

John Wesley the Methodist

Chapter X - Lay Helpers

Wesley's "Irregularities."--", Soul-saving Laymen."--Cennick, Humphreys, Maxfield.--, He is as Surely Called of God to Preach as You Are."--John. Nelson, of Birstall.--The Extraordinary Call of Women.--Mary Bosanquet and others.

WESLEY had already become a radical anti-High Churchman. Four departures from conventional church "order" evidence this. He had organized a system of religious societies altogether independent of the parochial clergy and of episcopal control, and the "rules" of his societies contained no requirement of allegiance to the State Church. This was a distinct step toward a separate communion. A year later he had built meetinghouses, licensed and settled on trustees for his own use. The next year he began, with his brother, to administer the sacraments in these houses. Now he took another step in the same direction by calling out lay preachers, wholly devoted to the work of preaching and visitation. When this last step was challenged he met it in a style which showed how resolutely he was "casting off the graveclothes" of sacerdotalism. "I do assure you this at present is my embarrassment. That I have not gone too far yet I know, but whether I have gone far enough I am extremely doubtful Souldamning clergymen lay me under more difficulties than soulsaving laymen."

The step cost him a severe struggle. "To touch this point," he says, "was to touch the apple of mine eye." But in his First Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion he triumphantly justifies lay preaching by Scripture, Church history, and Christian common sense. "God immediately gave a blessing thereto. In several places, by means of these plain men, not only those who had begun to run well were hindered from drawing back unto perdition, but other sinners also, from time to time, were converted from the error of their ways I know no Scripture which forbids making use of such help in a case of such necessity. And I praise God who has given even this help to these poor sheep when their own shepherd pitied them not."

The "plain men" who head the host of Wesley's lay preachers are John Cennick, Joseph Humphreys, Thomas Maxfield, and John Nelson.

John Cennick was the grandson of persecuted Quakers. He had turned from a reckless youth to deep seriousness and so to a joyous Christian experience. He made the acquaintance of the Methodist leaders, and was engaged to teach the Kingswood school. Here, with Wesley's approval, he began "expounding" the word to the assembled colliers. Later he left the Methodists and joined the Moravians, doing nobly the work of an evangelist amid mobs and sore abuse. He died in 1755, if it be well to speak of him as dead who wrote those living hymns, "Children of the heavenly King" and "Thou dear Redeemer, dying Lamb."

Joseph Humphreys, who began to assist Wesley at the Foundry in 1740, had been trained for the ministry in a Dissenters' school. Having been awakened by hearing the Methodist preachers, he began to read sermons, then to exhort briefly, and finally to preach, in spite of jeers and maltreatment. After his work with Wesley he joined Whitefield's following, later the Presbyterians, and died a regularly ordained clergyman.

Thomas Maxfield was one of the first converts at Bristol. He went up to London with Charles Wesley, and was helpful as personal worker at the Foundry meetings. By the usual stages he went on from exhortation to preaching in John Wesley's absence.

Wesley at first considered this preaching of sermons, as distinguished from the informal exhortations of a leader, an irregularity, and hastened back to London to check it. He arrived with an anxious look upon his face. His mother inquired the reason of his concern and displeasure.

"Thomas Maxfield has turned preacher," was his abrupt reply.

"John," said Mrs. Wesley, "you know what my sentiments have been. You cannot suspect me of favoring readily any thing of this kind. But take care what you do with respect to that young man; for he is as surely called of God to preach as you are. Examine what have been the points of his preaching, and hear him yourself."

Wesley heard Maxfield preach, and was satisfied. "It is the Lord!" he exclaimed; "let him do what seemeth him good. What am I that I should withstand God?" His last scruples about employing unordained preachers yielded to his mother's argument, and the woman apostle of the old rectory kitchen, who had alarmed her good husband by the "irregularity" of her fireside services, gave an impetus to the work of the lay preachers which is felt to-day over the whole earth. The way was now prepared for the extension of Methodism throughout the country, and for the growth of the "circuit" system. But Wesley's enlistment of laymen roused afresh the fears of the English prelates. When Robinson, the Archbishop of Armagh, met Charles Wesley at the Hot-wells, Bristol, he said:

"I knew your brother well; I could never credit all I heard respecting him and you; but one thing in your conduct I could never account for--your employing laymen."

