JOHN WESLEY: FIELD PREACHER

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Whilst not exactly abounding, the number of sites in the British Isles which by their name denote the once vibrant presence and proclamation of the Gospel by John Wesley, reveal far more than just a folk memory that a great and good man came that way. Over the primitive roads of the eighteenth century other great men passed, but apart from the historical record, none seem to have the same place name tribute that was accorded to the great evangelist. 'Wesley Steps,' 'Wesley Stones,' 'Wesley Field,' 'Wesley Oak,' 'Wesley Tree,' 'Wesley Place,' 'Wesley Lane,' 'Wesley Cross'; and other identifiable locations, on maps or in local tradition, out-name even his towering contemporaries. They are all held together by a common factor. They are exposed to the skies. They tell us what the man was about. John Wesley was a field preacher, and that activity changed the name of the topography of many towns and villages.

Wesley travelled at least 250,000 miles in his lifetime and preached between 40,000 and 45,000 sermons.1 If 'the vast majority of these sermons were preached out of doors,'2 we should not let this anniversary pass from us without examining the major factors of that ministry which was for him the most difficult and the most necessary.3 He needed no apology for his God-empowered service, but ten years before his death he set down the compulsion behind all that toil, trouble, and triumph over those years:

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 therein, making a way for myriads 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.4

"Being Thus Excluded from the Churches"—His Reasons

It is important to grasp something of the pre-history of the events which led John Wesley into the highways. George Whitefield was the

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2 McGonigle, 138.
3 1989 being the two hundred and fiftieth year since John Wesley commenced this ministry.
catalyst and human instrument. He it was who challenged and invited Wesley to enter a most unwelcome and unattractive ministry. The 'Great Awakener' had been in Bristol for several weeks early in 1739. There was no welcome in the churches and the Chancellor of the diocese forbade him the use of any consecrated Anglican building pending the Bishop's ultimate ruling. Frustrated, but with fiery zeal, he preached first in Newgate prison, and then to those most forlorn of creatures, the colliers of Kingswood. Their living conditions were utterly loathsome and spiritual nurture non-existent. Moved with deep compassion he climbed Kingswood hill on Saturday afternoon, February 17, 1739, and preached with his usual power to about two hundred pit-men. His Journal testifies:

Blessed be God that I have broken the ice! I believe that I was never more acceptable to my Master than when I was standing to teach those hearers in the open fields.5

If Whitefield's feet made haste with the Gospel, they were always exceedingly itchy. Other worlds called and America needed him. Prayer, providence, or plan caused him thus to write to Wesley: "I am but a novice; you are acquainted with the great things of God. Come, I beseech you; come quickly."6

Wesley had excellent reasons to refuse the flattery-strewn invitation. He had never considered such extraordinary work, and London demanded him. Thus his immediate reaction was highly negative: "I had no thought of leaving London, when I received after several others, a letter from Mr. Whitefield, and another from Mr. Seward, entreating me . . . to come to Bristol without delay. This I was not at all forward to do."7 He prayed much and took counsel with brother Charles. There was no encouragement there, far from it, for it was altogether too unseemly. The burden remained, and eventually it was settled by the drawing of a sacred lot within the Fetter Lane Society. How amazing that the stroke which determined one of the most decisive actions in British Christian history was an act of fortuitous chance. Or was it?

Reaching Bristol on Saturday, March 31, he straight away heard Whitefield at the Weaver's Hall.8 The next day he joined Whitefield without

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7The Journal of John Wesley (London, 1909–1916, etc.) N. Curnock, editor. Vol. II, 156. Cited hereafter as Journal. There is a strong tradition that Seward was the first Methodist martyr. He died on October 22, 1740, as a result of injuries said to be caused by a mob at Hay-on-Wye. He was thirty-five. More recent research has, however, raised questions on the exact cause of his death. Cf. "The Death of William Seward at Hay . . .", Proceedings, Wesley Historical Society; XXXIX, No. 1. Feb., 1973. He had stood with Wesley, Whitefield, and Howell Harris. Harris it was who had stimulated Whitefield to work in the open air.
8Journal, II, 167. (March 31, 1739).
participating, at the Bowling Green, Rose Green, and on Hanham Mount. Wesley was traumatized. All his established and entrenched principles of church order and discipline were stood on end. There was so much still within him that was appalled by such scenes. But the John Wesley of the 24th of May was pulled, and that crisis equipped him for this ultra-radical challenge. He wrote:

I could scarce reconcile myself at first to this strange way of preaching in the fields . . . 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.10

