

A Third Decade of Evangelistic Toil (1761-1770)

The third decade presents features of a mingled character, several of them being of great interest. Signs of revival and extension appeared in many parts of the country. 'In the beginning of the year 1760,' Wesley wrote, 'there was a great revival of the work of God in Yorkshire Here began that glorious work of sanctification which had been nearly at a stand for twenty years. But from time to time it spread, first through various parts of Yorkshire, afterwards in London, then through most parts of England; next through Dublin, Limerick, and all the south and west of Ireland. And wherever the work of sanctification increased, the whole work of God increased in all its branches. Many were convinced of sin, many justified, many ,backsliders healed. So it was in the London Society in particular. In February, 1761, it contained upwards of two thousand three hundred members; in 1765, above two thousand eight hundred.' This expansion of the work was observable, not only in and around London, but in most parts of England and Ireland, and a similar testimony was borne in 1764.

Wesley dwells much on 'this work of sanctification,' which he defines more accurately as 'entire sanctification,' in harmony with 1 Thess. v. 23: 'The God of peace Himself sanctify you wholly.' This is the 'perfect love,' or 'Christian perfection,' which he strenuously and constantly urged all his societies to seek. 'By perfection I mean the humble, gentle, patient love of God and man, ruling all the tempers, words, and actions; the whole heart and the whole life.' This was no higher attainment than he had long ago been taught, by his early 'oracle' Law - from whom he both borrowed the phrase and learned how great was the possible spiritual privilege of man under the gospel of Jesus Christ. But a peculiarity of Wesley's teaching was that 'this perfection is always wrought in the soul by faith, by a simple act of faith; consequently in an instant.' But he says, 'I believe in a gradual work, both preceding and following that instant. As to the time,' he adds, 'I believe this instant generally is the instant of death, the moment before the soul leaves the body. But I believe it may be ten, twenty, or forty years before death. I believe it is usually many years after justification; but that it may be within five years or five months after it.' This was associated with an entire devotion of the heart and life to God, so as to 'rejoice evermore, pray without ceasing, and in everything give thanks.' 'The loving God with all our heart, soul, and strength, and the loving all men as Christ loved us, is, and ever was, the sum of what I deliver as pure and undefiled religion.' While this, entire dedication to God, and the happy experience of the love of God shed abroad in the heart, raised many of the early Methodists to saintliness of character, many of the less wary were carried away by a perversion of the teaching into a wildness of enthusiasm that for many years did much to hamper Wesley in his labours, and in several places to arrest the progress of the work. So that, looking back at the close of the year 1762, he could not but be thankful for a year of uncommon blessings, and yet he had had 'more care and trouble in six months than in several years preceding'!

Fletcher wrote to Charles Wesley at this time: 'Many of our brethren are overshooting sober Christianity in London. Oh that I could stand in the gap! Oh that I could, by sacrificing myself, shut this immense abyss of enthusiasm which opens its mouth among us! The corruption of the best things is always the worst of corruptions.'

The names of George Bell and Thomas Maxfield stand unhappily associated with this defection; and yet it was to the hands of the latter that the London Society was to a large extent committed. He left Wesley in 1763, drawing away a number who sympathized with his extravagances.

Charles Wesley and Whitefield (who was now in England) were both in ill-health, and the burden on Wesley was prodigious. Happily his health was Thoroughly re-established, and he was able to undertake extraordinary labours. At one time he wrote, 'Three days in a week I can preach thrice a day without hurting myself; but I had now far exceeded this, besides meeting classes and exhorting the societies.' At a subsequent period he wrote, 'This and the three following days I preached at as many places as I could, though I was at first in doubt whether I could preach eight days, mostly in the open air, three or four times a day. But my strength was as my work. I hardly felt any weariness first or last.'

In the extremely severe winter of 1763, Wesley distributed 'pease pottage and barley broth' at the Foundery, and made a collection of 300 to meet the necessities of the starving and destitute poor. In the following year the Foundery was repaired and enlarged.

