

John Wesley the Methodist

Chapter XIII - In Conference with the Preachers

An Ecclesiastical Statesman.--The First Conference.-- Notable Conferences.--One-Man Power.--"Christian Democracy." --Early Discipline.--Circuits.

"MY brother Wesley acted wisely. The souls that were awakened under his ministry he joined in societies, and thus preserved the fruit of his labor. This I neglected, and my people are a rope of sand." Thus Whitefield, the evangelist, spoke of John Wesley, the ecclesiastical statesman. It was Wesley's aim to bind together with links of steel not only individual members, but all the new societies from Land's End to Newcastle. And he did this at first without any intention to form a separate Church from the Establishment. With a sole desire to shepherd these souls, but against his own ecclesiastical sentiments, in spite of his own protests, and with a curious obliviousness to the final results of his action, Wesley step by step organized a great New Testament Church, which after his death was to drift away from the State Establishment and become one of the Free Churches of the world. It was not Wesley but Wesley's Christ who, as Head of his Church, overruled Wesley's Anglicanism that Methodism might become cosmopolitan.

During his first five years of itinerancy, from 1739 to 1744, forty-five preachers, including three or four clergymen, had gathered round Wesley. The lay preachers maintained themselves by working at their secular callings in the intervals of their journeys. There is no record of the total membership in England, but in London alone there were two thousand members. The class meeting was fully developed, the Rules of the United Societies printed and enforced, the quarterly visitation of the classes arranged for, lay preaching instituted, places of worship secured, and the sacraments administered. And all this had been done apart from episcopal authority or control.

Five years after the formation of the first society class the first Conference was held in London, in 1744. Its purely incidental character is indicated by the quiet record in Wesley's Journal, where "Conference" is spelled with a small "c": "Monday, August 25, and the five following days, we spent in conference with many of our brethren, come from several parts, who desire nothing but to save their own souls and those that hear them."

"That little conclave of 1744 in the Foundry," said Dr. Gregory in 1899, "was the first of a series which has already extended over a hundred and fifty-five years, with many offshoots and affiliations, directing and administering to thousands of churches, in almost every nation under heaven." There were present the two Wesleys and four other clergymen: John Hodges, rector of Wenvo, Wales; Henry Piers, Vicar of Bexley; Samuel Taylor, Vicar of Quinton in Gloucestershire; and John Meriton, from the Isle of Man. The four lay "assistants" present were Thomas Richards, Thomas Maxfield, John Bennet, and John Downes. The Conference considered three points: 1. What to teach. 2. How to teach. 3. How to regulate doctrine, discipline, and practice. For two days they conversed on such vital doctrines as the Fall, the Work of Christ, Justification, Regeneration, Sanctification. The answer to the question "How to teach" was fourfold: 1. To invite. 2. To convince. 3. To offer Christ. 4. To build up. And to do this in some measure in every sermon.

In the light of later history the questions relating to the Church of England are of great interest. It was agreed to obey the bishops "in all things indifferent," and to observe the canons "so far as we can with a safe conscience." The charge of schism was anticipated thus:

"Q. 12. Do not you entail a schism on the Church that is, Is it not probable that your hearers after your death will be scattered into sects and parties Or, that they will form themselves into a distinct sect

"A. 1. We are persuaded the body of our hearers will even after our death remain in the Church, unless they be thrust out. 2. We believe, notwithstanding, either that they will be thrust out or that they will leaven the whole Church. 3. We do, and will do, all we can to prevent those consequences which are supposed likely to happen after our death. 4. But we cannot with good conscience neglect the present opportunity of saving souls, while we live, for fear of consequences which may possibly or probably happen after we are dead."

It was decided that lay assistants should be employed "only in cases of necessity." The rules of an assistant are terse: "Be diligent. Never be triflingly employed. Be serious....Speak evil of no one; else your word, especially, would eat as doth a canker." The remainder of these rules appear in our facsimile pages of the recent edition of Bennet's Notes.

