

Proceedings

OF THE

Wesley Historical Society

Editor : REV. WESLEY F. SWIFT

Volume XXIX

March 1953

“ THE GLORY OF THE METHODISTS ”

An Unpublished Wesley Letter

CERTAIN themes recur constantly in John Wesley's correspondence. The emphasis upon the necessity for seeking Christian perfection is one. Another is early rising, combined with early morning preaching services.

Early morning services were dictated at first by the difficulty of getting a congregation of working people at any other time, especially for mid-week visits of Methodist leaders such as Wesley himself. Gradually the retiring and rising habits of the English people changed, however, and with them the ability of Methodism to command an early morning congregation—though I remember that my trial sermon as a candidate for the Primitive Methodist ministry was preached at 7 a.m.! Although vestiges of the practice have survived even to the present century, by the opening decades of the nineteenth century early morning preaching was fast dying out. Even in Wesley's own day there was not the enthusiasm for the practice which he desired. The Conference of 1768 considered at some length the question:

“ In many places the work of God seems to stand still. What can be done to revive and enlarge it? ”

One of the remedies suggested was this:

“ Let the preaching at five in the morning be constantly kept up, wherever you can have twenty hearers. This is the glory of the Methodists. Whenever this is dropped, they will dwindle away into nothing. Rising early is equally good for soul and body. It helps the nerves better than a thousand medicines; and, in particular, preserves the sight, and prevents lowness of spirits, more than can well be imagined. ”

Having thus made his public proclamation, Wesley continued to enforce the matter in private letters. Writing to Adam Clarke on 3rd January 1787 about a recent revival, he said: “ I hope those who were then awakened are not all fallen asleep again. Preaching in the morning is one excellent means of keeping their souls awake. ” The same emphasis in more characteristic language reminiscent of

the 1768 *Minutes* comes in a letter of 25th October 1789 to John Grace, the preacher at Londonderry (familiarily known as "the walking Bible"): "You do well to be exact in morning preaching: that is the glory of the Methodists. Whenever the morning preaching is given up the glory is departed from us."

That this is not an isolated instance is confirmed by a letter written by Wesley to another preacher five years earlier, and now first available for publication through the kindness of Mr. G. Percival Harris, LL.B. The recipient was Thomas Longley, a travelling preacher who had been accepted in 1780 and was at this time stationed as the "Assistant" or superintendent of the Derby Circuit. The letter was addressed:

To/Mr. Longley
At the Preachinghouse
. . . ter¹

The letter reads thus:

Manchester
April 11, 1784

Dear Tommy,

You have reason to be thankful that the Society does not decrease in number. And the members of it will not decrease in grace, if you strongly and explicitly exhort them, 'to go on to perfection'; especially if you encourage them, both by Precept & example, To rise early in the morning. The Morning Preaching is the Glory of the Methodists. Whenever that ceases, the Glory is departed from them. I am

Your affectionate Friend & Brother

J. WESLEY.

FRANK BAKER.

¹ Wesley would normally have addressed Longley at Derby. It is just possible that the address was "Burton", though there does not seem to have been a chapel there at this date. The most likely explanation is that Longley was staying for a time at Leicester, which was in the Derby circuit until 1776, and with which there may well have been some interchange. The only other known letter of John Wesley to Longley had been written earlier in the same connexional year, on 5th November 1783. It was addressed: "To Mr. Longley, At Mr. M. Dobinson's, In Derby."

Two recent books on Scotland, though not directly bearing upon Methodist history, are valuable for "background" material, and are complementary to each other. The religious life of Scotland, especially in the post-Reformation period, is as interesting as that of nonconformity in England, and the variety and nature of its splits and offshoots (such as the United Association Synod and the New Light Anti-Burghers) even more confusing. The story has often been told, but there is room for C. Stewart Black's new presentation in concise and readable form in *The Scottish Church* (William McLellan, pp. 276, 10s. 6d.). . . . Less familiar ground is covered in *The Domestic Life of Scotland in the Eighteenth Century*, by Marjorie Plant (Edinburgh University Press, pp. xii. 319, 25s.). It fully justifies its claim to be "a fully documented description of the domestic life of all ranks of Scottish society", and is worthy to stand alongside Graham's classic study of *The Social Life of Scotland in the Eighteenth Century*.