

John Wesley the Methodist

Chapter XVI - The Work Beyond the Sea

Methodism in 1769.--An American Offshoot.--Shall Wesley Go-- Political Pamphlets.--Wesley to Lord North.--A Calm Address --A Methodist Episcopal Church for America.

A DOZEN years ago there came to light a letter written by John Wesley in 1769 to John Liden, a professor in Lund University, in Sweden, and giving in orderly arrangement the condition of Methodism as it existed in that year.

The sixth paragraph alludes to the work in America: "There are only three Methodist societies in America: one at Philadelphia, one at New York, and one twelve miles from it. There are five preachers there; two have been at New York for some years; three are lately gone over. Mr. Whitefield has published a particular account of everything relative to the Orphan House (in Georgia)."

The first societies in New York and Maryland were the result of the independent labors of emigrants who had been converted in Ireland. Appeals came from the new societies urging Mr. Wesley to send them regular Conference preachers. In the Leeds Conference of 1769 Question XIII is as follows: "We have a pressing call from our brethren at New York (who have built a preaching house) to come over and help them. Who is willing to go"

A young man, apparently far gone in consumption, rose up in his place in the gallery and said, "If you will send me, sir, I will go in the name of the Lord." Immediately another young man, also in the gallery, got up and said, "Sir, if you will send me, I will go with Brother Pilmoor." This second volunteer was Richard Boardman.

Then came Question XIV: "What can we do further in token of our brotherly love " Answer: "Let us now make a collection among ourselves." (This was immediately done.) Question XV: "What is the whole debt remaining" Answer: "Between five and six thousand pounds." So with a heavy debt on one hand and no reserve for contingent expenses on the other, the great American Mission began in the British Conference.

Lloyd's Evening Post, of May 6, 1769, had some fun at the expense of this departure. The public were sarcastically informed that the following promotions in the Church were about to be declared: "The Rev. G; Whitefield, Archbishop of Boston, Rev W. Romaine, Bishop of New York; Rev. J. Wesley, Bishop of Pennsylvania; Rev. W. Madan, Bishop of the Carolinas; Rev. W. Shirley, Bishop of Virginia; and Rev. C. Wesley, Bishop of Nova Scotia."

Wesley was greatly moved by the reports which came to him from the American envoys, Boardman and Pilmoor. He wrote: "It is not yet determined if I should go to America or not. I have been importuned for some time; but nil sat firmi video. I must have a clear call before I am at liberty to leave Europe." Referring to this period, Mr. Tyerman remarks: "Wesley had nearly arrived at the age of threescore years and ten; but if his way had opened, he would have bounded off across the Atlantic with as little anxiety as he was accustomed to trot to the hospitable Perronet home at Shoreham." The obstacles, however, were insurmountable. There was no one during his absence to take his place as superintendent general of the societies in Britain, and to this must be added the strong objections of the people to let him go.

"If I go to America," said he, "I must do a thing which I hate as bad as I hate the devil."

"What is that " asked his friend. "I cannot keep a secret," he answered; meaning that he must conceal his purpose, otherwise his societies would interfere and effectually prevent his going.

Twelve months later he wrote to Mrs. Marston, of Worcester: "If I live till spring, and should have a clear, pressing call, I am as ready to embark for America as for Ireland. All places are alike to me. I am attached to none in particular. Wherever the work of our Lord is to be carried on, that is my place for to-day. And we live only for to-day. It is not our part to take thought for to-morrow."

Rumors spread, both in America and England, that Wesley had decided to go and "turn bishop;" and he wrote later to Walter Sellon: "Dear Walter, you do not understand your information right. Observe, 'I am going to America to turn bishop.' You are to understand it in sensu composito. I am not to be a bishop till I am in America. While I am in Europe, therefore, you have nothing to fear; but as soon as ever you hear of my being landed in Philadelphia it will be time for your apprehension to revive. It is true some of our preachers would not have me stay so long, but I keep my old rule: Festina lente."

For several years the Conference continued to appoint volunteers to America. In 1770 the name of young Francis Asbury was read out--the man who, under God, was to lay the foundations of the Methodist Episcopal Church, when the troubles between the king and the colonies should have led to the War of Independence.

It was Wesley's way to maintain a deep interest in all events which touched the national life. When the kingdom was agitated by fears of a French invasion, in 1756, Wesley, ever practical, proposed to raise five hundred volunteers, supported by contributions, ready to act for a year in case of invasion. They were to be supplied with arms from the Tower and to be drilled by one of the king's sergeants. The offer does not appear to have been accepted. During the Seven Years' War the Methodists observed the national fasts and united in constant intercession.

