

## JOHN WESLEY'S PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICE OF PREACHING

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John Wesley is known among Methodists as being a great preacher; that is part of the Wesleyan tradition. But what precisely is the basis of his reputation as a preacher? What sources do we (or should we) rely upon for a description and evaluation of his role as Methodist preacher? Our reading of his *Sermons*? The reports of his contemporaries? His own comments about preachers and preaching? The verdict of biographers and historians? Should we try to test the results of his preaching, the progress of the revival?

Contemporaries, of course, differed in their perspective on Wesley. Their view of his preaching often was determined by whether or not they agreed with his theology. It appears, for instance, that his *reputation* as an "enthusiast," in some instances at least, was worse than the *reality*. A story is told about Wesley, after preaching at Peasholm Green one Sunday, going to the parish Church, as was his custom. The parish priest saw from Wesley's clerical garb that he was a clergyman, and without knowing who he was, offered him the pulpit. After the service, the priest asked the clerk who the preacher was. "Sir," said the clerk, "he is the vagabond Wesley, against whom you warned us." "Aye, indeed!" said the astonished rector, "we are trapped; but never mind, we have had a good sermon."<sup>1</sup>

As for Wesley's own comments, he made plenty of statements about what a preacher should be, and do, and say. But are such expressions by Wesley an adequate basis of measuring him as a preacher? Can we simply evaluate him on the basis of his enumerated principles on the matter? W. L. Doughty, in *John Wesley, Preacher*, assumes that whatever is positively recommended by John Wesley must be regarded as characteristic of the man himself; that in drawing up his various rules, he was "an imaginary spectator of himself."<sup>2</sup> Such a statement screams for analysis by the historian. And that hypothesis can be tested in some crucial areas, of course, by placing Wesley's actual practice of preaching alongside his principles and checking the correlation. We should not necessarily assume that what he says a preacher should be in fact describes himself, or that what he says a preacher should do describes his activity, or that what he says a preacher should say describes his sermons. What I would like to do is to evaluate (as best we can) John Wesley, Methodist preacher, by some

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<sup>1</sup>Luke Tyerman, *The Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley*, 3 vols. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1870-71), 2:571; he repeated the offer the next time as well.

<sup>2</sup>William L. Doughty, *John Wesley, Preacher* (London: Epworth Press, 1955), pp. 147-50.

of his own criteria of what a preacher should do and say. That is to say, measure his practice by his principles.

There are several problems entailed in this endeavor. In the first place, we must realize that some of his ideas changed from time to time and remember that he occasionally exaggerated to make a point. These variables are often overlooked in general comments about, and evaluations of, Wesley. We must also recognize that some of the rules he set for preachers might not have been intended to apply to him. In looking for evidence of his homiletical practices, we must not simply assume that his oral preaching is accurately reflected in his published sermons. And in looking at contemporary accounts of his preaching, we must always try to filter out the prejudicial perspectives (positive as well as negative) of his listeners.

For his principles, we will look at what he said a preacher should do and say, as found in some documents such as the Rules of a Helper; the Questions for examining preachers at conference; Rules for preaching (first at the 1747 conference, revised and expanded in the "Large" *Minutes*). There are also other specific injunctions in the Minutes, as well as in his letters and journal. We can test these, then, against the records we have of his practice: what he did and said; some records from his own hand (journals, letters, diaries, sermon register, published and manuscript sermons); some from other observers.

## I

The "Large" *Minutes* of 1763 contain a list of Rules for the preachers (or Helpers). Number eleven is often quoted:

You have nothing to do but to save souls. Therefore spend and be spent in this work; and go always, not only to those who want [i.e., need] you, but to those who want you most.<sup>3</sup>

This represents Wesley's commitment to the revival, a lifelong vocation and mission that is echoed in his letter to brother Charles in the 1770s: "Your business as well as mine is to save souls. When we took priests' orders, we undertook to make it our one business. I think every day lost which is not (mainly, at least) employed in this thing. *Sum totus in illo* [to this I am wholly committed]."<sup>4</sup>

From very early in his ministry, John Wesley realized that his mission could not be fulfilled if it were limited by the typical conventions of the English parish system. In 1739, at the outset of the revival when he was criticized for preaching out of doors in one of the parishes in Bristol, he pointed out to the bishop, Joseph Butler, that he had no specific commission to a particular parish. But at the same time, he said, "A dispensation of the gospel is

committed to me' [1 Cor. 9:17], and 'woe is me if I preach not the gospel' [1 Cor. 9:16], wheresoever I am in the habitable world."<sup>5</sup>

This is the basis of his principle, "I look upon all the world as my parish." That is, to put the idea in other words, I do not consider myself to be limited by conventional parish boundaries and methods. This innovation, preaching across parish boundaries and outside of parish churches, was to become a primary characteristic of the Methodist revival. As he later explained, this so-called "field-preaching" was a "sudden expedient"; he had no design to preach in the open air until pulpits closed to him.<sup>6</sup> In his *Short History of the People Called Methodists*, he explained the development this way: "Being thus excluded from the churches and not daring to be silent, it remained only to preach in the open-air; which I did at first, not out of choice, but necessity; but I have since seen abundant reason to adore the wise providence of God herein, making a way for myriads [*sic*] of people who never troubled any church, nor were likely to do so, to hear that word which they soon found to be the power of God unto salvation."<sup>7</sup>

Much of the early preaching was done in homes, barns, fields, and market-places, to large groups of "mixed" background spiritually. In fact, the crowds are often noted by John or Charles as rather raucous: "wild beasts" is one of Charles's favorite descriptions. The point was, nevertheless, that these people, by and large, were not coming to the church. Therefore, as Christ sought us as a shepherd and came after us into the wilderness, so we should go to the people where they are.<sup>8</sup> We have also been commanded to go into the highways and byways and invite the people to the gospel feast.

