

THE EDUCATION OF WESLEY'S PREACHERS.

BY THE REV. FRANK BAKER, B.A., B.D.

SOMEWHERE about the year 1740, John Wesley began to employ lay preachers. Describing these first preachers later he said they were

'young, poor, ignorant men, without experience, learning, or art; but simple of heart, devoted to God, full of faith and zeal, seeking no honour, no profit, no pleasure, no persecution, nor whatever man could do unto them; yea, not counting their lives dear unto them, so they might finish their course with joy'.

Poorly educated though they might be, these 'saint errants', as an opponent described them, were just the right men for the work of 'spreading Scriptural holiness through the land'. Wesley infinitely preferred them to many of the ordained clergy, who, as he complained to the Bishop of London, 'knew something of Greek and Latin; but knew no more of saving souls, than of catching whales'.

Wesley soon found, however, that in the eyes of many people earnestness and effectiveness did not compensate for lack of ordination. His preachers were ridiculed as 'illiterate mechanics, much fitter to make a pulpit than to get into one'. They were scorned because they had been 'bred up as tailors, masons, colliers, tinkers and sow-gelders'. Honest toil was presumed by these scoffers to unfit a man for piety or learning. The *Westminster Journal* (June 8, 1745) described how Tolly, a joiner-preacher, was taken by the press-gang to be a soldier. The article complained that he 'pretended he was a learned and holy man; and yet, it appeared that he was only a journeyman joiner!' But on this reasoning even the joiner, Jesus, could not pretend to learning or holiness.

The newspapers were continually holding up the preachers to ridicule. One humorist, in the *Connoisseur* for August 22, 1754, tells how Broughton's boxing amphitheatre

'is converted into a Methodist meeting-house, and perhaps (as laymen are there admitted into the pulpit) those very fists, which so lately dealt such hearty bangs upon the stage, are now with equal vehemence thumping the cushion'.

Nor were the poets, so-called, backward. One describes the lay-preachers thus:—

Every mechanic will commence
Orator, without mood or tense.
The bricklayer throws his trowel by,
And now builds mansions in the sky.

The cobbler, touched with holy pride,
 Flings his old shoes and lasts aside,
 And now devoutly sets about
 Cobbling of souls that ne'er wear out.
 The baker, now a preacher grown,
 Finds man lives not by bread alone,
 And now his customers he feeds
 With prayers, with sermons, groans, and creeds.
 Weavers, inspired, their shuttles leave,
 Sermons and flimsy hymns to weave.
 Barbers unreaped will leave the chin,
 To trim and shave the man within.
 The gardener, weary of his trade,
 Tired of the mattock and the spade,
 Changed to Apollo in a trice,
 Waters the plants of paradise.
 The fishermen no longer set
 For fish the meshes of their net;
 But catch, like Peter, men of sin,
 For catching is to take them in.

These criticisms, however, only went to prove the snobbishness of those who offered them. Methodism appealed chiefly to the poor and the middle classes, and as such was despised by those who considered themselves superior beings. The preachers had not been to a University. They did not understand Greek and Latin. Therefore they were labelled 'ignorant'. Dr Bett has shown, however, by an examination of the biographies contained in *The Early Methodist Preachers*, that many of them had had at any rate a grammar school education. They came chiefly, he says, from the social grade 'between working class and middle class proper—artisans in business for themselves, small tradesmen, small farmers and the like'. A few of them, indeed, became really learned scholars, and almost all of them possessed sound common sense, and had a real desire to learn, so that they should be useful instruments in the Master's hands.

Charles Wesley himself suffered a little from what one might call 'University priggishness'. He was afraid that the lay preachers might 'usurp the sacred character'. Whilst John Wesley was always sympathetic and helpful towards his preachers, Charles tried in many ways to subdue them. One of his poems contains the words:

Raised from the people's lowest lees,
 Guard, Lord, Thy preaching witnesses.

John, however, asterisked the first line, adding the laconic footnote, 'Query?' For he knew that his preachers were not 'raised from the people's lowest lees', although he recognized

quite clearly that their abilities for the work differed greatly. In the early days of Methodism there were really four classes of preachers:—

1. Ordained 'itinerants' (or travelling preachers), such as John and Charles Wesley, and William Grimshaw. These had been University-educated for the ministry of the Established Church.

2. Unordained 'itinerants', with a moderately good education, who travelled in a district allotted to them, and gave all their time to this work. Sometimes in the very early days they augmented their meagre allowances by selling medicines, but this was later forbidden by Conference.

3. 'Half-itinerants', who partly maintained themselves, and partly travelled about preaching. Among the twelve 'Half Itin^{rs}' named at the 1755 Conference were John Haime, the famous soldier-preacher, William Shent, the Leeds barber, who preached to the customers in his shop, and Matthew Lowes, who travelled as a salesman of a patent medicine, and preached at the same time.

4. 'Local Preachers', who kept at their ordinary tasks, and just preached occasionally in neighbouring chapels or meeting-houses.

