

Anecdotes of the Wesleys

Carrying out an eBay search the other day for Methodist Hymn Books I came across an entry from "*rare-book-collections*" for two DVDs containing scans of 322 rare Methodist Books. Could this be worthwhile or would it turn out to be "rubbish"?

At £4.65 – including postage – I took a chance. An American production, scanning books held in many libraries with the support of the Microsoft Foundation, it was worthwhile and I am just beginning to discover the mass of material included on the two discs. There are Sermons, Hymns, Histories, Minutes, Commentaries etc.

One book I have glanced at is entitled "Anecdotes of the Wesleys".

The anecdotes were compiled by the Rev. J.B. Wakeley in 1878. The book contains a section each for Samuel Snr., Susannah, John and Charles. Three examples are reproduced below.

Susanna Wesley and her Grandchildren

John Wesley never spoiled a story for the sake of relatives. In his sermon on Training Children he says, "In fourscore years I have never met with one woman who knew how to manage grandchildren. My own mother, who governed her children so well, could never govern one grandchild."

John Wesley's First Extemporaneous Sermon

Mr. Wesley was at first a reader of sermons and thought he could preach in no other way. An extemporaneous preacher will always have the advantage over the reader of sermons. Could Whitefield or John Wesley have preached with such power or pathos as mere readers? Mr. Wesley related the following anecdote to Mr. Thomas Letts, of Allhallows Church, London. While he was putting on his gown in the vestry, he said to him, "It is fifty years, sir, since I first preached in this church. I remember it from a peculiar circumstance that occurred at that time. I came without a sermon, and going up the pulpit stairs I hesitated, and returned into the vestry under much mental confusion and agitation. A woman who was there noticed that I was deeply agitated, and she inquired, 'Pray, sir, what is the matter with you?' I replied, 'I have not brought a sermon with me.' Putting her hand upon my shoulder, she said, 'Is that all? Cannot you trust God for a sermon?'"

That question had such an effect upon me that I ascended the pulpit and preached extempore, with great freedom to myself and acceptance to the people, and I have never since taken a written sermon into the pulpit."

Would it not be well for some of the pulpit readers of the day if some mother in Israel should inquire of them, "Cannot you trust God for a sermon?" We are glad to say that the sons of Wesley follow his example in this respect.

Extract from John Wesley's Journal – Sunday 28th January 1776

*I was desired to preach a charity sermon in All-hallows church, Lombard Street. In the year 1735, about 40 years ago, I preached in this church, at the earnest request of the churchwardens, to a numerous congregation, who came, like me, with an intent to hear Dr Heylyn. **This was the first time that, having no notes about me, I preached extempore.***

(It sounds as though he intended being in the congregation, but was persuaded to preach – hence no notes!)

The Wellesleys

While Charles was at Westminster School, Mr. Garret Wesley, a rich Irish gentleman, desired to adopt him as his heir and take him to Ireland. The decision was left to Charles, and he declined the tempting offer.

Josephus informs us that when Moses was a little boy, Pharaoh had a golden crown made and placed it on the head of the boy, who trampled it under his feet. So it was with Charles Wesley.

Disappointed in the boy's refusal, Mr. Garret Wesley adopted Richard Colley, an Irish relative, who took the name of Wesley, and became the grandfather of the Marquis of Wellesley and the illustrious Duke of Wellington.

John Wesley calls this "a fair escape."

Had Charles chosen to go to Ireland, his beautiful hymns that have enriched the Psalmody of the world would probably never have been written.

On how small a thing turns the destiny of individuals, Churches, empires.

Selected by Eric Brown, from Revd J. B. Wakeley's book of the same name.