And besides, Wesley points out, greater blessings generally attend to field-preaching than to preaching in churches. As he explained to John Smith, he did more good in three days preaching on his father's tomb at Epworth than he did preaching for three years in his pulpit. And, he notes, houses (or even churches) do not hold as much as the fields or other open-air sites. "What building," he says, "except St. Paul's Church, would contain such a congregation? And if it would, what human voice could have reached them there? By repeated observations I find I can command thrice the number in the open air that I can under a roof."<sup>9</sup>

Wesley became fascinated by the technique (and "technology") of field-preaching. He preached under tall spreading trees, in market places, tin mines,

<sup>3</sup>*Journal and Diaries II*, ed. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, in *The Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 19:472; repeated in *A Farther Appeal*, VI.3, ed. Gerald R. Cragg (*Works*, 11: 178).

<sup>4</sup>See *Farther Appeal*, VI.3 (*Works*, 11:178).

<sup>5</sup>Some clergy had objected to his doctrine, but "far more common" and "plausible" was that the people crowded in and blocked up the church from the "best" in the parish. *A Short History of the People Called Methodists*, ed. Rupert E. Davies (*Works*, 9:431).

<sup>6</sup>*Farther Appeal*, Part III, III.22 (*Works*, 11:306).

<sup>7</sup>*Journal and Diaries IV* (*Works*, 19:230), September 23, 1759.

<sup>8</sup>*Minutes of the Methodist Conferences*, (London: John Mason, 1862), 1:494, 496.

<sup>9</sup>John Telford, ed., *The Letters of John Wesley*, 8 vols. (London: Epworth Press, 1931), 5:316 (Apr. 26, 1772).

coal pits, in front of walls—any place that would give him a good sounding board and a veritable sound chamber. He was always raised up above the crowd, whether on a chair, a tombstone. He often used a portable or makeshift pulpit, made of wood and or canvas.<sup>10</sup> He was very interested in finding places in which he could speak to large numbers of people and be heard. Not only did he figure out the best places to stand outdoors (tree limbs forming trumpet speaker, resonance of walls in enclosure of the market place), he also was conscious of the acoustics of particular churches. Of the Temple Church in Bristol, he noted in 1782: “I now found how to speak here so as to be heard by everyone: direct your voice to the middle of the pillar fronting the pulpit.”<sup>11</sup> At Sunderland in 1788, doubting whether he might be heard by the expected crowds, he had Joseph Bradford stand in the farthest corner of the church to see if his voice would carry.<sup>12</sup> It did.

Wesley was also interested in calculating the numbers of hearers in large crowds. In one instance near Leeds, he preached to a large crowd at the foot of a hill, and calculated that the hollow would contain 60,000 people—“and a clear, strong voice might command them all” (noting that he doubted whether any human voice could be heard by half that number upon a level plain).<sup>13</sup> At one point, he noted that his voice could be heard distinctly at 140 yards, which is undoubtedly an exaggeration (this would calculate to a crowd of 134,000).<sup>14</sup> In another instance, he stated in his *Journal* that he had “found no congregation that his voice could not command.”<sup>15</sup> This remark fails to take into account his own earlier comments on several occasions where people left because they could not hear, or where Wesley himself mentions that half the crowd could not have possibly heard him.<sup>16</sup> His concern for numbers also included the other end of the scale: on more than one occasion, his advice was that a preacher should not preach regularly in any place where the congregation does not amount to at least twenty persons—otherwise, it is making the gospel too cheap.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>10</sup>*Journal and Diaries III* (Works, 20:454), April 19, 1753; cf. June 2, 1752.

<sup>11</sup>*Journal and Diaries VI* (Works, 23:256), October 6, 1782.

<sup>12</sup>*Journal and Diaries VII* (Works, vol. 24), June 1, 1788.

<sup>13</sup>*Journal and Diaries IV* (Works, 21:10), May 4, 1755.

<sup>14</sup>By Benjamin Franklin's calculation (two square feet per person, or 4.5 people per square yard), Whitefield could be heard by over 30,000 people at seventy yards in a semi-circle; L. W. Labaree, et al., eds., *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), p. 179n. By this same calculation, a hearing distance of 140 yards would result in 138,000 listeners (perhaps an intentional exaggeration by Wesley).

<sup>15</sup>*Journal and Diaries VI* (Works, 23:302), at Manchester, Easter 1784.

<sup>16</sup>There were times he could not be heard, or doubted that he could, such as at Sandgate, Newcastle, on his first visit (May 30, 1742) and at Leeds (April 26, 1747). *Journal and Diaries II and III* (Works, 19:269; 20:169).

<sup>17</sup>See Telford, *Letters*, 7:47 (Jan. 6, 1781): “That is a doubt with me too whether you do right in preaching to 12 or 15 persons [in the Dales]. I fear it is making the gospel too cheap, and will not therefore blame any Assistant for removing the meeting from any place where the congregation does not usually amount to 20 persons.”

The large numbers, of course, gained him some notoriety, and Wesley and other Methodists were roundly criticized for this practice. Field-preaching was seen by many as irregular, if not illegal, and certainly indecent. To those, Wesley responded, “I wonder at those who still talk so loud of the *indecent* of field-preaching. 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.”<sup>18</sup>

In 1745, Wesley was inclined to think that field-preaching was more important than establishing societies, and decided on an experiment that has not been widely noticed by historians: to concentrate (especially in Wales and Cornwall) on preaching without forming any societies.<sup>19</sup> The following year, he was still willing to extend the trial, thinking that even at that point they had limited field-preaching too much. He noted in the *Minutes*, “we have found a greater blessing in field preaching than in any other preaching whatever.”<sup>20</sup>

Now, having said all this, we must notice that his advice and practice is not unwaveringly universal with regard to field-preaching. In 1744, his instructions at conference were “never preach without doors when we can with any conveniency preach within.” And in fact, most of Wesley's own preaching was within four walls, to the societies or the classes. Wanda Smith, who has established an accurate record of Wesley's preaching, estimates that the overwhelming proportion of his preaching throughout his lifetime, perhaps more than ninety percent, was to the Methodist societies.

