

John Wesley the Methodist

Chapter XI - Two Sorts of Methodists

Whitefield's Calvinism.--Arminians.--"The Queen of the Methodists."--Trevecca College.--Lady Huntingdon's Connection.--Time Heals the Wounds.--Whitefield's Candle Burns to the Socket.

WHILE John Wesley was organizing societies and building preaching houses in England, George Whitefield was ranging through the American colonies kindling the old churches into new zeal by his flaming eloquence. He returned to England in March, 1741, prepared to take issue with his former leader on the doctrine of election. His intercourse with the New England Calvinists had made him a militant opponent of the doctrine of universal redemption as taught by the Wesleys. Some of the new societies had already split upon this rock, even John Cennick, the schoolmaster at Kingswood, having seceded and urged Whitefield to return from America in order to defend the doctrine.

To Wesley's intensely practical mind the main reason for opposing the Calvinistic theories was what he considered to be their tendency to antinomianism. To check the progress of what he felt to be dangerous error, he preached and published his famous sermon on Free Grace--the third sermon that he had published. On reading this sermon and Charles Wesley's appended hymn, Whitefield attacked it in a pamphlet "Letter to John Wesley," which was disfigured by the personalities and bad logic of the overmatched debater.

About six weeks before his arrival in England some one obtained a copy of an abusive private letter he had sent to Wesley in 1740 and circulated it at the doors of the Foundry.

Wesley heard of this, and having procured a copy, tore it in pieces before the assembled congregation, declaring that he believed Whitefield would have done the same. In two minutes the whole congregation had followed his example, and all the copies were torn to tatters.

When Whitefield reached England, in March, 1741, and preached at Kennington Common, he was greatly distressed to find that his letters to Wesley had alienated many of his friends. He did not refrain, however, from preaching against the Wesleys by name, at Moorfields. His old friends, nevertheless, invited him to preach at the Foundry, but with Charles Wesley by his side he there proclaimed the Absolute Decrees in the most offensive manner, and it was evident, as Wesley says, that "there were now two sorts of Methodists--those for particular and those for general redemption."

It is not necessary to enter into all the details of the painful important controversy. It is far pleasanter to record that in the course of time the personal breach between the evangelists was entirely healed, although both held fast their own opinions, and the living stream of Methodism was divided into, two currents. "One branch," says Bishop McTyeire, "after refreshing and enriching a dry and thirsty land, is absorbed and lost; the other, with well-defined and widening banks and deepening current, flows on."

Howell Harris, the warm-hearted Welsh Calvinist, and Lady Huntingdon found Wesley ready to forgive Whitefield's impetuous personal abuse, and one of the noblest characteristics of Whitefield was revealed in his willingness to confess his faults. He wrote to Wesley in October, 1741: "May God remove all obstacles that now prevent our union; may all disputings cease, and each of us talk of nothing but Jesus and him crucified. This is my resolution, I am without dissimulation. I find I love you as much as ever, and pray God, if it be his blessed will, that we may all be united together." Later Wesley's pardon was asked for the unnecessary and offensive taunts of the widely circulated letter. In a pamphlet of some years later Whitefield made the following frank confession: "It was wrong in me to publish a private transaction to the world, and very ill-judged to think the glory of God could be promoted by unnecessarily exposing my friend. For this I have asked both God and him pardon years ago, and though I believe both have forgiven me, yet I believe I shall never be able to forgive myself; my mistakes have been too many and my blunders too frequent to make me set up for infallibility. But many and frequent as my mistakes have been or may be, as I have no part to act--if I know anything of my heart--but to promote God's glory and the good of souls, as soon as I am made aware of them they shall be publicly acknowledged and retracted."

Whitefield soon regained his popularity. Evangelical Calvinists, mostly Dissenters, rallied 'round him and built his first tabernacle in Moorfields not far from the Foundry. It was only a large, rough wooden shed, but for twelve years it was Whitefield's metropolitan cathedral and was the scene of great spiritual victories.

A few months later Whitefield sent Cennick a contribution of 20, from a lady, toward a chapel at Kingswood, which still stands. Like Wesley, he began to employ lay evangelists. Howell Harris was soon preaching in the Moorfields tabernacle.

The Wesleyan Methodists now became distinguished from the followers of Whitefield as Arminians. The Arminian or, rather, Remonstrant, Confession arose in Holland about the beginning of the seventeenth century as a protest against Calvinism. The principle of the Arminian type of doctrine was the universality of the benefit of the atonement and the restored freedom of the human will. The

Wesleyan Methodists, however, rejected the teaching of the immediate successors of Arminius, who were tinged with Socinianism and rationalism, and Wesleyans, as Pope says, were Arminians as opposed to Calvinists, but in no other sense.

