HISTORY of CHRISTIANITY

Part IV – The Age of Reason and Piety:

The Church in Early Modern Times (A.D. 1543 - 1738)

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During the two centuries between the death of Martin Luther in 1546 and the conversion of John Wesley in 1738, the Christian world experienced a major paradigm shift from the Age of Faith to the Age of Reason. The tension between these two, faith and reason, was always there, like an underground stream running just beneath the surface, sometimes unseen, at other times erupting like a geyser into full view. It is a conflict embedded within the very bedrock of Christianity itself.

Jesus said that we were to love God with all our mind. (Matthew 22:37: "Jesus replied: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.'" NIV) Yet Saint Paul warned against an over reliance on philosophy and vain speculation. Tertullian's famous question, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What has the church to do with the academy?" echoes down the centuries.

In the early church, Augustine struggled to integrate his Christian faith into the world view of neoplatonism. In the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas tried to harmonize the competing claims of nature and grace. It was not an easy task. Three years after his death, many of his ideas were condemned by the Bishop of Paris, indicating that, at least in the minds of some, Thomas had not perfectly succeeded in this quest. In the sixteenth century, the Reformation asserted the priority of revelation over reason, but neither Luther nor Calvin were prepared to abandon the life of the mind. Only when human reasoning was elevated above faith was it seen as an enemy of God, a beast or, as Luther called it, "The Devil's Whore."

THE MAJOR PARADIGM SHIFT

The period immediately after the Reformation was a time of great triumph in many ways. The ideas of Luther and Calvin were expressed in classic statements of faith: "What is the chief end of man?" asks the Westminster Shorter Catechism. "To glorify God and to enjoy Him forever."

This was the age of Johann Sebastian Bach, who inscribed on every piece of music he wrote the words: *Soli Deo Gloria!,* "To God alone be the glory!" This was also the age of John Bunyan and John Milton, of artists Rubens and Rembrandt, and the amazing art and architecture of the Baroque period, all majestic witnesses to the coherence and power of the Christian vision.

Descartes, a French philosopher who introduced a new method of knowledge based on the principle of radical doubt. Archbishop William Temple once said that the most disastrous moment in European history was perhaps the bitterly cold day in the winter of 1620, when Descartes climbed into the alcove of a stove and resolved to search for a new kind of philosophy. Out of this effort came his famous principle *cogito, ergo sum,* "I think, therefore I am." Or as he also expressed it, "I doubt, therefore I am." Descartes himself remained a nominal Catholic. The result of his philosophy was to split apart reality into mind and matter and to reduce God to the level of a hypothesis called in, as it were, merely to guarantee the validity of human thinking.

Building on the work of Copernicus and Descartes, Sir Isaac Newton finally drew up, in complete mathematical form, a mechanical view of nature. Newton was a devout Christian who accepted the claim of the Bible. He even wrote a commentary on the Book of Revelation. But later philosophers found it easier to accept his mathematics than his theology, thus deepening the rift between faith and reason.

THE AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT BORN

In such an atmosphere, the "Age of Enlightenment" was born. What is "The Enlightenment"? It was a tendency, a spirit which permeated the culture and religion of the 17th and 18th centuries, characterized by two primary thoughts:

- The first we might call "The Rise of the Imperial Self." The great German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, summarized the Enlightenment in two Latin words: *supere aude!* — "dare to think for yourself! "To think for one's self meant to seek the supreme touchstone of truth in one's own reason.

- And this implied the second principle of the Enlightenment: a radical suspicion and distrust of authority and tradition, especially Christian authority and tradition.

The Enlightenment attack on Christianity took two forms. One was biting sarcasm and ridicule. "Ecrasez l'infâme!" shouted Voltaire, "Destroy the infamous thing!"— meaning historic Christianity. To be sure, there was much about the church which deserved criticism: for more than one hundred years Europe had been ravaged by fierce wars of religion, Catholics fighting Protestants; and there was immorality and corruption in the church itself. But Voltaire was less interested in reform than in refutation. He denounced Christian doctrine and belief. He scoffed at the miracles in the Bible and made fun of traditional Christian teaching: "If Jesus had been taken up to a hill where he could see all the kingdoms of the earth," he asked, "why hadn't he discovered America instead of Columbus? And why had Jesus not returned to earth as He had promised to establish the kingdom of God with power and great glory? What had detained him? Was the fog too thick perhaps?"

