

W. Very easily. Mr Wesley's opinions underwent an entire change on this point; and the means by which that change was in part, if not chiefly, effected, was the reading of two works written by distinguished Churchmen

C. Was it so really? I had no idea of this.

W. Perhaps not, Sir; and I would fancy hope that this is the case of many of your clerical brethren, who busy themselves just now in the circulating of extracts from his writings, with the view of persuading the Methodists that they are departing from the principles of their founder.

C. But surely Mr. Wesley was a very inconsistent person.

W. No; that I cannot admit. He only changed his opinions upon better information, as every other man may do, and has a right to do. If his conduct at any given time was at variance with the opinions which he then held he certainly was inconsistent; but not otherwise. It is an easy thing to select detached passages from the fourteen large volumes of his Works, which were published at intervals during the space of half a century, and by comparing them together, to make a show of contradiction. This you know, Sir, is the trick which infidels attempt to practise with the sacred volume. But the same rule by which we confute them, will hold good in its application to Mr. Wesley's Works. Observe the several times of writing, and the seeming inconsistency is at an end. Pray can you find the date of the first passage you quoted?

C. It is found in his Journal for the year 1745.

W. You will observe it is in a letter addressed to his brother-in-law, Mr. Hall. This letter was written December 30th of that year. Now let us turn to the second extract. Where is that found, Sir?

C. In one of his "Appeals to men of reason and Religion."

W. Yes, Sir, in the third Part; at the close of which, as in the former case, you find the date December 18th, 1745. So that these two passages were written within a fortnight of each other. And in the course of the next month his opinions on the subject in hand were greatly shaken. In his Journal, under date of January 20th, 1746, he writes: "I set out for Bristol. On the road I read over Lord King's 'Account of the Primitive Church.' In spite of the vehement prejudice of my education, I was ready to believe that this was a fair and impartial draught; but if so, it would follow that Bishops and Presbyters are (essentially) of one order."

From this opinion of the essential equality of Bishops and Presbyters he never afterwards varied. Writing a letter under date September 10th, 1764, he says, "Lord King's 'Account of the Primitive Church' convinced me many years ago, that Bishops and Presbyters are the same order, and consequently have the same right to ordain."—Works, vol. xiii., p. 233.

C. Did you ever hear that Lord King's book was answered, and with so much success, that he himself was convinced of his error, and espoused the opinion he had opposed?

W. I have heard a report of that sort, but do not know on what foundation it rests. Nor does Mr. Wesley ever mention the answer: from which I conclude, either that he never saw it, or that it failed to convince him. But that is nothing to the present purpose. The next book to which he refers, as having contributed much to the change of his views, was the work of a more eminent man than even the theological Lord Chancellor. He mentions it in several places. Thus in a letter to a friend, who taxed him with contradicting his subscription to the Twenty-third Article, by allowing Lay-Precursors: "They" (the Methodist Clergy) "subscribed it in the simplicity of their hearts, when they firmly believed none but episcopal ordination valid. But Bishop Stillingfleet has since fully convinced them, this was an entire mistake." (Vol. xiii., p. 223.) So in another letter: "This opinion" namely, that the episcopal form of church government is prescribed in Scripture, "which I once zealously espoused, I have been heartily ashamed of ever since I read Bishop Stillingfleet's 'Irenicum.' I think he has unanswerably proved that neither Christ nor his Apostles prescribe any particular form of church government; and that the plea of divine right for diocesan Episcopacy was never heard of in the primitive church." (Vol. xiii., p. 200.)

And yet once more: "Read Bishop Stillingfleet's 'Irenicum,' or any impartial history of the ancient church, and I believe you will think as I do. I verily believe I have as good a right to ordain, as to administer the Lord's supper." (Vol. xiii., p. 137.) You see, Sir, that it is not quite fair to quote as against the Methodists, opinions of Mr. Wesley which he not only ceased to hold, but repeatedly and plainly disowned.

C. It was in the later years of his life that he published the last extract I read to you. In fact, it was only a few months before his death. The sermon from which it is taken is dated May 4th, 1789, and I find he died March 2d, 1791. So that here we have his last words, and they are expressed against his Preachers administering the sacraments. By doing this he says they "renounce the first principle of Methodism."

W. I am glad, Sir, to find that you confine yourself to his words. Some of your brethren have acted very dishonourably in this respect. It is not long since I saw a tract in which the passage you have quoted was introduced, as containing Mr. Wesley's views upon this vitally important question, namely, as to the validity of the sacraments administered by persons not ordained by a Bishop; whereas the most casual reader may see that the validity of such sacraments is not mentioned, nor even hinted at, throughout the sermon; the sole question under discussion being, whether Methodist Preachers might, or might not, administer them.

