

Citation metadata

Author: Richard P. Heitzenrater
Date: Jan. 1999
From: *Methodist History* (Vol. 37, Issue 3)
Publisher: United Methodist Church, General Commission on Archives & History
Document Type: Article
Length: 8,932 words

Main content

Article Preview :

John Wesley is known among Methodists as being a great preacher; that is part of the Wesleyan tradition. But what precisely is the basis of his reputation as a preacher? What sources do we (or should we) rely upon for a description and evaluation of his role as Methodist preacher? Our reading of his Sermons? The reports of his contemporaries? His own comments about preachers and preaching? The verdict of biographers and historians? Should we try to test the results of his preaching, the progress of the revival?

Contemporaries, of course, differed in their perspective on Wesley. Their view of his preaching often was determined by whether or not they agreed with his theology. It appears, for instance, that his reputation as an "enthusiast," in some instances at least, was worse than the reality. A story is told about Wesley, after preaching at Peasholm Green one Sunday, going to the parish Church, as was his custom. The parish priest saw from Wesley's clerical garb that he was a clergyman, and without knowing who he was, offered him the pulpit. After the service, the priest asked the clerk who the preacher was. "Sir," said the clerk, "he is the vagabond Wesley, against whom you warned us." "Aye, indeed!" said the astonished rector, "we are trapped; but never mind, we have had a good sermon." (1)

As for Wesley's own comments, he made plenty of statements about what a preacher should be, and do, and say. But are such expressions by Wesley an adequate basis of measuring him as a preacher? Can we simply evaluate him on the basis of his enumerated principles on the matter? W. L. Doughty, in *John Wesley, Preacher*, assumes that whatever is positively recommended by John Wesley must be regarded as characteristic of the man himself; that in drawing up his various rules, he was "an imaginary spectator of himself." (2) Such a statement screams for analysis by the historian. And that hypothesis can be tested in some crucial areas, of course, by placing Wesley's actual practice of preaching alongside his principles and checking the correlation. We should not necessarily assume that what he says a preacher should be in fact describes himself, or that what he says a preacher should do describes his activity, or that what he says a preacher should say describes his sermons. What I would like to do is to evaluate (as best we can) John Wesley, Methodist preacher, by some of his own criteria of what a preacher should do and say. That is to say, measure his practice by his principles.

There are several problems entailed in this endeavor. In the first place, we must realize that some of his ideas changed from time to time and remember that he occasionally exaggerated to make a point. These variables are often overlooked in general comments about, and evaluations of, Wesley. We must also recognize that some of the rules he set for preachers might not have been intended to apply to...

[Access from your library](#)

This is a preview. Get the full text through your school or public library.

Source Citation

Source Citation

Heitzenrater, Richard P. "John Wesley's principles and practice of preaching." *Methodist History*, vol. 37, no. 3, 1999, p. 89+. Accessed 6 Nov. 2020.

Gale Document Number: GALE|A352487180

Explore

This is a preview. Get the full text through your school or public library.

[Access from your library](#)

Footer

- [About](#)
- [Contact Us](#)
- [Terms of Use](#)
- [Privacy Policy](#)
- [Accessibility](#)

This is a paper on John Wesley and his view of preaching. It takes the theme of law and gospel and makes a case that soft preaching leads to cheap grace. Copyright: Attribution Non-Commercial (BY-NC). "We do not trust those persons who have two faces, nor will men believe in those whose verbal and practical testimonies are contradictory. As actions speak louder than words, so, an ill life will effectually drown the voice of the most eloquent ministry."²⁵ This principle, is what fueled Wesley's desire for a pious life. According to Wesley, if the preacher has established the law in his own life, seeing faith as a means to produce holiness, and he has dedicated himself to preaching the whole counsel of God's Word, he is equipped to couple the preaching of the law and the. "Preaching procedures must be adapted to the several stages of the minister's own growth and to the changing conditions of the people. Methods effectual in one period of life will not necessarily suffice for other periods. Even though the principles of effective preaching remain constant, the way in which they work out varies as situations change. Hence, homiletical methods need to be revised several times within a single lifetime. This book is planned to aid the experienced pastor who finds it advisable at intervals to evaluate and re-evaluate his techniques of sermonizing." (e