

The Wesleyan.

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"WISDOM IS THE PRINCIPAL THING; THEREFORE GET WISDOM."

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WESLEYAN TRACTS FOR THE TIMES.

WHY DON'T YOU COME TO CHURCH? A DIALOGUE BETWEEN A CLERGYMAN AND A WESLEYAN METHODIST.

(Continued.)

Clergyman Thank you I will read it carefully. There is another point or two on which I wish to ask a question if you please.

Wesleyan By all means, Sir.
C. How is it, then, that all your Preachers now give the sacraments? Wesley, you say, ordained only two or three.

W. It is not quite correct to say all our Preachers give them. The Local Preachers, who follow trades, do not, nor the probationers for the ministry; but only those who, after due probation, have been solemnly ordained to the work and office of the ministry. The governing power of the Body has, since Mr. Wesley's death, been vested in the Conference, and these arrangements are made by its authority.

C. But can the Conference give a divine commission?

W. Certainly not; but it can give directions as to the mode in which the commission given to the Wesleyan Ministers shall be fulfilled. And this is all it pretends to do. It is the common authority to which those who have received a divine commission agree to be subject, for the sake of peace and order just as the first Methodists agreed to be subject to Mr. John Wesley during his life.

C. But the Conference has been unfaithful to its promises. It said, in August 1791, "We engage to follow strictly the plan which Mr. Wesley left us at his death." And in three or four years afterwards they authorized the administration of the sacraments, the very thing which he had so strictly forbidden.

W. I trust you will remember the difference, Sir, between plans and principles. Mr. Wesley altered his own plan repeatedly. Every instance of variation from Church order was an alteration of his plan, but an alteration demanded by his principles. Such was the cause of the Conference. They made his plan their own, at his death, just as he had made the rubrics and canons his plan at the beginning of his ministry. But they were compelled, like him, to choose between altering their plans, and abandoning their principles. And they chose the less of what they consider to be two evils.

C. The "people forced them into this deviation," they say; and hence they seem to be entirely at the mercy of the people. If this be so, you can have no security that greater deviations still may not take place whenever the people choose to demand it. You may deviate into Socinianism itself, if the people are to be judges of what is right, and the guides of the Conference.

W. You misunderstand the expression, Sir. When the debates on this subject were going on, those who wished all the Methodists to go to church for the sacraments, said frequently that the Preachers kept up an agitation on these points in order to increase their own power and importance. It is of this accusation that the Conference refers in the passage you quote. As though they should say, "We are content to remain as we were for ourselves; we have not promoted the discussion of this subject. If the harmony of our societies is endangered, it is not by our act, but by the acts of others. The people will not be content without the sacraments, though we may be content not to administer them." Nor do they mean to admit by this expression that they sacrificed their own convictions to a rude clamour out of doors. The people whose voices they listened to in this instance were, many of them, persons of enlightened and established piety. They had scriptures of conviction as to the propriety of receiving the Lord's sup-

per at the hands of such Clergymen as those at St. Ives or Sheffield, and in company with gross, notorious evil-livers. They therefore threatened their own Ministers to give it to them, and while they refused to do so, the persons either went to a neighbouring church, (often at great inconvenience,) or to a Dissenting chapel, or neglected that sacrament entirely. Thus the Conference had no alternative but to listen to the request of these persons, or virtually to dismission from the societies, and I was then exposed to all the spiritual dangers from which Methodism had at first rescued them. Their language in the very document which you quote to their disadvantage, shows that they were not borne away by a torrent, but acted with solemn deliberation. And as to the suggestion that other and more important changes may be effected by clamour, so that we have no security against falling into Socinianism itself," all that I shall say at present is, that we can afford to smile at it.