A. S. Wood gets to the heart of Wesley's dilemma:

He endured it only because God had called him to adopt such a means . . . There is something ironical that such a man as Wesley should expose himself . . . Nor did he shrink from the uncouth mob . . . with filth and foul odours, and often heckling and violence . . . a dapper little don . . . finical about his appearance . . . as neat as a tailor's model . . . he could not bear a speck of dirt. He hated noise and disturbance. That he should venture . . . and face the great unwashed was nothing short of a miracle. Only grace could have turned John Wesley into a missioner to the common people.11

Wesley was no Whitefield. The Gloucester man was dramatic with conscious and unconscious skills in crowd-moving control. He could sway people by uttering the word “Mesopotamia!” Crowds were deeply affected by Wesley, but by his words rather than his manner of utterance, by his appearance rather than any style. He cultivated no acting method. He was deeply hurt by charges of being a mountebank. “Wesley was no extrovert. It must have cost him more than we can imagine.”12

Whitefield had paid a heavy price. The self-righteous bigots, clerical and lay, saw him, he said, as “. . . venting his enthusiastic ravings in a gown and cassock upon a common . . . But if this is to be vile, Lord grant that I may be more vile.”13 With Paul, the two warriors were now as the “filth of the world.” “It was an Apostolic army of old contemptibles that Wesley joined when he left the churches for the open air.”14 Before entering Bristol he wrote to former ‘Holy Club’ member James Hervey, exclaiming: “Blessed be God, I enjoy the reproach of Christ! Oh may you also be vile, exceeding vile, for His sake! God forbid that you should ever be other than generally scandalous: . . . If any man tell you there is a new way of following Christ, he is a liar, and the truth is not in

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10 Ibid., II, 167.
12 Ibid.
him."  

From the perspective of 1745 he wrote his *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, insisting that he only turned to the fields when the doors of the churches were closed. "There was no scheme at all previously formed, . . . nor had I any other end in view than this—to save as many souls as I could." It was therefore "a sudden expedient, a thing submitted to rather than chosen . . . preaching thus better than not preaching at all." In Whitefield style he said, "Behold the amazing love of God to the outcasts of men! His tender condescension to their folly! They would regard nothing done in the ordinary way. All this was lost upon them. The ordinary preaching of the Word of God they would not even deign to hear."  

He stood on profound history as well as apostolic authority. But for a man who tried to swamp the land with cheap abridgements of so many worthy precursors, he interestingly rarely if ever turned to them for his armor. The critics' claim that it was absolute innovation was a major error. This had been the very means of introducing the faith into Britain. Ethelbert of Kent received Augustine beneath the sky. Paulinus and Aidan had used this means in the north. Bede's account of Aidan is almost Wesleyan: "to traverse both town and country . . . inviting to embrace the mystery of the faith." Those 'religious roundsmen' of the thirteenth century, the itinerant friars, had restored field preaching. The Lollards had also taken on this mantle. Field preaching had an honoured place in the English Reformation, had been upheld by the Scottish Covenanters, and had brought to birth the Quaker movement.  

But he could have utilized a far more personal tradition. Perhaps he was aware of this insight when he said to Adam Clarke: "If I were to write my own life I should begin it before I was born." Maldwyn Edwards shrewdly recognizes this: "What thrust him out on these ceaseless journeys? . . . one could say 'it was in his blood.'" It is possible that his great-grandfather, Bartholomew Westley, preached in the field after his ejection from Allington in 1662. Joining the despised nonconformists, he probably knew the secret open-air conventicles. The likelihood that his son, John Westley, preached in the field is even stronger. A favourite  

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20Wood, 108.  
student of John Owen, he studied oriental languages and divinity at Oxford. His contemporaries included such burning lights as John Goodwin, John Howe, Philip Henry, Stephen Charnock, and Joseph Alleine. John Wesley was well aware of the family history and shared his knowledge with Charles in 1768. John Westley was imprisoned for his refusal to use the prayer book, and was a worthy opponent of Archbishop Laud and all things Arminian. Calamy records an interview he had with Gilbert Ironside, Bishop of Bristol. John Wesley possessed a written account and printed it in full in the *Journal*. John Westley majors on those very issues which were to be so crucial in his grandsons' ministry: ministry and ordination, order and authority. Westley's burden is on the evidence of signs and fruits as the proof of gospel preaching and apostolic practice, rather than episcopal ecclesiastical authority. John Wesley needed his grandfather. Westley had been a haunted and hunted man, preaching wherever his people would gather.

Now in 1739 John stood where his worthy forebear had made his stand:

Monday, 2nd April, 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 a ground adjoining to the city, to about three thousand people. The scripture on which I spoke was this... 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He hath annointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He hath sent me to heal the broken-hearted; to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind; to set at liberty them that are bruised, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.' The lines were drawn and the Rubicon crossed. This was the introduction of "A new era in the religious history of England; for her greatest religious leader between Cromwell and Newman had found his way to the hearts of her people."

