JOHN BENNET: "SERVANT OF JESUS CHRIST
IN THE WORKE OF THE GOSPEL"
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Many scholars, particularly those within Methodism, have either ignored John Bennet or dismissed him as being "an incorrigible Dissenter."\(^1\) Mainly because of his involvement with Grace Murray, a woman apparently already engaged to John Wesley himself, those with a denominational axe to grind have branded Bennet as "a treacherous, unfriendly man."\(^2\) Others, sometimes in a highly romanticized fashion, have presented Bennet as a cowardly figure, suffering from a "sensitive nervous temperament," in contrast to John Wesley, "in all his virile frame."\(^3\) After almost two hundred fifty years of neglect by ecclesiastical scholarship, Bennet is still regarded by some as "the first authentic Methodist agitator."\(^4\)

However, if we peer through the considerable mist of prejudice which has gathered around the name of Bennet since his death in 1759, it becomes clear that this traditional image hardly does credit to the historical details of Bennet's life. As certain writers have stated, not only was he "one of Wesley's most responsible helpers in Yorkshire, Lancashire and Derbyshire,"\(^5\) but Bennet has also been described as "the most outstanding of Wesley's young preachers."\(^6\) His usefulness as an itinerant evangelist is further evidenced in a remark made by Charles Wesley when he stated concerning Bennet: "there is not one of all our labourers whom I esteem and love or with whom I am more united."\(^7\) Such a weight of both contemporary and recent testimony supports the designation of Bennet as "the apostle of the Northwest."\(^8\)

Although no devoted Boswell hung upon Bennet's utterances, an extremely rich and interesting deposit of primary source material exists, casting a bright interpretive light upon his life and thought. In 1742, in an attempt "to be more watchful" over his "words and actions" Bennet

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\(^1\) G. E. Harrison, Son to Susanna (London: Penguin, 1944), 144.
\(^2\) C. E. Vulliamy, John Wesley (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1933), 214.
\(^3\) Harrison, 145.
\(^7\) Letter by Charles Wesley to Jonathan Reeves, 1752 (Wesley letterbook, Methodist Archives).
“began to keep a diary” in which, as he himself stated: “I noted down all my remarkable actions that occur’d from Day to Day.”9 The considerable body of autobiographical literature that was written as a result of this decision sheds fresh light not only on Bennet’s life, but also on the origins, rise, and influence of the Evangelical Revival in the northern counties during the eighteenth century. Accordingly, the possession of such extant material enables the researcher of revival history to reassess the merits of Bennet, particularly concerning his contribution to the early development of Wesleyan history.

One of the first points of interest revealed about Bennet from the pages of his diaries is that, unlike most of the other early Methodist preachers, including the Wesley brothers, he emerged from a nonconformist background. Bennet informs us that his family attended the dissenting Chapel of Dr. James Clegg at Chinley in Derbyshire.10 Although sitting under the ministry of Clegg throughout his youth, Bennet’s relationship with the dissenter came to an end in 1742 when his connections with the Methodists grew stronger. In his journal, under the entry for May 17, 1742, Bennet wrote:

I went to hear doctor Clegg rail against the Methodists. It made me somewhat uneasy to hear him, and purposed, if he persisted, to leave his Chappel.

A week later Bennet had made a definite decision to terminate his relationship with his minister, for in his journal he remarked:

I heard Dr. Clegg preach from Proverbs 21:3. I saw through his doctrine and verily believed that I had better stay away.11

The Journal, as it describes Bennet’s spiritual development, provides insights into the lives and careers of other nonconformist preachers, especially the Moravians. In the spring of 1742, following his evangelical conversion experience,12 Bennet met and became influenced by the itinerant evangelist Benjamin Ingham. Bennet described how:

hearing that Mr. Ingham of Abberford near York and David Taylor were at John Wardlows of Fulwood Booth near Sheffield I and Shart of Bowden Head went to meet them.13

