



DISCOVERY

Edited by
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Wesley on Important Issues

We are talking about Methodist issues, of course, touched upon by Wesley in this hitherto unpublished letter. Wesley, in writing to his itinerants, seldom commented on current political issues, but often on matters of the Methodist societies. I had the good fortune to hear of this unpublished letter through my agent in London. I relayed the news to my good friend Page Thomas, Director of the Center for Methodist Studies at Bridwell Library, Perkins School of Theology, Dallas. He arranged for the purchase of the letter which is now in the valuable collection of Wesley letters at Bridwell Library.

The letter itself is written by John Wesley to Jasper Winscomb who, after Wesley's death, was looked upon as a troublemaker rather than as a leading Methodist. He never rose beyond the role of Local Preacher. His letters from Wesley are important since they open up a field of subjects that Richard Heitzenrater, today's greatest Wesley scholar, analyzes with his usual penetrating insight. The Library has two other Winscomb letters. This letter and Dr. Heitzenrater's analysis follows:

John Wesley and Jasper Winscom on Itinerant Preaching

Jasper Winscom is not a familiar name among Methodists—his name is not found in most histories of Methodism. A friend of John Wesley and Francis Asbury, he was, however, the founder of Methodism in Winchester, and a longtime local preacher. For the last four years of Wesley's life, Winscom was a probationary member of the Conference, admitted on trial in 1788.

A small clutch of nineteen letters from John Wesley to this early Methodist preacher over a period of twenty-one years survives. The last let-

ter, the most recently discovered,¹ though very short, touches some issues that persisted throughout their correspondence.

Bristol, Sept. 7, 1790

Dear Jasper,

Last week I wrote to the Isle of Jersey that John Bredin should return to England and go into the Portsmouth Circuit. But if he *is* come, I should have no objection to his changing with you and going into the Oxford Circuit, provided he was able to keep the round.

I hope you do not neglect preaching in the morning. You should have told me before, of what you thought amiss in William Thom, that he might have been made sensible of it.

I am,

Your affectionate friend and brother.

J. Wesley

The issues evident here, in reverse order, are (1) the character and actions of the preachers; (2) the importance of early morning preaching; and (3) the nature of the itinerant system. These concerns often interrelate in the practical matters of the Methodist societies.

Jasper Winscom was a shopkeeper in Winchester.² In the mid-1760s, he invited Methodist preachers to the city after he had read some of John Wesley's writings that had been given to his wife. Within a year or so, four persons formed a class in Winchester, with Jasper as their leader. In 1765, when Wesley himself preached there, the group had grown to a dozen or so.³ Winscom, eventually a local preacher, became actively engaged in the development of Methodism in south central England. His correspondence with Wesley, beginning at least as early as 1769, reflects his concerns and activities.

Wesley's letters to Winscom point to the latter's special interest in the building of preaching houses and the appointment of itinerant preachers. In these endeavors, Jasper was more active and influential than one might expect of a local preacher. In the mid-1770s, Winscom displayed a special interest in the infancy of Methodist work on the Isle of Wight. When Wesley designated James Skinner, also a local preacher in Winchester,⁴ as the first missionary to the Isle of Wight in 1775, Winscom tried to change Skinner's appointment to Kent. Wesley reacted negatively to the suggestion, saying that such a move would interfere with the prospect of "having a fair trial in the Isle of Wight." Wesley, however, approved the rest of Winscom's proposed "method" for the Isle, including the procurement of a preaching house, and agreed to help with the expense.⁵

¹Unpublished letter, MS. at Bridwell Library, Southern Methodist University.

²He was either an ironmonger (John B. Dyson, *Methodism in the Isle of Wight* [Ventnor: Burth, 1865], p. 73) or a haberdasher (John Telford, *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley* [London: Epworth, 1931], 6:182).

³Dyson, pp. 72–73.

⁴Skinner was admitted on trial in 1776 (appointed to Cornwall West) and into full connection in 1777 (appointed to Sussex). He desisted from traveling in 1782.

⁵Letter, October 20, 1775; Telford, 6:183 (MS. at Bridwell Library, SMU).

Four years later, Winscom, still pressing Wesley on matters relating to the Isle of Wight, apparently asked for the appointment on the South Wiltshire circuit of a fifth full-time preacher who could spend most of his time on the Isle. Wesley's response was that "ours are *traveling* preachers; therefore, I can never consent that any of them should remain for a month together in the Island." If an additional preacher would have "full employment" otherwise throughout the circuit, Wesley agreed to "inquire where one can be found."⁶ The circuit, its name changed to "Salisbury" or "Sarum," continued to employ only four preachers, however, for a decade, even though the membership of the societies nearly doubled (from 301 in 1778 to 593 in 1787).