"I Offered Them Christ"—His Content

For the next fifty-one years and six months, when finally at eighty-seven he uttered his last open-air word, the tramp preacher laboured on. The texts changed, but the theme of reconciling costly love never did. His last sermon was delivered under an ash tree in Winchelsea in Sussex in 1790.

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24 Letters, V, 76. (To Charles Wesley, January 15, 1768).
26 Journal, II, 172–173 (April 2, 1739). The scene was a brick yard.
"The road . . . from Bristol in 1739 to Winchelsea in 1790 was marked by undimmed vision, undaunted courage and the unfailing blessing and power of God." 29 Whilst the zeal never abated, he never really felt at home in the open air. That little hill outside a city wall in 1739, and a thousand hillsides after, was an eternal cross to him. He knew so many calvaries. "In the awe . . . with which we look on that open air revival, we may forget that the man who went unwillingly to Aldersgate Street went even more unwillingly to the work of saving others." 30

Were the themes he employed the same or different to those he proclaimed in the preaching houses? The subjects did not greatly differ. The same essential message of salvation and the ordering of the Christian life was applied. Again, we have to ask whether he allowed for a greater simplicity, or employed a wider range of illustrative material when confronted with the ignorant and unwashed? Certainly he did not deliver messages as in their published form. But we may doubt very much whether they were offered in that form even to the convinced and converted.

The Large Minutes 31 were a compilation of the plan of discipline of the societies during Wesley's lifetime, the last revision being in 1789. Herein we have the content of his expectations:

Q.7. Is field-preaching unlawful?
   A. We conceive not. We do not know that it is contrary to any law either of God or man.

Q.8. Have we not used it too sparingly?
   A. It seems we have: (1.) Because our call is, to save that which is lost. Now, we cannot expect them to seek us. Therefore we should go and seek them. (2.) Because we are particularly called, by "going into the highways and hedges," which none else will do, "to compel them to come in." (3.) Because that reason against it is not good. "The house will hold all that come." The house may hold all that come to the house; but not all that would come to the field.

The greatest hindrance to this, you are to expect from the rich, or cowardly, or lazy Methodists . . . go out in God's name into the most public places . . .

Shall we barter our souls for money?

The purpose is clear: "to save that which is lost . . . to compel them to come in." Already there is evidence of some Methodists turning away from the fire. Again he drives it home:

Q.36. What is the best general method of preaching?

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29 McGonigle, 138.
30 Reginald Kissack, "Two Hundred Years of Methodist Field Preaching," The London Quarterly & Holborn Review, April, 1939, 146.
31 Works, VII, 299-338.
A. (1.) To invite. (2.) To convince. (3.) To offer Christ. (4.) to build up; and to do this . . . in every sermon.\(^\text{32}\)

Miserably field preaching so declined in the settled connection that less than twenty years after the *Large Minutes*, the open-air work of a considerable number of North Staffordshire Methodists led to their being read out of the societies. They united under William Clowes and Hugh Bourne to create the Primitive Methodists.

What was the essential marrow of Wesley's preaching? “His was true biblical preaching . . . . As an evangelist, he knew that his main task was to persuade men . . . . The appeal had to be pressed home in a personal manner, so that every hearer was left feeling that the protective covering of neutrality and indifference had been stripped off . . . . the decisive moment had arrived. In other words Wesley's preaching possessed an existential quality.”\(^\text{33}\) In his sadness at what he considered to be inadequate preaching, we can measure his own strengths. On hearing a Presbyterian sermon in Aberdeen, he observed: “I heard many excellent truths delivered in the kirk; but, as there was no application, it was likely to do as much good as the singing of a lark.”\(^\text{34}\) His own purpose is abundantly clear as any sampling of the *Journal* will show. “I applied the words closely”; “I closed the weighty question.” He was always careful to accept God's sovereignty in every part of the word offered. “The Spirit applied the Word”; “God make the application”; “The Word of the Lord prevailed.” “I there offered Christ,”\(^\text{35}\) was his entire purpose. A. S. Wood has found the following expressions as the most common in asserting this purpose: “I offered the grace of God”; “I offered the redemption that is in Christ Jesus”; “I proclaimed the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ”; “I proclaimed the name of the Lord”; “I proclaimed Christ crucified”; “I proclaimed free salvation”; “I declared to them all 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.”\(^\text{36}\)

Any attempt to assess John Wesley without placing at the masthead his unique calling as an evangelist-preacher may grant him high honour but will not probe the real purpose of the man.

The five series of sermons published in his name cover a vast ground.\(^\text{37}\) The first and major corpus are all based on the fundamental foundational beliefs of the Christian faith. They are basic Bible enthused with fire.

\(^{32}\) *Works*, VIII, 300–301, 317.

\(^{33}\) Wood, 157.

\(^{34}\) *Journal*, VI, 239 (June 13, 1779).