It was decided that the best way to spread the Gospel was "to go a little and little farther from London, Bristol, St. Ives, Newcastle, or any other society. So a little leaven would spread with more effect and less noise, and help would always be at hand." It is evident that the towns here named were regarded as the centers of Methodism in that year. The belief was expressed that the design of God in raising up the preachers called Methodists was "to reform the nation, particularly the Church," and "to spread scriptural holiness throughout the land."

During its session Lady Huntingdon invited the Conference to her London mansion in Downing Street, and Wesley preached from the

text, "What hath God wrought." This was the first of the household services which afterward, under Whitefield, almost transformed that aristocratic mansion into a chapel.

The second Conference was held at Bristol, in the Horsefair preaching room. London and Bristol were the meeting places until 1753, when Leeds was added; in 1765 Manchester was visited, and these became the four Conference towns for the rest of Wesley's lifetime.

A layman was present at the second Conference, as well as seven lay preachers. This layman was Marmaduke Gwynne, a magistrate of Garth, whose daughter Charles Wesley married. In 1749 the question was asked, "Who are the properest persons to be present at any Conference of this nature" The answer was: "1. As many of the preachers as conveniently can. 2. The most earnest and most sensible of the Band Leaders where the Conference is. 3. Any pious and judicious stranger who may be occasionally in the place." It is evident that the early Conferences were very mixed in their membership. It was not until 1784, when Wesley's famous "Deed of Declaration" was enrolled, that the Conference received a legal definition, and the governing body of one hundred preachers was appointed. And it was not until 1797 that "the Band Leaders" and "pious and judicious strangers" were formally excluded, and preachers only declared eligible to attend. Later legislation has again opened the door to the laity.

The Church principles aimed at and acted on at Wesley's Conferences are clearly stated. The leading principle is that every ecclesiastical obligation, including obedience to bishops and observance of canons, must be subordinated to the salvation of souls. We have seen this expressed at the first Conferences; it was reaffirmed later. In 1746, after he had read Lord (Chancellor) King's account of the Primitive Church, Wesley finally renounced the doctrine of apostolical succession. He never swerved from his conclusion, and in a letter to his brother Charles many years after he spoke of "the uninterrupted succession" as "a fable, which no man ever did or can prove."

The Leeds Conference of 1755 was confronted by the fact that some of the lay preachers, upon their, own responsibility, had begun to administer the sacraments. Sixty-three preachers assembled--an unprecedented number. Many views were advocated, but John Wesley's prevailed. He succeeded in persuading the Conference that; whether it was lawful or not, it was no way expedient to separate from the Church. He admitted that he could not answer the arguments for secession; but he wrote: "I only fear the preachers or people leaving not the Church, but the love of God and inward or outward holiness If, as my lady [Huntingdon] says, all outward Establishments are Babel, so is this Establishment. Let it stand, for me; I neither set it up nor pull it down. But let you and I build up the city, of' God." "Church or no Church," he again wrote, "we must attend to the, work of saving souls," He felt that separation at this time would not help the main work. Walsh and his associates consented, for the sake of peace, to cease to administer the sacraments.

So here, for a season only, the question was shelved, not as the result of any ecclesiastical opinion held by John Wesley, "but of that expediency which with him was always a moral law."

At the Leeds Conference of 1769, memorable, as we shall tell later, for the appointment of the first preachers to America, Wesley read a paper in which he advised the preachers what to do after his death. It was signed by all the preachers at the Conferences of 1773, 1774, and 1775, and was afterward superseded by his Deed of Declaration, but it is worthy of note here as showing that at the age of sixty-six he felt that Methodism would be compelled, sooner or later, to take an independent and permanent form.

During his lifetime John Wesley was recognized as the living center of his united societies. He was the president of every Conference. He was felt to be the father of this new people, who before were "not a people," but "a rope of sand." A Fernley lecturer has well said that nothing but his personal influence--spiritual, moral, and intellectual, brought to bear on each part of the wide connection by his visitation and his facile, firm, yet flexible and gentle pen, which gave him a kind of connectional ubiquity--could possibly have held together and molded the vast and locally scattered multitude which was pulsating with a new life.

