

Book Review

John Wesley in America: Restoring Primitive Christianity

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The book is a revised version of his doctoral thesis on John Wesley in Georgia. The time Wesley spent in Georgia is portrayed as a failure by many authors who have documented his life. Wesley's travel to Georgia illustrates his spiritual struggle before his evangelical conversion at Aldersgate. Hammond steps away from the conventional view of Wesley returning from Georgia as a failure with no purpose for his life. He offers a new reading of this episode: Wesley went to Georgia with a specific purpose but returned stronger to England.

Wesley was introduced to the concept of the roots of the primitive church through his parents and then later by his lecturers in Oxford. Primitive Christianity interested him very much, and he studied the early church vigorously. His journey to Georgia was with the purpose to experiment with the biblical principles he learned and found consistent even up to the early apostolic fathers. Wesley spent

much time understanding the primitive church and worked to implement the same concepts again in the Church of England. As an ordained priest, Wesley longed for renewal in the Church of England. Hammond illustrates all these aspects through careful research into what Wesley understood and how he worked to implement primitive Christianity in the colony of Georgia.

The book indicates all of the critical players in Wesley's life. His parents played an important part in shaping his concept and understanding of the early church. This is often overlooked, as much emphasis is placed on Wesley's ministry after his Aldersgate conversion. The idea of the primitive church was a familiar concept among seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Anglicans. Hammond lays down the primitive church roots in the mind of Wesley in a very structural way. From childhood, his interest was to read about the patristic tradition. His forerunners all studied the 'New Testament model to restore the primitive Christian faith' (p. 17). Many conversations took place among scholars to return the Christian faith to its 'purified sources'. As humanism became the centre for patristic studies in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, it was apologetics that stood firm to defend the church's doctrine and practice. The Church of England apologists held that whatever was first in history is true and whatsoever came later is false. Therefore, humanism was later and argued to be false. As these tensions are sketched, it is the shaping of Wesley that takes place. The primitive church was a concept found in Scripture, and it was traceable through the writings of the early church fathers. It was now evident that the church had moved away from its previous views. Wesley had resources to assist him but also the daily observance that the church needed renewal. It was the influence of others like John Clayton and Thomas Deacon that ensured that Wesley studied the 'doctrine, discipline, and practice of the early church' (p. vii).

As Wesley was interested in the concept of the primitive church, the colony in Georgia was the perfect experimental ground for him and his colleagues. All the chapters reflect how Wesley understood and implemented some of the practices even on the *Simmonds*, the ship on which Wesley and his friends travelled. As they were going to America, the group of friends implemented several personal practices, with the travellers on the ship. This study records the specific methods of their daily

activities. Hammond finds that Wesley was very deliberate in his actions and also in his discussions with his friends and the Moravians on the ship. Hammond does well to illustrate how Wesley thought and what discussions he had with the Moravians and other travellers. This is because of the use of primary resources, including Wesley's writings. There is a continuous line that can be drawn from the writings of the early church and how Wesley was actively thinking and trying to implement the old practices of Christianity. This study outlines factors which may explain why Wesley did not take offence when he was excluded from the pulpits of the Church of England later in his life. The book indicates a clear understanding of Wesley's position, his contemporaneous convictions, and purpose for his actions. The reader becomes aware of his devotion and structural method and the remarkable leader he was. He was a great thinker and strategist.

Wesley's ministry is viewed in a different light when he reached Georgia. Hammond expresses Wesley's thought very well. Wesley is understood in how he engaged with practices and disciplines. As he revised the prayer book, it almost feels as if Wesley assumed that everyone in Georgia would automatically accept it. His descriptions of the clerical practices are described clearly, and Wesley speaks for himself. Wesley wanted a first church structure according to the book of Acts and worked diligently to implement service liturgy and structures like the use of Holy Communion. Wesley was accused of enslaving the people with his methods. His implementation of specific diets and fasting times led Tailfer to charge Wesley as following in the footsteps of the Roman Catholic church. For a group of colonists, these aspects were still sensitive, and they were not always prepared for the changes. Wesley is portrayed as calm but also still keeping his focus to work towards a primitive Christianity. Even his studies regarding fasts and his diet preferences are documented, and Hammond illustrates well the depth and the context in which Wesley functioned.

The study encompasses all of Wesley's conflicts in the period. Wesley was accused of being an enthusiast and by other groups as a Roman Catholic. It is probably the controversy with Sophia Williamson that is the most well known in Wesleyan writings. Hammond addresses this issue in the light of Wesley's ministry

to women. A very clear and descriptive explanation is given regarding their relationship and the intentions of Wesley. Hammond's argument presents evidence from Wesley's writings. Many other authors accused Wesley of adultery with Sophia, Hammond clarifies this by a clear description and timeframe in Georgia. It is also clear that Wesley still acted in the best interest of Sophia and also the church. He was in no position to compromise even if he had personal feelings towards her. Hammond sets the tone of the ongoing controversy and also engages with the arguments of other authors such as Thicknesse.

The book reflects historical study of a specific timeframe in the life of John Wesley. Christianity's primitive roots are contested and argued for in this time. The monograph is well-structured, and the careful and thorough use of primary sources leaves few gaps or areas for critique. As it focusses on historical study, there are no strong arguments to try and convince the reader but purely a compilation of the evidence that has been researched. Hammond briefly extends his work to include Wesley's return from Georgia. Evidence in his writings and ministry indicates that Wesley remained interested in the concept of the primitive church, and this interest continued throughout his lifetime. Wesley's emphasis on the early church was a motive to continue to seek to realise this concept in the church of his day. He understood that change must occur even in conflicting times. It supports Wesley's action to stay an ordained priest with the Church of England until his death because he knew the church required renewal sent from God. He kept his hope and worked diligently to bring change. Hammond's work will have broad appeal for many Christians as they can better understand the thoughts and actions of Wesley's time in Georgia. It also sets a different tone to how Wesley returned to England. Many scholars view this period in Wesley's life and ministry as negative. Wesley self-proclaimed his reliance on works-righteousness by seeking 'assurance of salvation through imitating the spiritual discipline and liturgical practices of the primitive church' (p. 190). Wesley realised his inner spiritual struggle to find assurance of salvation. In 1738 after Wesley returned to England in a meeting held at Aldersgate, he found inner assurance of faith. There is little evidence that Wesley changed his view of Christian ministry after his Aldersgate conversion. Hammond

concludes that 'Wesley did not abandon his belief in the primitive church as a normative model for doctrine and practice' (p. 200).

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