The pillar and prop of Whitefield and his Calvinistic followers was Selina, Countess of Huntingdon, one of the most notable figures in Methodist history, the woman who won from her fashionable friend, Horace Walpole, the half-ironical title, "Queen of the Methodists." This peeress, the daughter of the Earl of Ferrars, was four years younger than John Wesley. Being naturally of a serious mind, her impressions were deepened by the experience of her sister, Lady Margaret Hastings, who had been converted by Ingham, the Oxford Methodist. She, too, experienced the joy of full acceptance in Christ, became a hearer of Whitefield and, an attendant at the Foundry. Although she sided with Whitefield in the Calvinistic controversy, she was largely instrumental in bringing about the reconciliation of the leaders, and became a devoted friend of Mrs. Charles Wesley.

It required much more courage to face the prejudices and ridicule of her class, but it is to the credit of the nobility that they learned to respect Lady Huntingdon's character and motives, though only a few followed her example. She succeeded in persuading the most distinguished men and women of her day to meet in her drawing-room at Chelsea, or her chapel at Bath, or in Whitefield's Tabernacle itself, to hear her favorite preachers. The lists of illustrious persons given by her biographers make some pages look like a court directory.

There is evidence that even in the corrupt court of the second George it was felt that Lady Huntingdon had chosen the better part. One day at court, we are told, the Prince of Wales inquired where Lady Huntingdon was, that she so seldom visited the circle now. Lady Charlotte Edwin replied with a sneer, "I suppose praying with her beggars." The prince shook his head and said, "Lady Charlotte, when am dying I think I shall be happy to seize the skirt of Lady Huntingdon's mantle to lift me up with her to heaven."

Lady Huntingdon's personal character deserved and won the deepest respect. An Anglican writer has well said that the moral courage which enabled a lady, brought up among all the traditions of an aristocracy such as the aristocracy was in the reigns of George II and George III, to cast aside all the prejudices of her order, and brave all the contempt and ridicule of those with whom she would naturally be most brought into contact, and cast in her lot openly and without reserve with the despised Methodists, is admirable. If she seems at times to adopt a somewhat imperious air toward her proteges, we must remember that a countess was a countess in those days, and that she was certainly encouraged in the line she took by the extravagant homage paid to her by Whitefield and others. John Wesley, indeed, was never dazzled by her grandeur; on the contrary, he took upon him more than once to rebuke the imperiousness of "that valuable woman." Berridge, of Everton, rebelled in his own laughing way against her authority; and there is not the slightest trace of undue subserviency in the clergy, like Romaine and Henry Venn and others, who acted with rather than under her. But the majority of those who were connected with her could not fail to be-dazzled by the honor of the connection; and not only submitted, but courted, the authority which she was not slack in assuming over them.

But she used that authority for the highest purposes. She was as far removed as John Wesley from any love of power for power's sake. She devoted her fortune to her new work. The sale of her jewels contributed to the building of a chapel at Brighton. She erected or purchased buildings in many places, appointing ministers as she thought fit--revoking such appointments at her pleasure. The united congregations were called "Lady Huntingdon's Connection." Over the affairs of this connection she ruled with much tact until her death, appointing committees of laymen to superintend secular business.

There was a great stir at the universities in 1767. A little band of Methodists had been formed in Cambridge under Rowland Hill. At Oxford, Halward, of Worcester College, formed an evangelical "Holy Club," with the result that six students of St. Edmund's Hall, Oxford, were expelled, after due trial, "for holding Methodist tenets, and taking upon them to pray, read, and expound the Scriptures in private houses." The Oxford authorities as well as the public journals accused Lady Huntingdon of "seducing young men from their respective trades and avocations and sending them to the university, where they were maintained at her expense, that they might afterward skulk."

The resolute countess had already consulted Wesley about a scheme for the education of preachers, and she decided at once to build a college of her own.

On the site of an old castle in South Wales she built Trevecca College. It was opened in 1768. John Fletcher, the saintly Methodist clergyman of Madeley, was president, and Joseph Benson was head master, until the Calvinistic sympathies of the countess led to their retirement. She resided at the college for many months in the year, and "stationed" the students; some going to Ireland, others to America, but the greater number supplying her chapels in Great Britain.

Lady Huntingdon maintained her leadership of her connection with undiminished vigor. Her chapels at Bath and Brighton were always full. About the middle of the eighteenth century Tunbridge Wells became a more popular resort than either of these places, and she forthwith built a chapel there which Whitefield opened with one of his thrilling sermons.

Lady Huntingdon's societies, like Wesley's, drifted away rather than separated of set purpose from the Established Church. She was compelled to become a practical Dissenter in the interests of her noble evangelistic work. The crisis in her case, however, came earlier

than in Wesley's. The step was not taken hastily, but after repeated provocations, legal decisions, and with a pure desire to secure the preaching of the Gospel. The clergymen who preached in her chapels were silenced by the Anglican authorities in 1782, and she was forced with bitter pain to withdraw from the Church to which she had been so loyal.