"My Lord," said Charles, "the fault is yours and your brethren."

"How so" asked the primate.

"Because you hold your peace, and the stones cry out."

"But I am told," said the archbishop, "that they are unlearned men."

"Some are," said the sprightly poet; "so the dumb ass rebukes the prophet."

John Wesley's defense of these "unlettered" men was, perhaps, more to the point. He wrote:

"I am bold to affirm that these unlettered men have help from God for that great work—the saving of souls from death. . . . Indeed, in the one thing which they profess to know, they are not ignorant men. I trust there is not one of them who is not able to go through such an examination in substantial, practical, experimental divinity as few of our candidates for holy orders, even in the university, are able to do."

John Nelson, the prince of lay preachers, was a giant York shire stonecutter, whose great body held a soul tormented by uncertainty. "Surely God never made man to be such a riddle to himself, and to leave him so," he wrote, in the era of his spiritual conflicts. "I was like a wandering bird cast out of the nest till Mr. John Wesley came to preach his first sermon in Moorfields. O that was a blessed morning to my soul! As soon as he got upon the stand he stroked back his hair and turned his face toward where I stood, and, I thought, fixed his eyes upon me. His countenance struck such an awful dread upon me, before I heard him speak, that it made my heart beat like the pendulum of a clock, and when he did speak I thought his whole discourse was aimed at me. When he had done I said, ' This man can tell the secrets of my heart; he hath not left me there, for he hath shown the remedy, even the blood of Jesus. '"

Conversion made John Nelson a new creature. His Birstall neighbors were curious to know the cause of the change, and from telling them he was soon preaching to them. "If it be my Master's will, I am ready to go to hell," said he, "and preach to the devils." He could hardly have fared worse had he been taken at his word the parish clergy were enraged to see a stone mason assuming to teach people the way to heaven. They used every means foul and fair to silence him and disperse his meetings. Wesley saw the greatness of the man and called him to London. Together they traveled Cornwall, preaching and enduring opposition and privation. He was cast into prison, impressed as a soldier, but after three months was released. He continued to preach in the market places, submitting to all indignities rather than defend himself by his strength. Once he was felled by a brute who had sworn to kill him. His assailant leaped upon him several times, till he was breathless, and the renewed bleeding from his morning wounds left him unconscious. The bully then seized one of the Methodists who was near and flung him against a wall, breaking two of his ribs. He then went to the gentleman who had hired him and boasted, "I have killed the preacher; he lies. dead in the croft."

As Nelson lay bleeding on the ground "the parson's brother" and about twenty others came to see if he were really dead. They cursed him soundly, dragged him into the street as consciousness returned, and one after another struck him till he was down again. Eight times he struggled to his knees, and eight times they knocked him down. Then taking him by his long hair, they dragged him over the stones, kicking him fiercely. Six of them got on his body and thighs, "to tread the Holy Spirit out of him," they said. One exclaimed, "I have heard that a cat has nine lives; but I think he has ninescore." Another said, "If he has, he shall die this day." The "gentlemen" then dragged him to the village well and attempted to put him in, but a woman intervened and resisted them, and at last some "gentlewomen from the city called the gentlemen by their names," who looked as men confounded at being discovered in this dastardly work. Some friends helped him into a house, and the next day he met Wesley and "found his word come with power" to his soul, and was constrained to cry out: "O Lord, I will praise thee Thou hast brought me out of the jaws of death." It was with men of such mettle to carry the proclamation that John Wesley organized his itinerant ministry.

We have seen that Susanna Wesley became a lay preacher in the rectory of Epworth and saw the fruit of her labor. Her meetings formed part of that providential training which made her not only the mother of the Wesleys, but also the "mother of Methodism." We cannot wonder that John Wesley, enriched by the influence of his gifted mother and sisters, should have recognized the freedom and power of woman in the work of extending and deepening the Evangelical Revival and its philanthropic ministry.

