

THE BEGINNINGS OF METHODISM

We need to look back further than the Wesley brothers to discover the roots of the Methodist Church; indeed, we have to begin with Christ himself. It was 'in the fulness of time' that Jesus came onto the human scene, as the Son of God, to bring the children of the Father back into a right relationship with Him. Through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus we are given the opportunity of a new beginning to our life, we are freed from the hold of sin and receive the gift of eternal life. It was the Spirit of the Risen Christ which brought into being the Christian Church at Pentecost.

The Church of the first century was a community of people who confessed Jesus Christ as Lord. There was little organisation and little was needed; but in time the Church inevitably developed into an institution. It was an institution which knew problems, conflicts and persecution, and St. Paul's letters reveal this only too well. There was the need for renewal at various stages of its history. Following a thousand years of ever growing political and financial strength, there was the great schism dividing the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox in 1054 AD. There was the renewal of St. Francis and his followers in the 13th Century and the Renaissance of the 14th and 15th centuries prepared the way for the great Reformation spearheaded by Martin Luther and others throughout Europe.

In England, John Wycliffe, who was born in 1330, spoke out against the medieval superstition and spiritual darkness, saying 'The hour has come, society is changing the Church. We ask God then, in His supreme goodness, to reform the Church.' It was Wycliffe who translated the Bible into English from the Latin, so that ordinary people could read it. Sadly he was executed because of his reforming ideas. Others too were impelled to provide translations - William Tyndale in 1526 and Miles Coverdale in 1539 - which culminated in the Authorised version of 1611. Reformation in England dates from 1534 when the Church of England discarded the authority of the Pope, aided and abetted by King Henry VIII. There was Thomas Cranmer who was responsible for the renewal of the

Prayer Book and the liturgy of the Church of England. Tragically he, together with Bishops Latimer and Ridley and Sir Thomas More, was executed because of his faith and courageous stand for reformation.

In the next few centuries there were others who saw the Church of England in need of reform and renewal: George Fox, John Bunyan, the Pilgrim Fathers and the Wesley Family. They also saw the deep needs of the people in England, the great divisions in their society and the terrible social problems which contained the seeds of revolution. It is impossible to understand the Methodist movement apart from the England into which it was born. Life was cheap, living conditions were meagre, the plague and smallpox had no cure - there was little hope or expectation. The churches were empty and such religion as existed was cold and formal. There was no real communication of Christianity, and it was unable to speak to the needs of the people. There was a deep longing for both spiritual and social reformation, and it was to meet this need that John and Charles Wesley came onto the scene.

Samuel Wesley, a son and grandson of Church of England ministers, was the parish priest of Epworth, a small country town in Lincolnshire for 39 years. His wife was Susanna Annesley, daughter of a leading Nonconformist. To Samuel and Susanna were born nineteen children, nine of whom died in infancy, leaving seven daughters and three sons. John was born in 1703, and Charles in 1707. When John was five the rectory caught fire, and he was the last to be rescued from the burning house. Ever afterwards he believed that God had a special work for him to do, and thought of himself as 'A brand plucked from the burning.'

John and Charles had an excellent education. John studied at Charterhouse School for six years, and then went to Christ Church College, Oxford. He was elected a Fellow at Lincoln College, Oxford, at the early age of twenty-three. Charles studied at Westminster and then joined John at Oxford. There at the University they formed a small group of students into what became known as the 'Holy Club' or 'The Bible Moths' - because they

read the Greek New Testament together. But the name that really stuck was 'Methodists', due to their methodical way of prayer and Bible study, and as Charles said in one of his letters, because they had 'agreed together to observe with strict formality the method of study and practice laid down in the Statutes of the University'. Both brothers were ordained as Anglican priests, and after receiving their Master of Arts degree they went to Georgia, the British colony in America. John was a missionary to the Indians and Charles was private secretary to the Governor, General Oglethorpe.

