

JOHN WESLEY'S MEANS OF EVANGELISM

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SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

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Wesley built towards a Church where every member was actively an evangelist.

Wesley never self-consciously described himself as an evangelist.

His practice reflected the four forms of communication characteristic of the early Church.

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## I N T R O D U C T I O N

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This essay is an attempt to evaluate the methods of evangelism used by John Wesley during the course of his long ministry in the eighteenth century. Wesley's methods are important, since by their use he exercised a remarkable influence upon the religious and social life of eighteenth-century England. They have a continuing importance, too, for a Church that wants to carry out her Lord's "Great Commission"<sup>1</sup> effectively. In the history of the Church Wesley stands in the front rank of those who have significantly carried forward the mission of the Church. Therefore we do well to pause and learn what we can from his example and experience.

Since it is necessary to consider the claim that "Wesley's supreme instrument was preaching"<sup>2</sup>, we must give a good deal of attention to his preaching ministry. We will be concerned to know what he preached about, how he preached, to whom he preached, where and when he preached. How did his hearers regard him as a preacher, and how was it that his preaching had such considerable influence upon so many of them? The view has been held by some critics<sup>3</sup> that Wesley's success rested upon his abilities as a "hell-fire" preacher, who skilfully manipulated the minds of his hearers, thus driving them by fear to a crisis of conversion. What truth is there in such a charge? And what was Wesley's own attitude to his congregations? Questions such as these demand that we have a clear picture of the background, condition and needs of Wesley's hearers and of the mood of the times in which he lived. What was it like to live in England in the eighteenth century?

The scope of this essay will take us beyond the study of Wesley's formal preaching activity, for this was not the only method or technique that he employed in his work of evangelism. His approach was a many-faceted one, calling to mind the words of St. Paul, "I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some."<sup>4</sup> Thus we will recognize

2/ among Wesley's .....

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1. Matthew 28:19.

2. W.H. Fitchett, Wesley and His Century, London, 1906, p. 179.

3. For example, William Sargant, in his book, Battle for the Mind, London 1957.

4. I Corinthians 9:22 (Revised Standard Version).

among Wesley's means of evangelism such steps as the formation of Societies, the organization of converts into classes and bands, his ventures in the field of education, his measures to provide for the material needs of people, and so on.

While Wesley enjoys a reputation for being a notable preacher, his undoubted flair for adaptation and organization must also be recognized. He was a superb Christian strategist, who, in the course of his long ministry, developed a full-orbed technique of evangelism. His approach was remarkably flexible, thus enabling him to respond effectively to the needs of the situation as they arose. It was not merely because of his ability as a preacher that the results of his work proved to be so far-reaching and enduring. In this Wesley stands in striking contrast alongside his colleague in the Revival, George Whitefield. Whitefield was the greater preacher and orator, but he either did not possess Wesley's gift for organization or saw no need for it. He was content largely to leave everything to preaching, while Wesley, on the other hand, clearly saw the need for the further consolidation and organization of the fruit of the preaching mission.

Wesley regarded preaching as one of the "means of grace" given by God for the blessing of His people and for their Christian growth. We shall see how preaching and the other "means of grace" became "means of evangelism" in Wesley's hands. He made a useful distinction between certain of these means. Some he called "Instituted Means", since they are instituted by God, and witnessed to by the Scriptures. They are therefore indispensable for the Christian. His other category was that of the "Prudential Means", which he saw as arising out of the actual situation in which the work of evangelism was being done, and being shaped by the immediate needs of the moment. To each of these categories we must direct our attention in due course.

In a concluding chapter Wesley's emphasis on holiness will be discussed in its relation to his understanding of the purpose and the direction of his evangelism.

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## Chapter One

THE CHIEF MEANS

"I do indeed live by preaching!" With these words Wesley sums up the JOURNAL entry of his preaching engagements for one day during a journey through Leicestershire<sup>1</sup>. His comment reflects his own estimate of the primary importance of preaching in his total ministry. On page after page of the Journal he records how he preached in places up and down the length and breadth of England, and in Wales, Scotland and Ireland.

In terms of time alone it is clear that preaching was the consuming passion of his life. Wesley's Sermon Register for the period January 14, 1747, to December 25, 1761<sup>2</sup> indicates the frequency with which he preached during that period. As an example, we find that he preached sixty-nine times during May 1751<sup>3</sup> and forty-nine times during May 1761<sup>4</sup>. Such figures were quite usual for him. A comparison of the Sermon Register with the Journal shows that Wesley preached on every possible occasion, and that he usually expounded a text when meeting the Society and the Bands in any place. Often the Journal merely notes that he preached, while the Register for that date has three or more texts. In the words of W.L. Doughty, it shows that

"... on reaching his destination, Wesley preached in the evening and then expounded in a Society Meeting; spent the night in that place; preached at five o'clock the next morning and again before his departure." <sup>5</sup>

It was not unusual for him to preach four or five times a day, often commencing at five o'clock in the morning. In the rare event of illness or extreme weariness, he would allow himself

4/ the luxury .....

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1. Journal, 28th July, 1757.

2. Ibid., Vol. VIII, pp. 171 - 252.

3. Ibid., Vol. VIII, p. 195.

4. Ibid., p. 249.

5. W.L. Doughty, John Wesley, Preacher, London, 1955, p. 185.

the luxury of resting a day or two. Such "rest" might mean "only preaching morning and evening"<sup>6</sup>. When he suffered a sprained ankle, he preached kneeling<sup>7</sup>.

There is a sense in which the accidents of Wesley's ancestral background led him to his high regard for the preaching office and prepared him for this work. His father, grandfather and great-grandfather had all been clergymen. There is little doubt that his mother, herself the daughter of a Puritan divine, also exercised an important formative influence upon him in this regard<sup>8</sup>.

Wesley preached his first sermon in September 1725, soon after he had received deacon's orders in the Church of England<sup>9</sup>. The text was Matthew 6:3 on seeking first the Kingdom of God. The manuscript of the sermon still exists. W.L. Doughty describes it :

"It is a pleasant, neat, compact and ingenuous little discourse, to which exception could hardly be taken, and one calculated to make such of Wesley's hearers as understood him feel happy and comfortable; a sermon couched in Scripture language, containing many Scripture quotations and adaptations and full of good advice, but lacking that pungent exposition of the central doctrines of the Christian Faith that was presently to characterize his preaching and, metaphorically, to 'shake the gates of hell' " 10.

We are dependent for our knowledge of Wesley as a preacher on his own scattered references in his Journal, Diary and Letters, and on the comments and opinions of contemporaries who heard him. His own published sermons cannot be as helpful in this regard as we should like them to be, for they are polished literary works abounding in classical allusions and quotations, intended for a literate reading-public. From them we can certainly learn of the subject-matter of his preaching and of the way he treated Scripture and developed his themes. But

5/ Wesley's preaching ...

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6. Journal, 1st January, 1759.

7. Ibid., 17th February, 1751.

8. See W.L. Doughty, op. cit., pp. 5 - 8, and A. Skevington Wood, The Burning Heart, London, 1967, pp. 27 - 28.

9. Journal, Vol. I, p. 60 (see also Ibid., 16th October, 1771).

10. W.L. Doughty, op. cit., p. 10.

Wesley's preaching was done extemporaneously, so that the published sermons are in the nature of an expansion of his usual preaching. Furthermore, he took great care to present his message in such a way that it would be possible for the simple people in his congregations to understand him. He spoke plainly, simply and directly. Though Wesley does not comment on this point himself, it must be assumed that his method of sermon preparation changed when once his mission got fully under way. Much of his reading was done while travelling on horseback and, in later years, in his chaise. There was now little time for the painstaking detailed preparation of his early years.

He preached a fair amount during the next few years both in and around Oxford, and as a curate for two years in his father's parish at Epworth. In 1746, looking back upon this period of his life, he wrote :

"From the year 1725 to 1729 I preached much, but saw no fruit of my labour. Indeed it could not be that I should; for I neither laid the foundation of repentance, nor of believing the gospel; taking it for granted, that all to whom I preached were believers, and that many of them 'needed no repentance'." <sup>11</sup>

It was not until 1738 that his preaching was to convey a really telling message. A number of factors combined to effect the change. His voyage to Georgia brought him into contact with the Moravians. He was impressed by their trusting, radiant faith, but he did not understand them when they tried to show him "a more excellent way" <sup>12</sup>. In Georgia his clumsy application of a rigid ecclesiastical discipline landed him in serious trouble with the colonists and contributed to the spiritual aridity of his ministry in Savannah. All these things caused him to look deep into his own poverty of soul. Despondently he returned to England in 1738, But the Georgia experience had not been wholly a waste. The truth was beginning to dawn upon him that his soul would not be saved through a change in external environment, but by an inward transformation.

6/ No sooner .....

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11. Works, Vol. VIII, p. 468 - The Principles of a Methodist Farther Explained , 17th June, 1746.

12. Journal, Vol. I, p. 470 - Wesley's review of events leading up to 24th May, 1738.

No sooner had he landed at Deal than he was preaching to a company gathered at the inn <sup>13</sup>. During the next two or three months he preached frequently by invitation in various churches. An arousing note began to appear in his sermons, and was resented by his complacent hearers <sup>14</sup>. Yet Wesley was becoming increasingly dissatisfied with himself. Seeking the counsel of a Moravian friend, Peter Böhler, he "was clearly convinced of unbelief, of the want of that faith whereby alone we are saved" <sup>15</sup>.

His first reaction was to leave off preaching, since he could not see how he could preach to others if he himself did not have faith. Böhler advised him to "preach faith TILL you have it; and then, BECAUSE you have it, you WILL preach faith." <sup>16</sup>. For the next two months Wesley preached this saving faith while he searched for it himself. Increasingly his hearers were disconcerted by his disturbing mode of preaching. Then, on 24th May, he experienced the saving grace of Christ. His soul was liberated. But more important, the preacher was now invested with a message of burning intensity and urgency. He had found "his" gospel to communicate to others.

Wesley stated his understanding of the gospel as follows :

"The gospel (that is, good tidings, good news for guilty, helpless sinners), in the largest sense of the word, means, the whole revelation made to men by Jesus Christ; and sometimes the whole account of what our Lord did and suffered while He tabernacled among men. The substance of all is, 'Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners'; or, 'God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, to the end we might not perish, but have everlasting life'; or, 'He was bruised for our transgressions; He was wounded for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon Him; and with His stripes we are healed.' " <sup>17</sup>.

Wesley's preaching emphasized the love of God and His grace to sinners. When asked what religion it was that he preached, Wesley replied :

7/ "The religion .....

13. Journal, 1st February, 1738.

14. Ibid., 26th February, 1738.

15. Ibid., 4th March, 1738.

16. Ibid.

17. The Way to the Kingdom, Sermon VII, Forty-Four Sermons, p. 82.

"The religion of love; the law of kindness brought to light by the Gospel. What is this good for? To make all who receive it enjoy God and themselves; to make them like God; lovers of all; contented in their lives; and crying out at their death, in calm assurance, 'O grave, where is thy victory ! Thanks be unto God, who giveth me the victory, through my Lord Jesus Christ'. " 18

Wesley saw this grace of God in Christ as being "free in all, and free for all." 19 It is free in all to whom it is given, for it does not depend on any power or merit in man, not in any good works or righteousness of the receiver. But equally, it is free for all men. No man is beyond the range of God's love. Wesley constantly maintained this emphasis in the face of those who pressed the rigid extremes of predestinarianism.

Such a message came as good, glad tidings to countless of the poor, humble, simple people of the land. It was to them that Wesley's message was largely directed. Their lives were spelled out in terms of overcrowding, extreme poverty, ill-health, monotonous food, and over-long hours of work. When the pressure became too great, they often found compensation in drunkenness, indulgence in brutal sports, and in violence.

"It was a hard, harsh world for the mass of English people, and one singularly devoid of pity. Disease, violence, early or sudden death, were too common." 20

Wesley's preaching of the love of God and the grace of Christ to sinners struck an answering chord in the hearts of such benighted people. They heard him gladly, listened eagerly, and responded joyfully.

Wesley also spoke forthrightly about man's need. Before God he is a sinner, depraved and fallen, and deserving only of death. But God in His mercy has provided a way of escape through the merits of Christ's redeeming work. Through Christ God restores men to His original purpose for them. This is salvation, God's work in man, embracing both justification and sanctification.

8/ Salvation by .....

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18. Works, Vol. VIII, p. 8 - An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion (1744).

19. Works, Vol. VII, p. 373 - Sermon CXXVIII - Free Grace.

20. Dorothy Marshall, Eighteenth Century England, London, 1962, p. 243.

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Salvation by faith alone was a dominant note in Wesley's preaching, and some of his greatest sermons were on this theme <sup>21</sup>. Salvation means Justification or Forgiveness of Sins. It involves Regeneration, or the New Birth. It produces its fruits in a man, what Wesley called "Christian Assurance", or the "Witness of the Spirit" to the believer's acceptance into the Family of God. Now he is a child of God by Redemption as well as by Creation.

"I believe every Christian who has not yet received it should pray for the witness of God's Spirit with his spirit that he is a child of God. In being a child of God, the pardon of his sins is included; therefore I believe the Spirit of God will witness this also. That this witness is from God, the very terms imply; and this witness I believe is necessary for my salvation." <sup>22</sup>

Wesley believed, too, that God's purpose for the believer was that he should be holy. He saw this as an integral part of salvation. Christ came not merely to deliver men from sin, but to fill them with the fullness of God <sup>23</sup>. The purpose of God for man is not only that he should be born again, but that he should be holy.

"(Real religion is) .... a restoration of man by Him that bruises the serpent's head, to all that the old serpent deprived him of; a restoration, not only to the favour but likewise to the image of God, implying not barely deliverance from sin, but the being filled with the fullness of God." <sup>24</sup>

Thus Wesley explicitly identified salvation with holiness. He saw that part of his task was to indicate clearly the nature of the new life which follows the new birth. Constantly he urged his hearers to reach out after the highest.

"But what is the perfection here spoken of? It is not only a deliverance from doubts and fears, but from sin; from evil desires and evil tempers as well as from evil works. Yea and it is not only a negative blessing, a

9/ deliverance from .....

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21. See Forty-Four Sermons, Sermon I - Salvation by Faith, V - Justification by Faith, VI - The Righteousness of Faith, XXXIV - The New Birth.

22. Works, XII, p. 35 - letter to his brother Samuel, 30th November, 1738.

23. Ibid., VI, p. 274 f - Sermon, The End of Christ's Coming.

24. Ibid., p. 276.

deliverance from all evil dispositions ...; but a positive one likewise; even the planting of all good dispositions in their place ...." <sup>25</sup>

He preached in this vein to the Societies and also to the many uncommitted people who came to hear him. From the first sanctification, or holiness, was urged even on those who were still only seeking.

In Chapter Five we will give further consideration to the important relationship in Wesley's thinking and practice between evangelism and holiness. We note here that Wesley's teaching on the new life of holiness in the believer was set out in many sermons "dealing with matters of morals, expediency and general decency." <sup>26</sup> He gave his people careful instruction in the art of Christian living. He expounded the practical teaching of the "Sermon on the Mount" in thirteen published sermons, and he frequently preached these. Other sermons dealt with some very practical matters, such as Health, Sleep, Redeeming the Time, the Use of Money, etc. His aim in all such preaching was to exhort and help believers to go on to perfection, to set before them the delineations of a life of holiness.

Wesley's message had a dramatic effect upon people who were starved for such a word from God. It was not an age of inspired preaching in the normal course of events; indeed, it was an age when multitudes of English people probably never came within earshot of any preaching at all. And the English Church was both sadly handicapped and feebly lethargic to do very much about this situation.

A number of factors contributed to the impotence of the Church in the face of the social and moral degeneracy of the period. Within half a century three crippling blows had struck the Church: the expulsion between 1661 and 1665 of one-fifth of its clergy under the anti-Puritan laws; then, some twenty years later, the suspension of the Non-Jurors, the clergy who refused to subscribe to the Oath of Allegiance to William III; and, finally, the effectual suppression of Convocation

10/ after its prorogation ...

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25. Works, VII, p. 236 - Sermon CX, The Discoveries of Faith.

26. W. L. Doughty, op. cit., p. 87.

after its prorogation by Royal Writ in 1717. "The Church found herself shorn of both left and right wings. Zealous priest and flaming prophet were now cut off."<sup>27</sup> The men lost were men of piety and religion, while many of the men remaining were the "moderates, the reasonable men, the time-servers, the self-seekers and pluralists."<sup>28</sup> Had the 'National' Church studied how best to extinguish all spiritual fire within the realm and to crush all crusading initiative, she could have devised no better plan than these two tragic expulsions."<sup>29</sup> On top of this the silencing of the Convocation, rendering it impotent, had a great deal to do with the Church's inability to meet the challenges of the age. While Norman Sykes<sup>30</sup> has helped to put the other side of the picture by showing that there were some good men among the bishops of the period, men of zeal and deep spirituality, there is nevertheless little evidence in the history of the Convocation to suggest that it would have risen to the challenges of the times had it been in the position to do so. The Church was helpless and probably unwilling to extend its parish system to take in the new towns and cities that were mushrooming as a result of the Industrial Revolution. Thousands of people were beyond any reach of the Church.

This was not the only problem. Other people were theoretically within ear-shot of the preaching of the Church, but they did not listen, for there was no message for them there. This was the age of Deism, of a mechanical Deity, active in creation, but inactive ever since, and now distant and remote. The burgeoning scientific attitude fostered a cold rationalistic approach in the thinking of the age. Christians, too, adopted a rationalistic approach in their religion, attempting an intellectual defence of the faith. "Christianity was to be neither 'mysterious' nor 'miraculous', but basically rational and humane."<sup>31</sup> The result was an under-mining of Christian foundations and a dilution of Christian faith.

11/ Faith and morals .....

27. J.W. Bready, England From 1713 to 1760 After Wesley, London, 1938, p. 25.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.

30. N. Sykes, Church and State in England in the Eighteenth Century, Cambridge, 1934, p. 144, et. al.

31. V.H.H. Green, John Wesley, London, 1964, p. 4.

Faith and morals in England sunk to a low ebb, and a decadent, moribund Church was itself part of the lamentable situation. It had no gospel to proclaim, no message with any "bite" to it.

There was no urgency about the typical preaching of the age. The only passion was the passion for reasonableness. Enthusiasm had been put out of court by the events of the previous century. The lamentable effect of the wars of religion was to make the new age highly suspicious of theological pretensions and claims.

Passionlessness in the pulpit was the order of the day. Sermons were "eminently reasonable, admirably practical, but unconscionably platitudinous."<sup>32</sup> Archbishop Tillotson was the homiletical model for the age. In a famous, much-reproduced sermon on the text, "His commandments are not grievous"<sup>33</sup>, his aim was to show "that the laws of God are reasonable, that it is suited to our nature and advantageous to our interest; that we are not destitute of sufficient power and ability for the performance of them; and that we have the greatest encouragements to this purpose." He went on: "Two things make any course of life easy; present pleasure and the assurance of a future reward. Religion gives part of its reward in hand, the present comfort and satisfaction of having done our duty; and for the rest it offers us the best security that heaven can give. Now these two must needs make our duty very easy; a considerable reward in hand, and not only the hopes but the assurance of a far greater recompense hereafter."<sup>34</sup>

The Hanoverian pulpit also displayed a distinct distrust of theology, and indulged in innocuous moralizing. It had no message for the people.

"Evil and guilt, sin and redemption - the whole personal drama and appeal of religion - was forgotten or rationalized away .... It was not a religion which had much

12/ appeal to the .....

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32. Horton Davies, Worship and Theology in England, From Watts and Wesley to Maurice, 1690 - 1850, London & Princeton, 1961, p. 73.