And in 1748, after two or three years of emphasizing field-preaching at the expense of setting up societies, he called the experiment off. Again the *Minutes* give the reason: “The preacher cannot give proper instructions to those who are convinced of sin unless he has opportunities of meeting them apart from the mixed, unawakened multitude.”<sup>21</sup> His explanation fifteen years later is more strongly worded: “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. How much preaching has there been for these twenty years all over Pembrokeshire! [Wales was Whitefield country.] But no regular societies, no discipline, no order or connexion; and the consequence is that nine in ten of the once-awakened are now faster asleep than ever.”<sup>22</sup> Whitefield certainly

<sup>18</sup>*Journal and Diaries III* (Works, 20:245), August 28, 1748.

<sup>19</sup>*Minutes*, 1:27 (August 3, 1745, Q. 11): “May we not make a trial, especially in Wales and Cornwall, of preaching, without settling any societies?” This decision also had an effect on the subject matter of the sermons that he published in 1746; its rescission also had an effect on the second volume of sermons in 1748. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), pp. 176–78.

<sup>20</sup>*Minutes*, 1:37: “Q.1: Have we not limited field preaching too much? A. It seems we have . . . (3) Because that reason against it is not good, ‘The house will hold all that come.’ The house may hold all that will come to the house, but not all that would come to the field.”

<sup>21</sup>*Minutes*, 1:39.

<sup>22</sup>*Journal and Diaries IV* (Works, 21:424), August 25, 1763.

knew this was the case, and noted later, "My brother Wesley acted wisely. The souls that were awakened under his ministry he joined in class, and thus preserved the fruit of his labour. This I neglected, and my people are a rope of sand."<sup>23</sup> In 1770, Wesley added a comment along these lines in the "Large" *Minutes*: "It is far easier to preach a good sermon than to instruct the ignorant in the principles of religion."<sup>24</sup>

Wesley's personal attitude toward field-preaching is also often overlooked. In 1759, he pointed out that he did not really enjoy the experience: "I preached . . . to twice the people we should have had at the house. What marvel the devil does not love field-preaching! Neither do I: I love a commodious room, a soft cushion, an handsome pulpit. But where is my zeal, if I do not trample all these under foot in order to save one more soul?"<sup>25</sup> In 1772 he was still complaining: "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>26</sup>

Regardless of the inconvenience, criticism, personal displeasure, and all the rest, Wesley's practice generally conformed to his principles in this regard—going to those who needed him the most meant preaching in nearly every conceivable location and circumstance.

## II

The most noticeable Methodist preaching (because it was fairly unique) took place early in the morning, generally about 5:00 a.m. before people went to work. Wesley saw early morning preaching as important to the health of body and soul. The *Minutes* were very specific on this point: "Let the preaching at five in the morning be constantly kept up, wherever you can have twenty hearers."<sup>27</sup> In 1784, Wesley discovered that morning preaching had been discontinued in Chester, the people not being inclined to come so early, especially in the winter. "If so," reacted Wesley, "the Methodists are a fallen people. Here is proof." He then proceeded to outline in his *Journal* his own practice in the matter, preaching at five in the morning in Georgia in 1736, carrying on the same through the early days of the revival in England, down to that day. The matter, as he saw it, was inextricably tied in with the general practice of early rising, without which neither "souls nor bodies can long remain healthy."<sup>28</sup>

<sup>23</sup>Doughty, p. 57; see JW's comment in a letter to CW—"I must go round and glean after G. Whitefield." *Letters II* (Works, 26:55), April 21, 1741.

<sup>24</sup>*Minutes*, 1:470. "And as much as this work is despised by some, I doubt not but it will try the parts and spirits of us all. So Archbishop Usher: 'Great scholars may think it beneath them to spend their time in teaching the first principles of the doctrine of Christ. But they should consider that the laying the foundation skilfully, as it is the matter of greatest importance in the whole building, so it is the masterpiece of the wisest builder.'"

<sup>25</sup>*Journal and Diaries IV* (Works, 21:203), June 26, 1759.

<sup>26</sup>*Journal and Diaries V* (Works, 22:348), September 6, 1772.

<sup>27</sup>*Minutes*, 1:79 (1768), Q. 23, A. 3.

<sup>28</sup>*Journal and Diaries VI* (Works, 23:301), April 5, 1784.

That same spring, he also discovered that morning preaching had been given up in Stroud and surrounding towns. "If this be the case while I am alive," he moaned, "what must it be when I am gone? Give up this, and Methodism too will degenerate into a mere sect, only distinguished by some opinions and modes of worship."<sup>29</sup>

And the problem even began to appear in the very nest of Methodism. In 1787, Wesley gave the order that everyone at the Foundery in London should go to bed at 9 and get up for morning preaching at 5, a practice that he was happy later to report was still persisting.<sup>30</sup>

Wesley's own diary confirms that he was himself rather consistent in the practice of early rising and early morning preaching.

Whenever the preaching was to happen, there were two or three additional rules that speak to the matter of punctuality.

Be punctual.. Do everything exactly at the time.<sup>31</sup>

Be sure never to disappoint a congregation, unless in case of life or death.<sup>32</sup>

In this regard, Wesley's pattern is generally a model of precision. His itineraries and circuit plans represent the careful planning of a master of time. Trips to the Midlands, the North, to Scotland, Ireland, and Wales, were always preceded by correspondence with his hosts along the way, spelling out his schedule and listing the place (and often the times) where and when he planned to preach. It is not exactly clear what an excusable "case of life or death" might entail, but there were, of course, times when his itinerary was threatened by accidental travel disruptions. But even many of those instances resulted in some extraordinary means being employed in order to meet the schedule.

Now, on another matter of punctuality, he did not do so well—how long to preach. The first rule of preaching in the early *Minutes* was "Be sure to begin and end precisely at the time appointed."<sup>33</sup> His principle was in fact even more specific, as he stated more than once: the Methodist rule is to conclude the service within the hour. As he told a woman in Ireland, "People imagine the longer a sermon is, the more good it will do. This is a grand mistake."<sup>34</sup> In some cases, Wesley even threatened preachers who were long-winded with expulsion: "Unless you can and will leave off preaching long, I shall think it my duty to prevent your preaching at all among the Methodists."<sup>35</sup>

However, there are frequent occasions when Wesley went far beyond the limits of his own rule. At Birstall in 1745, he notes that he "was constrained

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 23:298, March 15, 1784.

