

John Wesley the Methodist

Chapter VII - The New Birth

Whitefield's Revival Fire.--Peter Bohler's Influence.--Charles Wesley's Happy Day.--John Wesley's Heart "Strangely Warmed."-- A Spiritual Revolution. WHILE the Wesleys were in America their young Oxford companion, George Whitefield, had set the world to talking. Such preaching was never heard. The parish churches were crowded to the doors when he was to preach, even on week days. He preached thirty times a month, some, times four sermons on a Sunday, and weeping hearers followed him out into the streets to get a word with him. He says of a notable sermon: "The doctrine of the new birth and justification by faith in Jesus Christ (though I was not so clear in it as afterward) made its way like lightning into the hearers' consciences."

All classes for the first time now heard from a tongue of fire the Gospel of Christ. The mighty doctrines of justification and regeneration leaped forth in living power. Heaven and hell were realities in awful contrast. Of course the people were moved. They felt that Whitefield was one of them. His illustrations, drawn from common life and spiced with humor, deepened the popular interest. "Even the little improprieties," remarked Wesley, "both of his language and manner, were the means of profiting many who would not have been touched by a more correct discourse or a more calm and regular manner of preaching."

To all must be added the power arising out of the divine transformation of the man and the eloquence of the Spirit. The God before whom he stood was to him so glorious in majesty that Whitefield would throw himself prostrate on the ground and offer his soul as a blank for the divine hand to write on it what he pleased. Mabie says that when Corot in his peasant blouse went out into the fields at four o'clock with his easel before him, and studied the dawn, "the day broke for him as if it had never come out of the sky before; as if he were the first man seeing the first day." So to Whitefield every day seemed the first day on which God had sent the Gospel to men and commissioned him to put the vital truth on the tablets of the heart.

An urgent letter from John Wesley turned Whitefield's attention to Georgia. His heart leaped at Wesley's words: "What if thou art the man, Mr. Whitefield Do you ask me what you shall have Food to eat, and raiment to put on; a house to lay your head in, such as your Lord had not; and a crown of glory that fadeth not away." Whitefield offered himself to the authorities of the Georgian Mission, was accepted, and voyaging westward his vessel passed that of John Wesley homeward bound. His apostolic journeyings and splendid services on both sides of the Atlantic transcend the scope of this biography, though we shall from time to time meet the flaming evangelist as we follow the person and work of the head of the Methodist movement.

For several years after their return from Georgia the Wesleys were thrown much in contact with certain Moravians whose creed kept alive the old doctrine of justification by faith. Peter Bohler, the Moravian, wrote to Count Zinzendorf at Herrnhut of his acquaintance with them:

I traveled with the two brothers, John and Charles Wesley, from London to Oxford. The elder, John, is a good-natured man; he knew he did not properly believe on the Saviour, and was willing to be taught. His brother, with whom you often conversed a year ago, is at present very much distressed in his mind, but does not know how he shall begin to be acquainted with the Saviour. Our mode of believing in the Saviour is so easy to Englishmen that they cannot reconcile themselves to it; if it were a little more artful, they would much sooner find their way into it. Of faith in Jesus they have no other idea than the generality of people have. They justify themselves; and therefore they always take it for granted that they believe already, and try to prove their faith by their works, and thus so plague and torment themselves that they are at heart very miserable.

Bohler put himself under Charles Wesley's care, at Oxford, to learn English. The pupil taught his teacher a yet nobler lesson. When he fell ill and seemed on the point of death Bohler asked him, "Do you hope to be saved " Charles answered, "Yes." "For what reason do you hope it" "Because I have used my best endeavors to serve God." Bohler shook his head and said no more. "I thought him very uncharitable," wrote Charles at a later day, "saying in my heart, Would he rob me of my endeavors I have nothing else to trust to." The sad, silent, significant shake of Peter Bohler's head shattered all Charles Wesley's false foundation of salvation by endeavors.

