

CHRIST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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

Compiled by John H. Evans

Sabbath Feb. 18, 2007

PART 19: DANGERS AND DIFFICULTIES

We have been following Wesley's development chronologically and in some detail. This seemed advisable in order to have some understanding of the psychological change that turned a very formal, strict churchman into the most effective evangelist of the Eighteenth century. At this point we will look at a sample of the serious difficulties that Wesley and his followers experienced, including dangerous physical attacks and false rumors and propaganda. The viciousness of the opposition peaked in the 1740's and 1750's before gradually trailing off and ending in respectability by the time of Wesley's death in 1791. In his journal Wesley left complete accounts of some of these but because of the length a narrative summary will be used.

The physical attacks came quickly after the "descent" into field preaching. On Tuesday April 11, 1740 in Bristol when Wesley was beginning to preach, what he describes as a "flood of rioters filled the streets and alleys shouting, cursing and swearing, ready to swallow the ground with fierceness and rage." The mayor finally called out the constables and took the leaders into custody and, the next day, into court.

On Monday January 25, 1742 in London Wesley was explaining I John 3:8 when a vicious group gathered shouting and then came among the hearers and began pushing, shoving and striking people. They "began throwing large stones upon the house" and part of it fell down "together with the tiles," some of it among the people. Finally Wesley said, "Let three or four calm men take hold of the foremost and charge a constable with him, that the law may take its course." The leader of the uprising was bound over to a court. The still unruly crowd cried out for "Richard Smith," one of their "champions." He, along with a woman "who was speaking words not fit to be repeated and throwing whatever came to hand," came in. As Wesley says though, "they had fallen into the hands of One higher than they." They fell on their knees and were exhorted to never forget the mercy God had shown them. The next day Wesley and his followers withdrew their claim against the offender taken into custody on "his promise of better behavior. There was never any disturbance at Long Lane after that."

There were other incidents of Wesley's congregations being stoned. At least twice unruly mobs sought to drive an ox and a bull among his hearers. He and his hearers were attacked by "barge men with clubs." One of the worst attacks occurred at Wenesbury on October 20, 1743. Wesley's account of it is much too long to include here, but we will note that several of his hearers were severely beaten, Wesley himself was dragged by his hair, hit on the back of his head with a stick, struck on the chest and "on the mouth with such force that blood gushed out immediately."

In addition to the physical attacks sampled above, Wesley and Methodists were ridiculed and satirized in cartoons and on the stage as well as denounced from many pulpits of the established church. There were some official clergy, though, who sided with Wesley. Here is an example of an advertisement published on Wednesday November 2, 1743:

By the Edinburgh Company of Comedians, on Friday November 4,
will be acted a comedy called,

The Conscious Lovers;

To which will be added a Farce, called

Trick upon Trick, or, Methodism Displayed

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Wesley arrived in Epworth on Saturday January 1, 1743. From his journal:

Sunday January 2, 1743 – At five I preached on “so is every one that is born of the spirit,” about eight I preached from my father’s tomb on Hebrews 8:11. Many from neighboring towns asked if it would not be well, as it was sacrament Sunday, for them to receive it. I told them “By all means but it would be more respectful to ask Mr. Romley the curate’s leave.” One did so in the name of the rest; to whom he said, “Pray tell Mr. Wesley, I shall not give him the sacrament as he is not fit.”

Wesley preached from his father’s tomb four more times, being denied the use of the church.

The foregoing gives only an indication of the difficulties faced by early Methodists. There is one more difficulty we need to look at in more detail, a very awkward one: Wesley’s courtship and marriage. To give this its due we will devote the next installment to that alone.