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HEADINGLEY PAPERS

III. John Cennick and Kingswood School

John Cennick is known to most Methodists by a handful of hymns and his ever-popular Graces. The student of Methodist history thinks of him also as a pioneer lay preacher in the Bristol area from the summer of 1739 until the winter of 1740, when he went over to the Calvinistic wing of the Methodist revival under somewhat unhappy circumstances. We are apt to overlook his work as a pioneer educationist at the original Kingswood School.

This school was founded in 1739 by George Whitefield for the teaching of the colliers' children, and was taken over by John Wesley. Whitefield and Wesley united in urging John Cennick, a young man nearing twenty-one, to become its first master. It was in this capacity, as prospective schoolmaster watching his school-buildings being erected and getting to know his future pupils and their parents, that Cennick commenced preaching. When the school was opened, late in 1739 or early in 1740, he was the only master, though Whitefield's original invitation was that he should be "one of the masters". The letter printed below shows that in August 1740 Cennick was still in sole charge but very anxious to have an assistant, not only to reduce his own responsibilities but also to extend the school's usefulness, as the area swarmed with children who were little more than savages. Cennick had even secured a recruit who, like himself, was content to work for his keep alone. This was William Spencer.

Spencer's appointment was approved by Wesley, and he thus became one of the pioneers of education at Kingswood. When Cennick was dismissed a few months later, Spencer remained in sole charge, and when Wesley opened the "New House" at Kingswood in 1748 Spencer was one of the original masters. After some years he left both Kingswood School and Methodism under a cloud. He became rich, and died intestate in 1779, providing Wesley with an opportunity to enforce the moral: "Reader! if you have not done it already, make your will before you sleep!" As early as 1764 his relationships with Methodism had become strained, but

Charles Wesley wrote in May that year to Joseph Cownley: "Billy Spencer was with us from the beginning: What you can do for him, I know you will." This letter reveals that beginning.

JOHN CENNICK TO JOHN WESLEY

Sat. Augst: 16, 1740

Dr. Brother,

I write now to ask your mind about letting Wm. Spencer be a sort of Usher to ye School at Kingswood under me, so might 15 or 20 Boys more be brought up, to ye good of them, and to ye satisfying an inquisitive people, who are always asking after more Masters.

You are persuaded I cannot always be there, yet so often as I could an Hour or two of a Day perhaps I might, and in that I might shew him what to do. He can write and cast account well; and would be content with Food and Rayment. This I believe we (that is our Society) could afford. Yet dr. sir if it be not according to your will speak and I have done. He is teased at home, and to get from them looks to Jamaca [sic]: I think 'tis better to abide here.

B. Chas is still very ill. Pray for him that his sickness be to the Glory of God! Pray for me that I may be humble, willing to be led by ye Lord's Hand whithersoever He pleaseth! There is now no Collections made, what must we do? Yesterday Mr. Morgan and wife (as he said) moved by ye Almighty went into ye Quakers Meeting dress'd as off [sic] that Society, and preached twice. The Bishop would have him return, he still persists and has made no small stir in this place. Mrs. Grevile, Jenny Smith, Tho^s Oldfield, W^m Winne seems now to have bid adieu to ye Word as among us preached. Tell me if you can talk with Mr. Seward, if he preaches, if many follow him? My Love to dear B. Nowers, Purdy, and all as many as bear ye Name of Christ, and asks after me. I think we go forward, and are vigilant here. Adieu!

To The Rev^d Mr. Wesley
at ye Foundry,
Upper Morefields
London.

The letter has other points of interest. It shows that in August 1740 there was little sign of the disaffection which overtook Cennick later in the year. It gives us a glimpse of Charles Wesley's desperate illness—probably typhus fever. It mentions the names of several well-known supporters of Methodism in London and Bristol, and mentions William Seward, whose preaching ended two months later in his death by mobbing. Perhaps of most interest, however, is the reference to "Mr. Morgan and wife", who attended a Quaker meeting dressed "as off that Society". The Rev. William Morgan, an Anglican clergyman, was a predecessor of Whitefield and the Wesleys in open-air preaching at Bristol. On 1st September 1740 Charles Wesley completed the story of Morgan's change of loyalty. He wrote to Whitefield about the troubles caused by the "still brethren": "The Quakers they say are exactly right & indeed the principles of the one naturally lead to the other. For instance take our poor Friend Morgan. One week he & his Wife were at J. Bray's under the preaching of the still Brethren. Soon after he turned Quaker, & is now a celebrated Preacher among them."

FRANK BAKER.