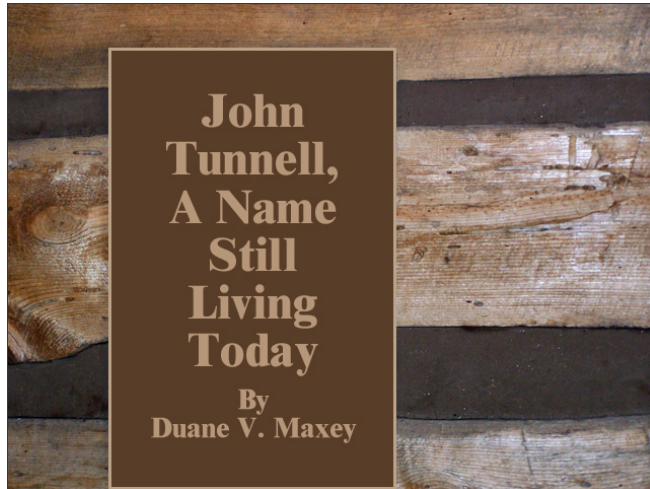


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**JOHN TUNNELL, A NAME STILL LIVING TODAY**  
Compiled, Edited, and Written by Duane V. Maxey



Proverbs 10:7 -- "The memory of the just is blessed: but the name of the wicked shall rot."

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Digital Edition 03-01-09  
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**01 -- ABOUT JOHN TUNNELL AND THE BLESSED MEMORY OF HIS NAME**

**This article is about John Tunnell, whose ministry in Early American Methodism was brief, but blazing with God's power, and whose name lives on yet today in 2009, over 200 years after his death -- a prime example of the above text.**

**Let me begin with a little bit about the ancestry of this mighty evangel of Early American Methodism.**

**William Tunnell, the father of John Tunnell, was born in France to Huguenot parents in about 1703. Fleeing persecution in France, William Tunnell's parents emigrated to Yorkshire, England, where William grew to manhood and married Anne Howard. In about 1736, William and Anne emigrated from England to America, settling in Spotsylvania, near Fredricksburg, Virginia.**

**I have found no record of the birth-date of their son, John Tunnell, nor did I discover whether he was born in England, or in Virginia, but it seems most likely that he was born in Virginia. Another fact I did not learn was John Tunnell's age when he became a Methodist Circuit Rider, but if he was born in 1740, four years after his parents emigrated to America, he would have been 37 years old at the time he entered the traveling connection of the American Methodist Church at the Conference held at Deer Creek, Maryland, on May 20, 1777 -- the latter date being one that is on record.**

**Thus, John Tunnell joined the American Methodist itinerant ranks more than 7 years before the Methodist Episcopal Church was organized -- at the Christmas Conference in Baltimore, Maryland in 1784. He was appointed one of the original Elders in the M. E. Church at that memorable conference, even though he was not present.**

**You see, John Tunnell was a "consumptive" -- a term used in earlier centuries to identify those who suffered from tuberculosis or some other pulmonary disease which in those days were incurable. The reason for Tunnell's absence from the Christmas Conference of 1784 was that he had gone to the West Indies island of St. Christopher's in hope of improving his health.**

**But it is clear that the reason why he was made an M. E. Elder, even though absent, was because he had already become known as a powerful and effective Methodist itinerant. So successful was this Methodist "Apollos" that those on the island of St. Christopher offered him a horse, a room, a servant to wait upon him, and one hundred fifty pounds per year if he would but remain and preach for them! - - an attractive offer, but one that he declined. Even though his life might have been prolonged by remaining in the West Indies, John Tunnell returned to America, and resumed his labors as an M. E. Circuit Rider -- with great success. But it was great success coupled with great sacrifice on his part, and he died just six years later in 1790.**

