

Discovery

edited by Kenneth E. Rowe

Edward Evans, Founding Philadelphia Methodist

by Frank Baker

It is extremely difficult to secure details about most of the laymen who often founded and usually maintained the early Methodist societies, both in Britain and in America. One of Whitefield's converts in Philadelphia was Edward Evans, a cordwainer who specialized in making high quality shoes for ladies, and later helped to found Philadelphia Methodism. Most of our information about him comes from the journal of Joseph Pilmore. Pilmore states that when he arrived from England in 1769 he found this "man of good understanding and sound experience in the things of God" who had "stood fast in the faith near thirty years." Although for a time he had been associated with the Moravians, and then served as an evangelist unattached to any denomination, eventually he found his true mission as one of the founding members and leaders of the St. George's Methodist Society.¹ For a short time before his death in October 1771, he also served as the pastor of Greenwich Chapel near Gloucester, New Jersey.

While working in the Methodist Archives in London last year, I discovered that John Wesley had preserved a letter to him from Evans. This letter is dated December 4, 1770, and Wesley's endorsement shows that he replied February 7, 1771, though the reply has disappeared. Evans states that he had admired Wesley and his brother Charles for thirty years, i.e. ever since he came under the influence of Wesley's pupil, Whitefield, and that he had frequently intended writing but had been dissuaded by Whitefield, and later by Peter Böhler. Now at last taking pen in hand he introduces himself at some length, with more details of his early life than have hitherto been available to us, including his theological disagreement with Whitefield, his rift with the Moravians after twelve years, and his delight in the coming of Wesley's preachers in 1769. The letter also shows that he had been serving as a freelance preacher from about 1759, and could in many respects be described as a Methodist at that time, so that Atkinson's claim that he was "the first American Methodist preacher" receives additional support.² Evans adds his own plea for the fulfilment of Wesley's own frequently expressed desire for a visit to America, assuring

1. *The Journal of Joseph Pilmore*, ed. Frederick E. Maser and Howard T. Maag. Philadelphia: Historical Society of the Philadelphia Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church, 1969, pp. 24, 33, 56-7, 62, 80, 81, 89, 105, 106.

2. See John Atkinson, *The Beginnings of the Wesleyan Movement in America*, New York, Hunt and Eaton, 1896, p. 277; cf. Gordon Pratt Baker (ed.), *Those Incredible Methodists*, Baltimore, Commission on Archives and History of the Baltimore Conference of the United Methodist Church, 1972, pp. 13-14.

him of a hearty welcome. It seems at least possible that the scriptural texts with which Wesley also endorsed this letter were referred to in his reply, and echoed his own missionary longings, which reached some kind of reward in this contact with a disciple from the early years in America — “that he died for all...” (2 Cor. 5:15), “to perform the mercy promised to our fathers, and to remember his holy covenant” (Luke 1:72). It seems most likely that his desire to visit America was greatly quickened by this letter from Evans, and that this accounts for its preservation, for the vast majority of such letters he scrapped.

The handwriting of the letter is poor, though usually legible. There is no attempt at paragraphing, and almost none at punctuation, occasional poor grammar, and much misspelling, sometimes to the extent that the meaning is doubtful. In order to assist the reader, however, paragraphing, punctuation, and modern spelling have been supplied, together with the occasional addition of words or letters within square brackets; unusual words and incorrect grammar, however, have been faithfully reproduced.

* * * * *

Philadelphia, December 4, 1770

Reverend and very dear sir,

It is now about thirty years since I first heard of you and your brother Mr. Charles Wesley, and then was begot in me a great love for you both, and a desire to be known to you by cordial correspondency of mutual love. But Mr. Whitefield, with whom I was in unity at that time, preferred the Calvinist[s] to you, you being not, as he thought, sound in the doctrine of reprobation, therefore was not for encouraging any correspondency, but lay that [a]way, was perhaps the reason I did not then write to you. Mr. Whitefield, though a good man, yet in many respects a weak and vain man, having sunk entirely into what is called Calvin opinion, with which I was not satisfied, and falling into an acquaintance with the people called Moravians, they took with me, and thereby my affection became loose to Mr. Whitefield as they were increased to them.

