

The Press and General Review

AN ADDRESS TO THE METHODIST SOCIETIES, FROM THE WESLEYAN DELEGATES ASSEMBLED IN ALBION CHAPEL, LONDON, Aug. 16-21, 1850.

DEAR BRETHREN.—It has fallen to our lot to address you in a different style from that ordinarily adopted by the Conference. The principal object of its annual pastoral letters has been to lead you to a closer walk with God, to induce you with renewed diligence to follow after holiness, and to persuade you to dedicate yourselves without reserve to Him who hath bought you with his blood. The circumstances in which we are placed must be our justification for deviating somewhat from the usual course. In this momentous crisis of our Connexional history, we consider it to be our duty to lay before you the state and prospects of our Church, to give you a brief outline of our proceedings, with the reasons for the steps which we have taken; and to remind you of a few facts, the statement of which will render those reasons still more obvious.

Scripture has enjoined upon us no regular plan of church government; but we may gather from the precepts of our Lord and his apostles, and from the practice of the early Christians, all the elements essential to the constitution of a Christian Church.

That Christianity is a simple institution, unaltered by worldly power, and not intended to abridge any man's civil or religious liberty, that a church is a voluntary society, invested with the right and duty of admitting or excluding its members, of choosing its own officers, and of repudiating any other head than Christ; and that liberty of conscience and a right of free inquiry are essential to the proper discharge of the duties of religion,—these are principles drawn from the highest source, acknowledged by and embodied in the constitution of all Protestant communities, and without the practical recognition of which we believe it to be impossible for the work of God to prosper in any Christian Church.

Now, these rights, which as Wesleyan Methodists you claim, in common with all other Christians, have been grievously invaded. Our preachers, forgetting the words of our Lord, "One is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren," have laid aside the Christian brotherhood, and assumed the worldly principle of masterhood. They have set themselves up as rulers over God's heritage, and as the princes of the Gentiles to exercise authority upon them. In short, they have seized the whole legislative and executive power of the Connexion, and have framed and enforced laws in direct violation of the treaty and covenant to which, in the years, 1795 and 1797, they bound themselves with all the solemnity of an oath.

These laws, improperly termed the "Declaratory Rules of 1835," have taken from the church the inalienable right of calling to account an offending brother, of examining into the truth of any accusation brought against him, and of deciding whether his offence, if proved, is deserving of reproof or punishment, or whether it unfits him for continued fellowship with his brethren. By these laws, the travelling preachers have superseded Our Lord's authority, and have arrogated to themselves that power which he vested in the church, when he commanded, that, if an offending brother should refuse to hear the voice of friendly admonition, the matter should be brought before the church: "If he shall neglect to hear them, tell it to the church; but, if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican."

Not content with thus usurping the power which belongs, by Divine institution, to the church, the Conference forbids inquiry into the affairs of Methodism, makes it expulsion from the Society either to discuss the merits of the system it has established, or to meet together for the purpose of memorialising the Conference; and to crown all, declares that the right of church-membership is as completely forfeited by a breach of one of these so-called laws of Methodism, as by a positive violation of the law of God.

The Conference has constituted itself into a Supreme Court, to which, in the last resort, all appeals, from both the preachers and the people, must be made. It sits within closed doors, and assumes to exercise irresponsible power. In the Minutes of 1835, it has revived and reasserted the Papal practice of question by penalty, ordaining that any preacher who refuses to submit to the "Friendly Examination," shall be considered as "ipso facto incurring the penalty of suspension;" and there is reason to believe, that, in the Conference, recently held in London, the practice has been declared applicable to the expulsion of members from Society.

Such are some of the encroachments of the Conference, some of those anti-Scriptural and anti-Methodistical laws which were first proclaimed in the year 1835. They had lain dormant, undisturbed, and almost unnoticed until last year, when the Rev. Messrs. Everett, Dunn, and Griffith, were cited to the bar of the Conference, were put to the question, and, because they refused to submit to so novel and unscriptural a proceeding were summarily, without trial or even accusation, expelled from the Connexion.

