

# Session 6: All-Out War On the Wesleys

What tho' a thousand hosts engage,  
A thousand worlds, my soul to shake?  
I have a shield shall quell their rage,  
And drive the alien armies back;  
Portrayed it bears a bleeding Lamb:  
I dare believe in Jesu's name.

Methodist meetings, now everywhere, were characterized by outward expressions of emotions—joy, weeping, and frequently speaking in unknown tongues and falling onto the floor in rigors. As initial attempts to silence the “enthusiastical” Wesley failed, and as his preaching events began attracting huge crowds, many anxious Anglican clergy began resorting to extreme means to stifle him. Though it is fairly well-known that Wesley’s field preaching stirred up mob violence, not so known is the fact that often the instigators of these riots were *clergy in excellent standing with the church!* Bishops sent their pastors orders to consider Methodists a “reproach not only to our church and country but to human nature itself.” In a 55-page pastoral letter, the Bishop of London dedicated 2/3 of the space to a denunciation of the Methodists. Clergy, who might have been friendly to the Methodists, were intimidated by the bishops. One historian wrote: “Vicars, deans, curates, rectors, chaplains, and bishops issued forth with sermons, pastorals, and tractates abusing the Methodists and warning the people against them.” When the Wesleys were coming to town, priests warned good Anglican fathers to bar their daughters from attending their services, for they cast a mysterious spell over the fairer sex. At St. Ives in 1743, Wesley attended an Anglican service. In his presence the rector called the Methodists “enemies of the church, seducers, troublers, scribes, Pharisees and hypocrites.” One lay preacher heard himself called by the priest a “minister of the devil, an enemy of God, an enemy to the church and to all mankind.” Methodism “was everywhere spoken against.” However, the bishops and priests only gave Methodism publicity, and soon everyone had heard of Wesley’s great movement.<sup>1</sup>

Still, the institutionally inert tried to stamp out the fire any way they could. Jealous clergy and drunken mobs teamed up to do harm. At Mackford, for

example, violence broke out and drunken troublemakers dragged Wesley by his hair through the mud. Those who had come to hear him were pelted with stones. Many were beaten with clubs and some sustained permanent injury. But prior to Wesley's arrival, Rev. George White had posted a proclamation calling together the mob "for the defence of the Church of England and the Support of the Manufactory in and about Colne."<sup>2</sup> Rev. White, the instigator, smiled as he watched his riot from the sidelines. Wesley said he appeared "well-pleased... talking of justice and law" and "not attempting in the least to hinder them." Beforehand he had promised every volunteer alcoholic drink. It might be worth noting that eventually Rev. Mr. White later died of an alcohol-related illness. After preaching at St. Ives, John Wesley wrote:

I preached at five. As we went home a great mob followed and threw whatever came to hand. I was struck several times, once or twice in the face."<sup>3</sup>

The Anglican priest at Tealby openly announced that he was raising a mob in order "to give the finishing strokes to the Methodists."

Like the Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, John and Charles taught their followers not to resist violence, to have courage and not be afraid. When John heard of a riot breaking out against a Methodist meeting in a neighboring town, instead of going the other way he would ride directly into the heart of the opposition! He told his preachers, "Always stare a mob in the eye!" When someone drew a knife or sword against John or Charles, they were known to open their shirts and say, "Kill me!"

Throughout Wesley's life, especially in the early decades, Methodists were abused like Christians in the first three centuries. Worshipers were attacked with clubs, whips, bricks, stink bombs, torches and rotten eggs. Methodist women were pulled from prayer meetings and raped, as were the wives and daughters of Methodist preachers. Their houses were burned and their meager belongings stolen or scattered. Horses were ridden and cattle stampeded through Methodist meetings.



18<sup>th</sup> century English sports were violent, and crowds found as much pleasure in watching a Methodist preacher tortured as cheering a cockfight. In Cologne, Lancashire in 1748, Wesley was struck in the face and knocked to the ground “by ruffians raging like lions,” while Grimshire folks threw “mire and dirt of every kind.” At Wednesbury Wesley endured a series of persecutions which lasted eight months, from June 1743 to February 1744. It started on the day before Ash Wednesday, 1744. Mobs shattered windows of all Methodist homes. Then “all the tables, chairs, chest of drawers, with whatever was not easily removable they dashed to pieces,” while unbreakables, such as feather beds, “they cut in pieces and strewed about the room.” At Wednesbury Wesley wrote that “one man struck me on the breast with all his might and the other on the mouth with such force that blood gushed out immediately.” Another time a gun was fired through a window of the bedroom where he was staying.

At Charlton all the farmers entered into a joint agreement “to turn all out of their service, and give no work to any who went to hear a Methodist preacher.”<sup>4</sup> Methodists were arrested, shackled and dragged into courts on charges of disturbing the peace and unlawful assembly. Police raided Methodist meetings and arrested and fined even the poorest participants. Some were ruined as judges took away all their money and possessions. One historian wrote, “...even the pillow under the head of the child in its cradle was taken by their cruel oppressors.”<sup>5</sup> Wesley said: “They thrust us into the mud, and then complained because we were dirty.” One group of “gentlemen” threatened to fire any of their employees who refused to participate in the riot. They drew up a