

FRANCIS GILBERT AND METHODIST ORDINATION

THE name of Gilbert has long been honoured in the history of Methodism's pioneer overseas missionary venture, the West Indies, and it is good to know that one of our members is at present engaged on a short biographical study of the family. Of the two sons of the Hon. Nathaniel Gilbert of Antigua most students know the elder, another Nathaniel, in whose temporary home at Wandsworth John Wesley preached early in 1758, later in the year baptizing Gilbert's negro slaves, prior to his return as an ardent Methodist to Antigua. Nathaniel Gilbert had been introduced to Methodism, however, by his younger brother Francis, who had fled from the West Indies to England after having—like another younger son—"wasted his substance in riotous living". This prodigal was never forgiven by his father, who at his death in 1761 left Nathaniel £40,000 and Francis nothing. Through the ministry of British Methodism, however, Francis had already discovered a far greater treasure than earthly wealth, and urged Nathaniel to come and see for himself what Methodism was all about, thus playing Andrew to his elder brother's Peter.

After Nathaniel had returned to Antigua in 1759, taking with him his baptized slaves and an enthusiastic Methodist widow, Mrs. Leadbetter, to second him in the course of evangelism to which he had pledged himself, Francis wondered whether to follow them. Already at the 1758 Conference he had been proposed as an itinerant preacher for the British work, and even before the death of his unrepentant father the West Indies were calling him.

By means of a letter written in 1760¹ we are permitted to enter his mind at this period, and to follow the musings of a Methodist who realized the dangers involved in the recent demand at Norwich that lay preachers should be empowered to administer the sacraments, but realized also that the position must squarely be faced if ever they were called to "preach the Gospel in any distant Part of the World"—the very issue which a quarter of a century later impelled John Wesley to take the much debated and oft delayed step of ordaining some of his preachers, thus committing an outright breach of Anglican church order. The letter is addressed, not to John Wesley, who had been half-inclined to let the lay preachers have their way, but to the zealous opponent of lay administration, Charles Wesley—though with the request that John should see it. It was not committed to the post, but simply addressed "To the Revd. Mr. Charles Wesley" and delivered by hand, being endorsed by Charles—"March 15, 1760. F. Gilbert honest". The letter runs thus:

¹ Preserved at the Methodist Book Room, and printed here by kind permission of the Book Steward, the Rev. Frank H. Cumbers.

Bristol March 15th 1760.

Revd. & dear Sir,

Altho' I think a Lay-Preacher may lawfully give the Sacrament, without the Imposition of a Bishop's Hand, yet I in no wise judge it prudent for any of those to do it, who are in Connection with your Brother & You. It is exceeding probable that if such a Thing was allowed, it wou'd throw us into great Confusion, involve us (your Brother in particular) in many Difficulties, perhaps do little Good & much Hurt. If such a Thing was proposed in Conference, & be put to the Vote, I think, I must lose the Grace I now have, before I cou'd give my Voice for it. However were I to preach the Gospel in any distant Part of the World, where there was no Plan of a Church yet laid, & where the Sacra^t. was not given more than once or twice in the Year in the Church after the English Establishment, I am now apt to think it might then be my Duty to give the Sacrament as well as to preach—

It has been for some Years impress'd upon my Mind that I shall return again to Antigua, tho I hope I shall never go till I have good Reasons to believe that it is the Will of God I shou'd. I believe the Way is clearing, & perhaps it will not be long 'ere I depart. Shou'd I preach the Gospel there, a Necessity perhaps wou'd be laid upon me to do the other Thing also, as ye Sacram^t. is seldom given there. Now I have no Objection to the being ordained by a Bishop, if I may be allowed to explain two or three of the Articles mine own Way, & perhaps no good Bishop wou'd object to my explanation of them. When I reflect on the Smallness of my Abilities either acquired or natural, & the Littleness of my Grace, I have no reason to expect Success; but perhaps the Bishop who ordained Mr. Haughton,² if he knew of the Likelihood of my going abroad, wou'd not refuse *me* Ordination.

