the graveyard next to the church. Wesley famously preached from atop his father's grave when the new priest at St. Andrew's would not allow him to preach inside the church.

Though Samuel's preaching shaped his children, clearly it was John's mother, Susanna, who had the greatest impact on their faith. She is often referred to as the "mother of Methodism."

Susanna was the beautiful, intelligent daughter of a popular Puritan minister in London. He insisted that his daughter receive a classical education, something most unusual at the time. She was a brilliant woman who later insisted that her own daughters learn to read, write, and pursue their education.

Samuel and Susanna married November 11, 1688. When Samuel became rector (priest in charge) of St. Andrew's Church sometime around 1695, the couple moved to the rectory (parsonage). The original rectory was destroyed by fire in 1709 when John was just five years old, a story we'll consider in more detail shortly. The house that currently stands, built when John was six years old, was the Wesley family home until Samuel died in 1735 and the home was given to the new rector, at which time Susanna went to live with her children.

It was in the kitchen of this "new" rectory that Susanna educated her children for six hours a day. It was where she held family devotions early on Sunday evenings. One time when Samuel was in London and the associate rector replacing him was a rather dull preacher, some of the townsfolk asked if they could join Susanna's Sunday devotions. As a result, more people began coming to her lessons than were attending church at St. Andrew's to hear the associate rector preach.

The associate, a Mr. Inman, complained to Samuel about the services Susanna was holding in their home. Samuel wrote asking her to stop, since it was considered scandalous that a woman would be, in essence, preaching to the congregation. Susanna's response to her husband made the case for why the meetings were appropriate, then ended with these words:

If you do, after all, think fit to dissolve this assembly, do not tell me that you desire me to do it, for that will not satisfy my conscience; but send me your positive command, in such full and express terms as may absolve me from all guilt and punishment, for neglecting this opportunity of doing good, when you and I shall appear before the great and awful tribunal of our LORD JESUS CHRIST.³

After that, Samuel didn't say another word about the services!

Susanna had a profound continuing influence on the faith of her children. Her writings included an extended catechism, prepared for her children. What's remarkable is how intentional she was about forming the faith of her children and continuing to invest in their faith when they became adults.

John's mother was a commanding presence in his life. He sought her wisdom. He valued her insights. There were many occasions when he changed his mind about some matter of leadership owing to her intervention. In one case, a layman had begun preaching, and John was against having any but ordained clergy preach. Susanna challenged her son to listen to the man preach and to see that God was working through him. Wesley did as Susanna suggested, and from that time on, lay preachers became an important feature of Methodism.

Among the beautiful things Susanna Wesley did with her children was to spend one hour a week with each child, asking about their faith, their fears, their hopes and dreams, the state of their souls. This loving

activity was to shape Wesley's later practice of asking Methodists to meet together weekly in small groups to enquire about one another's progress in the faith.

Susanna was not what today we would consider to be the perfect mother. For example, she believed in the importance of breaking a child's spirit and in children not being allowed to cry. Today these practices would be considered harsh, though in her own time they were considered good parenting principles.

What strikes me in reading Susanna's words, and the words of her children about her, was how important her faith, life, and prayers were for the Methodist revival that two of her sons would lead. When Charles Wesley, John's hymn-writing brother, was asked to what he attributed his conversion in college and his newfound spiritual vitality, he did not hesitate; he believed it was because of his mother's prayers. Think of 2 Timothy 1:5, in which Paul writes to Timothy, "I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you." For John and Charles, as for Timothy, their sincere faith lived first in their father and mother. Both parents had a profound impact upon the faith of their children, but Susanna's influence arguably was greater.

At the age of seventy-three, Susanna Wesley lay in bed approaching death. John noted in his journal of July 30, 1742, "I found my mother on the borders of eternity. But she had no doubt or fear nor any desire but (as soon as God should call) 'to depart and be with Christ.'" Her last request of her children was, "Children, as soon as I am released, sing a psalm of praise to God."⁴ She died later that day, and on Sunday John preached at her funeral, where a tremendous crowd had gathered to celebrate her life. Susanna Wesley changed the world by shaping the heart and faith of her children and by her wise counsel and persistent prayers and encouragement. It is not an exaggeration to say that there would have been no Methodist movement had it not

been for the faith and prayers of Susanna Wesley. Susanna was buried at the Bunhill Fields cemetery in London. Years later, right across the street, John Wesley would build his home and City Road Chapel, which became Methodism's mother church. From his study Wesley could look out and see his mother's grave. She continued to inspire him years after she had died.

A Humble, Listening, Catholic Spirit

If John Wesley learned about faith from his mother, he learned how to deal with disagreements from his father and grandfathers.

In many ways those two generations of Wesley's family reflected the religious conflicts of the time. John's grandfathers on both his mother's and his father's sides were dissenters from the established Anglican Church and had been strongly influenced by the Puritans; his parents were committed Anglicans deeply devoted to the established church with its high-church liturgy. John's grandparents refused to embrace the Book of Common Prayer and had been cast out of their churches as a result of the Act of Uniformity; his parents embraced the Book of Common Prayer and sought to ensure its use in the churches they served.

How did these family conflicts affect John Wesley? Wesley adopted a posture that is often called the *via media*—a middle way—that found truth on both sides of the theological divide. He was a cleric of the Church of England, yet he embraced many Puritan expressions of faith. He worshiped in the high-church tradition, yet he opened preaching houses that were filled with rousing hymn singing and little liturgy. Wesley had the ability to value and listen to people on opposite sides of the theological divide, to find the truth each possessed, and to chart a middle way, embracing the best of both sides.

Spiritual Mentors

A precursor to our own revival is often the prayers of our parents or grandparents. I remember that years ago, one of the founding members of The United Methodist Church of the Resurrection, the church where I serve, told me how she came to faith. She had been away from the church for more than thirty years, but her mother kept sending letters and telling her she needed God and needed the church. She told me, "I was so irritated that my mother was still trying to tell me how to live my life. Here I was, a grandmother, and she still was telling me what to do!" But as her mother became ill and later died, my friend could not stop thinking about those letters and the words of her mother. It was her mother's witness that led her back to church, where she experienced her own revival of faith.

For those of us who are parents, or aunts or uncles, we have a major role to play in the faith of our children and grandchildren, nieces and nephews. As my own children were growing up, I would pray at their bedside on my knees every night. I knew it was likely that one day they would turn away from their faith as they tried to discover who they were apart from being the preacher's daughters. But I hoped they would never forget their father praying next to their bedside at night, or their mother reading Scripture to them and telling them about her faith. Do you pray with your children and grandchildren, nieces and nephews? Do you take time to talk with them about faith? Do you write them notes about your faith? Are you spiritually mentoring these children? That's what Susanna did with her children, and the Methodist revival and all who trace their lineage through it are the fruit of her witness.

Not long ago I went to visit Marilyn, the mother of a longtime friend. She was in a hospice approaching death. I'd known her since I was fourteen. We had a wonderful visit as both of her sons looked on. Her youngest son, my friend, is a member of my congregation. Before I left she said, "I want to thank you for something." I asked, "What's that, Marilyn?" She said, "Thank you for bringing my son back to church. He wasn't going until he reconnected with you and began attending again. That means so very much to me." As my friend and I walked to the car I told him, "You know, I think your mom said that for your benefit. She wanted you to know how much it means to her that you are a follower of Christ, and she doesn't want you to fall away after she's gone." I'm guessing many of you had mothers or fathers, grandmothers or grandfathers, aunts or uncles who prayed you back to church, and you didn't even know it.
