

**THE WESLEYS
IN
CORNWALL**

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INTRODUCTION

Many Christians today are talking about revival, and of course we all long to see a revival in our days, there can be no doubt that this is the most pressing need of our age. The 18th century revival of which John Wesley was at the forefront proved that true revival changes the face of a nation beyond recognition, crime falls, injustices are put right, immoral standards are turned on their heads, misery gives way to laughter and sorrow is turned into joy. Any really discerning Christian will recognise in our age the signs of moral and ethical collapse; crime, abuse and sexual immorality are rampant, along with a rise in racism and injustice and confusion in the economic system. In this climate those who hold a Biblical view find themselves a small despised minority, laughed at and ignored by the media and society in general.

No wonder then that we grasp at any hint of revival wherever it may come from. However, contemporary church history is proving that we can too easily misread the signs; movements that were acclaimed as great works of the Spirit and the beginning of revival have soon faltered and in many cases disappeared into obscurity or fallen into doctrinal error. Along with this there has been a belittling of our Christian heritage, too often we have been told that God is doing a “new thing” and we do not need the lessons of the past. But we must realise that there is indeed a lot we can learn from the history of the church and if we would take heed we would all be much quicker to recognise false doctrines and counterfeit moves of the Spirit.

So what can we learn from the 18th century and the Wesleyan revival? My hope is that it would help us to recognise true revival. What stands out so vividly in Wesley’s journals is just how powerfully God was at work in moving thousands of people to go

and listen to the preaching of the gospel and how real the subsequent conversions were. Often the preachers felt they were mere bystanders as the Spirit moved and men and women were convicted of their need of the Saviour. There was great opposition too, mobs stirred up riots, bricks and stones were hurled at the preachers, many were imprisoned on trumped up charges, there was great commotion wherever the gospel was preached! Everybody was aware that something was “going on” and it is a true wonder to read how the persecution fades as more and more souls came under the power of the gospel. Even the secular historians had to take note of this great revival and admit that the result was to change Britain for immeasurable good.

It is my prayer that this short essay may give us a taste of true revival and a hunger to see such in our lifetimes, and that out of such hunger we may more earnestly pray and seek to share the gospel with our desperate nation.

Oh, that You would rend the heavens!
That You would come down!
That the mountains might shake at Your presence,
As fire burns brushwood,
As fire causes water to boil,
To make Your name known to Your adversaries,
That the nations may tremble at Your presence!
Isaiah 64:1,2

FIRST CONTACT

Cornwall of the 18th century was a wild, inhospitable place, there were few roads and people lived in small towns or hamlets often isolated from each other by many miles. The chief occupations were fishing, farming and tin mining. Writing of those days the Rev. L. Tyerman said, “Cornwall at this time was as imbruted as Staffordshire. Smuggling was considered an honourable traffic, and the plunder of shipwrecked mariners was accounted a lawful prize. Drunkenness was general; and cockfighting, bullbaiting, wrestling and hurling were the favourite amusements of the people.”¹ The Cornishmen, says J.S.Simon were devoted to king and church, but the church was not the shining light it ought to have been, for the clergy were a sad bunch of whom “even an amiable apologist must admit that among them were men whose character and conduct it is useless to defend.”² These clergymen were well known for their participation in the smuggling trade, church cellars often being used to conceal the contraband.

So then, Cornwall in the first half of the 18th century was a spiritually dark place, but there were distinct signs that change was on the way. In 1732 George Thomson a clergyman at St. Gennys was converted after dreaming of his death and subsequent judgement, he shut himself away with his Bible and found peace and assurance in knowing the forgiveness of his sins. George Thomson later became a great friend of the Wesleys who made use of his home during their visits to Cornwall. Another clergyman, John Bennet was converted through Thomson’s preaching, he was over three parishes in north Cornwall and with Thomson went on evangelistic tours preaching the message of “justification by faith.” In St. Ives there was a Religious Society of twelve godly members led by Catherine Quick, in 1743 a

Methodist sea captain named Joseph Turner landed at St. Ives and met this small group of believers, upon taking news of them back to the Methodist Society in Bristol, two lay preachers, Thomas Williams and William Shepherd were sent to Cornwall to preach. Charles Wesley determined to go to Cornwall himself and set out from Bristol with a companion on July 14th 1743; on the 15th he set out alone on the journey from Exeter to St.Ives.