If you approve of this, & you were to desire your Brother to speak to the Bishop concerning it, perhaps he wou'd do it & succeed. But let it be wch Way it will, this is my Prayer, Lord thy Will be done, make me any Thing, send me any where. I must beg your Prayers for

Your unworthy Son tho affec. Serv^t.FRAN^s. GILBERT.

If you shoud write to your Brother concerning this Matter, & you shou'd judge it well that I shd write to him also, perhaps your sending him this will do as well—

Whether Francis Gilbert actually did secure episcopal ordination seems very doubtful, although on 11th April, 1760 Charles Wesley wrote from London to his wife in Bristol:

“ Mr. Gilbert's you may read, & deliver. He returns to Antigua; & may easily get Orders first; which will greatly enlighten his understanding, & rectify his judgment, perverted by C.P.”³

² John Haughton, one of the earliest preachers, who after his ordination settled in Kilrea, Londonderry, where he was a useful minister and magistrate, according to Atmore's *Methodist Memorial*, p. 202.

³ This paragraph is omitted from Thomas Jackson's publication of the letter, in Charles Wesley's *Journal*, ii, pp. 232-4, but is here given from the original at the Methodist Book Room. Charles Perronet was one of the ring-leaders of the lay preachers demanding the right to administer the sacraments.

At any rate, unlike most preachers ordained in the third quarter of the century he retained his close contact with Methodism, both in England and Antigua. In 1763 or 1764 he appears to have been one of the itinerant preachers in the Wiltshire Round.⁴ From 1765, however, he was not listed as a preacher at all, even though the 1765 *Minutes* mention him as the Secretary of the Preachers' Fund. From London he went to Kendal, leaving there in June 1765 for Chester,⁵ where in 1767 he married Mrs. Leadbetter, who had returned from Antigua in charge of his brother's children.

That he continued regularly to preach may clearly be seen from various entries in *An Extract of Miss Mary Gilbert's Journal*, edited by John Wesley, and he certainly remained an *itinerant* preacher, whether in the technical Methodist sense or not. After the death of his niece Mary Gilbert in 1768 he removed to Whitchurch, where yet another of his charges, his niece Alice, died in 1772. Soon afterwards he returned to Antigua, whence he sent a plea to Wesley for missionaries. On the death of his brother Nathaniel in the following year, however, he returned to England, becoming a member of the Rev. John Fletcher's class at Madeley. (Many years earlier he had almost persuaded Fletcher to become a missionary to Antigua.) On 1st July 1779 Francis Gilbert died. But his dreams of a flourishing Methodist cause in Antigua did not die with him. His widow carried on his work, speedily returning to his native island to assist John Baxter revive Methodism there, herself returning to England only in 1791, and maintaining a rich Methodist witness till her death in 1816.

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⁴ *Lives of Early Methodist Preachers*, ed. Thomas Jackson, 4th ed., 1871, iii, p. 311.

⁵ See F. F. Bretherton, *Early Methodism in and around Chester*, pp. 72-95, for much information on the Gilberts.

Witney (High Street) Methodist Church has this year celebrated its centenary. The event has occasioned a booklet of a quality all too rare amongst such productions. Witney was usually Wesley's starting-point for his "little tours in Oxfordshire", and the full text of the *Journal* references to Witney is given, followed by a concise account of the history of Witney Methodism, the whole being most beautifully illustrated. The anonymous compiler is to be highly congratulated on such a worthy souvenir.

The Epworth Press has reprinted in pamphlet form John Wesley's *The Character of a Methodist* (pp. 16, 6d.) with an admirable Foreword by the Minister of Wesley's Chapel. We do not quite know *why* this reprint should have appeared, but we welcome it nevertheless and share Mr. Spivey's hope that similar reprints will quickly follow, for there is much that lies embedded in Wesley's *Works* which is apposite to the needs of this generation. Perhaps that is why, as the Foreword tells us, "Wesley's *Forty-four Sermons* are a 'best-seller' on church bookstalls".