<sup>30</sup>*Journal and Diaries VII* (Works, vol. 24), Dec. 9, 1787; Aug. 9, 1789.

<sup>31</sup>*Minutes*, 1:24, 494.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, 1:527.

<sup>33</sup>*Minutes*, 1:38, 527.

<sup>34</sup>Telford, *Letters*, 6:255 (Feb. 16, 1777); 7:90 (Nov. 19, 1781).

<sup>35</sup>Nathaniel Ward and Henry Foster; in Telford, *Letters*, 7:70 (June 26, 1781).

to continue my discourse there near an hour longer than usual, God pouring out such a blessing that I knew not how to leave off."<sup>36</sup> On one occasion at Stanley, he says he was "strengthened" to continue preaching for "near two hours, well into the darkness of the night under the lightning of a threatening storm" (which served to increase the seriousness of the listeners).<sup>37</sup> A fortnight later in Cardiff, he was given such freedom of speech and his heart was so enlarged that, he says, "I knew not how to give over, so that we continued three hours."<sup>38</sup> In 1742, he preached in the churchyard at Epworth, carrying on for "near three hours," then commenting that "yet we scarce knew how to part."<sup>39</sup> And so on the examples proliferate, no doubt the result of God working in his heart in such a way that the rule took second place to the work of the Spirit, at least in his case.

Frequency of preaching is another area where Wesley's practice does not match his principles. The rule was that preachers should not preach more than twice a day during the week or three times on Sunday.<sup>40</sup> He also spoke very harshly of the practice at Bath of that "vile custom" of the same person preaching three times a day to the same congregation, which, he said, was "enough to weary out both the bodies and minds of the speaker as well as his hearers."<sup>41</sup> Apparently, twice a day was a prescription as well as a proscription, for preachers were liable to location (not continued as itinerants but as local preachers) or retirement if they could not preach twice a day.<sup>42</sup> The point of it all was made in June 1775 in a letter to brother Charles: "Preach as much as you can and no more than you can."<sup>43</sup> The irony is, of course, that John himself outdistanced everyone else as to frequency, sometimes preaching four and five times in a day. In fact, in otherwise glowing comments at Wesley's death, one of his close friends, Samuel Bradburn, noted that when Wesley was thusly overextended, his third and fourth sermon in a day "would be far beneath what he could have made them, had he preached but twice" (that is, followed his own rule in that regard).<sup>44</sup>

### III

The art of preaching was of no small concern to Wesley. His own advice was given freely (and at times very specifically) to the preachers, and they

<sup>36</sup>*Journal and Diaries III (Works, 20:63)*, April 24, 1745.

<sup>37</sup>*Journal and Diaries II (Works, 19:102)*, October 7, 1739.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, 19:108, October 19, 1739.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 19:277, June 13, 1742.

<sup>40</sup>*Minutes*, 1:242.

<sup>41</sup>*Journal and Diaries VII (Works, vol. 24)*, September 5, 1790.

<sup>42</sup>*Minutes*, 1:715.

<sup>43</sup>Telford, *Letters*, 6:152 (June 2, 1775).

<sup>44</sup>Samuel Bradburn, *A Farther Account of the Rev. John Wesley* (London, 1791), p. 11. In 1765, JW commented to John Nelson that he preached eight hundred sermons that year; Telford, *Letters*, 4:197.

were questioned annually on the matter. One of the standard questions for preachers new and old was:

And has God given them any degree of utterance?  
Do they speak justly, readily, clearly?<sup>45</sup>

Clarity was the first desideratum. Wesley desired clearness of style and language. As he told Samuel Furly, "Clearness in particular is necessary for you and me, because we are to instruct people of the lowest understanding. . . . We should constantly use the most common, little, easy word (so they are pure and proper) which our language affords."<sup>46</sup> Dr. Middleton was posited as a model of impropriety in this regard, because "his diction is stiff, formal, affected, unnatural. The art glares, and therefore shocks a man of true taste."<sup>47</sup>

Wesley was opposed to the florid oratorical style so often heard in English pulpits. As he said in the preface to his *Sermons* in 1746, "I design plain truth for plain people."<sup>48</sup> He goes on then not only to explain himself on the matter in more detail (avoid philosophical speculation, words that are not easily understood, technical terms), but also to use two Latin tags in the preface itself (*homo unius libri, ad populum*), not to speak of the Hebrew, Greek, and Latin scattered throughout the sermons.

Nevertheless, we must grant that his prose is generally clear and pointed—not completely free from purple patches<sup>49</sup> perhaps, but certainly not florid or ornamented. And besides, the occasional slip into academic word-dropping probably was accepted by the listeners as a sign of his scholarly credentials and a verification of his authority in matters sublime.

As for the voice itself, Wesley's attitude is very clear on the matter:

Never speak above the natural pitch of your voice.<sup>50</sup>

In his "Address to the Clergy," Wesley expressed his wish that preachers would have a strong, clear, musical voice and a good delivery, both with regard to pronunciation and action, and pointed out that these were more acquirable than had generally been imagined.

He is quick to condemn loud preaching, or "screaming" as it was called. As he wrote to John King in 1775, "Scream no more, at the peril of your soul. . . . Speak with all your heart, but with a moderate voice." To Sarah Mallet he wrote in 1789, "Never scream. Never speak above the natural pitch

<sup>45</sup>*Minutes*, 1:31.

<sup>46</sup>Telford, *Letters*, 4:258 (July 16, 1764).

<sup>47</sup>"Always to talk or write like him would be as absurd as always to walk in minuet step. O tread natural, tread easy, only not careless. Do not blunder or shamble into impropriety." *Ibid.*, 4:232 (Mar. 6, 1764), to Samuel Furly.