What Voltaire tried to do with a sneer, the English deists wanted to accomplish through a religion of reason and refinement. The titles of their writings say it all: *Christianity Not Mysterious, Christianity as Old as the Creation.* No special revelation, no miraculous Incarnation was necessary.

In America, Thomas Jefferson, who was greatly influenced by the deists, published a special edition of the New Testament in which he literally cut out all of the verses which were offensive to his reason: No demons, no judgment, no hell, no miraculous interventions from above.

CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO THE ENLIGHTENMENT

What was the Christian response to The Enlightenment? Some Christians tried to answer the deists and the skeptics on their own terms. The philosopher John Locke, wrote a book entitled *The Reasonableness of Christianity.* Bishop Joseph Butler published his *Analogy of Religion,* claiming that the intricate design of the universe implied a Designer, that is, God. While this kind of apologetics had a place in Christian thinking, it did little to bring genuine renewal and revival to the church.

For this we must look elsewhere: to France, for the lonely witness of Blaise Pascal; to Germany, where the Pietists stressed the importance of the new birth; and finally, to England, where John Wesley and the Methodist revival made a lasting impact on the church in the modern world.

Pascal was a brilliant philosopher, mathematician, and inventor. He was the first man to wear a wristwatch. He also invented one of the earliest forms of the computer as well as the first underground public transportation system for the city of Paris. Pascal had a profound sense of the ambiguity of human existence:

> What a novelty, what a portent, what a chaos, what a mass of contradictions, what a prodigy is man! Judge of all things. A ridiculous earthworm who is none the less the repository of truth. A sink of uncertainty and error. The glory and scum of the world. A chaos suspended over an abyss.

Pascal was a Roman Catholic, of course. He defended the Jansenists, a radical Augustinian order opposed by the Jesuits. He agreed with the Jansenist emphasis on the sovereignty of God and the surprise of grace in the Christian life. Pascal was no irrationalist, but he realized the limitations of human thinking.

"The heart has its reasons which are unknown to reason," he said. When Pascal died at the age of 39, a statement of his own personal conversion was found on his body, sewn into the fabric of his shirt. It said this:

> The year of grace, 1654: Monday, November 23, day of St. Clement, pope and martyr, and others in the martyrology. Vigil of St. Chrysogonus, martyr, and others from about half past ten in the evening to about half past midnight. Fire. God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosopher and the scientists, certitude, certitude. Emotion. Joy. Peace. God of Jesus Christ.

Pascal's writings were not widely known outside of France in his own lifetime, but many of his ideas were echoed among the Pietists in Germany. Pietism arose as a protest movement within the tradition of Lutheran Orthodoxy. The Pietists stressed the religious renewal of the individual and experiential oneness with God over against arid scholasticism in theology and extreme formalism in worship.

John Wesley summarized the spirit of Pietism as well as anyone when he said,

> How plain and simple is this? Is not this the sum? One thing I know: I was blind, but now I see. If then it were possible (which I can see that it is not) to shake the traditional evidence of Christianity, still he that has the internal evidence would stand firm and unshaken.

Pietism was about "the internal evidence," and this led them to stress three things:

- The importance of the new birth, which implied a life of holiness and complete devotion to Christ. "We are called to be *ein ganzer Christ* (as they said in German), "a whole, complete Christian. We cannot be 'almost' Christians. 'Almost' a son is a bastard; 'almost' sweet is unsavory; 'almost' hot is lukewarm (which God speweth out of his mouth). So 'almost' a Christian is not a Christian."

- But for all of their stress on individual renewal, the Pietists were not like the early monks who lived alone in the desert. The context of personal renewal was the small group, the prayer circle, the Bible study fellowship. Within such small groups a much higher level of commitment could be demanded than was possible within the larger congregation. Not surprisingly, these smaller groups became "little churches within the church," sometimes leading to division and separation, but sometimes working as a reforming leaven within the larger group.