On Sunday, March 5, 1738, John Wesley wrote: "I was, in the hand of the great God, clearly convinced of unbelief, of the want of that faith whereby alone we are saved." In later years he adds, in parenthesis, "(With the full Christian salvation.)" To the question whether he should cease preaching his friend replied, "By no means." "But what can I preach " asked Wesley. "Preach faith till you have it, and then because you have it you will preach faith." And so on Monday morning he offered salvation by faith to a man under sentence of death in Oxford Castle.

He was deeply moved when the condemned man he again visited rose from prayer exclaiming eagerly, "I am now ready to die. I know Christ has taken away my sins, and there is no more condemnation for me." So he died in peace.

On the Sunday after this affecting scene Wesley took a step of no little importance in the history of Methodist worship. He writes in his

Journal of April 1: "Being in Mr. Fox's society, my heart was so full that I could not confine myself to the forms of prayer which we were accustomed to use there. Neither do I propose to be confined to them any more, but to pray indifferently, with a form or without, as I may find suitable to particular occasions."

Rigg has well observed how strikingly this illustrates the main principle of Wesley's ecclesiastical course, of using whatever methods dearly promised to do the most good. He enters into no abstract controversy as to praying with or without forms. Probably his experiences in America, where he heard the Presbyterian minister pray, and yet more his intercourse with the Moravians, had helped to loosen the bonds of servile ecclesiasticism in this respect. He never condemned forms of prayer, which would have precluded not only the liturgy, but the Lord's Prayer and many hymns, but he found free prayer rich in blessing, and henceforth he held himself at liberty, according to occasion, to pray without forms. "The ritualist was already greatly changed. Already the manacles had dissolved from the hands of devotion; soon the fetters would be broken which bound his feet from running in the evangelical way."

On the following Easter Sunday morning, after thus commencing the use of extempore prayer in social worship, he preached "in our college chapel" of Lincoln; and closed the day with the entry, "I see the promise; but it is far off."

Again Bohler came to his help by bringing together some friends to relate their experience in his hearing. As they testified with clearness and fervor to the joy of faith, John Wesley and his companions were "as if thunderstruck." An old Moravian hymn, "My soul before thee prostrate lies," was sung.

John Wesley thus sums up the result of his conversations with Bohler, the testimony of the Moravians, and the singing of this old hymn: "I was now thoroughly convinced; and, by the grace of God, I resolved to seek it unto the end: (1) By absolutely renouncing all dependence, in whole or in part, upon my own works or righteousness; on which I had really grounded my hope of salvation, though I knew it not, from my youth up. (2) By adding to the constant use of all the other means of grace continual prayer for this very thing, justifying, saving faith, a full reliance on the blood of Christ shed for me; a trust in him as my Christ, as my sole justification, sanctification, and redemption."

Charles Wesley was the first of the Wesley brothers to receive the name of Methodist, and he was also the first to experience joy and peace through believing. "While John was entering this Bethesda pool Charles stepped in before him. One Mr. Bray, a brazier, of London, a poor ignorant mechanic, who knows nothing but Christ, yet by knowing him knows and discerns all things," finds him sick and spiritually perplexed, and invites him to lodge with him in Little Britain, that, he may help him to spiritual health. Here the sick man found Luther's Commentary on Galatians, and was greatly edified by its views of the work of faith. He spent much time in reading, meditation, converse, and prayer, and on Whitsunday, in 1738, he found peace. A poor woman, the brazier's sister, herself recent convert, had been moved to address him with the words: "In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, arise, and believe, and thou shalt be healed of all thy infirmities." She spoke the words tremblingly, and fled. Bray reads, "Blessed is the man whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered," and the hearer, laying hold on the atonement by simple faith, finds himself at peace with God. Opening his Bible, his eye falls on the words, "and now, Lord, what is my hope Truly my hope is even in thee. He hath put a new song in my mouth, even a thanksgiving unto our God; many shall see it and fear and shall put their trust in the Lord." Thus Charles Wesley learned the new Song of the great revival, and found his lifelong inspiration.