The journey to St. Ives was a difficult one, the paths often being indistinct or even non-existent but on 16th July Charles reached his destination. In his journal he recounts his experiences of entering St. Ives and how first he was greeted in the name of the Lord by two tanners, then how some of the “devil’s children” shouted and pursued him like men out of the tombs; finally he was met by the lay preachers, Williams and Shepherd who took him to his lodgings. The following day, Sunday, Charles attended the local church only to hear a sermon directed against the Methodists who were put down as a new sect, and an enemy of the church, Charles listened to a similar sermon in the evening when the local curate preached on “Beware of false prophets”, obviously making it clear that it was the Methodists he had in mind. The next day Charles went out to preach and had his first taste of real opposition, a mob formed at St. Ives market beating drums and shouting, some of the mob charged at Charles and tried to pull him down, but Charles records, “They had no power to touch me. My soul was calm and fearless.”³ Charles would be continually troubled by mobs during his stay in St. Ives. One of the worst attacks came on Friday 22nd July, Charles had just announced his text when an “army of rebels” broke in and began to smash the building and beat those assembled there, particularly targeting the women and children. Charles tells how several times men rose up to beat him with clubs but were restrained by the hand of the Lord. The attack

lasted about an hour when the mob began to fight amongst themselves and finally dispersed. Charles saw in this event a great victory for the saints who by their meekness in the face of suffering won over some of their most bitter foes. Charles later learnt that these attacks were stirred up by the local ministers who claimed the Methodists were Popish emissaries who had come to prepare the way for the arrival of the Pretender from France.

Despite such violent opposition Charles saw many victories during his first visit to Cornwall. The mayor of St. Ives was an honest Presbyterian who befriended Charles and did all he could to restrain the mobs. As well Charles preached in other parts of Cornwall where he was heard with much approval, often by very large crowds. Some instances are recorded in his journal:

Carnegy Downs, Monday July 18th - “a crowd of a thousand tanners, who received the seed into honest and good hearts.”

Zunor, Wednesday July 20th - “some hundreds of the people, with sincerity in their faces received my saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand, repent ye and believe the gospel.’”

Gwennap, July 23rd - he invited the “whole nation of tanners to Christ” and took the names of several who wanted to form a society.

St. Just, Saturday July 30th - he wrote, “the hearts of thousands seemed moved as the trees of the forest.” It was in St. Just that Charles expected to see the biggest harvest.

These preaching points established by Charles were later to become the “Cornish circuit”. Charles preached to thousands during this first visit, many seem to have been convicted and outside of St.

Ives he was frequently warmly received and intently listened to. During the first week of August Charles received a summons from his brother John to return to London for a meeting with the Moravians and Predestinarians. He said his farewells and records how reluctant the people were to see him go, he was urged time and again to return. Before he left he preached at Gwennap to a huge assembly and was able to say, "God has set before us an open door, and who shall be able to shut it."⁴ He left Cornwall on Sunday 7th August leaving behind the beginnings of a great work and a testimony to the power of the Lord and the gospel. As a man of God, Charles left his own mark on the Cornish, his fearlessness and absolute faith in the Lord in the midst of persecution alongside his integrity and obvious concern for the lost souls of Cornwall touched the lives on many. All this showed the seal of the Lord's approval and opened Cornish hearts to the gospel.

It did not take John long to make the decision to follow in his brother's footsteps - Charles records the event on August 21st 1743, "My brother set out for Cornwall."⁵ In all John was to make 32 visits to Cornwall. On this first visit he got lost on Bodmin Moor, William Shepherd was travelling with him, and they only managed to find their way upon hearing the ringing of Bodmin bell. John got lost again during his second visit to Cornwall, this time on the moor in dreadful conditions of snow and cold and was providentially led to the home of Digory Isbell. Digory had been visited earlier by two of Wesley's companions and had determined to make his home a resting place and a preaching place for the travelling Methodist preachers. It became a favourite resting place of John Wesley. Digory later added two rooms to the side of the house, inspired by the story of the Shunnamite woman who built a prophet's chamber for Elisha. Downstairs Digory made a preaching room and upstairs was the

bedroom. This house still stands at Trewint on Bodmin Moor and is open to visitors.