- A third mark of Pietist spirituality was a sense of opposition to the world. *Gotteskinder* are not in league with *Weltkinder.* God's children march to a different drummer than the children of the world. To some Pietists, separation from the world meant a distinctive form of dress and food as well as foreswearing such worldly activities as dancing, drinking, the theater, etc. In the quest for authentic Christianity, legalism is always a possibility, but the Pietist reaction can also represent a healthy impulse against a Christianity that has become too accommodated to the culture around it. This tradition lives on today among the Amish and other holiness movements who have willingly separated from the world to maintain the purity of worship and a distinctively Christian lifestyle.

But in its larger expressions, the Pietist movement was both world-affirming and missionary-minded. It was the Pietists who pioneered works of charity among the poor: orphanages, medical missions, and Bible societies. It was also the Pietists (especially the Moravians, who carried the Gospel into the remote corners of the world), who paved the way for the modern missionary movement.

The founder of the Moravian Church was Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf, a Lutheran nobleman from Saxony. While touring Europe in 1719, Zinzendorf saw a famous painting of Christ wearing the crown of thorns, with the inscription: "All this I did for you. What are you doing for me?" Zinzendorf gathered around him a group of Moravian refugees who dedicated themselves to carrying the Gospel into all the world. The Moravians had a great devotion to Jesus, and many of Zinzendorf's hymns are still sung by Christians today. And the Methodist revival was born in a Moravian prayer meeting on Aldersgate Street in London, where John Wesley had gone seeking salvation and hope.

THE METHODIST REVIVAL: JOHN AND CHARLES WESLEY

John Benjamin Wesley was born in 1703, one of 19 children born to Samuel and Susanna Wesley. His father was a pastor, and Wesley grew up with the disciplines of the Christian life. When he was only six years old, the parsonage caught on fire. Young John nearly perished, being rescued at the last minute. His mother, Susanna, said that he was, "a brand plucked from the burning." Wesley never forgot this event. Every year, on the anniversary of his rescue, he stopped to thank God for his remarkable providence.

When he and his brother, Charles Wesley, were students at Oxford, they met another young man, the son of an innkeeper, named George Whitefield. All three would later emerge as leaders in the Evangelical Revival. At Oxford, they formed a small Pietist group, which other students nicknamed "The Holy Club." They would pray together, read the scriptures together, visit the sick and those in prison. They also read other devotional works such as Jeremy Taylor's *Rules for Holy Living and Dying,* William Law's *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life,* and Thomas à Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ.* Charles Wesley later said of these books: "These convinced me more than ever of the absolute impossibility of being half a Christian. I determined by God's grace to be all devoted to my Lord, to give Him all my soul, my body, and my substance."

Moved by this kind of commitment, both Wesley brothers volunteered for a stint of missionary service in the new colony of Georgia, where General James Oglethorpe needed chaplains to serve among his settlers, many of whom were recently released prisoners and other "ne'er do wells."

John Wesley was a notable failure as a minister in Georgia. He fell passionately in love with a young lady named Sophie Hopkey but decided, by casting lots, that he should not marry her. Miss Sophie felt betrayed and misled by Mr. Wesley. Before long, Wesley found himself imprisoned in Savannah, charged with slandering the good name of this young lady.

Somehow he managed to escape by the skin of his teeth and soon found himself on a ship headed back to England. When the ship was caught in a storm at sea, Wesley was deeply impressed by a band of Moravians who faced the danger with great peace and poise. He doubted his own salvation. He wrote in his journal,

> I went to America to convert the Indians, but, oh, who shall convert me? Who, what, is he that will deliver me from this evil heart of unbelief: I have a fair summer religion. I can talk well, nay and believe myself, while no danger is near. But let death look me in the face, and my spirit is troubled. Nor can I say, "to die is gain."

Back in London, he met a group of Moravians, led by Peter Böhler, who invited him to a service of worship held in a little meeting house on Aldersgate Street (not far from St. Paul's Cathedral). On the evening of May 24, 1738, Wesley went very unwillingly, he said, to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans.

"About a quarter before nine," John says,"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 my 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."

