

WHAT IS THE SECRET OF SPIRITUAL TRIUMPH?

*Has Methodism Been Diverted from its Aim?—
Heart-Need Which Overcomes Prejudice.—
The Methodist Evangel of the Victorious Life.*

(By the Rev. J. I. Brice, M. A.)

For thirteen years John Wesley wore his religion as a monk wears his hair-shirt. He was "a wearied sacerdotalist," saved but unsatisfied, reconciled but not rejoicing, zealous but futile, sometimes even doubting his acceptance with God. Then, on a day of grace, he discovered the liberating and gladdening power of "inward religion," and stepped into freedom, light, and certainty. He was very reticent about the experience. He went first to Herrnhut, and sat at the feet of Christian David, seeking definition. "Thrice," says Wesley, "he described the state of those who are weak in faith; who are justified, but have not yet a new, clean heart; who have received forgiveness through the blood of Christ, but have not received the constant indwelling of the Holy Ghost."

It was at Herrnhut, I believe, that Wesley's experience became articulate and the Methodist Evangel took form. From that time Wesley urged all believers to "press on to Perfection." To his helpers in the Revival he said, "Insist everywhere on the Second Blessing, as receivable in a moment and receivable now by simple faith. . . . This doctrine is the grand depositum which God has lodged with the people called Methodists; and for the sake of propagating this chiefly He appears to have raised us up." Methodism, by the invincible conviction of its founders, was raised to announce that the normal Christian Life is not a losing struggle, but a pageant of victory, and that the secret of spiritual triumph is Sanctification through Faith in the Power of the Indwelling Christ.

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It was the faith of our fathers that no believer in Christ need "go mourning all his days." There was open to all, on the simple conditions of surrender and faith, a life of freedom, joy, and mastery, a life of unbroken communion with God, blessed with the full assurance of His constant presence, fully furnished for effective service, and motivated in all its relations by perfect love.

There were no vagaries in the doctrine. It was plainly Scriptural, practical, and explicit. "All here is strong, sterling sense; there are no extravagant flights, no mystic reveries, no unscriptural enthusiasms," said Wesley concerning the testimony of a typical Methodist saint. The quibble about sinlessness raised no fears. "Whether sin is suspended or extinguished, I will not dispute," said Wesley, "It is enough that those who are perfect in love feel no temper contrary to pure love, while they rejoice, pray, and give thanks continually." Yesterday morning I came across this terse and graphic comment on the Methodist doctrine, in the beautiful sayings of Mother Eva of Friedenshort: "Christ does not bring us into a position where it is impossible to sin, but where it is possible not to sin. Sin in the case of a true believer should be only analogous to a railway accident, and never according to time-table."

The Methodists never contended for a spiritual attainment beyond which there can be no development, nor any further ethical choice. The spiritual life may be perfect though not perfected, just as a child may be physically perfect though not yet grown to manhood. There is the distant ideal of being perfected, and there

is the practical ideal of being now freed from defect and brought into that wholeness of spiritual health and moral efficiency, which is the will of God for all His children. That soul is perfect, in the sense of the Methodist doctrine, from which everything antagonistic to the mind of Christ has been cast out, and in which all affections are united in the love of Him and are solely in His control. Wesley believed that the practical ideal can be attained instantaneously, by a second work of grace, here and now, through faith; but never did he deny the further growth of a soul so blessed.

The sanctified heart, said our fathers, is a single heart, a heart rid of inward dissension and replete with heavenly power and passion, "a heart in every thought renewed and full of love divine," a heart completely delivered from the tyranny of sin and triumphing in the dominion of Christ. Let me quote Mother Eva again:—

"The Presence of Jesus is the joy of my life—

The Will of Jesus is the law of my life—

The Service of Jesus is the vocation of my life—

The Glory of Jesus is the crown of my life."

That is the sanctified life.

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The witness to sanctification made our Church. Early Methodist evangelism found its success, as it found its motive, in the belief that every believer in Christ may live victoriously. In one place there was a revival. "Here," said Wesley, "we have one proof of a thousand, that the blessing of God always attends the publishing of full salvation as attainable now, by simple faith." In another place the work of God had gained no ground all the year, and Wesley's judgment was: "The preachers have given up the Methodist testimony. Either they did not speak of perfection at all (the peculiar doctrine committed to our trust), or they speak of it only in general terms, without urging believers to go on to perfection; and where this is not earnestly done, the work of God does not prosper." The testimony to sanctification was the Methodist charter and strength.

