

John Wesley the Methodist

Chapter VIII - Revival Preaching

" Jesus, the Sinner's Friend, Proclaim."--" By Grace are Ye Saved."--A Happy New Year.--Whitefield Calls Wesley Out of Doors.- Shouts in the Camp.--The Old Room at Bristol.-- The Foundry for Gospel Artillery.--Wesley's Chapel in City Road.--Wesley's House.

IN that first burst of song which came to Charles Wesley's lips at his conversion were these pregnant lines: O how shall I the goodness tell, Father, which thou to me hast showed That I, a child of wrath and hell, I should be called a child of God! Should know, should feel my sins forgiven, Blessed with this antepast of heaven And shall I slight my Father's love Or basely fear his gifts to own Unmindful of his favors prove Shall I, the hallowed cross to shun, Refuse his righteousness to impart. By hiding it within my heart No: though the ancient dragon rage. And call forth all his hosts to war; Though earth's self-righteous sons engage Them and their god alike I dare; Jesus, the sinner's Friend, proclaim; Jesus, to sinners still the same. John Wesley was not behind his brother in his purpose to proclaim salvation, and his tremendous energy, inspired industry, and genius for administration soon organized a corps of helpers to assist in declaring abroad the word of life. As he has strikingly summarized this phase of the movement: "Just at this time (1738-9), when we [the nation] wanted little of filling up the measure of our iniquities, two or three clergymen of the Church of England began vehemently to call sinners to repentance. In two or three years they had sounded the alarm to the utmost borders of the land. Many thousands gathered together to hear them, and in every place where they came many began to show such a concern for religion as they had never done before."

On the 11th of June, 1738, eighteen days after his conversion, John Wesley preached his famous sermon before the University of Oxford on "By grace are ye saved through faith"--the keynote of his entire ministry. That sermon is the first of those which form the standard of Methodist belief. That great doctrine he now began to preach with experimental fervor. His conviction of its importance was deepened by his visit to Herrnhut, in Bohemia (July-September, 1738), where he studied with enthusiasm and sympathy the beliefs and practices of the pious Moravians. On the way he spent a fortnight at Marienborn in company with Count Zinzendorf, the chief man of the Moravian brotherhood, The day after his return to London he began, to use his own words, "to declare in my own country the glad tidings of salvation, preaching three times and afterward expounding the Scripture to a large company in the Minorities," one of the localities in which his brother had been zealously preaching and working. Here a woman "cried out as in the agonies of. death," so poignant was her conviction of sin.

On New Year's eve, 1738-9, seven of the Oxford Methodists and some sixty others held a watch-night service and love feast in a religious society whose rooms were in Fetter Lane, London. The seven were ministers of the Church of England. Wesley writes of the ushering in of this most notable year in Methodist annals:

"About three in the morning, as we were continuing instant in prayer, the power of God came mightily upon us, insomuch that many cried out for exceeding joy, and many fell to the ground. As soon as we were recovered a little from that awe and amazement at the presence of his majesty we broke out with one voice, 'We praise thee, O God, we acknowledge thee to be the Lord.'" Whitefield pronounced this to be "the happiest New Year's Day he had ever seen."

Tyerman well regards it as a 'glorious preparation for the herculean work on which Whitefield and the Wesleys were entering. Three days afterward the seven clergymen met again. Whitefield says: "What we were in doubt about, after prayer, we determined by lot, and everything else was carried on with great love, meekness, and devotion. We continued in fasting and prayer till three o'clock, and then parted, with a full conviction that God was going to do great things among us."

It was Whitefield who began to preach in the open air, and he did so at first because the churches would not hold the multitudes who came to listen. At Kingswood, beside Bristol, on Saturday, February 17, 1739, before a congregation of two hundred colliers, he first defied ecclesiastical rules or fashions by preaching in the open air.

"I thought," says he, "it might be doing the service of my Creator, who had a mountain for his pulpit and the heavens for a sounding board; and who, when his Gospel was refused by the Jews, sent his servants into the highways and hedges." Wesley, who came to his aid at Bristol, shrank from the practice, but bethought himself of the Sermon on the Mount as "one pretty remarkable precedent of field preaching," and soon "submitted to be more vile," preaching to a crowd of four thousand from a hillock near the city from the words: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor." Charles Wesley had the same stiff churchly notions to break down, but he was soon in the fields with the others. Thus all three evangelists were committed to a work which did more than anything else to arouse the slumbering people and churches of England.