33. I John 5:3.

34. Quoted in H. Davies, op. cit., p. 56.

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appeal to the men and women living brutal and squalid lives in the disease-ridden slums of the new towns and mining villages. They needed revelation and salvation." 35

Oliver Goldsmith passed this judgement on the divines of his time :

"Their discourses from the pulpit are generally dry, methodical, and unaffecting, delivered with the most insipid calmness, in so much that should the peaceful preacher lift his head over the cushion, he might discover his audience, instead of being awakened to remorse, actually sleeping over his mechanical and laboured composition." 36

Wesley was critical of the preaching of such men as Tillotson and Bull. In his sermon True Christianity Defended<sup>37</sup> he described them and others as men who adulterated the word of God. In another sermon, The Deceitfulness of Man's Heart<sup>38</sup> he pilloried the sermon of a prominent preacher of the day, whose points were :

"First, that men in general (if not every individual) are very wise; Secondly, that men in general are very virtuous; and, Thirdly, that they are very happy." 39

Such preaching did not move men to commitment and action. It conveyed a caricature of the Christian Faith.

What was true of the sermons of the age was unfortunately true, too, of the usual services of the Church. They were extremely dull. There were notable exceptions, of course, but on the whole there was lacking in the typical services and sermons of the day "any element of holy excitement, of passionate pleading, of heroic challenge, of winged imagination." 40

Wesley's preaching, by contrast, was always informed by his own spiritual experience. Acting on Böhler's advice, he had preached faith until he had it himself. Then he continued to preach faith in the saving grace of Christ to the limit of

13/ his vision. ....

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35. J.H. Plumb, England in the Eighteenth Century, Penguin Books, 1950, pp. 44 - 45.

36. Quoted in A. Skevington Wood, op. cit., pp. 13 - 14.

37. Works, VII, p. 454 f.

38. Works, VII, p. 336.

39. Ibid.

40. Horton Davies, op. cit., p. 73.

his vision. He preached repentance and conversion, justification and sanctification. He declared the essential elements of the gospel with authority and power. People stopped to listen to him.

The main elements of Wesley's message have already been considered. In this chapter it remains for us to consider the way he preached, especially as seen by those who were in his congregations. In any comparison of the preaching-portraits of John Wesley and George Whitefield, Wesley's success as a preacher is a constant source of wonder. For Whitefield is widely acknowledged as having been a superlative orator. He possessed a "passionate temperament", a "bell-like voice, gifts of mimicry, dynamic gestures, and uninhibited speech ... " <sup>41</sup> All these he employed with tremendous effect in his preaching. He was an exciting popular preacher in every country that he visited. He was an unashamed actor, and used his actor's adaptability to hold the attention of his hearers, of high and low estate alike. His stentorian voice enabled him to make himself heard by audiences of many thousands in the open air.

Whitefield employed various techniques to good effect in his preaching-style. These included such devices as : the element of surprise, the use of fitting anecdotes and fascinating travellers' tales, the use of contrast and antithesis in sermon titles and in extended passages, flights of imagination, flashes of humour and wit, the great range of his appeal to sentiment, and his skill in vivid allustration. <sup>42</sup>

Wesley, on the other hand, presented a very different picture to the observer. While Whitefield was the flamboyant orator, the bold pioneer into new fields, Wesley was a dapper little don. He was always more at home in the academic calm of Oxford or in the country rectory. Restraint and calmness were the dominant features of his preaching method. It could not be otherwise, for by virtue of his background, training and inclination he differed widely from George Whitefield. Both of them were Church of England clergymen;

14/ both were .....

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41. Ibid., p. 145.

42. Ibid., p. 162 f.

both were Oxford men. But Whitefield grew up in a public-house, and Wesley in a parsonage.

Yet Wesley also possessed considerable personal endowments which contributed to his power as a preacher. His clear eye and direct gaze gave the impression that he was not speaking in general to a crowd of people but addressing individuals in a direct way. He was of small stature, yet had a commanding presence. His expressive features were framed by his long black hair. In his later years his intensely white hair gave him the appearance of a saint. His voice was clear, and, although it was not as powerful as Whitefield's, it nevertheless had unusual carrying power, so that he had no difficulty in making himself heard<sup>43</sup>. He had recognized early in his ministry that all other devices in preaching are of little account if the preacher cannot make himself heard. In 1749 he published a tract entitled Directions Concerning Pronunciation and Gesture<sup>44</sup>. In it he deals with a variety of faults in speech and delivery. In particular, he warns against "speaking with a tone", such as "womanish", "Squeaking", "singing", "canting", "swelling", "theatrical", "awful", "whining", "solemn", "odd" and "whimsical". In particular, he urged his preachers not to strain their voices with shouting or "screaming". He made it clear that he himself never resorted to "screaming."<sup>45</sup> He warned against monotony, and urged the general rule, "endeavour to speak in public just as you do in common conversation", with "a natural, easy and graceful variation of the voice, suitable to the nature and importance of the sentiments we deliver." The voice should be managed in a manner appropriate to the emotional quality of the subject being dealt with.

15/ The tract goes .....

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43. See Journal, 28th May 1745, 13th August 1746, 5th April 1752, 10th September 1760, 25th September 1767, etc. These are a few examples of how Wesley was able to make himself heard with ease by large crowds, often despite the weather.

44. Works, XIII, pp. 478 - 487.

45. See A.S. Wood, op. cit., p. 155, footnote 6 - references to various letters.

The tract goes on to deal with gestures, which Wesley describes as "the silent language of face and hands."<sup>46</sup> He had little regard for windmill preachers who rely too much on gesticulation. Gesture, to be effective,

"must be well adjusted to the subject, as well as to the passion which you desire either to express or excite. It must likewise be free from all affectation, and such as appears to be the mere, natural result, both of the things you speak and of the affection that moves you to speak them. And the whole is so to be managed, that there may be nothing in all the dispositions and motions of your body to offend the eyes of the spectators."<sup>47</sup>

Wesley then discusses the importance of a correct bodily posture, of the way the head should be held, and of the face as the mirror of the emotions. The eyes should meet directly all the listeners in turn, "with an air of affection and regard; looking them decently in the face, one after another, as we do in familiar conversation."<sup>48</sup> Clapping of the hands and thumping the pulpit are discouraged. Throughout he advocates a self-disciplined, calm and restrained manner of preaching. We may regard Wesley's various directions as being "a bit of self-portraiture"<sup>49</sup>, for the picture of Wesley as preacher that is thus conveyed to us is certainly borne out by the reports of eye-witnesses who came to hear him<sup>50</sup>.

Wesley's preaching style was natural and free. He very early shook off his bondage to a prepared manuscript. He recounts how he first ventured to preach extempore when he was prevailed upon at the last moment to preach at a service at All-hallows Church, London, in 1735, when the appointed preacher failed to appear<sup>51</sup>. Many years later he recalled his mental confusion and agitation prior to his preaching on that occasion, and how he experienced a great sense of freedom in preaching extempore<sup>52</sup>. He never again took a written sermon with him into the pulpit. But this does not mean that he no

16/ longer wrote his .....

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46. Works, XIII, p. 484.

47. Ibid.

48. Ibid., p. 526.

49. W.L. Doughty, op. cit., p. 150.

50. Ibid., pp. 107 f, cites a number of such reports.

51. Journal, 28th January, 1776, recounting an incident that took place in 1735.

52. The Wesleyan Methodist Magazine (1825), pp. 105 -106; quoted in W.L. Doughty, op. cit., p. 12.

longer wrote his sermons in full. Wesley very early in his life had acquired thorough and meticulous habits in his sermon preparation and in his systematic exposition of Scripture. It is unlikely that he ever completely abandoned these habits. Most probably his usual way of working was to prepare his written sermon carefully, and then to preach it, having left the manuscript at home<sup>53</sup>. The structures of the published sermons reveal careful planning. Many of them are set out under three clear headings, with numerous sub-divisions. His points are all so logically inter-related that the general outline is clearly grasped. "They are models of precise, definite, theological and ethical statement, their framework obviously designed by a man who knew exactly what he wished his framework to contain."<sup>54</sup> There is a striking simplicity about the construction of the written sermons. If, as we believe, the preached sermons did not differ greatly from the printed ones in terms of content and construction, then this very simplicity of presentation would have enabled Wesley's average hearer to remember the outline of the discourse clearly.

Wesley favoured a plain, simple style in writing and preaching. He sets out his ideal in his preface to the Sermons published in 1746 :

".... Nothing here appears in an elaborate, elegant or oratorical dress .... I now write, as I generally speak, ad populum -- to the bulk of mankind ....

I design plain truth for plain people: therefore, of set purpose, I abstain from all nice and philosophical speculations; from all perplexed and intricate reasonings; and, as far as possible, from even the show of learning, unless in sometimes citing the original Scripture."<sup>55</sup>

He desired to avoid all difficult or uncommon words. He advised his preachers to avoid all jargon : ".... always suit your subject to your audience."<sup>56</sup> His own sermons were couched in plain, forthright language. Since they were intended for the common people, their language was such as

17/ people could .....

53. W.L. Doughty, op. cit., p. 138.

54. Ibid., pp. 138 - 139.

55. Forty-Four Sermons, London, 1944, p. v.

56. Works, VIII, p. 317.

people could readily grasp. His proclamation was always simple, logical, lucid and practical. As he put it, his main concern was not to "overshoot" the congregation<sup>57</sup>.

Above all, Wesley was a superlative teacher. He largely lacked the oratorical gifts possessed by Whitefield, as well as his flair for illustration. But the clarity and simplicity of his thought and language are the marks of a good teacher. While his published sermons abounded in literary references, he never vaunted himself as a scholar. He modestly cited many sources without attributing them to their authors, but indicated that they were citations and not of his own composition<sup>58</sup>. Horton Davies sums up the position fairly with his statement that, while Whitefield excelled Wesley in practically all the oratorical devices of preaching, Wesley was superior in "the construction, the logical elaboration, the balanced consideration, and the clear presentation of his theme, as also in the range of his instruction."<sup>59</sup>

As we shall see later in this essay, Wesley made effective use of his teaching skills in the further consolidation of the results of his preaching. For him evangelism did not end with preaching and conversion; he sought to build up and nourish his converts so that they might grow in their faith.

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57. Journal, 24th April 1789.

58. Horton Davies, op. cit., p. 161.

59. Ibid., pp. 171 - 172.

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## Chapter Two

A MEANS ABUSED ?

For Wesley preaching was always a means to the end of "saving souls from death." The reader of the Journal is struck by his frequent remarks that reveal his constant awareness of this as the true end of all preaching. This awareness gave burning urgency to his proclamation of the gospel. The question arises: when did this awareness first manifest itself ?

Wesley's biographers and Church historians have usually tended to the view that Wesley's Aldersgate Street experience made him an evangelist<sup>1</sup>. A strong case can be put, however, for the view that Wesley was an evangelist long before May 1738. Nehemiah Curnock, the editor of the Journal and the Diaries, refers to Wesley as "the man who even before his conversion was an enthusiastic evangelist."<sup>2</sup>

In 1725, even before his ordination to the diaconate, Wesley showed a keen sense of responsibility for the spiritual welfare of a fellow-student. At the funeral of a young woman, with whom they had both been acquainted, Wesley urged his friend to let him have the pleasure of "making him a whole Christian," since he was already at least half persuaded to this. Wesley continues: "... he could not do me a greater kindness, as both of us would be fully convinced when we came to follow that young woman."<sup>3</sup> Here is an early example of Wesley's life-long practice of seizing every available opportunity to make a direct appeal to individuals on the subject of personal religion. It became a mark both of his intimate conversations and of his public preaching.

The Oxford Holy Club, in which Wesley played such an important part, had as a declared primary objective the attempt to

19/ persuade all .....

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1. So, for instance, A.S. Wood, op. cit., p. 74.

2. Journal, I, Preface, p. x.

3. Works, XII, p. 10 - letter to his mother, January 1727.

persuade all men to become Christians. The various works of compassion of this group subserved a higher purpose, the saving of souls from death<sup>4</sup>. One of the questions put to the members of the Holy Club was :

"Have I in speaking to a stranger explained what religion is not? (not negative, not external); and what it is? (a recovery of the image of God); searched at what step in it he stops, and what makes him stop there? exhorted and directed him?"<sup>5</sup>

In 1734, when his father's health was declining rapidly, Wesley was urged to take up the incumbency of the Epworth parish. He declined the offer, giving as his reason his conviction that, since the glory of God was his sole consideration, he must do that which for him would most promote the glory of God<sup>6</sup>. He linked this "sole consideration" with his quest for personal holiness and the promotion of holiness in others<sup>7</sup>. He was convinced that even as an Oxford tutor he was in a position to work for the salvation of others. In his dealings with his students he revealed his urgent evangelical concern for them, using the available opportunities to speak to them about personal religion.

Shortly after his father's death Wesley felt constrained to offer for missionary service in Georgia. One of his motives was a somewhat selfish one, in that he hoped to save his own soul, and learn the true sense of the gospel by preaching it to the heathen<sup>8</sup>. His other reason for going to Georgia was his sure sense of missionary vocation, in which he was so different from many of his contemporaries. It is very likely that the seed of this was sown by his father Samuel Wesley, who was, in his way, "a true evangelical of his day, and

20/ possessed of .....

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4. Journal, I, p. 96 -- letter to Mr. Richard Morgan, 18th October, 1732.
  5. Works, XI, pp. 522 - 523.
  6. Journal, II, p. 159 -- letter to his father, 10th December, 1734.
  7. Ibid., p. 160.
  8. Journal, VIII, Appendix XII, p. 288 -- letter to John Burton, 10th October, 1735.
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possessed of more fervour than most of the clergy of that time." <sup>9</sup> Samuel Wesley had even worked on a comprehensive scheme of missions for India, China and Abyssinia<sup>10</sup>, and had talked of himself going as a missionary to China or Abyssinia<sup>11</sup>. V.H.H. Green mentions other factors which underline the Wesley household's missionary consciousness. John Lyndal, one of Samuel Wesley's parishioners at Epworth, had accompanied Oglethorpe to Georgia, and this probably stimulated John Wesley's interest in the colony. At Epworth, and again later at Oxford, John read with interest what the Danish missionaries had been doing in South India. In 1730, together with his sister, he went to Lincoln to watch the Indian kings, possibly the Cherokee chieftains whom Sir Alexander Coming had brought to England. In 1732 John Wesley became a corresponding member of the S.P.C.K. He also numbered among his friends many who were interested in missionary activity<sup>12</sup>.

Yet the Aldersgate Street experience of May 1738 did bring about a significant change in John Wesley. He had returned to England from Georgia, defeated, depressed, and acutely aware of his own spiritual malaise.

"It is now two years and almost four months since I left my native country, in order to teach the Georgian Indians the nature of Christianity. But what have I learned myself in the meantime? Why, what I least of all suspected, that I, who went to America to convert others, was never myself converted to God." <sup>13</sup>

His long search ended when he discovered for himself a sense of pardon and deep peace with God through faith in the merits of Christ alone.

His writings reveal how the events of May 1738 constituted a turning-point for him, and heralded his future effectiveness as a preacher and evangelist. Prior to May 1738 his own inward struggle, with all its anxious probing of heart and conscience, had produced "the spirit of heaviness." It absorbed much of his energy, and frustrated his efforts to serve God

21/ and his .....

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9. W.T. Townsend, H.B. Workman, G. Eayrs (eds), A New History of Methodism, I, p. 246.

10. Ibid., pp. 167 - 168.

11. V.H.H. Green, op. cit., p. 39.

12. Ibid.

13. Journal, I, pp. 421 - 422, January 1738.

and his fellow-men. "All the time I was at Savannah I was thus beating the air." <sup>14</sup> He found that it was different after Aldersgate Street :

"And herein I found the difference between this and my former state chiefly consisted. I was striving, yea fighting with all my might under the law, as well as under grace. But then I was sometimes, if not often, conquered; now, I was always conqueror." <sup>15</sup>

In a tract written in 1746, The Principles of a Methodist Farther Explained, Wesley summed up his preaching from 1729 onwards, and showed that the turning-point in effectiveness came when he started to concentrate on justification by faith alone:

"(1) From the year 1725 to 1729 I preached much, but saw no fruit for my labour. Indeed it could not be that I should; for I neither laid the foundation of repentance, nor of believing the gospel; taking it for granted, that all to whom I preached were believers, and that many of them 'needed no repentance.' (2) From the year 1729 to 1734, laying a deeper foundation of repentance, I saw a little fruit. But it was only a little; and no wonder: for I did not preach faith in the blood of the covenant. (3) From 1734 to 1738, speaking more of faith in Christ, I saw more fruit of my preaching, and visiting from house to house, than ever I had done before; though I know not if any of those who were outwardly reformed were inwardly and thoroughly converted to God. (4) From 1738 to this time, speaking continually of Jesus Christ, laying Him only for the foundation of the whole building, making Him all in all, the first and the last; preaching only on this plan, 'The kingdom of God is at hand; repent ye, and believe the gospel;' the 'word of God ran' as fire among the stubble; it 'was glorified' more and more; multitudes crying out, 'What must we do to be saved?' and afterwards witnessing, 'By grace are we saved through faith'." <sup>16</sup>

His experience of God's saving love in Jesus Christ, and his joy in his new-found sense of peace with God and with himself, gave Wesley's evangelical concern new direction and power. At last the missionary had been given a real message, and had found his mission.

In all true preaching the twin elements of proclamation and appeal go hand-in-hand. The proclamation of the gospel will lead naturally to an invitation to the hearer to respond to

22/ the message of .....

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14. Ibid., p. 470, May 1738.

15. Journal, I, p. 477, 24th May, 1738.

16. Works, VIII, pp. 468 - 469, The Principles of a Methodist Farther Explained (1746).

the message of the gospel. A preacher who feels the urgency of the gospel will both set forth the content of the gospel, and also do all in his power to urge his hearers to receive it. The question arises, then: how did Wesley understand preaching as a means of evangelism?

Wesley was an evangelist who set out to persuade men. He always sought to press home his appeal in a personal manner, so that his hearers were left feeling that his words had been addressed directly to them. John Nelson describes the day<sup>17</sup> when he heard Wesley preach his first sermon at Moorfields. Here is testimony both to Wesley's personal magnetism, and to the penetrating power of his appeal to the individual:

"As soon as he got upon the stand he stroked back his hair and turned his face towards where I stood, and I thought fixed his eyes upon me. His countenance struck such an awful dread upon me, before I heard him speak, that it made my heart beat like the pendulum of a clock; and, when he did speak, I thought his whole discourse was aimed at me. When he had done, I said, 'This man can tell the secrets of my heart ...' " 18

Wesley looked for a response to his preaching. In his own words, his intention was that of "earnestly inviting all sinners 'to enter into the holiest' by the 'new and living way' ...." <sup>19</sup>

At the same time he recognized the priority of the work of the Holy Spirit. After having preached in the parish church at Grimsby, he observes: "I spoke as plainly as possibly I could; but God only can speak to the heart." <sup>20</sup> We shall return to this point later when we consider whether Wesley used his considerable powers of persuasion to manipulate the minds of his hearers.

Wesley reveals his aims as a preacher in the instructions he issued to his preachers. In answer to the question, "What is the best general method of preaching?" he replies :  
 "(1) To invite. (2) To convince. (3) To offer Christ. (4) To build up; and to do this in some measure in every sermon."<sup>21</sup>  
 Each of these phrases merits further discussion.

23/ By the phrase .....

17. 17th June, 1739.

18. A.S. Wood, op. cit., p. 183 -- quoted from Wesley's Veterans, Vol. III, pp. 11 - 12.

19. Journal, 15th June, 1739.

20. Journal, 1st July, 1788.

21. Works, VIII, p. 317, The Large Minutes (1789)

By the phrase "To invite" Wesley was not referring simply to the device by which the preacher gains the attention of the congregation. There is a clue to his meaning in a letter written in 1751:

"I think the right method of preaching is this. At our first beginning to preach at any place, after a general declaration of the love of God to sinners and His willingness that they should be saved ..." <sup>22</sup>

The word 'general' here refers to Wesley's understanding of that which was distinctive in his preaching, namely, the universality of the love of God. He tells how he first began to declare this universal grace of God:

"While I was preaching at Newgate on these words, 'He that believeth hath everlasting life,' I was insensibly led, without any previous design, to declare strongly and explicitly that God willeth 'all men to be' thus 'saved;' and to pray that, 'if this were not the truth of God, He would not suffer the blind to go out of the way; but, if it were, He would bear witness to His word.'" <sup>23</sup>

The results of his preaching on that occasion convinced him of the validity of this new note. Three days later, he tells us, he again "declared the free grace of God."<sup>24</sup> Here, then, he had discovered the emphasis that was to become the characteristic feature of his message<sup>25</sup>, and was later reinforced by his brother Charles' hymns. It was a powerful element in his proclamation of the gospel of God's love for fallen man. It served to encourage the dehumanized people of his day with a message of hope, joy and love.

