Article 10 – The Evangelical Revival: Renewing the Church in Eighteenth-Century England

By the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Church of England had survived the upheavals of the Reformation, the English Civil War, the Commonwealth, and the Restoration. The monarchy had been restored in 1660, bishops had returned, and the Book of Common Prayer once again shaped the worship of the established Church. Outwardly, the Church appeared secure, yet some believed something was missing.

Critics complained that Christianity had become too comfortable and conventional. In some parishes, clergy held several livings and were seldom present among their people. In others, worship could seem formal and detached from everyday life. We should not take these criticisms as descriptions of every parish across England. The eighteenth-century Church of England contained many faithful clergy and active congregations, but there was a growing conviction among some Christians that the Church needed spiritual renewal.

Out of this concern emerged the Evangelical Revival.

Many of the leaders of the English Revival were Anglican clergy who wanted to awaken the Church from within. They emphasized personal faith, conversion, the authority of Scripture, the grace of God, and the call to live a transformed life.

Among the most important Anglican leaders of the Revival were three priests: John Wesley, Charles Wesley, and George Whitefield.

The story begins at Oxford University in the late 1720s and early 1730s. John and Charles Wesley became part of a small group committed to disciplined Christian living. They prayed together, studied Scripture, received Holy Communion regularly, fasted, visited prisoners, assisted the poor, and tried to order every part of their lives around their faith. Other students mocked their disciplined approach and called them “Methodists” because of their methodical religious practices. The name was intended as an insult, but it eventually became the name of the movement. Another member of the circle was George Whitefield, who would become one of the most popular preachers of the eighteenth century.

The members of what became known as the Holy Club were deeply religious, but for John Wesley disciplined religion did not necessarily bring spiritual assurance. Wesley struggled with questions about his own faith and salvation.

On May 24, 1738, Wesley attended a religious society meeting in Aldersgate Street in London. This was not a regular parish church service, but a gathering for prayer and spiritual encouragement.

While listening to someone read from Martin Luther’s Preface to the Epistle to the Romans, Wesley later recorded, “I felt my heart strangely warmed.” He continued that he felt he trusted Christ alone for salvation and received an assurance that Christ had taken away his sins.

The Aldersgate experience became a defining moment in Wesley’s life. This does not mean that he had previously possessed no Christian faith. He was already an Anglican priest, missionary, student of Scripture, and deeply committed Christian. Rather, Aldersgate marked a new experience of assurance and a deepened understanding of justification by faith and the grace of God. Wesley became increasingly convinced that God’s grace could be personally known and experienced. This emphasis upon conversion and assurance of faith became one of the central characteristics of the Evangelical Revival.

While John Wesley became the great organizer of the movement, George Whitefield became one of its most powerful preachers. Whitefield possessed an extraordinary ability to communicate with large crowds. In 1739, he began preaching outdoors to coal miners near Bristol, many of whom had little connection with the parish church. Thousands came to hear him preach.

Outdoor preaching was controversial. Anglican clergy were normally expected to preach within churches and within established parish structures. Preaching in fields and other public places seemed disorderly to many church leaders.

John Wesley was initially uncomfortable with the idea. Whitefield persuaded him to try field preaching, and Wesley soon became convinced of its effectiveness.

This decision transformed the revival movement. Preachers could now reach miners, labourers, tradespeople, and others who had little connection with a parish church. Crowds numbering in the thousands gathered to hear sermons about sin, grace, forgiveness, conversion, and new life in Christ. The Church was moving beyond its walls.

Wesley eventually expressed the missionary spirit of the movement in the famous phrase, “I look upon all the world as my parish.” He did not mean that parishes were unimportant. Wesley remained an Anglican priest throughout his life. Rather, he believed that the Church’s mission could not be restricted by traditional parish boundaries when people were spiritually neglected.

The revival quickly became more than a series of exciting sermons. Wesley understood that religious enthusiasm could disappear unless people were formed into communities. He therefore organized converts into societies, classes, and bands where people prayed together, studied Scripture, encouraged one another, cared for those in need, and held one another accountable in their Christian lives.