C. Exactly so. That is the very point, and that point he decides against them. "Ye did not, at the beginning," says he, "like Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, seek the priesthood also. O, contain yourselves within your own bounds! Be content with preaching the Gospel." Can words be plainer! How you can profess to venerate his memory, while you act so completely at variance with his injunctions, I cannot tell. Surely if he ranks the Preacher, who pretends to administer with Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, he would condemn you, the receiver, as a partaker of their sins.

W. Softly, Sir, softly. We will turn to the sermon, if you please, though I fear my explanations will tire you.

C. Go on, Sir, and do not be afraid.

W. Suppose, in the first place, remembering the date of the sermon, we turn to the Journals. We shall there find that on August 1st, 1785, he set apart three "well-tried Preachers to minister in Scotland." Their names were John Passon, Thomas Handy, and Joseph Tylor. From other sources we learn that early in the year 1789, he ordained three other Ministers, without seducing them out of England. Their names were Alexander Mather, Thomas Rankin, and Henry Moore. The last of these has published a copy of the letters of orders given him on this occasion. They are dated February 27th, 1789, and countersigned James Creighton, Peard Dickenson, Presbyters of the Church of England, and read as follows:—

"Know all men, by these presents, that I, John Wesley, late Fellow of Lincoln College, in Oxford, did, on the day of the date hereof, by the imposition of my hands and prayer, (being assisted by other ordained Ministers) set apart Henry Moore, for the office of a Presbyter in the Church of God: a man whom I judge qualified to feed the flock of Christ, and to administer the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's supper, according to the usage of the Church of England; and as such I do hereby recommend him to all whom it may concern. In testimony whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and seal.

"JOHN WESLEY."

Now, Sir, let me ask, can you imagine that the passage you have read from the sermon was intended to prohibit these persons from administering the sacraments, or to deny, even by implication, the validity of the sacraments administered by them? Would it be consistent with common sense to suppose that he intended to revoke these powers as soon as they were bestowed?

C. I can hardly think that; but such conduct is very strange, to say the least of it.

W. So it no doubt appears to you, Sir; as well to many others who have never considered the subject fully. To those who have, it appears perfectly consistent both with Mr. Wesley's avowed principles, and with his method of proceeding from the beginning. And this I will endeavour to show you. It must be borne in mind, however, that principles and plans are very different things. A principle may be carried out in

one mode at one time, and in another mode at another time. And further, a firm adherence to principle may even compel a man to change his plans as circumstances change. And this is precisely the case of Mr. Wesley. His principles cannot be better stated than in his own words: "I have one point in view,—to promote, so far as I am able, vital, practical religion: and by the grace of God, to beget, preserve, and increase the life of God in the souls of men." (Vol. xiii., p. 167.) "I look upon all the world as my parish; thus far I mean, that in whatever part of it I am, I judge it meet, right, and my bounden duty, to declare unto all that are willing to hear, the glad tidings of salvation. This is the work which I know God has called me to; and sure I am that his blessing attends it. His servant I am; and as such am employed according to the plain direction of his word. As I have opportunity, doing good unto all men." (Vol. i., p. 190.) You will please to recollect, Sir, that he began his public life upon the plan of preaching, at every opportunity, in such churches as were open to him; but when the churches were closed against him, his principles led him to preach in the fields, and other unconsecrated places. His plan alone was changed; the time and place of preaching being regulated by circumstances.

Again: he began upon the plan of seeking the help of the Clergy only; but where he could not find Clergymen to assist him, his principle drove him to accept the help of laymen. His "vehement prejudice of education" rendered both these arrangements most unpleasant to him; but his sense of duty, his fixed adherence to principle, enabled him to surmount the unpleasantness. So, upon the same principle, when some of the societies would otherwise have been deprived of the sacraments, he authorized a few of his Preachers to administer them. But he never deviated unnecessarily from the order of the Established Church; and hence arose his seeming inconsistency in this matter. He appointed some Preachers to administer the sacraments where he found it absolutely necessary to do so; but he positively forbade those whom he had not appointed to undertake the work. And this is the real drift of the sermon from which you quote. It is an absolute prohibition of the administration of the sacraments by the ordained Preachers; and it, so far, a striking testimony to the manner in which he strove to soften that separation from the Establishment which he saw could not be wholly avoided. This view of the case is strengthened when we read, as we do in Myler's "History," (Svo., 1813, p. 175, that when he ordained these Preachers to administer in England, he "strongly advised them that, according to his example, they should continue united to the Established Church, so far as the blessed work in which they are engaged would permit." So whether I look at the small number of the persons to whom he gave this power, or at the advice which he gave them as to the exercise of it, or at the large number of those to whom he refused it, I see plain proof of his consistency throughout. Such was his love for the Established Church, that he would not depart from it further than was absolutely necessary. But so strong and fixed was his determination to "seek first the kingdom of God,"—so closely did he adhere to the principle of promoting vital, practical religion, at all costs and hazards,—that he was willing for its sake to sacrifice the dearest object of his affections, the Established Church itself.