On the following Tuesday he began the hymn which links his conversion with that of his brother: Where shall my wondering soul begin
How shall I all to heaven aspire
A slave redeemed from death and sin,
A brand plucked from eternal fire,
How shall I equal triumphs raise,
Or sing my great Deliverer's praise

On that Whitsunday which brought joy to Charles Wesley's soul his brother John attended the Church of St. Mary-le-Strand. He was still grieving because he had not the assurance of acceptance. "Let no one deceive us by vain words," he wrote to a friend, "as if we had already attained this faith. By its fruits we shall know. Do we already feel peace with God and joy in the Holy Ghost Does his Spirit bear witness with our spirit that we are the children of God Alas! with mine he does not. O, thou Saviour of men, save us from trusting in anything but thee! Draw us after thee. Let us be emptied of ourselves, and then fill us with all peace and joy in believing, and let nothing separate us from thy love in time or eternity."

His prayer was heard. On Wednesday, May 24, at five in the morning, he opened his Testament to these words: "There are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises, that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature." As he was about to leave the house he came upon the words, "Thou art not far from the kingdom of God."

In the evening he reluctantly attended a little meeting in Nettleton Court, on the east side of Aldersgate Street, where a few pious souls met in a society for prayer and Bible study. Some one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans descriptive of saving faith.

About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins,

even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death. I began to pray with all my might for those who had in a more especial manner despitely used me and persecuted me. I then testified openly to all there what I now first felt in my heart.

The brazier's house was but a few steps away, and John Wesley hastened thither to hail his brother with the rapturous words, "I believe," and to join him in singing the new hymn, Where shall my wondering soul begin

His conversion revolutionized the whole character and method of his ministry. The great evangelical doctrines had been obscured by his sacerdotalism. His moral teaching, lofty as it was, had lacked the inspiration of the mightiest motive-- the personal consciousness of God's love to man and the burning love to God created by the witness of the Spirit. The faith of a servant was transformed into the faith of a son, and from this hour, as Dr. Rigg observes, "this ritualistic priest and ecclesiastical martinet was to be transformed into a flaming preacher of the great evangelical salvation and life in all its branches, and its rich and varied experiences. Hence arose Wesleyan Methodism and all the Methodist Churches." The younger Methodist, Rev. Hugh Price Hughes', expressed the same conviction as to the historical importance of this event: "The Rubicon was crossed. The sweeping aside of ecclesiastical traditions, the rejection of the apostolical succession, the ordination with his own hands of presbyters and bishops, the final organization of a separate and fully equipped Church, were all logically involved in what took place that night."

Oxford Methodism, as Fletcher's latest biographer, P. W. Macdonald, has observed, "With its almost monastic rigors, its living by rule, its canonical hours of prayer, is a fair and noble phase of the many-sided life of the Church of England, and with all its defects and limitations claims our deep respect. But it was not the instrument by which the Church and nation were to be revived; it had no message for the world, no secret of power with which to move and quicken the masses. To do this it must become other than it was. It must die in order to bring forth much fruit. And this death and rising were accomplished in the spiritual change wrought in John Wesley, the leader of the earlier and the later Methodism." The place of this spiritual event in the history of the English nation has been well stated by the historian Lecky: "It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that the scene which took place at that humble meeting in Aldersgate Street forms an epoch in English history. The conviction which then flashed upon one of the most powerful and most active intellects in England is the true source of English Methodism."

From the year of his conversion Wesley's sacerdotalism withered away. He did not, as an Anglican has observed, abate his attachment to the ordinances of the Established Church, and he did not at once reach that degree of independence of her hierarchy and some of her rules which marks his farthest point of divergence. Dr. Rigg has forcibly said, "Habits of thought and feeling which had become a second nature still clung to him for a while; but these dropped off one by one until scarcely a vestige of them was left." The graveclothes of ritualistic superstition hung about him even after he had come forth from the sepulcher and had in his heart and soul been set loose and free, and he only cast them off gradually, but the new principle that he had embraced led before long to his complete emancipation from the principles and prejudices of High Church ecclesiasticism. The ultimate separation of the Methodist societies from the Anglican Church, Dr. Rigg says, was also involved in this change: "Newman renounced justification by faith, and clung to apostolical succession; therefore he went to Rome. Wesley embraced justification by faith, and renounced apostolical succession; therefore his people are a separate people from the Church of England."