This visit to America became a fiasco, with the exception that on the outward journey the brothers met up with the Moravian Christians. They were members of an ancient community of Moravian Protestants who had been persecuted in their native Germany and were going to settle in Georgia. The leader of the party, an elder called Spangenberg, talked to John and Charles about the need for personal friendship with God, and asked them the questions, 'Do you know yourself?' and 'Do you know Jesus Christ?' After less than two years the Wesleys returned to England, with John saying 'I went to convert the Indians, but realised I was myself unconverted.' Almost as soon as John returned he sought out the English Moravians, and quickly came under the influence of their leader, Peter Bohler. Bohler advised John to 'Preach faith until you have it; and then because you have it, you will preach faith'; and it soon became obvious to John that Christianity was a matter of personal experience. He began to realise that salvation by faith, and faith alone, was his way into the Kingdom of God; and having examined the facts carefully, his logical mind was forced to admit that God does grant both forgiveness for the past and power for the future to those who simply trust in Him for these things.

Once John Wesley's mind was convinced, his heart quickly followed. On 24th May 1738, John went in the afternoon to evensong at St. Paul's Cathedral where he listened to the choir singing, 'Out of the depths have I cried unto Thee, O Lord'. He then went on to a fellowship meeting with a group of Moravian Christians meeting under the auspices of the Church of

England. We then hear Wesley's own description of what happened that night at a quarter to nine:

'In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.'

John went out from that meeting house a new man; he made his way to his brother Charles' lodgings, shouting 'I believe', and Charles told him that three days previously he, too, had gone through a similar conversion experience. The two brothers then sang a hymn of triumph which Charles had written the previous day - 'Where shall my wondering soul begin?', the last lines being, 'Believe, and all your guilt's forgiven; only believe - and yours is heaven.'

From that moment on John Wesley began to see something of what God had in store for him. He did not dream of beginning a rival organisation to the Church of England and certainly had no idea of founding a world-wide Church. Yet he believed that God was calling him to recall the Established Church to her spiritual mission and to proclaim the good news of salvation by faith to those whom the church did not touch. One of his first actions was to return to Oxford University and preach a sermon in St. Mary's on 'By grace are ye saved through faith'. It was the manifesto of the new revival of Christianity in England, which would also spread throughout the world.

Sadly the revival did not find a welcome from either within the Church or without. On numerous occasions John and Charles and their followers were in danger of their lives, as parsons and squires egged on mobs to attack them. It was an odd situation; the churches were empty, and the one man people were prepared to flock to hear preach was shut out of the churches. The Wesley brothers linked up with George Whitfield, a previous member of the Holy Club, and they preached

to many crowds of people, eager to listen to the word of God. Yet even Bishop Butler told John to keep within his own parish, to which injunction he gave his famous reply: 'The world is my parish'. John's predicament was dramatised on one occasion when he used his father's tomb as a pulpit. In the course of 1739 only four churches were open to him, so he had to go into the open air or to such locations as Newgate jail.

The first Methodist meeting house was opened in Bristol on 3rd June 1739 and was known as the New Room in the Horsefair. It had a preaching place, living quarters and a stable for the preacher's horse. It is still in existence, the oldest Methodist shrine in the world. In the autumn of the same year, Wesley acquired a ruined cannon factory in the City of London, this became the famous Foundry, and was the London headquarters of the Methodist movement for forty years. At the Foundry Wesley carried on an extensive social programme, including a dispensary for free medicine and medical service, a day school for neglected children, a loan society, an employment bureau, a publishing house and book room and shelter for widows. The third centre to open was at Newcastle-upon-Tyne, where Wesley established his noted Orphan House in 1742, and this was his headquarters in the North of England. He also opened a school for miners' children at Kingswood in Bristol.

Alongside the opening of buildings, there was also a need for preachers. One of the first was John Cennick, who was born in Reading on 12th December 1718. It was at a service in St. Lawrence's Church, Reading, that he found Christ, and wrote: 'My heart danced for joy, and my dying soul revived. I heard the voice of Jesus saying, "I am thy salvation". I knew Christ loved me, and died for me, I rejoiced in God my Saviour.' Early in 1738 he met George Whitfield in Oxford, and went with him to Bristol. The following year Wesley appointed him to be his first master at Kingswood School. As with Charles Wesley, John Cennick was a hymn writer, publishing a number of hymns, including 'Ere I sleep, for every favour', 'Thou Great Redeemer, dying Lamb' and 'Be present at our table, Lord'. He then became a Moravian, dying at the early age of 36 on 4th July 1755.