C. You have certainly put a better construction upon his sermon than it carries at first sight; but your general argument is faulty in the extreme. It assumes two things: first, that there was an actual necessity for the steps taken by Mr. Wesley; and, secondly, that religion could be better promoted by his irregularities than otherwise: and these I can by no means admit.

W. And yet, Sir, they are capable of easy proof. Take the last mentioned first. Supposing him to have been strictly regular, he could have preached (ordinarily) but in one parish, and there only in the church; could have used no extemporary prayer, and formed no societies. The parish in which he might, and probably would, have settled, had he been so minded, was Epworth in Lincolnshire, the population of which, in his days, was two thousand. Had he continued there, what should I, or thousands more who are situated in distant parts of the country, have

known of him? And, except through him, what probability is there that I should have known any thing of vital godliness? Humanly speaking, none whatever. There were other Clergymen, contemporary with him, who were pious and regular, and found fault with his irregularities. I allude to Mr. Adam, of Wintingham, Mr. Walker, of Truro, and Mr. Venn, of Huddersfield. What am I the better, at this distance of time and place, for all their regular labours? They might have lived in the planet Venus for all the good which I have received from them; while the irregular fellow of Lincoln College has been the instrument, in the hand of God, of turning me and mine from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that we might receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified. A blessed irregularity this, Sir!

C. But we are not to do evil that good may come. You know that order is as necessary in the Church as any where else; it, indeed, is not more so; and if every man is to be at liberty to break the bounds, and go where he pleases, the Church will be involved in perpetual confusion. This you yourselves practically acknowledge: for you have a discipline of your own, and, as I have heard, enforce it strictly. If any man attempt to intrude your rules, you punish him: why then do you praise Wesley for having transgressed the rules of his Church?

W. I thank you for that question, Sir, because it leads us directly to the next subject. We do acknowledge the necessity of discipline in the church, and, I hope, show by our practice in administering it constantly, that we entertain a high sense of its value. But the case of Mr. Wesley must not be tried by ordinary rules. The state of things in the Established Church when he began his course was widely different from what it is at present, and required extraordinary measures. And this constitutes our chief grounds of defence, as it did his also, that "necessity has no laws." I think it deserves to be mentioned, that, as Mr. Wesley was never benefited, he could not, in your sense of the word, "break bounds;" but admitting him to have been in the fullest sense, under the laws of the Church, we can make out as clear a case of necessity as ever was pleaded to justify the infraction of positive law since the world began. And this remark applies equally to the first irregular steps which Mr. Wesley took, such as field-preaching, and the formation of societies, and to the last, the ordination of Preachers to administer the sacraments. As to the moral condition of the Church and nation at the commencement of his course, we do not ask you to take our word on that point; nor can you suspect either of the three witnesses whom I will now produce of a bias in our favour. Archbishop Secker declared in 1733, the year in which John Wesley was converted, that an open and professed disregard of religion had become the distinguishing character of the age; and that a torrent of impiety had set in which, if it were not stopped, must become absolutely fatal to the country. Dr. Southey, reviewing the same period avows his conviction that there never was less religious feeling in the country, either in the Establishment or out of it, than when Mr. Wesley blew his trumpet and awakened those who slept. And Mr. William Gladstone, a justly distinguished modern writer, specifies as the characteristics of the times in question, "a rapid and great declension in the tone of all the doctrines of religion, a great increase of glaring abuse, and a miserable debasement of the entire religious action of the Church." So that, in his view, "there lay before them" (that is, the Wesleys and their coadjutors) "a work which might, with some justice, be termed one of general re-conversion." I might enlarge these quotations, and add many others of the same purport, if it were necessary; but the fact which they declare admits of no dispute, except among those who are determined to believe what they wish to be true, in spite of all evidence to the contrary. If such was the state of the nation at the commencement of Wesley's labours, it was not to be expected that he would meet with much countenance from the Clergy. They were generally averse to his efforts; and not a few were open and bitter persecutors of both Preachers and people. Many of the Clergy positively refused the sacraments to the Methodists; and others were so wicked, that the people