

Tracts for the Times

IT was whilst England was overshadowed by the Stuart Rebellion in 1745 that Wesley began the first organised dissemination of tracts on a large scale. The moral,

as well as the spiritual condition of England filled him with alarm. He prepared about a dozen little exhortations, of from four to twelve pages each, with such titles as "A Word to a Drunkard," "A Word to a Sabbath Breaker," "A Word to a Street Walker." His first effort in this line had been published a year or two earlier, entitled, "A Word in Season; or, Advice to a Soldier," which had been a dual-purpose weapon, issued sometimes with the alternative title of "Advice to a Sailor." The first two of this new group of tracts are our present concern.

On October 10, 1745, after an interview with General Wentworth, Wesley stayed at Doncaster, "nothing pleased with the drunken, cursing, swearing soldiers who surrounded us on every side." On that same day he wrote an eleven-page pamphlet with the title "Advice to the People called Methodists." Describing Methodists as "people who profess to pursue (in whatsoever measure they have attained) holiness of heart and life," he warns them of the misunderstanding and persecution which is bound to be theirs because of the novelty of their principles and practices. The very name they bear is in bad odour. "To most people it is still 'heathen Greek,' vaguely standing for 'something very bad—either a Papist, a heretic, an underminer of the Church, or some unheard-of monster.'"

In particular, in these days of national peril, he warns them that Methodists, with their private fellowship meetings, are liable to be suspected of carrying on some sinister design (especially by those who do not, or will not, know your

In Wesley's Day

inviolable attachment to His present Majesty)." With what seems almost excessive caution he bids them beware of giving opportunity to their enemies by narrow-minded zeal or extravagant "enthusiasm," wisely urging them, "If you cannot reason or persuade, a man into the truth never attempt to force him into it."

A few days later, while in Sheffield, Wesley wrote a companion-tract—to the general public this time. Its title was modelled on that of his venture of two years earlier: "A Word in Season; or, Advice to an Englishman." He recalls to his fellow-citizens the disaster at Prestonpans less than a month ago—"Our armies broken in pieces; and thousands of our men either killed on the spot, or made prisoners in one day." He becomes a prophet of woe, rousing men to withstand the romantic appeal of Prince Charlie:—

"Nothing is plainer than that the Pretender cannot be King of England, unless it be by conquest. But every conqueror may do what he will; the laws of the land are no laws to him. And who can doubt, but one who should conquer England by the assistance of France, would copy after the French rules of government?"

(Wesley, of course, had no great love for the French language or people.) The remainder of the tract is an exposition of the text, "Because of our sins is this evil come upon us," and he urges—

"Therefore, whatever we do, let us make God our friend; let us with all speed remove the cause of His anger; let us cast away our sins. Then shall His love have free course, and He will send us help, sufficient help, against all our enemies."

It has been said that the Methodist Revival saved England from a counterpart of the French Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century. Fifty years earlier Methodism was pulling its weight in the same direction.

F. B.

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