

In Wesley's Day

Methodist Epistles

A FORGOTTEN aspect of Methodist worship is recalled by an entry in Wesley's *Journal* for September 3, 1745: "Great was our joy in the Lord at the public reading of the letters." There follows a long extract from one of the letters, describing the ups and downs of Methodism in Betley during the previous month.

The debt we owe to the Primitive Church for preserving the letters of St. Paul and others by its custom of reading them publicly is well known. The importance of Wesley's adaptation of the ancient custom is not generally recognised. Yet it was largely due to this that he was able so successfully to weld the scattered Methodist Societies into a "Connexion." By means of the "public reading of the letters" they were enabled to keep in touch both with him and with each other.

It began like this. Soon after the epochal event of May 24th, 1738, Wesley began collecting accounts of people who had passed through similar experiences. While at Oxford later in the year he noted, "being desirous to know how the work of God went on among our brethren at London, I wrote to many of them concerning the state of their souls." The replies so rekindled the glow of his own warmed heart that he decided to read them to the "little company," meeting in his rooms at Lincoln College. His diary for Saturday, December 9, 1738, reveals the following "order of service": "Conversed, read letters, singing, prayer." The next Saturday he adopted a similar procedure in London, and on the following Monday George Whitefield "read letters" at Wesley's lodgings.

The practice took on. The first Methodist Conference, meeting in 1744, recognised it by appointing monthly "Letter-Days" in London, Bristol, and Newcastle, in addition to the more well-known

Watch-nights and Love-feasts. Linked up with these arrangements was the re-commendation that Wesley should correspond monthly with his Assistants up and down the country, "and with some other person (at least) in each Society." He was thus not likely to run short of material for the "Letter-Days"! The Conferences of 1745, 1746, and 1747 similarly fixed monthly dates for letter-reading, in each case on a Tuesday—the 1744 date had been Mondays. From 1748 the matter seems to have been left to local arrangement. (Actually the "Letter-Day" conducted by Wesley on September 3, 1745, was not according to Conference arrangements, the official date being September 10.)

The letters were mainly concerned, as might be expected, with conversions, revivals, deathbed scenes, and providential deliverance, interspersed often with religious comments. Sometimes, it must be admitted, the knowledge that a letter might be read in public had a cramping effect on the writer's style, and was apt to lead to too much moralising. But the 1748 and 1749 Conferences made it a point of duty that preachers should send Wesley a "circumstantial account" of "every remarkable conversion" and "of everyone who dies in the triumph of faith."

Gradually the practice fell into disuse, especially as Methodist worship, from being a mere addendum to attendance at the Parish Church, came to be regarded as sufficient in itself. The process was undoubtedly hastened by the monthly publication, commencing in 1778, of the *Arminian Magazine*, for this provided for Methodist home consumption exactly what the "public reading of the letters" had given. It is good to know, however, that this practice is not quite a thing of the past, but can still on occasion be used to good effect—and is, in the monthly missionary meetings of the Methodist Women's Work Department.

F. B.

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