At the Conference of 1766 he frankly faced the question: "What power is this which you exercise over both the preachers and the societies " After tracing step by step the wonderful history of the societies, he affirms, "It was merely in obedience to the Providence of God, for the good of the people, that I first accepted this power which I never sought; it is on the same consideration, not for profit, honor, or pleasure, that I use it this day."

"Does not Methodism . . . represent Christian democracy within the Church, in opposition to the supremacy of a few great ones" says the Lutheran Church historian, Hagenbach. Contrasting Wesley with Zinzendorf, "who could never lay aside the count," this German onlooker observes of Wesley: "Nature had made him a man for the masses, and, notwithstanding all that native nobility and dignity by which he impressed everybody, there was in him a true absence of everything that savored of haughtiness." Although, inspired by the purest motives and for the good of the people, he maintained his leadership to the last, no leader of men was ever more willing to take counsel with others. With aristocratic blood in his veins, he founded the most democratic Church in Christendom. He encouraged the utmost freedom of discussion in his Conferences. He would have no man muzzled.

It is surely not without reason that so many Methodist class leaders and local preachers have been elected to the various local government boards which now abound in England. In many rural districts their training in the conduct of Church business has fitted them

above all others to serve the community in these local boards. Uninteresting and complicated as Methodist polity and the doings of "Conference" may appear to the casual observer, to those who follow its development the history has national significance.

It was in 1747 that the qualifications of lay preachers were set down in this wise:

"Q. How shall we try those who believe they are moved by the Holy Ghost and called of God to preach

"A. Inquire, 1. Do they know in whom they have believed Have they the love of God in their hearts And are they holy in all manner of conversation 2. Have they gifts (as well as grace) for the work Have they (in some tolerable degree) a clear, sound understanding Have they a right judgment in the things of God Have they a just conception of the salvation by faith And has God given them any degree of utterance Do they speak justly, readily, clearly 3. Have they success Do they not only so speak as generally either to convince or affect the hearts "

The territorial division of the country early necessitated a gradation of office among the preachers. In the most incidental "common-sense manner" a primitive episcopacy of the purest type was thus formed, without the name. The preacher in charge of a circuit was called an assistant (to Wesley), and his colleagues were helpers, both to the assistant and Wesley. At the third Conference we also find the third office, exhorter, recognized. The religious life of the preachers of each grade was the primary qualification, but from the first their intellectual training was provided for, as the lists of books in the early Minutes show. "Read the most useful books," was a minute at Leeds in 1766. "Steadily spend all the morning in this employ, or at least five hours in twenty-four ' But I have no taste for reading.' Contract a taste for it by use, or return to your trade." This applied especially to the itinerants, for whom a better financial provision was made about this time.

Wesley's common sense is evident in the crisp sentences of the "smaller advices about preaching" in 1746. After advising that assistants should never preach more than twice a day, unless on Sunday or special occasions, the minute enjoins: "1. Be sure to begin and end precisely at the time appointed. 2. Sing no hymns of your own composing. 3. Endeavor to be serious, weighty, solemn, in your whole deportment before the congregation. 4. Choose the plainest text you can. 5. Take care not to ramble 'from your' text, but keep close to it, and make out what you undertake. 6. Always suit the subject to the audience. 7. Beware of allegorizing or spiritualizing too much. 8. Take care of anything awkward or affected, either in your gesture or pronunciation. 9. Tell each other if you observe anything of this kind."

A question of intense interest to all who, like Wesley, are engaged in evangelizing the masses also occurs at this third Conference:

"Q. What sermons do we find by experience to be attended with the greatest blessing

"A. 1. Such as are most close, convincing, and practical. 2. Such as have most of Christ the 'Priest, the Atonement, 3. Such as urge the heinousness of men living in contempt or ignorance of him."

