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JOHN WESTLEY (1636-1678)

Grandfather of John Wesley 1703-1791

By David Hilton

John Westley's father, Bartholomew was rector of Charmouth in Dorset. In 1662 he was ejected from his living. He used his medical skills to support himself and his family financially. Bartholomew lived quietly among his old parishioners. He was generally respected for his benevolence and blameless character. On 15 February 1670 Bartholomew died, and was buried at Lyme Regis.

John Westley was born in 1636. As a schoolboy, he became a convinced Christian. He became a student at New Inn Hall, Oxford, where he was noted for his seriousness and diligence. He studied Oriental languages. He was highly regarded as a devout and promising young student by the great Puritan theologian, Dr John Owen, who had been appointed by Oliver Cromwell as Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University.

John warmly supported Owen's Congregational views, and very likely, Owen's Calvinism. He attached himself, after leaving Oxford, to a Congregational 'gathered church' at Weymouth, where he exercised his gifts as a preacher. His preaching was highly regarded, and led to the conversion of many.

In 1658 when the vicar of Winterborn-Whitchurch, near Blandford, died, the parishioners chose John to be their pastor. John was approved by the county Commission of Triers, a body set up to test the suitability of all candidates for the Christian ministry.

In 1659 John married Miss White, the daughter of John White (1574-1648), Presbyterian minister of Dorchester, who played a significant part in the Westminster Assembly (1643-1649). Miss White was also a niece of Thomas Fuller, the church historian.

In summer 1661, John was put in prison for not using the Book of Common Prayer in his parish church. In 1662 his ministry ceased since he could not conform to Parliament's new Act of Uniformity. His congregation were in tears as he preached his last sermon to them on the text, 'And now brethren, I commend you to God and the word of His grace.'

The Dissenters of Ilminster, Bridgwater and Taunton supported John's clandestine ministry, and he preached in various Nonconformist congregations. He frequently preached for Joseph Alleine, the Puritan author of *'An Alarm to the Unconverted.'*

In 1663 John was invited to become pastor of a Congregational congregation at Poole in Dorset. On four occasions he was imprisoned for preaching illegally. His struggles with persecution and poverty led to his early death in 1678, when he was only 42 years old.

John's son, Samuel, changed the family name to 'Wesley', and left Nonconformity to become an Anglican clergyman. Two of Samuel's sons, John and Charles Wesley, would add their grandfather's Puritan Evangelical faith and Dissenting practices to their Anglican upbringing.

John Westley had exercised an itinerant ministry from 1662, had pastorally cared for the poor, had stuck conscientiously to his principles, and had lived a simple, godly life. He had wanted to go as a missionary to America, but had been prevented from doing so by circumstances.

His grandsons, John and Charles Wesley, would fulfill that dream by going to Georgia, but even more so, by their itinerant evangelism in England. While professing loyalty to the Church of England, John and Charles, started a Methodist movement, which after their deaths, would become a Nonconformist denomination.

David Hilton is a Lay Preacher and retired civil servant living in Wellingborough, Northants.