Wesley's concern for the "traveling" nature of the itinerancy and his growing irritation with Winscom's attitude toward this principle also appears in his response to Winscom in 1781: "But what shall we do with the Salisbury Circuit? I do not like it at all. It is all wrong. A Methodist preacher should never spend above two nights together at one place. And all the preachers should regularly follow each other through the whole circuit. Consider how this may be done, and send your plan to [me]."⁷ That Wesley would be negotiating at this level with a local preacher seems rather unusual. Winscom obviously felt a great deal of responsibility for the lack of success on the circuit,⁸ as evidenced by Wesley's words of consolation after the Conference of 1782: "That the work of God has not prospered in the Salisbury Circuit for several years is none of your fault. I am persuaded you have His work at heart, and will do all that is in your power to promote it."⁹

In 1787, the fourth preacher on the Sarum circuit, Thomas Warwick, was designated by Wesley as a missionary to the Isle of Wight. Winscom must have been displeased with the appointment, or at least with Warwick's activities on the Isle, and seems to have expressed his displeasure to Wesley. Wesley's response to Winscom, the informant, in March of 1788 is telling: "As soon as possible go to the isle and acquaint Thomas Warwick with what is laid to his charge. According to the spirit and manner wherein he receives it must our proceeding be. If you see reason to believe he is truly penitent, we may possible try him a little longer. But if he makes light of the matter and braves it out, I am afraid we must let him drop. Send word of all that occurs to [me]."¹⁰

Did Winscom see the opportunities opening for him at this point? One can only surmise what he might have communicated in May of 1788 to elicit the following response from Wesley: "It seems to me, the most proper Assistant for the Sarum Circuit (only do not talk of it yet) will be Jasper Winscom. I am

⁶Letter, January 14, 1779; Telford, 6:334.

⁷Letter, July 24, 1781; *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* 19 (1933): 68–69.

⁸Letter, August 10, 1782; Telford, 7:135–36 (MS at Bridwell Library, SMU). The membership on the circuit was 340 in 1773; it dropped to 301 in 1778 and had only grown back to 346 in 1781.

⁹Letter, August 10, 1782; Telford, 7:135–36 (MS. at Bridwell Library, SMU).

¹⁰Letter, March 6, 1778; Telford, 8:42.

convinced the person whom I had intended for it is not the proper person. It is exceeding well that the warning was given me before the Conference."¹¹ Had Jasper given the "warning," hoping to advance his own prospects? At the time of Wesley's remarkable letter, Winscom himself was a local preacher, his acceptance as a preacher "on trial" yet two months away. Wesley disappointed Jasper's hopes for an appointment as Assistant, however, when he named William Thom to that position for the Sarum circuit.¹² Wesley appointed Winscom as one of the preachers on the circuit, apparently to work with Thomas Allen on the Isle of Wight.

Winscom, however, continued to press his own agenda. In November of that year, Wesley once again found it necessary to respond to Winscom's attempts to alter the "traveling plan" of itinerancy: "No preacher ought to stay either at Portsmouth, or Sarum, or any other place a whole week together. That is not the Methodist plan at all. It is a novel abuse."¹³

The following year, Wesley designated the Isle of Wight as a separate circuit. In the *Minutes* of the Conference, Winscom was listed first, as the Assistant, with a new probationer, Henry Saunders, as the other preacher. Before the year was out, Winscom seems to have appealed to Wesley to divide the circuits in his region into smaller areas, a "novel" approach that he had long promoted. Wesley's response in March 1790 was unequivocal: "I am likewise in no haste to multiply preachers or to *divide circuits*. Most of our circuits are too small rather than too large. I wish we had no circuit with fewer than three preachers in it or less than four hundred miles' riding in four weeks. Certainly no circuit shall be divided before the Conference. If we do not take care we shall all degenerate into milksops. Soldiers of Christ, arise!"¹⁴

Winscom's life as an Assistant was short-lived. The limits of tenure in Wesley's version of the itinerant system had the predictable result. At the 1790 Conference the very next year, Wesley reconfigured the circuits in that region, but in a manner opposite from what Winscom had hoped. Rather than increasing preachers and dividing circuits, Wesley reduced the number of preachers on the Sarum circuit to two and combined the Isle of Wight with Portsmouth in a new circuit of that name. Although Wesley continued Henry Saunders in the latter, he appointed Winscom to be one of the three active preachers (but not the Assistant) sixty-five miles north in Oxfordshire. Apparently dragging his feet about moving, Jasper proposed an alternate plan directly to Wesley. He asked to stay on the Isle of Wight with Saunders or else

¹¹Letter, May 28, 1788; Telford, 8:61.