John was initially disappointed with his first visit to Cornwall, seeing meagre results to his ministry, even the weather seemed to be against him as he suffered days of Cornish rain and fog. Though he found the St. Ives society in good shape, numbering about 120, his first attempts at preaching met with very little response, he preached in the same places as Charles to crowds of several hundreds but saw no effect. However on the weekend of September 10th and 11th things changed dramatically. At 4 o'clock that Saturday afternoon John preached to a crowd of about 1,000 at St. Just, who all behaved in a "quiet and serious manner," at 6pm he preached to a small congregation at Sennen who woke him between 3 and 4am the following morning they were so eager to hear more of the word of God. Between 8 and 9am he preached at St. Just to the biggest congregation ever seen in those parts. Later in the day he preached at St. Ives when the "dread of God fell upon us while I was speaking, so that I could hardly utter a word."⁶

Like his brother, John faced mob violence in St. Ives, often stones and mud were thrown at him, on one fearful occasion (Friday 16th September) the mob broke into the meeting room "roaring and striking those who stood in their way, as though Legion himself possessed them."⁷ John managed to quieten the leader, who in turn quietened the mob. Like his brother John finished his visit in a triumphal note; at Trezuthan Downs he preached to 2-3,000 and on Tuesday 20th September he preached to an immense crowd of 10,000 at Gwennap Pit. He preached until it was dark to people gripped with the "deepest attention." Wesley left Cornwall on Thursday 22nd

having left a deep impression and built further upon the foundations laid by the pioneering work of his brother and the lay preachers.

THE MINISTRY CONTINUES

The following year (1744) both John and Charles visited Cornwall again. John was first, travelling with lay preacher James Wheatley, he arrived in Cornwall on Monday 2nd April and spent the night at Digory Isbell's, travelling to St. Ives the following day to stay with John Nance. John spent 2 weeks in Cornwall culminating in a visit to John Bennett's parish where Wesley preached to a large crowd at Laneast. Charles made his way down to Cornwall on the 12th July and reached St. Gennys on the 15th where he stayed with "Brother Thomson". Charles obviously loved his visits to Cornwall and to read his journal of this period gives a glimpse into his joy and delight, not just in his ministry but in the friends he made and in the delights of the countryside and he seems to have been especially fond of rock climbing around the Cornish coast. Charles went on preaching tours with the rectors Thomson and Bennett, in St. Ives the arrival of three clergymen apparently alarmed their persecutors who were in awe of such highly respected ministers as Thomson and Bennett, Charles records that the "Brethren were strengthened" by the arrival of Thomson.

Persecution continued to be a problem for the Methodists throughout 1744 as John and Charles both experienced. The mobs continually caused trouble, in St. Ives stones were thrown through the windows of believer's homes, and those who offered the preachers hospitality were often under attack. It was the Anglican ministers who continued to stir up persecution; in St. Ives, Hoblin the curate railed against the Methodists as enemies of the church,

claiming they were Jacobites and Papists. In Penzance John first encountered the minister, Dr. Borlase who was a noteworthy adversary, also a magistrate he made it impossible for the persecuted Methodists to obtain justice against their persecutors. Charles said that Borlase was the greatest persecutor of the little flock in Penzance and records one of Borlase's fellow clergymen claiming "he wished the Bible was still in Latin only, that none of the vulgar might be able to read it."⁸

Despite the opposition there was much to encourage the Wesleys in 1744, their Journals note the forming of new Societies in Penzance, Morva and Gwennap and new preaching points opened in Penzance and Falmouth on the south coast. They continued to preach to crowds of hundreds and thousands. The greatest evidence of the work of the Lord was at Gwennap where for the first time in living memory the jail was found empty, wrote Charles "the whole county is sensible of the change and not one Gwennap man was available for a wrestling match," they were "struck off the devil's list, and found wrestling against him, not for him."⁹

Persecution was an ongoing problem for these first Cornish Methodists and the sad thing is that the chief protagonists were the Anglican ministers, Borlase as magistrate posed serious problems, along with another minister in Redruth who was also a magistrate and determined to "root out this sect". The next time John returned to Cornwall in July 1746 he found lay preachers being arrested on "trumped up" charges; one was even arrested on the charge of knowing his sins were forgiven. Borlase himself attempted to arrest John and have him pressed as a soldier. Borlase and the other magistrates made use of an act passed during Queen Anne's reign (1703) which allowed them to impress idle persons for soldiers and

marines. Though some of the lay preachers found themselves arrested, Wesley always escaped by some mysterious means always facing the accusers with calm confidence and seems to have had miraculous escapes from their hands, often his prospective captors seem to let him go without any explanation.

Riots continued as well during 1746, there was a fierce riot in Falmouth from which John so miraculously escaped that he wrote, "I never saw before..... the hand of God so plainly shown as here."¹⁰ A few days later he faced a mob at Stithians near Helston. The Helston mob appear to have arisen about this time and Helston was a "storm-center" for several years. Charles visited in July and found that the "rebels of Helston threatened hard," some even claiming that he had brought the Pretender with him. At the same time Charles was amazed and delighted at the change wrought in St. Ives, where no threat at all faced him and he wrote that he "walked the streets with astonishment, scarce believing it St. Ives."