<sup>48</sup>Albert C. Outler, ed., *Sermons I (Works, 1:104)*.

<sup>49</sup>George Lawton, *John Wesley's English; A Study of his Literary Style* (London, 1962), p. 243.

<sup>50</sup>Telford, *Letters*, 8:190 (Dec. 15, 1789).

of your voice; it is disgusting to the hearers. . . . It is offering God murder for sacrifice."<sup>51</sup>

Wesley's own practice in this matter is described by his first biographer, John Hampson, who said that Wesley's manner was graceful and easy—his voice was not loud, but clear and manly; his style neat, simple, perspicuous, and admirably adapted to the capacity of his hearers.<sup>52</sup> Wesley's voice did occasionally give out, as on one occasion in December of 1789, but we can assume that it was not the result of straining his voice by screaming.<sup>53</sup>

On the other hand, Horace Walpole's description is openly critical in describing Wesley as preacher: "Wondrous clean, but as evidently an actor as Garrick. He spoke his sermon, but so fast and with so little accent, that I am sure he has often uttered it, for it was like a lesson" (a set speech). Walpole's prejudices, which no doubt colored his general opinion, come out in his further comment: "There were parts and eloquence in it; but towards the end, he exalted his voice and acted very ugly enthusiasm."<sup>54</sup>

In any case, Wesley's voice and delivery were certainly not in the class with orators like Whitefield, who could not only reach the largest of crowds, but who, the actor Garrick claimed, could melt his listeners to tears merely by his pronunciation of the word "Mesopotamia."

As for the matter of gestures, Wesley also had a definite opinion and some suggestions. Rule 8 for preaching was:

Take care of anything awkward or affected, either in your gesture or pronunciation.

Wesley even published a little pamphlet on "Directions Concerning Pronunciation and Gesture." In this handbook he pointed out that gestures should be well-adjusted to the subject, free from affectation, and such as will not offend. He gives very precise directions in some particulars, such as not to stretch one's arms more than a foot sideways while preaching. Yet this moderation of action might have been taken a bit too far by Wesley himself. One observer of Wesley's preaching in Lincolnshire reported, "There was so little effort in the preacher, that but for an occasional lifting of his right hand, he might have been a speaking statue."<sup>55</sup>

As for the general demeanor of the preacher, Wesley's rules are quite clear:

Endeavour to be serious, weighty, and solemn in your whole deportment before the congregation.<sup>56</sup>  
Beware of clownishness. Be courteous to all.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>51</sup>Telford, *Letters*, 6:167 (July 28, 1775); 8:190 (Dec. 15, 1789).

<sup>52</sup>John Hampson, *Memoirs of the late Rev. John Wesley, A.M.* (Sunderland, 1791), 3:158.

<sup>53</sup>*Journal and Diaries VII (Works, vol. 24)*, Dec. 16, 1789.

<sup>54</sup>W. S. Lewis, ed., *Horace Walpole's Correspondence* (New Haven, 1937–83), 35:118–20. JW had preached at Lady Huntingdon's Chapel in Bath on Oct. 5, 1766.

<sup>55</sup>*Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* 7 (1910):131 (hereinafter *WHS*).

<sup>56</sup>*Minutes*, 1:38, 527

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, 1:529.

These rules for preaching follow very closely the prescriptions of his first two rules for the Preacher (1744):

Be diligent; never be unemployed a moment. Never be triflingly employed. . . .  
Be serious. Let your motto be, "Holiness to the Lord." Avoid all lightness as you would avoid hell-fire; and laughing as you would cursing and swearing.<sup>58</sup>

And the questions for examining preachers at conference (1746) follow in the same vein:

And are they holy in all manner of conversation?<sup>59</sup>

In this instance, the demeanor in preaching was an extension of the general deportment of the preacher, who was raised up by God "to spread Scriptural holiness across the lands." Charles left us the most memorable form of the injunction that John tried to embody: "Unite the pair so long disjointed, Knowledge and vital piety." John Wesley may not have been the most impressive orator, as a Swedish visitor once noted, but he did reflect in his person many of the primary ideals he held. "He has not great oratorical gifts, no outward appearance," said Professor J. H. Liden after he heard Wesley preach, "but he speaks clear and pleasant. . . . He looks as the worst country curate in Sweden, but has learning as a bishop and zeal for the glory of God which is quite extraordinary. . . . He is the *personification of piety*, and he seems to me as a living representative of the loving Apostle John."<sup>60</sup>

#### IV

The whole matter of what Wesley or any other Methodist might preach derives in part from the nature of the movement. There are several places where Wesley defined or described Methodism (and Methodists) in terms of its primary mission to spread holiness. The "main doctrines" of the movement likewise were usually listed as three in number (which, he said, include all the rest): repentance, faith, and holiness—the first (repentance) seen as the porch of religion, the second (faith) as the door, and the third (holiness) as religion itself.<sup>61</sup> These Wesley called "the grand scriptural doctrines" around which he hoped to consolidate the evangelical movement in the eighteenth century. The particular emphases might be expressed differently, depending upon the context of his explanation.<sup>62</sup> For instance, on one occasion he declared that "the distinguishing doctrines on which I do insist . . . in all my preaching . . . [are summed up] as perceptible inspiration . . . this is the substance of what we all

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*, 1:24, 493, 495.

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*, 1:31.

<sup>60</sup>*WHS* 17 (1929):2.

<sup>61</sup>"Principles of a Methodist Farther Explained" (1746), *Societies (Works, 9:227)*.

<sup>62</sup>Original sin, holiness of heart and life, love of God and neighbor, justification, salvation by faith, assurance of faith, witness of the Spirit, Christ in all his offices (law and gospel)—all part and parcel of the central gospel proclamation.

preach";<sup>63</sup> and yet in the same letter said, "salvation by faith was my only theme."<sup>64</sup> At another time, he noted (to the same person), "in my general tenor of preaching, I teach nothing (as the substance of religion) more singular than the love of God and man."<sup>65</sup>

Whatever other phrasing might be used to explain its particular emphasis, soteriology might be expected to be virtually the sum and substance of Methodist preaching. As he expressed the matter in a short treatise on Methodism, "The essence of it is holiness of heart and life."<sup>66</sup> As we said in the last section above, in this sense, the topics for preaching were an extension of the Christian life that the preacher was expected to model.

