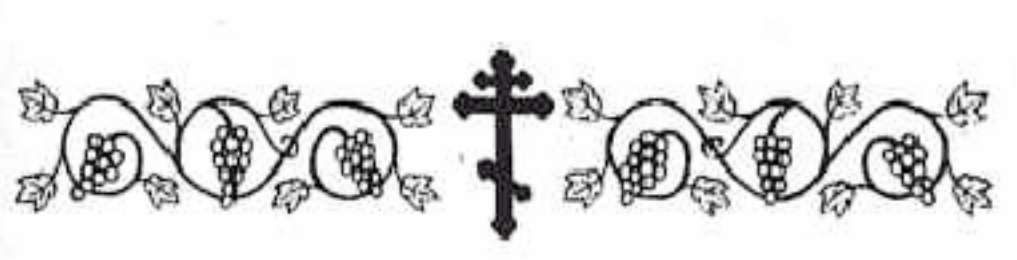

Prayer Before Studying Theology:

O Lord, take full possession of my heart, raise there your throne,
And command there as you do in heaven,
Being created by you, let me live for you;
Being created for you, let me always act for your glory;
Being redeemed by you, let me give to you what is yours;
And let my spirit cling to you alone, for your name's sake.
--John Wesley

John Wesley and the Rise of Early Methodism

To understand Wesley's life and contribution, one needs to understand how seventeenth-century High Church Anglicanism and the early seventeenth-century Moravian movement each contributed to his development.

The High Church tradition in Anglicanism: In describing the Anglican tradition, it has been customary to recognize three parties within the Church of England up until the middle of the nineteenth century:

1) The High Church party represented a kind of reformed Catholicism, in which the tradition of the early and medieval periods of the church, (as carried forward in the Church's pattern of worship and devotional practices) was purified of superstitious accretions, so that doctrines and practices not grounded in the Scriptures and the early history of the Church were rejected.
   - Examples: Bishops Jeremy Taylor (1613-1667) and Thomas Ken (1637-1711).

2) The Low Church party, which represented a type of Reformed piety that looked to Calvin and those members of the English Reformation who were strongly influenced by Calvin. While agitating for a simple order of worship and against traditional rituals and ceremonies, they were willing to keep the basic framework of Prayer Book worship and therefore remained within the state church (unlike the Puritans, who advocated the regulative principle of worship and were eventually ejected from or left the state church).
   - Examples: Bishops William Beveridge (1637-1707) and Simon Patrick (1626-1717).

3) The Latitudinarian party, which was originally quite small but became a significant force between 1660 and 1850 and then again from the end of the nineteenth century into the first half of the twentieth century. Generally sympathetic to plain (low church) worship, they
   - wanted only the most minimal set of beliefs to be required of churchmen and
   - placed great faith in reason for promoting social and religious progress.

High Churchmen were characterized by

- their knowledge of classical and patristic (early Christian) literature and
- their ability to write Christian poetry, prayers, sermons and devotional material in a literary style that was elevated in tone and very vivid, but retained its clarity and accessibility.
    - Meditation upon the mysteries of the faith, particularly as set forth in the sacraments, was a major theme in their writings.

Although they were a varied group, one often gets the impression of High Churchmen as being gentlemen on the fringes of the aristocracy who, had their ecclesiastical and social responsibilities been lighter, would have preferred to retire to some rural setting for a quieter life of unhurried study and contemplation.

Their devotional works are often characterized by a serious moral tone and a sense of responsibility before God (not only for the conduct of one's own life, but also for the moral and spiritual benefit of others) which one misses in writers of a more liberal, mystical or sectarian bent.