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9 Bennet’s autobiographical journal, April 1742, 21.
10 Clegg was probably a Presbyterian pastor. Cf. V. S. Doe (ed.), Diary of James Clegg (Buxton: Derbyshire Record Society, 1978), 3 vols.
11 Bennet, journal, May 24, 1742.
12 Bennet gives as the date for his conversion January 1741. However, this more likely should read 1742. He states in his journal that this “memorable change happened on the 7th of January, 1741 . . . about eight O’clock in the evening” when he “went to hear David Taylor at Heyfield.”
13 Ibid., 21.
Having "perceived something amiable in his looks and a gracefullness in his speech and behaviour," Bennet associated himself with Ingham and the Unitas Fratrum. Throughout May 1742 he accompanied Ingham on an evangelistic tour of Lancashire and Cheshire, during which the Moravian revealed to Bennet:

Where in true religion consisted and how far it is possible for men to go in Duties and yet be ignorant of the true Christian faith which evidences itself in every good word and work.\(^\text{14}\)

Bennet's diary supplies interesting glimpses into the efficacious results of the Moravians' preaching. At Dukinfield, Bennet remarked that "the Lord's power was great" for Ingham "spoke as one that had authority," and accordingly he concluded: "I was constrained to say God is with this man of faith."\(^\text{15}\)

Despite such enthusiasm manifested by Bennet during his early association with Ingham, he soon came to reject the theological teaching of the Moravians, regarding it as nothing less than antinomianism. Bennet's attitude towards the Brethren was revealed some years later when, on visiting the religious society at Adlington and witnessing the "shyness" of the people, he wrote in his diary:

O how hard it is for anyone that hath imbibed the german principles ever after to relish sound doctrine.\(^\text{16}\)

From the date of his acceptance as a Methodist preacher in April 1743, to his secession from the Wesleyan movement nine years later, Bennet undertook a campaign of aggressive evangelism which established a well regulated circuit of religious societies extending through large parts of the north of England. This circuit, aptly named "John Bennet's Round," involved a preaching tour, starting at Bennet's headquarters and home at Chinley, to Chester in the south, and as far as Ilkley in Yorkshire in the north. In a letter to John Wesley in 1750 Bennet could state with justification:

My circuit enlarges daily, so that I shall near two hundred miles to ride each fortnight.\(^\text{17}\)

By 1748, the work of evangelism and nurture of the nascent religious groups was so great that Bennet wrote to Wesley, pleading for assistance:

Sir, if it is in your power you should send me a labourer. I believe there is no part of our Lord's Vineyard that is in greater want. No one man is able to supply half of

\(^{14}\)The words of Ingham, spoken in a sermon on Acts 9:22, preached at Robert Chetham's House. Bennet's diary, May 1, 1742.

\(^{15}\)Ingham preached at the house of John Lyons from John 7:17. Cf. diary, May 1, 1742.

\(^{16}\)April 17, 1748, diary.

\(^{17}\)Letter written by Bennet to John Wesley from Bolton, March 6, 1750, letterbook.
the places. This hurry of temporal business robs me of that little time I have, and strength too. 18

William Grimshaw, the evangelical vicar of Haworth, in a letter to the Methodist leader in the winter of 1747, testified to the usefulness of “Brother Bennet” in “carrying on the Lord’s work.” The letter concluded with the words:

I hope brother Bennet fails not to inform you, how well the work of grace flourished in Derbyshire, Cheshire and in the south of Lancashire, particularly about Bolton, Chowbent, etc. 19

During this “work of grace” Bennet had founded numerous religious societies. As early as 1742 Bennet informs us that after having “called to see John Lyon who was much out of health,” he returned “home in haste, having agreed to meet at Chappell Milntown in order to begin a society.” Accordingly he kept his promise and “drew up some rules” which “were consented unto freely by upwards of 40 serious persons who agreed to meet at John Daynes once a month in the way of a religious society.” 20

A year later a group consisting of other such “serious persons” was established at Bramhall, then a small village lying about three miles due south of the expanding industrial town of Stockport. 21 Similar societies soon appeared at places such as Hurdsfield, Warburton, 22 Mellor, and Lee End, Bennet’s home at Chinley. 23 According to Everett, and information gained from his so-called “Living oracles,” Bennet and John Nelson were the first Wesleyan preachers to visit Alpraham in Cheshire, regularly preaching beneath the branches of a pear tree. By the evangelistic labors of such “pear tree preachers” Wesleyan Methodism was first introduced to that part of the Cheshire plain. 24