Yet the statement of the universal love of God for sinners was only a prelude to the further step of convincing men. In the letter to which we earlier referred, Wesley proceeded to say that after the initial proclamation of God's love for all, the preacher should go on "to preach the law in the strongest,

24/ the closest, the .....

22. Works, XI, p. 486 - Letter on Preaching Christ, 20th December, 1751.

23. Journal, 26th April, 1739.

24. Journal, 29th April, 1739.

25. The sermon on Salvation by Faith opens with such a declaration of the free grace of God - Sermon I, Forty-Four Sermons, p. 1.

the closest, the most searching manner possible ..." He explains what he means: "By preaching the law I mean explaining and enforcing the commands of Christ briefly comprised in the Sermon on the Mount." <sup>26</sup> In his sermon The Origin, Nature, Property, and Use of the Law, Wesley outlined a threefold use of the law. Its first use is to convince the world of sin; it is to "slay the sinner," by which is meant to convince a man that he stands 'guilty before God.' This conviction is always the work of the Holy Spirit alone, but He does this by means of the law. Then, while the law serves to bring a man to the realization of his guilt before God, it also goads him to turn to Christ for salvation. Thus the second use of the law is to bring the sinner to Christ, that he may live. The third use of the law is, "to keep us alive." "It is the grand means whereby the blessed Spirit prepares the believer for larger communications of the life of God." <sup>27</sup> The quickened soul must not be allowed to forget what God demands of him in terms of the works of righteousness. Therefore sinner and believer alike need to sit under the preaching of the law.

Wesley believed that law and gospel should always be preached in conjunction with one another, for this was essential to the healthy development of the mature Christian. He described such preaching as follows:

"From the beginning they have been taught both the law and gospel. 'God loves you: therefore love and obey Him. Christ died for you: therefore die to sin. Christ is risen: therefore rise in the image of God. Christ liveth evermore: therefore, live to God, till you live with Him in glory.'" <sup>28</sup>

He approved the opinion that a minister of Christ should do three things: "first, to preach His law, in order to convince of sin; to offer free pardon, through faith in His blood, to all convinced sinners; and, in the third place, to preach His law again, as a rule for those that believe." <sup>29</sup> This balance of gospel and law in preaching was an important precaution against the twin dangers of Antinomianism and Pharis-

25/ ism; one of .....

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26. Works, XI, p. 486.

27. Works, V, pp. 442 - 443.

28. Works, XI, p. 492.

29. Journal, 2nd June, 1742.

ism; one of these was likely to follow if either gospel or law were preached to the exclusion of the other.

Wesley advocated preaching Christ as the third element in his four-fold method of preaching. The sinner, having been convinced of his utter inadequacy to atone for his sin by any effort of his own, and of his inability to fulfil God's purpose for him, is now ready to be told of God's gift of forgiveness and power in His Son, Jesus Christ. It is the moment for the preacher to declare that the first and great command to a Christian is, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ"; that Christ is all in all, our "wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption;" that all life, love, strength are from Him alone, and are all freely given to us through faith.<sup>30</sup> Here the preacher is "preaching the life, death, resurrection, and intercession of Christ, with all the blessings which in consequence thereof are freely given to true believers."<sup>31</sup>

While there was a stress in such preaching on the priestly work of Christ, by whose merits man's forgiveness and reconciliation to God are made possible, Wesley was emphatic that Christ must also be preached in all His offices. He must be set forth as our great High-Priest, as the Prophet of the Lord, and as our King for ever<sup>32</sup>. Wesley was critical of the so-called 'gospel-preachers' who dwelt exclusively on the priestly work of Christ. The Conference recognized this as a distorted type of preaching and agreed that:

"The most effectual way of preaching Christ, is to preach Him in all His offices, and to declare His law as well as His gospel, both to believers and to unbelievers. Let us strongly and closely insist upon inward and outward holiness, in all its branches."<sup>33</sup>

The 'gospel-preachers', whose method Wesley described as "a luscious way of talking,"<sup>34</sup> were in effect preaching justification without regeneration or sanctification. Wesley described it as ".... the most useless, if not the most mis-

26/ chievous; a dull, .....

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30. Works, XI, p. 489 - Letter on Preaching Christ, 20th December, 1751.

31. Ibid., p. 486.

32. Sermon - The law Established Through Faith, II, Works, V, p. 461.

33. Works, VIII, p. 318 ff, The Large Minutes.

34. Letters, V, p. 84, to John Fletcher, 17th March, 1768.

chievous, a dull, yea or lively, harangue on the sufferings of Christ, or salvation by faith without strongly inculcating holiness." <sup>35</sup> Such preaching, he said, tended to drive holiness out of the world.

In his tract Thoughts Concerning Gospel Ministers, Wesley gave his definition of a true gospel minister:

"He, and he alone, of whatever denomination, that does declare the whole counsel of God; that does preach the whole gospel, even justification and sanctification, preparatory to glory. He that does not put asunder what God has joined, but publishes alike, 'Christ dying for us, and Christ living in us.' He that constantly applies all this to the hearts of the hearers, being willing to spend and be spent for them; having himself the mind which was in Christ, and steadily walking as Christ also walked; he, and he alone, can with propriety be termed a Gospel Minister." <sup>36</sup>

Wesley believed that if the gospel was to be preached in its fulness, then the two notes, the love of God calling men to conversion, and growth in godly living, should both be heard.

Wesley's fourth emphasis is that the purpose of a sermon is to build up: the converted sinner must also grow in holiness as a believer. It is necessary for the believer to hear the whole counsel of God, both law and gospel, that he may grow towards God's ultimate purpose for him, which is a relationship of love to God and neighbour. We shall turn in the final chapter to the link in Wesley's thinking and practice between evangelism and holiness.

We return to Wesley's conviction that preaching should always press home an appeal on the hearer. There must be an 'application.' After attending a service in a Church in Aberdeen, he wrote that the excellence of the sermon was offset by the lack of an application, and the sermon "was likely to do as much good as the singing of a lark. No sinners are convinced of sin, none converted to God, by this way of preaching." <sup>37</sup> He himself preached twice later that same day, and he writes that he ".... made a pointed application to the hearts of all that were present." <sup>38</sup> He wanted some response to the gospel

27/ from his hearers .....

35. Works, XII, p. 140 - letter to Charles Wesley, 4th November, 1772.

36. Works, X, p. 456.

37. Journal, 13th June, 1779.

38. Ibid.

from his hearers; he wanted them to receive Christ. The Journal abounds with phrases such as: "I there offered Christ .... I offered the grace of God.... I offered the redemption that is in Christ Jesus .... I proclaimed the name of the Lord .... I proclaimed Christ crucified .... I proclaimed the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ .... I declared the free grace of God .... I exhorted the wicked to forsake his way .... I began to call sinners to repentance .... I invited all guilty, helpless sinners."

Wesley assessed his congregations in terms of their potential responsiveness to the appeal of the gospel. The Journal frequently reflects how he felt about particular congregations that he addressed. Sometimes an unexpected response gratified him. So, at Leicester, he was afraid that his calling there was but 'lost labour', but was surprised to find "they were present in large numbers at five in the morning, and were evidently determined to 'stir up the gift of God that was in them'." <sup>39</sup> But at Athlone he found that despite the appearances to the contrary, the people were not receptive:

".... a great part of the congregation was in tears. Indeed almost all the town appeared to be moved, full of goodwill and desires of salvation. But the waters spread too wide to be deep. I found not one under any strong conviction, much less had any one attained the knowledge of salvation ...." <sup>40</sup>

Wesley wanted his congregations to feel the truth of God's word as well as hear it. His comment on an Edinburgh congregation is illuminating:

"I am amazed at this people. Use the most cutting words, and apply them in the most pointed manner, still they hear, but feel no more than the seats they sit upon!" <sup>41</sup>

It is instructive to see how Wesley adapted himself to the needs and level of understanding of his hearers. He was, as we have already seen, a good teacher. When he preached in 1739 to the inmates of the Bristol poor-house, Wesley took as his very appropriate text the words: "When they had nothing to pay, he frankly forgave them both." <sup>42</sup> On another occasion he arrived in Hednesford just in time to hear the

28/ account of the .....

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39. Journal, 19th June, 1777.

40. Journal, 4th April, 1748.

41. Journal, 25th April, 1784.

42. Journal, 14th April, 1739; Luke 7 : 42.

account of the sudden death of a young woman on the previous day. He writes:

"This gave us a fair occasion to exhort all that were present, 'so to number' their own 'days' that they might apply their 'hearts unto wisdom.' " 43

A few weeks later he went to the castle at Oxford, where he ministered to a condemned man with prayer and by preaching on "It is appointed unto men once to die." 44 That very day the man was led to faith in Christ, and in due course went to his execution with cheerfulness and in peace. 45

Such examples abound. Wesley was always an 'opportunist'. He was sensitive to the condition and needs of those to whom he ministered, and he used all his skill as a pastor and teacher to bring the word of God to men in a relevant way, so that they might hear it and respond.

The Journal entry for 6th May, 1769, reveals how he adapted himself to a congregation in a particular way. While preaching at Sligo in Ireland, he found that by talking of salvation by faith, he was shooting over the heads of the people. But the next morning he tried another way:

"I suited myself to their capacity by preaching on, 'Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched.' The effect was that the evening congregation was such as I had not seen here for many years." 46

Again, at Port Glasgow a few years later, he switched his theme to speak "strongly of death and judgement, heaven and hell." The congregation ceased its laughing and talking, and was "quietly and deeply attentive." 47 At Sundon, in 1764, he had come to the conclusion that after all their preaching in that place, the Methodist preachers might just as well have preached in Greek, since even those who had regularly attended the preaching had evidently not received the message. A few days later he tried another way:

29/ "I preached on, .....

43. Journal, 21st March, 1738.

44. Hebrews 9:27.

45. Journal, 27th March, 1739.

46. Journal, 6th May, 1769.

47. Journal, 22nd April, 1772.

"I preached on, 'Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched'; and set before them the terror of the Lord, in the strongest manner I was able. It seemed to be the very thing they wanted. They not only listened with the deepest attention, but appeared to be more affected than I had ever seen them by any discourse whatsoever." 48

Wesley shared the belief in a literal hell which was still fairly generally held in eighteenth-century England, although it was beginning to be questioned. He believed that hell as the place of everlasting punishment for unrepentant sinners was an incontestable part of the Scriptural revelation. And, since it was a characteristic of the age to interpret Scripture in a very literal way, such passages as bear directly on the themes of death, judgement, heaven and hell were given what we would now regard as sensational treatment. Wesley's Journal and Sermon Register<sup>49</sup> reveal that he quite frequently preached on such texts<sup>50</sup>. He did not shrink from speaking directly and bluntly on hell. It was a scriptural theme that he treated with the utmost seriousness, for he believed that hell was a certainty for those who refused to repent and believe the gospel.

Wesley's critics have sometimes claimed that his success as a preacher can be attributed to his deliberate and persistent use of the fears of hell-fire as a means of terrifying his hearers, and so creating a climate conducive to the crisis of conversion. William Sargant, in his book Battle for the Mind,<sup>51</sup> claims that Wesley was successful because he discovered that habits of thought and behaviour can be changed "by a tremendous assault on the emotions."<sup>52</sup> He argues that Wesley hit upon the "extremely effective technique of conversion," and embarked on his mission with the help of his brother, "whose hymns were addressed to the religious emotions rather than the intelligence." In short, he claims, Wesley's method was to create a high emotional tension in his potential

30/ converts by .....

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48. Journal, 26th February, 1764.

49. Journal, VIII, pp. 171 - 252 : 14th January, 1747 to 25th December, 1761.

50. A selection of examples of such passages and texts, together with occasions when Wesley preached on them, is listed in A.S. Wood, op. cit., p. 273.

51. Pan Books, Ltd., London, 1959.

52. op. cit., p. 83.

converts by stressing the consequence of hell-fire for those who failed to achieve salvation; that he then pressed them to accept the way of escape from the terrors of hell, reminding them that if they failed to do this and met with a fatal accident on the way home, they would pass straight into the fiery furnace.<sup>53</sup>

As he considers the strange paroxysms that seized many people in Wesley's congregations, particularly in the early days of the Revival, Sargant identifies them with the technique of abreaction which, he says, "is a time-worn physiological trick which has been used, for better or worse, by generations of preachers and demagogues to soften up their listeners' minds and help them take on desired patterns of belief and behaviour."<sup>54</sup>

Sargant's views on Wesley and his methods are unbalanced and often historically inaccurate. They are even unreliable from a scientific point of view. Ian Ramage has shown<sup>55</sup> that, while there are forms of conversion and evangelism (he prefers to call these 'pseudo - conversion' and 'pseudo - evangelism') that are psychologically similar to brainwashing and indoctrination, genuine conversion and evangelism should be clearly discriminated from these on psychological grounds. He believes that Sargant is confused concerning the causes of the paroxysms. These points merit further discussion here.

It is remarkable that Sargant never once quotes from the sermons of Wesley. These sermons show that Wesley always laid far greater stress on God's love for the sinner than on the "terrors of the Lord." Wesley had agreed with "John Smith" that there was little good to be done by "the profuse throwing about hell and damnation."<sup>56</sup>

Wesley did not deny that there were times when he preached on this theme. Yet when he touched on these ideas, it was with

31/ a remarkable .....

53. Ibid., p. 84.

54. Ibid., pp. 62 - 63.

55. Ian Ramage, Battle for the Free Mind, London, 1967.

56. Works, XII, p. 73 - letter to John Smith, 25th June, 1746. (In fact, in the same letter Wesley confessed that his greatest danger was not that of allowing his zeal to lead him into impetuosity, but of being tempted to lukewarmness. He inclined more to being "a saunterer inter sylvas Academicas, a philosophical sluggard, than an itinerant Preacher." - p. 72).

a remarkable restraint. In this respect he stands in sharp contrast to the methods and emphasis of his colleague in the Revival, George Whitefield, whose preaching was often vivid and terrifying, with much play on the idea of a hell of eternal punishment. Wesley, on the other hand, "softened the traditional doctrine of hell," for "he rejected the predestinarian element in the current teaching about hell ... and thus the idea of a Tyrant God."<sup>57</sup> What is more, Wesley's concept of salvation went beyond heaven or hell to an emphasis on a present deliverance from sin.<sup>58</sup>

Following a terrifying storm at sea during his voyage to America in 1736, Wesley records his surprise that the terror they had experienced had had so little effect for good on some of the ship's company. For the future, he observes, those that are dead to the appeal of love are unlikely to obey out of fear<sup>59</sup>. Nehemiah Curnock observes that Wesley was ever afterwards "sparing in his use of fear as a motive."<sup>60</sup>

The sermon On Hell, which Wesley did not include in his Four Volumes of the Standard Sermons, was, according to the Sermon Register, not preached at all during the period 1747 - 1761. In this sermon Wesley has this to say of the bodily torments and tortures of hell outlined by many other preachers:

"But I find no word, no tittle of this, not the least hint of it in all the Bible. And surely this is too awful a subject to admit of such play of imagination. Let us keep to the written word. It is torment enough to deal with everlasting burning."<sup>61</sup>

In this sermon Wesley says that no-one is sent to Hell by God's intention. It is reserved only for those "who in spite of all the warnings of God, resolve to have their portion with the devil and his angels."<sup>62</sup> S.G. Dimond writes that the sermon is ".... an elaborate argument, illustrated by many quotations and classical allusions which stamp it as an early academic exercise."<sup>63</sup>

32/ In another .....

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57. Ian Ramage, op. cit., p.118.

58. Ibid., p. 120.

59. Journal, 18th January, 1736.

60. Ibid., I, p. 139, footnote.

61. Works, VI, p. 387.

62. Ibid., p. 382.

63. S.G. Dimond, The Psychology of The Methodist Revival, London, 1926, p. 83.

In another sermon on Dives and Lazarus, Wesley clearly emphasizes a positive deliverance from sin rather than a negative fear of hell. He says that there is no method, be it fear or love, and no power which can by itself change a man. "God alone can raise those that are 'dead in trespasses and sins'."<sup>64</sup>

As for the hymns of Charles Wesley, while they are most certainly full of evangelistic appeal they are remarkably silent on the terrors of hell. J. E. Rattenbury notes that there was only one hymn on hell in the large hymnbook, while the hymns on the 'Four Last Things' contain just one hymn on hell and twelve on heaven<sup>65</sup>. And far from appealing merely to the emotions, these hymns were directed to the intelligence, for they are full of essential Christian teaching. It could be argued that many people learned more about the meaning of their faith from the hymns of Charles Wesley than they did from the sermons of John Wesley.

We find Wesley reprimanding his preachers for preaching "too much of the wrath and too little of the love of God ... thereby causing some to lose the joy of faith."<sup>66</sup> In a sermon on The Nature of Enthusiasm he warned his preachers against trying to frighten men into the Kingdom of God:

"Never dream of forcing men into the ways of God. Think yourself and let think. Use no constraint in matters of religion. Even those who are farthest out of the way never compel to come in by any other means than reason, truth, and love."<sup>67</sup>

Clearly the 'terrors of the Lord' sometimes formed a part of Wesley's preaching, yet he was restrained in his use of this element. His appeal was never primarily to fear: rather, we see here something of his genuine compassion and concern for those who were morally and spiritually asleep.

Writing to 'John Smith' he gives a reason for this note in his preaching:

33/ "But may not .....

64. Works, VII, p. 253.

65. J.E. Rattenbury, The Evangelical Doctrines of Charles Wesley's Hymns, London 1941, pp. 78 - 79.

66. Works, VIII, p. 284 - Minutes of Conference, 1784.

67. Works, V, p. 478.

"But may not love itself constrain us to lay before men 'the terrors of the Lord'? And is it not better that sinners 'should be terrified now than that they should sleep on and awake in hell'?" 68

There are also other factors that Sargant and like-minded critics do not seem to consider. There was, for instance, Wesley's strong belief in the sovereignty of God. Frequently, when assessing the results of his preaching in a particular place, Wesley makes this kind of observation:

"All the hearers were deeply attentive, whom I now confidently and cheerfully committed to 'the great Shepherd and Bishop of souls'." 69

"I spoke as plain as possible I could; but God only can speak to the heart." 70

Then, too, Wesley had a deep respect for reason. This stemmed from his own background and training. It did not allow him to stoop to the use of methods that constituted a naked assault on the emotions.

Neither would his concern for the whole man, and the integrity of that man, whether rich or poor, permit the attempt to bludgeon him into faith. As we have seen, there were times when he believed that the occasion called for a stern, direct declaration of 'the terrors of the Lord.' However, he resorted to this sparingly, and, when he did, it was with restraint. It was not his intention to frighten men into the Kingdom of God, but to win them with the appeal of the love of God for sinners.

What, then, was the significance of the strange physical phenomena that frequently attended Wesley's preaching? We read of many occasions when, during the delivery of the sermon, some of the people fell to the ground, convulsed with sighs and sobs, or cried out as if in agony. There were convulsive tearings, violent trembling, groaning, and other physical effects even to the extent of insanity. Were these the result of mass-hysteria, whipped up by an emotional and persuasive preacher? Was there a connection between the message of the preacher and these paroxysms?

34/ Wesley himself .....

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68. Ibid., XII, p. 73 - letter to "John Smith", 25th June, 1746.