This startling exhibition of the alleged laws of Methodism led many of you to examine them more fully; when, to your astonishment and dismay, you discovered, that, while you slept confidently in the bosom of the church, the tares of unlimited despotism had been stealthily sown. You naturally called meetings to consider the alarming state of things, and to consult about a remedy; and not a few of you were forthwith cited before our ecclesiastical courts, accused of a violation of Methodist law, and expelled in daring opposition to the verdict of the Leaders' Meeting, which constitutes our local Presbytery.

Under these circumstances you followed the example of your illustrious forefathers, met in large numbers, elected us to be your representatives, and empowered us to act for you in any way which, after due deliberation, we might consider to be most conducive to the security of your Scriptural and Methodistical rights, and to the restoration of peace and harmony in the Connexion. We accordingly met in the month of March, in Albion Chapel, London, to the number of three hundred and seventy-four, and spent four days in an earnest, and we trust prayerful, consideration of the whole case.

The result of our deliberations is before you; and, whatever opinions may be formed as to the soundness of our views or the wisdom of our plans, we were actuated, be assured, by a cordial and self-denying attachment to true Methodism, and by a sincere desire to do that which should be sanctioned by the approval of the Great Head of the Church. During our sittings, we sent a small deputation to wait upon the President of the Conference, and respectfully request him to meet a committee appointed by us to lay the result of our united deliberations before him. He utterly refused to hold any communication either with us or with our committee, denouncing our mode of procedure as unconstitutional.

We then separated for a season to our homes; having first, as you are aware, appointed a committee composed of gentlemen from different parts of the country, with instructions to revise the whole collection of Methodistical laws, and with power to act in conjunction with the Conference or its committee, in agreeing upon and settling such a Code as should be thought adapted to promote the peace and prosperity of the Connexion. The Committee of Privileges thus appointed, agreeably to the instructions given them, have revised the whole of the laws, and, after a vast amount of labor and thought, have embodied them in a formal Code, which is in substance nearly the same as was agreed upon in the year 1795 and 1797, but embraces certain extensions which appear to be demanded by the principles of the New Testament, together with certain guards highly necessary to secure you against future encroachments. This important document will shortly be laid before you.

The Conference had no sooner assembled, than the committee deputed their secretaries (Brothers Robert Swan Stanley, of Newcastle-on-Tyne, and Joseph Massingham, of Norwich,) respectfully to intimate to the President, that they were prepared, according to the terms of their appointment, to meet with the Conference, or with a committee appointed by that body; and also to inquire when the Conference would be pleased to receive the numerous memorials with the presentation of which you had entrusted them. After the lapse of some days, an official answer was received, stating, that the "existence and action" of your committee were a "deliberate and flagrant violation of the discipline of Methodism," re-asserting the laws of 1835, and declining either to meet your committee or to receive your memorials, under the pretext that they were unconstitutional. Some of you, anticipating this objection, adopted the mode of memorializing laid down in the minutes of 1835, though to do so seemed to imply a recognition of those really unconstitutional regulations: but the memorials of this class have had no greater success than the others; these memorials were indeed received, but the demands contained in them have been rejected.

All hope that the Conference would respect your memorials and consent to an amicable adjustment of your scriptural and reasonable claims being at an end, the committee immediately summoned us to London. On the 16th of August, we again met in Albion Chapel, but under circumstances far more painful and distressing than at first. Many of us who, when we separated in March, were active, and we trust faithful members and office-bearers of long standing in the societies, had in the interval, and for no crime but that of acting as your representatives, been ruthlessly expelled by the superintendent preachers as unworthy of the privilege of Christian fellowship. We now saw the Connexion, which was before suffering from the miseries of division and strife, threatened with utter dissolution, by the sanction given to acts of reprisal under the disguise of discipline, and by the contemptuous disregard of your temperate remonstrances.

