

ARTICLES

John Wesley: A Speech Critic

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John Wesley's life and ministry have yielded many rewarding and lasting studies in theology, preaching, and revivalism. One of his greatest contributions to Christendom was his concern for personal, inward piety. A revolutionary kind of religion in the Anglican Church fostered England's "Great Awakening" in the eighteenth century, which spared the country the effects of the bloody and atheistic French Revolution. The Wesleyan Movement need not be recounted here except to say that preaching was indissolubly linked with its methodology. Although rhetoricians were busy reading Hugh Blair, George Campbell, and Thomas Sheridan, Wesley by precept and example, was attempting to make theology and rhetoric compatible.

Wesley traveled over 250,000 miles in his lifetime and preached over 40,000 sermons. It is not an exaggeration to suggest that he traveled more than any other man of his time, spoke to larger audiences, and reached a wider reading public.¹ Obviously, one who saw his little band of believers expand into societies in Ireland, Wales, Scotland, and America, thought it necessary to train and to appoint preachers to carry on the work. By 1791, there were over 100,000 members that needed instruction, and Wesley had definite ideas as to how his preachers should preach.

When the doors of the Church of England were closed against Wesley, he went to the open fields. It is not difficult to understand that Wesley would be concerned about the vocal aspects of the speaking situation. As for his own acumen in preaching, biographer Thomas Dodd states: "His delivery was destitute of the arts of oratory or elocution. His action calm,

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1. James Golden, "John Wesley on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres," *SM*, 28 (1961), 264.

and voice natural, not loud, and clear and manly; style neat, simple, perspicuous.”² His words, “like light, travel in straight lines, and have an instinctive perception of their goal. They never stray, never falter, never miss the mark.”³ It was said that even a child could easily understand him. “There were no far-fetched terms, no soaring among the clouds. All was simple, artless, and clear.”⁴ He knew the secret of that purely Christian eloquence whose only law is sympathy, that speaks to people, not sternly as a prophet, but with the tenderness of a fellow-bondsman, who does not separate his lot from theirs.⁵ Our point here is not to elaborate on Wesley’s preaching but to underscore his ability as a speech critic and to examine his rhetorical concerns for his clergy.

Wesley had a thorough knowledge of the classics in rhetoric. In his *Works* and *Journals* he quoted from Cicero,⁶ calling him “a genius in oratory.”⁷ He compared Aristotle with Lord Bacon as those who have universal genius, applicable to everything.⁸ Although not rhetorically oriented, he quoted from the works of Plato,⁹ Lucretius,¹⁰ Tertullian,¹¹ and Augustine.¹² In fact, there are over twenty direct quotations (from the Latin) from Augustine’s works. He studied the works of Lucian for over fifty years.¹³

It was Wesley’s custom to read quite often to his preachers. He read a *Compendium on Rhetoric* to them with the conviction that “a man of tolerable understanding may learn more in six months’ time than is commonly learned at Oxford in four years.”¹⁴

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2. Thomas Dodd, *John Wesley*, (Cincinnati, 1891), p. 44.
 3. Joseph Dawson, *John Wesley on Preaching* (London, 1904), p. 12.
 4. William McDonald, *The Young People’s Wesley* (New York, 1901), p. 136.
 5. Dawson p. 17.
 6. John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson (London, 1872), IV, 191; VI, 268, 313; VIII, 198; IX, 227, 228.
 7. *Works*, XIII, 478.
 8. *Works*, IV, 404.
 9. *Works*, IX, 194.
 10. *Works*, VIII, 26.
 11. *Works*, X, 90.
 12. *Works*, II, 9; VI, 328, 513; VII, 170; XII, 1.
 13. *Works*, IV, 78.
 14. *Works*, II, 48.

He was familiar with the Port-Royal school,¹⁵ the works of Joseph Glanvill,¹⁶ Pascal's *Thoughts*,¹⁷ Rollin's *Ancient History* and *Belles Lettres*. He said, "I read Rollin's *Belles Lettres* several years ago. Some things I liked; some I did not."¹⁸ Later he called Rollin "a pious man, and a fine historian."¹⁹ Another work he read to his preachers was Aldrich's *Logic* and some of Fenelon.²⁰ Of Hugh Blair, he said, "He is elegant, but not a deep writer."²¹ He attributed the writing of *Fingal* to Blair, which he says is the finest epic poem in the English language.²² After reading Sheridan's *Lectures on Elocution* he expressed his disappointment and suggested there was more in the penny tract that he authored, "On Action and Utterance."²³ He also mentioned his acquaintance with the works of Perkins without making any critical comments.²⁴

Wesley was equipped to be a critic. Although not having too much to say about the right kind of style, he frowned upon the assertion that one who speaks properly and fluently is in God's favor.²⁵ He was careful to point out that there was something more than the gifts of speaking. "All the power of convincing speech, all that force of persuasion, if it is not joined with meekness and lowliness, with resignation and patient love, would no more qualify him for the fruition of God, than a clear voice, or fine complexion."²⁶ On another occasion he stated, "Elegance of style is not to be weighed against purity of heart."²⁷

Notwithstanding these comments about that which was greater than style, Wesley advocated a style that was characterized by simplicity. In writing or speaking, Wesley's dictum came from Fenelon: "Simplicity

15. *Works*, II, 39, 40, 68, 69.

