

# The Wesleyan Conception Of Evangelism

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Following the spiritual crisis of May 24, 1738, in which he was soundly converted, John Wesley saw the work of the church in its true perspective. He fully realized, as he had not been able to realize prior to the crisis, that evangelism was the urgent, primary, and perennial task of the church. The focal point in the twelves rules of a "Helper" in the Methodist Societies was in these familiar words: "You have nothing to do but to save souls. Therefore spend and be spent in this work" (Works VIII, 310, Jackson edition). In order to impress his helpers that their duties were not to become merely perfunctory, he further admonished them that it was not their business merely to preach so many times and to take care of this or that society, but "to save as many souls as you can; to bring as many sinners as you possibly can to repentance, and with all your power to build them up in that holiness without which they cannot see the Lord" (Ibid.). Always the grand objective of these methods and means was to be kept in view: to win the lost to Jesus Christ.

The admonition was not a mere piece of pious advice by the father of Methodism; it was the consuming passion of his own heart and ministry. Something of the devotion and self-denial which he brought to the work of evangelism is revealed in an entry in his Journal in the year 1759. After preaching in the open air at Newcastle-upon Tyne, he wrote: "What marvel the devil does not love field preaching! Neither do I: I love a commodious room, a soft cushion, a handsome pulpit. But where is my zeal, if I do not trample all these underfoot in order to save one more soul?" (Journal, IV. 325, Curnock edition). Two significant observations are worth noting about this particular entry: first, that it was twenty years after he had begun field-preaching, and second, that it was on one of these occasions at Newcastle that some of his congregation began to pelt him with mud and rotten eggs (cf. Tyerman Life and Times of John Wesley, II, 329). Here was a man determined to do the work of evangelism regardless of the cost! The fire of God was in his soul as it was in Jeremiah and St. Paul, and the work of God must be done.

On the high vocation of evangelism he focused his efforts for more than fifty years. Only eight days before his death on March 2, 1791, Wesley preached his last sermon. The evangelistic note still predominated on that occasion as he dwelt on the text, "Seek ye the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near" (Isaiah 55:6). Without question he was the greatest evangelist England ever had. His life and ministry of abundant labors -- with his unflagging zeal in his evangelistic appeal to the heart and conscience of England, his brooding care of awakened souls, his organizing genius in the shepherding of his followers, and his devotion to practical religion -- yield for us some insights and principles which have enduring value in the work of Christ. It is the purpose of the present study to set forth some of these principles, which include the centrality of preaching, the message of the evangel, the importance of Christian experience, the adaptability of methods, and the criterion of genuineness.

#### THE CENTRALITY OF PREACHING

The Apostle Paul exalted the ministry of preaching, for "it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe" (1 Corinthians 1:21). No one has practiced this supreme act more persistently and consistently than did Wesley. He stated in his Journal (V, 116) that he preached about 800 times a year. It is thought that he must have preached at least three or four times a day during the last fifty years of his life, and that, from the time of his return from America in 1738 he had preached no less than 40,000 sermons, with some estimates as high as 52,400. (Cf. Piette John Wesley in the Evolution of Protestantism, p. 392). His labors were diversified, but his primary and absorbing task was the preaching of the Gospel, as these figures might well prove. His work throughout the British Isles necessitated 250,000 miles of travel, very largely devoted to his preaching ministry.

The evangelistic emphasis predominates in Wesley's sermons. He was not the type of preacher who is content to "shoot an arrow at a venture". Like Peter at Pentecost, he applied his message to his audience. The Gospel message had a relevancy to the present hour, the present moment. It was more than a mere convenience -- something to be accepted or rejected at leisure. The message carried with it a compelling urgency, and Wesley did not leave the responsibility of applying his message to the hearers alone; He was bold enough to make the application himself. In fact, his directness was responsible for closing more than one pulpit to him. Nor did the complexion of his audience deter him at this point. It was from St. Mary's pulpit at Oxford that Wesley courageously declared "in trumpet tones the distinctive message of the Methodist revival,

to the consternation of University dignitaries accustomed to the cold official sermons normally dealing with some recondite point of morals or philosophy" (Baker *The Methodist Pilgrim in England*, p. 24). It was the seventh and last time he was called upon to preach the University sermon, for on that occasion (August 24, 1744) he boldly confronted the officialdom at Oxford with Bible religion in a message on "Scriptural Christianity" (in which 176 Scripture quotations were woven into the sermon).