The philosophic critic of Methodism, Isaac Taylor, has 'truly said: "The men who commenced and achieved this arduous service, and they were scholars and gentlemen, displayed a courage far surpassing that which carries the soldier through the hailstorm of the

battlefield. Ten thousand might more easily be found who would confront a battery than two who, with the sensitiveness of education about them, could mount a table by the roadside, give out a psalm, and gather a mob."

While Wesley remained at Bristol the famous Methodist school at Kingswood, for the education of the colliers' children, began to rise. It was Whitefield who initiated it, but Wesley who gave it substance and form and directed its beneficent career. Under his preaching at Bristol also broke out the strange cries and shouts, accompanied by singular physical manifestations such as marked the Great Awakening in New England. Cries of the sharpest anguish were heard. Hardened sinners were stricken down as in the throes of death. A Quaker who was angry at what he thought to be the affected groans and cries in Baldwin Street room was knitting his brows and biting his lips in displeasure when he was struck down in a moment, as by an unseen hand, and recovering after prayer, cried out, "Now I know thou art a prophet of the Lord!" Bold blasphemers cried aloud for mercy; passing travelers, pausing to hear, were smitten to the earth in deep conviction for sin. An irritated mother, vexed by the weeping of her daughter, became herself convulsed with sorrow and went home in joy. A physician, who thought that mere excitement or even fraud had most to do with these scenes, was present at one meeting and watched with keen eyes one woman whom he had known for years: She broke out into "strong cries and tears." Great drops of perspiration ran down her face, and her body shook. He was convinced that in this case at least there was no imposition nor mere natural disorder, and when, in a moment, both body and soul were healed he acknowledged "the finger of God."

It must, in justice to Wesley, be said that such phenomena were never encouraged by him, but every effort was made to control them. There is no doubt that there were some cases of imposture. Charles Wesley said: "Many, no doubt, were at our first preaching struck down, both body and soul, into the depth of distress. Their outward affections were easy to be imitated." Where he suspected affectation he ordered the persons to be carried away. At Newcastle he declared he thought no better of anyone for crying out or interrupting his work, and successfully secured quietness. He sometimes regarded "the fits" as a device of Satan to stop the work.

But when every allowance was made for such cases the evangelists themselves had good reason to believe that the large majority were the result of real and intense conviction for sin. "From the days of John the Baptist till now," observes Mrs. Oliphant, "such incidents have made themselves visible wherever a new voice like that of him in the wilderness has come, rousing the world into a revival of religious life." One of Wesley's most recent biographers in the Anglican Church, Miss Wedgwood, is convinced "that there was something in the personal influence of Wesley (for it certainly does not remain in his sermons) which had the power of impressing on a dull and lethargic world such a horror of evil, its mysterious closeness to the human soul, and the need of a miracle for the separation of the two, as no one perhaps could suddenly receive without some violent physical effect."

On May 12, 1739, the foundation stone of the first Methodist "preaching room" in the world was laid. It was the building known to Wesley in after years as "the new room in the Horsefair." The eleven trustees whom Wesley anointed did very little to raise the necessary funds, and Wesley took upon himself the payment of the builder. Whitefield urged Wesley to get rid of the trustees, on the ground that they would have power under the deed to turn him out if he displeased them by his preaching. Wesley took this advice, canceled the deed, and became the sole proprietor. This, though insignificant at the time, was a matter of great importance, for in this manner nearly all the chapels built in the early years of his career were vested in himself. This involved serious responsibility, which however, was honorably fulfilled; for trusts were afterward created, and by his "Deed of Declaration" all his interests in his chapels were transferred to his incorporated Conference.

Three weeks after the first stone was laid Wesley wrote: "Not being permitted to meet in Baldwin Street, we met in the shell of our new society room. The Scripture which came in course to be explained was, 'Marvel not if the world hate you.' We sung: Arm of the Lord, awake, awake Thine own immortal strength put on, and God, even our own God, gave us his blessing." Here the first class meeting was held. Here, in Wesley's lifetime, eighteen Conferences assembled. From the old pulpit, moved from its former place, but otherwise unchanged, John Wesley in 1739 expounded the Acts of the Apostles, the "inalienable charter" of the Churches of God. It was also Charles Wesley's pulpit, in which he preached for many years. And many others, men of renown, who turned the old godless world of those days upside down, preached in that pulpit, and lodged in the little rooms above, like ships' cabins. Whitefield complained to Wesley that the room was too richly ornamented. Wesley replied: "The society room at Bristol, you say, is adorned. How Why, with a piece of green cloth nailed to the desk, and two sconces, for eight candles each, in the middle. I know no more. Now, which of these can be spared I know not; nor would I desire more adornment, or less. But 'lodgings are made for me and my brother.' This is, in plain English, there is a little room by the school where I speak to the persons who come to me, and a garret in which a bed is placed for me."

