

“First Woman Preacher [Sarah Crosby].” *Methodist Recorder* (October 20, 1949): 11.

To trace with certainty the remote beginnings of a spiritual movement, whether in the life of a community or an individual, is always difficult. It seems fairly certain, however, that the first woman preacher of Methodism was Sarah Crosby, and that her religious awakening took place two hundred years ago, on Monday, October 30, 1749. Since her birth on November 7, 1729, she had passed through the normal spiritual uneasiness of youth, but in spite of desires for reformation in her early teens she sorrowfully found herself still able “to delight in singing, dancing, playing at cards, and all kinds of diversions.” Intermittently she was sobered by thoughts of death, and on one occasion of solitary brooding when she was seventeen believed herself actually dying, “being seized with a cold trembling from head to foot.”

She then came under the influence of a Dissenting minister, Mr. Andrews, a Calvinist, though not of the hardest school, who seems to have preached rather vaguely about salvation as “having an interest in Christ.” Young Sally interpreted this as “making herself good, in order to come to Christ,” and for two years unsuccessfully strove after self-improvement. In despair she then sought a personal interview with Mr. Andrews, expecting him to say, “You have done *all* that you can do, and must now perish!” We can picture her relief when, after questioning her, he announced that she already had “an interest in Christ”—“What! such a wretch as I, (to) be saved by grace!” A few weeks later the leaven of his comforting words worked its way through her being, culminating in spiritual release, which she thus described to John Wesley:—

“I now feared neither earth, nor when God revealed his Son in my heart, and now I thought all my sufferings were at an end. I laboured to persuade all with whom I conversed, to come to Christ, telling them there was love, joy, peace, etc., for all that came to him.

“I now feared neither earth, nor hell; and as to temptation, I scarce knew what it meant. My soul was happy, and I desired only to suffer and die¹ for him, who had revealed himself in my heart.”

It will be noted that already the evangelistic urge was strong within Sally Crosby. As her spiritual experience deepened, so did her desire to tell others about it.

In February, 1750, Sally felt an inward urge to hear John Wesley preach at the Foundery, London, on the eve of his departure for Ireland. What seemed a disappointing sermon left her with one memorable phrase—“If it is possible for God to give us a little love, is it not possible for him to *fill* us with love?”—to which she had answered mentally, “Yes, it is possible; but he will not do it.”

During the eight months of Wesley’s absence she discovered more about the Methodist teaching on “perfect love,” or entire sanctification. Charles Wesley’s hymns, in particular, became a rich source of inspiration and challenge. Her earlier scepticism about being “filled with love” was now replaced by an eagerness to experience what was often called “the second blessing.” On John Wesley’s return to London in October, 1750, she joined the Methodist Society, receiving her first class ticket from him. For several years her mind continued to be a spiritual battleground, however, the tension being increased by her searching responsibilities as a

¹Orig., “died”; a misprint.

class leader, her great philanthropic labours, and a growing estrangement from her husband, who after almost seven years of married life finally left her on February 2, 1757.

The loss of her husband was counterbalanced by a new friendship with a girl ten years her junior, Mary Bosanquet, who herself was being thrust out into the world by her parents on account of her Methodist convictions. These two, together with Mrs. Sarah Ryan, two years older than Sarah Crosby, formed an inseparable Methodist trio, first in their London lodgings, then in their orphanage venture at Leytonstone, and later at Leeds, until Sarah Ryan was carried off by the hand of death in 1768, and Mary Bosanquet by the loving hand of the Rev. John Fletcher in 1781.

For other reasons 1757 was a memorable year. Mrs. Crosby recommenced an intimate correspondence with John Wesley—one of the main causes of Wesley's wife leaving him in a fit of jealousy the following January. And there came to her at last the certainty that God had "taken the root of sin out of her heart." Already she had made a mental vow that "if the Lord would but fully save me, I would declare his goodness, although I believed it would expose me to various exercises, both from ministers and people." This was surely a call to preach which she believed to be conditional upon her reaching the stage of entire sanctification. Something of this kind she now knew, although there were still further heights of experience to scale. Only the right opportunity was needed for her to take her stand in public as one of God's preaching women.