With this strong emphasis upon preaching, it is not surprising that Wesley's sermons became a part of the doctrinal standards for the Methodist preaching houses. Wesley formulated no Creed, but he regarded the so-called "Standard Sermons" and his "Notes Upon the New Testament" as the exposition of truths defined in the New Testament and restated in the Articles and Homilies of the Church of England. These were a natural form of doctrinal standard for a church that originated out of a glorious era of gospel preaching. Actually, this form of standard was a reversion to the Apostolic and primitive form of standard. The Apostolic Church was an evangelistic Church, and its standard of doctrine was first of all a type of preaching. Such New Testament expressions as "another gospel" (Galatians 1:6), "the gospel of Christ" (Galatians 1:7), "the gospel which was preached of me" (Galatians 1:11), "no other doctrine" (I Timothy 1:3), "according to the glorious gospel" (I Timothy 1:11), and "the form of sound words" (I Timothy 1:13), as well as other phrases (Cf. I Timothy 4:6, 16; 6:3, 20; II Timothy 1:14; 2:2), amply indicate there was a familiar form or norm of preaching.

Thus, the Wesleyan message, delivered by Spirit-anointed preachers, was a revival of New Testament Christianity. In his *Short History of Methodism* Wesley wrote that in 1738 he and a few associates were "resolved to be Bible-Christians at all events; and, wherever they were, to preach with all their might plain, old Bible Christianity" (Works, VIII, 349). The results of their preaching were phenomenal -- multitudes were won to Christ, and even historians agree that the course of English history was changed.

#### THE MESSAGE OF THE EVANGEL

Wesley did not discover or preach a new gospel, but he had such a clear and vital grasp of the richness of the Christian message that "all the elements of gospel truth were in him combined in a burning focus of spiritual light and heat, as, perhaps, they had not been since the Apostolic Age" (Burwash *Wesley's Doctrinal Standards*, pp. xiii, xiv). The great principles of scriptural religion, as understood and proclaimed by John Wesley, in his "Standard Sermons" have been summarized by Chancellor Burwash of Canada as follows:

1. The universality and impartiality of God's grace to man as manifested in the provisions of the Atonement.
2. The freedom of the human will, and man's individual, probational responsibility to God.
3. The absolute necessity, in religion, of holiness in heart and life.
4. The natural impossibility of this to fallen human nature.
5. The perfect provision for this necessity and impossibility, as well as for the pardon of past sins, in the salvation offered by Christ.
6. The sole condition of this salvation -- faith.
7. The conscious witness of the Spirit to this salvation. (*Ibid.*, p. xii, xiii)

The richness of the Wesleyan message can be seen in the vital synthesis and presence of all the great emphases that have characterized historical Christianity at its best. Wesley's full-orbed conception of New Testament Christianity

embraced the great scriptural verities of all ages and schools of Christian thought. It grasped the wideness of God's love with the Old Greek Christian and the modern Arminian, and it sounded the depths of the human heart with Augustine. It maintained the necessity of good works with the Roman Church, and it recognized the peculiar import of faith with Protestantism. With the Churchman it held the importance of means, and with the evangelical mystic, it recognized the peculiar office of inward grace; and it built the doctrines of inward holiness and Christian perfection of the English mystics upon their true foundation; by uniting them to the evangelical principles of saving faith (*Ibid.*).

In a word Wesley was Scriptural, historical, experimental, and practical. All the great phases of the Christian life were proclaimed in the Wesleyan revival, such as repentance, faith, justification, regeneration, the witness of the Spirit, the conflict with sin in believers, and perfect love. Wesley and his co-laborers saw the lost state of England. Sin was everywhere, even in the church and especially among the depraved populace. In the light of this fact, Wesley's succinct admonition to Alexander Coates is characteristic of his attitude in emphasizing the following practical truths found in the Bible:

Practical religion is your point; therefore keep to this: repentance toward God, faith in Christ, holiness of heart and life, a growing in grace and in the knowledge of Christ, the continual need of His atoning blood, a constant confidence in Him, and all these every moment to our life's end (Letters IV, 159, Telford edition).