16. *Works*, II, 243; III, 58.

17. *Works*, II, 276.

18. *Works*, XII, 126.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 442.

20. *Works*, II, 129, 176.

21. *Works*, IV, 151.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 276.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 50.

24. *Works*, III, 30.

25. *Works*, VII, 50.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

27. *Works*, XII, 26.

is that grace which frees the soul from all unnecessary reflections upon itself.”²⁸ In a letter to Rev. Mr. Furly, July 15, 1764, he said, “What constitutes good style? Perspicuity, purity, propriety, strength, and easiness, joined together. When anyone of these is wanting, it is not a good style. Clearness is of utmost importance because we are to instruct people of the lowest understanding. We should always use the most common, little, easy words. . . There is dignity in this simplicity, which is not disagreeable to those of the highest rank.”²⁹

When it came to the particulars on preaching, Wesley became very concise and to the point. In a letter to a Mr. John King, July 28, 1775, he advised: “Scream no more, at the peril of your soul. . . Speak earnestly as you can; but do not scream. Speak with all your heart; but with a moderate voice.”³⁰ When asked what was the best general method of preaching, he answered, “To invite, to convince, to offer Christ, to build up.”³¹ Being more specific, he added, “Always suit your subject to your audience. Choose the plainest texts you can. Take care not to ramble; but keep to your text, and make out what you take in hand. Be sparing in allegorizing or spiritualizing. Take care of anything awkward or affected, either in your gesture, phrase, or pronunciation.”³²

In his address to the clergy, February 6, 1756, he said, “Next to prudence or common sense, the clergyman should have some degree of good breeding; I mean address, easiness and propriety of behavior. . . . In order to do this, would not one wish for a strong, clear, musical voice, and a good delivery both with regard to pronunciation and action?”³³ He closed this address to the clergy by stating that he mentioned delivery because it was far more acquirable than was commonly imagined. Consequently, Wesley was more specific and wrote in greater detail about the cannon of delivery than did any of the others.³⁴

Wesley divided delivery into four general areas: (1) How to speak so as to be heard without difficulty and with pleasure; (2) General rules for the variation of the voice; (3) Particular rules for varying the voice; and (4) Gesturing.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 287.

29. *Works*, XIII, 416-418.

30. *Works*, XII, 331.

31. *Works*, VIII, 317.

32. *Ibid.*

33. *Works*, X, 485.

34. *Works* XIII, 518-527.

To be heard without difficulty and with pleasure was given priority in achieving effective delivery. He advised all who could to study the art of speaking, to practice the art before contracting the common imperfections in speaking. He advised that speakers should be governed by reason, not by example. Having given this advice, he stated, "The first business of a speaker is to be heard and understood with ease."³⁵ One could achieve this by having a clear, strong voice and by knowledge of the common fault in speaking. Knowing the faults, the speaker would be aware what to avoid. Should a preacher not have a strong, clear voice, he was to practice something aloud each morning for a half hour. In order to acquaint the minister with the common faults in speaking, Wesley enumerated seven of them.

1. Speaking too loud. Listeners would impute this fault to either ignorance or affectation.
2. Speaking too low. To Wesley, this was more disagreeable than speaking too loud. He suggested conversing with those having impaired hearing to overcome this difficulty.
3. Speaking in a thick, cluttering manner. That is, some people mumble, swallow words or syllables.
4. Speaking too fast. The preacher should weigh the sense and proportion of his material and properly enunciate every word.
5. Speaking too slow.
6. Speaking with an irregular, desultory, and uneven voice, raised or depressed unnaturally or unseasonably.
7. Speaking with a tone. Wesley considered this fault the most abominable. He said, "Some have a womanish, squeaking tone; some a singing or chanting one; some an high, swelling, theatrical tone, laying too much emphasis on every sentence; some have an awful, solemn tone; others an odd, whimsical, whining one, not to be expressed in words."³⁶ If one would speak in public as he spoke in conversation, this problem could be overcome, he added.

