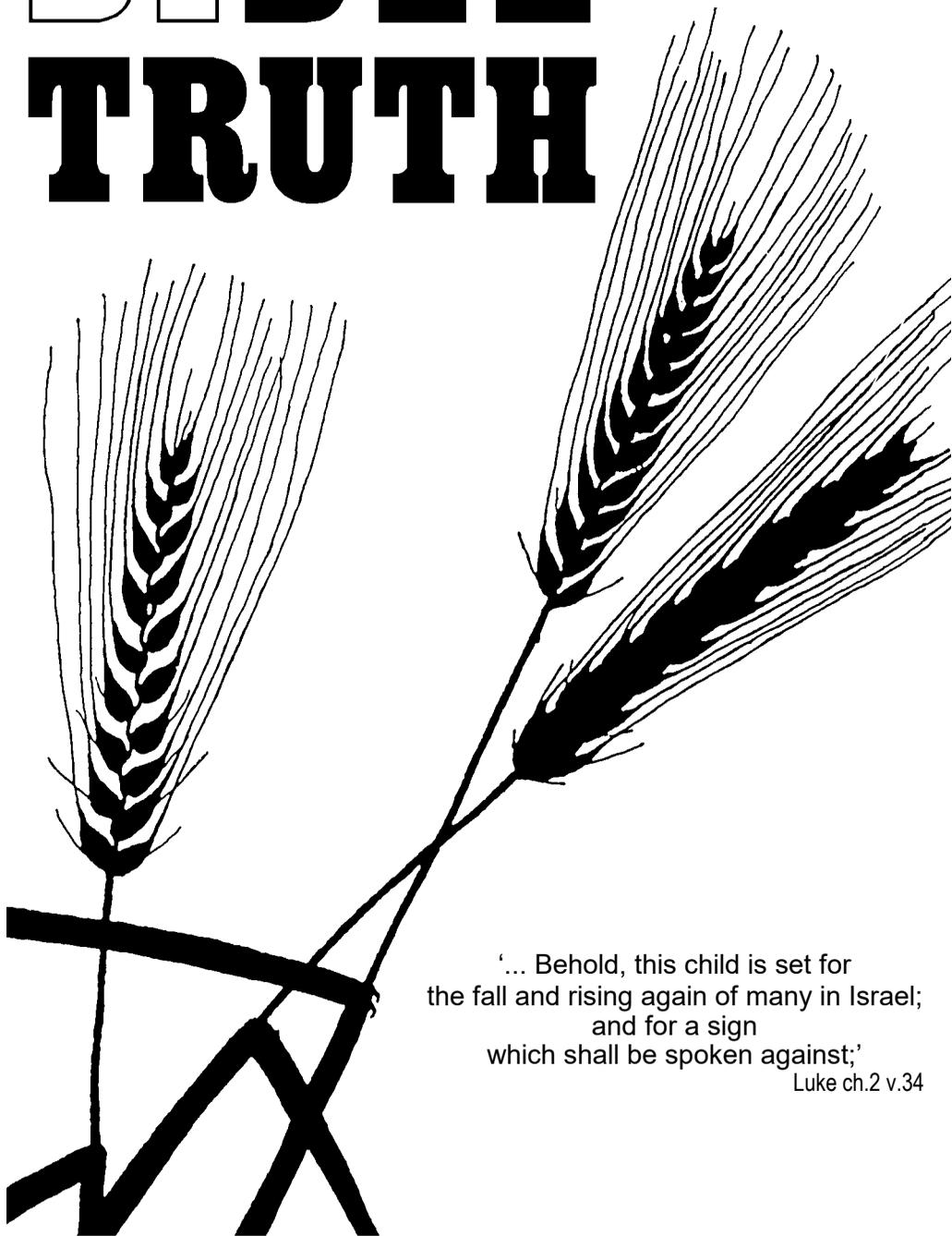


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'... Behold, this child is set for
the fall and rising again of many in Israel;
and for a sign
which shall be spoken against;'

Luke ch.2 v.34

The Evangelical Awakening

John & Charles Wesley

from *the Lion Concise Book of Christian Thought*,
by Tony Lane, 1984, pp 155-156 (with permission).

This was a time of considerable moral and religious decline in England. Unbelief was becoming fashionable and many of the clergy preached little more than a barren moralism. The preaching of the Wesleys and other Evangelicals, or 'Methodists' as they came to be called, came as a clarion call to return to the gospel, the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. As pulpits closed to them, first Whitefield and then Wesley began, in 1739, to preach in the open air. Circumstances had pushed them into the most effective way of reaching the mass of the populace, many of whom were not touched by the churches.

Evangelical preachers went about preaching in the market places and wherever they could gather an audience. John Wesley himself travelled some 5,000 miles a year every year, on horseback, at a time when major roads resembled country dirt tracks of today. (Not for nothing has he been called 'God's Horseman'.) He would stop several times a day and preach to whoever would listen.



'I look upon all the world as my parish. Thus far I mean, that in whatever part of it I am, I judge it meet, right and my bounden duty to declare, unto all that are willing to hear, the glad tidings of salvation'.

Sometimes, especially in the early years, he would meet with a hostile reception, including stoning. But he persevered and was still preaching in the open air at the age of eighty-seven, shortly before his death. There are few areas in England where Wesley did not preach.

Wesley and the other Evangelical preachers had to face opposition, from the clergy and from all levels of society. But at the same time, many responded. Through their preaching Britain experienced the Evangelical Revival and many were brought into a living personal knowledge of Jesus Christ. As a result of the revival, Evangelicalism became a major factor in Anglo-Saxon Protestantism — and for much of the time since then, the dominant factor. The Wesleys gathered their converts into societies, which existed alongside the local parish churches. But the hostility of the Church of England led to their separation from the established church, to form the Methodist Church. Not that the Church of England itself was untouched. As a result of the revival, the Evangelicals became in due course the major group in the Church of England, a position that they retained until the latter part of the nineteenth century. The traditional free churches (the Presbyterians, Congregationalists and Baptists), which had declined in numbers and vitality, were also revived and grew rapidly.

The revival dramatically influenced the Church in England. But its effects were not merely ecclesiastical. Through the revival the lower classes were touched by the gospel in a way that had not previously occurred. Indeed, all levels of society were affected and the moral tone of the nation changed significantly. It has been said that without the revival Britain would probably have faced a revolution like the French Revolution. In the nineteenth century the 'nonconformist conscience' was a powerful factor in politics. The roots of the trades union movement and the Labour Party go back into Evangelicalism. The social and political life of the nation was profoundly affected in many ways.

The Evangelicals had a faith to preach. They also had a faith to sing about. Charles Wesley was probably the greatest English hymn-writer ever. The basic tenets of the Evangelical message can be summarised from his hymns.