Whilst the itinerants proper were naturally better equipped mentally than the majority of the 'Locals', it was by no means always so. There was developing even then the keen desire to serve God with brain, as well as with voice and heart, that has made the Methodist local preacher such a tremendous power for good in our land. This quest for mental culture was welcomed by John Wesley. He repeatedly stressed the need for study, so that a preacher could make the most of his God-given powers. This is the advice he gave to John Trembath:

'What has exceedingly hurt you in time past, nay, and I fear to this day, is want of reading. I scarce ever knew a Preacher read so little. And perhaps, by neglecting it, you have lost the taste for it. Hence your talent in preaching does not increase. It is just the same as it was seven years ago. It is lively, but not deep: there is little variety: there is no compass of thought. Reading only can supply this, with meditation and daily prayer. You can never be a deep Preacher without it: any more than a thorough man. O begin! Fix some part of every day for private exercises. You may acquire the taste which you have not; what is tedious at first will afterwards be pleasant. Whether you like it or no, read and pray daily. It is for your life; there is no other way; else you will be a trifler all your days, and a pretty, superficial Preacher. Do justice to your own soul; give it time and means to grow. Do not starve yourself any longer.'

It is a matter of history that John Trembath did not take Wesley's advice. He continued to starve his soul, and it

withered away and died. There are some Methodist preachers to-day who are courting the same danger. May they let their minds and souls grow by prayer-directed reading, before it is too late!

(*To be continued.*)

COUNTRY CIRCUIT PLAN-MAKING.

BY 'HAROLD KING'.

WE are five of us making the Plan as a rule, and it takes us several mornings. I have heard the Super say it's the worst plan that he has had to tackle in a ministry of thirty-five years, many of them in the best circuits in Methodism. It is a joy to realize that we are unique in one thing at least, and that not even the best circuits can surpass us in this matter of a Chinese-puzzle-of-a-Plan! And it is a puzzle. The five who manage to complete it quarter by quarter, tactfully avoiding the pitfalls which await the unwary, deserve well of the circuit. Had they the halfpence which are due to them, probably they would not feel so sore.

But let us look at some of the difficulties, not as Barrie's Mr. Eassie did, who 'looked difficulties in the face and passed them by', but with discerning sympathy and the grace of laughter. If we can laugh, the way will not be too heavy, and here and there difficulties will disappear.

First of all, it has been rumoured that there is a strong anti-ministerial bias in the circuit. I have never believed that and I have never found it. Once in a trustees' meeting, when the trustees were discussing a leak in the roof, a deaf brother, mistaking the theme under discussion, said courageously that he knew what was in all their minds and that if no one else was prepared to do so he would propose that the minister's stipend be dropped by ten pounds per annum! But that story is apocryphal. The anti-ministerial feeling may be judged from the fact that every Church is jealous lest it receive less than its share of ministerial services. Something of the keenness to obtain a minister's services for outstanding occasions at least can be read in the naïvete of the following request:

DEAR MR. SUPER,

It is our Chapel Anniversary at _____ on Easter Sunday, so we would be glad if you would plan the young minister, Rev. _____, failing him Rev. _____, and if both these are booked, please plan yourself, and oblige. Yours truly,

We get quite a number of letters like that. Bro. Ham, for instance, doesn't want to go to _____. He's been there three quarters running. Our youngest colleague suggests he should go to _____ walking. Bro. Ham is sent to _____ as suggested.

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II

WESLEY'S early preachers felt a keen desire to improve themselves mentally and spiritually by reading. In this pursuit he urged them on. Making a strict inquiry into the lives of the full-time preachers in 1751, he gave them the choice, 'Either follow your trade, or resolve, before God, to spend the same hours in reading, &c., which you used to spend in working'. The trouble was that the preachers were embarrassed by the multitudes of books that offered them knowledge about God. As Wesley said in the preface to his *Christian Library* (fifty volumes of religious literature specially selected, edited, and published for his preachers):

'One who desires to make the best of a short life, is lost among five hundred folios, and knows not where to begin. He cannot read all, and would willingly read those only that will best reward his labour. But who will point out those? Who will give him a clew, whereby he may guide himself thro' this labyrinth?'

The writers of the previous century had been sound in their beliefs, but usually full of words and very dull. Their works were generally enshrined in cumbrous and expensive folios—even bigger than the traditional Family Bible. For instance, *Matthew Henry's Commentary*, which was even then a standard work, and which Wesley abridged for his own *Notes on the Old Testament*, consisted of six folio volumes of seven hundred to eight hundred pages each, and cost six guineas. Wesley said of it, 'It seems to be his aim to say as much as he can!'

These solid, but fairly reliable, religious books had been superseded by more popularly written, but decidedly speculative works. Wesley describes their authors as

'mere children compared with the former writers; and to throw out such frothy, un concocted trifles, such undigested crudities, as a man of learning, fourscore or a hundred years ago, would have been ashamed to set his name to'.