To be heard with pleasure, the speaker must render his voice as soft and sweet as possible. The hoarse, harsh, obstreperous voice could never

35. *Ibid.*, 519.

36. *Ibid.*, 520.

make a favorable impression on the audience. Wesley said that exercise would cure this malady. The speaker must labor to avoid the odious custom of coughing and spitting. Most important in effective use of the voice is its variation. Generally, the voice may be varied in three ways: as to height or lowness; as to vehemence or softness; and as to swiftness or slowness.

It is interesting to note Wesley's particular rules for varying the voice. Emotions must be displayed through the articulate use of the voice. For instance, to speak of natural things, one only needs a clear and distinct voice. To speak of the good and honorable actions of men, a full and lofty accent is needed; wicked and infamous actions need to be described by a strong and earnest voice. When speaking of happy events in life, the voice must be characterized by a lively and cheerful accent. When relating tragedy or misfortune, the voice should be slow with a mournful tone. The voice should also be varied according to the greatness of the subject. Little concerns should show an unconcern and familiar voice.

Wesley emphasized the fact that the emotion should be imprinted on the heart of the speaker, for unless he is moved, he will not be successful in moving others. To express love, "use a soft, smooth, and melting voice; hate, by a sharp and sullen one; joy, by a full and flowing one; grief, by a dull, languishing tone, sometimes interrupted by a sigh or groan; fear is expressed by a trembling and hesitating voice; boldness, by speaking loud and strong; anger is shown by a sharp and impetuous tone, taking the breath often, and speaking short; compassion requires a soft and submissive voice."³⁷

Other suggestions in varying the voice dealt with particular aspects of the discourse. At the beginning of the speech, the voice should be low, not only because it is good for the voice but also because it shows a sense of modesty. In the kind of argumentation that is trying to prove, the voice should be a little louder. More loudness should come when you attempt to refute your adversaries. When the conclusion is near, pause, then "gradually rise to the utmost strength of pronounciation, and finish all with a lively, cheerful voice, expressing joy and satisfaction."³⁸

In concluding the suggestions on voice variation, Wesley observed that in reciting and answering objections, the voice should be varied as if

37. *Ibid.*, 523.

38. *Ibid.*, 524.

two persons were speaking. In a prosopopoeia (personification), the voice should be varied according to the character of the persons introduced; in apostrophe, according to the circumstances of the person or thing to which you address your speech; in an aposiopesis (a sudden break off), the voice, which was raised to introduce it, must be lowered considerably. He finished his advice by urging all his preachers to observe those who spoke well.

Wesley was as precise in the rules for gesturing as he was for voice variation. He defined the gesture as “that silent language of your face and hands.”³⁹ He carefully pointed out that the gesture must not contradict what is being said. The gesture must be free from affectation, must be natural, and must be so managed that no motion of the body will offend the eyes of the listeners.

Since it is more difficult to find out the faults of gesture than those of pronunciation, Wesley advised that the speaker use a large looking-glass to observe himself or ask some skillful friend to observe the motions. As for the movements in the speaking situation, they should be governed by the circumstances.

The face is what gives the greatest life to action. “You should adapt all its movements to the subject you treat, the passions you would raise, and the persons to whom you speak.”⁴⁰ Eye contact was given considerable place in Wesley’s concern for audience interest. “You should always be casting your eyes upon some or other of your auditors, and moving them from one side to the other, with an air of affection and regard.”⁴¹ Your eyes should correspond with what is being said. If one speaks of heaven or things above or of things below, the eyes should say so.

In the use of hands, Wesley wanted his preachers to observe the following rules: Never clap your hands, nor thump the pulpit. Use the right hand most; use the left to accompany the other. The hands should seldom be lifted higher than the eyes, nor let down lower than the breast. Your eyes should always have your hands in view, so that those you speak to may see your eyes, your mouth, and your hands, all moving in concert

39. *Ibid.*, 525.

40. *Ibid.*, 526.

41. *Ibid.*

with each other, and expressing the same thing. Seldom stretch out your arms side-ways more than half a foot from the trunk of your body. Your hands are not to be in perpetual motion: "This the ancients called the babbling of the hands."⁴²

Wesley summarized his views on delivery by suggesting that one learns most by practice, by hearing a good speaker, and by speaking often. With an emphasis on imitation, he concluded by stating, "Whenever you hear an eminent speaker, observe with the utmost attention what conformity there is between his action and utterance, and the rules."⁴³ His "methodistic" approach in every aspect of speaking and in his teaching of others was an attempt to get beyond the tedious reflections upon the art to the end of speaking with ease and grace.

42. *Ibid.*, 527

43. *Ibid.*