18 October 22, 1748, Bennet diary fragment.
19 Letter written by Grimshaw to John Wesley from Ewood, November 27, 1747, letterbook.
20 May 21, 1742, autobiographical journal.
21 Under the diary entry for July 14, 1743, Bennet stated: “I went to Bramhall and settled a soc’ there.”
22 A tiny hamlet in Cheshire used by Bennet as an occasional stopping place while traveling from Boothbank to Oldfield Brow. Cf. February 18, 1748, Bennet diary. Warburton was later to be a place of significance for Bennet, for once he had seceded from Methodism in 1752, and following a brief period of church planting in Bolton, he continued as a Congregational minister for a small independent group that met there. Cf. S. R. Valentine, “The Independent Years of John Wesley’s Bennet,” Journal of the URC History Society, October 1989, 315-319.
23 It is highly probable that Bennet founded these societies between October 1744 and February 1747. There is a gap in Bennet’s journals for this period. The Hurdsfield group was formed by Thomas Buckley, a gentleman of Congleton, who, with the aid of Bennet, regulated a society which met in his own house, with himself as class leader. Bennet regularly preached at Buckley’s house. Cf. November 17, 1747, and February 16, 1748, diary.
24 J. Everett, Wesleyan Methodism in Manchester and Its Vicinity (Manchester, 1827), 18-20.
Bennet, as far as we know, was the first Methodist preacher to visit the city of Chester and pioneer a work at that place. Writing to the Methodist leader in 1747, he stated:

I am assured that the time is come that the gospel must be preached in that city . . . the inhabitants received me gladly and said “we have heard of Wesley and read his books, why could you not have come hither sooner.”

Two years later, in 1749, Bennet again visited the city and stated that he spoke “with a few persons in private” and that they had a “design to begin a little society.”

According to common report Bennet was a preacher of considerable merit. Thomas Bennet, a resident of Chelmorton, writing to a friend, described the Chinley preacher in the following words:

When I was a young man, the Puritans came and preached—and the people were much affected under them. There is a man called John Bennet who preaches just in the same way, and the people are affected under him in the same manner, and if you will procure your father’s barn, I will invite him.

Occasionally Bennet’s preaching had a startling effect on those who listened, similar to the reaction of others who came under the eloquent oratory of Wesley and Whitefield. Although there may have been some religious hyperbole, Bennet provided an account of such hysteria which is worthy of quoting in full. In his diary for the entry under January 22, 1748, he wrote:

this day a man came to hear me preach who had been a few weeks ago and in sore distress about his soul. He had heard me preach a sermon at Hadfield brow, and was struck to the heart, a few days after he stripped himself naked, and ran into the neighborhood. He was pursued and overtook, apprehended and bound with cords for several days.

In almost Gadarene demoniacal style the man languished in his melancholy, awaiting his day of deliverance, for as Bennet stated:

Scarce any person durst come near him. He gave no bad words. He was near 3 weeks before he co’d get any sleep. The minister of the Parish was sent for to pray for him. But he was so terrified that he durst scarce stay in the room. . . . The poor man said within himself that if he co’d sleep he should find rest unto his soul, and so it was, for as soon as he had slept he awakened praising God, and so continues in the joy of faith and in his right senses.

Although Bennet contributed much to the development of Wesleyan Methodism by his preaching and success at founding religious societies, it is also probable that he played an important role in the establishment of Methodist polity. Bennet’s influence in this area is such that it has been

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25 Letter by Bennet to John Wesley, written from Chinley, March 7, 1747.
26 April 13, 1749, Bennet diary. Cf. F. F. Bretherton, Early Methodism in and Around Chester (1903), 27.
27 Letter quoted by Everett, Historical Sketches, 27.
stated, not only was he “one of the architects of early Methodist connexion­
alism,”28 but he also “retained the confidence of Wesley as an administrator
of Methodism.”29 Research has yet to prove the part that Bennet played
in the introduction of the first annual conference in 1744. One fact beyond
dispute, however, is that his pen has provided the most detailed account
available of this meeting.