It was the same throughout the county and opposition was beginning to abate. In places where the persecution was worst Charles feared for the societies but found to his joy and encouragement that the Lord was raising up "exhorters" - men who stood firm and held the societies together, standing in the gap and strengthening the trembling sheep. New societies were springing up at this time (Wendron, Stithians) and Methodism was obviously making very real and deep roots throughout Cornwall. The impact of these first three years of Methodism is truly impressive, the Wesley brothers had made many true and abiding friendships, they had preached to thousands, many were converted, the societies were visibly increasing and growing in strength and nurturing their own preachers and leaders. In north-west Cornwall the Wesleys had good friends and co-workers in the two ministers Thomson and Bennett

and five churches (Trewint, Laneast, Tresmere, Week St. Mary and Tamerton) where they could freely preach to the large crowds who gathered to hear them; it was here that John saw a “great awakening” unlike any other in Cornwall. ¹¹

Charles had a deep passion for Cornwall and he wrote at the time, “I...adored the miracle of grace, which has kept these sheep in the midst of wolves. Well may the despisers behold and wonder. Here is a bush in a fire, burning, yet not consumed! What have they done to crush this rising sect? but lo! they prevail nothing!....Many waters cannot quench this little spark which the Lord hath kindled neither shall the floods of persecution drown it.”¹²

Some persecution continued however and in 1747 it took an unexpected turn when Lavington was made the Bishop of Exeter, his diocese included Cornwall. Lavington did not like Methodists and began his campaign against them by closing the pulpits in N.W. Cornwall to the Wesleys. Only one remained open to them at George Thomson’s church, Thomson withstood the Bishop remaining a firm friend to the Wesley brothers. Lavington continued his attack by publishing pamphlets against Methodism, these had titles such as, “The Enthusiasm of Methodist and Papists Compared.” One of these pamphlets contained an accusation against John Wesley concerning his conduct with women, and one Cornish woman in particular, this caused Wesley a lot of trouble, the pamphlet was circulated as far as northern England and was used by his enemies to besmirch his name. In 1750 John took it upon himself to visit the woman concerned and on questioning her found she had no complaint against him. It appears that Lavington had used her idle gossip without ever verifying the truth of her statements. About this time saw the notable conversion of the Anglican minister Samuel Walker of Truro further adding to Lavington’s anxieties. In fact Lavington’s attacks appear to

have been a desperate and largely futile measure, his influence was quite limited and by September 1748 the churches in Cornwall were once again open for the Wesleys to preach in.

THE FINAL CHAPTER

From this time the situation in Cornwall became much more settled and Methodism grew peacefully and rapidly. One notable visit of John Wesley was in September 1757, in his Journal he records a journey around Cornwall's perimeter and not once is there a mention of mobs, violence or attempted arrests. He found places which had been previously closed to him now welcoming him with open arms. One such place was Mevagissey, "When I was here last," he wrote, "we had no place in the town.... But things are altered now: I preached just over the town, to almost all the inhabitants, and all were as still as night."¹³ One of the hardest places to preach at was Helston, but finally in 1777, on August 20th John reported that "prejudice there was at an end, and that all the town, except a few gentry willingly hear the word of salvation."¹⁴ 1777 can be claimed as the year that saw the end of persecution against the Methodists in Cornwall. By 1780 there were 26 Methodist preaching houses in Cornwall, third in number to Ireland with 37 and Yorkshire with 54, Durham was fourth with 15. ¹⁵

John Wesley's final and 32nd visit to Cornwall came in July 1789, it's a visit that has been described as a triumphal march. In Richard Watson's words: "when he was last in Cornwall Wesley passed through the towns and villages as in a triumphal march, whilst the windows were crowded with people anxious to get a sight of him and to pronounce upon him their benedictions, yet he says not a word

of it all.”¹⁶ Wesley preached in packed churches and chapels and even in Helston he found the “largest and most serious congregation I ever remember to have seen here.” His last comment on Cornwall was, “So there is a fair prospect in Cornwall from Launceston to Land’s End.”¹⁷

It cannot be doubted that over a period of 46 years the ministry of the Wesleys completely transformed the lives of the Cornish, from a land of sinners, Cornwall became a land of saints. One old saying used to be that the devil wouldn’t cross the Tamar into Cornwall because he had heard that whatever entered Cornwall was made either into a pasty or a saint, and he fancied neither. Claude Berry wrote of John Wesley, “No other individual in history has left such an impress upon Cornwall as Wesley, and if beneath that impress something of our old spontaneity and naivete was lost, much was buried that was brutal and depraved and did not deserve to survive.”¹⁸

What was it that Wesley brought to Cornwall that precipitated such a great change which was felt not only in Cornwall but throughout the British Isles? The answer can be found in one word - revival! And it was such a revival that no-one was left insensible to its effects, even those with no particular religious interest cannot deny the stupendous changes for good that were wrought in British society as the revival took hold and Jesus became known as Lord throughout the land. The Wesley brothers were men who had a message that burned in their souls with such holy passion that they could not help but proclaim it to all and sundry. That passion was born from the deep conviction that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation and that through the preaching of the gospel men and women would meet the Saviour and find all their needs met in Him. It is such passion and conviction that is desperately needed amongst the Lord’s people today.