I was much pleased with them in many respects, their seeming deadness to the world, their plainness and self-denial, and great simplicity, engaged me to them very close. I blessed God for these people more than for any I had known. Surely, said I, these are the people, and I will go with them. Yet I had not forgotten you. You often came into my mind, which made me speak to them at times of you. Peter Boehler was the first acquaintance I had amongst them. He told me [he] had a personal acquaintance with you and your brother, but by slight and insinuation diverted my purpose of writing to you, as I became more generally acquainted with them and their plan. They fully engaged my time and attention amongst them for about twelve years, in which course of time I found great changes amongst [them], and generally for the worse. The

Count was a warm-spirited man, and having the absolute rule and direction over all their affairs, did as came into his mind, and all his dogma and notion, of which he was ever full of coming over successfully ['suckfeucly'], must be implicitly ['implicetively'] observed and followed as the Bulls or Decretals of the Pope. These things with grief I often noticed, and many Jesuitical evasion[s], and tricks sometimes played on one or another, made me often stare, and think, surely I was mistaken. These were not the people I expected. Those and many other things set me greatly to reasoning, how ['who'] could these things be, seeing they are not know[n] in the Scriptures, nor were they ever taught by our Lord and Saviour, nor any of his apostles, so that they must be nought but the whims of the Count. And having a bad appearance ['apperence'], and a bad tendency to levity and uncleanness of both flesh and spirit, deceit and treachery, I could not endure them; and being fully convinced that these things were so, I and my friends left them.

I, being sick of disappointment, I thought to retire, and spend the remains of my days in a separated way, and cleave to Jesus only. Other[s] might do as they may, but here I was not permitted to have my own will, nor sit all the day idle, but my Master called me out again, and that in a more public manner than heretofore. And through grace I have been, in I hope a good degree, obedient to his call for now about eleven or twelve years past. I have left the city mostly, and gone into the lanes and highways in the country, to compel sinner[s] to come in. And, praised be the Lord, he has made many that they have come in, and yet there is room. But now, behold, when I least expected it, what God has done — inclined your heart to send two dear men from your Conference to us, by which means my old desires is renewed, as I now perform what I long intended, namely of writing to you and acquainting you that I am one with you in the Lord.

Your dear young men, I mean Brother Boardman and Brother Pilmore, have been a welcome and an acceptable present to us. I think I have seen them as they are, and they are very dear to me, and much beloved. I find them truly sincere, and heartily concerned for the good cause. Their fervency and labour therein greatly delights me. The Lord is with them, and owns and blesses [them] greatly to the people, not only here in town, but wherever they go; is pleased to begin in the mind of the people an unfeigned love for them. So that you may expect much good has been done by them, and that much more good will be done by them. The Lord preserve them little and low; be for him and all will be well. I have took a delight to do, and still shall, God being my help, do what I can in encouraging them, and strengthening their hand in the Lord, by every little assistance I can give them. Many doors are opened, and many more are opening for the preached Word. The Lord send more faithful labour[er]s into his vineyard! Amen.

I was in hopes that our Master had inclined you to make us a visit this

year, but I judge it is to be next year, when perhaps it will be the best time. We cannot give up so good a hope. We know all things are possible with him with whom we have to do. This I can assure you, that you will be received with the greatest love by the generality of the people, for I well know the mind of the people toward you. They love your name.

Now what shall I say more? Have I not need to apologize for saying so much? No, I will not, neither, but will presume to say, if you judge of my love by the lengthiness of my letter, you may think I highly esteem you, which I sincerely assure you I do, and in the spirit of love I conclude,

Your unworthy friend, servant, and brother in the Lord our Saviour,

Edward Evans

N.B. If you think me worthy, pray present my most kindest respects to your dear brother Mr. Charles Wesley. If you think it worthy an answer, please to direct for Edward Evans in Philadelphia, to the care of Mr. Francis Harris, Merchant.

[Wesley has endorsed the first of the two legal size pages: "Philad[elphi]a, Edw. Evans 2 Cor. 5.15, Luke 1.72". Beneath Evans' date he has added: "+ a[nswere]d Feb. 7, 1771".