That opportunity was not very long in coming. In January, 1761 one of her converts removed to unevangelised Derby, and Sarah Crosby accompanied her. Soon they had a Sunday evening class meeting in operation. On February 1 there were twenty-seven present. The following Sunday nearly two hundred turned up. Sarah Crosby's diary records her embarrassment:—

"I was not sure whether it was right for me to exhort in so public a manner, and yet I saw it impracticable to meet all these people by way of speaking particularly to each individual. I therefore gave out an hymn, and prayed, and told them part of what the Lord had done for myself, persuading them to flee from all sin."

On the following Friday—the occasion of a National Fast—she once more "exhorted near two hundred people to forsake their sins, and showed them the willingness of Christ to save."

Already she had dispatched a letter asking for Wesley's ruling on the unusual situation, but his three days' delay in answering shows that he was not unduly worried—he knew by now that God often used such emergencies to reveal new and fruitful methods of Christian service. He replied on February 14:—

"My dear Sister,

Miss Bosanquet gave me yours on Wednesday night. Hitherto, I think you have not gone too far. You could not well do less. I apprehend all you can do more is, when you meet again, to tell them simply, 'You lay me under a great difficulty. The Methodists do not allow of women preachers; neither do I take upon me any such character. But I will just nakedly tell you what is in my heart.' This will in great measure obviate the grand objection [i.e., the Scriptural objection], and prepare for J. Hampson's coming. I do not see that you have broken any law. Go on calmly and steadily."

The first step had been taken. True, Sister Crosby was regarded as an “exhorter” rather than a preacher, and years later Wesley was still advising her to announce her services as “prayer-meetings,” and never to take a text. Eventually, however, he had to admit the fact that she *was* a preacher—and a most acceptable and successful one—quietening his conscience about the Pauline injunction that women² must not speak in churches (1 Cor. xiv. 34–35), with the argument that there were extraordinary exceptions even to this rule. And so Sarah Crosby became the first of a handful of women preachers in Wesley’s own day, which after a temporary eclipse following his death grew in later generations to a mighty host.

Throughout the forty years of her preaching life, during which time she ranged far and wide throughout Yorkshire and the Midlands, becoming well known enough to form the prototype of George Eliot’s Sarah Williamson, Mrs. Crosby’s emphasis was always upon the personal experience of the Christian believer. This was her favourite theme, and it was to her that Wesley confided one of his best definitions of Christian Perfection (preserved in her letterbook, in the possession of the writer):—“It is nothing more, nothing less than pure love, humble, gentle patient love filling the heart and ruling the life.” John Wesley paid her the tribute, “She is useful wheresoever she goes, particularly in exciting believers to go on to perfection.”

To her two class meetings in Leeds she continued to commend what she herself had known of the heights of Christian experience until within two or three days of her death at the age of seventy-five on Sunday, October 24, 1804. Yet she did not lose the wonder of her first hesitant beginnings, her spiritual birthday being a red-letter day in the annual round. In recording the fiftieth anniversary of her conversion, even the phrase about her “interest in Jesus Christ,” so reminiscent of her awakening, reveals how much that occasion in 1749 had meant to her through a long and useful life as the pioneer woman preacher of Methodism:—

“October 30. This ought to be a day of prayer, humiliation, and thanksgiving, for the long-suffering of the Lord. It hath proved salvation to my soul. It is now 50 years since I first felt the love of God so shed abroad in my heart, as to assure me of my interest in Jesus Christ. . . . The Lord is still my salvation. He hath helped me through various trials. Through snares and temptations his hand has preserved me. He hath called me to prove a greater salvation, a fulness of love. . . . I will take the cup of salvation, and call upon the Name of the Lord for more.

For more I ask, I open now
My heart to embrace thy will.”

By Rev. Frank Baker, B.A., B.D.

²Orig., “woman”; a misprint.