Appendix

We noted earlier that during times of persecution in Cornwall, God raised up “exhorters” who held the societies together, some of these men became part of “Wesley’s army” of itinerant preachers and worthy of note as they illustrate something of the influence and fruitfulness of Wesley’s ministry. We shall briefly look at just three of these:

Peter Jaco

Born in Newlyn in 1729 Peter Jaco was the son of a pilchard processor. After leaving school at the age of 14 he joined his father in employment. From a young age Peter had “awful thoughts of God” which kept him from youthful excesses. He was aware of his sinfulness but did not know what to do about it. In 1746 he heard his first Methodist preacher and was soon after converted through the preaching of a local tinner. He later became an exhorter and when John Wesley visited in 1751 he appointed Peter over several societies, in 1754 Wesley called him to London and at Conference he was appointed to the Manchester circuit. He faced many difficulties, once in Warrington he was struck so hard on the chest by a brick that the blood gushed out through his mouth, nose and ears. He often preached three or four times a day, riding 30 or 40 miles with very little of the basic necessities of life. He died in 1781 aged 52 after several years of ill-health.

John Murlin

Born at St. Stephen in 1722 he was a farmer and a carpenter, and at his own admission an “enemy to God and his own soul”, he swore, gambled and drank heavily. He heard a Methodist preacher in February 1749 and came under conviction of sin, in April he found

release for his soul after a long struggle. Soon he was asked to lead a small class and later became a reluctant preacher and was amazed to find God using him to bring blessing. Following this John Wesley asked him to be a travelling preacher at first sending him to west Cornwall, later he would labour in Ireland, Bristol, London and Manchester. In his latter days he was afflicted by a painful rheumatism so that he could barely walk. He had a stroke which left him completely immobilised, but he continued to maintain his happiness in the love of God. He died in 1799 and was buried in the same vault as John Wesley at City Road Chapel.

Richard Rodda

Born in 1743 at Sancreed his parents were “God-fearers” who initially wanted nothing to do with the Methodists. However his eldest sister was converted, followed by his mother. From a very early age (4-6) he developed an awareness of God and sin. In 1756 he came under strong conviction of sin, and after seeking rest for his soul for two years he found peace with God on the 11th June 1758 upon which he wrote a hymn, “Praise God, my soul, whose wondrous love hath drawn thy thoughts to thing above.” Richard worked in the mines and testified to many miraculous escapes wrought by God’s hand. He became a local preacher, often preaching three times on a Sunday, travelling many miles on foot. He met John Wesley while on a business trip to Wales and offered his service to the Glamorgan circuit. He laboured as an itinerant preacher for 33 years and ended his days in London on October 30th 1815 aged 72. Like most of the early Methodist preachers he faced trials and persecutions which he overcame fearlessly and was never deterred from his call to be an itinerant preacher.

Paul Sherbird

FOOTNOTES

1. The Life and Times of J.Wesley, Vol.1; p.415.
2. J.Wesley and the Methodist Societies; p.316.
3. Journal of C.Wesley, Vol.1; p.322
4. Journal; p.332.
5. Journal; p.334.
6. J.Wesley; Works, Vol.1; p.431
7. ibid
8. Op cit; p.374
9. Op cit; p.375
10. Works, Vol 1; p.505
11. ibid; p.508
12. Journal, Vol 1; p.423
13. Works, Vol.2; p.427
14. In J.S.Simon; The Last Phase; p.94
15. ibid; p.160
16. In Journal Vol 7; p.528
17. In J.S. Simon; op cit; p.317.
18. Claude Berry; Cornwall; p.185

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- J. S. Simon; The Last Phase
- F. G. Gill; In the Steps of John Wesley
- Claude Berry; Cornwall
- Peggy Pollard; Cornwall
- Thomas Jackson(ed); Lives of Early Methodist Preachers; Vols. 1,2,3
- Rev. L. Tyerman; The Life and Times of Wesley

