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"Not slothful in business; fervent in spirit."

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Religious.

From the London *Freeman*.

WESLEYAN METHODISM.

It is now considerably more than a hundred years since John Wesley and George Whitfield first put the Gospel trumpet to their mouth, and sounded the alarm which awakened sleeping churches and careless worldlings. They rendered immense service to the case of religion, and commenced a new era in the history of the world's evangelisation. We unhesitatingly pronounce the founders of Methodism to have been the two greatest preachers of their own or the present century. Not that their sermons are comparable for style and eloquence with the discourses of Robert Hall, or equal in thought and suggestiveness to the Broadmead lectures of John Foster. Many a man has tried to read through the published sermons of Whitfield, but has found the task too wearying for his patience. Wesley's sermons are more interesting, but even they, excellent as they doubtless are, fall far below the standard of pulpit oratory which was raised at Cambridge and Leicester and Bristol by the most finished preacher of modern times. And yet, as preachers, Wesley and Whitfield claim the first and highest place. They summoned and collected multitudes of men and women, made "common people" feel their sinfulness, proclaimed Christ Jesus as the Saviour of the lost and ruined, and thousands changed their manner of life and became converts to the faith. Like Luther and Latimer, Wesley and Whitfield spoke out of the fulness of their hearts, spoke the language understood and used by the poor, spoke of Christ and the great salvation in city and in country; and we see the results, not only in the tens and hundreds and thousands who sought mercy and found peace through the Redeemer, but also in the quickening of evangelical zeal in the Establishment and among Nonconformist churches, in modern missions, in that solicitude about the many which has characterised the religious activity of our century, and in the innumerable lay agencies by which the churches seek to extend the kingdom of Christ.

Out of this religious movement, begun in the third decade of the last century, and which continued for at least fifty years, Wesleyan Methodism grew. It began in a spiritual necessity. John Wesley was a Churchman, had no liking for Dissent, and would in his earlier days have shrunk from the thought of establishing a society separate from and independent of the Church of whose ministry he was a member. But circumstances controlled and directed the development of the system which bears his name. Careless and ungodly clergmen had no sympathy with the intense earnestness and demonstrative piety of Wesley's converts. And so, to meet the needs of his spiritual children, he formed bands, consisting of about ten persons each, for mutual conversation and united prayer. These bands, however, were designed to be auxiliaries to, rather than substitutes for, the Established Church, and Wesley for many years supposed it possible to keep in communion with the Church of his fathers. But eventually the pulpits of the Establishment were closed against him, he became a sort of ecclesiastical outlaw, and by degress his plans were perfected, till at last the country was divided into circuits, each of which was presided over by a superintendent minister; Mr. Wesley even ordained men to preach the Word and to administer the ordinances; a deed-poll was executed by which chapels were secured for ever to himself and his successors in the Conference; and before his death in 1791, Wesleyan Methodism flourished as a distinct and separate Christian community, as truly Nonconformist in its practice, though not by profession, as any one of the three denominations.

The progress of Wesleyanism is one of the most marked and significant phenomena of our age. In the year 1738, on his return from America, John Wesley began his Society with fifty persons, whom he formed into bands or classes. By 1770—in thirty-two years—the Society had grown to large dimensions, numbering 119 ministers and 26,283 communicants. The next twenty years witnessed a constant increase, for in 1780, there were 278 ministers and 58,673 members. Strange to tell, the rate of increase was more than maintained after the death of Wesley. He had earnest and successful men as his followers; and under their management, and by their indefatigable and untiring efforts, the Wesleyan Methodists, during the interval from 1790 to 1810, enjoyed almost uninterrupted prosperity, numbering, at the close of the twenty years, 137,797 communicants and 672 ministers. By the year 1830, the Wesleyans had increased the number of their members to 248,592, and of their ministers to 824; and in 1850 they rejoiced in 1,034 ministers and 358,277 communicants. At the Conference recently held at Birmingham, it was reported that the present total number of members is 330,827, which our readers will observe is 27,450 less than in 1850. But in 1850 the controversy about the Fly-sheets was in progress, and Messrs Everett, Dunn, and Griffiths were strenuously advocating a reform. In consequence of the expulsions and withdrawals which accompanied or followed the discussion, the Conference societies suffered a diminution of their numbers, and in 1853, only 270,265 members were reported. Comparing, as we obviously should, this year's returns with the numbers of 1853, there has been an increase during the twelve years of 30,562 members. To complete our estimate of the progress of Wesleyan Methodism, we must include the statistics of the United Methodist Free Churches. In 1835, a strong party, dissatisfied with the great legislative and disciplinary power of the ministers, which contrasted and still contrasts with the less authoritative character of other Nonconforming ministers, seceded from the original Connexion and formed the Wesleyan Methodist Association. This community ultimately joined with the Wesleyan Reformers in establishing the United Methodist Free Churches. At the Annual Assembly held the other day in Nottingham, this branch of the Wesleyan family reported 65,689. If we add this number to the total given above, we find that the Wesleyans of the two denominations number 366,516, which, however, only shows an increase of 8,239 over the numbers in 1850. It certainly does appear as if Wesleyanism had reached its climax; for, while 283 circuits show an increase, 284 report a decrease in their membership; the mission stations also suffering a considerable diminution in the number of their members. Such is the history of the progress of Wesleyan Methodism, and we find it equally instructive in its records of success and narratives of failures.