69. Journal, 4th June, 1742.

70. Ibid., 1st July, 1788.

Wesley himself was very interested in these occurrences. He provides many detailed descriptions of them in his Journal. He believed that these things posed three questions:

"1) Are they genuine? 2) Are they necessary? 3) Are they due to natural or supernatural causes?"

He answered: "1) Yes; 2) No; 3) Supernatural: God or the devil."<sup>71</sup>

Yet Wesley remained perplexed about these scenes of extreme emotion and was uneasy about them. It was not unnatural to associate them with New Testament stories of demon-possession. But since these distortions of body and mind could, as he saw it, be attributed either to God or the devil, he felt it necessary to assess each instance carefully on its own merits. At times, as when he commented on the extreme case of a young woman at Kingswood, he unashamedly confessed that he was unable to come to any conclusion: "The fact I nakedly relate, and leave every man to his own judgement of it."<sup>72</sup>

Wesley observed in 1772 that the physical manifestations were "common at the dawn of a work."<sup>73</sup> A close reading of the Journal reveals that these paroxysms occurred chiefly in the earlier part of Wesley's ministry. S.G. Dimond and I. Ramage note that most of these spectacular manifestations of the Revival were confined to the years 1739 to 1743<sup>74</sup>. Wesley's biographers have tended to treat these things as a passing phase of the 'forties', and his interest in them as a weakness that he later overcame<sup>75</sup>. But R. Knox cites examples from the Journal in support of his view that the paroxysms continued after 1743, and were known to appear even as late as 1786<sup>76</sup>. He agrees, however, that when once they had ceased in a particular place, they did not usually re-occur there, or, if they did, it was by "a law of diminishing returns."<sup>77</sup> But during those later years they still sometimes

35/ re-appeared in .....

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71. Cited by Ramage, op. cit., p. 166.

72. Journal, 23rd October, 1739.

73. Ibid., 4th June, 1772.

74. Dimond, op. cit., p. 126; Ramage, op. cit., p. 140.

75. thus for instance, R. Southey, The Life of Wesley, (1846), Vol I, p. 213.

76. R. Knox, Enthusiasm, Oxford, 1950, p. 213.

77. Ibid., p. 529

re-appeared in new places, as happened at the 1772 revival at Weardale, where the work had already been established for some thirty years.

T. E. Brigden makes the interesting point that the later fall-off in the incidence of such phenomena can be linked with the development of Methodist singing, which "contributed largely to the higher expression and control of the intense emotion of the great awakening."<sup>78</sup>

We must agree with Knox's conclusion that Wesley never outgrew his interest in the convulsions<sup>79</sup>, and that he did not at any period of his life either regret or discourage such happenings.<sup>80</sup> But his next assertion is to be questioned, when he claims that in Wesley's frequent use of the phrase, 'The power of the Lord was present, both to wound and to heal'<sup>81</sup> the word 'to wound' meant "an outward manifestation of spiritual crisis, more or less sensational."<sup>82</sup> This claim is not proven. The evidence from Wesley's own practice and reflection suggests that this is not what he meant when he spoke of his desire that his hearers should 'feel' the truth of the gospel. Wesley was uneasy about these physical manifestations, and is unlikely to have tried to stimulate them deliberately. We must regard his word 'to wound' as metaphorical language to describe the deep-probing action of the Spirit of God when men really hear His word.

Of course Wesley's critics and enemies made great use of these Methodist 'extremes' to discredit him, and he was frequently challenged to express an opinion about them. In 1759 he preached at Everton, some months after the remarkable revival that had taken place there under the ministry of John Berridge. Wesley had visited Everton at the time, and had been personally much affected by the paroxysms that were then so much in evidence<sup>83</sup>. Four months later he is struck by the more sub-

36/ dued atmosphere .....

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78. T.E. Brigden, in A New History of Methodism, op. cit., p.216.

79. R. Knox, op. cit., p. 530.

80. Ibid., p. 535.

81. Journal, 1st March, 1742, and frequently.

82. Knox, op. cit., p. 522.

83. Journal, 29th July, 1759.

duced atmosphere then prevailing, and speaks in general of the importance of such manifestations:

"The danger was to regard extraordinary circumstances too much ...; as if these were essential to the inward work, so that it could not go on without them. Perhaps the danger is to regard them too little, to condemn them altogether; to imagine that they had nothing of God in them and were a hindrance to His work. Whereas the truth is: God suddenly and strongly convinced many that they were lost sinners, the natural consequence whereof were sudden outcries and strong bodily convulsions."<sup>84</sup>

He went on to admit the possibility that in some people the manifestations were due to pretence, or imitation of others, but he felt that this did not deny the real work of the Spirit. "The shadow is no disparagement of the substance, nor the counterfeit of the real diamond."<sup>85</sup>

In 1768 Wesley wrote a reply to Dr. Thomas Rutherford, who had roundly criticised these physical manifestations. Wesley concludes his letter:

"Upon the whole, I declare once for all (and I hope to be troubled no more upon the subject) I look upon some of these bodily symptoms to have been preternatural or diabolical, and others to have been effects which in some circumstances naturally followed from strong and sudden emotions of mind. These emotions of mind, whether of fear, sorrow or joy, I believe were supernatural, springing from the gracious influences of the Spirit of God which accompanied His word."<sup>86</sup>

Wesley did not believe that these disturbances were necessarily important.

"I speak of them as 'outward symptoms which have often accompanied the inward work of God'. Often, I say, not always, not necessarily: They may, or they may not. This work may be without those symptoms, and those symptoms may be without this work."<sup>87</sup>

What were these emotions of mind that caused people to fall to the ground, sobbing, crying, convulsing? Fear, sorrow, or joy?

To find the answer it is necessary to bear in mind the living conditions of the bulk of the people in eighteenth-century

37/ England. A .....

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84. Ibid., 25th November, 1759.

85. Ibid.

86. Works, XIV, p. 358.

87. Ibid., p. 84.

England. A very large proportion of the population was made up of poor people. Thousands were crowded together in the new rising industrial towns and villages. The social conditions, especially of the poor, were appalling. Dorothy Marshall describes the kind of life that was known to so many people:

"Overcrowding made every kind of sexual laxity almost normal. Extreme poverty made thieving and bullying the only alternatives to starvation. Overcrowding, poverty, and ill-health together with monotonous food and over-long hours of work, often found compensation in drunkenness, in a love of brutal sports, and in a violence that broke out again and again when the pressure became too great. It was a hard, harsh world for the mass of English people, and one singularly devoid of pity. Disease, violence, early or sudden death, were too common."<sup>88</sup>

Conditions such as these had a brutalizing effect on family life and dehumanized the individual.

Wesley came to such people, caught up in the web of vicious circumstances, and declared to them the love of God. He told these deprived and unloved people that God loved each one of them. He went to people who "knew much of the harshness of the world and the severity of the law"<sup>89</sup> and offered them the grace of God. It was something altogether new for many of them, something immensely comforting and reassuring. His preaching did not have to create in them a sense of sin and guilt, for that was there already. His message and its appeal afforded them the opportunity to shed their sin and guilt as they experienced God's accepting and pardoning grace. Small wonder, then, that there were extravagant and violent reactions to his preaching, producing convulsive and irrational behaviour. Tearfully, but joyfully, people were being set free from their grinding bondage. Their collapse into paroxysms was not a collapse under imposed stress, as Sargent believes it to have been, but was collapse after the release of intolerable stress<sup>90</sup>. Ramage argues that Wesley managed "to set free a whole flood of emotion that was not merely a normal response to present stimulation, but the outpouring of repressed emotion from the past."<sup>91</sup> The release was pre-

38/ cipated, not .....

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88. Dorothy Marshall, Eighteenth Century England, London 1962, p. 243.

89. Ramage, op. cit., p. 192.

90. Ibid., p. 59.

91. Ibid., p. 184.

cipitated, not by an emotional over-playing of the terrors of hell and eternal punishment, but by the calm declaration of the gracious love of God, for sinful men. The emotions were those of fear: fear, not of hell-fire, but of God, a reverential awe for a holy God; there was sorrow for past sin and wasted living; but most of all, there was joy, the joy of people who believed they had been found by God.

Such scenes of physical agitation and distress also occurred after the preaching of certain other preachers. We are not surprised when such things follow the preaching of George Whitefield, for he, with his powerful voice and dramatic style of preaching appealed to the senses and to the imagination. Charles Wesley, too, with his poetry and sensitivity, made a concentrated and overwhelming appeal to the emotions. Yet it was John Wesley who, in his calm reasoned way, struck a deeper note and moved his hearers most mightily.

We should note that Wesley never seemed to associate these strange vocal utterances with what is known as Pentecostal glossalalia. He was not unaware that there was such a thing as the gift of tongues. His only reference to this gift occurs in a letter written in 1748 or 1749 to Rev. Dr. Conyers Middleton<sup>92</sup>. He disputes Middleton's claim that since apostolic times there had been no instances of any persons who had exercised this gift. He argues that it has been known even since the Reformation, and cites the example of the Protestant inhabitants of the valleys of Dauphiny less than fifty years before. But there is no suggestion either here or anywhere else in Wesley's writings that he regarded the physical phenomena so often seen in the Revival as being in any sense of a Pentecostal nature, or that the vocal utterances of those who experienced these disturbances could be identified with tongues-speaking. R.A. Knox also speaks of the remarkable "absence of glossalaly among the early Methodists" - remarkable because "Wesley is for ever commenting on the various jumpers, jerkers, roarers of his day." Yet there is no single allusion, in all his Journal, to the gift of tongues.<sup>93</sup> In his interesting study of Howel Harris, who can be regarded

39/ as Wesley's .....

92. Works, X, pp. 54 - 56.

93. R. A. Knox, op. cit., p. 551.

as Wesley's precursor as an itinerant evangelist, G. F. Nuttall writes that "in Harris' circle enthusiasm did not break out into glossalalia. It is a point at which early Methodism stands clearly distinct from both Irvingism and modern Pentecostalism."<sup>94</sup>

The nineteenth century saw the advent in Britain and America of numerous evangelists who developed definite techniques of 'revivalism'. The legacy left by these practitioners has not been uniformly good or acceptable, and some of them have given evangelism a bad name. They stooped to excesses of emotionalism, and to dubious manipulatory methods in order to stimulate a response to the message they proclaimed. There is a tendency to regard Wesley as in some sense the father of these methods and the originator of these questionable revival techniques.

But it is a mistake to identify him with this group. He was not the man to abuse the preaching office in such ways: for he had a deep respect for the individual, and a clear sense of the initiative of God - what he called 'prevenient grace'; he was dedicated to preaching a theologically sound gospel; he believed in no stereotyped conversion experience for all people, but in the variety of God's approach to different people.

It cannot be said that the altar-call for decision for Christ was a regular method used by Wesley. In fact there is only one single reference to anything resembling an altar-call in his writings:

"Toward the close of the sermon, I asked, 'Which of you will give yourself, soul and body, to God?' One cried out, with a cry that almost shook the house, 'Oh, I will, I will.' And as soon as she could stand, she came forth in the midst, to witness it before all the congregation."<sup>95</sup>

We often read of Wesley asking those who were interested in joining the Methodist society to come and tell him so the next morning. It seems to have been the nearest he regularly came to making a call for decision.

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94. G.F. Nuttall, Howel Harris, 1714 - 1773, p. 52

95. Journal, 17th June, 1749.

## Chapter Three

THE INSTITUTED MEANS

Wesley frequently used the phrase "the means of grace". In his sermon of this title he defined what he understood by the phrase:

"I understand outward signs, words, or actions, ordained of God, and appointed for this end, to be the ordinary channels whereby we might convey to men, preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace."<sup>1</sup>

He believed that a number of things served as such channels:

"The chief means of these are prayer, whether in secret or with the great congregation; searching the Scriptures; (which implies reading, hearing and meditating thereon) and receiving the Lord's Supper, eating bread and drinking wine in remembrance of Him: And these we believe to be ordained of God, as the ordinary channels of conveying His grace to the souls of men."<sup>2</sup>

He made a further distinction between the Instituted and the Prudential means of grace. The Instituted means have been instituted by God and are witnessed to by the Scriptures; they are, therefore, indispensable for the Christian. The Prudential means, on the other hand, are called forth by the situation and are, therefore, flexible and subject to change. There is a statement of this distinction in The Large Minutes<sup>3</sup>, where he lists the instituted means as follows: Prayer, Searching the Scriptures, The Lord's Supper, Fasting, Christian Conference.

In Wesley's own practice these means of grace became his means of evangelism. For if God conveyed His grace by these means to individual Christians, including Wesley himself, then his appreciation of their importance led him inevitably to use them widely in his work of winning men for God's Kingdom. We shall see how Wesley's use of these means of grace made them effective tools in his work of evangelism.

41/ At first sight .....

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1. Forty-Four Sermons, Sermon XII, The Means of Grace, p. 136.
  2. Ibid., pp. 136 - 137.
  3. Works, VIII, pp. 322 - 324.

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In a comment on the Twentieth of the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England, Wesley said that it claimed three things as being essential to the visible Church. The second of these is "... preaching, and consequently hearing, the pure Word of

At first sight it seems strange that Wesley should omit preaching from his list of the instituted means of grace. Knowing how he stressed the importance of the preaching office, we expect to find preaching at the head of the list. But there is little doubt that Wesley presupposed the place of preaching. His emphasis on the hearing of the Word of God implies the necessity of preaching, and calls to mind the words of St. Paul: "And how are they to hear without a preacher?"<sup>4</sup>. In his list of the instituted means he refers, in connection with "searching the Scriptures", to "Reading, Meditating and Hearing." The questions that he then asks under this heading of "Hearing" indicate that he had in mind the hearing of the exposition of Scripture, for he asks: "Every morning? carefully? with prayer before, at, after; immediately putting in practice?"<sup>5</sup>. This was a reference to attendance at the early morning preaching which, we shall see, Wesley encouraged with much enthusiasm. In a comment on the Twentieth of the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England, Wesley said that it claimed three things as being essential to the visible Church. The second of these is "... preaching, and consequently hearing, the pure Word of God."<sup>6</sup>

We may say, then, that Wesley regarded preaching as so fundamental a means of evangelism, that it stood by itself in his thinking. He considered that "the first principle of Methodism (is) wholly and solely to preach the Gospel."<sup>7</sup> In answer to the Ordinary of Newgate, who had accused him of turning Dissenter from the Church of England, Wesley quoted with warm approval from the Article on the Church, which defined a true Church as "a congregation of faithful people, wherein the true word of God is preached and the Sacraments duly administered."<sup>8</sup> A. L. Boraine suggests that another possible reason why Wesley did not include preaching in his

42/ list of instituted .....

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4. Romans 10 : 14 (Revised Standard Version).

5. Works, VIII, pp. 322 - 324.

6. Ibid., p. 31 - An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion.

7. Ibid., VII, p. 277 - Sermon on The Ministerial Office.

8. Journal, 6th February, 1740.

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list of instituted means was the fact that preaching was not an issue in his controversy with the Moravians<sup>9</sup>. Their doctrine of "stillness" did not preclude the preaching office. But Wesley had a low regard for Moravian preaching, and he spoke of "the comfortable way in which the Brethren preach."<sup>10</sup> He saw a vast difference between the Methodist and the Moravian way of preaching:

"If he (a believer who has fallen into carelessness or sin) comes to hear our preaching, then we shake all his bones in pieces. If he comes to them they stroke him and lull him asleep."<sup>11</sup>

In his sermon on The Means of Grace, Wesley points out that God is not restricted to any pattern or order in conveying this grace to man. He is free to use or refuse His appointed means of grace, but He "is generally pleased to use these means in bringing a sinner to salvation."<sup>12</sup> "If any of these will reach a stupid, careless sinner, it is probably hearing, or conversation."<sup>13</sup> For God very often encounters the sinner "by an awakening sermon or conversation."<sup>14</sup>

Clearly, Wesley considered preaching to be the central and primary instituted means of grace. Since we have already given due attention to the place and use of preaching in Wesley's evangelism, we now look in turn at his other instituted means.

#### THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE SACRAMENTS

##### (a) Baptism:

Baptism is not included in Wesley's list of the instituted means of grace. The Lord's Supper is often discussed in his writings, while Baptism receives comparatively scant and frag-

43/ mentary references. ....

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9. A.L. Borraine, The Nature of Evangelism in the Theology and Practice of John Wesley, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Drew University, Madison, New Jersey, 1969.

10. Journal, 25th November, 1744 - see also 28th November, 1750, a "letter to an old friend."

11. Ibid.

12. Forty-Four Sermons, Sermon XII, The Means of Grace, p. 148.

13. Ibid., p. 149.

14. Ibid., p. 148.

mentary references. These facts indicate that Baptism, for Wesley, was a means of grace less important, theologically and practically, than the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

A probable reason for the omission of Baptism from Wesley's list of the instituted means of grace is that the people for whom the list was intended were already baptized members of the Church of England. The other listed means of grace are repeatable, and can serve as constant, renewing sources of grace for the Christian. Baptism, on the other hand, is not repeatable.

Another likely reason for the omission of Baptism from the list is that, since his doctrine of conditional election demanded a conscious belief in Jesus Christ, Wesley emphasized those means which required a conscious participation on the part of the believer.

Wesley certainly regarded Baptism as a means of grace instituted by Christ and witnessed to by Scripture. Writing to William Law in 1756 he says: "The plain meaning of the expression, 'Except a man be born of water' is neither more nor less than this, 'Except ye be baptized'. And the plain reason why he ought to be thus born of water is because God has appointed it. He hath appointed it an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace; which grace is 'a death unto sin and a new birth unto righteousness'."<sup>15</sup>

Wesley was concerned to ensure that Baptism answered the end of its institution, which is the conscious entering into the new life in Christ. The intention of this means of grace is to lead man to a further conscious acceptance of God's justifying and sanctifying grace. He urged men not to trust in their Baptism for salvation, but rather to prove their Baptism by trusting in Jesus Christ for their salvation.

"Say not then in your heart, 'I was once baptized, therefore I am now a child of God'. Alas, that consequence

44/ will by no .....

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15. Works, IX, p. 494. An Extract of a letter to the Reverend Mr. Law, 6th January, 1756.

will by no means hold."<sup>16</sup>

"Lean no more on the staff of that broken reed, that ye were born again in baptism. Who denies that ye were then made children of God, and heirs of the Kingdom of heaven? But, notwithstanding this, ye are now children of the devil. Therefore, ye must be born again."<sup>17</sup>

He definitely linked Baptism with the crisis of regeneration: "No stress is laid on the age of the baptized, or the manner of performing it, in one or the other; but only on our being risen with Christ, through the powerful operation of God in the soul; which we cannot but know assuredly, if it really is so; and if we do not experience this, our baptism has not answered the end of its institution."<sup>18</sup>

In an age when the Church was in the grip of a paralysing formalism, and men trusted in the externals of religion to the neglect of vital piety, this was an important emphasis. Wesley regarded the occasion of a baptism as an opportunity when God might work both in the baptized and in those present to witness the baptism. He relates how, on the occasion of the baptism of one Hannah C--, "God, as usual, bare witness to this ordinance. A solemn awe spread over the whole congregation, and many could not refrain from tears."<sup>19</sup> On another occasion a certain gentlewoman was baptized, and immediately found peace. Wesley comments, "... the outward sign, duly received, is always accompanied with the inward grace."<sup>20</sup> Yet Wesley had no illusions about these things. He remarks that of the adults he had recently known baptized, one was at the time born again in the full sense of a thorough, inward change, while others knew only the remission of their sins. "And some (as it has since too plainly appeared), neither in one sense nor the other."<sup>21</sup>

Wesley himself rarely administered baptism, since most of his converts were Anglicans who had been baptized in infancy. The few adults who asked for baptism were exceptional cases.

45/      The Journal .....

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16. Forty-Four Sermons, Sermon XIV, The Marks of the New Birth, p. 172.

