

The Wesleyan.

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

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MODERN METHODISM, WESLEYAN METHODISM.

Notwithstanding the pains they have taken to explain their true position, it is still vehemently and repeatedly asserted that the present race of Methodists have departed from the principles of their founder and spiritual father, the late Rev. John Wesley. It therefore appears to be necessary to enter again into this question; and in order to bring it fairly before the reader, and in as small a compass as possible, we shall first of all inquire what are those features in the system of modern Methodism with which modern high Churchmen are most displeased, and then consider how far Mr. Wesley's authority can be pleaded in their behalf. This will be a fair, straightforward course, and will leave our opponents no alternative but to set aside facts, or admit our conclusions.

The charges usually brought against us, and which constitute the head and front of our offending, are, that we neglect the order of the Establishment; that we are under no control, either parochial or episcopal; that we hold our services in church hours, that our Ministers are ordained among ourselves; and that, in virtue of such ordination, they administer the sacraments to our societies.

Now on all these points we appeal for a justification either to the avowed principles or recorded practice of John Wesley.

1. Mr Wesley always set aside the order of the Establishment where he found it interfering with the spread of the Gospel truth. It was charged upon him and his brother that their "principles and practice were totally subversive of the Established Church, because (1.) they gathered congregations, and exercised their ministerial office therein, in every part of this kingdom, directly contrary to the restraint laid upon them at their ordination, and to the design of that parochial distribution of duty settled throughout the nation. (2.) They disclaim all right in the Bishops to control them in any of these matters, and say that, rather than be so controlled, they would renounce all communion with this Church."

His reply to these charges was as follows:—"I answer, first, they do gather congregations every where, and exercise their ministerial office therein. But this is not contrary to any restraint which was laid upon them at their ordination, for they were not ordained to serve any particular parish. But were it otherwise, suppose a parish Minister to be either ignorant or negligent of his duty, and one of his flock adjures me for Christ's sake, to tell him what he must do to be saved, was it ever the design of our Church that I should refuse to do it because he is not of my parish? ... Thirdly. "In every point of an indifferent nature they obey the Bishops, for conscience sake. But they think episcopal authority cannot reverse what is fixed by divine authority."—Works (Fourth Edition,) vol. xiii., pp. 222, 223.

Again, Mr. Wesley was asked the following questions, which, with the answers affixed, would be sufficient evidence in support of our position, if they stood alone in his writings; and how much when taken in connection with what precedes and follows! "(1.) 'Do you judge that the Church, with the authority of the State, has power to enact laws for her own government? I answer, If a dispensation of the Gospel is committed unto me, no Church has power to enjoin me silence. Neither has the State; though it may abuse its power, and enact laws whereby I suffer for preaching the Gospel.

"(2.) 'Do you judge it your duty to submit to the laws of the Church and State, as far as they are consistent with a good conscience?—I do. But 'woe is me,

if I preach not the Gospel.' This is not consistent with a good conscience.

"(3.) 'Is it a law of the Church and State that none of her Ministers shall gather congregations but by the appointment of the Bishop? If any do, does she not forbid her people to attend them? Are they not subversive of the good order of the Church? Do you judge there is any thing sinful in such a law?

"I answer, (1.) If there is a law, that a Minister of Christ who is not suffered to preach the Gospel in the Church should not preach it elsewhere, I do judge that law to be absolutely sinful. (2.) If that law forbids Christian people to hear the Gospel of Christ out of their parish church, when they cannot hear it there, I judge it would be sinful for them to obey it. (3.) This preaching is not subversive of any good order whatever. It is only subversive of that vile abuse of the good order of our Church, whereby men, who neither preach nor live the Gospel, are suffered publicly to overturn it from the foundation: and in the room of it to palm upon their congregations a wretched mixture of dead form and named morality."—Works, vol. xiii., pp. 220, 221.