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE

The religion of the heart as a conscious experience of the Christian believer occupies a central place in Wesleyan evangelism. "Joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Spirit" (Romans 15:13) is the spiritual birthright of every redeemed child of God. John Wesley and his followers insisted that the foundation of the Christian life is not laid in some mysterious communication of sacramental grace, much less in a mere intellectual assent to a creed or great principles of religious truth, but in a conscious reception of justifying, regenerating, and sanctifying grace, through a definite act of personal faith in Christ.

In his comment on Jesus' discourse on the new birth in John 3, Wesley says "our Lord shows that no external profession, no ceremonial ordinances, or privileges of birth, could entitle any to the blessings of the Messiah's kingdom," since "this could only be wrought in man by the almighty power of God" because "every man born into the world was by nature in a state of sin, condemnation, and misery." Therefore, no man can enter the kingdom "except he experience that great inward change by the Spirit" (Notes Upon the New Testament, p. 311, 1950 edition).

The doctrine of assurance has important significance in the teaching of Wesley. He defined it as "an inward impression on the soul, whereby the Spirit of God directly witnesses to my spirit, that I am a child of God; that Jesus Christ hath loved me, and given himself for me; and that all my sins are blotted out, and I, even I, am reconciled to God" (Standard Sermons I, 208, Sugden edition). Writing of his own experience at Aldersgate, Wesley tells us: "The Spirit itself bore witness to my spirit, that I was a child of God, gave me an evidence thereof; and I immediately cried, 'Abba, Father!'" (Ibid. II, 350). In regard to a question concerning entire sanctification as a spiritual crisis, "But how do you know, that you are sanctified, saved from your inbred corruption," Wesley answered: "We know it by the witness and by the fruit of the Spirit" (Works XI, 420).

Two recurring phrases in the writings of John Wesley are "experimental religion" and "experimental salvation." The experimental nature of the Christian faith was a truth he emphasized

continually. For example, in his important *Notes Upon the New Testament* (1950 edition) we find these expressions: "an experimental knowledge of Christ as the Son of God" (p. 713, note on Ephesians 4:13); "the experimental knowledge of pardoning love" (p. 722, note on Ephesians 6:17); "the inward, experimental knowledge of Christ, as my Lord" (p. 734, note on Philippians 3:8); "the divine, experimental knowledge of God and of Christ" (p. 890, note on II Peter 1:2); and "experimentally know him" (p. 910, note on I John 3:6). And what Wesley emphasized has been confirmed by a multitude of witnesses across the years.

#### THE ADAPTABILITY OF METHODS

Though conservative by nature, Wesley was willing to modify his methods in order to meet the spiritual needs of multitudes without Christ. His conversion not only changed his view of the neglected doctrines of the Church and modified his ecclesiastical views, but more significantly, it made him an evangelist of the best type, filled with an insatiable desire to save the souls of men. An indication of the intense struggle he underwent when he began field preaching with Whitefield in Bristol is found in his journal entry: "I could scarce reconcile myself at first to this strange way of preaching in the fields, of which he set me an example on Sunday; having been all my life (till very lately) so tenacious of every point relating to decency and order, that I should have thought the saving of souls almost a sin if it had not been done in a church" (*Journal II*, 167). That he was determined to utilize a new avenue to reach the masses with the Gospel can be gathered from his entry on the following Monday: "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." By so doing, Wesley and his collaborators reached great multitudes of people who were alienated from the Church.

All this was necessitated because so many churches had closed their doors to him. He found it impossible to observe all the proprieties expected of an Anglican minister with respect to other clergymen and their parishes. In order to fulfill the Divine commission which had been given to him, he found it necessary to disobey Episcopal Canons, and began preaching in the open fields in the parishes of other clergymen. In addition, he practiced and encouraged extemporaneous prayer, in spite of his love of the Anglican liturgy. He also sent out some of his converts as laypreachers. It was not that he had no respect for tradition or for authority. The whole story indicates that Wesley was not first a churchman and then an eager seeker of souls. On the contrary, he was first an

eager seeker of souls, then a churchman. When Church or ecclesiastical privilege or pronouncements stood in the way of the well-being of souls, then Wesley did not hesitate to put this well-being first. This was a foremost necessity for Wesley, the evangelist. Like the Apostle Paul, Wesley believed that a God-called man was under compulsion to preach the Gospel, and his duty to that commission was a first consideration under all circumstances. When James Hervey criticized him for preaching in another's parish, Wesley made his famous reply: "I look upon all the world as my parish," Wesley's letter, in which this remark is found, is one of the classics of the Evangelical Revival, and lays bare the secret springs and motivations of his labor as an evangelist. (Cf. Letters I, 284-287).

