

CHRIST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

History Series: The History of John Wesley and the Methodist Church

Compiled by John H. Evans

Sabbath Jan. 28, 2007

Part 16: REACHING OUT TO THE MASSES

In the Spring of 1739 Wesley was fully occupied with the Moravian Fetter Lane Society and others. He had no thought of leaving London when on March 15 he received a letter from Mr. Whitefield and a Mr. Seward urging him in the strongest terms to come to Bristol “without delay.” Wesley’s reaction: “This I was not at all forward to do.” After turning it over in his own mind he put the matter before the Fetter Lane Society on Thursday the 28th. There was much discussion, with his brother Charles being vigorously opposed to his going. They appealed to the Oracles of God and received these words: “Son of Man, behold, I take from thee the desire of thine eyes at a stroke. Yet shall thou not mourn or weep, neither shall thy tears run down.” There was still much discussion until all agreed to decide the issue by lot “and it was determined that I should go.” [Note: There were other times when decisions were made by lot, as is exemplified in Scripture.]

Wesley left on the evening of Friday, March 29th and arrived in Bristol on the evening of Saturday, March 31. (Bristol is almost straight west of London on the coast of the Bristol Channel. Nearby is the resort town of Bath and just north is Gloucester, all of which figured prominently in early Methodism.) Wesley writes as follows:

I could scarcely reconcile myself to this strange way of preaching in the fields, of which he [Whitefield] set me an example on Sunday. I had 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 had not been done in church.

Now occurs a major event in Wesley’s ministry. Recall that his father was a very strict Anglican, Wesley had a very strict upbringing, he had been very strict regarding church order in Georgia and he was an Oxford Don. All this indicates a very formal and rigid personality.

Monday, April 2, 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 the ground adjoining to the city, to about three thousand people.

Sunday, April 8, 1739 - At seven in the morning I preached to about a thousand persons at Bristol, and afterward to about fifteen hundred on the top of Hannam Mount Kingswood.

Tuesday, April 17, 1739 - At five in the afternoon I was at a little society in the Back Lane. The room in which we were was propped beneath, but the weight of the people made the floor give way; so that in the beginning of the expounding the post that propped it fell down with a great noise. But the floor sank no further; so that after a little surprise at first, they quietly attended to the things that were spoken.

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A similar thing happened again several months later.

Thursday, August 27, 1739 - I went in the afternoon to a society in Depford and, thence, at six, came to Turner's Hall, which holds (by computation) two thousand persons. The press both within and without was very great. In the beginning of the expounding, there being a large vault beneath, the main beam which supported the floor broke. The floor immediately sank, which event occasioned much noise and confusion among the people. But two or three days before, a man had filled the vault with hogsheads of tobacco. So that the floor, after sinking a foot or two, rested upon them, and I went on without interruption.