\(^{36}\) Wood, 51, for full *Journal* entries.

Doughty says: "... there is nothing about them that is peculiar to Methodism. ... Methodism has no esoteric doctrines that distinguish it from every other Christian Communion."\(^{38}\) Candidly this will not serve. Accepting that these sermons are biblical truth laced with experience, there are "distinctives" or "our doctrines" which whilst certainly not esoteric, cannot be said to be bland enough to be acceptable to all Christian expressions. Entire sanctification or perfect love, found no support even amongst the vast majority of non-Wesleyan evangelicals, and to this day remains a stone of stumbling to many. Likewise, his views on the witness of the spirit, inseparable in the Wesleyan structure from his declarations on salvation and sanctification, have had little or no acceptance from huge sections of Christendom.

His messages are set forth under the general headings of scriptural, doctrinal and experiential. There are the expected bulwarks: salvation by faith, under justification by faith, the forgiveness of sins, the necessity of the new birth, and the fullness of regeneration. Secondly, the joy of believing and the Christian's walk of faith operative through the witness of the spirit. Whilst perfect love was the "Great Depositum," John Wesley saw the witness of the spirit (far more than popularly understood "assurance") as the most needful preaching priority. "The inward witness, son, the inward witness! That is the proof, the strongest proof of Christianity."\(^{39}\)

Perfect love, or the less happily named Christian perfection, was a constant theme. This was love excluding all known deliberate sin. In Wesley it is deeply Christological, whereas his later followers often only expressed it in climactic pneumatological terms. Others sought to displace Wesley's process-crisis-process teaching with progressive work only. Sadly 'Wesleyans' have often divided on un-Wesleyan polarities.

He expounds the Trinity, the person and work of Christ, the final coming and the wonder of heaven and terrors of hell. We may question the place these topics had in the open air. We can only describe the last major group of sermons as miscellaneous. They are generally concerned with "going on with Christ" and the building up of believers in the disciplines of faith. He preached (and constantly) a series of thirteen messages on the Sermon on the Mount. Richard Green is right: "... perhaps the most beautiful examples of ethical teaching Wesley ever penned, and the best reply to the charge that Methodism had no ethical message."\(^{40}\)

In the 1745 Conference a question was posed which he probably raised: "Do we preach as we did at first? Have we not changed our doctrines?" The answer came:

\(^{40}\)Richard Green, John Wesley Evangelist (London, 1905), 314.
At first we preached almost wholly to unbelievers. To those, therefore, we spake almost continually of remission of sins through the blood of Christ, and the nature of faith in His blood. And so we do still, among those who need to be taught the first elements of the Gospel of Christ. But those in whom the foundation is laid, we exhort to go on to perfection.  

Again, the Large Minutes of 1789 put the distinction in bolder type:

Q.38. Have not some of us been led off from practical preaching by what is called preaching Christ?
A. Indeed we have. 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 unbelievers. Let us strongly and closely insist upon inward and outward holiness, in all its branches.

Now we have a new note. Unbelievers need the law and the gospel. He preached on the use of time, sleep, dress, smuggling, health and diet, marriage, family religion, “friendship with the world,” the use of money, the danger of riches, spiritual idolatry, courtesy, “on pleasing all men,” temperance, political matters, and on how to make a will! Practical divinity indeed.

“I Preached”—His Style and Language

The open fields demand a style, method, language and most certainly volume, not asked of the sanctuary preacher. Whilst he was laid low from time to time, the utter man-killing nature of his ministry, sustained for so very long, shows the power of his voice and strength of physical constitution. He hated cancelling an engagement no matter how foul the elements. Assuredly he was no ranter, and we are rightly amazed as to how he was heard above it all. He encountered mighty throngs, and often faced outrageously loutish behavior, even to the point of death-defying moments. Many questions about his open-air work are far from original, but we are not sure that to this day they can be satisfactorily answered. How was he heard? Did indeed all hear? Were the reported vast crowds factual or guess-work? Did Wesley count feet?

Donald Soper, amongst others, seriously questions total crowds. “The crowds to whom Wesley preached (and in terms of numbers asserted in the Journal it is prudent to divide by three at least to get anywhere near the size of his audiences) were largely uneducated. . . .” A division by three is just snatching out of the air. Why not by half or by six? Notwithstanding doubts, we are sure that Wesley could count, and stewards were always on hand to help direct and count the crowds. Lord Soper

\footnote{Works, VIII, 283–284 (Minutes, 1745).}
\footnote{Ibid., 318.}
is surely right from his own very special perspective as an open-air preacher, when he declares: "Ultimately, John Wesley in the open air was a phenomenon. He appeared, and his appearance was invested with psychological (or I would want to put it, spiritual) dynamism, and impression that defies analysis." Soper continues:

There must have been modifications in the manner of delivery, and the interruptions which made the flow of his speaking often spasmodic rather than continuous. The evidence such as it is, and it is tantalizingly little, is that he offered Christ to the crowd and set that offer within the framework of a conversion experience open to all who would repent of their sins, and yield themselves to the everlasting mercy of God. The emphasis was moral; what evidence he advanced was the word of God as infallibly expressed in the Bible. He called for immediate decision and couched that call in the language of his brother's hymns.