Once more he writes, "you ask, 'How is it that I assemble Christians, who are none of my charge, to sing psalms, and pray, and hear the Scriptures expounded?' and think it hard to justify doing this, in other men's parishes, upon catholic principles.' Permit me to speak plainly. I, by catholic principles, they mean any other than scriptural, they weigh nothing with me. I allow no other rule, whether of faith or practice, than the holy scriptures: but, on scriptural principles, I do not think it hard to justify whatever I do. God in Scripture commands me, according to my power, to instruct the ignorant, reform the wicked, confirm the virtuous. Man forbids me to do this in another's parish; that is, in effect, to do it at all; seeing I have now no parish of my own, nor probably ever shall. Whom then shall I fear, God or man? It is but just to obey man rather than God, judge you. A dispensation of the Gospel is committed to me; and woe is me if I preach not the Gospel. But where shall I preach it upon the principles you mention? Why, not in Europe, Asia, Africa, or America; not in any of the Christian parts, at least, of the habitable earth. For all these are, after a sort, divided into parishes. If it be said, 'Go back then to the Heathens, from whence you came?' nay, but neither could I now (on your principles) preach to them; for all the heathens in Georgia belong to the parish either of Savannah or Frederica. Suffer me now to tell you my principles on this matter. 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."—Journal, June 11th, 1739.

In full consistency with these societies he refused to give up the societies he had formed in certain parts of Cornwall to the care of the parochial Clergy, even when he believed those Clergymen to be men of piety. Mr. Walker of Truro expostulated with him on this head, but he persisted in his refusal. The following is a specimen of the correspondence which passed between them relative to the withdrawal of the Methodist ministry and ordinances from a neighbouring parish.

"... I could not deny that Mr. V. was a gracious person; and I heard him preach the true, though not the whole, Gospel. But had it been the whole, there are several reasons still, why I did not give up the people to him. (1.) No one mentioned or intimated any such thing, nor did it once enter into my thoughts. But if it had, (2.) I do not know that every one who preaches the truth has wisdom and experience, to guide and govern a flock. I do not know

that Mr. V. in particular has. He may, or may not. (3.) I do not know whether he would or could give that flock all the advantages for holiness which they now enjoy; and to leave them to him before I was assured of this would be neither justice nor mercy. (4.) Unless they were assured of this, they could not in conscience give up themselves to him; and I have neither right nor power to dispose of them contrary to their conscience."

"But," it was replied, "they are already his by legal establishment." Mr. Wesley rejoined, "if they receive the sacrament from him thrice a year, and attend ministrations on the Lord's day, I see no more which the law requires. But to go a little deeper into this matter of a legal establishment: Does Mr. Conon or you think that the King and Parliament have a right to prescribe to me what Pastor I shall use? If they prescribe one which I know God never sent, am I obliged to receive him? If he be sent of God, can I receive him with a clear conscience till I know he is! And even when I do, I believe my former pastor is more profitable to my soul, can I leave him without sin? Or has any man living a right to require this of me?

"I extend this to every gospel Minister in England. Before I could with a clear conscience leave the Methodist Society even to such an one, all these considerations must come in."—Works, vol. xiii., pp. 191, 192.

There can be no need of further evidence on this point. Here were Ministers preaching in dioceses where they had no license, and in places that were never consecrated; and societies formed, meetings held, even against the will, of the incumbent. The question, be it observed, is not now whether these things were right or wrong, but whether Mr. Wesley did them. And since this cannot be denied, it is absurd to exclaim against the Methodists for departing from his principles, in becoming independent of the national Church. Modern Methodism may thus be clearly seen to be in this respect at least, Wesleyan Methodism.