In London, whither he went in June, Mr. Wesley preached to vast crowds in the fields near the site of the old Foundry and the later chapel in City Road, the most celebrated preaching-house of world-wide Methodism.

The winter of 1739 was unusually severe, and in the prospect of being unable to preach out of doors, and with most of the churches closed against him, Wesley, by the advice and with the help of two gentlemen until then unknown to him, leased the Foundry for 115, and afterward restored and almost rebuilt the whole, at a cost of 800, to fit it for his purposes. This was the arsenal which had been wrecked by an explosion when the Methodist preacher was a lad at the Charterhouse School.

Its preaching room would seat fifteen hundred people. The band room behind seated three hundred. One end of the chapel was fitted up for a schoolroom; the opposite end was the "book room," and the Collection of Psalms and Hymns published in 1741 bore the imprint, "Sold at the Foundry, Upper Moorfields." Above the band room were Wesley's apartments, whither he brought his mother, to spend her declining days.

Wesley's first service was held at the Foundry on Sunday, November 11, 1739. He wrote: "I preached at eight o'clock to five or six thousand, on the Spirit of Bondage and the Spirit of Adoption, and at five in the evening in the place which had been the king's foundry for cannon. O hasten Thou the time when nation shall not rise up against nation, neither shall they learn war any more!" For thirty-eight years the Foundry was the headquarters of Methodism, and the center of many philanthropic agencies, including the charity school, a dispensary, almshouse for nine poor widows, and a loan society. "On dark winter nights, over roads without pavements, and unlighted by gas or lamps of any kind save the flickering lantern of the serious and earnest worshipers, might be seen those devout men and women almost groping their way to the daily services at the first Methodist chapel, led by the tinkling of the Foundry bell."

The building was often so overcrowded that preacher and people left it for the open fields, and the crazy structure was costly to repair. In 1775 Wesley obtained from the city authorities a piece of land two hundred yards away from this old building, and on a stormy April day in 1777 he laid the foundation stone of the "new chapel" in City Road. On November 1, 1778, the chapel was opened. It was the first Methodist chapel built in London, and was unequaled throughout the connection. To a preacher who compared one of the Hull chapels with it Wesley replied, "If it be at all equal to the new chapel in London I will engage to eat it." Two years after its completion Wesley was awakened one night by an alarm of fire. The building stood in the course of the flames, but while the family were at prayer the wind shifted and saved the structure. The glory of the "latter house" was as great as that of the former, and many memorable services were held within its walls, notably that of 1785, the first London ordination service, when three laymen were solemnly set apart "to administer the sacraments and feed the Church of God." In 1791 ten thousand persons filed through the house to look on the calm face of John Wesley as he lay coffined for burial in the adjoining graveyard.

The chapel in City Road, now known as Wesley's Chapel, has been many times renovated, but the shell of the building, the galleries and beams, the communion table and rail are all of Wesley's time. Many mementos of the Wesleys and Fletcher are preserved in it, and it is the most interesting locality in London to all lovers of Methodist history. Twice, in 1881 and 1901, the Ecumenical Conference has brought together within its hallowed walls the spiritual children of John Wesley from every quarter of the world. In 1902 its memorial window to Bishop Simpson, the gift of American Methodists, was unveiled, with appropriate ceremony, to which the presence and participation of the Ambassador of the United States gave especial dignity.

Wesley's dwelling house still stands substantially unaltered on the south side of the open space in the front of the chapel. He occupied the three rooms on the ground floor, and was head of the household of London preachers who dwelt above, as a significant entry in his Journal shows, December 9, 1787: "I went down at half an hour past five, but found no preacher in the chapel, though we had three or four in the house. [From the minutes of the Conference we may infer that these were Dr. Coke, Mr. Creighton, Samuel Bradburn, and John Atlay.] So I preached myself. Afterwards, inquiring why none of my family attended the morning preaching, they said it was because they sat up too late. I ... therefore ordered that (1) everyone under my roof should go to bed at nine, that (2) everyone might attend the morning preaching."

Hither came Dr. Coke to discuss Wesley's momentous proposal of ordination--although the ordination took place later in a private house at Bristol. Hither, also, often came Charles Wesley on his little horse, gray with age, to write and sing many of his hymns to the delighted household. And hither, too, came John Howard, the philanthropist, to spend an hour with John Wesley in memorable converse. And in the front room the founder of Methodism died. Can we wonder that the plain old dwelling is visited by troops of Methodists, who rejoice that in 1898 it was endowed as a permanent memorial of Wesley and a house for "Christian workers in the development of the spiritual and aggressive work connected with Wesley's Chapel"