Such books were often dangerous in their effects on the sensitive religious natures of the early Methodists. *Wesley's Journal* for January 1, 1746, notes the case of 'poor John Webb, now thoroughly poisoned by Robert Barclay's *Apology*' (a well-known Quaker book), 'which he was sure would do him no hurt'. Weakened faith and secession from the Methodists were common happenings, and were largely the result of indiscriminate reading, which was especially dangerous to those with no previous training in the things of religion.

John Wesley felt that he must do something to guide his preachers through the troubled and treacherous waters of the religious literature of the day. In the first two Conferences, of 1744 and 1745, there was talk about 'a seminary for labourers'—a Theological College. But the matter was shelved, and the 'seminary' did not materialize until 1834. Something towards helping the preachers was done immediately, however, by suggesting what books might profitably be read. The task of issuing lists of recommended books was continued for years, and is a feature of Methodism to-day.

In order to supply the deficiencies in these lists, Wesley applied himself diligently to abridging old books and writing new books. One of the questions which he asked in each of these first two Conferences was, 'What should I write next?' Strong-willed and self-reliant though he was, he wanted suggestions from those he was trying to help. His manuscript Minutes of the 1758 Conference show the question again arising. (These Minutes are given in the form of Q[uestion] and A[nswer].):—

Q. It was agreed that every preacher should read over our *Works*, and bring in what remarks occurred. Who has done this?

A. None yet. We will begin without delay, and bring in our Remarks at the next conference.

Perhaps the best way of seeing how Wesley both advised and assisted his preachers in their reading is to study an extract from his manuscript record of the 1746 Conference :

In what light should your Assistants consider themselves? (The 'Assistants' were what we should call 'Superintendent Ministers'). As learners rather than teachers: as young students at the University, for whom therefore a method of study is expedient in the highest degree.

Q. 15. What method would you advise them to?

A. We would advise them 1. Always to rise at four. 2. From four to five in the morning, and from five to six in the evening, partly to use meditation and private prayer, partly to read the Scripture (two or three verses, or one or two chapters), partly some close practical book of divinity, in particular *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*, Kempis, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Mr. Law's *Tracts*, Beveridge's *Private Thoughts*, Heylin's *Devotional Tracts*, *The Life of Mr. Halyburton*, and *Monsieur de Renty*. 3. From six in the morning (allowing one hour for breakfast) to twelve, to read in order slowly, and with much prayer, Bp Pearson on the Creed, Bp. Fell on the Epistles, Mr. Boehm's and Mr. Nalson's sermons, Mr. Pascal's Thoughts, our other Tracts and Poems, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Cave and Fleury's *Primitive Christianity*, and Mr. Echard's *Ecclesiastical History*.

Thus Wesley advised his preachers *how* to study, and *what* to study. But he did more even than that. He provided them with the necessary books. Out of the eight books recommended

for early morning reading he had already himself published cheap abridgements of six, and a seventh was to follow. He also provided libraries of the more expensive and cumbersome books, which the preachers could consult when they were in London, Bristol or Newcastle. He tried to establish at any rate a small religious library in every Methodist meeting house, but this ideal was more even than his powerful personality could achieve. He always carried a good stock of books himself, however, and it seems that often, after reading a book, he would leave it lying about on Methodist premises, to be devoured by the next studious preacher who arrived at that particular place. He also gave considerable monetary assistance to those who wished to purchase books.

Occasionally, Wesley held retreats, and study-circles, in order to help his preachers. The *Journal* for February 23, 1749, records :

My design was to have as many of our preachers here during Lent as could possibly be spared; and to read lectures to them every day, as I did to my pupils at Oxford. I had seventeen of them in all. These I divided into two classes, and read to one Bishop Pearson On the Creed, to the other Aldrich's Logic, and to both Rules for Action and Utterance.

Apparently at the Orphan House at Newcastle he would sometimes train young men for the itinerancy for months at a time, for he records in his *Journal* for March 4, 1747 :

This week I read over with some young men, a compendium of rhetoric, and a system of ethics. I see not why a man of tolerable understanding may not learn, in six months' time, more of solid philosophy than is commonly learned at Oxford in four (perhaps seven) years.

Wesley was truly the preachers' friend, understanding the varied mental and spiritual needs of his mixed band of comrades, and providing for those needs. Occasionally he had to advise a studious Joseph Benson, 'beware you be not swallowed up in books: An ounce of love is worth a pound of knowledge'. But the reading of most of his preachers he was continually stimulating. One of the last letters he wrote contains these words :

It cannot be that the people should grow in grace, unless they give themselves to reading. A reading people will always be a knowing people.

The Methodist people, and especially the Methodist preachers, *have* grown in grace, for they *have* become a reading people. We thank God for the great scholars that Methodism has reared. But we thank Him even more for the spark of knowledge, fanned by the keen desire to learn, that burns in even the poorest and least educated Methodist preacher—if he is a true Methodist preacher.