**My guess is that John Tunnell died at about age 50, or a bit younger, and he spent only 13 years in the M. E. ministry, but, like other great Christian evangelists, the magnitude of his effectiveness was not measured by years, but by the power and depth of his Divine anointing and the totality of his devotion to Christ.**

**Before relating more of the particulars about John Tunnell, let me mention my text once more: "The memory of the just is blessed: but the name of the wicked shall rot." The name of the wicked rots, but the name of many a godly, early American preacher lives on yet today -- including the name, "John Tunnell". He was a man who, though ill in body, was very healthy and powerful spiritually -- a man who was "faithful unto death."**

**Following their emigration to America, others also among the posterity of William and Anne Tunnell entered the ministry, so that the Tunnells became a notable family of preachers. John and his brother Stephen both entered the Methodist ministry, as did David Tunnell, perhaps their younger brother. And, the name "John Tunnell" has not rotted, but is of "blessed memory" even now, in the year 2009!**

**In my online searching, I found one Rev. John Tunnell Ball, a John Tunnell who is an insurance agent, a Dr. John W. (Wes -- probably short for Wesley) Tunnell, another John Tunnell of Tennessee, a John Wallace Tunnell who was a naval pilot, a violinist named John Tunnell, two Baptist pastors named John Tunnell, nine John Tunnells living in Texas, Virginia, Oklahoma, and Toronto, Canada, and a researcher named John Tunnell. Judging from the "finds" of my online search, I could, perhaps, list even more men living today with that name, but here I forebear: "The memory of the just is blessed," and the name of "John Tunnell" lives on, yet today -- more than 200 years after his death in 1790, following a brief ministry of 13 years -- but a ministry that was ablaze with the glory of God!**

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## **02 -- EXCERPTS ABOUT JOHN TUNNELL FROM THE HDM LIBRARY**

**Next, I shall present some excerpts about John Tunnell from the HDM Library which verify what I have written thus far:**

**"John Tunnell was a saintly man of great gifts, who, in East Tennessee and the far West, did pioneer work for thirteen years. He died July, 1790, and Asbury preached his funeral sermon."**

**"John Tunnell was received on probation at the Conference of 1777; a name fragrant to the Methodists of that early day, though familiar to few of our times. "He was truly an apostolic man; his heavenly-mindedness seemed to shine on his face, and made him appear more like an inhabitant of heaven than of earth."**

**"His gifts as a preacher,' says Lee, 'were great.' He was sent in 1777 to the famous Brunswick circuit, Va., where he labored with much usefulness; the next year he traveled Baltimore circuit. After several years of indefatigable labors in the middle states, he was sent, by the Conference in 1787, with four itinerants, among whom was young Thomas Ware, beyond the mountains, to the Holston country, now called East Tennessee. He thus scaled the Alleghenies, and, though comparatively forgotten by us, takes historical rank among the founders of Methodism in the great valley of the West, its most important arena.**

**"A sailor was one day passing where Tunnell was preaching. He stopped to listen, and was observed to be much affected; and on meeting with his companions after he left, he said, 'I have been listening to a man who has been dead, and in heaven; but he has returned, and is telling the people all about that world.' And he declared to them he had never been so much affected by anything he had ever seen or heard before. True it was, that Tunnell's appearance very much resembled that of a dead man; and when, with his strong musical voice, he poured forth a flood of heavenly eloquence, as he frequently did, he appeared indeed as a messenger from the invisible world.**

**"His last appointment was in this frontier, (1789,) where he fell at the head of a little corps of seven itinerants, who were on four circuits, after thirteen years of faithful services, a victim of consumption -- a constitutional tendency developed by his exposures and fatigues.**

**"Of Tunnell one said, that 'he was a man of slender habit, who, early in life, wore himself out in the work of God, and went home to glory. He was a preacher much beloved and greatly blessed. A sweet singer in Israel, he had a soft, clear voice; and his demeanor was humble, meek, and gentle. He was a son of consolation and of affliction.'**

