

John Wesley the Methodist

Chapter V: The Holy Club

Charles Wesley Begins It.--"Methodists."--John Wesley its Father.--"Men of One Book." Works of Mercy and Help.--The Oxford Methodists.--Whitefield.--Death of the Epworth Rector.-- Reserved for a Better Appointment.

CHARLES WESLEY came up to Christ Church, in 1726, a bright, rollicking young fellow, "with more genius than grace." He had objected to becoming "a saint all at once." But the rebuff did not estrange the brothers, and soon after John went to Wroote, Charles wrote to him in a very changed mood, seeking the counsel which before he had spurned. Lamenting his former state of insensibility, he declared: "There is no one person I would so willingly have to be the instrument of good to me as you. It is owing, in great measure, to somebody's prayers (my mother's most likely) that I am come to think as I do; for I cannot tell myself how or why I awoke out of my lethargy, only that it was not long after you went away." He not only gave himself with zest to his studies, but began to attend the weekly sacrament and induce others to unite with him in seeking true holiness. He and his companions adopted certain rules for right living, and apportioned their time exactly to study and religious duties, allotting as little as possible to sleeping and eating, and as much as possible to devotion. This precise regularity caused a young gentleman of Christ Church to say derisively, "Here is a new set of Methodists sprung up."

Charles Wesley says that the name of Methodist "was bestowed upon himself and his friends because of their strict conformity to the method of study prescribed by the university." John Wesley, in an address to George II, designates his societies "the people in derision called Methodists," and in his English Dictionary makes good use of the word. He defines a Methodist as "one that lives according to the method laid down in the Bible."

Overton, with an honorable regard for his own college worthy of Wesley himself, says: "A Lincoln man may be pardoned for remarking with satisfaction that Lincoln had nothing to do with the feeble jokes which were made upon these good earnest youths. Christ Church and Merton must divide the honor between them. The Holy Club, Bible Bigots, Bible Moths, Sacramentarians, Supererogation Men, Methodists--all these titles were invented by the fertile brains of 'the wits' to cast opprobrium, as they thought, but really to confer honor upon a perfectly inoffensive band of young men who only desired to be what they and their opponents were alike called--Christians. An Oxford man may, indeed, blush for his university when he reflects that these young men could not even attend the highest service of the Church without running the gauntlet of a jeering rabble, principally composed of men who were actually being prepared for the sacred ministry of that Church."

When John Wesley returned to Oxford he at once became the leader of this little band formed by his brother. His age, his genius for generalship, his position in the university, his superior learning, made this a matter of course. And Charles rejoiced in this. A more perfect instance of real brotherhood it would be difficult to find in history. The elder always spoke of the work which was being done as their joint work. "My brother and I," is the expression he constantly used in describing it. Charles was by no means the mere "man Friday" of his brother, as some have supposed. He would not have been a Wesley if he had not given proof of magnificent individuality. It must be remembered that he was the first Methodist. He was to take his full share in the work of the great revival, not only as a poet, but as a preacher. But John Wesley was nicknamed "the Curator of the Holy Club," or, sometimes, "the Father of the Holy Club." The old rector of Epworth, hearing of John's new title, wrote: "If this be so, I am sure I am the grandfather of it; and I need not say that I had rather any of my sons should be so dignified and distinguished than to have the title of 'His Holiness.'"

Gambold says: "Mr. John Wesley was always the chief manager, for which he was very fit; for he not only had more learning and experience than the rest, but he was blest with such activity as to be always gaining ground, and such steadiness that he lost none. What proposals he made to any were sure to charm them, because they saw him always the same. What supported this uniform vigor was the care he took to consider well of every affair before he engaged in it, making all his decisions in the fear of God, Without passion, humor, or self-confidence; for though he had naturally a very clear apprehension, yet his exact prudence depended more on humanity and singleness of heart. To this I may add, that he had, I think, something of authority on his countenance, though, as he did not want address, he could soften his manner and point it as occasion required. Yet he never assumed anything to himself above his companions. Any of them might speak their mind, and their words were as strictly regarded by him as his were by them."

The first work of the Holy Club was the study of the Bible. The new movement was spiritual, humanitarian, but, first and strongest of all, scriptural. The searching of the Scriptures was earnest, open-minded, devout, unceasing. Wesley himself said: "From the very beginning--from the time that four young men united together----each of them was homo ur, ius libri; a man of one book They had one, and only one rule of judgment They were continually reproached for this very thing, some terming them in derision Bible Bigots; others, Bible Moths; feeding, they said, upon the Bible as moths do on cloth And indeed, unto this day, it is their constant endeavor to think and speak as the oracles of God." This fundamental fact in the history of Methodism must never be lost to view.