Dr. Osborn, in an able speech at the Conference in Birmingham, advocated the thorough working of the old plans which had been found so well adapted to the needs of the latter half of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth. There can be no doubt that the early successes of Wesleyan Methodism were due in a large measure to the varied agencies employed in the conversion of sinners, and more especially to that out-door or field preaching for which Wesley and his fellow-labourers were famous. The combination of ministers and lay preachers, the wise distribution of work to the men best fitted to do it, and the hearty mutuality of the toilers, had much to do with the triumphs which crowned the efforts of the founders and fathers of Methodism. They thought comparatively little of the details of their organization; were mainly intent on teaching and preaching Christ; and, being earnest about their own salvation and the salvation of others, they addressed themselves to the one task of saving souls. But since then attention has been called away from the chief design and end of Methodism to its peculiarities as an ecclesiastical organisation. So long as Wesley lived, and the Annual Conference was presided over by him, and made a means of rekindling the evangelical zeal and spiritual fervour of the preachers, the ministers and members of the infant community were content with the arrangements that had been made for their government and discipline. This, however, did not continue long after the death of Wesley. Mr. Kitham, and those who with him afterwards constituted the Methodist New Connexion, struck the key-note of discontent, by the advocacy first of the right of Methodists to the enjoyment of all Church privileges, irrespective of the clergy of the Establishment, and then of the right of the members to participate with the ministers in the government of the societies. Other conflicts followed, till at last the agitation for Reform about the year 1850 forced upon the consideration of Wesleyans questions affecting the claims of the Conference and the rival rights of the laity. Under such circumstances it is difficult, if not impossible, to work "the old plans" in the spirit of former days. By decisive and perhaps proper measures the Fly-sheet controversy was suppressed. Clearly, the poll-deed enrolled by Mr. Wesley in Chancery give to the Legal Hundred—the Conference, that is—the right of appointing all ministers to circuits, and fixes, as firmly as the Act of Uniformity does, the conditions and terms on which men shall exercise the ministry among Wesleyans. This deed gives the supreme power to the Conference, and does not admit the laity to any participation in ecclesiastical rule. Church bonds are never grievious till they are felt. Many of our Wesleyan brethren have been galled by the fetters fastened on them by the poll-deed; and though they love Methodism too much to forsake it, the chains prevent the enjoyment of that freedom with which their fathers did the work of the Lord. There are probably other causes for the apparent arrest of the progress of Methodism. The collegiate education given to their candidates for the ministry, their growing love for Gothic architecture and highly decorated places of worship, their evident desire to win over the educated and the wealthy to their ranks, and, above all, the stereotyped character of their system, which, though exactly suited to the latter half of the eighteenth century, is not necessarily adapted to all times and circumstances, render "the thorough working of the old plans, which had been so eminently successful under the direction of Wesley," altogether impracticable. "The new wine" of modern Methodism must be put into "new bottles"; otherwise, there is danger of the bottles breaking and the wine running out. We fear—most gladly should we find ourselves mistaken—that Dr. Osborn cannot persuade his brethren to return nor go back himself to "the thorough working of the old plans."