**"The sister of Patrick Henry, wife of General Russell, was saved after hearing a message by John Tunnell. On the occasion he preached an excellent sermon, which produced great effect. His discourse was followed by a number of powerful exhortations. When the meeting closed, Mrs. Russell [Patrick Henry's sister] said to one who was there: 'I thought I was a Christian; but, sir, I am not a Christian -- I am the veriest sinner upon earth. I want you and Mr. Mastin to come with Mr. Tunnell to our house and pray for us, and tell us what we must do to be saved.'**

**"After spending the afternoon in prayer, still neither of the Russells had gotten through. One of the company wrote:**

**"Being much exhausted, the preachers retired to a pleasant grove, near at hand, to spend a short time. On returning to the house we found Mrs. Russell praising the Lord, and the general walking the floor and weeping bitterly. At length she sat down, quite exhausted. This scene was in a high degree interesting to us. To see the old soldier and statesman, the proud opposer of godliness, trembling,**

and earnestly inquiring what he must do to be saved, was an affecting sight. But the work ended not here. The conversion of Mrs. Russell, whose zeal, good sense, and amiableness of character were proverbial, together with the penitential grief so conspicuous in the general, made a deep impression on the minds of many, and numbers were brought in before the Conference closed. The general rested not until he knew his adoption; and he continued a faithful and an official member of the Church, constantly adorning the doctrine of God our Saviour unto the end of his life."

"John Tunnell died near 'Sweet Springs,' in July, 1790. His brethren bore his remains over the mountains, about five miles east of the Sweet Springs. Asbury preached his funeral sermon at Dew's Chapel, and interred him there, among the hills of Western Virginia, where he sleeps without a memorial; but his name will live forever in 'the record on high,' if not on earth. The Minutes of 1790 record in three sentences his obituary, and testify that he was 'a man of solid piety, great simplicity, and godly sincerity; well known and much esteemed by ministers and people.'

"He had traveled extensively through the states, and 'declined in much peace.' Lee says, 'he was greatly lamented.' 'In the Conference of 1787,' says Thomas Ware, 'I volunteered, with two other young men, who esteemed the reproach of Christ greater riches than earthly treasures, to accompany Tunnell to the Holston country'-- words, though brief, yet pregnant with volumes of history. Tunnell was one of the most eloquent preachers of that age; and, though bearing about with him the infirmities of incurable pulmonary disease, he traveled and labored without faltering till smitten down by death, and the hardships of the frontier fields.

"Alas! that our imperfect records admit of so slight a commemoration of such saintly heroism. Asbury, in laying him in the grave, wrote: 'I preached his funeral sermon; my text, "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." We were much blessed, and the power of God was eminently present. It is fourteen years since Brother Tunnell first knew the Lord; and he has spoken about thirteen years, and traveled through eight of the thirteen states; few men, as public ministers, were better known or more beloved. He was a simple-hearted, childlike man; of good learning for his opportunities; he had a large fund of Scripture knowledge, was a good historian, a sensible preacher, a most affectionate friend, and a great saint. He had been declining, in strength and health for eight years, and, for the last twelve months, sinking into a consumption. I am humbled. O let my soul be admonished to be more devoted to God!'"

Here is another excerpt from the HDM Library which makes mention of John Tunnell:

"At one time all Maryland was ablaze with revivals. In New England revival followed revival, some of them of great power. God again visited Virginia in 1787

with a revival which far exceeded that of a decade previous. Jesse Lee, in his account of this revival, says:

**"It was common to hear of souls being brought to God while at work in their houses or in their fields. It was often the case, that the people in their cornfields, white people, or black, or sometimes both together, would begin to sing, and being affected would begin to pray; and others would join with them, and they would continue their cries till some of them would find peace to their souls. Some account of this work was published in the newspapers at different times, and by this means spread through all the United States."**