The proceedings of the Conference then sitting presents an unbroken series of acts of despotism and injustice. One of your oldest and most distinguished ministers was expelled without being allowed even to appear before his brethren, or so much as to make any defence, oral or written, against the charges fabricated against him; he could be heard only in com-

mittee, and then not in vindication, but solely in "apology, extenuation, or retraction."—Another highly-esteemed and aged minister was driven from his home, degraded from his office, deprived of his income, and placed under interdict as to the locality of his future abode because, when compelled, against his most earnest entreaties, to form part of a Minor District Meeting, he dared to give a conscientious vote in opposition to the other members of the court of review, and to put in the reasons of his dissent. A third, who had retired through infirmity to end his days among his friends, has been banished from his chosen residence, and deprived of part of his scanty income, because a member of his family was supposed to have uttered some sentiment of which the majority of the Conference disapproved. Others have been punished or censured for the simple exercise of their privilege as members of the Conference, in opposition to these oppressive proceedings, and for advocating the scriptural rights of the people; while those acts of discipline so called, by which so many officers and members of long standing and irreproachable character have been expelled, were approved and confirmed, and the daring perpetrators honored and rewarded.

These things deepened our conviction, that most extensive alterations were absolutely necessary. We perceived, that the thorough Reform without which it were impossible for the work of God to prosper among us, and without which we cannot long exist and cohere as a body, was obstructed by the obstinacy of a dominant faction; and we were led carefully to inquire by what means their power of obstruction might be overcome. We were convinced, that, since the voice of public opinion, enforced by the united sanction of reason and of Scripture, had failed to move our oppressors to any concessions, we must at length have recourse to the most decided measures, in order to bring them to a better mind.

After a long and anxious deliberation, a thorough investigation of the whole subject, and a free and protracted debate, we have come to the solemn conviction, that, as the assumption and acts of the Conference are palpably contrary to the authority of the Great Head of the Church, at total variance with the design and constitution of the first Christian churches, and practically opposed to the diffusive genius of Christianity; and as, moreover, the Conference, notwithstanding all the events of the past years, has finally avowed its "unalterable resolution" to persist in maintaining a system which bears so many marks of the Divine reprobation,—we dare not and cannot conscientiously contribute, as heretofore, to any of the funds employed in its support. In obedience to the imperious call of duty, we therefore deliberately advise and recommend, that the usual contributions to all Wesleyan funds be at once diverted into another channel, until the Conference shall fully accede to your just and Scriptural claims.

It may be objected, that this is an attempt to coerce our preachers, and to force them to act contrary to their judgments. Our answer is, that, having long and patiently tried all milder means in vain, we have no alternative but either to betray our trust by leaving the liberties of the Church of Christ at the mercy of usurpers or to avail ourselves of the only further argument which remains at our disposal. And we are the more willing to advise you at once to adopt this measure, because, believing, as we have said, that the Conference is pursuing an unscriptural course we feel that by continuing to contribute to the Connexional funds you would be sustaining its agents in their violent and unjust proceedings, and, indeed, would be making yourselves a party to their evil doings. You have exhausted all the resources of reason and persuasion; and it is now high time, we submit, to obey and strictly to carry out the Apostle's injunction, "Be ye not partakers of other men's sins."

But, while we contemplate with just alarm the rapid growth and full-blown maturity of a usurpation which has deprived us of our scriptural rights, and now threatens to annihilate the work of God from among us, we are still persuaded, that Methodism, separated from the evils introduced into its constitution, is a great and glorious institution, "a vessel fitted for the Master's use," and destined to overflow with blessings to the whole world. We, therefore, strongly urge you to retain your membership; and to use all the influence you possess to regain for yourselves and for your children that liberty which Christ came to establish. Endeavor, by conversation with your neighbors, by correspondence with the distant, by the liberal circulation of judicious tracts and pamphlets, by public meetings and lectures, and by every other method of diffusing information, to form a scripturally-enlightened public opinion with respect to Methodist institutions.

Whenever, from numerous expulsions or other local circumstances, it is impossible for you to continue in nominal communion with the Body, we consider you will be justified in taking, and we recommend you to take, steps for the conduct of public worship by the Local Preachers, and of all the other religious services common to Methodism, either in buildings specially procured for the purpose, or, if practicable, in conformity with the provisions of the Deeds of Trusts, by withdrawing the chapels from under the exclusive jurisdiction of the Conference

and its agents. Of your moral claim to them there can be no question. You contributed to their erection, for your own accommodation as well as for the benefit of the preachers; and that you should put in force any legal claim which you may have will excite surprise in none who are aware that you have no other places of assembly for Society purposes.