It is gratifying to record that Lady Huntingdon lived to regret the spirit of the Calvinistic controversy. She survived Mr. Wesley about five months. After his death a small tract was published containing the particulars of his last illness, and the expressions to which he then gave utterance. Lady Huntingdon read it with great interest, and sending for Joseph Bradford, asked him if this account was true, and if Mr. Wesley really died acknowledging his sole dependence upon the meritorious sacrifice of Christ for acceptance and eternal life. He answered her ladyship that this was so, and that from his own knowledge he could declare, whatever reports to the contrary had been circulated, that the principles which Mr. Wesley recognized upon his deathbed had invariably been the subject of his ministry. She listened with eager attention to this statement, confessed that she had believed that he had grievously departed from the truth, and then, bursting into tears, expressed her deep regret at the separation which had in consequence taken place between them. She died at the age of eighty-four, in the Chapel House, Spa Fields, June 17, 1791, and was buried at Ashby-de-la-Zouch, clothed with the white silk dress in which she opened the chapel in Goodinan's Fields. "I long to be at home. I shall go to my Father; can he forget to be gracious Is there any end of his loving-kindness My work is done. I have nothing to do but go to my Father," were among her last words.

Dr. Haweis, his wife, Lady Anne Erskine, and a lay gentleman were appointed trustees of the chapels, houses, and other effects of Lady Huntingdon's Connection; and they were to appoint successors.

For thirty-one years, from the date of his conversion (1739) to his death, in 1770, Whitefield traveled and preached with such consuming energy that the attempt to follow him produces a sensation of breathlessness. In 1744 he made his third visit to America, remaining four years; his fourth visit was in 1751, less than one year; the fifth in 1754, a little over a year; the sixth in 1763, lasting about two years; his last in 1769.

Whitefield's Tabernacle, in Tottenham Court Road, London, was opened in 1756. Beneath it were vaults, "where," Whitefield used to say to his somewhat bigoted congregation, "I intend to be buried, and Messrs. John and Charles Wesley shall also be buried there. We will all lie together. You will not let them enter your chapel while they are alive. They can do you no harm when they are dead." He continued to do the work of an evangelist to the last in England, Scotland, and America, besides conducting an enormous correspondence.

During the last four years of his life in England Whitefield's friendship with the Wesleys became very warm. John Wesley breakfasted with him, and sadly writes of him as "an old, old man, fairly worn out in his Master's service, though he has hardly seen fifty years;" and a month later: "Mr. Whitefield called upon me. He breathes nothing but peace and love. Bigotry cannot stand before him, but hides its head wherever he comes." And in a letter to his wife Charles Wesley wrote of two happy hours he and his brother spent with their old friend. "The threefold cord we trust will never more be broken."

In 1769 he made his last voyage, and after revisiting the scenes of his Gospel triumphs from Georgia to New England, died at Newburyport, Mass., September 30, 1770, "suddenly changing," as the quaint epitaph has it, "his life of unparalleled labors for his eternal rest."

In compliance with Whitefield's expressed wish, John Wesley preached his funeral sermon in Tottenham Court Road Chapel. and Charles Wesley, who had introduced the humble Oxford servitor to the Holy Club years before, wrote an elegy full of tender feeling upon the death of his friend.

What is probably the true version of a story concerning Wesley's warm friendship for Whitefield was sent to the editor of the Contemporary Review, in 1891, by Mr. Bevan Braithwaite, the venerable representative of the Society of Friends at the centenary celebration of Wesley's death. Mr. Braithwaite heard it from Edward Pease (the friend and early patron of George Stephenson), who died in 1857 at the advanced age of ninety-two. He was fond of relating how in early manhood he had stolen into a chapel to hear Wesley preach, and had a distinct recollection of his personal appearance and earnest solemnity of manner. The following was his story:

"One day, after Whitefield's decease, John Wesley was timidly approached by one of the godly band of Christian sisters who had been brought under his influences and who loved both Whitefield and himself:

"" Dear Mr. Wesley, may I ask you a question'

"" Yes, of course, madam, by all means.'

"" But, dear Mr. Wesley, I am very much afraid what the answer will be.'

"" Well, madam, let me hear your question, and then you will know my reply.'

"At last, after not a little hesitation, the inquirer tremblingly asked, ' Dear Mr. Wesley, do you expect to see dear Mr. Whitefield in heaven'

"A lengthy pause followed, after which John Wesley replied with great seriousness, 'No, madam.' "His inquirer at once exclaimed, 'Ah, I was afraid you would say so.'

"To which John Wesley added, with intense earnestness, ' Do not misunderstand me, madam; George Whitefield was so bright a star in the firmament of God's glory, and will stand so near the throne, that one like me, who am less than the least, will never catch a glimpse of him.'"