

On Laying the Foundation of the New Chapel, Near the City-Road, London

John Wesley

Methodist · Post-Reformation · Sermon

STROMATA 194

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INTRODUCTION

Preached in 1777 at the laying of the foundation stone for Wesley's new chapel on City Road, London, this sermon is Wesley's own retrospective account of Methodism's first fifty years, starting with a handful of Oxford students reading Thomas a Kempis together in 1725, through the Georgia mission, the open-air preaching at Moorfields, and the movement's spread across England, Ireland, and Scotland. Wesley is at pains here to insist that Methodism is not a new sect but the old religion of Scripture and the primitive Church, and that his societies mean to remain within the Church of England. Reads as both memoir and manifesto.

"According to this time it shall be said, -- What hath God wrought!" - Num. 23:23

We need not now inquire, in what sense this was applicable to the children of Israel. It may be of more use to consider in what sense the words are applicable to ourselves; -- how far the people of England have reason to say, "According to this time, what hath God wrought!"

A great man, indeed, who I trust is now in a better world, Dr. Gibson, late Lord Bishop of London, in one of his Charges to his Clergy, flatly denies that God has wrought any "extraordinary work" in our nation; -- nay, affirms, that to imagine any such thing is no better than downright enthusiasm. It is so, if his Lordship's supposition is true, -- if God has not wrought any extraordinary work; but if he really has, then we may believe and assert it, without incurring any such imputation.

Yet a still greater man of a neighbouring nation, a burning and a shining light, equally eminent in piety and in learning, partly confirmed the Bishop's supposition; for Bengelius, being asked why he placed the grand revival of religion so late as the year 1836, replied, "I acknowledge all the prophecies would incline me to place it a century sooner; but an insurmountable difficulty lies in the way: I cannot reconcile this to matter of fact; for I do not know of any remarkable work of God which has been wrought upon earth between the years 1730 and 1740." This is really surprising. It is strange that sensible men should know so little of what is done at so small a distance. How could so great a man be ignorant of what was transacted no farther off than England? -- especially considering the accounts then published in Germany, some of which were tolerably impartial; nay, considering the particular account which

I had sent, as early as the year 1742, to one well known through all the empire, Pastor (afterwards Superintendent) Steinmetz.

But has there, indeed, been any extraordinary work of God wrought in England during this century? This is an important question: It is certainly worthy of our serious consideration; and it is capable of being answered to the full satisfaction of every fair inquirer. He may easily be informed, what work it is, and in what manner it has been wrought. It is true, I am in one respect an improper person to give this information; as it will oblige me frequently to speak of myself, which may have the appearance of ostentation: But, with regard to this, I can only cast myself upon the candour of my hearers, being persuaded they will put the most favourable construction upon what is not a matter of choice, but of necessity. For there is no other person, if I decline the task, who can supply my place, -- who has a perfect knowledge of the work in question, from the beginning of it to this day. We may consider, First, the rise and progress of this work: Secondly, the nature of it.

I. As to the rise of it. In the year 1725, a young student at Oxford was much affected by reading Kempis's "Christian Pattern," and Bishop Taylor's "Rules of Holy Living and Dying." He found an earnest desire to live according to those rules, and to flee from the wrath to come. He sought for some that would be his companions in the way, but could find none; so that, for several years, he was constrained to travel alone, having no man either to guide or to help him. But in the year 1729, he found one who had the same desire. They then endeavoured to help each other; and, in the close of the year, were joined by two more. They soon agreed to spend two or three hours together every Sunday evening. Afterwards they sat two evenings together, and, in a while, six evenings, in the week; spending that time in reading the Scriptures, and provoking one another to love and to good works.

The regularity of their behaviour gave occasion to a young gentleman of the college to say, "I think we have got a new set of Methodists," -- alluding to a set of Physicians, who began to flourish at Rome about the time of Nero, and continued for several ages. The name was new and quaint; it clave to them immediately; and from that time, both those four young gentlemen, and all that had any religious connection with them, were distinguished by the name of Methodists.