But we affectionately and most earnestly advise and warn you not, under any circumstances, to secede from the Body, either by joining any church, or by forming yourselves into a new sect. The most inconsiderable member, while in the Connexion, by adding to the weight of the whole, has his value and his use; while, out of it, the greatest talents can be of practical avail, and each individual secession sets an example detrimental to our cause. The Conference being aware of this, its whole policy is intended to drive you from the Body. Too many of the travelling preachers would rejoice in the loss of tens of thousands of members, if by such means they could be relieved from a combined assault upon the authority they have usurped over God's heritage.

In that case, commanding, as they do, an immense amount of property in chapels and school houses, raised at your expense, and confirmed in their present position, they would go headlong in their despotic career, until that Methodism which, by the blessing of God, once shone forth "fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and (to the enemies of the cross of Christ) terrible as an army with banners," would be transformed into a curse and a pestilence, and would become "a proverb and a by-word among the nations." Alas, dear Brethren, this is already the language of a sad and solemn reality. Already do our ministers claim to exercise unlimited and irresponsible power over the affairs of the entire Connexion. Already do they make the individual membership of every Wesleyan hang upon their will. If you would check them in a career so perilous to all that you most value, no time is to be lost. Anticipating a crisis no longer avoidable, they are exerting every nerve to make themselves independent of your aid. At this moment they are upon the eve of receiving a Government grant of some thousands of pounds, by which they will be enabled to rivet the shackles of their despotism upon the rising generation.

Will you extend to them your help, until, by the multiplication of independent resources, they can do without you, and set even your last argument at defiance? Will you defer decisive measures, till your preachers have by degrees erected themselves into a priestly hierarchy, under the patronage, but free from the control of the State, and you shall be deprived of all possibility of rescuing your beloved Methodism from their perverting grasp?

Such, dear brethren, is the calamitous state of the Connexion, and such is the fearful alternative before you. Nothing but an immediate and universal combination, a vigorous and persevering resistance, and a bold and fearless assertion of your rights, can save the Connexion from ruin. The travelling preachers, with few exceptions, have combined to oppress you; you must unite to resist them: else, you will fall, one by one, an unpitied sacrifice, in the struggle which at present you have the means of terminating in favor of your cause. Arise from your lethargy. Show yourselves to be not merely Englishmen, but Christians. With virtuous courage, resolve to regain, by your activity and vigilance, that liberty which has been lost by your sloth and apiniveness. On your temperate but manly exertions, under the Divine blessing, depend the happiness and freedom of your posterity. The Conference (whose existence, in spite of all deed-polls, depends upon public opinion) will be little inclined to oppose your will, when once asserted in the language of firm and decisive action.

Calumny may, indeed, brand you with odious epithets, may misinterpret your actions and misconstrue your convictions. "Put away from you all bitterness, and wrath, and anger." Cultivate most carefully personal piety, conscientiously use such means of grace as you have hitherto found ministering to your spiritual edification, and keep in view the great object of Christian organization, the enlargement of the kingdom of Christ, by the individual and general co-operative zeal of its faithful and loyal subjects. Heed not the reproaches that may be heaped upon your head, persevere in the path of duty, and calmly await the decision of the Great Judge, before whom both you and your accusers must appear, and in whose presence the secrets of all hearts will be laid open. Then, when the clouds of misrepresentation shall be scattered, it will be seen that you were a virtuous and oppressed people, who were treading, though with unequal steps, in the path of those illustrious prophets, apostles, and martyrs, "of whom the world was not worthy;" and, in the gracious estimation of the Supreme Arbiter, you will be deemed not unworthy partakers in the reward.

"Therefore, beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord;" and, whatever may seem to be the issue of the present conflict, comfort yourselves with the assurance that "your labor is not in vain in the Lord." We are, dear Brethren, on behalf of the Wesleyan Delegates,

Yours, very affectionately,
G. W. HARRISON, Chairman,
T. HUNT,
F. GOSJEAN, Secretaries.
J. HARRISON.
Aug. 17, 1850.