**"Asbury's joy in recording the triumphs of the gospel is seen on every page of his Journal:**

**"Wilson Lee is all upon the wing in the work. Glory, glory, glory!"**

**"Surely, we may say our Pentecost is fully come this year when we recollect what God hath wrought.' 'The people sang and leaped for joy of heart. They have beaten down strong drink, and the power of God is come.' 'The spirit of the Lord came among the people, and sinners cried aloud for mercy. Perhaps not less than twenty souls found the Lord.' 'There was a divine stir in the congregation.' 'Today I received a letter from Brother Tunnell, informing of the spreading of the work of God in several parts of North Carolina.' 'The fire of the Lord spreads from house to house and from heart to heart.' 'Many professed to be converted to God.' 'The fire spreads throughout the whole neighborhood.' 'The last quarterly meeting was a wonder-working time. Fifty or sixty souls then and there appeared to be brought to God.' 'It was a great day to saints and sinners. Fifty or sixty souls have been strongly and powerfully converted to God.' 'We have good news from a far country. Jersey flames with religion. Some hundreds are converted.' 'The happy news of the revival of the work of God flies from one part of the continent to the other, and all partake of the joy.'"**

**Here is yet another excerpt about John Tunnell from the HDM Library:**

**"Methodism, in its early days, was favored not only with its sons of thunder, but also its sons of consolation. Tunnell was an Apollos -- 'mighty in the Scriptures,' mighty in eloquence. His speech distilled as the dew, and as the rain upon the new-mown grass. He moved, melted, and charmed his audiences..."**

**Thomas Ware, one of Tunnell's itinerant co-laborers, wrote the following concerning the sailor's awe when hearing him preach:**

**"A sailor was one day passing where Tunnell was preaching. He stopped to listen, and was observed to be much affected; and on meeting with his companions after he left, he said, 'I have been listening to a man who has been dead and in heaven; but he has returned, and is telling the people all about that world.' And he**

declared to them he had never been so much affected by anything he had ever seen or heard before. True it was that Tunnell's appearance very much resembled that of a dead man; and when with his strong musical voice he poured forth a flood of heavenly eloquence, as he frequently did, he appeared, indeed, as a messenger from the invisible world."

The following is Thomas Ware's account of the conversion of Patrick Henry's sister under John Tunnell's ministry during the M. E. Conference held in Holston, May 13-15, 1788:

"The Methodist Conference in the West was held in Holston, in 1788. Bishop Asbury did not attend, but Asbury's God was there.

"We were not idle,' says Thomas Ware, 'and the Lord gave us many souls in the place where we were assembled, among whom were General Russell and lady, the latter a sister of the illustrious Patrick Henry. I mention these particularly, because they were the first-fruits of our labors at this conference.

"On the Sabbath we had a crowded audience; and Mr. Tunnell preached an excellent sermon, which produced great effect. The sermon was followed by a number of powerful exhortations. When the meeting closed, Mrs. Russell came to me and said, "I thought I was a Christian; but, sir, I am not a Christian, I am the veriest sinner upon earth. I want you and Mr. Mastin to come with Mr. Tunnell to our house, and pray for us, and tell us what we must do to be saved." So we went, and spent much of the afternoon in prayer, especially for Mrs. Russell; but she did not obtain deliverance. Being much exhausted, the preachers retired to a pleasant grove near at hand, to spend a short time. After we had retired, the general, seeing the agony of soul under which his poor wife was laboring, read to her, by the advice of his pious daughter, Mr. Fletcher's charming address to mourners, as contained in his Appeal. At length we heard the word "Glory!" often repeated, accompanied with the clapping of hands. We hastened to the house, and found Mrs. Russell praising the Lord, and the general walking the floor and weeping bitterly, uttering, at the same time, this plaintive appeal to the Saviour of sinners: "O Lord, thou didst bless my dear wife while thy poor servant was reading to her; hast thou not a blessing also for me?" At length he sat down, quite exhausted. This scene was in a high degree interesting to us. To see the old soldier and statesman -- the proud opposer of godliness -- trembling, and earnestly inquiring what he must do to be saved, was an affecting sight. But the work ended not here. The conversion of Mrs. Russell, whose zeal, good sense, and amiableness of character were proverbial, together with the penitential grief so conspicuous in the general, made a deep impression on the minds of many; and numbers were brought in before the conference closed. The general rested not until he knew his adoption; and he continued a faithful member of the Church, and an official member, after he became eligible for office, constantly adorning the doctrine of God our Saviour unto the end of his life."