But where is the old evangel of full salvation now? These are stirring days. In the mercy of God our satisfaction with the poor average of Christian life and service has been mightily disturbed. Surely, Methodism came to the kingdom for such a time as this. But are the awakened and dissatisfied coming to us for the answer of power and the secret of triumph? No! We are letting others take our crown, Oxford Groups and holiness sects of one sort or another.

Just before his death, Wesley sensed the dangers ahead of his Church, and he wrote to one of his preachers, "God is aiming at one thing, to spread holiness over the land. It is our wisdom always to have this in view. A thousand things will be presented by men and devils to divert us from our point." I believe that has happened — we have been diverted from our point. "Other days, other terms," is mere evasion. Methodism as a Church has not been preaching "the Second Blessing" in any terms for some time. Definite holiness preaching is now generally anomalous, and "the holiness movement" is a side-show of the Connexion. Furthermore, I suggest that in Methodism, as elsewhere, there is widespread and deeply-rooted prejudice against the doctrine of a second work of grace. There is no mystery in the fact that hundreds of our young people "have not so much as heard that the Holy Ghost is given."

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As a matter of fact, the doctrine of Sanctification has been and still is under a general cultural eclipse. It is not difficult to account for the prejudice against it.

For one thing, the distinctive Methodist experience is decisively conditioned by Bible-truth. Consequently, as Dr. Perkins points out, "it has in our day been profoundly affected, and doubtless chilled, by the historico-critical method of Scripture study." We are always loth to admit it, but the critical issue goes to the very roots of religious conviction; and the logical destination of of rationalising modernism is far away from the old evangelical position. A little while ago, a certain school of modernism took inventory, and this was said: "The necessity is upon us to find something to give us what the Bible gave them (our parents), the feeling of security in a trouble-ridden world, clearness and definiteness in religious conviction, the accent of authority in the testimony to religious experience, and a firm, sure hold of faith in Christ." But meanwhile, lacking the authority of the Word, the ordinary man has had no ground of hope concerning a sanctifying crisis, or, for that matter, any redemptive crisis whatever.

Strangely enough, the doctrine was further shadowed by the social awakening. All at once "the social implications of Christianity" came to view; and, henceforth, self-edification in any form was intolerable. Religion was, in fact, more than morality touched with emotion; it was humanitarianism with a religious sanction; and a man who was primarily concerned with his own sanctification was anything but a Christian. Dr. Dale voiced the new criticism of the Methodist testimony. He told us that the Evangelical Revival had done very little to give the world a nobler ideal of practical life, and that the doctrine of Sanctification, "which ought to have led to a great and original ethical development," had solved none of the immense practical questions which it suggests. He did not define his ethical and economic expectations, but he made it clear that the new social temper was unfavourable to the doctrine of Sanctification.

Then came Evolution. "The meaning of Pentecost is hidden from us," said Nathaniel Micklem, "partly because our modern thinking is always cast in terms of evolution." The theological application of the Darwinian hypothesis could only have one result for the Methodist doctrine. The leading Methodist theologian, a saintly scholar, expressed it thus:—"Holiness is an eternal approximation towards an unrealisable ideal. . . . Never do we read of a Higher Life that is other than an intensification of the lower." From that time the doctrine was "unscientific."

The decisive factor for common Christian thought and practice is not the pure theologian, but the popular preacher. When the modern preacher began to synthesise and apply the intellectual tendencies described above, the preaching of "the Second Blessing" naturally ceased. The old Evangel with its crises was replaced by the cult of the quest, with Jesus as Teacher of a school of seekers after moral betterment, social reform, and a sentimental philosophy. The word "discipleship" was re-orientated with a new emphasis upon the sheer process of seeking instead of the old insistence upon the need for regeneration and the second work of grace. And so the old doctrine was eclipsed.

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In writing this one has in mind the great company of young people to whom the new in-