In the four or five years following, another and another were added to the number, till, in the year 1735, there were fourteen of them who constantly met together. Three of these were Tutors in their several Colleges; the rest, Bachelors of Arts or Under-graduates. They were all precisely of one judgment, as well as of one soul; all tenacious of order to the last degree, and observant, for conscience' sake, of every rule of the Church, and every statute both of the University and of their respective Colleges. They were all orthodox in every point; firmly believing, not only the Three Creeds, but whatsoever they judged to be the doctrine of the Church of England, as contained in her Articles and Homilies. As to that practice of the Apostolic Church, (which continued till the time of Tertullian, at least in many Churches,) the having all things in common, they had no rule, nor any formed design concerning it; but it was so in effect. and it could not be otherwise; for none could want anything that another could spare. This was the infancy of the work. They had no conception of anything that would follow. Indeed, they took "no thought for the morrow," desiring only to live today.

Many imagined that little society would be dispersed, and Methodism (so called) come to an end, when, in October, 1735, my brother, Mr. Ingham, and I, were induced, by a strange chain of providences, to go over to the new colony in Georgia. Our design was to preach to the Indian nations bordering upon that province; but we were detained at Savannah and Frederica, by the importunity of the people, who, having no other Ministers, earnestly requested that we would not leave them. After a time, I desired the most serious of them to meet me once or twice a week at my house. Here were the rudiments of a Methodist society; but, notwithstanding this, both my brother and I were as vehemently attached to the Church as ever, and to every rubric of it; insomuch that I would never admit a Dissenter to the Lord's Supper, unless he would be re-baptized. Nay, when the Lutheran Minister of the Saltzburghers at Ebenezer, being at Savannah, desired to receive it, I told him, I did not dare to administer it to him, because I looked upon him as unbaptized; as I judged baptism by laymen to be invalid: And such I counted all that were not episcopally ordained.

Full of these sentiments, of this zeal for the Church, (from which, I bless God, he has now delivered me,) I returned to England in the beginning of February, 1738. I was now in haste to retire to Oxford, and bury myself in my beloved obscurity; but I was detained in London, week after week, by the Trustees for the Colony of Georgia. In the meantime, I was continually importuned to preach in one and another church; and that not only morning, afternoon, and night, on Sunday, but on week-days also. As I was lately come from a far country, vast multitudes flocked together; but in a short time, partly because of those unwieldy crowds, partly because of my unfashionable doctrine, I was excluded from one and another church, and, at length, shut out of all! Not daring to be silent, after a short struggle between honour and conscience, I made a virtue of necessity, and preached in the middle of Moorfields. Here were thousands upon thousands, abundantly more than any church could contain; and numbers among them, who never went to any church or place of public worship at all. More and more of them were cut to the heart, and came to me all in tears, inquiring with the utmost eagerness, what they must do to be saved. I said, "If all of you will meet on Thursday evening, I will advise you as well as I can." The first evening about twelve persons came; the next week, thirty or forty. When they were increased to about an hundred, I took down their names and places of abode, intending, as often as it was convenient, to call upon them at their own houses. Thus, without any previous plan or design, began the Methodist society in England, -- a company of people associating together, to help each other to work out their own salvation.

The next spring we were invited to Bristol and Kingswood; where, likewise, Societies were quickly formed. The year following we went to Newcastle-upon-Tyne, and preached to all the colliers and keelmen round it. In 1744, we went through Cornwall, as far as Sennen, near the Land's End; and, in the compass of two or three years more, to almost every part of England. Some time after, we were desired to go over to Ireland; and, in process of time, to every county therein. Last of all, we were invited to Musselburgh, Glasgow, and several other parts of Scotland. But it was in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Dundee, Arbroath, and Aberdeen, that we saw the greatest fruit of our labour.

II. Such was the rise, and such has been the progress, of Methodism, from the beginning to the present time. But you will naturally ask, "What is Methodism? What does this new word mean? Is it not a new religion?" This is a very common, nay, almost an universal, supposition; but nothing can be more

remote from the truth. It is a mistake all over. Methodism, so called, is the old religion, the religion of the Bible, the religion of the primitive Church, the religion of the Church of England. This old religion, (as I observed in the "Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion,") is "no other than love, the love of God and of all mankind; the loving God with all our heart, and soul, and strength, as having first loved us, -- as the fountain of all the good we have received, and of all we ever hope to enjoy; and the loving every soul which God hath made, every man on earth as our own soul. This love is the great medicine of life; the neverfailing remedy for all the evils of a disordered world; for all the miseries and vices of men. Wherever this is, there are virtue and happiness going hand in hand; there is humbleness of mind, gentleness, long-suffering, the whole image of God; and, at the same time, a 'peace that passeth all understanding,' with 'joy unspeakable and full of glory.' This religion of love, and joy, and peace, has its seat in the inmost soul; but is ever showing itself by its fruits, continually springing up, not only in all innocence, (for love worketh no ill to his neighbour,) but, likewise, in every kind of beneficence, -- spreading virtue and happiness all around it."

