

## June 11<sup>th</sup>

It started as a religious club that flubbed. In 1728, **Charles Wesley** and 2 friends began a small group at Oxford College, the seminary of Anglican priests which taught Luther's theology. Older brother, **John Wesley**, had already graduated but came back as a tutor. He was a very deliberate and organized guy. By the time **George Whitefield** joined the group in 1733 it had 9 members. The focus of the Holy Club group was religious self-discipline. They woke early and fasted and took communion several times a week, observed Saturday Sabbath to prepare for Sunday services. It was somewhat a works righteousness to work for salvation – more Catholic than Lutheran. To understand this, realize that books were few and not allowed outside of libraries. Old Catholic traditions and beliefs crept in the Anglican church, alongside Calvinism.

Whitefield questioned the Holy Club practices. He noted that in John 3 Jesus said he must be born again. Whitefield's solution was however, self-denial leading him to nearly die from malnutrition. In recovery over his rock-bottom efforts to bring about salvation, God's Spirit came to him. He describes, "O! With what joy—joy unspeakable... was my soul filled when the weight of sin went off and an abiding sense of the love of God broke in upon my disconsolate soul!" Whitefield wrote a letter to John Wesley, attempting to share what had happened to him: "Into the gracious arms, I blindly throw myself." Pure grace it was but Whitefield adopted the Puritan Calvinism more than Luther's teaching. The Wesleys, still friends, were a bit standoffish over George's theology.

In 1735, John, Charles, and George, urged by Lutheran Moravians, went to Georgia in America to convert Indians. On the way there, heavy storms raked their small ship and John Wesley cowered below deck. He observed that the Moravians were at peace, he only wished he had that. Whitefield got waylaid preaching in Charleston and Savannah and eventually took his tent meeting crusade north all the way to New Jersey. His message was close to what Billy Graham did years later and it revolutionized American thinking, from religion to politics. But the Wesleys' mission to Indians was a flop and they returned to London. They came under the influence of Peter Bohler, another Moravian. Bohler's teaching on justification by faith alone, not works, was convincing. The Wesleys began to read Luther's teachings on Romans and Galatians, happily realizing that grace was God's work, but the doctrine had not yet been experienced. What they were looking for was *assurance of salvation*. Charles got ill and in his illness found God's presence and assurance. He told John. John struggled for days with what had happened to his brother. He wanted to believe but couldn't and became depressed. Then on the night of May 24, 1738, he rather unwillingly went to a reading party held by some Moravians on Aldersgate Street. What was being read was the only surviving piece of Luther's 1516, *Compendium on Romans*, a book burned by Rome. The surviving portion was the preface. Wesley wrote in his journal, "About a quarter to nine, 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 salvation; and an assurance was given to me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."

John and Charles went on to lead the great Methodist Revival that changed English society and swept Scandinavia. It has a strong emphasis on Christian service and experiencing the Holy Spirit. Methodists are credited for being near to Lutherans theologically. The major difference is in their partial adoption of prevenient grace. This was picked up from a Dutch theologian, Arminius, who objected to Calvin's double election predestination and became almost Lutheran himself. Arminianism holds that men are not born sinful, yet are instantly corrupted (a Catholic concept). Yet God offers his salvation by grace to all and it is up to each person to reach out to accept it. (free will, prevenient grace) [Lutherans believe all of us are born sinful, with only the ability to say NO to God. But the Holy Spirit gives us power to respond to God's call. Calvin was "supralapsarian" – some are predestined to say YES to God and some He predestines for Hell – double election. Catholics often believe they are saved by grace but have obligations, must work out steps of their salvation.]

P.S., the entire *Compendium on Romans* was found! One copy wasn't burned. The Vatican found it in a deep vault and produced it in 1970. In it, we see Luther's brilliance and faith in expounding the book of Romans in pure literal joy – all done a year before the 95 Theses.