One might of course challenge Donald Soper as to whether we do have such little evidence of the nature of the proclamation.

"His delivery was destitute of the arts of oratory or elocution. His action calm, and voice natural, not loud, and clear and manly; style neat, simple, perspicuous." His statements, "like light, travel on straight lines, and have an instinctive perception of their goal. They never stray, never falter, never miss the mark." "He knew the secret of that purely Christian eloquence, whose only law is sympathy, that speaks to people, not sternly as a prophet, but with the tenderness of a fellow-bondsman, who does not separate his lot from their." But what of those who actually heard him? Apart from those who were moved by the gospel offer and obviously offered glowing testimonies of his grace and power, and those who loathed and mocked all his works; neutral reporters are remarkably few in number. "When he came to what he called his plain, practical conclusion," says Dr. Kennicott, a twenty-four-year-old graduate of Wadham College,

... he fired his address with so much zeal and unbounded satire as quite spoiled what otherwise might have been turned to great advantage: for, as I liked some, so I disliked other parts extremely. I liked some of his freedom... but he concluded with words full of presumption. Had these things been omitted, and his censures moderated, I think his discourse as to style and delivery, would have been uncommonly pleasing to others as well as to myself.

Professor J. H. Liden of Usala, visiting England in 1769, met with John and Charles. Attending a church service he reflected:

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44 Soper, John Wesley: Contemporary Perspectives, 185.
45 Ibid.
46 Thomas Dodd, John Wesley (Cincinnati, 1891), 44; cited by Killian, 8.
47 Joseph Dawson, John Wesley on Preaching (London, 1904), 12.
48 Ibid., 17.
The sermon was short but eminently evangelical. He had no great oratorical gifts, no outward appearance, but he speaks clear and pleasant. . . . He is small, a thin old man, with his own long and straight hair, and 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. His talk is very agreeable, and his mild face and pious manner secure him the love of all rightminded men. . . . He seems to me as a living representative of the loving Apostle John.  

Things that Liden did not see in Wesley, another witness, John Nelson, himself to be so greatly used later in the revival, did, and was made to glow:

... 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, and 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. . . . I said, 'This man can tell the secrets of my heart: he hath not left me there; for he hath showed the remedy, even the blood of Jesus.'

This was in Upper Moorfields on June 17, 1739, just two months into his field ministry. Nelson also relates the testimony of a soldier that he heard in Westminster. The man had been exceedingly wicked, but testified:

I did not put any restraint on any lust or appetite; till one day I was coming out of the country by Kennington Common. Mr. John Wesley was going to preach and I thought I could hear what he had to say; for I had heard many learned and wise men say he was beside himself. But when he began to speak, his words made me tremble, I thought he spoke to no one but me, and I durst not look up; for I imagined that all the people were looking at me. Mr. Wesley cried out, 'Let the wicked forsake his way . . . and let him return to the Lord' . . . I immediately went home and began to read and pray.

He then speaks of backsliding but returning to a glorious victory experience under the ministry of Charles Wesley. Thomas Rutherford emphasizes how the appearance and charm of Wesley deeply affected him,

In May 1770, for the first time I heard that extraordinary man at Morpeth. . . . His apostolic and angelic appearance struck me exceedingly . . . like one come down from heaven to teach men the way thither. He opened in a concise and easy manner, . . . and spoke with much simplicity, and at the same time, with such wisdom and authority, as I never heard before. To me he seemed like one of the apostles . . . confirming the churches.

Horace Walpole listened to Wesley in Lady Huntingdon's chapel in Bath on October 5, 1766. He was no great judge of things spiritual, but his comments as a very considerable man of affairs help us with the picture:

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52 Ibid., 10ff.
53 Wesleyan Methodist Magazine, 1808, 437.
I have been to one opera, Mr. Wesley’s. They have boys and girls with charming voices, that sing hymns . . . to Scotch ballad tunes . . . Wesley is a lean, elderly man, fresh-coloured, his hair is smoothly combed, but with a curl at the ends. Wondrous clean, but as evidently an actor as Garrick. He spoke . . . so fast and with so little accent, that I am sure he had often uttered it, for it was like a lesson. There were parts and eloquence in it, but he . . . exalted his voice and acted very ugly enthusiasm; decried learning and told stories. Except a few from curiosity, and some honourable women, the congregation was very mean. 54