One emphasis found in the mid-seventeenth century High Churchmen is on "holy living," a state which one is only able to attain after much serious self-examination, a consciousness of one's sins, the regular practice of self-denial and reflection upon one's own mortality, so that one might dedicate oneself totally to the love of God and prepare oneself as a temple which God might desire more completely to inhabit. Cf. Jeremy Taylor's (1613-1667) "act of desire" in preparation for receiving the Lord's Supper in his work *Holy Living*:

> Lord Jesus, come quickly; my heart is desirous of Thy presence and would entertain thee, not as a guest, but as an *inhabitant*, as the Lord of *all* my faculties. Enter in and take possession, and dwell with me for ever, that I also may dwell in the heart of my dearest Lord, which was opened for me with spear and love.

Life of John Wesley (1703-1791)

Born Epworth 1703. Father (Samuel) rector of Epworth; grandparents on both sides were prominent Dissenters (i.e. Puritans ejected from the established church). Under the guidance of his mother Susanna, brought up in an environment of relatively strict religious and moral discipline.

Educated at Oxford (entered Christ Church 1720; elected fellow of Lincoln College 1726, where he taught Greek and basic philosophy [logic] and supervised disputations by undergraduates)

1725 (ordained deacon)-1728 (ordained priest):

- 1725: reads Bp. Taylor's *Holy Living and Dying*, which awakens him to <u>the need for a purity of intention</u>;
- 1726: reads Thomas à Kempis' *Imitation of Christ*, which showed him <u>the need for a religion of the heart</u> (1726).
- 1727-1728: reads William Law (*Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*) and <u>realizes that he must devote himself totally to God</u>.
    - Cf. p. 102 on baptismal grace lost through persistence in sin;
    - Wesley consequently read Scripture, prayed and yet was unacquainted with inward holiness, then gradually recognized the need for this (p. 103).

1729: John Wesley assumes leadership of the Holy Club which had been founded at Oxford by his brother Charles (meetings intended to promote Bible study, prayer, frequent communion)

- Compare the prior emergence of Anglican religious societies in England in the 1690's under Anthony Horneck (a Lutheran pietist who had emigrated to England and founded a peculiarly English version of the *collegium pietatis*)
    - focus on baptized person's search for spiritual growth with society rules as basis for developing a rule of life (see Bunton, p. 38);
    - strong sacramental focus (frequent communion)
    - desire to arrive at a holy life (works of charity; dues paid and distributed to the poor)
    - compared to the Halle Lutheran pietist *collegium pietatis*, the Anglican religious societies were typically a bit less focused on the exposition of Scriptures or the subjective appropriation of spiritual realities described according to the stages of the *ordo salutis*
- John Wesley also begins the study of early Christian writers (esp. Greek ascetical writers, e.g. Gregory of Nyssa and ps.-Macarius) and reads various works on repentance, the fasts of the church, and early Christian worship.
    - P. 101: Wesley concludes that the unity of the church has not been sufficiently emphasized/accounted for in thinking about doctrine/practice
    - Wesley argues that the consensus of the early church should be used as a norm to guide reflection/devotion (the Vincentian canon=we should believe what has always been everywhere believed by everyone), though he admits this can be overvalued (p. 77)

1730 Wesley begins to visit the poor and prisoners

- see p. 103 on works of charity and mercy plus simplicity, fasting and self-examination
    - On self-examination (the *examen*), see also pp. 79, 85

1735-1737 Wesley sails to Georgia to do missionary/pastoral work (see Whaling, p. 16), where his inexperience, rigidity, and fondness for high church traditions irritate the congregation; forced to flee when he reneges on a commitment to marry Sophia Hopkey and becomes the object of legal action.

1738 under the influence of the Moravian Peter Böhler, awakens to faith/assurance and visits Moravians in Germany but then broke with the English Moravians over relationship between justification and works of charity and over their quietism in regard to seeking guidance.