2. The next point in dispute is, the holding Methodist services in Church hours. Now we freely admit that the liberty of so doing was denied by Mr. Wesley to most of the societies during the earlier periods of his ministry, and to some of them as long as he lived. But to others it was granted almost from the beginning of Methodism. The services in London were not regulated by a reference to those of the Established Church; but both at the foundry, West-street, and elsewhere, they were fixed at such times as suited Mr. Wesley's convenience. It is to no purpose to object that these services were mostly conducted by Clergymen, since our Clergymen officiating were entirely independent of parochial government, and had, as it has been justly remarked, "no more to do with the Church as to real connexion and subordination, than with the Jews." Bristol, as it was the second place in which Methodism was established, was next included in the arrangement now described. And very few places, except London and Bristol, had the service in Church hours till the year 1781. At the Conference held that year, it was agreed, "First that it was highly expedient, that all the Methodists (so called) who had been bred here, should attend the service of the Church, as often as possible; but that, secondly, if the Ministers began either to preach the absolute decrees, or to rail at and ridicule Christian perfection, they should quietly and silently go out of the church, yet attend it again the next opportunity."

Six months afterwards Mr. Wesley published this resolution of the Conference in the Magazine, and added to it the following expression of approval:—"I have

since that time, revolved this matter over in my own mind. And the more I consider it, the more I am convinced this was the best answer that could be given. I still advise all our friends where this case occurs, quietly and silently to go out."—Arminian Magazine, vol. v., p. 153.

It was not to be supposed that the system of going out quietly and coming again the next time, would last long. Accordingly, five years after this, the performance of divine service in Methodist chapels during Church hours was formally allowed in our specified cases, which were stated thus:—1. When the Minister is a notoriously wicked man. 2. When he preaches Arian, or any equally pernicious doctrine. 3. When there are not churches in the own sufficient to contain half the people. 4. When there is no church at all within two or three miles.

In process of time this liberty was extended to a greater number of places, as Mr. Wesley clearly foresaw that it would be. "A kind of separation from the Church," he writes, in 1788, "has already taken place, and will inevitably spread, though by slow degrees. Those Ministers, so called, who neither live nor preach the Gospel, I dare not say are sent of God. Where one of these is settled, many of the Methodists dare not attend his ministry, so, if there be no other church in that neighbourhood, they go to church no more. This is the case in a few places already, and it will be the case in more; and no one can justly blame me for this, neither is it contrary to any of my professions."—Works, vol. xiii., p. 250.

Again, it may be remarked, that the question now before us is not what is right, but what was done by Mr. Wesley; and he must have a bold front who, after reading these passages, will venture to assert that "modern Methodism is totally at variance with the principles and plans of its founder." The permission granted to the societies at large, to hold service in Church hours, since his death, is but the extension of a measure which had his hearty and deliberate approval. The grounds upon which that permission was granted, it would require a volume to state at length. Nor would we willingly enter, if we could, upon an enumeration of the faults of the national Clergy. It suffices us to state, first, That, looking back upon the history of Methodism, it appears certain that the effect of this permission has been to prevent a large accession to the ranks of avowed and active Dissent which would otherwise inevitably have taken place; so that our modern high Churchmen, if they had understood their own true interests, would rather have welcomed such a step on the part of the Conference, than have repudiated it. And, secondly, That, looking round on the present condition of the Establishment, we are satisfied that the Clergy are not in a situation to call upon us to return to the practice of a part of the early Methodists, and to close our chapels in Church hours. There are still too many places where the Minister is a notoriously wicked man, where the most pernicious doctrine is constantly preached where there is not church room for half the population, or where the church is too much distant from the people, to allow the Methodists to sit in permanent attendance such a practice for a moment, even if it were made to last.

"To be every one expelled by Mr. Wesley himself in the case of Dublin. 'But it is not customary to your profession to present services in Dublin on Church hours? For what necessity is there for that? or what good end does it answer?' I believe it answers several good ends, which could not so well be answered any other way. The first is, I imagine as it may seem, to prevent a separation from the Church. Many of our society were lately expelled from the Church, they never attended it again. But when they only served the Church every first Sunday in the month, they had they not better attend it every week? ... I have not time to say more to it." I cannot. I have striven to do so twenty or thirty years, but in vain. The second is, the warning of them from attending dissenting meetings, which many of them attended constantly, but now have wholly left. The third is, the constantly hearing that sound doctrine which is able to save their souls."—Works, vol. vi., p. 26.