

## Revivals And Church History :: POOR MAN'S PREACHER

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John Wesley, the great revival preacher is seen as the man who turned a nation back to God.

John Wesley began by preaching in churches where he was invited, but the power of his words meant that invitations soon dried up! In April, 1739 he went to Kingswood, Bristol, where his friend, George Whitefield, had begun a work among the poor miners. With wonder he witnessed huge crowds of dirty, ragged people, some unwashed from the mines, drinking in the word of life, their tears making white channels down their grimy faces.

This marked the turning point in Wesley's ministry. He surrendered his pride over preaching outside a church building, and heralded Jesus to 5,000 poverty-struck miners. From then on, Wesley was ready to preach Christ in any place and in any way.

By nature John Wesley was learned and stuffy, but from this time onwards his heart regularly yearned with God's compassion towards the destitute and the underprivileged.

In his extensive diary this heart of compassion often shines through. For example, in 1742, we read: "Ever since I came to Newcastle, my spirit had been moved within me by the crowds of poor wretches that loiter here. So much drunkenness and swearing, even among little children, I had never heard before. I walked down to Sandgate, the poorest and most contemptible part of the town, and began to sing a Psalm. Three or four people came out to see what was the matter, who soon increased to four hundred. They stood and gaped at me in astonishment, so I told them I would preach again at 5 o'clock.

"At 5 o'clock the hill was covered from top to bottom. I never saw so large a number of people together and I knew only half would be able to hear my voice. After preaching, the poor people pressed around me out of pure love and kindness, and begged me most earnestly to stay with them a few days."

A year later, also near Newcastle, we read: "I had a great desire to visit a village of coal-miners that has always been in the front rank for savage ignorance and wickedness. I felt great compassion for these poor people, the more so because all men seemed to despair of them.

"I declared to them Him who was 'bruised for our iniquities'. The poor people came quickly together and gave earnest heed to what I said, despite the wind and snow. As most of them had never claimed any belief in their lives, they were the more ready to cry to God for the free redemption which is in Jesus."

A beautiful work of the Holy Spirit was done among the poor that day, and Wesley's heart was knitted to them. Within weeks he was referring to them as "my favourite congregation."

The Methodists were severely persecuted. Houses were pillaged, women abused, preachers beaten and chapels demolished. Yet even in the darkest times, Wesley's heart yearned for the poor to be saved. At Bolton in 1749 a large mob broke into the house where he was staying, intent on "dashing out his brains." Trusting in God's protection, he went among them and stood on a chair to preach.

"My heart was filled with love," he wrote, "and my eyes with tears." He preached on 'All things are ready; come to the marriage feast', and so many were won by the Lord that next day, "We were able to walk the streets unmolested, none opening his mouth except to thank and bless us."

Wesley made it his custom (and that of his fellow-preachers) always to visit the poor and the sick himself and not simply to send aid. In every town where a large church had been planted, Wesley would always appoint seven or twelve men with the special task of visiting and caring for the poor. And this was not only spiritual help, but also the giving of food, clothing and coal for the winter.

The fruits of the revival were immense, not least among the poor. Wesley could write of many places: "The streets do not now resound with cursing; the place is no longer filled with drunkenness and uncleanness, fightings and bitterness. Peace and love are there."

When, many years later, a young preacher visited a poor part of Cornwall, he remarked to a miner what an upright people they seemed to be. "How did it happen?" He asked. The old miner bared his head and said, "There came a man among us. His name was John Wesley."