Doughty is right: “With few exceptions, contemporary references to Wesley’s preaching are by men and women who never moved beau monde of the age, but who found . . . what Horace Walpole and those like him missed, and all life was for them miraculously and superbly different thereafter.” 55

His sermon construction was always distinctive and clear, largely employing the introduction and three main point system still beloved by many today. He would then subdivide until on occasions the framework which began so clearly, turns into the impression of heaviness. The plan so obvious in the published sermons was not always so clear in the heat of actual delivery. On April 28, 1774, he opened the new preaching house at Wakefield and that sermon was taken down in a shorthand form. Curnock was not too impressed with the verbatim version: “. . . it does not help us to account for the preacher’s popularity.” 56

Many of the sermons were preached over and over again. The outlines as now published must have held some sway but not by any means the proclaimed form. There can be no doubt that he employed a homely rather than homiletic style, and that the phraseology, and ever so reasoned paragraphs gave way to a more down to earth pattern. Indeed, “. . . to a more colloquial style; . . . an exposition and illustrations that the ordinary man . . . could readily understand.” 57 The great Samuel Johnson well understood the success of the Methodist preaching:

Owing to their expressing themselves in a plain and familiar manner, which is the only way to do good to the common people, and which clergymen of genius and learning ought to do from a principle duty, when it is suited to their congregations. 58

Wesley would stand by that:

I dare no more write in a fine style than wear a fine coat . . . were it otherwise, had I time to spare, I should still write just as I do. I should decline . . . a highly ornamental style. . . . Only let his (the preacher) language be plain, proper and clear.

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55 Doughty, 127.
56 Ibid., 138.
57 Ibid., 139.
and it is enough. God himself has told us how to speak, both as to the matter and the manner: 'If any man speak,' in the name of God, 'let him speak as the oracles of God;' and if he would imitate any part above the rest, let it be the First Epistle of St. John. This is the style... for every gospel preacher. And let him aim at no more ornament than he finds in that sentence, which is the sum of the whole gospel, 'We love Him, because He first loved us.'

In 1764 he had not changed:

... because we are to instruct people of the lowest understanding... we, above all, if we think with the wise, yet must speak with the vulgar. We should constantly use the most common, little, easy words which our language affords. When I had been a member of the University about ten years, I wrote and talked much as you do now. But when I talked to plain people... in the town, I observed they gaped or stared. They quickly obliged me to alter my style and adopt the language of those I spoke to. And yet there is dignity in this simplicity, which is not disagreeable to those of the highest rank... never designedly use a hard word. Use all the sense, learning and fire you have; forgetting yourself and remembering only these are the souls for whom Christ died.

In the Preface to the Sermons published in 1746, the same principles appear for the world to read:

The following sermons contain the substance of what I have preached for between eight or nine years. ... Nothing appears here in an elaborate, elegant or oratorical dress... I now write as I generally speak, ad populum — to the bulk of mankind... I labour to avoid all words which are not easy to be understood, all which are not used in common life; and, in particular, those kinds of technical terms that so frequently occur in Bodies of Divinity... to common people an unknown tongue. Yet I am not assured that I do not sometimes slide into them unawares: it is so extremely natural to imagine that a word... familiar to ourselves is to all the world...

Ultimately, when all has been said about his style and content, we disregard at our peril the great and mysterious factor which penetrated his words and provided that unction that had nothing whatsoever to do with correctness of word or stance. It was the Holy Spirit. Wesley was the used one, and his attitudes only assisted.

“So Many Living Witnesses”—The Results

The outdoors had called him as the churches rejected him. 1739 marked the turning to the outside world with all its despair. Now he wrapped himself around his brother’s words: “Esteem the scandal of the Cross and only seek Divine applause.”

Once convinced of its value, field preaching held all the priorities. Tyerman calculated that of five hundred sermons preached between April

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60 Letters, IV, 256–258 (to Samuel Furly).

61 Wesley’s Hymns (Collection of Hymns for the Use of People Called Methodists). In all nineteenth-century editions, No. 483, verse 4, lines 5 and 6.
and December, 1739, only eight were in churches. In June that first year's
crowds reached seven thousand at the Bowling Green and Ross Hill in
Bristol, and standing with Whitefield at Blackheath, they were confronted
with fourteen thousand people. With increasing age there was no diminishing of enthusiasm. He was
converted in 1756 that: "It is field preaching which does the execution still,
for usefulness there is none comparable to it." It was God's way in a new and onward awakening dispensation of
reaching the last, the least, and the lowest of all. There was no other way,
and the Lord had chosen and anointed his man.