Mary Bosanquet, who became the wife of Fletcher of Madeley, is the most eminent of the daughters of Methodism who received what Wesley called the "extraordinary call" to address mixed public Congregations. She was the daughter of wealthy worldly folk, and it was from a Methodist maidservant that Mary first heard of the peace that comes with believing. Before she was twenty her father drove her from home because she would not promise to refrain from trying to convert her brothers. With her own means she opened an orphanage. She and Mrs. Sarah Crosby, one of her helpers, began to address the members of society. Many were present, and the two women were in effect preaching before they knew it.

In 1771 Mrs. Crosby wrote a letter to Wesley to ask his advice and direction for Miss Bosanquet on the same point. With the sound judgment and calm, good sense which distinguished her she argues that from the Scriptures it is clear that occasionally women had an

extraordinary call to preach. For herself she concludes, "If I did not believe I had an extraordinary call, I would not act in an extraordinary manner." Wesley's reply expresses his mature and final opinion: "MY DEAR SISTER: I think the strength of the cause rests there; on your having an extraordinary call. So I am persuaded has every one of our lay preachers; otherwise I could not countenance his preaching at all. It is plain to me that the whole work of God termed Methodism is an extraordinary dispensation of his providence. Therefore I do not wonder if several things occur therein which do not fall under ordinary rules of discipline. St. Paul's ordinary rule was, 'I permit not a woman to speak in the congregation.' Yet in extraordinary cases he made a few exceptions; at Corinth, in particular.

"I am, my dear sister, your affectionate brother,

'JOHN WESLEY."

Mrs. Crosby traveled widely through Yorkshire after this letter, and her labors were owned of God.

Mary Bosanquet was asked by many, "If you are called to preach, why do you not do it constantly, and take a round as a preacher" She answered, "Because that is not my call. I have many duties to attend to, and many cares which they know nothing about. I must therefore leave myself to his guidance who hath the sole right of disposing of me." Again, she tells us, they asked, "Why do you not give out, 'I am to preach ' Why call it meeting " She answered, "Because that suits my design best. First, it is less ostentatious. Secondly, it leaves me at liberty to speak more or less, as I feel myself led. Thirdly, it gives less offense to those who watch for it." Thus she uses her gifts with discretion, as tenderly sensitive to inward impressions, which she believed were wrought by the Holy Spirit, as the saintly Quaker women like Elizabeth Fry and Mary Capper. For thirteen years she toiled at Cross Hall, sometimes in great financial straits, sometimes slandered, but comforted by her friendships, and ever praying, "Only make me what thou wouldst have me to be, and then lead me as thou wilt."

We have seen that Wesley recognized the "extraordinary call" of Sarah Crosby and Mrs. Fletcher as preachers. Later we find him giving even more decided encouragement to Miss Mallet (afterward Mrs. Boyce), whom he met at Long Stratton, in Norfolk, and of whose remarkable experience he gives an account in his Journal. He became to her, as she well says, "a father and a faithful friend." Her own Journal is so suggestive and terse that it must tell its own story: "When I first traveled I followed Mr. Wesley's counsel, which was to let the voice of the people be to me the voice of God, and where I was sent for, to go, for the Lord had called me thither. To this counsel I have attended unto this day. But the voice of the people was not the voice of some preachers. Mr. Wesley soon made this easy by sending me a note from the Conference by Mr. Joseph Harper, which was as follows: ' We give the light hand of fellowship to Sarah Mallet, and have no objection to her being a preacher in our connection so long as she preaches the Methodist doctrine and attends to our discipline.' This was the order of Mr. Wesley and the Conference of 1787. From that day I have been little opposed by preachers."

Another of the prophesying daughters of Methodism was Mrs. 'Ann Gilbert, who consulted John Wesley, about 1771 as to her public work. He took her by the hand, saying only, "Sister, do all the good you can." One minister, who heard her preach in Redruth Chapel to fourteen hundred people, said that she had a torrent of softening eloquence which occasioned a general weeping through the whole congregation; and, what was more astonishing, she was blind, and had been so for many years. The Rev. W. Warrener, the first missionary to the West Indies, was converted under the preaching of another good woman, Miss Hurrell; and Mrs. Holder, Mrs. E. Collett, Mrs. De Putron, and Mrs. Sarah Stevens, all of them ministers' wives, were preachers.