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### 03 -- A SKETCH OF JOHN TUNNELL

At the risk of seeming to be too repetitious and redundant, I shall next present most of a sketch of John Tunnell by Matthew H. Moore in his 1884 book, "Pioneers Of Methodism In North Carolina And Virginia." This is an excellent sketch, and though the reader will find various facts already presented again repeated therein, I present it in hope that it will more firmly fix in the minds of those who read it the powerful influence of one who spent such a short time in the ministry, but who, in spite of his physical illness, did a great work for Christ -- so great that his memory is still blessed today. And, there is much in this sketch that reveals the reasons WHY John Tunnell was able to do such great exploits for Jesus during his brief ministry.

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#### John Tunnell

If the reader will call to mind the appearance of Thomas H. Stockton, and the mellifluous voice of Thomas G. Lowe, he will have formed some idea of John Tunnell, one of the most eloquent and effective preachers of early Methodism, and one of the most saintly characters that ever adorned the Christian profession in any age or in any denomination. They were all orators; all consumptives. Tunnell, like Stockton, bore in his features the traces of disease and the appearance of death; like Lowe, his rich, strong, melodious voice charmed all hearers, as his eyes glowed and his pale features were lit up with the inspiration of his theme, and he poured forth upon the listener a flood of heavenly eloquence.

Jesse Lee calls him a "great preacher;" Asbury calls him "a great saint." He was a man dead to the world and its vanities; a man who saw in eternity his home, and was conscious that he was marching steadily there; a man whose life had been severed from the chains of sin, and "hid with Christ in God;" a man who, in the light of God's grace, read his "title clear to mansions in the skies;" a man who loved Jesus, and desired that the whole world should know and love him; a man walking with God in the garden of faith, and merely repeating to his audience, at the place of worship, the message delivered to him in the retreat of prayer.

He did not attain unto this exalted height in the spiritual life without conflicts; and his features were marked by the unmistakable lines of sorrow and humiliation, and intercession and abnegation. A man must sound the depths of human misery before he can begin to comprehend or appreciate the wonder of human redemption. He must taste of the gall and the wormwood before he is prepared to rejoice in God's free grace abounding to the chief of sinners. He must read by the heaven-lit torch of pain in his own heart the mighty mystery of life, and the solemn and awful meaning of duty and destiny, before he is prepared to declare unto others the whole



**counsel of God. So, then, we are prepared to know that Tunnell was called an apostolic man in his day.**

**The supports of his faith had reached down, deep down to the eternal springs of God's purpose, God's will concerning him, and God's everlasting love toward him in Christ Jesus, and with joy he drew water from the wells of salvation. The light of a grand life-purpose shone out through the windows of his soul, and his countenance was radiant with a mighty hope. His words fell upon his hearers as the echo of the answer of divine inspiration to human entreaty. The listener felt that the man before him was just from the mountain-top, where he had conversed, almost face to face, with God. He was a true son of consolation, winning the sinner away from his sins, bearing him on the never-drooping wing of his own strong faith, opening to his enraptured vision the closed doors of the Father's gracious design, and pointing him to the glories and beauties of the kingdom and city of God, purchased for his habitation and enjoyment forever.**