Reference has just been made to Charles Wesley as a hymn writer, his greatest and most lasting contribution to the Methodist movement and the universal Church. He wrote some six thousand in all, in which he set the Christian Faith to song. He is probably religion's most prolific poet. His hymns have found their way into every hymn-book down through the years; and among them are such favourites as 'Love Divine, all loves excelling', 'Hark, the herald angels sing' and 'O, for a thousand tongues to sing'. For a number of years he helped John with the work of preaching and teaching throughout the country, but in the end he married and settled down in Bristol and later in London. He died in 1788 and is buried at Marylebone Parish Churchyard.

The Methodist movement grew like a bush fire, and needed some organisation. Wesley formed the converts into Societies, consisting of all those who met and worshipped together. The Societies were divided into Classes of about a dozen people, who met weekly under a leader, with personal testimony and teaching, and making financial contribution to the building up of the work. There was a Class ticket issued four times a year, with the name of the member written in the corner. Wesley was very strict about membership, stressing the need to be committed to Christ and the working out of their faith in their daily lives. He issued several Rule Books for Societies. In 1744 Wesley called his first Conference together, with four lay preachers and six clergy present. The decision was soon taken that because of the rapid growth of the Societies, the country should be divided up into Rounds or 'Circuits'. There were seven Circuits at the Conference of 1746. The discussions of those first conferences centred around three questions: what to teach; how to teach; and what to do, and stated too that all Methodists should regard themselves as members of the Church of England which was to be defended in preaching and in life. By the Conference of 1767 there were forty Circuits and 25,911 members. At the crucial Conference of 1784 Wesley gave Methodism a separate legal status and ensured its continuance after his death by what was known as 'The Deed of Declaration'. It gave authority to legislate for the Methodism of the future, outlining the basis of ministry, appointing preachers 'for

no more than three years successively to the use and enjoyment of any chapel and premises'.

Wesley's work in London outgrew the Foundry, which needed to be replaced, so in April 1777 a new chapel was begun in the City Road opposite the Bunhill Field burial ground where his mother had been laid to rest in 1742. It was an elegant building, the pillars supporting the gallery being made from masts given to Wesley by King George III from the naval dockyard at Deptford. A house was built alongside the chapel. This became Wesley's home for the last twelve years of his life, and he returned there to die in 1791. It was extensively rebuilt in 1977 and is now a great centre for worldwide Methodism.

Something needs to be said about the tremendous spread of Methodism to other parts of the world. In 1757 a wealthy planter from the West Indian island of Antigua read one of Wesley's books. His name was Nathaniel Gilbert. He came to London to meet Wesley, who then preached in Gilbert's London home; the seeds were sown, and on returning to Antigua, Gilbert began the Methodist cause which took the lead in caring for the welfare of the slaves. Back in London Wesley was also caught up in the campaign to free the slaves; the last letter he wrote before he died was to William Wilberforce, supporting his Bill for the abolition of slavery throughout the British Empire.

With the development of the American colonies, more and more Methodists were crossing the Atlantic. In 1760

two Methodist preachers, Philip Embury and Richard Strawbridge formed the first American Societies in New York and Maryland. In 1771 Wesley sent Francis Asbury to the Colonies, following the Conference's requests for volunteers to work in America. The first Conference of the American Methodist Episcopal church was in 1784, and Wesley ordained Richard Whatcoat and Thomas Vasey as Elders, and Thomas Coke as Superintendent of the Church. Wesley had asked the Bishop of London to ordain these men, but because of the colonies' independence from Britain this had not been possible. Today the American Methodist Church is one of the largest in the United States with 40,000 churches and 10 million members.

On his 80th birthday John Wesley was in Holland and he wrote, 'I have this day lived fourscore years; and by the mercy of God, my eyes are not waxed dim. And what little strength of body or mind I had thirty years since, just the same I have now. God grant I may never live to be useless'. That prayer was granted. He lived to be almost 88; he continued to rise at 4.00 a.m. each morning and preached around the country until two days before he died. The end came on 2nd March 1791 with his final words: 'The best of all is - God is with us'. No one in the 18th Century had played such an important part in calling the Church to renewal. No one had given more hope to those in our society who were in desperate need. He travelled over a quarter of a million miles to proclaim the Good News, and began the movement under the Spirit of God which is Methodism.