- Pp. 104-105: trusting in one's own righteousness (while serving sin and thinking, because one experiences the terrors of the law and the comforts of the Gospel that one already has faith and only needs more of it) vs. trusting God's righteousness (and recognizing that one *needs* faith in Christ→being victorious over sin)
    - For this contrast, cf. pp. 136-137, but note the interiorization which possibly discounts the use of the means of grace (due to the influence of later Pietism)
    - Compare p. 105 where faith is a victory that leads to "dominion over sin and constant peace from a sense of forgiveness" (note the influence of Francke and later Halle Pietism)

        - P. 106-107:
            - "no one could have such a sense of forgiveness and not *feel* it"
            - "a sense of pardon for all past, and freedom from all present, sins"
            - "a full reliance on the blood of Christ shed for *me*, a trust in him, as *my* Christ, as *my* sole justification, sanctification and redemption"
            - Scriptures open, speak, as in the garden scene in Augustine's *Confessions*: "I felt my heart strangely warmed, I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone…and an assurance was given to me…temptations…cried out and…fled away.
        - P. 127-128: Faith associated with confidence, certainty and inner vision of eternal, spiritual things
        - Pp. 129-130: Internal evidence more important than external evidence (compare Zinzendorf's views here), since the former is
            (a) not weakened by the transmission of testimony over the ages and
            (b) accessible to the simple
- P. 99: Like Zinzendorf, belief/faith in Christ not a matter of external evidences but of inward conviction (cf. p. 134), inward feeling being the most infallible of proofs, with the result that the heart is no longer troubled or fears but has peace.
    - See also p. 131 on superiority to the passions and being able to walk as Christ walked; though not necessarily experiencing joy, which as a divine consolation comes and goes. Contrast the Moravians' teaching that *Glückseligkeit* ("joyous blessedness," i.e. the joy of knowing Christ is part of faith/assurance).
        - P. 132 An evidence of holiness and happiness
- P. 101: Like Tersteegen, feared that Lutheran/Reformed/Moravian emphasis upon inward faith will obscure the need for good works (this corrected by the moralism of high church Anglican writers)
    - True love requires complete surrender of self and total commitment to God and his work in the world; compare the covenant prayer on pp. 140-145 with Tersteegen's testament written in his own blood.
    - P. 122: value of universal, disinterested love, which is productive of the right affections and actions
        - Sanctification=true love (perfect charity)=Christian perfection=regeneration/restoration of the image and partaking of the divine nature has profound ethical implications

1739 open air preaching, itinerancy

- Wesley hopes to recruit others and create an evangelical preaching order like the Franciscans or Dominicans in the late middle ages, i.e. an order of soundly converted (regenerate) persons who were committed to
    - living a simple life
    - obedience to a rule of prayer and life

- itinerant preaching to reach the common people, particularly those who were
  - alienated from the church
  - unreached by the church in the countryside or
  - had recently moved to the city and were unconnected with the church.
- care for the poor and the sick

1742: development of the class meeting

- Those who were responded to the open air preaching and became members of the society of Methodists tended to drift and fall away, so Wesley introduced a hierarchy of interlocking groups which were oriented to fulfilling the mission of the Church (compare Zinzendorf's groups at Herrnhut) and could be disbanded when they ceased to perform their function or were no longer necessary
  - These groups were intended to be a supplement to the public worship of the congregation, rather than a competitor with or replacement of the latter.
  - The most important of the groups for the converted was the class meeting. One could no longer be a member of the society of Methodists unless one actively participated in a class meeting where one gave a report of one's spiritual condition (tickets issued only to those who participated regularly in the class meeting were necessary to enter society functions). Group leaders also met group members individually on a regular basis outside the group.
    - This created an effective format in which lay leaders could be discipled and developed and the mission of the church contextualized and carried out by these lay leaders.
  - For the zealous, one could also join one of a variety of segmented, affinity-based groups (i.e. a band) (persons of same sex, age, marital status) in which confession was practiced (see p. 65 and compare Zinzendorf's groups at Herrnhut) (those wishing to join a band underwent rigorous screening prior to admission—attendance at the band was encouraged but not compulsory).
    - Note also the existence of penitent bands, for those being disciplined for misconduct but desiring restoration to the movement.
  - Finally, the development of leaders who could be entrusted with more responsibilities required the formation of select societies (persons of exemplary character, including women). As one moves through the small group structure toward this higher level, there is less structure/interrogation by the leader and greater disclosure, which requires greater discretion/confidentiality.
- Note the way in which voluntarism permeated the structures used by early Methodism. By "voluntarism" I mean that to enter the society, class meeting, etc. one must make a personal decision to join the group, so that people choose to associate with those whom they trust (as opposed to being compelled by the

society or the state to associate only with some longstanding, historically-accepted institutional entity.)