The parliamentary elections of the day were often riotous. We find Wesley "hastening to Bristol on account of the election" in 1756. He called all the freemen of the society together after preaching, and "enlarged a little on his majesty's character, and the reasons we had to spare no pains in his service," with a view to persuading some of them to vote for John Spencer, who was opposing Jarrit Smith, a suspected Jacobite. This at least reveals the loyalty of the Wesleys to King George. "The whole city is in confusion," writes Wesley to Mr. Blackwell. "O what a pity there could not be some way of managing elections of every sort without this embittering of Englishmen against Englishmen, and kindling fires which cannot be quenched in many years!"

About 1764 he wrote a letter to the societies at Bristol in which he utters a noble protest against political corruption: "For God's sake, for the honor of the Gospel, for your country's sake, and for the sake of your own souls, beware of bribery. Before you see me again the trial will come at the general election for members of Parliament. On no account take money or money's worth. Keep yourself pure. Give, not sell, your vote. Touch not the accursed thing, lest it bring a blast upon you and your household." He asserts that this political morality is essential "to your retaining the life of faith, and the testimony of a good conscience." Such was the ethical teaching of the leader of the Great Revival.

Wesley's first political pamphlet was directed against John Wilkes, M.P., the editor of the North Briton, whose blundering arrest by the government made him a popular hero. Wesley says of himself that politics were beyond his province, but he uses "the privilege of an Englishman to speak his naked thoughts." "I have no bias, one way or the other. I have no interest depending. I want no man's favor, having no hopes, no fears, from any man." We may question if Wesley were unbiased, but of his disinterestedness there can be no doubt. He defends the character of the king, though later we find him opposed to his American policy. He sees that the rule of "King Wilkes" means the rule of "King Mob." Wesley's pamphlet was published in 1768. Next year the celebrated Letters of Junius appeared in the Public Advertiser, and political excitement rose to fever heat. The attempt to tax the American colonies by the notorious Stamp Act--an infringement of the principle "no taxation without representation"--and the imposition of other obnoxious duties after its enforced repeal, were producing the ferment which resulted in the American War of Independence.

The scenes and passions of the American Revolution are now viewed by Englishmen in lengthening perspective and in clearer light. But many of the most honest Christian Englishmen of that day could not see through the smoke of fratricidal war and party fury, as the little band of Methodist preachers in America proved to their cost.

Even Wesley's vision became dim in the thick of the storm. During the first two years of the Revolution he was in sympathy with the colonists. On June 15, 1775, he wrote his now famous letter to Lord North and the Earl of Dartmouth. This letter was consigned to an official pigeonhole, and was first printed in full nearly a century later by Dr. George Smith. It has often been quoted since, notably by Bancroft, who, however, was misled as to its place in the story of Wesley's political change of view. "In spite of all my long-rooted prejudices," writes Wesley, "I cannot avoid thinking, if I think at all, that an oppressed people asked for nothing more than their legal rights, and that in the most modest and inoffensive manner that the nature of the thing would allow. But waiving this, waiving all consideration of right and wrong, I ask, Is it common sense to use force toward the Americans Whatever has been affirmed, these men will not be frightened; and it seems they will not be conquered so easily as was at first imagined. They will probably dispute every inch of ground, and, if they die, die sword in hand. Indeed, some of our valiant officers say, 'Two thousand men will clear America of these rebels.' No, nor twenty thousand, be they rebels or not, nor perhaps treble that number. They are as strong men as you; they are as valiant as you, if not abundantly more valiant, for they are one and all enthusiasts--enthusiasts for liberty; and we know how this principle breathes into softer souls stern love of war, and thirst of vengeance, and contempt of death. We know men, animated with this spirit, will leap into fire or rush into a cannon's mouth. 'But they have no discipline.' Already they have near as much as our army, and they will learn more of it every day, so in a short time they will understand it as well as their assailants. 'But they are divided among themselves.' So you are informed. So, doubt not, was Rehoboam informed concerning the ten tribes. So, nearer our own times, was Philip informed concerning the people of the Netherlands. No, my lord, they are terribly united. Not in the province of New England only, but down as low as the Jerseys and Pennsylvania. The bulk of the people are so united that to speak a word in favor of the present English measures would almost endanger a man's life. Those who informed me of this, one of whom was with me last week, lately come from Philadelphia, are no sycophants; they say nothing to curry favor. But they speak with sorrow of heart what they have seen with their own eyes and heard with their own ears.

"These men think, one and all, be it right or wrong, that they are contending pro aris et focis; for their wives, children, and liberty. What an advantage have they herein over many that fight only for pay! none of whom care a straw for the cause wherein they are engaged; most of whom strongly disapprove of it. Have they not another considerable advantage with the colonists from the moment they determined upon revolution, and his horror of war intensified his feelings." Bishop McTyeire well remarks on the extreme infelicity of the case that, while the letter to Lord North lay buried in the state archives for nearly a century, the Address to the Colonies was published

by tens of thousands of copies, creating serious difficulties for the American preachers.