17. Ibid., p. 173.

18. Notes Upon the New Testament, Colossians 2 : 12.

19. Journal, 16th October, 1756; 3rd October, 1758.

20. Ibid., 5th February, 1760.

21. Ibid., 25th January, 1739.

46/      In this sermon .....

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22. Ibid., 25th January, 1739; 6th April, 1748; 5th December, 1757.

The Journal records a few such instances where Wesley baptized adults who had been converted. Some were Quakers, others Anabaptists, while one man was a Portuguese Jew<sup>22</sup>. He tells of an occasion when he baptized seven adults, two of them by immersion<sup>23</sup>.

There are no recorded instances of Wesley baptizing infants except during his Georgia ministry. No doubt this is to be attributed to the fact that since he never had any parish of his own after his return to England, he was never in a position where he would be asked to baptize children. And since he remained unwaveringly loyal to the Established Church, and would take no step that would suggest any break with that Church, he always enjoined the Methodists to go to the parish church for the administration of baptism

b) The Lord's Supper:

Wesley's personal practice with regard to the use and importance of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper is in strong contrast with the general attitude of the Church of his day. Already during his Oxford days we see him making a rule of communicating every Sunday, or even more frequently, if opportunity presented itself. This pattern remained fixed to the end of his days. Throughout his Journal he makes mention of attending the Sacrament on Sundays at the local parish church wherever he found himself at the time, if the local incumbent was agreeable.

He urged his followers to communicate constantly. In 1788 he prefaced his sermon on The Duty of Constant Communion with the following words:

"The following Discourse was written above five-and-fifty years ago, for the use of my pupils at Oxford. I have added very little, but retrenched much; as I then used more words than I do now. But, I thank God, I have not yet seen cause to alter my sentiments in any point which is therein delivered."<sup>24</sup>

46/ In this sermon .....

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22. Ibid., 25th January, 1739; 6th April, 1748; 5th December, 1757.

23. Ibid., 21st March, 1759.

24. Works, VII, Sermon, The Duty of Constant Communion, p. 147.

In this sermon he shows "that it is the duty of every Christian to receive the Lord's Supper as often as he can." This is because the Holy Communion is both a command of God and a mercy from God to man. Members of the Band-Societies were directed "to be at church and at the Lord's table every week."<sup>25</sup>

John Bowmer has shown that in the Church of England in the eighteenth century, the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper was "infrequently administered and indifferently regarded by large numbers of both clergy and laity",<sup>26</sup> and concludes, "The evidence seems to show that the majority of the serious-minded church-going people of the eighteenth century received the Sacrament on the great festivals of the Church Year; but in some parishes, mainly in London and a few large towns, there were churches where monthly celebrations were held."<sup>27</sup> No doubt the pluralism of the age, with its consequent absence of regular clergy in some parishes, contributed to this low regard for the Sacrament and to irregular communication.

In his sermon of 1739 on The Means of Grace, Wesley speaks of the Lord's Supper as an essential means of grace. In answer to the Moravian teaching on "stillness", he advocated the use of the Lord's Supper as one of the means of grace that ordinarily conveyed God's grace to unbelievers. Wesley agreed with the Moravians that salvation is of God alone and that man must wait upon the Lord. But his understanding of "waiting" was different: a man is to wait for the grace of God by using the means of grace, not by laying them aside. For God is pleased to offer this grace by His appointed means, which are instituted by Christ and witnessed to in the Scriptures. Therefore to deny the means of grace is to resist that which God has appointed in Scripture. And the way shown in Scripture embraces "the way of prayer," "searching the Scriptures" and "partaking of the Lord's Supper."<sup>28</sup>

47/ Wesley held .....

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25. Works, VIII, p. 274, Directions to the Band-Societies.

26. John C. Bowmer, The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper in Early Methodism, London, 1951, p. 3 f; quoted by A.L. Boraine, *op. cit.*

27. *Ibid.*, p. 8; cf. Horton Davies, *op. cit.*, pp. 62 - 64.

28. This is an interesting contrast with Böhler's advice to "preach faith till you have it, and then, because you have it, you will preach faith." (Journal, 4th March, 1738).

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Wesley held that ALL men, even unbelievers, should avail themselves of the means of grace. He based this conviction on the example of Jesus:

"Our Lord commanded these very men who were then unconverted, who had not yet received the Holy Ghost, who, (in the full sense of the word) were not believers, to do this 'in remembrance of' Him. Here the precept is clear. And to those He delivered the elements with His own hands. Here is example equally indisputable."<sup>29</sup>

He believed that believers and unbelievers alike are to be invited to the table of the Lord, since God's love is extended to all men.

It is important to note the shift in Wesley's sacramental views. Once he had been very strict in admitting only baptized and episcopally confirmed persons to the sacrament. In Georgia this caused him a great deal of trouble and contributed to his downfall. After his return to England the urgency of his evangelical mission changed all this, until the Lord's table was as free of access as the very gospel he preached. But he still insisted upon some evidence of genuine faith and the intention to live a holy life<sup>30</sup>.

The reason for this modification of his sacramental views is that Wesley regarded the means of grace as being not only confirming but also converting ordinances. He knew of a number of people who claimed to have been converted through attending the Lord's Supper. He relates that his mother was one:

"I talked largely with my mother, who told me that, till a short time since, she had scarce heard such a thing mentioned as the having forgiveness of sins now, or God's Spirit bearing witness with our spirit; much less did she imagine that this was the common privilege of all true believers. 'Therefore,' said she, 'I never durst ask it for myself. But two or three weeks ago, while my son Hall was pronouncing those words, in delivering the cup to me, 'The blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was given for thee', the words struck through my heart, and I knew God for Christ's sake had forgiven me all my sins'."<sup>31</sup>

This was despite the fact that she had been aware that her father, Dr. Annesley, had known such faith himself. Apparently she had looked upon it as the peculiar blessing of a few,

48/ not as promised .....

29. Journal, 27th June, 1740.

30. Horton Davies, *op. cit.*, p. 207.

31. Journal, 3rd September, 1739.

not as promised to all the people of God.

Wesley tells of another woman who had disregarded advice not to communicate (given her by an advocate of "stillness"), and who found that "'He was made known unto her' in breaking of bread. In that moment she felt her load removed, she knew she was accepted in the Beloved."<sup>32</sup>

Wesley records an occasion when he preached on the text, "Do this in remembrance of Me."<sup>33</sup> He goes on to reflect that some people had been affirming that the Lord's Supper was not a converting, but only a confirming, ordinance, and that therefore only converted believers ought to communicate. He answers them thus:

"But experience shows the gross falsehood of that assertion that the Lord's Supper is not a converting ordinance. Ye are the witnesses. For many now present know, the very beginning of your conversion to God (perhaps, in some, the first deep conviction) was wrought at the Lord's Supper. Now, one single instance of this kind overthrows the whole assertion."<sup>34</sup>

He pursued the same theme the following day, and showed how God can use the Sacrament to convey His grace to all conditions of men.

"I showed at large: (1) That the Lord's Supper was ordained by God to be a means of conveying to men either preventing, or justifying, or sanctifying grace, according to their several necessities. (2) That the persons for whom it was ordained are all those who know and feel that they want the grace of God, either to restrain them from sin, or to show sins forgiven, or to renew their souls in the image of God. (3) That inasmuch as we come to this table, not to give Him anything, but to receive whatsoever He sees best for us, there is no previous preparation indispensably necessary, but a desire to receive whatsoever He pleases to give. And (4) That no fitness is required at the time of communicating, but a sense of our state, of our utter sinfulness; every one who knows he is fit for hell being just as fit to come to Christ in this as well as all other ways of His appointment."<sup>35</sup>

#### PRAYER

In the sermon on The Means of Grace prayer, both private and congregational, is named as a means of grace. Wesley defines

49/ this further .....

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32. Ibid., 20th September, 1739.

33. Luke 22 : 19.

34. Journal, 27th June, 1740.

35. Journal, 28th June, 1740.

this further in The Large Minutes : "Prayer, private, family, public; consisting of deprecation, petition, intercession, and thanksgiving."<sup>36</sup> Quoting from the New Testament, Wesley says that our Lord Himself gave express direction that all who desire the grace of God are to wait for it in the way of prayer<sup>37</sup>.

The Journal reveals how in 1738 he ventured on the new way of extemporary prayer. On the 27th March he went to the Castle at Oxford, where he preached, and afterwards prayed with a prisoner, "first in several forms of prayer, and then in such words as were given us in that hour."<sup>38</sup> This proved helpful, for the man there and then confessed his sins and trusted in Christ as his Saviour.

On 1st April Wesley writes:

"Being at Mr. Fox's society, my heart was so full that I could not confine myself to the forms of prayer which we were accustomed to use there. Neither do I propose to be confined to them any more; but to pray indifferently, with a form or without, as I may find suitable to particular occasions."<sup>39</sup>

The forms of prayer that Wesley was accustomed to were those of the Church of England Prayer Book. It is interesting to note that his move into 'free' prayer took place even before his 'conversion' of May, 1738.

The use of extemporary prayer brought down on Wesley the censure of many churchmen. They accused him of doing harm by breaking and setting aside order. In reply he pointed out what was the purpose both of set forms of prayer and of free prayer:

"(1) It were better for me to die than not to preach the gospel of Christ; yea, and in the fields, either where I may not preach in the church or where the church will not contain the congregation. (2) That I use the service of the Church every Lord's Day, and it has never yet appeared to me that any rule of the Church forbids my using extemporary prayer on other occasions. But methinks I would go deeper. I would enquire, What is the end of all ecclesiastical order? Is it not to bring souls from the power of Satan to God, and to build

50/ them up in .....

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36. Works, VIII, p. 322.

37. The Means of Grace, Sermon XII, Forty-Four Sermons, p.139.

38. Journal, 27th April, 1738.

39. Ibid., 1st April, 1738.

them up in His fear and love? Order, then, is so far valuable as it answers these ends; and if it answers them not, it is nothing worth."<sup>40</sup>

In his sermon on The More Excellent Way Wesley encouraged Christians to follow the advice of Mr. Law, rather than use without variation the same form of prayer to which they are accustomed. He says: "Consider both your outward and inward state, and vary your prayers accordingly."<sup>41</sup> This he practised himself through the long years of his ministry. When he prayed for people, whether individually, or in large groups, it was with great sensitivity to their needs. Prayer thus became in his hands an effective means of evangelism, for through such prayer people were awakened to deep desire for God.

"... the end of your praying is not to inform God, as though He knew not your wants already; but rather to inform yourselves; to fix the sense of those wants more deeply in your hearts, and the sense of your continual dependence on Him who only is able to supply all your wants. It is not so much to move God, who is always more ready to give than you to ask, as to move yourselves, that you may be willing and ready to receive the good things He has prepared for you."<sup>42</sup>

The Journal has many references to people who found release from their sins, and joy in Christ, by the use of prayer, often after the preaching. After preaching at Snowsfields, London, Wesley went into a friend's house nearby:

"A poor sinner indeed followed me, one who was broken in pieces by the convincing Spirit, and uttered such cries as pierced the hearts of all that heard. We poured out our souls before God in prayer, and light sprung up in her heart."<sup>43</sup>

#### SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

Wesley laid down clear guide-lines for those who would find a means of grace in searching the Scriptures. Such searching should include Reading, Meditating, and Hearing<sup>44</sup>: "Reading",

51/ he urged, .....

40. Works, XII, p. 79, letter to "John Smith", 25th June, 1746.

41. Works, VII, p. 30.

42. Forty-Four Sermons, Sermon XXI, Sermon on the Mount - VI, p. 274.

43. Journal, 17th February, 1750.

44. Works, VIII, The Large Minutes, p. 323.

he urged, "should be done constantly, some part of every day; regularly, all the Bible in order; carefully, with the Notes; seriously, with prayer before and after, fruitfully, immediately practising what you learn there."<sup>45</sup> He quoted with approval, 2 Timothy 4:16, that all Scripture is "profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness;" to the end "that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works."<sup>46</sup> But he went on:

"Nor is this profitable only for the men of God, for those who walk already in the Light of His countenance; but also for those who are yet in darkness, seeking Him whom they know not. Let them thus wait upon God, that His light may dawn upon them."<sup>47</sup>

So He recommended the careful reading of Scripture, for it, too, could be a converting medium.

Wesley's own preaching ministry represents his unceasing efforts to unfold before his hearers the message and meaning of Scripture, that God may apply its truths to their hearts. He was always a biblical preacher, and saw it as his business to declare to people a divine revelation, the truth of God. In his hands the Scriptures became a two-edged Sword of the Spirit, and their message penetrated deep into the hearts of men. Wesley tells how he once expounded the Word to "a little cold company" at Bury St. Edmunds from 1 Corinthians 13 as his chosen chapter. He says that it was this love that they lacked, although they did not like to be told so. "But I cannot help that. I must declare just what I find in the Book."<sup>48</sup>

He frequently described himself as a "man of one Book", which, of course, he was not. He meant that for him the Bible was the Book of all books. His sermons were thoroughly Bible-based. He encouraged people to search the scriptures as a means of grace. He himself let no opportunity slip to guide them in such searching, that the Word of God might address them in depth.

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45. Ibid.

46. Forty-Four Sermons, Sermon XII, The Means of Grace, p.142.

47. Ibid., p. 143.

48. Journal, 2nd November, 1772.



FASTING

As a member of the Holy Club, Wesley had begun to observe all the fasts of the Church and, in addition, he fasted every Wednesday and Friday. He maintained this discipline faithfully during his stay in Georgia. He believed it useful as a means of making a person more conscious of God, and of the shortcomings in his life, such as ingratitude and over-indulgence. He saw it as an aid to prayer, which God uses to confirm and increase in a man "seriousness of spirit, earnestness, sensibility and tenderness of conscience, deadness to the world, and consequently the love of God, and every holy and heavenly affection."<sup>49</sup>

Wesley regarded fasting as a "precious" means of grace "which God Himself has ordained."<sup>50</sup> As such he enjoined it not only on those going on to perfection, but also on all men. It would be an indication of a man's seriousness in seeking salvation. "... when it is duly used, He will surely give us His blessing."<sup>51</sup>

CHRISTIAN CONFERENCE

Wesley recognized the need for less formal opportunities for testimony and teaching, and he used the phrase 'Christian Conference' to describe these. The phrase covered the use of the spoken word between people in a number of different situations. The same urgency that marked all Wesley's other means of grace characterized this one too. He had no use for mere idle chatter or gossip:

"Are you convinced how important and how difficult it is to 'order your conversation right'? Is it always in grace? seasoned with salt? meet to minister grace to the hearers? Do you not converse too long at a time? Is not an hour commonly enough? Would it not be well always to have a determinate end in view, and to pray before and after it?"<sup>52</sup>

53/ The Journal and .....

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49. Forty-Four Sermons, Sermon XXII, Sermon on the Mount - VII, p. 294.  
 50. Ibid., p. 288.  
 51. Ibid.  
 52. Works, VIII, The Large Minutes, p. 323.

The Journal and Diary have numerous references to Wesley's conversations with small groups of people or with individuals. Apparently he set aside a definite part of each evening for such conversation. Because he was always on the go, he never spent more time than he needed to over any conversation.

Dr. Johnson complained:

"John Wesley's conversation is good, but he is never at leisure. He is always obliged to go at a certain hour. This is very disagreeable to a man who loves to fold his legs and have his talk out, as I do."<sup>53</sup>

Wesley's talk was always directed to the end that he had in view, which was his mission to declare the gospel to all men. When he had said what he wanted to say, he moved on again. He used his journeys to good effect, too. For when travelling in a carriage with others, he was quick to seize the opportunity to engage them in deep and earnest conversation.

The Bands and the Societies provided opportunities for Christian Conference. Their rules required that attention be given to testimony and exhortation. Members were to speak everything that was in their hearts without reserve. It was the practice that even those who had indicated their desire for salvation were enrolled in the Society. So the conversations became means of grace, as Christians built each other up in their faith, and helped the seekers to find their salvation in Jesus Christ.

Wesley held regular annual Conferences with his preachers. The time was used to review the work that had been done in the Societies and plan for the future. There was opportunity for "Conversation on the Work of God," and the preachers received valuable training for their future usefulness.

Wesley had a high regard for house-to-house visitation, and frequently enjoined it upon his helpers. He managed to do a surprising amount of visitation himself when he 'inspected' one by one the members of a Society and talked with them of their present Christian experience.

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53. Boswell's Life of Johnson, ed. G. Birkbeck Hill (1934), Vol. III, p. 230. (Cited in A.S. Wood, op. cit., p. 115, footnote).

## Chapter Four

THE PRUDENTIAL MEANS

Since evangelism takes place within a given set of circumstances, those circumstances will to some extent determine what is done and how it is done. In this chapter we discuss the ways in which the particular circumstances of his day influenced and shaped the methods of evangelism used by Wesley.

So, for instance, when he was denied access to the pulpits of the Church of England, he eventually turned to the expedient of "field-preaching". His burning passion to declare the grace of God to as many people as possible, together with the fact that he never had any parish of his own, set his feet in the way of an itinerant ministry. His conviction that a process of thorough Christian nurture was essential for the new convert, together with his doubts that this would be, or even could be, provided in the existing structures of the established Church, led to the formation of the Societies with their sub-structure of bands and classes. The impossibility of ministering singlehanded to the growing membership of the Methodist Societies led him to rely on the help of an important band of lay-preachers. When the people's long working hours made it impossible for him to preach before them at any reasonable hour of the day, he tried early morning preaching as a way of reaching them before the day's work began. The particular needs and circumstances of the Methodist converts led to the introduction of such special services as the Love Feast, the Covenant Service and the Watchnight.

Enough has been said to underline the fact that Wesley was flexible in his approach to evangelism. Circumstances forced him either to accept being circumscribed in his mission, or to be ready to venture on strange, new paths. Often it was with much reluctance that he tried the new methods, yet, when he had seen their possibilities, and proved their efficacy, he was honest and generous in commending them. In fact an interesting pattern emerges in Wesley's reactions to the means developed. (1) It begins with expressions of his

55/ distaste when .....

distaste when circumstances push him into an unusual practice. (2) He discovers the possibilities of the methods, and (3) then adapts them for his own purposes. (4) His growing conviction about the usefulness of the practices eventually rises to (5) a statement of principle that the Methodist work will decline if these things are ever abandoned or neglected.

We will see, too, that in adopting these new methods - which he called "prudential means" - Wesley was usually an adaptor rather than an innovator, for he took the ideas from a variety of sources. He believed that the use of such "prudential means" was fully justified, for they were grounded on reason and experience, and served to apply the general rules given in Scripture according to particular circumstances. He argued that such "prudential helps", being neither enjoined nor forbidden by his Church, did not raise any matter of principle. Their effectiveness was the sole criterion:

"That with regard to these little 'prudential helps' we are continually changing one thing after another is not a weakness or fault, as you imagine, but a peculiar advantage which we enjoy. By this means we declare them all to be merely 'prudential', not essential, not of divine institution. We prevent, so far as in us lies, their growing formal or dead. We are always open to instruction; willing to be wiser every day than we were before, and to change whatever we can change for the better."<sup>1</sup>

In later years all his doubts about the wisdom of using these prudential means had vanished. We can hear Wesley the pragmatist and passionate evangelist finally answering Wesley the fastidious don and traditionalist:

"I would observe every punctilio or order except when the salvation of souls is at stake. Then I prefer the end to the means."<sup>2</sup>

#### FIELD-PREACHING

Wesley's earliest attitude to field-preaching was to regard it as a misfortune, and it was with great reluctance that he turned to it as a method of evangelism. Following his return

56/ from Georgia .....

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1. Letters, II, p. 298.