In the year 1764 Wesley addressed a letter to about fifty evangelical clergymen, with a view to promote a friendly union amongst them. 'The great point I now laboured for,' he writes, 'was a good understanding With all our brethren of the clergy, who are heartily engaged in propagating vital religion: Three only of the fifty responded. But at the Conference of that year, John Pawson, who was present, says, 'Twelve of those gentlemen attended our Conference in Bristol, in order to prevail with Mr. Wesley to withdraw the preachers from every parish where there was I an awakened minister; and Mr. Charles Wesley honestly told us, that if he was a settled minister in any particular place, we should not preach there. To whom Mr. Hampson [one of the assistants] replied, "I would preach there, and never ask your leave, and should have as good a right to do so as you would have." '

An unhappy press controversy also arose about this time from the publication of eleven letters written by Hervey, and published after his

death, in reply to some strictures passed by Wesley on the Calvinistic views expressed in Hervey's Theron and Aspasia. Wesley's part in the strife was to publish A Treatise on Justification, extracted from Mr. John Goodwin; with a Preface wherein all that is material in Letters just published under the name of the Rev. Mr. Hervey is answered, The controversy was embittered by some who took part in it; and Tyerman thinks that Wesley's work in Scotland was hindered by it for twenty years, and that it was the root of a much more important controversy that dated from the end of this decade.

At the Conference of 1766, when many important matters were considered, the question was asked, 'Are we Dissenters' and in reply it was said, 'A. We are irregular – (1) by calling sinners to repentance in all places; (2) by using extemporary prayer. Yet we are not Dissenters in the only sense which the law acknowledges: namely, persons who believe it is sinful to attend the Church. For we do attend it at all opportunities. We will not, dare not, separate from the Church for the reasons given several years ago And as we are not Dissenters now, so we will do nothing willingly which tends to a separation from it. Therefore let every assistant immediately so order his circuit that no preacher may be hindered from attending the church more than two Sundays in the month.' It was also affirmed that the services were public worship in a sense; but not such as would supersede the Church service. This presupposed public prayer. If the services had been intended to be used instead of the Church service, they would be essentially defective.

Wesley entered into a full explanation of his position in reply to the question, 'What power is this which you exercise over all the Methodists in Great Britain and Ireland' He also dwelt on the condition of the societies, and gave many explicit and valuable counsels to the preachers.

From a letter addressed by Charles Wesley to his wife, and dated August 21, 1766, the following interesting extract may be made. 'Last night my brother came. This morning we spent two blessed hours with G. Whitefield. The threefold cord we trust will never more be broken. On Tuesday next my brother is to preach in Lady Huntingdon's chapel at Bath. That and all her chapels (not to say, as I might, herself also) are now put into the hands of us three.' This indicates a pleasing reunion, and that the brothers were welcomed whenever they could preach in her ladyship's chapels. All this was very gratifying; but subsequent Calvinistic controversies led to the closing of the doors against the Wesleys, about the time of Whitefield's death.

In 1769 he paid his last visit to America. He died on his knees the following year (September 30, 1770), a martyr to excessive labour in the holiest and most blessed service.

Two important steps were taken at the Conference of 1769. One is explained in the following entry: 'We have a pressing call from our brethren at New York (who have built a preaching house) to come over and help them. Who is willing to go A. Richard Boardman and Joseph Pilmoor.' Further, as a token of brotherly love to the little society that had been formed in New York, the members of the Conference made a collection of 70 amongst themselves, to pay for the passage of the brethren and to aid the society across the water. Thus was begun a work the issues of which are to be seen to-day in the largest of the transatlantic Churches.

Another important step was the preparation of a scheme for the perpetuation of Methodism in the event of Wesley's death.

At the Conference held in the last year of the decade it was shown that the number of Methodist circuits had increased to fifty, including America, the itinerant preachers to one hundred and fifty, and the members of the societies to twenty-nine thousand. In reply to the question, 'What can be done to revive the work of God where it is decayed' After several suggestions, it is next observed, 'We said in 1744, "We have leaned too much towards Calvinism,"' and it was asked, 'Wherein' The answer to that question gave rise to a bitter and prolonged controversy, as will appear subsequently.

During these years the Press, in its numerous attacks upon Methodism, was very virulent, and not unfrequently coarse. A few were more serious, to which Wesley replied. He made considerable use of the Press for his own purposes, and some of his publications were the product of much labour. Amongst them the chief were: An Explanatory Commentary on the Old Testament, 3 vols., A Survey of the Wisdom of God in Creation, or A Compendium of Natural Philosophy, first issued in two volumes, then expanded to three and afterwards to five volumes; A Plain Account of Christian Perfection, a work of much value, as showing Wesley's mature and carefully expressed views on this subject; a volume of Advices on Health, extracted from Dr. Tissot; also several parts of his Journal, many hymnbooks, and a considerable number of pamphlets of various kinds and some sermons. Throughout the entire decade Wesley laboured with the utmost assiduity, not relaxing his labour for a single day, or wasting a single hour of the time. Through difficulties and discouragements he held on his way; even the clouds that gathered around him at times could not hide from his view the clear indications of the Divine blessing upon his labours; and in spite of all the great work progressed.