Bennet’s diary records how “the first Quarterly meeting in Lancashire”
was held “at Major Marshalls at Todmorden Edge on Tuesday 18th Oc­
tober, 1748,” while the first of such meetings in Cheshire took place “at
Robert Swindel’s in Woodley on Thursday October 20 at 11 o’clock.” It
can be assumed with much certainty that the Quarterly Meeting was in­
roduced by Bennet, possibly because of Quaker influence. In the Con­
ference minutes for 1749 it was asked how the Assistants could gain a
knowledge of such meetings, and in response to the question, it was sug­
gested that Bennet should “send us up his plan,” and that he should “go
himself as soon as may be to Newcastle and Wednesbury and teach them
the nature and methods of these meetings.”30

Realizing the importance of the Quarterly Meeting in establishing
Methodism as a “connexion” rather than a number of loosely associated
congregations, Bennet wrote to Wesley, pleading with him: “Oh! dear Sr,
Let this method be used in other places.”31 It would appear that Wesley
encouraged Bennet to establish Quarterly Meetings at other locations in
his round, for during the following year similar meetings were held at
Woodley, Leeds, and Birstal.32

Despite his general usefulness to Methodism, by 1749 a deep rift had
developed between Bennet and the leader of the Methodist movement
which ultimately led to the former’s secession from the Wesleyan fold.
The reasons for this separation were as follows. Following the emotional
furor arising from the Grace Murray incident, Bennet believed, rightly
or wrongly, that he had “run the gauntlet of bitter invective” from the
mouth of John Wesley, who, it was argued, indulged in “blackening other
mens’ characters to exalt his own.”33 Theology was another factor
separating the two men, for not only had Bennet changed his soteriological
stance and become an acolyte of Calvin, but they also differed “res­
pecting the righteousness of Christ being imputed to believers as the only

30 Taken from the Appendix of the 1862 edition of the Minutes for 1749.
31 Letter by Bennet to John Wesley, from Chinley, October 22, 1748.
32 Leeds, May 1, 1749, and Birstal, May 4, 1749. Bennet’s diary.
33 The words of Elizabeth Whitefield in a letter to John Bennet, written from London,
November 21, 1751.
ground of their justification before God." These factors, and the incident relating to the Bolton Trust Deeds, led Bennet to leave Methodism and work as an Independent Minister until his death, at the age of forty-five, in 1759.

How is the life of Bennet to be assessed? As can be seen from the above survey of his activities, Bennet from 1743 to 1752 was one of the veritable army of lay preachers who served John Wesley as "sons in the gospel." Even those who fail to acknowledge his worth because of denominational bias have described him as "a man of character, education and energy." However, if we are to be true to the source material available, then we must recognize Bennet as one of the leading pioneer preachers at Wesley's disposal for, as Everett states, "few men were more useful in the early stages of Methodism than he." In his own words, Bennet was a "servant of Jesus Christ in the Worke of the Gospel."

34 The words of W. Bennet, Memoirs of Grace Bennet (Macclesfield, 1803), 12. Bennet stated in a letter to Rev. J. Baddiley of Heyfield in 1753 that the teaching relating to "man's original impotency, and inability to spiritual good; Eternal Election, Predestination" were "doctrines that are fundamental" to the Christian faith. He vehemently affirmed his acceptance of the doctrines which had been "owned, asserted, vindicated" by "Archbishops, Bishops, Professors of Divinity and" all those "whose works were founded on the Calvinian Bottom." Letter to Baddiley, August 13, 1753, letterbook.
35 A trust deed had been created for the meeting house at Acresfield, Bolton, which empowered Wesley and Grimshaw with the right to appoint preachers solely at their discretion. Bennet accused Wesley of trying to make the meeting house his own. Cf. Bennet's diary, April 1, 1752.
37 J. Everett, Historical Sketches of Methodism in Sheffield (1828), 40.
38 The title of a sermon by Bennet on "The Saints Perserverance Manifested and Proved from the Word of God," 1756.