2. Letters, IV, p. 146 - to George Downing, 6th April, 1761. (Quoted by A.S. Wood, op. cit., p. 162.)

from Georgia in February 1738, Wesley was at first in some demand as a preacher in various London churches. But already certain disturbing notes in his preaching were giving offence. The events of May 1738 only made matters worse. His zeal, earnestness and passion were now more evident than ever, and one by one Churches told him he would not be invited to preach again. One reason for this denial of the pulpits was a doctrinal one; for it was claimed that he was preaching an unacceptable "new" doctrine. There was a practical reason too, in that Wesley attracted such large crowds that there was no room left for the regular members of the Churches. For a man who believed that he had a commission to preach the gospel this was a bitterly frustrating situation. Wesley now began to preach more often in Society Rooms and in work houses.

In the meantime his colleague and friend, George Whitefield, had found a way of overcoming such restrictions. He had been restrained from preaching anywhere in the diocese of Bristol, except at Newgate prison. Then, one day early in 1739, he went to Kingswood, a community of colliers, where there was neither church nor school. Speaking from a hill, he preached to some 200 of these social outcasts. Within weeks he was speaking to thousands. He sent an urgent call to John Wesley in London to take over from him, as he was soon to return to Georgia. After much soul-searching Wesley met Whitefield in Bristol. He describes how he felt then about Whitefield's new method:

"I could scarce reconcile myself at first to this strange way of preaching in the fields, of which he set me an example on Sunday; having been all my life (till very lately) so tenacious of every point relating to decency and order, that I should have thought the saving of souls almost a sin if it had not been done in a church."<sup>3</sup>

On Sunday, 1st of April, on the eve of Whitefield's departure, Wesley was present when he preached to thousands of people on three occasions during the day. Wesley was impressed with the possibilities offered by this way of preaching, and was sufficiently convinced to try it himself the next day.

57/ "At four in .....

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3. Journal, 31st March, 1739.

"At four in the afternoon I submitted to be more vile, and proclaimed in the highways the glad tidings of salvation, speaking from a little eminence in the ground adjoining to the city, to about three thousand people."<sup>4</sup>

It is noteworthy that his text on this occasion was Isaiah 61 : 1, 2. The words were a prophetic description of his ministry in the years to follow.

Field-preaching soon became central in Wesley's ministry and, far from regarding it as a misfortune, he saw it as a providential expedient. In this way he was able to reach so many more people than any church could accommodate. But more, it enabled him to bring the gospel to people otherwise inaccessible. After preaching on the green at Bedminster, he writes:

"I am apt to think many of the hearers scarce ever heard a Methodist before, or perhaps any other preacher. What but field preaching could reach these poor sinners?"<sup>5</sup>

After preaching at Redcliff Hill, he writes:

"This is the way to overturn Satan's kingdom. In field preaching, more than any other means, God is found of them that sought him not. By this, death, heaven, and hell come to the ears, if not the hearts, of them that 'care for none of these things'."<sup>6</sup>

Wesley provided his "apologia" for field-preaching in his "A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion":

"Be pleased to observe: (1) That I was forbidden, as by a general consent, to preach in any church (though not by any judicial sentence) 'for preaching such doctrine'. This was the open, avowed cause; there was at that time no other, either real or pretended, except that the people crowded so. (2) That I had no desire or design to preach in the open air, till after this prohibition. (3) That when I did, as it was no matter of choice, so neither of premeditation. There was no scheme at all previously formed, which was to be supported thereby; nor had I any other end in view than this - to save as many souls as I could. (4) Field preaching was therefore a sudden expedient, a thing submitted to, because I thought preaching even thus, better than not preaching at all: First, in regard to my own soul, because a 'dispensation of the gospel being committed to me', I did not dare 'not to preach the gospel': Secondly, in regard to the souls of others, whom I everywhere saw 'seeking death in the error of their life'."<sup>7</sup>

58/ This passage .....

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4. Ibid., 2nd April, 1739.
  5. Journal, 17th September, 1763.
  6. Ibid., 30th September, 1767.
  7. Works, VIII, pp. 112 - 113, A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion (1745).

This passage has been quoted at some length, for it shows how Wesley's feeling about field-preaching developed a stage further. The expedient method had become a tactical necessity, and Wesley defended it with growing conviction. For field-preaching makes it possible for the preacher to address larger congregations than any church can hold. It enables him to go where the people are to be found, in the new industrial towns and villages which have neither church nor priest and where the labouring poor rarely, if ever, come within ear-shot of the gospel.

Wesley's critics questioned the need to preach in fields and streets, claiming that there were churches enough to preach in and ministers enough to do the preaching without his dubious contribution. Wesley replied that since sinners were not being reclaimed, this was evidence enough that there were not enough churches or ministers, and the argument made no difference if people never came near a church. He could not share the prevailing point of view that if people never entered a church, it was their own fault and they could be left to die and be damned.

"I grant it is their own fault; and so it was my fault and yours when we went astray like sheep that were lost. Yet the Shepherd of souls sought after us, and went after us into the wilderness. And 'oughtest not thou to have compassion on thy fellow-servants as He had pity on thee?' Ought not we also 'to seek', as far as in us lies, 'and to save that which is lost'?"<sup>8</sup>

These words reveal his passionate concern for the eternal well-being of the people who were commonly looked upon as outcasts. It was a miracle of grace that sent out the neat, fastidious Oxford don to bring the message of the gospel to the common people. A.C. Outler believes that Wesley underwent a further "conversion", no less important than his Aldersgate experience. It was his "conversion from passion to compassion as his dominant emotion, his change from a harsh zealot of God's judgement to a winsome witness to God's grace, from a censorious critic to an effective pastor, from arrogance to humility."<sup>9</sup>

59/ Outler goes on .....

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8. Ibid., p. 112 f.

9. A.C. Outler, Evangelism in the Wesleyan Spirit, Nashville, Tennessee, 1971, p. 19.

Outler goes on to suggest that while this was obviously not the first time that Wesley had preached the 'glad tidings of salvation',

"it was almost certainly the first time that anybody else had heard these tidings for themselves in his preaching of them.  
 ... part of this must have been because here his proclamation had finally passed over from highly self-conscious words to truly unself-conscious action. His passion for truth had been transformed into compassion for persons. This visible demonstration of his actual identification with them had stirred forlorn men to a real 'hearing of faith', and it was their hearing of faith that finally clinched Wesley's firm grasp upon his own faith. It was Wesley's belated success as an evangelist that finally made him into an assured believer. .... 'Preach faith until you have it' had been Peter Böhler's prescription, but it hadn't worked out like that. Instead, Wesley had preached faith until others had it .. and that was what broke the drought in his own spirit."<sup>10</sup>

Outler's valuable insight goes a long way towards explaining why Wesley was to become such a highly successful evangelist.

Wesley became so firmly convinced of the necessity of field-preaching that he could attribute the decline in the life of a Society to its absence, and prescribe it as a remedy for anaemic Societies. He diagnosed the neglect of field-preaching as one hindrance of the work of God in York, and immediately set about remedying the defect himself by preaching at 8 a.m. alongside the city walls<sup>11</sup>.

At Girs, a few years later, he was sure that the want of field-preaching contributed to the "deadness" there:

"I do not find any great increase of the work of God without it. If ever this is laid aside, I expect the whole work will gradually die away."<sup>12</sup>

At the annual Conferences and in letters to individuals, Wesley repeatedly underlined the great value of this method. He wrote to James Rea, one of his preachers in Ireland:

"Preach abroad ..... if ever you would do good. It is the cooping yourselves up in rooms that has damped the work of God, which never was and never will be carried on to any purpose without going out into the

50/ highways and hedges .....

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10. Ibid., pp. 20 - 21.

11. Journal, 5th July, 1761.

12. Journal, 24th June, 1764.

highways and hedges and compelling poor sinners to come in ..... Preach abroad in every place. Mind not lazy or cowardly Methodists. 'Tis a shame to preach in a house before October, unless in a morning."<sup>13</sup>

Wesley's approach to the question of field preaching was an essentially pragmatic one. He believed that its merits, seen, for instance, in the presence of a large serious congregation on Moorfields, would convince any impartial man of its expediency<sup>14</sup>. He continues:

"By repeated observations I find I can command thrice the number in the open air that I can under a roof. And who can say the time for field-preaching is over, while, (1) greater numbers than ever attend; (2) the converting as well as convincing power of God is eminently present with them?"<sup>15</sup>

Wesley used some strange pulpits in the course of his wide travels. It mattered little to him what form they took, as long as people could see and hear him. A chair or table, a wall, an open, high window, a market cross in the centre of the village, the steps of a building, a horseblock, or a tombstone (even at times that of his father in the Epworth graveyard) - all these were put to use. For many people his appearance, in gown and bands, under the blue skies, was an uncommon sight, to say the least.

Yet Wesley disclaimed the suggestion that the success of his preaching was to be attributed mainly to the novelty of this method. His letter of 24th March, 1747 to "John Smith" indicates that his open-air preaching at that time did not evoke any remarkable immediate response:

"I believe it was to obviate this very supposition that my preaching so rarely made any impression at all till the novelty of it was over. When I had preached more than six score times at this town (Newcastle), I found scarce any effect; only that abundance of people heard and gaped and stared and went away much as they came. And it was one evening, while I was in doubt if I had not laboured in vain, that such a blessing of God was given

61/ as has continued .....

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13. Letters, V, p. 23. To James Rea, 21st July, 1766.  
Quoted in W.L. Doughty, op. cit., p. 52.

14. Journal, 23rd September, 1759.

15. Ibid.

as has continued ever since, and I trust will be remembered unto many generations."<sup>16</sup>

In 1775, after preaching in Moorfields to a larger congregation than usual, he commented: "Strange that their curiosity should not be satisfied yet, after hearing the same thing near forty years!"<sup>17</sup> Clearly, the attraction was not Wesley's appearance in the open air but the message of his preaching.

Even though Wesley was firmly convinced of the great value of open-air preaching, he gave himself away from time to time, revealing how this mode of operation went against his natural inclinations.

".... I love a commodious room, a soft cushion, a handsome pulpit. But where is my zeal, if I do not trample all these underfoot in order to save one more soul?"<sup>18</sup>

"I preached on the quay at Kingswood, and near King Square. To this day field-preaching is a cross to me. But I know my commission and see no other way of 'preaching the Gospel to every creature'."<sup>19</sup>

By then he had been preaching in the open-air for thirty-three years!

There was much else to turn Wesley from field-preaching besides his own uneasiness. He knew at first hand of its hazards, and all the discomfort from the elements, and even the violence of uncouth enemies. He challenged those who merely criticised him whether they were prepared to accept the inconvenience that necessarily accompanied field-preaching:

"Can you bear the summer sun to beat upon your naked head? Can you suffer the wintry rain or wind, from whatever quarter it blows? Are you able to stand in the open air without any covering or defence when God casteth abroad his snow like wool, or scattereth his hoarfrost like ashes? .....

Far above all these, are the contradiction of sinners, the scoffs both of the great vulgar and the small; contempt and reproach of every kind; often more than verbal affronts, stupid, brutal violence, sometimes to the hazard of health or limbs or life."<sup>20</sup>

62/ Clearly, it is .....

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16. Works, XII, pp. 89 - 90.

17. Journal, 8th October, 1775.

18. Ibid., 26th June, 1759.

19. Ibid., 6th September, 1772.

20. A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, Works, VIII, p. 231.

Clearly, it is only the conviction that this way is God's will for him that "could induce any man of common sense to continue therein one year."<sup>21</sup>

Wesley had also to face a great deal of opposition. This came from friends and enemies alike, including members of his family, fellow-clergy, and the hierarchy of the Church; it was even claimed by some that the Methodist open-air preaching was seditious. Wesley answered such charges by pointing out that the statute forbidding field-preaching applied only to Dissenters. Since the Methodists were not Dissenters, there was no need for them to qualify themselves or their assemblies according to the Act of Toleration. He argued, too, that the Methodists could make the same plea as the Religious Societies, whose members were not Dissenters from the Church. Since the Societies had never been declared illegal, no more could the Methodists be regarded as seditious.

For those who objected to the "indecent" of open-air preaching, Wesley had a ready reply:

"The highest indecency is in St. Paul's Church, when a considerable part of the congregation are asleep, or talking, or looking about, not minding a word the preacher" says. On the other hand there is the highest decency in churchyard or field, when the whole congregation behave and look as if they saw the Judge of all, and heard Him speaking from heaven."<sup>22</sup>

#### ITINERANCY

It is estimated that Wesley travelled about 250,000 miles during the course of his long career as an evangelist. He was constantly on the move, and had little time to pause for rest or for leisure. The reader of the Journal is left feeling breathless trying to follow Wesley's account of his incessant travels.

Even before his first venture into field-preaching Wesley was committed to a wide-ranging itinerant ministry. On 20th March, 1739, before he began his open-air preaching, he had written to James Hervey:

63/ "God in Scripture .....

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21. Ibid.

22. Journal, 28th August, 1748 - also 19th September, 1781.

"God in Scripture commands me according to my power, to instruct the ignorant, reform the wicked, confirm the virtuous. Man forbids me to do this in another's parish: that is, in effect, to do it at all; seeing I have now no parish of my own, nor ever probably shall. Whom, then, shall I hear, God or man? 'If it be just to obey man rather than God, judge you. A dispensation of the Gospel is committed to me; and woe is me if I preach not the Gospel.' ..... Suffer me to tell you my principles in this matter. I look upon all the world as my parish; thus far, I mean, that in whatever part of it [I] am, I judge it meet, right and my bounden duty, to declare unto all that are willing to hear, the glad tidings of salvation. This is the work I know God has called me to; and sure I am that His blessing attends it."<sup>23</sup>

The frustration of the early months following his return to England from Georgia, together with the compulsion of a message that he could not keep to himself, had already born in him a determination not to be restricted by ecclesiastical barriers. His dilemma was this: while he had no desire to leave the Church of England, he also believed that he had a divine commission to preach the Gospel, a commission which he could not disobey.

Following his first experiences of field-preaching Wesley was immediately active in the London and Bristol areas, preaching wherever he had the opportunity. In August 1739 he had an audience with Bishop Butler of Bristol, who told him that, since he was not commissioned to preach in that diocese, he had no business there and should leave. Wesley records how he replied:

"My Lord, my business on earth is to do what good I can. Wherever, therefore, I think I can do most good there must I stay, so long as I think so. At present I think I can do most good here; therefore, here I stay. As to my preaching here, a dispensation of the Gospel is committed to me, and woe is me if I preach not the Gospel wherever I am in the habitable world! Your Lordship knows, being ordained a Priest, by the commission I then received I am a priest of the Church Universal. And being ordained as Fellow of a College, I was not limited to any particular cure, but have an indeterminate commission to preach the word of God in any part of the Church of England. I do not therefore conceive that, in preaching here by this commission, I break any human law."<sup>24</sup>

64/ As far back .....

23. Journal, 11th June, 1739.

24. Journal, II, p. 257, footnote.

65/ From London .....

25. Quoted in A.S. Wood, op. cit., p. 49.

26. Works, XIII, p. 279.

27. In Essays in Modern English Church History in Memory of

As far back as 1734 Wesley had thought like this. At that time his father and brother Samuel had brought pressure to bear on him to accept the incumbency of Epworth. He insisted then that God had not called him to the oversight of a parish, and secured a supporting opinion from Bishop Potter of Oxford.<sup>25</sup> Although Wesley resigned his Fellowship of Lincoln College on 1st June 1751, he was by then so convinced of the providential expediency of his itinerant ministry through the Kingdom, that he continued in his travels without the slightest hesitation, and apparently without further episcopal prohibition.

There were many precedents for Wesley's itinerant evangelism, even if he did not dwell on these to justify his own practice. In the early Church the Apostles had travelled widely. The initial missioning of Britain had been carried out by itinerants such as Ninian and Patrick in the fifth century, Columba in the sixth century, Augustine of Canterbury, Paulinus and Aidan and Chad. The friars of the thirteenth century had followed the same method, as had the Lollards in the following century and, at the time of the English Reformation, the Scottish Covenanters, and George Fox and the early Quakers. Wesley once claimed that the first itinerant Preachers in England were twelve appointed by Queen Elizabeth, "whose office and salary still continues, though their work is little attended to."<sup>26</sup>

As the immediate herald of Wesley's itinerant mission there had been the Revival in Wales, which came under way a few years before 1738. J.D. Walsh writes<sup>27</sup> that some of the major techniques of the Revival in England, such as itinerant- and field-preaching, sometimes by laymen, and the gathering of converts into nourishing Societies, were features of the Welsh movement two or three years before they were adopted by Whitefield and Wesley in England. As early as 1714 Griffith Jones was preaching in churchyards and on the hills in the small awakening in Carmarthenshire and Pembrokeshire. Howell Harris, with whom Wesley was to have some contact, had been converted in 1735. Large-scale popular Welsh revivalism began in 1736 with Harris and Daniel Rowlands itinerating.

65/ From London .....

25. Quoted in A.S. Wood, op. cit., p. 49.

26. *Works*, XIII, p. 279.

27. In *Essays in Modern English Church History in Memory of Norman Sykes*, eds. G.V. Bennett and J.D. Walsh, London 1966, p. 134.

From London and Bristol Wesley's work fanned out farther afield. London was an obvious base, where Wesley had friends and supporters in the Fetter Lane Society. In November 1739 Wesley was urged to purchase the Foundery near Moorfields. After the final break with the Moravians in July 1740, the Foundery became the home of the first exclusively Methodist Society in London, and the headquarters of Wesley's mission. At Bristol the New Room in the Horsefair had been built even before the Foundery, and served as Wesley's centre of operations in that area.

Soon Newcastle-upon-Tyne was added as the third point of a triangular track. John Nelson had been converted in London, and then returned to his home in Birstall to set about evangelising the district. Wesley travelled North in response to Nelson's plea that he visit him and support the work by preaching there. From Birstall he moved to Newcastle-upon-Tyne and commenced his evangelistic thrust in that area at Sandgate. Wesley's account of how he actually gathered the people is an important indication of how he must often have done the same thing elsewhere:

"..... standing at the end of the street with John Taylor, began to sing the hundredth Psalm. Three or four people came out to see what was the matter, who soon increased to four or five hundred. I suppose there might be twelve to fifteen hundred before I have done preaching ....." "

At the conclusion of the sermon Wesley made an announcement:

"Observing the people, when I had done, to stand gaping and staring upon me with the most profound astonishment, I told them, 'If you desire to know who I am, my name is John Wesley. At five in the evening with God's help, I design to preach here again'."<sup>28</sup>

Before long Leeds and Manchester were added to Newcastle as springboards from which to evangelize whole areas. On his travels between these major centres Wesley made many preaching stops at smaller places. He thus made the first of many visits to Epworth on his way back to London from his first excursion to the North. There was no definite plan to his movements at the outset, and in 1743 he spent about fourteen weeks in London, ten in Bristol and district, thirteen in and about Newcastle, three in Cornwall and twelve elsewhere, chiefly in the Midlands and North.

66/ But a pattern .....

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28. Journal, 30th May, 1742.

But a pattern for his work was taking shape. He had become a convinced itinerant. For nearly fifty years thereafter he was constantly on the move. In 1747 he paid his first visit to Ireland, and was subsequently to go there another twenty times. In 1751 he made the first of twenty-two visits to Scotland.

We noted earlier that Wesley believed that his earliest preaching in any one place had little noticeable effect until the people had got over the novelty of field-preaching. Wesley paid repeated visits to the same places because he depended less on one grand effort than on the cumulative effect of many sermons. He had early resolved "not to strike one stroke in any place where I cannot follow the blow."<sup>29</sup> This probably meant that he saw the need for the proper after-care of the converts. When urged to preach at Mullingar in Ireland during a stop-over of one hour, he had serious misgivings:

"..... I had little hopes of doing good by preaching in a place where I could preach but once, and where none but me could be suffered to preach at all."<sup>30</sup>

Wesley's preaching tours did not cover the whole of England, but ran in certain well-marked courses between the three points of London, Bristol and Newcastle-upon-Tyne, with certain variations. In later years his travels were more widely distributed over the Kingdom. Wesley concentrated on districts with large population, and left wide spaces of England practically unvisited. He went little into the purely agricultural regions where the established Church was strongest, but roughly followed the lines of England's industrial development where the Church's ministry was woefully inadequate. He went where the population was thickest, where it was possible for people freely to follow his ministry if they so desired, and where he could follow up his own work by repeated visits and daily preaching. He aimed primarily at colliers, miners, foundry-men, weavers, spinners, skilled artisans and the day-labourers of the towns.