With characteristic wisdom and charity Asbury thus comments on an "affectionate" letter which he received from Wesley: "I am truly sorry that the venerable man ever dipped into the politics of America. My desire is to live in love and peace with all men; to do them no harm, but all the good I can. However, it discovers Mr. Wesley's conscientious attachment to the government under which he lives. Had he been a subject of America, no doubt but he would have been as zealous an advocate of the American cause. But some inconsiderate persons have taken occasion to censure the Methodists in America on account of Mr. Wesley's political sentiments."

The independence of America brought Wesley face to face with a new problem. The American Methodists were left without an ordained ministry capable of administering the sacraments. They looked to Wesley as their "father," and asked what they should do.

The crisis was reached in 1784. Thirty-eight years earlier, as we have seen, Wesley had renounced the High Church dogma of apostolic succession, and had been convinced that in the primitive Church "bishops and presbyters were of the same order, and consequently have the same right to ordain." He now proceeded to exercise that right. The Rev. Dr. Thomas Coke, a presbyter of the Established Church, had been for six years a Methodist preacher. In his study at City Road, London, Wesley first asked Dr. Coke to accept episcopal consecration at his hands and become "superintendent" (or bishop) of the societies in the United States. Coke asked for time to consider this innovation on the order of the Anglican Church. Wesley cited the example of the ancient Alexandrian Church, which for two hundred years had provided its bishops through ordination by its presbyters. Two months passed before Coke wrote to Wesley accepting his proposal, though still suggesting delay. But on September 1, 1784, the momentous step was taken at Bristol. Richard Whatcoat thus records it in his Journal: "September 1, 1784, Rev. John Wesley, Thomas Coke, and James Creighton, presbyters of the Church of England, formed a Presbytery and ordained Richard Whatcoat and Thomas Vasey deacons, and on September 2, by the same hands, etc., Richard Whatcoat and Thomas Vasey were ordained elders, and Thomas Coke, LL.D., was ordained superintendent for the Church of God under our care in North America."

The ordination took place in Mr. Castleman's, 6 Dighton Street. Wesley commissioned Dr. Coke to ordain and consecrate Francis Asbury as "joint superintendent" on his arrival in America, and wrote a letter for circulation among the societies, which concludes with the significant words: "As our American brethren are now totally disentangled both from the State and from the English hierarchy, we dare not entangle them again either with the one or the other. They are now at full liberty simply to follow the Scriptures and primitive Church; and we judge it best that they should stand fast in that liberty wherewith God has so strangely made them free."

Charles Wesley was shocked by what he considered to be a breach of Church order. He wrote to his friend Dr. Chandler: "I can scarcely yet believe it, that in his eighty-second year my brother, my old and intimate companion and friend, should have assumed the episcopal character, ordained elders, consecrated a bishop, and sent him to ordain our lay preachers in America. Lord Mansfield told me last year that ordination was separation." He wrote to his brother begging him, before he had quite broken down the bridge, to stop and consider. But his brother had considered the question for forty years, and the extraordinary need of America was not the only ground of his action. He based it upon Scripture, history, and reason. "I firmly believe," he replied, "that I am a scriptural episcopos as much as any man in England, or in Europe; for the uninterrupted succession I know to be a fable which no man ever did or can prove."

Canon Overton, a Churchman who considers Wesley's action to have been utterly wrong, says with honorable candor: "It has been said that John Wesley's mental powers were failing when he began to 'set apart' his preachers; and Charles Wesley himself has countenanced the idea by exclaiming, 'Twas age that made the breach, not he!' But there really appear to be no traces of mental decay in any other respects."

Wesley used the Latin designation "superintendent" rather than "bishop," the more accurate rendering of the Greek episcopos. The latter word was associated in England with too much secular pomp to satisfy his simple tastes. It was not his wish to multiply bishops of the Anglican type. He desired a more primitive Church order; as Dr. Gregory has expressed it, "not prelatical, but presbyterial; not hierarchical, but evangelistic; not diocesan, but 'itinerant.'" The term bishop, in this primitive sense, was afterward adopted by the Methodist Episcopal Church. Wesley raised an objection to the designation "Episcopal," though he clung tenaciously to his term "superintendent."

The history of the Methodist Episcopal Church shows that Wesley's fear of the hierarchical use of the more simple and exact term "bishop" was groundless. Watson has well stated Wesley's position. He "never did pretend to ordain bishops in the modern sense, but only according to his view of primitive episcopacy... founded upon the principle of bishops and presbyters being of the same degree; a more Extended office only being assigned to the former, as in the primitive Church. For, though nothing can be more obvious than that the primitive pastors are called bishops or presbyters indiscriminately in the New Testament, yet at an early period those presbyters were, by way of distinction, denominated bishops, who presided in the meetings of the presbyters, and were finally invested with the government of several churches, with their respective presbyteries; so that two offices were then, as in this case, grafted upon the same order." The Methodist bishops, says Watson, "have in practice as well exemplified the primitive spirit as in principle they were conformed to the primitive discipline."