This is the religion of the Bible, as no one can deny who reads it with any attention. It is the religion which is continually inculcated therein, which runs through both the Old and New Testament. Moses and the Prophets, our blessed Lord and his Apostles, proclaim with one voice, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy soul, and thy neighbour as thyself." The Bible declares, "Love is the fulfilling of the Law," "the end of the commandment," -- of all the commandments which are contained in the oracles of God. The inward and outward fruits of this love are also largely described by the inspired writers; so that whoever allows the Scripture to be the Word of God, must allow this to be true religion.

This is the religion of the primitive Church, of the whole Church in the purest ages. It is clearly expressed, even in the small remains of Clemens Romanus, Ignatius, and Polycarp; it is seen more at large in the writings of Tertullian, Origen, Clemens Alexandrinus, and Cyprian; and, even in the fourth century, it was found in the works of Chrysostom, Basil, Ephrem Syrus, and Macarius. It would be easy to produce "a cloud of witnesses," testifying the same thing; were not this a point which no one will contest, who has the least acquaintance with Christian antiquity.

And this is the religion of the Church of England; as appears from all her authentic records, from the uniform tenor of her Liturgy, and from numberless passages in her Homilies. The scriptural, primitive religion of love, which is now reviving throughout the three kingdoms, is to be found in her Morning and Evening Service, and in her daily, as well as occasional, Prayers; and the whole of it is beautifully summed up in that one comprehensive petition, "Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love thee, and worthily magnify thy holy name."

Permit me to give a little fuller account, both of the progress and nature of this religion, by an extract from a treatise which was published many years ago: -- [Farther Appeal, Part III.]

"Just at the time when we 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. Many thousands gathered together to hear them; and, in every place where they came, many began to show such concern for religion as they never had done before. Many were in a short time deeply convinced of the number and heinousness of their sins, of their evil tempers, of their inability to help themselves, and of the insignificancy of their outside religion. And from this repentance sprung fruits meet for repentance; the whole form of their life was changed. They 'ceased to do evil, and learned to do well.' Neither was this all; but over and above this outward change they began to experience inward religion; the love of God was shed abroad in their hearts, which they enjoy to this day. They 'love Him, because he first loved us;' and this love constrains them to love all mankind, and inspires them with every holy and heavenly temper, with the mind which was in Christ. Hence it is that they are now uniform in their behaviour, unblamable in all manner of conversation; and in whatsoever state they are, they have learned therewith to be content. Thus they calmly travel on through life, never repining, or murmuring, or dissatisfied, till the hour comes that they shall drop this covering of earth, and return to the Father of spirits."

This revival of religion has spread to such a degree, as neither we nor our fathers had known. How extensive has it been! There is scarce a considerable town in the kingdom, where some have not been made witnesses of it. It has spread to every age and sex, to most orders and degrees of men; and even to abundance of those who, in time past, were accounted monsters of wickedness. Consider the swiftness

as well as extent of it. "In what age has such a number of sinners been recovered in so short a time from the error of their ways? When has true religion, I will not say since the Reformation, but since the time of Constantine the Great, made so large a progress in any nation, within so small a space? I believe hardly can either ancient or modern history afford a parallel instance.

"We may likewise observe the depth of the work so extensively and swiftly wrought. Multitudes have been thoroughly convinced of sin; and, shortly after, so filled with joy and love, that whether they were in the body, or out of the body, they could hardly tell; and, in the power of this love, they have trampled underfoot whatever the world accounts either terrible or desirable, having evidenced, in the severest trials, an invariable and tender good-will to mankind, and all the fruits of holiness. Now so deep a repentance, so strong a faith, so fervent love, and so unblemished holiness, wrought in so many persons in so short a time, the world has not seen for many ages.