This meant more, however, than simply witnessing to one's religious experience. Wesley expected the preacher to have a well-furnished mind that was capable of understanding the meaning of the apostolic witness and have the ability to communicate the great truths of Scripture. One of the three main sections of questions for the annual examination of preachers at conference was headed: "Have they gifts (as well as grace) for the work?"<sup>67</sup> Charles and John differed on the relative value of gifts and grace. John's view was, "Of the two, I prefer grace before gifts."<sup>68</sup> For Charles, it was the other way around. Charles was a hard examiner of the preachers, much tougher than John. In 1751, he described the immanent fate of one preacher as a warning to others: "[My brother,] without God's counsel, made a preacher of a tailor; I, with God's help, shall make a tailor of him again."<sup>69</sup>

The concern for gifts and grace was broken down into three further questions:

Have they (in some tolerable degree) a clear, sound understanding?  
Have they a right judgment in the things of God?  
Have they a just conception of salvation by faith?

The Wesleys exercised some rigor in this regard and tried to help the Methodists avoid the popular form of preaching known as "gospel preaching." Wesley described this form of preaching as an "unconnected rhapsody of unmeaning words," that speaks much of the promises, but little of the commands of Christ.<sup>70</sup> "Gospel sermons" were not welcome in the Methodist preaching house: "The term has now become a mere cant word. I wish none of our Society would use it. It has no determinate meaning. Let but a pert, self-sufficient animal, that has neither sense nor grace, bawl out something

<sup>63</sup>*Letters II* (Works, 26:181–82), Dec. 30, 1745 to John Smith.

<sup>64</sup>*Ibid.*, 26:183.

<sup>65</sup>*Ibid.*, 26:160 (Sept. 28, 1745).

<sup>66</sup>"Thoughts upon Methodism" (1786), *Societies* (Works, 9:529).

<sup>67</sup>*Minutes*, 1:31.

<sup>68</sup>*Letters II* (Works, 26:472), July 24, 1751.

<sup>69</sup>Frank Baker, *Charles Wesley as Revealed by his Letters* (London, 1948), p. 86.

<sup>70</sup>*Letters II* (Works, 26:486), Dec. 20, 1751.

about Christ and his Blood or justification by faith, and his hearers cry out, 'What a fine gospel sermon!'"<sup>71</sup> "Of all preaching," he said, "what is usually called gospel preaching is the most useless, if not the most mischievous; a dull, yea or lively, harangue on the sufferings of Christ or salvation by faith without strongly inculcating holiness."<sup>72</sup> That was the point: holiness was to be the focus of the message, and that entailed preaching both the law and the gospel; in effect, preaching Christ in all his offices.<sup>73</sup>

Although Wesley seems to have generally followed his own advice in this regard, the comments of one particular critic leave the impression that his approach may have bordered on gospel preaching on occasion. This observer remarked that Wesley's sermons "consisted of nothing more than a string of mystical raptures about the new birth."<sup>74</sup>

Having said this, we should note that over the wide range of Wesley's lifetime, the focus of his topics changed from time to time, as did that of his preachers (sometimes by his direction). At one conference, the question was raised, whether or not some had been preaching "too much of the wrath and too little of the love of God?"<sup>75</sup> This question had come up in the context of a concern that they were no longer preaching "as at first," and had perhaps changed their doctrines. Wesley's response is particularly interesting:

1. At first we preached almost wholly to unbelievers. To those, therefore, we spake almost continually of remission of sins through the death of Christ, and the nature of faith in His blood. . . . 2. But those in whom the foundation is already laid, we exhort to go on to perfection, which we did not see so clearly at first. . . . 3. Yet we now preach, and that continually, faith in Christ as the Prophet, Priest, and King. . . .

In pointing out that different audiences need different topics, he is alluding to another of his basic rules for preaching:

Always suit your subject to your audience.<sup>76</sup>

His own explanation of the difference between the preaching early in the revival, to the large "mixed" crowds (largely unconverted), and the later preaching, to those in the society in whom the foundation had been laid, is easily borne out in his published sermons. You may remember, we pointed out that in 1745 the decision was made to preach more widely in the fields at the expense of setting up societies. Interestingly enough, at that point, volume one of his *Sermons* was being prepared, and what is the topic of nearly every sermon in that volume?—justification by faith, in one form or another. The experiment was given up in 1748, and the emphasis was renewed on the

<sup>71</sup>Telford, *Letters*, 6:326–27 (Oct. 18, 1778), to Mary Bishop.

<sup>72</sup>*Ibid.*, 5:345 (Nov. 4, 1772), to Charles Wesley.

<sup>73</sup>*Letters II* (Works, 26:482–7); see also *Minutes*, 1:718.

<sup>74</sup>Heitzenrater, *Mirror and Memory* (Nashville, 1989), p. 163.

<sup>75</sup>The answer was, "We fear they have leaned to that extreme." *Minutes*, 1:9, see also 1:32, qu. 17.

<sup>76</sup>"What inconvenience is there in speaking much of the wrath and little of the love of God?"

<sup>76</sup>*Minutes*, 1:38, 527.

establishment of societies, just as another volume of *Sermons* appeared. It is perhaps no accident that the lead sermon in that volume is "Christian Perfection" and nearly all the rest of the sermons in that volume deal with nurturing the Christian life (e.g., he starts his series on the Sermon on the Mount).

