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THE ELECTRIFYING JOHN WESLEY!

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What was John Wesley doing when, in 1753, he purchased four portable electrical machines able to subject people to electrical charges? It came about as a result of his fascination with Benjamin Franklin's electrical experiments which became widely known through the publication of his letters to Peter Collison, a member of the British Royal Society. Wesley developed a deep appreciation for the powerful effects of electricity and, along with others of his day, saw great potential for its medical use. The electric machines were able to produce a mild electric charge via a handle which turned a rotating cylinder. He provided this as a free clinical service for the poor, treating a wide range of disorders including ague, knots in the flesh, lameness, leprosy, palpitations, various pains, rheumatism, sprain, swellings, tooth-ache, fits, headaches and inflammations! This form of electrotherapeutic activity might now seem strange to us but it was not uncommon then and the stimulation of nerves and muscles undoubtedly benefited some people.

Wesley became one of the more prominent electrical practitioners of his time and while his influence on the development of this science (which has led on to a wide range of electrically based treatments including ECT and electrical stimulation to reduce inflammation, epilepsy and chronic pain) is disputed his book the *Desideratum or Electricity made Plain and Useful* (1760) was highly praised by none other than Joseph Priestley in his classic *History and Present State of Electricity, With Original Experiments* (1767).

For Wesley it was, typically, a case of science in the service of the poor. And if this still seems to us to be a rather unusual activity for a clergyman and evangelist then we ought to recognise that we now live in an era when the divide between theology and science is much deeper and more disputed than it was in his time. Many clergy offered medical treatment to the poor who could not afford physicians and Wesley was as well informed and as skilled as many of them. He also wrote a *Primitive Physick or An Easy and Natural Way of Curing Most Diseases* which was first published in 1747 and subsequently went through 23 editions. It was the eighteenth century's most popular medical self-help manual.

The separation and, indeed the so-called 'warfare', between faith and science was still to come. It was partly real and partly myth, encouraged by those like A.D. White who, in his influential *Warfare of Science with Theology* (1898) mis-leadingly described Wesley as one who sought to make science subject to theology. Certainly, it is not hard to find places where Wesley opposed various aspects of science (he was, for instance, among the last ones resisting the Copernican system of astronomy) but that emerges out of his deep engagement with many dimensions of science and his willingness to engage in debate. Those who know anything of Wesley will understand that he read voraciously and so he read on a wide range of scientific subjects, was always full of ideas, tended to be eclectic, was

certainly willing to change his mind and, although he made a great contribution to the popularisation of science, he was not always on the right side with respect to scientific discernment. But he was, for instance able to engage in the famous Clarke-Leibnitz controversy concerning absolute and relational theories of space supporting each side in different aspects of their theories.

In rejecting the idea that Wesley was anti-science or that he saw science only as subject to theology it is important not to swing too far in the other direction and exaggerate his scientific influence. He was primarily a clergyman and, in regard to science more of a populariser than an experimental or theoretical scientist. Wesley's attitude to science and the natural world is found in his *Survey of the Wisdom of God in the Creation or a Compendium of Natural Philosophy* (1763) which provided a "plain account of the visible creation, directed to its right end... to display the invisible things of God, his power, wisdom and goodness... He [God] does not impart to us the knowledge of himself immediately... but he has commanded the heavens and the earth to proclaim his existence, to make him known to us... [and] He has raised up men who explore their beauties and become their interpreters". Because the world reveals the nature of God, in his *Address to the Clergy* (1756), he therefore urged preachers to study not only philosophy, but also 'natural philosophy' or, as we would say today, 'science'.

It is possible to see in Wesley how natural philosophy (reason and science) and faith (theology and ministry) engage dynamically. On the one hand, as we have seen, there are very positive connections between the two: firstly, science functions as an aid to healing the sick, secondly, science can show how nature in itself illustrates the attributes of God, and thirdly, the scientifically derived laws of nature can help explain the ways in which divine providence functions.

On the other hand, there were situations where Wesley was obliged to challenge the ways that science was used. Firstly, he objected to those who used science in such a way that God was removed from all direct participation in the natural (including the human) world. Scientific explanations should not be used as an alternative to recognising the handiwork of God. This tendency to push God away led, in his day, to Deism (a remote God not interacting with the world in any way) and, ultimately to atheism. Secondly, he also opposed determinist understandings of science. He accepted much of David Hartley's materialist view of brain functioning but rejected the implication that people have no real liberty of thought or action.

In these debates about the relationship between natural philosophy and theology it is possible to see issues which are still with us today. Indeed, they have become even more conflicted and broader in scope. Pastors today must face many issues relating to *cosmology* (how the science of the origin and evolution of the universe informs a Christian understanding of creation and how to speak about prayer, miracle, and divine action in a universe operating by scientific laws), *anthropology* (human uniqueness and purpose in light of biological evolution, how genetics affects our understanding of spirituality, the implications of neuroscience, the nature/nurture controversy and the scientific and spiritual dimensions of problems such as addiction and depression) and *ecclesiology* (the way a particular ecclesial "ethos" shapes the integration of theology and science, the misunderstandings of the church as being "spiritual" and therefore divorced from creation, the relevance of relativity and space-time theory for conceiving of the redemption, restoration and the church as an eschatological community).

In short, Wesley's struggles with science and faith are reflected in our modern situation and his advice to preachers – to study widely in science – is still sound today. It would be good to follow his example, for he sought to engage evangelical faith with the best science in order to build a bridge between them with the primary, gospel aim of leading people to God who is both Creator and Redeemer.