"No less remarkable is the purity of the religion which has extended itself so deeply and swiftly: I speak particularly as to the doctrines held by those who are the subjects of it. Those of the Church of England, at least, must acknowledge this; for where is there a body of people, who, number for number, so closely adhere to the doctrines of the Church?

"Nor is their religion more pure from heresy than it is from superstition. In former times, wherever any unusual religious concern has appeared, there has sprung up with it a zeal for things that were no part of religion. But it has not been so in the present case; no stress has been laid on anything, as though it was necessary to salvation, but what is plainly contained in the word of God. And of the things contained therein, the stress laid on each has been in proportion to the nearness of its relation to what is there laid down as the sum of all, -- the love of God and our neighbour. So pure, both from superstition and error, is the religion which has lately spread in this nation.

"It is likewise rational. It is as pure from enthusiasm as from superstition. It is true the contrary has been continually affirmed; but to affirm is one thing, to prove is another. Who will prove that it is enthusiasm to love God, yea, to love him with all our heart? Who is able to make good this charge against the love of all mankind? (I do but just touch on the general heads.) But if you cannot make it good, own this religion to be sober, manly, rational, divine. "It is also pure from bigotry. Those who hold it are not bigoted to opinions. They would hold right opinions; but they are peculiarly cautious not to rest the weight of Christianity there. They have no such overgrown fondness for any opinions, as to think those alone will make them Christians; or to confine their affection, or esteem, to those that agree with them therein. Nor are they bigoted to any particular branch even of practical religion; they are not attached to one point more than another; they aim at uniform, universal obedience. They contend for nothing circumstantial, as if it were essential to religion; but for everything in its own order.

"They dread that bitter zeal, that spirit of persecution, which has so often accompanied the spirit of reformation. They do not approve of using any kind of violence, on any pretence, in matters of religion. They allow no method of bringing any to the knowledge of the truth, except the methods of reason and persuasion; and their practice is consistent with their profession. They do not, in fact, hinder their dependents from worshipping God, in every respect, according to their own conscience."

But if these things are so, may we not well say, "What hath God wrought!" For such a work, if we consider the extensiveness of it, the swiftness with which it has spread, the depth of the religion so swiftly diffused, and its purity from all corrupt mixtures, we must acknowledge cannot easily be paralleled, in all these concurrent circumstances, by anything that is found in the English annals, since Christianity was first planted in this island.

It may throw considerable light upon the nature of this work, to mention one circumstance more, attending the present revival of religion, which, I apprehend, is quite peculiar to it. I do not remember to have either seen, heard, or read of anything parallel. It cannot be denied that there have been several considerable revivals of religion in England since the Reformation. But the generality of the English nation were little profited thereby; because they that were the subjects of those revivals, Preachers as well as people, soon separated from the Established Church, and formed themselves into a distinct sect. So did the Presbyterians first; afterwards, the Independents, the Anabaptists, and the Quakers: And after this was done, they did scarce any good, except to their own little body. As they chose to separate from the Church, so the people remaining therein separated from them, and generally contracted a prejudice against them. But these were immensely the greatest number; so that, by that unhappy separation, the hope of a general, national reformation was totally cut off.

But it is not so in the present revival of religion. The Methodists (so termed) know their calling. They weighed the matter at first, and, upon mature deliberation, determined to continue in the Church. Since that time, they have not wanted temptations of every kind to alter their resolution. They have heard abundance said upon the subject, perhaps all that can be said: They have read the writings of the most eminent pleaders for separation, both in the last and present century: They have spent several days in a General Conference upon this very question, "Is it expedient (supposing, not granting, that it is lawful) to separate from the Established Church?" But still they could see no sufficient cause to depart from their first resolution. So that their fixed purpose is, let the Clergy or laity use them well or ill, by the grace of God, to endure all things, to hold on their even course, and to continue in the Church, maugre men or devils, unless God permits them to be thrust out.