Having said that, we need to remember that his published *Sermons* should not be taken as necessarily indicative of his preaching habits, whether we are speaking of style or topics. As for style, it becomes apparent from firsthand accounts, such as that of Sir Walter Scott, that his preaching was richly interlarded with *exempla*: "He told many excellent stories."<sup>77</sup> His vocabulary in the oral preaching was also at a different level from that in his written work, though we would expect the two forms to be within the same universe of theological discourse.<sup>78</sup>

As for the topics, an examination of his preaching records (he left two sermon registers covering 1747–61 and 1787–88, along with numerous references in his letters, diaries, and *Journal*), reveals a great deal about his oral preaching that has not been noticed by most commentators on Wesley's preaching. For instance, of his favorite 35 preaching texts in his lifetime, only five of them are the topic of published sermons (and only one before 1760). And of the forty-three sermons that he had published in his collection by 1760, his sermon register records his preaching on only sixteen of the texts; of those, seven were on only one or two occasions. In the meantime, his second and fourth most favorite preaching texts (2 Cor. 8:9 "For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich"; and Isa. 55:7, "Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts") are not represented in any written or published form.

Which is to say, we need to check Wesley's preaching register to test the texts from which he preached. An examination of that same period surrounding the decisions of 1745–48 reveals some interesting tendencies. One would expect that the period of heavy field-preaching would yield more preaching on texts related to repentance, faith, and justification, and that is the case, at least to some extent. One of his favorite texts in the early revival was Eph. 2:8 ("For by grace are ye saved through faith"), which he used thirty-four times in 1738–42, eight times in 1744–48, but not once from 1749–54. On the other hand, Hebrews 12:28 (on serving God acceptably with reverence and godly fear) is not used prior to 1749, but in the following five years is the text on twenty-one occasions.<sup>79</sup> These observations need further careful checking, since Wesley's audiences varied widely in any given period. But the tendency

<sup>77</sup>See James Downey, *The Eighteenth-Century Pulpit* (Oxford, 1969), p. 164; Doughty, p. 198.

<sup>78</sup>See comparison of oral and written versions of "On Charity," *Sermons I* (*Works*, 1:515–16); see also Heitzenrater, *Mirror and Memory* (Nashville, 1989), pp. 165–66.

<sup>79</sup>See also Rom. 12:1, used almost none early, three in 1747, but thirty-four in 1748–53; similarly with Cor. 6:19.

to select topics according to the context and audience, and speak to their needs and at their level, is also supported by the testimony of several observers who indicate that Wesley spoke very directly to his listeners. It is no accident that as the Methodists began to emulate their disciplined, hard-working leader, they often improved their economic standing, and Wesley found it necessary to begin preaching on topics such as "The Use of Money," "On Dress," and "The Danger of Increasing Riches."

His text was always taken from the Bible, though a study of his use of Scripture turns up some interesting patterns in that usage. The general approach, of course, is summed up in one of his most often quoted phrases, "Let me be *homo unius libri*" (a person of one book). The world that serves as the basic source of his vocabulary, imagery, and even illustration is the scriptural world: it represents the matrix for his careful interweaving of material from other sources. Of course, one only has to look at the footnotes in the new four-volume edition of the *Sermons* to be reminded of the wide cast of his net beyond the Scriptures, or the fruits of his "plundering the Egyptians."

What is not often noted, in all this talk about primacy, is his later criticism of preachers who had taken his earlier dictum on "the one book" to its literal conclusion. In the "Large" *Minutes* of 1770, he asks "But why are we not more knowing?" In the answer, he comes down hard on idleness and as a cure promotes reading: "Read the most useful books, and that regularly and constantly . . . at least five hours in twenty-four. 'But I read only the Bible' [you say; he goes on sarcastically:] Then you ought to teach others to read only the Bible, and by parity of reason, to hear only the Bible. But if so, you need preach no more. Just so said George Bell. And what is the fruit? Why, now he neither reads the Bible nor anything else. This is rank enthusiasm. If you need no book but the Bible, you are got above St. Paul. . . . 'But I have no books.' I will give each of you, as fast as you will read them, books to the value of five pounds. . . . 'But I have no taste for reading' [you say]. Contract a taste for it by use, or return to your trade."<sup>80</sup> This rather clear qualification of the *homo unius libri* principle thus became fixed in the by-laws of the Methodists, as well as in Wesley's practice.

Another rule has to do with plainness. As we have seen, he recommended using plain words. He told Sam Furly in 1764, "If we think with the wise, yet must [we] speak with the vulgar." As an Oxford don, Wesley soon discovered, while speaking to the prisoners at the Castle or the plain people in the town, that his University diction resulted only in gapes and stares: "This quickly obliged me to alter my style and adopt the language of those I spoke to. And yet there is a dignity in this simplicity, which is not disagreeable to those of the highest rank."<sup>81</sup> Wesley's own testimony is verified by a woman who heard him preach at Lincoln, and remarked to a friend, "Is this the great Mr. Wesley,

<sup>80</sup>*Minutes*, 1:518.

<sup>81</sup>Telford, *Letters*, 4:258 (July 15, 1764), to Sam Furly.



of whom we hear so much in the present day? Why, the poorest person in the chapel might have understood him!" To which the friend replied, "In this, madam, he displays his greatness: that, while the poorest can understand him, the most learned are edified, and cannot be offended."<sup>82</sup>

Plainness also related to the use of the Bible: Choose the plainest texts you can.<sup>83</sup> These were the ones, for Wesley, that best expressed "the analogy of faith"—the grand truth of salvation that ran through the Scriptures from one end to the other. One of his basic rules of interpretation, as you remember, is to explain the difficult texts by the easy ones. And generally this means, by those which make clear the "way of salvation" (*via salutis*). In trying to develop a complete list of Wesley's preaching, we have had some difficulties reading his diaries in the later years because of the very poor, shaky handwriting. But when the entries are in doubt, it is quite often the case that one of the possible options is one of the plain, preachable texts (in this sense) that Wesley used so often.

