

## In Wesley's Day

# The Best Pulpit

ON August 10, 1745, Charles Wesley paid his first visit to the ancient town of Shepton Mallet, preceding his brother John by a few months. Charles's *Journal* records:

"I preached at Shepton Mallet, where a great door is opening and there are many adversaries. One of the devil's drunken champions attempted to disturb us; but my voice prevailed."

This public preaching-service had attracted the attention of a number of ruffians bent on the pleasurable sport of Methodist-baiting, so it was felt unwise to adjourn to the usual rendezvous for the more intimate fellowship of a class-meeting. Accordingly a different meeting-place was secretly agreed on, while Charles Wesley led the crowd on a false scent, intending to double on his tracks and thus escape them. The plan miscarried, however. He says:—

"I walked forward toward the town, then I turned back over the field, to drop the people, and, springing up a rising ground, sprained or broke my leg. I knew not which; but I fell down when I offered to set my foot to the ground."

The Methodists rescued their leader, taking him to the shelter of a nearby cottage—a "hut," as he calls it. Word quickly went round that the preacher had broken his leg. (One version said that it was his neck, and that it was a judgment on him!) One well-to-do townsman relented so far as to send "a kind message and his bath-chair," inviting Wesley to his house. Charles would not leave the "hut," however, saying, "I thanked him, but declined his offer, on account of my pain, which unfitted me for any company, except that of my best friends, the poor."

In spite of his pain, and a sleepless night on the best bed the cottage could offer, Wesley was able to conduct the 6 a.m. service the next day, which was Sunday, on which occasion he had the joy of receiving twenty new members

into the society. At 8 a.m. a surgeon arrived from the neighbouring village of Oakhill. (Competent doctors were rare in the provinces, of course, but it seems very strange for a market-town to rely on the services of a village doctor!) The surgeon diagnosed, not a broken leg after all, but a violent sprain.

By this time the news had travelled far and wide, and a great crowd had assembled to see if the Methodist preacher was ready to give them a sermon. He was. He asked his hosts to fetch out a table, on which they placed a chair. Wesley was assisted on to the table, and there, kneeling down, with the chair as his reading-desk, he conducted an open-air service lasting an hour, his pain forgotten. This sermon preached on his knees reminded him, he said, "of Halyburton's best pulpit, which alone seemed preferable to this."

Who was Halyburton, and what was his "best pulpit"? Thomas Halyburton was a Presbyterian minister who died in 1712, aged thirty-eight, worn out with his devoted labours. His biography so impressed the two Wesleys that they republished it in an abridged form in 1739, the first of many such Methodist publications. Halyburton's lingering death occupies one-seventh of the whole book. Though his bodily powers decayed, his spirited exhortation continued to the end. To one ministerial visitor he proclaimed: "This is the best pulpit that ever I was in. I am now laid on this bed for this end, that I may commend my Lord."

The later obsession of the Methodists with death-bed scenes was without doubt largely due to the example of Thomas Halyburton; and when, many years afterwards, John Wesley sadly wrote of the death of his brother Charles, it was in words reminiscent of one of the dying phrases of the same Halyburton who was so dear to them, both, and from whose "best pulpit" Charles Wesley had just stepped into eternity.

F. B.

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