- This voluntaristic small group structure helped establish early Methodism as a group that could respond quickly to
    - large-scale demographic changes (creating affinity groups among persons new to the city) and
    - socio-economic changes
        - urbanization and industrialization, which caused displacement;
        - trade guilds were being replaced by domestic industries and monopolistic tendencies were emerging;
        - the enclosure of private land limited the access of the poor to grazing land
            - A series of acts of Parliament between 1709 and 1869 (esp. after 1750) required that private lands (fields, meadows, pastures and other cultivatable lands) be fenced off from common lands. Traditionally, individual cultivators had held a number of small, dispersed parcels of land which were treated as being under the control of the cultivators only during the growing season; after harvesting and until the next growing season the land was treated as common land and used by the community for the grazing of village livestock and other purposes. Enclosure was supposedly enforced to encourage greater agricultural efficiency, but also increased the amount of pasturage available to larger and more affluent landholders, to the detriment of persons who were poorer and smaller landholdings. Enclosure involved the putting of a fence or hedge around a piece of open land to prevent the exercise of common grazing rights and the use of the land by others for various other purposes.

  This allowed the voluntaristic small group structure to fill an emerging gap in church life and to disciple persons who had been poorly reached by the church but were now beginning to acquire positions of skilled labor and an expanded social role. This incidentally helped to retard other, secularizing tendencies and bring significant new resources into the Christian movement.

The Role of Small Groups in Promoting and Sustaining Spiritual Renewal in the Early Modern Period (Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries)

As Bunton notes, this does raise some interesting questions about how one should evaluate the Pietist tradition of small groups that we have examined over the last few weeks. We may distinguish between

- groups used to renew the broader church and
- groups that had elected to be autonomous from the church and had their own eldership/teaching office.

Did either of these models (or the hybrid forms used by Zinzendorf and Wesley) achieve its potential?

- To what extent did they promote the priesthood of all believers, so that all believers were equipped and able to
    - offer basic private teaching of the faith,
    - hear confessions and declare God's forgiveness of sins to all who repent,
    - offer guidance regarding assurance of salvation, and

- practice and encourage the use of spiritual disciplines like prayer, fasting and meditation?
    - Consisting of quasi-family relationships among people who have experienced conversion/new birth, the small group could provide avenues for advance in the Christian life which were simply not possible for the individual to achieve by himself or herself:
        - a more intimate form of sharing and pastoral care, while still emphasizing the corporate nature of the faith
        - a high degree of unity and relative equality despite differences in social background
        - accountability with multiple persons, particularly where there is some form of explicit covenant among group members as e.g. among the Anabaptists and early Methodism (admittedly, the idea that a transformed life will show the fruit of good works can have elements of both truth and untruth about it, depending upon how it is presented)
- How to maintain quality control when the pastor is not present? (Review the sermon, read approved sermons [the *postilla*] and devotional works, so that limits are placed on the development of the small groups and ultimately there is a heavy reliance on public preaching)
- Families as little churches and responsible for primary religious instruction (catechesis).
- The small group structure was an appropriate vehicle for material and spiritual assistance to persons in need in the local community
    - visiting the poor and the sick and bringing them food and medicine
    - visiting prisoners
    - establishing charitable schools/medical clinics for the poor,

  all the while working for the conversion of the religiously indifferent and spiritually careless.

I am no longer my own, but yours.
Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will;
put me to doing, put me to suffering;
let me be employed for you or laid aside for you,
exalted for you or brought low for you;
let me be full, let me be empty;
let me have all things, let me have nothing;
I freely and heartily yield all things to your pleasure and disposal.

X_____