67/ The tours were .....

29. Journal, 13th March, 1743.

30. Ibid., 9th July, 1750.

The tours were planned out in advance with great minuteness as to details of places to be visited, hours of arrival, services to be held. Appointments were made for him to preach on these itinerating rounds many weeks in advance, and notice was formally given in these places of his forthcoming visit. He carried out his appointments resolutely, making it a rule never to disappoint a congregation if it could possibly be avoided. Wherever possible, he tried to accommodate unexpected requests for preaching visits to particular places, but declined such invitations if it meant that he could not keep a prior appointment on time. He was punctual, despite the obstacles posed by the weather and the uncertain roads. He covered incredible mileages, often in daunting conditions, travelling on foot, on horseback and, later in his life, by chaise.

Remarkably Wesley suffered few moments of discouragement and depression. Despite the rigours and the many hazards of his restless life, he usually managed to remain cheerful and positive in his outlook. We may attribute this partly to his constant change of scene and congregation. A "dead" audience in one place was often counteracted and relieved by an eager and responsive one at the next stop. Sometimes there are hints that this wandering existence was uncongenial to Wesley. So, on 9th March, 1759, after preaching morning and evening at the Foundery, where he had his own rooms, he wrote:

"How pleasing would it be to flesh and blood to remain in this little quiet place . . . . Nay, I am not to consult my own care, but advancing the Kingdom of God."<sup>31</sup>

When, in time, Wesley appointed suitable laymen as helpers, the demands that were made on them necessitated that they too should travel from place to place, and Conference regulations were formulated to cover this development. Wesley was soon convinced of the worth of this means of evangelism:

"So great a blessing has from the beginning attended the labours of these Itinerants, that we have been more and more convinced every year of the more than lawfulness of this proceeding."<sup>32</sup>

Some of the preachers did not want to be itinerants, but Wesley was adamant in insisting on this system:

60/ "It is a .....

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31. Journal, 9th March, 1759.

32. Works, XIII, p. 197. Letter to Rev. Mr. Walker, 3rd September, 1756.

"It is a shame for any Methodist preacher to confine himself to one place. We are debtors to all the world. We are called to warn everyone, to exhort everyone, if by any means we may save some."<sup>33</sup>

In 1756 Samuel Walker of Truro urged Wesley to seek episcopal ordination for his preachers, and settle them in fixed parishes. In reply Wesley voiced his fears that "... they will ere long grow dead themselves, and so will most of those who hear them. I know, were I myself to preach one whole year in one place, I should preach both myself and most of my congregation asleep."<sup>34</sup> He went on to state his conviction that a congregation stood to benefit much by a frequent change of teachers, whose talents and abilities could complement each other. He advocated that "no preacher shall remain in the same circuit more than two years together, and few of them more than one year."<sup>35</sup> At Aberdeen, in 1784, he spoke to a group of preachers of the hurt done both to them and the people where preachers stayed six or eight weeks together in one place. Such a preacher can "neither ... find matter for preaching every morning and evening, nor will the people come to hear him. ... Whereas, if he never stays more than a fortnight together in one place, he may find matter enough, and the people will gladly hear him."<sup>36</sup>

Thus itinerancy, which had begun as a prudential means of ministry, had grown into a matter of principle for Wesley. After his death Methodism went on regarding it as virtually an instituted procedure. To some extent modern Methodism still clings to the practice, while at the same time it tries to minister to people whose increased mobility tends to turn them into itinerants themselves.

#### METHODS OF CHRISTIAN NURTURE

In 1763, while he was visiting South Wales, Wesley was struck by the noticeable lack of the preservation of the fruits of some twenty years of preaching all over Pembrokeshire. He

69/ believed that .....

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33. Works, XII, p. 417. Letter to Mr. Joseph Benson, 11th December, 1772.

34. Ibid., XIII, p. 197. Letter to Rev. Mr. Walker, 3rd September, 1756.

35. Works, VII, p. 208, Sermon CVII, On God's Vineyard.

36. Journal, 5th May, 1784.

believed that this could be attributed to the absence of regular Societies, discipline, order or connexion. Consequently, "nine in ten of the once-awakened are now faster asleep than ever."<sup>37</sup> This observation served only to strengthen the conviction that he had long held:

"I was more convinced than ever that the preaching like an apostle, without joining together those that are awakened and training them up in the ways of God, is only begetting children for the murderer."<sup>38</sup>

Wesley recognized that the careful nurturing of the newly-awakened Christian was even more important than his spiritual re-birth. Such nurture was Wesley's "chief care".

"We must build with one hand, while we fight with the other. And this is the great work: not only to bring souls to believe in Christ but to build them up in our most holy faith. How grievously are they mistaken who imagine that as soon as the children are born they need take no more care of them! We do not find it so. The chief care then begins."<sup>39</sup>

He recognized the crucial importance of continuing to nurture those who had responded to the preaching. By contrast George Whitefield concentrated on preaching, but took few pains to consolidate his gains. Towards the end of his life he acknowledged the superiority of Wesley's methods:

"My brother Wesley acted wisely. The souls that were awakened under his ministry he joined in class, and thus preserved the fruit of his labours. This I neglected, and my people are a rope of sand."<sup>40</sup>

Wesley's basic means of following up his people was plain pastoral visitation. He frequently emphasized its importance. Reaching Colchester in December 1758 he found:

".... the Society had decreased ..... and yet they had had full as good preachers; but that is not sufficient. By repeated experiments we learn that though a man preach like an angel, he will neither collect nor preserve a Society which is collected, without visiting them from house to house."<sup>41</sup>

70/ He regarded such .....

37. Journal, 25th August, 1763.

38. Ibid.

39. Works, XIII, p. 23. Letter to Miss Bishop, 1st September, 1771.

40. Quoted in A.S. Wood, op. cit., p. 188.

41. Journal, 29th December, 1758.

He regarded such visitation as a chore, "a heavy cross"<sup>42</sup>, yet essential:

"I began at the east end of the town to visit the Society from house to house. I know no branch of the pastoral office which is of greater importance than this. But it is so grievous to flesh and blood, that I can prevail on few, even of our Preachers to undertake it."<sup>43</sup>

As late as November 1787 he still personally visited the classes in London, Bristol, Cork and Dublin, while with the other Societies, their respective Assistants supply my lack of service."<sup>44</sup>

In fact in February 1791, only a few weeks before his death, he still spoke in person to some two thousand members of the London classes in the space of nearly three weeks<sup>45</sup>.

Wesley used such visitation for specific purposes. He sought out those who had demonstrated a religious awakening under his preaching, so as to establish and enforce Society-discipline by examining the lives of his people and purging the "disorderly walkers", as he called them. He also used the visitations to deal with anything that threatened to disturb the peace of the Societies. In particular, he sought out those who had separated from his groups and tried to lead them back into the fold.

wesley had very early recognized the value of the Society and of the small group method for the building up of his converts by oversight, instruction, fellowship and discipline. His appreciation began, we might say, at his mother's knee in the careful Christian instruction that Susannah Wesley gave to her large family. The Oxford Holy Club, too, had given him a taste of what a close, supporting Christian fellowship group could mean. The institution of a Society and of a select band at Savannah was one of the early accomplishments of his ministry in America<sup>46</sup>. On his return to England he became a member of the Fetter Lane Society in London, and retained this

71/ membership until .....

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42. Ibid., 30th October, 1772.

43. Ibid., 12th January, 1774.

44. Ibid., 19th November, 1787.

45. Ibid., VIII, p. 124, footnote.

46. Journal, I, pp. 198 - 205, April, 1736.

membership until the first purely Methodist Society was formed at the Foundery when he finally broke with the Moravians.

Wesley understood the Society to be:

" . . . . no other than 'a company of men having the form and seeking the power of godliness, united in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they may help each other to work out their own salvation.'"<sup>47</sup>

His use of the Society and of smaller groups within the Society shows once again Wesley's genius for adaptation. He did not invent these means, but borrowed the ideas from other sources and re-shaped them for his own ends. Many Societies had come into existence in the English Churches before 1700 as a reaction to the spiritual dearth and social decline after the Restoration. The members of these Societies associated for religious conference, hymn-singing, prayer and conversation on practical religion. At every meeting they contributed to the relief of the poor. They were regular in their attendance at Communion. These Societies served as adjuncts to the life of the parish within the Established Church. Following his return from Georgia in February 1738, Wesley turned more and more to preaching in Society Rooms as the pulpits of the Church closed to him. He had also been greatly influenced by his experience at different times of Moravian communal Christian life.<sup>48</sup>

The Fetter Lane Society in London which he attended for some time was basically a Moravian group. The sub-division of Wesley's Societies into smaller groups of "bands" and "classes", sometimes according to sex and marital status, also owed much to the Moravian example.

Wesley believed it necessary to establish the Societies with their sub-structure of smaller groups in order to provide the necessary after-care for new Christians, which he did not believe they could get within the life of the Established Church. He answered charges that he was causing a schism in the Church and destroying existing fellowship by saying that no such fellowship existed, and that such nominal believers as there were in the parishes had done nothing to care for his converts:

72/ "Which of these . . . . .

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47. Works, VIII, p. 269, Rules of the United Societies, (1743).

48. He had first encountered this on board ship to Georgia. In 1738 he visited the European headquarters of the Unitas Fratrum at Herrnhut.

"Which of these true Christians had any such fellowship with these? Who watched over them in love? Who marked their growth in grace? Who advised and exhorted them from time to time? Who prayed with them and for them, as they had need? This, and this alone is Christian fellowship: But alas! Where is it to be found? Look East or West, North or South: name what parish you please: Is this Christian fellowship there? Rather, are not the bulk of the parishioners a mere rope of sand?"<sup>49</sup>

Always anxious that the Methodists should not separate from the Church, Wesley bade members of the Societies attend the parish Church (or a dissenting meeting-house), and arranged that group meetings and preaching occasions took place at times when they would not conflict with the regular services of the Church. His idea of the Societies and smaller groups was that they could offer nurture over and above that which was provided by the Church.

"Together with these helps, which are peculiar to their own Society, they have all those which (are) enjoyed in common by the other members of the Church of England."<sup>50</sup>

While this was true, Wesley's Methodists increasingly derived greater benefit from the Methodist ordinances, and laid greater store by them. Wesley's own growing conviction about the importance of these ordinances contributed to this outlook. In 1784, for instance, he was saying of the Methodist discipline: "... without this, little good can be done among the Methodists."<sup>51</sup> He was effectually generating forces that would inevitably separate Society in the parish into Church and chapel.

The classes were introduced originally not as a means for instruction but as a way to facilitate the raising of money to discharge the debt on the New Room built in Bristol. Captain Foy had proposed a penny-a-week subscription, and offered to be responsible for eleven poorer members who might not have a penny to give<sup>52</sup>.

".... it was at length agreed, (1) that every member of the Society who was able should contribute a penny a week; (2) that the whole Society should be divided into  
73/ little companies .....

49. Works, VIII, p. 251, A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists (in a letter to the Rev. Mr. Perronet (1748)).

50. Works, VII, p. 208, Sermon CVII, On God's Vineyard.

51. Journal, 20th September, 1784.

52. Works, XIII, p. 259. Thoughts Upon Methodism.

little companies or classes - about twelve in each class; and (3) that one person in each class should receive the contribution of the rest, and bring it in to the stewards weekly."<sup>53</sup>

Wesley soon recognized that the system of classes could serve as a most useful means for the personal supervision of every member of the Societies. It was arranged that the classes should assemble weekly under appointed class-leaders, and in the classes the members discussed their problems and encouraged one another. This provision lifted a heavy weight of responsibility off Wesley's own shoulders. At first he had attempted to examine all the classes himself, but as the work expanded and Societies were formed all over the Kingdom, he was forced to delegate the supervision to leaders. Thus a band of under-shepherds came into being, as the first link in a chain of pastoral care for the newly-converted, and made it possible for Wesley to itinerate freely.

The classes served as the disciplinary units of the Societies. A leader was responsible for a number of things:

".... to see each person in his class, once a week at least, in order to enquire how their souls prosper; to advise, reprove, comfort, or exhort, as occasion may require; to receive what they are willing to give toward the relief of the poor."<sup>54</sup>

The "Bands" or "Select Bands" formed small inner groups within the classes. The idea was borrowed from the Moravians. The first Bands were formed at Bristol within a few days of Wesley's first essay into open-air preaching. He had recently assisted James Hutton in re-modelling the London Societies, and now found the opportunity to practise these ideas in the West. The Band operated as Methodism's confessional cell. It consisted of between five and ten persons, who met weekly for the re-counting of current Christian experience. Their purpose was to obey the commandment to "Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed."<sup>55</sup> One member of the Band would be asked by the others to describe:

74/ " .... his own .....

53. Journal, 15th February, 1742.

54. Works, VIII, p. 253. A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists, (1748).

55. Works, VIII, p. 272. Rules of the Band Societies, (1738).

".... his own state first, and then to ask the rest, in order, as many and as searching questions as may be, concerning their state, sins and temptations."<sup>56</sup>

Select Bands within the Bands provided an even more intimate searching fellowship.

Let Wesley speak as he describes the impact of these various prudential means of Christian nurture:

"Many now happily experienced that Christian fellowship of which they had not so much as an idea before. They began to 'bear one another's burdens' and naturally to 'care for each other'. As they had daily a more intimate acquaintance with, so they had a more endeared affection for, each other. And 'speaking the truth in love, they grew up into Him in all things, who is the Head, even Christ; from whom the whole body, fitly joined together, and compacted by that which every joint supplied according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, increased unto the edifying itself in love.'"<sup>57</sup>

#### LAY PREACHERS

The ministry of laymen was given further recognition when Wesley first began to sanction the activity of lay preachers. While Wesley employed Joseph Humphreys as a lay preacher on the Moravian model as early as 1738<sup>58</sup>, John Cennick, who first preached at Kingswood near Bristol in June 1739, is often regarded as the first Methodist lay preacher. Cennick was urged to step into the breach when another preacher from Bristol failed to arrive<sup>59</sup>.

To start with, Wesley only reluctantly accepted the idea of a layman preaching. When Thomas Maxfield, a product of Wesley's ministry in Bristol, was appointed as a helper to meet the Society in London, to pray with the members, and to advise them during Wesley's absence, began also to preach, Wesley hastened to London to put an end to such presumption. But his mother, then living at the Foundery, had heard Maxwell preach, and cautioned her son:

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75/ "John, you know .....

56. Ibid.,

57. Works, VIII, p. 254. A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists.

58. Journal, 9th September, 1790, and II, p. 352 n.

59. Ibid., p. 228, footnote.

"John, you know what my sentiments have been. You cannot suspect me of favouring readily anything of this kind. But take care what you do with respect to that young man, for he is as surely called of God to preach as you are. Examine what have been the fruits of his preaching and hear him yourself."<sup>60</sup>

Wesley bowed to his mother's advice. Though he had always regarded preaching as permissible only to the episcopally ordained, his prejudices were gradually broken down, so that by 1747 he could speak of the "weak cause" of a clergyman whom he had heard arguing the unlawfulness of laymen's preaching<sup>61</sup>. On the 4th May 1748 he wrote a letter to a Clergyman, in which he defended lay preaching on the strength of the conversion of souls<sup>62</sup>.

Maxfield, for whom Wesley secured episcopal ordination in 1762, eventually broke completely with Wesley. Yet his early effectiveness as a helper and preacher helped Wesley to see the enormous possibilities the wide-spread preaching of suitable laymen offered. Once again, Wesley had stumbled upon a further means of extending the work of evangelism. To the instituted means of preaching he added another prudential form. In doing so he also crossed into the territory of dissenting argument.

As his early reluctance to allow lay preaching melted away, Wesley became a firm believer that such preaching was right and necessary, and he was to argue its rightness by drawing attention to the precedents for it - in the scribes in the Old Testament, in Paul and Barnabas in the New Testament, in John Calvin in the 16th century, in Roman Catholic lay-brothers, and in the requirement of European Protestant Churches that a man preach for at least a year before ordination<sup>63</sup>.

The duties of lay preachers were set out as follows :

"(1) To expound every morning and evening. (2) To meet the united society, the bands, select society, and the penitents, once a week. (3) To visit the classes once a quarter. (4) To hear and decide all differences.

76/ (5) To put the .....

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60. Henry Moore, Life of John Wesley, I, p. 505 - quoted in Doughty, op. cit., p. 7.

61. Journal, 12th April, 1747.

62. Works, IX, p. 184.

63. Works, VIII, pp. 221 - 222. A Further Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion.

(5) To put the disorderly back on trial, and to receive on trial for the bands or society. (6) To see that the Stewards, Leaders, and the Schoolmasters faithfully discharge their several offices. (7) To meet the Leaders of the bands and classes weekly, and the Stewards, and to overlook their accounts."<sup>64</sup>

Their main function was to supply the need of a preacher for a Society at those times when one of the Wesleys or their helpers was unable to be present. In this sense they were Methodism's "local" preachers. But their work was not confined to the local scene, and soon some of them were also itinerating.

For theological and practical reasons they were not permitted to administer the sacraments. Wesley kept a rigid distinction between the priestly and the prophetic ministries; his preachers were to be received as prophets, not priests. As long as the Methodist preachers remembered this, there could be no cause for the separation from the Church of England he wished to avoid at all costs.

He kept a tight rein on his preachers by calling them together regularly in conference. The annual Conference served as a training centre for the preachers. In addition Wesley prescribed for them, early rising, time for prayer and Bible study, and general study. He furnished suitable material for their use by producing in 1750 his A Christian Library. Its fifty duodecimo volumes contained a collection of writings, selected and abridged, from the most valuable stores of English theology. It included works by John Arndt, Robert Bolton, Dr. Cave, Martin Luther, George Fox, Samuel Clark, Puritan divines such as John Owen, Henry Scougal, Richard and Joseph Alleine, and many others. Any preacher who was unwilling to apply himself to systematic reading was advised to return to his trade<sup>65</sup>.

#### EARLY MORNING PREACHING

An early riser all his life, Wesley used this time for private prayer, study and writing. The early morning hours also came  
77/ to be used .....

64. Works, VIII, p. 261. A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists.

65. Works, VIII, p. 315. Minutes of Several Conversations Between the Rev. Mr. Wesley and Others (1744 to 1789).

to be used for a remarkable new form of ministry, early morning preaching.

Wesley records that he first began this ministry in Georgia and continued with it on his return to England:

"As soon as I set foot in Georgia I began preaching at five in the morning, and every communicant, that is, every serious person in the town, constantly attended throughout the year; I mean, came every morning, winter and summer, unless in the case of illness. They did so till I left the province. In the year 1738, when God began his great work in England, I began preaching at the same hour, winter and summer, and never wanted a congregation."<sup>66</sup>

While modern readers of the Journal might resist the idea of attending preaching services at 5 a.m., for the people who constituted Wesley's early morning congregations it was no hardship out of the ordinary. Labourers and working-class people were accustomed to working long hours - often up to 14 hours a day; their day usually began very early in the morning, and they went to bed not long after darkness. The poor could not afford to burn oil lamps or tallow candles for long at night. So to come to a service at 5 a.m. required little, if any, earlier rising than usual; they could thus pause for worship before the day's work began. For many of them this was the only time they could attend the Methodist preaching. They came early; the preacher had their minds at their freshest and most alert.

Once again Wesley came to lay great store on this method of reaching these people, and frequently stressed to his helpers the importance of early morning preaching. At the Conference of 1738 the question was asked, "What can be done to revive and enlarge the work of God?" The answer was given:

"Let the preaching at five in the morning be constantly kept up, wherever you can have twenty hearers. This is the glory of the Methodists. Whenever this is dropped they will dwindle away into nothing. Rising early is equally good for soul and body. It helps the nerves better than a thousand medicines, and, in particular, preserves the sight and prevents lowness of spirits, more than can well be imagined."<sup>67</sup>

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78/ Not only was .....