C. You are very bold.

W. Yes, Sir, you have emboldened me. I should wish you to know that, so far as doctrine goes, no body of Christians on earth has such securities for the perpetuation of their faith as we have. Our standards are few and simple, consisting of the first fifty-three Sermons in Mr. Wesley's collected Works, and of his notes on the New Testament. These are always before the people, just as your own Articles, Liturgy, and Homilies are. But here is our great advantage. Our Ministers are every one of them solemnly questioned every year as to their belief of them, and copies of the most searching kind are circulated concerning every one of them twice in every year. Any member of society is at liberty to impeach them of false doctrine, and bring them to trial, all reasonable facilities are afforded for this purpose, and the process is simple and unexpensive. Our chapels are secured to us on trust that no doctrine contrary to these standards shall be preached in them, and could it be shown that any general departure from Wesley's doctrine had taken place, the Court of Chancery would dispossess us of them. We have, therefore, a direct interest in maintaining the integrity of the faith, as our adversaries would also have in showing that we had not done so, if they could. Above all, we admit no man to the ministry until he has given every reasonable ground of hope that he has prevailed upon himself to be the power of God to his own salvation. And while he continues to feel their saving efficacy, it is not likely that he should wish or attempt to set them aside. While the Spirit of God rests upon our Ministers, and they continue upright and pious men, it is morally impossible that they should teach any other doctrine than they now do, and if they cease to be honest men, it will not matter much what doctrine they preach, for God will not bless them, and they will soon come to nought.

C. I perceive that you are full of confidence and hope. But there is another subject to which I should like to bespeak your most serious attention before we bring this long conversation to an end.

W. After the patient hearing you have given me, Sir, it would indeed be a shame were I to demur to your request. Pray proceed.

C. You have admitted more than once that the Wesleyans were devotedly attached to the national Church, and longed for its reformation above all things. That they laboured long and hard for this, I readily grant, and also that their labours have been productive of great advantage to the country at large. But do you not think that the Church of England is now in a greatly improved state?

W. Unquestionably it is so; in some respects. I have observed with much pleasure her increasing purity of morals, and her active efforts for the spread of religion both at home and abroad.

C. Then let me ask, what do you suppose Wesley would do under present circumstances?

If he so closely adhered to the Church in her low estate, how much more would he do so in her revived condition? If he looked with jealous displeasure on any attempt at separation from her when the evil within her was so much greater, and the good so much less, than at present, how could he bear to see the people who, against his will, are called by his name, becoming a body of avowed Dissenters? Surely you should consider whether the time is not come when you are called upon to return as a body to first principles, and seek a closer union with the Church of England than has subsisted for many years past. I am without hope that you would find a disposition in some influential quarters to resist such a movement in the utmost, and if there were no other reasons in its favour, the rapid progress of Romanism might surely suggest to all classes of Protestants the advantage and necessity of a closer union among themselves. By such an advance the Methodists would gain much in comfort and respectability; the Establishment would derive a substantial benefit in the healing of an extensive breach, and the common cause of Christianity must be greatly assisted by an advance, though it were but of a single step, towards that blessed state of the Church for which our dying Saviour entreated his Father, "that they all may be made perfect in one."

W. You have suggested matter for an hour's discourse, Sir, but I will make my reply as short as possible. I am not inessential to the blessings of Christian unity in general, and would part with a good deal to secure it. Still less am I inessential to the advantage of union among Protestants, under present circumstances. Though I must take leave to say, that I do not think the anti-Romanist party in England would be strengthened by the junction of the Methodists with the Established Church, as it is certain that the tone of true Protestant feeling in the Establishment has declined most grievously in the last few years. The Methodists, therefore, can do better service against Rome in an independent position, than they could possibly render otherwise. They must needs be hampered by any thing like a coalition with the Establishment just now, when a large party exists within her pale, on whose speedy conversion to Rome the Pope and all his hosts are joyfully reckoning. But this is only one branch of the general subject, and looking at the cause as a whole, it may be thus stated.—First, I ask myself, Can we not have unity without uniformity? And a careful perusal of the Scriptures satisfies me that we can, and ought to have it. But, secondly, as my brethren of the Establishment think differently, how far is it my duty to act upon their views rather than my own? I say in reply, I will do so as far as I can with a good conscience. Then, thirdly, we come to the points in which I, as a private person, should conscientiously demur to the uniformity which they demand in order to unity. I say, as a private person, for as I have no authority to propose alterations on either side, I must take things as they are. Some of the subjects on which I should desire satisfaction are these.—Whether in the Established Church I should have the same privileges as I now have, the same opportunities for doing and recovering good, and if not, whether I may lawfully give them up without an equivalent?

