

Change You Can Believe In

Two speakers:

- each generating tremendous media attention –writes ups in all the national papers
- each attracting large crowds, often in the tens of thousands.
- and each talking about “change:” change you can believe in, literally.

Barack Obama? John McCain? Sarah Palin? No, I’m talking about 18 century England’s two mega-famous preachers, George Whitefield and John Wesley.

Obama, McCain, Palin – even Billy Graham, Rick Warren and Joel Osteen had nothing on these guys. When Whitefield would preach, usually in an open field near a factory or coal mine, he’d often attract upwards of 20,000 people, some times more than 30,000. He often spoke without notes and always without a microphone (Charles Wesley said Whitefield had a voice that could “raise the dead”).

George Whitefield’s message was all about change. **"Come poor, lost, undone sinner,"** he’d say to his audience at the end of his sermons, **"come just as you are to Christ."** This was an invitation to repent of your sins, accept Christ as your personal savior and allow him to change your heart.

Hundreds of thousands at these preaching events accepted this invitation and experienced spiritual awakening.

It was actually Whitefield who got John Wesley started as a revival preacher, asking him to speak at one of these big gatherings. At first Wesley was reluctant (he’d always preached in a sanctuary to people seated in orderly pews), but he gave in and was soon hooked. Within a few years, Wesley was also preaching to thousands. He, too, preach a message of change: change of heart and life. Thousand came to hear him and give their lives to Christ.

All over England, Whitefield and Wesley were household names. They were the “rock super stars” of their age.

And yet these two friends were different in many ways. Wesley, in particular, became increasingly concerned about the long-term impact of Whitefield's dynamic preaching.

Crowds would flock to hear Whitefield, and many in them would respond by publically declaring their faith in Christ. But Wesley wondered what became of these people once the initial excitement had passed.

Whitefield didn't have much of a system to ensure new converts found their way into a local church or small group. Whitefield thought that was the responsibility of the local parish priest. And in any case, he was all about awakening faith, not sustaining it.

But John Wesley said without a way to sustain and deepen faith, people are apt to slip back to where they were before. Wesley said it was like starting a fire. The initial blaze might burn bright for a time, but to last, a fire needs to be fed. Otherwise those who are initially "fired up" soon become "burned out."

In other words, deep, lasting change – the kind you could really believe in – required something more than just an initial "blaze" of faith.

Flash in the Pan

I think many of us understand what Wesley was saying. We've had that initial blaze of faith:

- we experienced something incredible during a worship service – maybe around the communion table or during confirmation – and God seemed so real and close
- or maybe we heard an incredible speaker at a retreat or a conference, and our faith seemed to take a leap forward.
- Or maybe we experienced a personal crisis – the death of a love one, the loss of a job, the end of a relationship. The pain moved us to pray or read the Bible, and for a time, we experienced a new birth of faith.

Such powerful experiences, both positive and negative, can fire up our faith. They really do make us feel alive to God in a new way. They make the world look different. They make us feel different.

And yet, when waters of baptism are evaporated or when the speaker's words fade from memory or the pain of a crisis lessens, or new distractions grab us or other crises erupt or old demands get in our face, what keeps our new faith from returning to the "same old, same old?"

Grant's 1974

One of my favorite Amy Grant songs is 1974. In the song she talks about how she felt as a teenager on the day she and some of her friends were baptized. She gives voice to the enthusiasm and commitment she felt that day:

We were young
None of us knew quite what to say
But the feeling moved
Among us in silence anyway
Slowly we had made
Quite a change
Somewhere we had crossed a big line
Down upon our knees
We had tasted holy wine
And no one could sway us
In a life time

And yet, in the chorus, the adult Amy Grant voices her fear of losing what she had in that moment. She prays:

Stay with me
Make it ever new
So time will not undo
As the years go by
How I need to see
That's still me

Working It Out

John Wesley would've understood both her fear and longing. He knew faith is precious but also fragile. Like a new fire, our faith needs carefully tended.

One of his favorite Bible verses was found in the passage _____ read to us this morning from Philippians, where Paul says:

I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.

Another favorite verse of Wesley's was also found in this letter, the place where Paul challenges Christians to **"work out your own salvation with fear and trembling."**

Wesley shared Paul's confidence that God would finish the good work he'd begun in us, but he also believed with Paul that spiritual change comes only to those who earnestly and actively seek it. It's a partnership. God working in us and with us to make us new.

One of Wesley's favorite illustrations for this was to talk about spiritual growth as like moving into a house (that's why there's a house on the front of the bulletin). Our first step of faith is like landing on the porch of a house. God invites us in, we step up and God opens the door for us. But that's not where it ends. We can't live in the doorway. Too easy to slip back out into the cold. So God calls each of us move into the house of faith, to explore all the rooms and make our home.

Three Simple Rules

This is where the Three Simple Rules come in: 1) Do no harm; 2) Do good; and 3) stay in love with God.

As Wesley's preaching began to stir up new faith in more and more people, he realized he needed to develop a way to sustain and deepen their faith. To do this, he did two things: he organized these first "Methodists" into small groups so they could watch over one

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another in love and he gave them three simple rules, which if practiced, would taken across the threshold of faith and deeper into the heart and home of God.

He based these three rules on Jesus' Great Commandments "to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and your neighbor as yourself." Doing no harm and doing good are how you love your neighbor; doing what you need to do to stay in love with God (worship, prayer, Bible Study, Holy Communion) is how you love God with heart, soul, mind and strength.

Practice these Three Simple Rules and your faith will grow, Wesley said.

Over the next five weeks, you and I have the opportunity to put Wesley to the test. Read the book, use the devotional, attend worship, participate in Sunday school, and be a part of a small group. And above all, live the three simple rules day by day: do no harm, do good, and stay in love with God.

If we long for real change, these are some of the ways we must seek it. And if we seek it, I trust God will work it in us.