The readers of *The Freeman* cannot possibly be unconcerned or uninterested spectators of the progress and doings of Wesleyan Methodists. Believing, as we do, that they have accomplished great good and made all the churches their debtors; knowing that they have told the glad tidings to many of the poor of the land, who otherwise might never have heard the good news; admiring the earnestness and zeal and self-sacrifice with which they have laboured in the vineyard of the Lord; and rejoicing in their co-operation with other Christians in many a good word and work, we share in the joy of their successes and partake their sorrows. By them Christ is preached, and in truth: "therein we do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice." At the same time, we are not surprised that their system hinders them in their work. Had the Wesleyans of this century not been controlled and bound down by the plans of their predecessors,—had there been greater flexibility in the means and agencies of Methodism, had liberty to act as circumstances required and conscience dictated been the legacy of John Wesley and his followers, instead of the poll-deed, with its sharply-defined constitution ministerial autocracy, the result, we venture to think, would have been more gratifying. This is the advantage of our Congregationalism. The cardinal principle which vests the right of government in the majority of the members, is applicable to all times and meets every need. It almost supposes that with changing circumstances the churches will change their modes of action, adapting themselves to the localities in which they are situated, and to the population they seek to win for Christ. Nor is there anything in Congregational principles to prevent us from adopting the combinations which have been so successful among the Wesleyans. Tens and twenties of our members can meet for conversation and prayer; churches in a district can combine to occupy every nook and corner of the district, so as to leave no soul unvisited by the messenger of mercy; our ministers can organise preachers into a band for the evangelisation of a neighbourhood and the instruction of the ignorant; and our pastors and elders can meet in annual assembly to confer on "the things of the kingdom." Hitherto this has not been done. But were a man like Wesley to arise among us, filled with flaming zeal for the glory of God and the conversion of souls, inspiring all the churches with a kindred spirit, and teaching them how to unite so as to help each other's faith and joy, while all were working for Christ; should our district unions of churches become to us what Circuits are to Wesleyans, their members seeking nothing but the well-being of each brotherhood and "the furtherance of the Gospel"; should the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland influence its members at the annual meeting as the founders of Methodism were moved to greater devotedness and more activity at their Conference—should all this be done, without the execution of any poll-deed, or application to the Court of Chancery, or the least appeal to the law, we should secure the good and escape the evil of Wesleyan Methodism. The Conference held the other day at Birmingham will, we hope, produce good and abundant fruit among the Wesleyans themselves; but we shall be still more gratified to learn that it has taught other Christians the secret of success, by referring them to the early history of Methodism, and warned them of stereotyping the forms and details of Church Government by legal deeds. Surely it is possible to reject the ecclesiastical peculiarities of Wesleyanism, and yet to catch the spirit of its founder and emulate its mutual helpfulness.

Close Communion on the other side.

Our Pedobaptist friends are greatly troubled because Baptist churches cannot regard them as fully qualified for communion. They think it a mark of bigotry, forgetting that the disciples of Jesus must hold without wavering to the laws of the Master.

It may not be known to many that early Baptists in New England, who separated from Congregational churches, were in favor of what was called mixed communion, while the churches from which they separated refused to commune with them. Dr. Backus, in his journals and letters, records many such instances. We give a few illustrations:—

"Nov. 8, 1753. I had considerable discourse, last night and this morning, with Washburn, upon our former differences about baptism. From all I could learn, he and his church have now a zealous disposition to cut off from their communion all who are fully of the mind that there is no gospel warrant for infant baptism, let their behavior apart from this be such as it may."

At a conference of Pedobaptist and Baptist ministers to discuss the matter of differences, Solomon Paine, one of the former, said: "That when he joined the Baptists in communion, he did not so critically examine the foundation of things as he ought to have done. He thought *then* that they might go on together, but *he now found that they could not.*" He read a paper concerning his principles, the sum of which was, "That if any godly people, who do not hold infant baptism, confessed that it might be their *darkness* that they did not hold it, he would commune with them; but *he would not commune* with those who said it was their *light* and not their darkness which made them reject infant baptism."

The Braintree church "debarred their sister, Hannah Linfield, from communion, for being rebaptized, which implied that infant baptism was a nullity, and so that the church were unbaptized."

It seems a little curious to read that when the Baptists were weak, their brethren of other churches sought to make them odious and crush them, by denying them the privilege of communion. Now that the Baptists have grown strong and are firm in the scriptural practice of inviting only baptized believers to communion, they are reproached for narrow-mindedness and bigotry.—*National Baptist.*

There is nothing of which men are so fond, and withal so careless, as life.