The industrial revolution paid no attention to parish boundaries ... the mine ignored
the parson ... there were scores of industrial villages and suburbs ... without any
church or priest. Ignorance of the most elementary facts of the Christian religion was
astonishingly widespread. Only a fundamental constitutional reform of the Established
Church could have coped ... such reform was unthinkable. Dissent, too, failed to
realize its opportunities ... the old non-conformist churches were moribund. It was
left to Wesley and his disciples to reap the harvest of neglected souls.

As zealous as ever, he witnessed the greatest crowd on record at
Moorfields on August 25, 1773, He was sure that all heard clearly, includ­ing
those on the edge of great throng. "So the season for field preaching
is not yet over. It cannot, while so many are in their sins and in their
blood." Constantly the preachers were pressed to go out and do likewise.
"Preach abroad ... It is the cooping yourselves up in rooms that has
damped the work of God, which never was and never will be carried out
to any purpose without going out into the highways and hedges compelling
poor sinners to come in." There could be only one proof, one test, for the value of open-air
work. Critics notwithstanding, were there fruits in lives changed?

A vast majority of the congregation in Moorfields were deeply serious. One such hour
might convince any impartial man of the expediency of field preaching. What building,
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. And who can
say that the time of field preaching is over, while (1.) greater numbers than ever attend;
(2.) the converting as well as the convincing power of God is eminently present with
them.

Attempts to claim field preaching to be all rank enthusiasm and high
indecency received short shrift.

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62 Tyerman, Life of Wesley, I, 234. The Diaries support Tyerman.
63 Journal, II, 220 (June 14, 1739).
64 Ibid., IV, 188 (October 10, 1756).
67 Ibid., V, 132. (June 18, 1765) (To James Rea).
68 Ibid., IV, 354, (October 23, 1759).
I wonder at those who still talk so loud of the indecency 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 of what the preacher says. On the other hand, there is the highest decency in a churchyard or a field, when the whole congregation behave and look as if they saw the judge of all, and heard Him speaking from heaven.69

Arguably Wesley's greatest defence of his activity lies in his correspondence with "John Smith." Whilst not entirely proven, it is highly likely that it was indeed, Thomas Secker, Bishop of Oxford, and later elevated to Canterbury. "Smith" challenged Wesley on his "preaching up and down and playing the part of an itinerant evangelist."70 The evangelist laid the situation bare:

I know God hath required this at my hands. To me, His blessing my work is an abundant proof; although such a proof often makes me tremble. But "is there not pride and vanity in the heart?" There is; yet this is not my motive to preaching. I know and feel that the spring of this is a deep conviction that it is the will of God.71

In September, 1772, he still insisted: "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."72

One of the vital converts, having been touched at Kingswood, expressed his bounding heart in verse form. In the Wesleyan Methodist Magazine he is simply described as a "poor man." If he was a miner, then he was quite a brand. Christ had given him a measure of culture as well as conversion:

Those dark, benighted slaves, alas! we find
Were to their dearest interests wholly blind.
How gross their ignorance! Their hearts how dark!
No ray of light was there—no heavenly spark.

But when a modern Druid did enquire,
How sad their fate: he strung his tuneful lyre;
Around his sounding lyre the miners throng,
Charmed with his voice, they blest him as he sang.

O happy day! O most stupendous birth!
In heaven was gladness, and good-will on earth.
The attentive wood was ravished as he sung,
While truths divine flowed sweetly from his tongue.
Victorious heavenly love, it all O'ercame,
Colliers looked mild and savages grew tame.
Renewed by Grace, enlightened by the word,
They now became true followers of the Lord.
They worshipped God, and lived in love and peace,
And daily found their happiness increase.73

70Letters, II, 77. (June 25, 1746).
71Ibid., 96-97.
72Journal, V, 484 (September 6, 1772).
73Wesleyan Methodist Magazine, 1803, 48.
“It was said of Napoleon that he could stamp soldiers out of mud. By his preaching Wesley surpassed this miracle. He fashioned saints out of slime.”

Amazing scenes sometimes took place during the open air work. They contained the elements of everything from mass hysteria, to a glory reminiscent of the day of Pentecost. Such is a typical example:

12 June 1742. (Epworth) while I was speaking several dropped down as dead, and among the rest such a cry was heard of sinners groaning for the righteousness of faith as almost drowned my voice. But many of these soon lift up their hearts with joy, and broke out into thanksgiving, being assured they now had the desire of their soul—the forgiveness of their sins.

Sydney G. Dimond helpfully summarizes this kind of phenomena:

In some instances the whole congregation is described as breaking forth into tears or cries or groaning, but, apart from these general statements, I have examined two hundred and thirty-four individual cases enumerated and reported during the years 1739-1746. . . . From the distribution of these peculiar phenomena it is apparent that they occurred largely among the more primitive . . . in the neighbourhood of Bristol and Kingswood, and at Gateshead Fell and Chowden, which Wesley characterizes as ‘the very Kingswood of the North.’