In a sense, Wesley’s genius was not simply that he could preach; it was also his ability to organize the revival into a movement.

The revival also found expression through music. Charles Wesley wrote thousands of hymns and sacred poems that expressed the theology of the revival in language people could sing and remember. Among his hymns are “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing,” “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling,” “O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing,” and “Christ, Whose Glory Fills the Skies.”

For Charles Wesley, hymns were more than decorations added to worship. They were theology set to music. Through singing, people learned about grace, salvation, holiness, the love of Christ, and the work of the Holy Spirit. Long after particular sermons were forgotten, people remembered the hymns and continued to sing them.

At the heart of the Evangelical Revival was the conviction that Christian faith should transform human lives. The revivalists emphasized several themes: the authority of Scripture, humanity’s need for salvation, the assurance of God’s grace, and growth in holiness.

For John Wesley, holiness was never simply a private spirituality. He famously taught that Christianity was a “social religion.” By this he meant that Christian faith and holiness could not be lived in isolation from others. Faith should change how Christians treated the poor, prisoners, workers, neighbours, and strangers.

The revival therefore produced considerable charitable and social activity. Revivalists visited prisoners, established schools, distributed food and clothing, provided medical assistance, and

encouraged practical care for those living in poverty. Personal conversion and social responsibility belonged together.

The Evangelical Revival, however, was not a single, unified movement. Significant theological disagreements emerged, particularly over the nature of salvation and predestination. George Whitefield embraced a Calvinist understanding of election, while John Wesley rejected Calvinist predestination and emphasized that God's saving grace was offered to all. These disagreements contributed to the development of different evangelical and Methodist streams.

At the same time, tensions were growing between Wesley's movement and the structures of the Church of England. As the revival expanded, Wesley increasingly relied upon lay preachers because there were not enough sympathetic Anglican clergy to serve the growing Methodist societies. This unconventional ministry caused concern among some Church authorities.

Nevertheless, Wesley repeatedly insisted that he had no intention of leaving the Church of England. He remained an Anglican priest until his death in 1791. Yet the movement he created had developed its own preachers, societies, meeting houses, conferences, and structures. After Wesley's death, the separation gradually became more definite, and Methodism developed into an independent Christian tradition.

The Evangelical Revival, however, did not disappear from the Church of England with the emergence of Methodism.

A strong evangelical movement remained within Anglicanism. It included figures such as John Newton, a former slave-ship captain who later became an Anglican priest and is remembered especially for writing the hymn "Amazing Grace." Newton eventually became a prominent opponent of the slave trade.

Another important figure was William Wilberforce, an evangelical Anglican layperson and Member of Parliament who devoted much of his political career to the struggle against the British slave trade. His evangelical faith was central to his understanding of this work.

This connection between evangelical faith and social reform became an important part of nineteenth-century Anglicanism. The movement also contributed to the growth of missionary organizations and Bible societies. Evangelical Anglicans increasingly believed that the Church had a responsibility to carry the Gospel beyond Britain.

Like every historical movement, however, the Evangelical Revival had its contradictions. George Whitefield, for example, preached to enslaved people, yet he also owned enslaved people himself and actively supported the legalization of slavery in Georgia. His important role in the Evangelical Revival cannot be separated from this deeply troubling part of his life.

Nor should the eighteenth-century Church of England simply be portrayed as spiritually lifeless until the evangelicals arrived. The Church contained other important traditions of prayer, scholarship, pastoral ministry, and charitable work. The Evangelical Revival was one movement within a much larger Anglican story. Nevertheless, its influence brought new energy to the life and mission of the Church.

For the evangelicals, Christianity could never be merely inherited. Baptism, worship, church membership, and Christian culture were important, but they were no substitute for a living faith in God. Faith had to become personal. Grace had to transform the heart. And transformed hearts were called to transform the world around them.

These convictions would become an enduring stream within Anglicanism.