66. Journal, 5th April, 1784.

67. Quoted in Doughty, op. cit., p. 169.

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Not only was early morning preaching the glory of the Methodists, but Wesley even went so far as saying that Methodism would be in danger should the practice ever cease<sup>68</sup>. When he arrived at Worcester in 1779 he found that there had been no morning preaching there for some seven months. "So the people were of course weak and faint."<sup>69</sup> He frequently prescribed for an ailing Society the immediate resumption of, or emphasis on, morning preaching.

After Wesley's death early morning preaching fell into disuse. By then the development of incandescent lighting had made it possible to hold evening services. Norman Sykes writes that Wesley himself introduced "the immensely successful experiment of Sunday evening services during autumn and winter"<sup>70</sup>, thus ensuring that Methodist meeting times did not clash with those of the Established Church.

#### OTHER PRUDENTIAL MEANS

Brief mention must be made of certain other methods and resources developed by Wesley during the course of his long career as an evangelist.

##### a) Special Services

Wesley was instrumental in developing three characteristic Methodist services for the deepening of the spiritual life. In each case he really borrowed ideas from other sources, but, like the skillful adaptor he was, applied the ideas towards the achievement of his ends with single-mindedness and imagination.

The Love Feast, an idea borrowed from the Moravians, was really a revival of the ancient agape of the primitive Church. Wesley probably experienced his first love feast among the Moravians while in Georgia<sup>71</sup>. The procedure was for the company present to distribute and eat

79/ plain cake, .....

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68. Journal, 15th March, 1784.

69. Ibid., 18th March, 1779.

70. N. Sykes, The English Religious Tradition, London, 1953, p. 66.

71. Journal, 8th August, 1737.

plain cake, while water was passed from person to person in a two-handled 'loving cup'. The service emphasized the union of the society in love to Christ and to one another. Time was then given for personal witness. After a collection had been taken to meet the expenses of the occasion, the residue was divided among the poor. Love feasts were usually held on Sunday evenings. Wesley saw the great benefits that could accrue from the use of this means:

"To increase in them a grateful sense of all his mercies I desired that, one evening in a quarter all the men in band, and on the second, all the women would meet; and on a third, both men and women together; that we might together 'eat bread' as the ancient Christians did 'with gladness and singleness of heart'."<sup>72</sup>

The use of Watch-night services probably also derived from the example of the Moravians, although Wesley nowhere acknowledges this. He relates how some members of the Society at Kingswood sometimes spent the greater part of the night in prayer and praise. Apparently the Kingswood miners used such occasions to recall how in their unregenerate days they had usually spent their week-ends getting drunk at the ale-houses. Wesley, after attending one of the vigils and finding it helpful, warmly commended this way to all Societies.

The watch-nights were held originally on the Friday of the month nearest the full moon, so that there might be light on the way for the members of the congregation when they returned to their homes. To those critics who claimed that the people attended the watch-nights merely because of their novelty, Wesley replied by pointing out that those who had been helped by such services had not fallen away: "... the impression then made on many souls has never since been effaced."<sup>73</sup> He was all the more determined, therefore, to make good use of this means which could serve as a converting ordinance.

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72. Works, VIII, p. 258, A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists.

73. Ibid., p. 256.

The Covenant Service was a borrowing from Puritanism, the idea having come to Wesley through his reading of some of the works of Richard Alleine<sup>74</sup>. On 25th December 1747 Wesley strongly urged the Methodists to give themselves wholly to God in a covenant. The first such covenant service was held on 11th August 1755, after Wesley had for some days systematically instructed the people on the meaning and terms of the covenant. He recognized the value of a renewal of covenant vows at the beginning of a new year. So in 1766 the Covenant service was first used in this way.

Wesley planned the service in two parts. The first part was devoted to 'directions' to help prepare oneself to make the covenant. The member was urged to set aside time for private prayer to seek God's help, to consider the conditions of the covenant, and to search the heart. In this way he composed his spirit into the serious frame necessary for so weighty a transaction. Then he must lay hold on the Covenant of God and his promise of grace and strength. He must resolve to be faithful and, finally, set about the work God has given him to do<sup>75</sup>. There then followed, as the second part of the service, the solemn taking of the Covenant. The Covenant Service became, in Wesley's usage, a means by which the believer was helped to commit his heart, mind and will to God. It served as a channel of God's grace, and its intention fairly accurately summed up the nature of Wesley's over-all mission.

b) Hymns

Charles Wesley's poetic gift made it possible for the great evangelical doctrines so clearly preached by his brother to be transposed into verse, thus helping the Methodists to express their faith feelingly in song. Often the lines were wedded to catchy popular melodies. So the hymns of Methodism served a double purpose: the people were given an outlet for their devotional fervour,

81/ while the hymns .....

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74. Prof. Horton Davies points out that Wesley made an error here, and that he meant Joseph Alleine. See Horton Davies, op. cit., p. 198, footnote.

75. Ibid.

while the hymns also had an "important pedagogical value as means of communicating doctrine and thus came to be the sung creeds of the Methodists."<sup>76</sup>

John Wesley published a number of hymn-books during his life. The best-known is the one published in 1780, A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists". In the preface Wesley speaks of the nature and purpose of this collection of hymns: it is "a little body of experimental divinity." He recommends the collection to every reader: "... as a means of raising and quickening the spirit of devotion, of confirming his faith, of enlivening his hope, and of kindling or increasing his love to God and man."<sup>77</sup>

The hand of Wesley the evangelist can be clearly seen in the high proportion of missionary hymns, for Wesley saw the Methodist movement as an agency for the evangelising of England. Hymns of exhortation constituted a prominent section under the heading 'Exhorting and Beseeking Sinners to return to God'.

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76. Ibid., p. 201.

77. The preface of the 1780 Collection can be read as one of the prefaces to the present Methodist Hymn Book, (1933).

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## Chapter Five

MEANS TO AN END

The point was earlier discussed<sup>1</sup> that Wesley was an evangelist by intent long before May 1738. What happened in him then gave new content, direction and impetus to a fervour that for some time had needed effective harnessing in the service of God. We noted how Wesley himself understood the changes, both in his preaching and in the response to that preaching, that followed in the wake of his personal development in those crucial years<sup>2</sup>. Now it is necessary to outline an important reciprocity between evangelism and holiness in Wesley's thinking and practice. His key-concept of holiness served both to motivate his evangelism and to direct it towards a goal, while his evangelistic message urged people seriously to seek after holiness.

We can only deal briefly with Wesley's understanding of holiness. It was essential to salvation:

"None are or can be saved but those who are by faith made inwardly and outwardly holy."<sup>3</sup>

He defines this holiness in the sermon The Wedding Garment published in 1790. Holiness is the true "wedding garment"<sup>4</sup>, the only qualification for glory. It is:

" ' ... a new creation' - the renewal of the soul 'in the image of God wherein it was created' ..."

" ' ... faith which worketh by love'. It first, through the energy of God, worketh love to God and all mankind; and by this love, every holy and heavenly temper - in particular, lowliness, meekness, gentleness, temperance, and longsuffering ....

" ' ... the keeping the commandments of God', particularly those: 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and thy neighbours as thyself.' In a word,

83/ holiness is the .....

1. See p. 18.

2. See pp. 21 - 22.

3. Works, XII, p. 447. Letter to a Young Disciple, 31st August, 1772.

4. Matthew 22 : 12.

holiness is the having 'the mind that was in Christ', and the 'walking as Christ walked'."5

Wesley's sermon on Christian Perfection<sup>6</sup> was first published in 1741, after Dr. Gibson, then Bishop of London, had given his full approval to Wesley's teaching on the subject<sup>7</sup>.

Wesley later claimed that he had held his views without break to the end of his life, and that his conversion experience of 1738 had done nothing to alter them:

"Such has been my judgement for these threescore years, without any material alteration. Only, about fifty years ago I had a clearer view that before of justification by faith; and in this, from that very hour, I never varied, no, not an hair's breadth. Indeed, some have supposed that when I began to declare, 'By grace ye are saved through faith,' I retracted what I had before maintained: 'Without holiness no man shall see the Lord'. But it is an entire mistake."<sup>8</sup>

In 1734, when he was under pressure to succeed his father in the Epworth incumbency, he wrote to his father to answer his arguments. He agreed that:

"... the glory of God and the different degrees of promoting it are to be our sole consideration and direction in the choice of any course of life ... I do not say that the glory of God is to be my first or my principal consideration, but my only one."<sup>9</sup>

However, he differed from his father in his view of how best to promote that glory of God. He believed that it must lead him to a search for that salvation and personal holiness that was God's design for him.

"Now that life tends most to the glory of God, wherein we most promote holiness in ourselves and others; I say, in ourselves and others; as being fully persuaded that these can never be put asunder."<sup>10</sup>

For the time being he was convinced that he could best promote God's glory in his position at Oxford.

Wesley's assiduous search for the salvation of his own soul was a long and painful one, for he firmly believed there to

84/ be a clear .....

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5. Works, VII, p. 316 f, Sermon CXX, The Wedding Garment, 26th March, 1790.

6. Forty-Four Sermons, p. 457, Sermon XXXV.

7. Works, XI, p. 374. A Plain Account of Christian Perfection.

8. Works, VII, p. 316. Sermon CXX, The Wedding Garment.

9. Journal, 28th March, 1739 - being a letter to his father written on 10th December, 1734.

10. Ibid.

be a clear connection between a man's fitness for God's service and his effectiveness in that service:

"To prove that the holier any man is in himself the more shall he promote holiness in others, there needs no more than this postulatam, the help which is done on earth God does it Himself. If so, if God be the sole agent in healing souls, and man only the instrument in His hand, there can no doubt be made but that the more holy a man is He will make use of him the more: because he is more willing to be so used; because the more pure he is, he is the fitter instrument for the God of purity; because he will pray more and more earnestly that he may be employed, and that his service may tend to his Master's glory; because all his prayers, both for employment and success therein, will the more surely pierce the clouds; because the more his heart is enlarged, the wider sphere he may act in without carefulness or distraction; and lastly, because the more his heart is renewed in the image of God, the more God can renew it in others by him without destroying him by pride or vanity."<sup>11</sup>

This quotation reveals Wesley's conviction of the necessity of personal holiness if a man was to be a fit instrument for God's use in the work of healing souls. In this sense, then, holiness was prerequisite for evangelism. It was his own search for such holiness that sent him to Georgia in 1735:

"My chief motive, to which all the rest are subordinate, is the hope of saving my own soul."<sup>12</sup>

He wrote in his Journal a few days later:

"Our end in leaving our native country was . . . . to save our souls, to live wholly to the glory of God."<sup>13</sup>

While Wesley never claimed in later years to have measured up to God's demands for personal holiness, he preached perfection to the end of his days. His effectiveness after the Aldersgate experience of May 1738 came not from any consciousness of personal perfection, but from the feeling of release, freedom and power that arose out of his experience of pardon and justification through the grace of Christ to him as an individual.

We cannot turn from Wesley's understanding of holiness without emphasizing its full dimensions. Wesley never regarded holiness merely as being so preoccupied with one's spiritual

85/ temperature as .....

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11. Letters, I, p. 172.

12. Letters, I, p. 188, to John Burton, 10th October, 1735, (cited in Wood, op. cit., p. 51).

13. Journal, 14th October, 1735.

temperature as to become pharisaically isolated. Personal holiness would seek to serve others and promote holiness in them. True holiness was social and issued in works of compassion on behalf of the neighbour and, together with that neighbour, revealed a deep concern for people in all their needs and relationships.

There were thus visible social effects of Wesley's evangelism. Real faith was known not only by an inner spiritual experience, but also by the outward marks of daily living. Methodists concerned themselves in increasing degree with various aspects of social reform. Wesley himself wrote to Wilberforce, supporting him in his fight against slavery. He attacked the slave traffic and made an appeal to slave-owners<sup>14</sup>. He never lost the care for prisoners and the condemned he first showed at Oxford. In later years he set up dispensaries for the sick, and made it possible for the poor to guard their savings in a mutual benefit society<sup>15</sup>. He started a school for colliers' children at Kingswood and an orphan house at Newcastle. He launched collections for the relief of the poor<sup>16</sup>, and promoted co-operative industry for them, encouraging the Strangers' Friend Society to provide relief<sup>17</sup>.

The range of Wesley's teaching is immense: he dealt with such issues as health, sleep, redeeming the time, dress, marriage, the education of children, the danger of riches, making a will, vocation, temperance, business, conversation, the use of leisure, and reading.

Thus he raised up and encouraged a growing company of lay-witnesses whose testimony was as diverse as their characters.

"This was not a stage beyond evangelism. It was, rather, the evangelistic enterprise itself in its natural unfolding ..... it is the word made visible in the lives of practising, witnessing lay-Christians that constitutes the Church's most powerful evangelistic influence."<sup>18</sup>

86/ Wesley's purpose .....

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14. Works, XI, pp. 59 - 79.

15. Journal, 4th December, 1746; 6th June, 1747; 17th January, 1748.

16. Ibid., 21st January, 1740.

17. Ibid., 25th November, 1740; 14th March, 1790.

18. A. C. Outler, op. cit., p. 26.

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Wesley's purpose as an evangelist was to awaken in his hearers an understanding of the requirements of a holy and loving God, and to urge them to turn from a wasteful life of sin and seek after that holiness of life which is God's will for men. He gave this goal a clear form. Of this form, R. N. Flew writes:

"... the truest evangelism is to preach the full ideal for which power is offered in this present life."<sup>19</sup>

The emphasis on holiness and the form Wesley gave it may be regarded as a key to understanding the Methodist revival. As Flew describes this:

"... a vast evangelistic advance can only be sustained if the Christian ideal for this life is steadily set forth in all its beauty and its fullness as being by the grace of God something not impossible of attainment."<sup>20</sup>

Holiness became one of Wesley's indispensables:

"Where Christian Perfection is not strongly and explicitly preached there is seldom any remarkable blessing from God, and consequently little addition to the Society and little life in the members of it .... Till you press the believers to expect full salvation now you must not look for any revival."<sup>21</sup>

What was true for individual believers was equally true for Societies. At Bristol he found the Society ailing, because:

"... Christian Perfection has been little insisted on; and wherever this is not done, be the preachers ever so eloquent, there is little increase, either in the number or the grace of the hearers."<sup>22</sup>

Similarly in Cornwall in 1762 he found that the work there was not as healthy as he had expected, and concluded:

"The more I converse with the believers in Cornwall, the more I am convinced that they have sustained great loss for want of hearing the doctrine of Christian Perfection clearly and strongly enforced. I see wherever this is not done, the believers grow dead and cold."<sup>23</sup>

At Weardale in 1774, he was surprised to find that the work of God, which had been so strong but two years previously, had suffered a "grievous decay". Among the reasons he found that:

87/ "... not one of .....

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19. R. N. Flew, The Idea of Perfection in Christian Theology, London, 1934, p. xiii.

20. Ibid.

21. Works, XII, pp. 270 - 271; letter to Mr. Merryweather, 8th February, 1766.

22. Journal, 30th September, 1765.

23. Ibid., 15th September, 1762.

"... not one of the preachers that succeeded was capable of being a nursing-father to the new-born children", 24

and that

"Men arose among ourselves who undervalued the work of God and called the great work of sanctification a delusion; by this they grieved some and angered others, so that both the one and the other were much weakened ..... Hence, the love of many waxing cold, the preachers were discouraged, and jealousies, heart-burnings, evil-surmisings, were multiplied more and more. There is now little revival ..."<sup>25</sup>

The whole structure of classes, bands and societies, shows that Wesley never regarded conversion as the final goal of his evangelism. He always urged, and the classes were designed to help converts progress towards, holiness. The end of evangelism, was not merely some climatic conversion experience, but holiness of heart and life. The scope of evangelism is the fullness of Christian experience: this was Wesley's never-faltering insistence. Hence his gathering of converts in societies to nourish them in their new-found faith, his insistence that every blow struck by preaching must be followed by thorough and continuing instruction and encouragement, so that there might be further growth; and finally, the strict disciplinary function of the class-meeting. No indulgence could be shown to those who persisted in sin, for such indulgence would arrest the healing of the individual convert and undermine the health of the entire group.

Wesley's thought about evangelism and holiness is thus a logical circle. Holiness is both the end and the means of evangelism. Men are urged to be holy, fit instruments for God's use, that they might be evangelists of God's grace. Wesley's thorough provision for the after-care of converts stemmed from evangelism, but also led to evangelism. The small-group structure served as the training-ground for potential leaders and preachers for the work of evangelism.

"Converts were trained to become soul-winners themselves. Many enlisted as lay-preachers - some itinerant and others local. Many more were appointed as leaders in their own society, and, in addition to watching over the flock, engaged in evangelistic activity in the neighbour-

88/ hood. In .....

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24. Ibid., 12th June, 1774.

25. Ibid.

hood. In this way, over the years, Wesley was surrounded by a huge army of helpers to sustain the work as it expanded."<sup>25</sup>

The system he had set up enabled his work to continue after his death, for he had built towards a Church where every member was actively an evangelist:

"A body of men compacted together, in order, first to save each his own soul; then to assist each other in working out their salvation; and afterwards as far as in them lies, to save all men from present and future misery, to overturn the kingdom of Satan, and to set up the kingdom of Christ."<sup>27</sup>

While the exact number of workers left behind after Wesley's death may be in dispute, the organization was remarkable in the proportion of its members who matched the ideal of each being a crusader for social righteousness, bound to give account of his stewardship of God: a vine with no dead branches.

We have seen something of the activities generated by Wesley's evangelism: their range and variety clearly show how they arose and were related to specific needs in the community. Temperance, savings, elementary instruction, were indeed good news to the urban poor, as well as attainable goals of holiness no less evangelical than the poverty and chastity of a religious order.

Remarkably Wesley never makes explicit reference to evangelism, and rarely describes himself self-consciously as an evangelist. Referring to the work of an evangelist in his sermon The Ministerial Office<sup>28</sup>, he argued that the office of evangelist is different from that of pastor or bishop. The evangelist is to preach, but, being under the authority of the pastor or bishop, he has no authority to administer the sacraments. Herein Wesley saw the essential difference between himself and his lay-preachers. He was an ordained minister of the Church of England: their work he readily equated with that of the New Testament evangelist. Their task was that of preaching the gospel under the authority of an ordained minister: Wesley himself.

89/ Yet he clearly .....

26. A.S. Wood, op. cit., p. 194.

27. Works, VI, p. 150; an Address to the Society for Reformation of Manners, 30th January, 1763.

28. Works, VII, p. 275.

Yet he clearly believed that an ordained minister should also do the work of an evangelist. He used to say that he had two calls to the ministry in the Church. One was his ordinary call, which he received through the channel of episcopal ordination. The other was his extraordinary call, given direct from God himself. He emphasized two elements in this extraordinary call: first of all he was to proclaim the good news of salvation to as many as would hear, in a field that went beyond parish limits; then he had also to care for the souls of the converts as the pastor of a flock larger than he could have found in any church. The evangelist, then, is a messenger raised up by God to preach the gospel, but it is not impossible for the office of pastor and evangelist to be invested in one man.

While this essay has reflected Wesley's emphasis on the importance of preaching as the primary means of evangelism, we have seen that other forms of communication were not excluded. In fact, Wesley's practice embraced the four different forms of communication that characterized the early Church: there was κήρυγμα - the herald's work of preaching or proclaiming good news; there was κοινωνία - which brought sinners into the community of Christ and the fellowship of believers, nurtured them in the faith, and helped them grow to maturity in Christ; there was διδασχῆ - which sought to impart the union of knowledge and vital piety through wide reading and study, providing literature for his people, their leaders and preachers, in the conviction that evangelism continues through the work of thorough Christian education; there was διακονία - where holiness means love for God and neighbour, so the mission, being Christ's, is one of humble service given in joy for joy.

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