Someone has said that "what happened in that little room was of more importance to England than all of the victories of Pitt by land or by sea." But what did happen in that little room? No doubt, Wesley's Aldersgate experience is one of the most famous conversions in the history of Christianity.

But what was he converted from? He was 34 years old when this happened. He had been brought up in a godly home, educated in the finest schools, ordained as both a deacon and priest in the Church of England. He had been a tutor at Lincoln College, Oxford, and had even served several years on the foreign mission field. Apart from a few wild oats in Georgia perhaps, there is no evidence that Wesley was anything other than a religious man of discipline, devotion, earnest service, and good works. But all of that had left him totally miserable, with no assurance of salvation.

And what was he converted by? There were none of the trappings of modern revivalism — no sawdust trail, no one sang "Just As I Am" or "The Old Rugged Cross." Someone was merely reading a commentary of Luther on a letter of Paul, who was explaining the meaning of the forgiveness that Jesus had brought. But in that moment, Wesley discovered for himself what Jesus had declared, what Paul had known, and what Luther had proclaimed, namely, that no one can find peace of heart by trying to make himself a worthwhile person in the eyes of God. Wesley later said that before Aldersgate, "he had had the faith of a servant. Now he had the faith of a son."

And finally, what was Wesley converted to? Well, in one sense, he was converted to the same kind of work he had been doing all along before Aldersgate. He remained a priest in the Church of England and continued to receive the sacrament of communion once every five days for the rest of his life. He still continued to visit the poor, the sick, the imprisoned. He continued to study and preach from the scriptures. But he was doing all of this now, not as a means to earn favor with God, but in glad and joyful obedience to God's amazing grace in his life.

Wesley was a brilliant organizer and a great popularizer of the evangelical faith among the common people of England. His friend, George Whitefield, persuaded Wesley to start preaching out-of-doors, and soon he was addressing huge throngs of coal miners and factory workers. The poor and the outcast responded gladly to his message.

Wesley had remarkable stamina. During the last 50 years of his life, he travelled 225,000 miles and preached more than 40,000 sermons, (an average of 15 per week). He once remarked that he first began to feel old at 85!

Wesley declared that he had only one point of view: "To promote, so far as I am able, vital, practical religion, and by the grace of God, beget, preserve, and increase the life of God in the soul of men."

METHODISM: A MOVEMENT ON FIRE!

Methodism was a movement on fire, with John's theology set to music by his brother, Charles, who produced over 7,000 sacred songs and poems. Hymn singing made an enormous contribution to the evangelical revival. The hymns of Charles Wesley were especially powerful, expressing both the joy of the new birth and the doctrinal truths of scripture.

"The world is my parish," Wesley had declared. His movement soon spread beyond England to America and, indeed, throughout the world.

His theology can be summarized in three phrases:

- Faith alone
- Working by love
- Leading to holiness

Wesley brought together the personal and social sides of Christianity. “To turn Christianity into a solitary religion is to destroy it,” Wesley said. He proved his contention through his work on behalf of the poor, the enslaved, the imprisoned, the unlearned, and the addicted.

In an age when many Christian leaders were defending the lucrative slave trade, Wesley spoke out against it. On February 24, 1741, Wesley wrote the following letter to William Wilberforce, encouraging him to persevere in the struggle against slavery:

> Dear Sir,
>
> Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils. But if God be for you, who can be against you? Are all of them together stronger than God? O, be not weary of well doing! Go on, in the name of God and in the power of His might, till even American slavery (the vilest that ever saw the sun) shall vanish away before it.

But his concern for the practical application of the Gospel was never divorced from the primary message of God’s love and grace in Jesus Christ. In an age when Christianity seemed to be overwhelmed by the rising tide of rationalism and unbelief, the “Evangelical Awakening” ignited new fire in God’s people, inspiring them once again to be a vital force in the life of the world. The spirit of that original Wesleyan movement still rings in the words of this Charles Wesley hymn on God’s sufficient, sovereign, saving grace:

> Father, whose everlasting love thy only Son for sinners gave,
> Whose grace to all did freely move
> And sent Him down a world to save,
> Oh, all ye ends of earth behold the bleeding, all-atoning lamb!
> Look unto Him for sinners sold,
> Look and be saved through Jesus’ name.