C. Privileges? opportunities? what can you mean? Would you not have the Liturgy, which Wesley pronounced the best in the world, and without which he protested that your services at the meeting were incomplete?

W. I suppose we should, and at this I for one should rejoice, but it would be with much trembling. I love the Prayer-Book as a whole, but it has great faults as well as great excellencies, and I should be very sorry to be tied to it exclusively. At present the advantage is on our side, we reap the benefit of the Liturgy and extemporary prayer too, and so secure the benefit of both methods

of devotion. But, if we joined the Establishment, we must give up extemporary prayer altogether. Our Ministers could never vary from the "prescript form" of any emergency, and in public worship, and all the offices of devotion, such as visiting the sick, or burying the dead, we should be actually deprived of all the gifts which God has bestowed upon them for the service of his church. Our prayer meetings, too, where other gifted persons, not Ministers, exert, so themselves, and edify the brotherhood, I presume, be at an end. Our class meetings, our love-feasts, watch-nights and covenant-meetings must needs follow in the trap of the prayer meeting.

C. You might then have less excitement (and that is a dangerous thing at best,) but you would gain in quietness and peace.

W. Sir, I take the liberty to doubt that. The excitement which these meetings keep up is not, an enemy to peace, but a friend rather. Our Saviour severely reprimanded and threatened one of the children of old because he was not excited; all excitement, therefore cannot be wrong. Would not the Lascians have had more true peace, if they had so stirred up the gift of God, that their love had become a vehement flame which many waters could not quench, nor the floods drown? You say, the Church offers no peace, instead of excitement. I say, God be thanked, I have peace already; so that I need not go to the Church to get that, and I cannot spare the excitement which she proposes to do away with. Therefore the advantage is on the side of remaining as I am.

C. I am sorry to hear you speak of gifts and gifted brethren, that was the cant of the Commonwealth.

W. True, Sir, and the use which was then made of those terms has often disgusted me as much as it has you. But the terms themselves are scriptural, and may not be thrown away because they are abused. You will not deny that the gifts of the Spirit are bestowed upon believers for their mutual edifying, and if so, they must needs be exercised; and what can there be wrong in speaking of Scripture facts in Scripture words?

C. I think it tends to self-complacency and spiritual pride, and beside, were natural endowments are often mistaken for spiritual gifts.

W. Will you throw away your Prayer-Book because forms tend to formality? Do you not use it and bow at it too, notwithstanding this admitted fact? Suffer me then to speak of the gift of prayer, and of the exercise of it also, though I know that, like every good thing, such phrases are liable to abuse. You cannot deny, however, that to confine oneself to a form is to neglect, or throw away, the gift of prayer; for who cannot pray when he has the book before him?

C. But the Lord's supper is Christ's own ordinance, and must be, consequently, worth all the rest. Your classes, bands, and what not, are human institutions, not worthy to be named in comparison of the holy communion.

W. True, Sir, perfectly true. And could you offer us the eucharist in exchange for all our humanly-derived means of grace, we should be bound to make the exchange, and sell every thing, and buy that "pearl of great price."

C. Indeed, I am glad to hear you say so. That is just the offer the Church makes you.

W. I do not so understand her. There is really no exchange in the case. I now have the eucharist, and other ordinances too. I am requested to give up the rest, that the Church may give me—what? Why, the eucharist? You may call this exchange, Sir; to me it seems more like robbery.

C. I do not assert that you have the eucharist; but that I cannot grant. That is the Church's concession.

W. But you will not deny that you say, Sir, and I come to church sometimes, and communicate there, as I told you at the be-

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