Near twenty years ago, immediately after their solemn consultation on the subject, a Clergyman, who had heard the whole, said, with great earnestness, "In the name of God, let nothing move you to recede from this resolution. God is with you, of a truth; and so he will be, while you continue in the Church: But whenever the Methodists leave the Church, God will leave them." Lord, what is man! In a few months after, Mr. Ingham himself left the Church, and turned all the societies under his care into congregations of Independents. And what was the event? The same that he had foretold! -- They swiftly mouldered into nothing.

Some years after, a person of honour told me, "This is the peculiar glory of the Methodists: However convenient it might be, they will not, on any account or pretence whatever, form a distinct sect or party. Let no one rob you of this glorying." I trust none will, as long as I live. But the giver of this advice entirely forgot it in a very short time, and has, almost ever since, been labouring to form Independent congregations.

This has occasioned many to ask, "Why do you say the Methodists form no distinct party, -- that they do not leave the Church? Are there not thousands of Methodists who have, in fact, left the Church; who never attend the Church Service; never receive the Lord's Supper there; nay, who speak against the Church, even with bitterness, both in public and private; yea, who appoint and frequent meetings for divine service at the same hour? How, then, can you affirm that the Methodists do not leave the Church?"

I am glad of so public an opportunity of explaining this; in order to which, it will be necessary to look back some years. The Methodists at Oxford were all one body, and, as it were, one soul; zealous for the religion of the Bible, of the primitive church, and, in consequence, of the Church of England; as they believed it to come nearer the scriptural and primitive plan than any other national Church upon earth.

When my brother and I returned from Georgia, we were in the same sentiments. And at that time we and our friends were the only persons to whom that innocent name was affixed. Thus far, therefore, all the Methodists were firm to the Church of England.

But a good man who met with us when we were at Oxford, while he was absent from us, conversed much with Dissenters, and contracted strong prejudices against the Church: I mean Mr. Whitefield: And not long after he totally separated from us. In some years, William Cudworth and several others separated from him, and turned Independents; as did Mr. Maxfield and a few more, after separating from us. Lastly, a school was set up near Trevecka, in Wales; and almost all who were educated there, (except those that were ordained, and some of them too,) as they disclaimed all connexion with the Methodists, so they disclaimed the Church also: Nay, they spoke of it, upon all occasions, with exquisite bitterness and contempt.

Now, let every impartial person judge whether we are accountable for any of these. None of these have any manner of connexion with the original Methodists. They are branches broken off from the tree: If they break from the Church also, we are not accountable for it.

These, therefore, cannot make our glorying void, that we do not, will not, form any separate sect, but from principle remain, what we always have been, true members of the Church of England.

Brethren, I presume the greater part of you also are members of the Church of England. So, at least, you are called; but you are not so indeed, unless you are witnesses of the religion above described. And are you really such? Judge not one another; but every man look into his own bosom. How stands the matter in your own breast? Examine your conscience before God. Are you an happy partaker of this scriptural, this truly primitive, religion? Are you a witness of the religion of love? Are you a lover of God and all mankind? Does your heart glow with gratitude to the Giver of every good and perfect gift, the Father of the spirit flesh, who giveth you life, and breath, and all things; who hath given you his Son, his only Son, that you "might not perish, but have everlasting life?" Is your soul warm with benevolence to all mankind? Do you long to have all men virtuous and happy? And does the constant tenor of your life and conversation bear witness of this? Do you "love, not in word" only, "but in deed and in truth?" Do you persevere in the "work of faith, and the labour of Love?" Do you "walk in love, as Christ also loved us, and gave himself for us?" Do you, as you have time, "do good unto all men;" and in as high a degree as you are able? Whosoever thus "doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother." Whosoever thou art, whose heart is herein as my heart, give me thine hand! Come, and let us magnify the Lord together, and labour to promote his kingdom upon earth! Let us join hearts and hands in this blessed work, in striving to bring glory to God in the highest, by establishing peace and good-will among men, to the uttermost of our power! First. Let our hearts be joined herein; let us unite our wishes and prayers; let our whole soul pant after a general revival of pure religion and undefiled, the restoration of the image of God, pure love, in every child of man! Then let us endeavour

to promote, in our several stations, this scriptural, primitive religion; let us, with all diligence, diffuse the religion of love among all we have any intercourse with; let us provoke all men, not to enmity and contention, but to love and to good works; always remembering those deep words, (God engrave them on all our hearts!) "God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him!"

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