The early preachers did not take a vow of poverty on entering the itinerancy, but the Frenchman, Lelievre, in his charming Life of Wesley, has well said, "They practiced a voluntary course of self-renunciation that was never excelled by the followers of St. Francis." One of the rules was, "Take no money of anyone. If they give you food when you are hungry, or clothes when you need them, it is good, but not silver or gold. Let there be no pretense to say we grow rich by the Gospel." Receiving their daily supplies from the society, they were only paid, in money, enough to cover their traveling expenses, and these were very small,, most of them walking long distances, One faithful preacher, who died, in harness, left but one shilling and four pence. "Enough," says Wesley, "for any unmarried preacher of the Gospel, to leave his executors."

Married preachers like John Nelson, stone mason, and William Shent, barber, had to work at their trade for support. In 1752 the Conference fixed 12 as the sum which the societies should pay annually to each preacher. It was a much-breached rule. In 1769 an allowance of 10 was made for the wife of a married preacher. And the next year we find a preacher's house in the principal Methodist centers. In 1774 the rule was made that "every circuit shall find the preacher's wife a lodging, coal, and candles, or 15 yet year" to procure them for herself. An allowance of 4 a year was made for each child.

The question of the education of the preachers' children occupied the Conference of 1748. The school at Kingswood was enlarged, with the help of 800 received from some unknown lady, and a schoolroom, separate from that used for the colliers' school, was provided. A very elaborate plan, extending to the very details of diet, was drawn up by Wesley, and the stringent rules suggest the reflection that Wesley was never blessed with any children of his own. The course of study was encyclopaedic; the discipline severe. But Kingswood School was a marvelous advance upon any school in the kingdom, for boys of from six to twelve years old, in the range and quality of its teaching.

The division of the kingdom into "circuits" first appears in the Conference Minutes of 1746. The circuits and appointments for the next quarter were thus arranged, the initials indicating the names of the preachers:

"Q. How are these places to be supplied for this quarter

"A. As far as we can yet see, thus:

Circuit. June. July. August.

1. London. J.W.J.R.T.R. J.W. To.M.J.R. C.W. Jo.B. Jo.D

2. Bristol. J.M.T. Md. J.W. C.W.T.K.T.H. T.R.T.J.

3. Cornwall. C.W.T. Mk. J.Tr. Jo. Tr. T.R.F.W.

4. Evesham. J.W. Ja. Jo. Ja.J.T. Jo. Co. Jas. Co.

5. Yorkshire. To. Ha. To.W. J.H.J.B. Ja.W. J.T. Jo.N. Ja.W.

6. Newcastle. Ja.W. Jo.R. J.N.T. We. S.L. S.L.T.W. Jo.W

7. Wales. Mr.M. T.R. J.W.

The chapels were legally settled upon trustees in 1749, and at the Manchester Conference of 1765 a secretary was appointed to examine the deeds and see that vacancies among trustees were filled. The regular annual publication of the Minutes also began at this latter Conference, and the first provision for the "worn-out preachers" having been made two years previously, the title of "Superannuated Preachers" appears in the Minutes for the first time. At this session the Member's Ticket was permanently adopted.

The Methodist preachers were required to exercise over each other the most faithful vigilance, and at every Conference after 1767 the question was asked: "Are there any objections to any of the preachers" who were named one by one. This practice is still maintained. Wesley regarded the maintenance of doctrine, experience, right conduct, and discipline as essential to the permanency of Methodism, and held that they must not be separated. "The first time I was in the company of the Rev. John Wesley," once wrote a correspondent of the New York Evangelist, "I asked him what must be done to keep Methodism alive when he was dead. To which he immediately answered: "The Methodists must take heed of their doctrine, their experience, their practice, and their discipline. If they attend to their doctrines only, they will make the people antinomians; if to the experimental part of religion only, they will make them enthusiasts; if to the practical part only, they will make them Pharisees; and if they do not attend to their discipline, they will be like persons who bestow much pains in cultivating their garden, and put no fence round it to save it from the wild boars of the forest."