**No better picture could be drawn of Tunnell than that afforded us in a little incident that has come down to us, illustrating the impression he made upon a hardened sinner. A sailor passing one day where he was preaching was attracted by the lute-like voice of the preacher, and paused and listened. He was deeply affected, and on returning to his associates, gave expression to his feelings in these words: "I have been listening to a man who has been dead and in heaven; but he has returned, and is telling the people all about that world."**

**Tunnell entered the traveling connection at the Conference held at Deer Creek, Md., May 20, 1777, and was appointed, with William Watters [who was the First, American-Born Methodist Circuit Rider] and Freeborn Garrettson [the great Revolutionary War-time Methodist Itinerant and Leader] to Brunswick Circuit. This field at that time embraced several counties in Virginia, and, crossing the Roanoke, took in a part of the territory afterward known as "Roanoke Circuit." It numbered thirteen hundred and sixty members. Jesse Lee [First Methodist Historian], then living in Halifax county, North Carolina, was one of the class-leaders. It had been blessed with the labors of Williams, Shadford, Dromgoole, Asbury, and Rankin, and was regarded the most important field in the Connection. Imperial old Brunswick! Not only did it present at that time the highest type of Methodism in America, but ever since have the various branches of our common family continued to draw from its primitive territory some of their ablest defenders.**

**After faithfully serving this charge one year, he was sent to Baltimore Circuit, and for several years preached with great success in the Middle States. His health failing, he sought a milder climate, and removed to St. Christopher's Island, in the West Indies. Not only did the change prove beneficial, but he so won the affections of the people at his new home that he was offered by them a large salary, a furnished house, and a slave to wait upon him, if he would remain with them as their pastor. But he declined their generous offer, returned to America shortly after the Christmas Conference of 1784, where he was elected an elder, and was sent to**

**Charleston, S. C. Methodism was just then being introduced into South Carolina, and this is the first mention of Charleston on the minutes.**

**In 1786 he labored as an "elder" in the Middle States. The next year, at the head of a little band of kindred brave spirits, he bore the banner of Christ across the Blue Ridge, and laid the foundations of Methodism in Western North Carolina and East Tennessee.**

**In 1788 he appears as presiding elder over Tar River, Bladen, New River, Roanoke, Caswell, New Hope, Guilford, Salisbury, Yadkin, and Halifax circuits, in North Carolina. But laborious as was this field of labor, it was on a yet harder field that the consecrated hero was to die.**

**In 1789 he was returned to the Holston District. Although rapidly declining into consumption, he did not shrink from the hardships before him. In that wild, rugged country, amid savage beasts and savage men, he proclaimed the glad tidings of the gospel of peace; and lying down in the wilderness, with no other shelter than the star-lit canopy, we may well imagine that, like Jacob of old, he had visions of angels and dreams of heaven. Asbury, traveling through this country, learned, on July 9th, 1790, of his death at Sweet Springs.**

**His remains were borne by his brethren over the mountains to Dew's Chapel, about four miles east of the Springs. There Asbury preached his funeral, and there he still sleeps, without a memorial...**

**He had not toiled and suffered and died in vain. The seeds he had sown sprung up and produced abundant fruit; and from his unmarked grave in the mountains a voice seems to whisper to us who have taken up the same cross and proclaim the same gospel: "Be faithful to the great trust that is committed to you. Be devoted to Christ. Serve your generation by the will of God. Look beyond for your reward."**

**He has been well and truly styled the Apollos of early Methodism. But not only was he an orator, he was a saint. No man in that body of devoted heroes was more holy, more heavenly-minded, more like his Master; and imbibing the same spirit, he followed to the letter the injunction of the "disciple whom Jesus loved:" "Hereby perceive we the love of God, because He laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren."**

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#### **04 -- IN CONCLUSION**

**No wonder the name of John Tunnell is still living today! "The memory of the just is blessed: but the name of the wicked shall rot." In March of 2009, his name is**

**the living proof of the first portion of Proverbs 10:7, and it should not surprise any if someone named "John Tunnell" is living on earth when Jesus returns!**

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**THE END**