¹²William Thom had been admitted into full connection in 1775, had been appointed Assistant at Whitehaven in 1780, and had been named an official member of Conference ("the Legal Hundred") by the *Deed of Declaration* in 1784. He is listed in the *Minutes* as Assistant at Sarum in both 1788 and 1789.

¹³Letter, November 8, 1788; Telford, 8:104.

¹⁴Letter, March 13, 1790; Telford, 8:206. Winscom had begun lobbying for division of the circuits as early as July 1788, before he was admitted on trial or appointed to a circuit.

to shift only slightly to the Sarum circuit as an additional preacher, to prevent a reduction on that circuit. Wesley's exasperation with Jasper is evident in his response of August 1790: "I do not see how you can be spared from your own circuit [Oxfordshire] till another is procured to take your place. Neither do I conceive how Sarum circuit can bear the expense of another preacher. I am well nigh tired of it. I have had more trouble with this circuit than with ten circuits besides."¹⁵

Nevertheless, Wesley seems to have partially succumbed to the pressure from Winscom. In less than a month, he wrote the letter of September 7, 1790 (see above), announcing that John Bredin¹⁶ had been recalled from the Isle of Jersey and appointed to the Portsmouth Circuit. Presuming that Bredin is able to move, though his health had been poor,¹⁷ Wesley gives Winscom permission to trade places with him in Portsmouth, provided Bredin "is able to keep the round," that is, travel the Oxfordshire circuit. Wesley also wanted to make sure that Winscom, given his history of lax discipline, was living up to the expectations of a traveling preacher. Wesley must have heard that Winscom was not as rigorous as might be hoped in the matter of preaching every morning at 5:00 a.m., since he specifically charges Winscom not to "neglect preaching in the morning."¹⁸ Winscom's plan for a trade to a more suitable assignment seems not to have succeeded in the end, however, since the next Conference finds him still on the Oxfordshire circuit (see below) and Bredin has joined the ranks of the "tired and worn-out" preachers.¹⁹

In the meantime, Winscom had apparently crossed swords with William Thom, the Assistant of the Sarum circuit, and angered Wesley also, over the finances of the preaching house at Winchester,²⁰ a town with which Winscom seems to have had continuing interests and ties.²¹ Winscom had helped procure the property for the preaching house in 1785,²² and had successfully

¹⁵Letter, August 28, 1790; Telford, 8:236.

¹⁶John Bredin was admitted on trial in 1769 and into full connection in 1771; in 1790 he was serving on the Isle of Jersey.

¹⁷See Wesley's letters to him, November 16, 1785, suggesting that he "must not expect much health on this side the grave," and June 1, 1789, suggesting medical remedies for his condition; Telford, 7:300, 8:139.

¹⁸Wesley calls preaching at five in the morning "one of the most healthy exercises in the world" (June 28, 1774), and felt very strongly that if Methodists did not attend such services, it was a sign that "they have lost their zeal; and then it cannot be denied, they are a fallen people" (April 4, 1784). John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley; Journal and Diaries*, ed. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993-95), 22:418, 23:301.

¹⁹Wesley indicated to George Snowden in October 1790 that Bredin had returned to Ireland as a superannuated (retired) preacher, a change he had suggested as early as August 1782 (Telford, 7:135; 8:241). The *Minutes* from 1791 show him drawing £12 annually from the Preachers' Fund.

²⁰The new preaching house in Silver Hill, Winchester, was opened by JW on Nov. 24, 1785. Telford, 7:289.

²¹Winscom seems to have retired from his business interests there, although that is not entirely clear.

²²As seen in Wesley's comment to him in May of that year: "You are in the right: that ground would be too small. Either have a proper place or none at all." Letter, May 9, 1785; Telford, 7:269.

appealed to Wesley for a £100 interest-free loan for a year to help finance about one-fourth of the cost of the project.²³ A year later, Wesley advised Winscom on how to clear up the debt and transfer the property to five trustees on the Conference Plan, using the Model Deed and certainly no lawyers!²⁴ Before long, however, Winscom was entangled in a law suit, which Wesley thought he handled unwisely but allowed him to pay the costs using the £100 he owed Wesley.²⁵

By June of 1790, Wesley told Thom that he was “very indifferent concerning the preaching-house” and would not concern himself about it any more, having lost £10 by it already, “to no purpose.”²⁶ Anything more would have to be done by the people of the circuit. In August, in a quimsical note to Winscom about the preaching house in Winchester, Wesley tried to find out how William Thom “raise[d] them eight pounds.” Wesley went on to ask, “And on what account did you pay six pounds?”²⁷ Winscom must have unburdened himself to Wesley regarding Thom, just as he had earlier about Thomas Warwick, since the following month Wesley wrote the letter reprinted above, in which he told Winscom, “You should have told me before, of what you thought amiss in William Thom, that he might have been made sensible of it.” Wesley’s comment suggests his manner of resolving disputes within the Methodist societies, and especially among the company of preachers—namely, to have contending parties confront each other face to face with their faults and weaknesses in order to promote subsequent improvement or to provide an acknowledged basis for eventual dismissal.²⁸