As for the matter of using particular texts, once announced, Wesley had clear advice in his Rules:

Take care not to ramble from your text, but to keep close to it, and make out what you undertake.<sup>84</sup>

This is another bit of his own advice that Wesley does not always seem to have followed. If his published sermons are any indication whatsoever in this regard, he quite frequently chooses a verse that represents only a jumping off place, and the sermon goes its own way, only occasionally playing off the text itself (see "The Almost Christian" which totally misreads or twists the text, "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian"). And quite often, it seems, his preaching went off into the realm of telling stories (on which he gives no advice, other than the general rules to "avoid all lightness, jesting, and foolish talking").<sup>85</sup> John Hampson reports that when Wesley fell into anecdote and story-telling (which he says was quite often, though we can be sure this did not mean telling jokes), "his discourses were little to the purpose. . . . We have scarcely ever heard from him a tolerable sermon in which a story was introduced."<sup>86</sup> More often than not, of course, Wesley's preaching, as well as his written sermons, seems to be rather closely reasoned and sticks rather tightly to a development of the text.

We come now to one last bit of advice that Wesley had with regard to the sermons that were preached. He thought the common practice recommended by some, of burning old sermons every seven years, was a bad idea. We know from his sermon registers and other records that Wesley preached old sermons

<sup>82</sup>Wesleyan Methodist Magazine 48 (1825):25.

<sup>83</sup>Minutes, 1:38, 527.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid., 1:38, 527.

<sup>85</sup>Minutes, 495; cf. 1:24.

<sup>86</sup>Hampson, 3:170.

over and over. "I cannot write a better sermon on *The Good Steward* than I did seven years ago" (he wrote in the 1770s) or "on *The Great Assize* than I did twenty years ago, . . . on *The Use of Money* than . . . thirty years ago, nay . . . on *The Circumcision of the Heart* than . . . five and forty years ago."<sup>87</sup> We know that Wesley preached on Mark 1:15 ("The Kingdom of God is at hand; repent ye and believe the Gospel") at least 190 times. In his diaries, some of his favorite texts are even listed with superscripts from 2 to 5, indicating that he had several sermons (up to four or five) on each of those texts (some of the published sermons, including one on Mark 1:15, likewise have later published counterparts on the same text).<sup>88</sup>

## V

How do we bring our look at John Wesley, Preacher, to a close? Perhaps our evaluation could continue in the same vein as above and simply look at the final question by which the Wesleys examined the Methodist preachers at conference:

Have they success?

Do they not only so speak as generally either to convince or affect the hearers?

But have any received remission of sins by their preaching? A clear and lasting sense of the love of God?<sup>89</sup>

The answer here is fairly easy, though not without some exceptions, as you might imagine. Wesley himself was aware of circumstances where he lacked success. Even in the matter of field-preaching, a practice which in some years brought hundreds of thousands to the preachers but only hundreds into the societies, he was not always effective. As Wesley told a correspondent in 1747, field-preaching never made any real impression until the novelty of it had worn off. In some particular places, such as in Newcastle, Wesley had long stretches of barren work: "When I had preached more than six score times at this town, 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 as has continued ever since, and I trust will be remembered unto many generations."<sup>90</sup>

<sup>87</sup>He adds, "Perhaps, indeed, I may have read five or six hundred books more than I had then and may know a little more history or natural philosophy than I did. But I am not sensible that this has made any essential addition to my knowledge in divinity. Forty years ago, I knew and preached every Christian doctrine which I preach now." *Journal and Diaries VI (Works, 23:104–5)*. This comment overlooks some rather significant changes in Wesley's thinking from 1738 to 1778, which he at other places admits.

<sup>88</sup>E.g., "Witness of the Spirit," "On Faith," "Repentance of Believers," "The Way to the Kingdom."

<sup>89</sup>Minutes, 1:31.

<sup>90</sup>Letters II (*Works, 16:237*), March 25, 1747.

On the other hand, the accounts are legion of Wesley's success in transforming the lives of thousands of people and bringing to them "a clear and lasting sense of the love of God." Wesley was speaking by and large to people who were the castoffs of society—they lived a hard, sad, and lonely life, had low self esteem, very little hope, and few friends that could help. When Wesley told these people the scriptural truths that God loved them, that they too could become children of God, could leave the guilt and misery of their sinful lives behind, and that in the face of death, they could enjoy the happiness and holiness that are marks of the Kingdom of God, he not only spoke from his own experience, he also spoke to the anxieties that many of them felt and he spoke of the certainties that many desired. Numerous are the people who were touched by this message of hope, and the crowds followed Wesley from place to place to hear this preaching of the Gospel. One woman, aged fifty-four, heard Wesley preach at Bristol, and was convinced that this was the truth of the gospel. When she heard that he was going to Plymouth next, she walked there—125 miles on foot—heard him preach, and walked home again.<sup>91</sup> Some of the people who listened and heard became preachers themselves. John Nelson tells of hearing Wesley preach at Moorfields in 1739: "I thought his whole discourse was aimed at me."<sup>92</sup>

Wesley's practice of preaching may have varied at points from his enunciated principles, which were designed as guidelines for his lay preachers (who were comparable to the uneducated, unordained curates in the Church of England). There was some precedent in the Church of England for fully ordained presbyters to be treated in a different manner from the curates.<sup>93</sup>

But in the end, in spite of all the rules, the questions, the suggestions, the publications on the technique of preaching, it was the message of the gospel communicated to the listener by the voice and life of the preacher that was most important for Wesley himself and his lay preachers. In that sense, the testimony of the Swedish professor is perhaps the most telling comment on John Wesley, Preacher—though Wesley may have looked like the scruffiest of country curates, said Professor Liden, yet he "has learning as a bishop and zeal for the glory of God which is quite extraordinary. . . . He is the *personification* of piety, and he seems to me as a living representative of the loving Apostle John."<sup>94</sup>

<sup>91</sup>John W. Etheridge, *Life of Adam Clarke* (London, 1859), pp. 120–21.

<sup>92</sup>Doughty, p. 115 (quoting Nelson's Journal).

<sup>93</sup>Uneducated curates were limited simply to reading from the *Book of Homilies* (without gloss), while priests could create their own sermons. See Heitzenrater, *Mirror and Memory*, pp. 176–81, 194; *WHS* 17 (1929):2.

<sup>94</sup>*WHS* 17 (1929):2.