Methods were therefore variable for Wesley. These might be changed, as both time and circumstances might demand, but the objective must be attained. The Gospel must be preached, and men and women must be confronted with the message of full salvation which alone can save from all sin. In order to accomplish this, Wesley had to resort to somewhat irregular methods and means which incited the hostility of the Church of England's clergy who had a blind zeal for the church as an institution without regard for the basic reason for its existence. In spite of these irregularities, as Baines-Griffith, an Anglican clergyman, has observed, "the question resolves itself to this, 'Whether it is not better that men should go to heaven by irregular methods, or regularly go to the devil?'" (Wesley the Anglican, p. 71). Notwithstanding his love for the Church of England, Wesley chose not to trifle with the Divine commission given to him, even though it caused him to defy some of the lesser regulations of the Church.

#### THE CONSERVATION OF RESULTS

As a shepherd of souls, Wesley was aware that "to retain the grace of God is much more than to gain it" (Ibid. VIII, 249). In fact, said Wesley, hardly one in three does. It was for this reason that Wesley gave himself to such prodigious labor in organizing counselling, and writing in order that awakened souls might come to a settled devotion to God and truth. As John S. Simon indicates, Wesley "saw that to lead a man to the Cross and then allow him to wander back into the world was to assist at a soul-tragedy" (John Wesley and the Methodist Societies p. 49). Wesley's organizing genius devised means through the ever-expanding fellowship of the United Societies for assisting new converts in their new-found faith. The organizational framework of the United Societies is described in his "Plain Account of the People Called Methodist", which included the classes with their leaders, the bands, membership tickets, and the responsibilities of assistants, stewards, and other

officers. Once again, the organization was not an end in itself, but rather to assist the members toward their realization of moral and spiritual progress.

In addition to the organization of the Societies, spiritual channels were emphasized to aid in Christian development. These spiritual channels were summed up in the "means of grace". There were two categories of such "means" those "instituted" which included prayer, searching the Scriptures, the Lord's Supper, fasting, and "Christian conference"; while the "prudential" means of grace, though not so specifically stated, were intended to regulate life in its various relationships. They included such matters as the training of the mind, the care of one's health, the planning of daily routine, the choice of companions, the use of money, and simplicity of dress.

It was in this manner, through the medium of organizational procedures and the means of grace, plus the untiring labors of Wesley and his colleagues, that the marvelous spiritual harvests of the Eighteenth Century Revival were conserved.

#### THE CRITERION OF GENUINENESS

John Wesley had a keen appreciation for the responsibilities, with their eternal consequences, which devolve upon a man who is called of God. The criterion of fruit-bearing is the test of a preacher. "By their fruit ye shall know them" (Matthew 7:16). "True prophets convert sinners to God, or at least confirm and strengthen those that are converted. False prophets do not," wrote Wesley. The chief mark of the false prophet is "not turning men from the power of Satan to God" (Notes Upon the New Testament, p. 43). In spite of ecclesiastical pressure and even bigotry and prejudices, Wesley was determined to obey God rather than men. Writing his brother Charles in 1755, Wesley commented on the excommunication of a Mr. Gardiner by the Bishop of London for preaching without a license: ". . . if we must either dissent or be silent, actum est. We have no time to trifle. Adieu" (Letters III, 131). It was characteristic of Wesley's spirit from first to last. There was no question about his love for the Church of England, but he wouldn't be silenced in preaching the gospel. Fittingly, the final entry in his famous Journal, only a few months before his death in 1791, was concerning his preaching ministry. He had preached in St. Paul's Church in Shadwell, enforcing "that important truth, 'One thing is needful'", to which Wesley added the comment, "and I hope many, even then, resolved to choose the better part" (Journal VIII 110). The fire of love and the zeal for souls continued to burn brightly to the end of his earthly labors, and the end itself matched and crowned the whole course of his ministry. Every God-called preacher put in trust with the Gospel, bound for the scrutinizing



judgment of a holy God, will feel constrained to pray, as he thinks of John Wesley: "Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his!"