We must also remember that Charles Wesley, William Grimshaw, John Berridge and George Whitefield also encountered such charged situations. Wesley was perplexed, and quite unsure whether they were of God or the devil. The New Testament accounts of demon possession often came to his mind, but he never declared such to be the result of demonic bondage. He simply records them for what they are worth: “The fact I nakedly relate, and leave every man to his own judgment of it.” He realized that such happenings could lose him the sympathy of the “thinking classes,” many of whom increasingly no longer counted him amongst the charlatans. The parish church at Everton had seen amazing scenes during the earlier ministry of Berridge. Later, Wesley recorded:

None were now in trances, none cried out, none fell down or were convulsed; only some trembled exceedingly, a low murmur was heard, and many were refreshed with the multitude of peace. The danger was to regard . . . too much, outcries, convulsions, visions, trances; as if these were essential to the inward work. . . . Perhaps the danger is to regard them too little, to condemn them altogether; . . . that they had nothing of God in them. . . . 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.

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75 *Works*, I, 379.
77 *Journal*, II, 298.
78 *Works*, II, 519.
Thus, Wesley appears to accept that God was active in these events on mature reflection, and we should also note that in spite of attempts to show otherwise, “these special peculiarities” did not include tongues as currently understood. But what of the vast numbers of “normal” converts? One such is a beautiful testimony:

When he first came to Bristol I went to hear him preach; and, having heard him, I said, “This is the truth.” I inquired of those around, who and what he was. I was told that he was a man who went everywhere preaching the Gospel. I further inquired, “Is he going to preach here again?” The reply was, “Not at present.” “Where is he going to next?” I asked. “To Plymouth,” was the answer. “And will he preach there?” “Yes.” “Then I will go and hear him. What is the distance?” “One hundred and twenty-five miles.” I went, walked it, heard him and walked back again.79

This was a certain Dame Summerhill of Bristol, who at the age of one hundred and four, shared her story with Adam Clarke.

Wesley suffered great blows for his God-given audacity. Missiles came from family, friends, his enemies and the completely indifferent. His elder brother, Samuel, said he would rather see John and Charles, “picking straws within the walls than preaching in Moorfields.”80 He had drawn the sword and many were his victories. It was a challenge to the lazy clergy, supremely indolent in very many places. He could not let them get away with the charge that his work was not that of a gentleman and unbecoming of a priest.

For who is there among you, brethren, that is willing (examine your own hearts) even to save souls from death at such a price? Would you not let a thousand souls perish, rather than you would be the instruments of rescuing them thus? . . . 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 hoar frost like ashes? . . . Far beyond all these, are the contradiction of sinners, the scoff 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. Brethren, do you envy us this honour? What, I pray, would you buy to be a field preacher? Or what, think you, could induce any man of common sense to continue therein one year, unless he had a full conviction in himself that it was the will of God concerning him.81

There is a moving touch in this plea:

Do not increase the difficulties, which are already so great, that, without the mighty power of God, we must sink under them. Do not assist in trampling down a handful of little men, who, for the present, stand in the gap between ten thousand poor wretches and destruction, till you find some other to take their places.82

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80 Joseph Priestley, Original Letters by the Rev. John Wesley and His Friends (1791), 109. Letter of Samuel Wesley (Junior), to Susanna Wesley, October 20, 1739.
81 A Farther Appeal (1745), 230–231.
82 Ibid., 231.
The sudden and glorious self-disclosure in 1739 that John Wesley was a field preacher turned him from a somewhat boring introvert into a ceaselessly moving extrovert. He was the means of releasing a power in Britain, especially in its domestic life, as much as his kinsman, the Duke of Wellington, did in foreign affairs. Kissack cannot trace the origin, but vouches for the following piece of advice which Wesley himself, or more likely one of his veterans, gave to a timorous colleague about to face his baptism of fire:

"The majority of any crowd will be bad throwers, and so only a few will hit you with their missiles. And of those that do hit you, most will strike your legs or body, which are protected by your clothes. The only ones that can damage you will be the few that strike your face, and most of these will be soft. And I have never received more damage from heavy or jagged missiles, than what a day or two in bed has easily repaired."\(^{83}\)

"If it is true to say that Methodism was born in song, it was certainly bred in the open air."\(^{84}\) This was its particular early mark, its means of getting through to the hearts of people, the great and the good, the bad and the base, the clean and the filthy. Donald Soper is right: "The Methodist Revival could not have happened without the ingredient of field preaching as a vital constituent. The moral and spiritual revival which is the hope, indeed the requirement, of man's future on this planet requires a similar evangelical excursion into the open air today."\(^{85}\)

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\(^{83}\)Kissack, 152.

\(^{84}\)Soper, 183.

\(^{85}\)Ibid., 189