At first the friends met every Sunday evening; then two evenings in every week were passed together, and at last every evening from six

to nine. They began their meetings with prayer, studied the Greek Testament and the classics, reviewed the work of the past day, and talked over their plans for the morrow, closing all with a frugal supper. They received the Lord's Supper weekly, fasted twice a week, and instituted a searching system of self-examination, aiming in all things to do the will of God and be zealous of good works.

The first flower of the study of the Bible was a new philanthropy. William Morgan, of Christ Church, visited a condemned wife murderer in the castle jail; Morgan also conversed with the debtors in prison, and was convinced that good might be done among them. On August 24, 1730, the brothers Wesley went with him to the castle, and from that time forward the prisoners became their special care. Morgan also began the work of visiting the sick. John Wesley wrote to his father for counsel, and received an inspiring letter: "I have the highest reason to bless God that he has given me two sons together at Oxford, to whom he has given grace and courage to turn the war against the world and the devil, which is the best way to conquer them."

The Bishop of Oxford gave the young men his approval, and the visiting was extended to poor families in the city. Children were also taught. One of these, a poor girl, called upon Wesley in a state of great destitution. He said to her, "You seem half starved; have you nothing to cover you but that thin linen gown?" She replied, "Sir, this is all I have." Wesley put his hand into his pocket, but found it nearly empty. The walls of his chamber, however, were hung with pictures, and they seemed to accuse him. "It struck me," he says, "'Will thy Master say, 'Well done, good and faithful steward' Thou hast adorned thy walls with the money which might have screened this poor creature from the cold! O Justice! O Mercy! Are not these pictures the blood of this poor maid?'"

It was the practice, he says, of all the Oxford Methodists to give away each year all they had after providing for their own necessities. He himself, having thirty pounds a year, lived on twenty-eight, and gave away two. The next year, receiving sixty pounds, he still lived on twenty-eight and gave away thirty-two. The third year he received ninety pounds and gave away sixty-two. The fourth year he received one hundred and twenty pounds, and still lived on twenty-eight as before, giving to the poor all the rest.

While the number of the Methodists was only four at first, in the following year two or three other students desired the liberty of meeting with them, and these were joined by one of Charles Wesley's students. In 1732 Benjamin Ingham, of Queens; Thomas Broughton, of Exeter; John Clayton, of Brazenose; James Hervey, and two or three others, were admitted to the club, and in 1735 George Whitefield, of Pembroke, became a member. The numbers fluctuated, and when the Wesleys sailed for Georgia the Holy Club had thirteen members. In 1733 there were twenty-seven Methodist communicants. During one of Wesley's absences at Epworth the number dwindled to five, but it rallied again when its leader was once more at the front. Of these early Methodists three were tutors in colleges and the rest were bachelors of arts or undergraduates. All were strictly orthodox in doctrine, or counted themselves so; and practically they had all things in common; that is, no one was allowed to want what another was able to spare.

It would be interesting to follow, if space allowed, the subsequent career of the Oxford Methodists. The sympathetic Morgan died of consumption in 1732. Robert Kirkham, whose sister Betty was probably Wesley's first sweetheart, became an Anglican curate. John Clayton became a High Church clergyman, and a powerful preacher, but refused to recognize the Wesleys after they broke away from Church usages and preached in the open air. Benjamin Ingham's friendship was of better metal. He followed them to Georgia and joined in their later labor. John Gainbold, after a brief experience as an Anglican rector, became a Moravian bishop, and wrote many hymns. James Hervey became a charitable country parson of Calvinist creed, who wrote the once popular, "Meditations." Thomas Broughton was curate at the Tower of London, and for the better part of his life secretary of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge. Charles Kinchin became dean of Corpus Christi College. He was a liberal Churchman, and maintained a close friendship with the Wesleys through life. John Whitelamb, a protegee of Rev. Samuel Wesley, Sr., became his curate, and married his daughter Mary. He was greatly afflicted and spent a life of obscurity as rector of the starveling parish of Wroote, adjoining Epworth.

The Holy Club had one member whose fame in some respects surpassed them all --George Whitefield. He was the son of an innkeeper at Gloucester, and drew ale for the customers until he was fifteen years of age. At the school to which he was sent he made a little stir with his talent for oratory and acting, read Thomas a Kempis, and began to dream of being a minister. At eighteen he entered Pembroke College, Oxford, as a servitor, for which his bartending experience served him well. He was drawn to the Holy Club, but in his poverty dared not join these young gentlemen, though he often gazed at them with deep emotion as they passed through a jeering crowd to receive the sacrament at St. Mary's. At length he made the acquaintance of Charles Wesley, who gave him religious counsel and helpful books, which brought him a powerful religious experience.