No further reference to Winscom appears in Wesley’s correspondence during the remaining five months of the latter’s life. However, after Wesley’s death, the leaders of the Conference soon discovered how troublesome Winscom could be, especially with his history of requesting that circuits be made smaller and that preachers be allowed to stay in one place longer. Still “on trial” for the third year, he had been assigned by Wesley in 1790 to the Oxfordshire circuit, no longer as an Assistant. Although he did not attend the Conference of 1791, he did join the chorus of voices trying to change the itin-

²³Letter, September 13, 1785; Telford, 7:289.

²⁴“I forbid engaging any attorney. You have the form of conveyance in the *Minutes*, which any one may transcribe.” Letter, October 17, 1786; Telford, 7:345.

²⁵“The Conference cannot, and will not, bear the expense of that foolish law suit. I can conceive but one way to pay it. The hundred pounds which you borrowed of me, you may pay to the attorney and his receipt in full shall be your discharge.” Letter, September 30, 1788; Telford, 8:96.

²⁶Letter to Thom, June 21, 1790; Telford, 8:223–24.

²⁷Letter, August 28, 1790; Telford, 8:236.

²⁸There are at least nineteen instances in the *Journal* where Wesley encouraged face to face confrontation in order to resolve problems of this sort (see, e.g., June 26, 1767); Wesley himself often heard the contending parties first separately and then face to face (e.g., Dec. 7, 1767). The quarterly examination of members incorporated this same principle (e.g., see March 9, 1747). Ward and Heitzenrater, 22:89, 115; 20:162–63.

erant system following Wesley's death.²⁹ His proposal for a "walking plan," perhaps creating circuits small enough to allow walking instead of riding, was brought before the body. But, as Joseph Bradford's subsequent letter informed him, the Conference not only rejected it but also requested Bradford to inform Winscom that "they judge you to meddle with things that belong only to the Assistant, and that they recommend you to mind your own business only."³⁰ The same letter, after first telling Winscom he was to stay in Oxfordshire another year, includes a postscript indicating that Bradford had just discovered the Conference wished that Winscom be stationed at Wells-next-the-Sea, near King's Lynn (Norfolk), well over a hundred miles northeast of Oxford.

Winscom's response was predictable. With regard to the new assignment, he said that he could not possibly move to so great a distance within three months. He also suspected that the change was instigated by other forces than the will of Conference and based on "bad information." Therefore, he told Bradburn, "I must beg you to inform the Conference I cannot comply with Wells, near Lynn," and added, "I will readily take any circuit within forty miles of Winton [Winchester]." He also responded to the "meddling" charge by saying that his submission of a proposal for a walking plan was justifiable, since "I have had for years authority from [Wesley] to lay any improvement before him I thought would be useful."³¹ Winscom's attempt to play on his supposed friendship with the deceased patriarch had no effect on the leadership of the Conference. Those who knew Wesley probably also knew of the problems that Winscom had caused him.

Such a long string of actions and reactions to the authority of Wesley and the Conference, no doubt, led to Winscom's lasting reputation as one who "loved power." George Stamp goes even further in claiming that "a more censorious and fault-finding man never existed."³² From 1792 on, we hear no more of Winscom in the connection. The Conference of that year dropped him from the lists of those "on trial," and he was never admitted into full membership as an itinerant preacher.³³ He therefore is never mentioned among the ranks of "Wesley's veterans" and remains among that multitude of largely indistinguishable historical persons known as local preachers.

²⁹To remove the common fear that after Wesley's death the preachers would cease to travel, the Conference of 1791 passed a rule placing a two-year limit on any preacher's successive appointments in any one place. William Myles, *A Chronological History of the People called Methodists* (London, Cordeaux, 1813), p. 209.

³⁰Letter of August 5, 1791; Dyson, p. 170.

³¹Letter, August 8, 1791; Dyson, p. 171.

³²Telford, 8:42n., quoting Stamp's manuscript history of Methodism in Hampshire.

³³Jonathan Crowther notes that four years was a normal probationary period, at the end of which, "should any serious doubts arise . . . respecting their piety, abilities, and probable usefulness," they would either be dismissed or continued on probation. *A Portraiture of Methodism* (London: Edwards, 1815), p. 275.