

## In Wesley's Day

# 'Original Enthusiast'

JOHN WESLEY'S *Journal* for August 16, 1745, reads thus:—

"I had much conversation with Mr. Simpson, an original enthusiast. That I might understand him the more thoroughly, I desired him in the evening to give an exhortation to the penitents. He did so, and spoke many good things, in a manner peculiar to himself. When he had done I summed up what he had said, methodising and explaining it. Oh what pity it is this well-meaning man should ever speak without an interpreter!"

What is an "original enthusiast"? Well, for one thing, it is an excellent example of the transforming power of time on the English language. When we find the word "enthusiasm" in Wesley's writings we must approach it cautiously. It didn't mean what it does mean, or else why need Wesley defend Methodists from the charge of being "enthusiastic preachers"? Indeed two months earlier Wesley had used this very phrase "original enthusiast" of a madman!

Read the definition that Wesley gives in his *Complete English Dictionary*: "AN ENTHUSIAST, a religious madman, one that fancies himself inspired." One of the dictionaries that Wesley used in compiling his own goes into greater detail, defining "enthusiasm" as—

"A Prophetick or Poetick Rage, Spirit, or Fury, which transports the Mind, enflames and raises the Imagination, and makes it think and express Things extraordinary and surprizing; the Word is generally applied to those Persons who pretend to have Divine Revelation to support some monstrous, ridiculous, or absurd Notions in Religious Matters, and thereby takes away both Reason and Revelation, and substitutes in the Room thereof the groundless Fancies, and obstinate Result of Self-Willedness, by using extravagant Gestures and Words, pretending to Things not only improbable, but also impossible."

And who was this "original enthusiast"? Be it admitted in a whisper—he was an Oxford Methodist! After his experiences in the "Holy Club" it seemed at first that the Rev. John Simpson would settle down as a solid evangelical clergyman. He sold his comfortable living in Leicestershire, however, refused the Countess of Huntingdon's alluring offers, and joined forces with Benjamin Ingham, another renegade Oxford Methodist. In the disputes which led to the Wesleys' withdrawal from the Fetter Lane Society in 1740, Simpson was one of the leading lights of the Moravian "stillness" party. He criticised the Wesleys for "preaching up the ordinances"—that is, for maintaining that any "means of grace" are necessary to the growth and expression of the Christian life, that "faith alone"—in a kind of religious vacuum—was not only useless, but harmful. Charles Wesley had some very sharp encounters with him. John Wesley was convinced of Simpson's honesty, but had to admit that his enthusiasm—call it "spiritual intuition" if you like—led him astray.

In a letter to Bishop Warburton, Wesley amplified his statement about Simpson's addressing the Methodists "in a manner peculiar to himself." He spoke "without order or connexion, head or tail, and in a language very near as Mystical as that of Jacob Behmen." No wonder that Wesley had to act as interpreter. Soon afterwards, however, Simpson realised that the bizarre garb of Behmenism was but a scanty cloak for his spiritual poverty. After unsuccessfully seeking readmission into the Church of England, he began flirting with the idea of becoming a Methodist preacher. Our last pathetic glimpse of him is as he asks Wesley's permission to attend the 1757 Conference, saying "What further I am to do, I know not; but I trust God will direct me."

F. B.

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