He learned that true religion did not consist in going to church, or faithfulness in any external duties, but was a union of the soul with God; and that he must be a new creature. It was an era in his history. He says: "I found and felt in myself that I was delivered from the burden that had so heavily oppressed me. The spirit of mourning was taken from me, and I knew what it was truly to rejoice in God my Saviour. The day-star arose in my heart. I know the place; it may perhaps be superstitious, but whenever I go to Oxford I cannot help running to the spot where Jesus Christ first revealed himself to me and gave me 'a new birth.'" This was in 1735, when he was in his twenty-first year. He was the first of the Holy Club to come into this divine experience. That he did not at once communicate it to the Wesley brothers, who for three years still groped in the twilight of legalism, may be partly owing to the difference which, on account of their superiority in learning and social position, would keep him from presuming to teach them, but still more was it due to the fact that they became at this time separated from him by their preparations for departure to America.

The Father of the Holy Club remained in residence at Lincoln College until 1735. For a time in 1730 he held a curacy near Oxford. He now began to converse in Latin with his brother, a habit which became lifelong. They walked to Epworth, seventy-five miles, on foot, in 1731, and John visited London in that year and the next, calling on William Law, and joining the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge. In 1734 his horseback journeys aggregated one thousand miles, and he formed the habit of reading in the saddle. At London he supervised the printing of his father's ponderous treatise on the book of Job.

The aged rector of Epworth was fast failing in health, and looked to one of his sons to succeed him in the living and furnish a home for their mother and sisters. The son Samuel thought he could not resign his post as headmaster of Tiverton Grammar School. They both turned to John. He had twenty-six reasons against it, but they were all reducible to two; namely, that he thought he could be more holy and more useful at Oxford. He says: "Another can supply my place at Epworth better than at Oxford, and the good done here is of a far more diffusive nature. It is a more extensive benefit to sweeten the fountain than to do the same to particular streams."

However, in spite of all this, he seems to have yielded ultimately to the earnest pleadings of his father and brother, and, no doubt, also the united appeals of his mother and sisters, who would otherwise lose their home. He consented to accept the living if it could be procured. But for some reason, probably the reports of his extreme strictness, the application was unsuccessful; the living of Epworth was given to a clergyman who appears never to have resided there, and the work was transferred to a curate. God had something more important for John Wesley.

The good old rector, who had had such a hard struggle all through life, finished his labors April 25, 1735, at the age of seventy-two. His sons were by his side during his last hours. His mind was at rest. He said to John, "The inward witness, son, the inward witness--this is the proof, the strongest proof, of Christianity." But it was some years before this son knew much about that. The day before his death he told Charles, "The weaker I am in body the stronger and more sensible support I feel from God." To the question, "Are you in much pain" he replied: "God does chasten me with pain, yea, all my bones with strong pain. But I thank him for all, I bless him for all, I love him for all." Laying his hands upon the head of Charles, he said: "Be steady. The Christian faith will surely revive in this kingdom; you shall see it, though I shall not." To his daughter Erailia he said, "Do not be concerned at my death; God will then begin to manifest himself to my family." So he peacefully passed away, just before sunset, and was buried "very frugally, yet decently, in the churchyard, according to his own desire." Little did he think to what strange uses his modest tombstone would be put in after years

John Wesley again returned to Oxford, whence he was, within a few months, to be removed to a widely different sphere of action. The group of earnest Christians who had composed the Holy Club was soon dispersed. "In October, 1735, John and Charles Wesley and Ingham left England, with a design to go and preach to the Indians in Georgia; but the rest of the gentlemen continued to meet till one and another were ordained and left the university. By which means, in about two years' time, scarce any of them were left."

Whitefield had some oversight of them until, in February, 1738, he also embarked for Georgia. Kinchin, Hutchins, Kirkham, and others were more or less at Oxford subsequently, and rendered valuable service in the outside work; but there was not continuously a sufficient number to maintain the frequent meetings, and the society was thus gradually dissolved. The influence of it remained a while as a sweet savor in Oxford, and was distributed widely by those who left. After Wesley's return from Georgia he met some of them, and wrote: "Soon after I returned to England I had a meeting with Messrs. Ingham, Stonehouse, Hall, Hutchins, Kinchin, and a few other clergymen, who all appeared to be of one heart as well as of one judgment resolved to be Bible Christians at all events, and, wherever they were, to preach, with all their might, plain old Bible Christianity."

The main purpose of these Oxonian Methodists had been to save their own souls and the souls of others. Though the little society passed away, yet through the lives of these three sons of genius and of grace, John and Charles Wesley and George Whitefield, first a university was aroused, then a kingdom was set in a blaze, and the nations beyond the seas felt the glow of the divine fires whose new enkindlings had occurred in the Holy Club.

To the two Wesleys, however, the great doctrines of justification by faith and the witness of the Spirit were not yet experimental verities. And they were to learn their practical force not from the voice and pen of any great teacher within their own Church, but from the lips of a humble Moravian preacher, and from the glowing commentaries of the great German reformer.