

Christmas Among the Early Methodists

REV. FRANK BAKER, B.A., Ph.D.

With something of a mental effort most of us can picture a Christmas without the many preparatory weeks of shopping for greeting cards, calendars, and presents, the constant bombardment of ear and eye by requests to "post early for Christmas," and the disorganisation of the normal postal services, in spite of many thousands of extra employees, from the middle of December onwards. We realise that this is a modern phenomenon, and that great-grandmama in her youth would have been highly surprised to receive a Christmas card, that Victorian innovation—

It is rather more difficult to realise that much more of what we regard as the "traditional" Christmas also dates from the last century. The Prince Consort brought over with him from Germany the "traditional" Christmas tree. Most of the general glamorising (and therefore commercialising) of Christmas—even its present-giving—must be laid at the door of Charles Dickens. Although on the festivals of the Christian year it was normal to eat a little more than usual, particularly on Christmas Day, which inherited an extra share of merriment from its ancestry in the Roman Saturnalia, it is doubtful whether John Wesley ever saw a Christmas turkey, though he probably did enjoy a slice off an occasional Christmas goose, or the really traditional boar's head. And young Jackie Wesley certainly did not hang up his stocking or his pillowcase on Christmas Eve. He had not even heard of Santa Claus.

Christmas and the Early Methodist.

When we turn to Christmas as celebrated by the early Methodists, therefore, we must discard the tinsel garb bequeathed to us by the nineteenth century, and the party costumes of the twentieth century. We must imagine a family festival with (it is true) a little more on the table than usual, with evergreens on the walls but no cards on the mantelpiece or presents on the sideboard, with a Yule log on the fire but no Christmas tree in the corner, with carols

and possibly waits, but with no Christmas broadcast, and no "Messiah." In one particular, however, these eighteenth century folk were far richer than many of us at Christmas time. There was no doubt in their minds that the essential feature of Christmas was that it celebrated the Birth of Christ.

Christmas Day— A Day of Worship.

For the early Methodists, Christmas dinner apart, Christmas Day centred on the parish church and the Methodist "preaching-house." It is no secret that John Wesley helped to start a revival of sacramental worship in his day, and Christmas was one of the seasons when he set his followers the example of regular and frequent communion. Almost second nature to them were the words of the Preface in the Communion Office:

"Upon Christmas Day, and seven days after.

"Because thou didst give Jesus Christ thine only Son to be born as at this time for us; who by the operation of the Holy Ghost, was made very man of the substance of the Virgin Mary his mother, and that without spot of sin, to make us clean from all sin. Therefore with Angels, etc."

John Wesley included this preface in his own revision of the prayer book for Methodists, though with the omission of the words "of the substance of the Virgin Mary, his Mother."

The Wesleys and Christmas.

Nor did Wesley restrict himself to daily communions for a week following Christmas, but observed the usage of the Primitive Church by celebrating Holy Communion for twelve days, witness his Christmas *Journal* entries in 1773 and 1774:

"Saturday, the twenty-fifth, and on the following days, we had many opportunities of celebrating the solemn feast-days, according to the design of their institution."

"During the twelve festival days we had the Lord's Supper daily; a little emblem of the Primitive Church. May we be followers of them in all things, as they were of Christ!"

It seems almost certain that John Wesley never let Christmas Day

pass without taking Communion—if one may except 25th December in 1737, when he was on his way back to England from Georgia, and confined to his bunk in the *Samuel* through seasickness.

Although the evidence is not so plentiful, the same seems to have been true of Charles Wesley, the Lord's Supper forming an inseparable part of his Christmas celebrations.

For neither brother did Christmas Day bring much relaxation from Christian labours. For both them and their followers it was, indeed, one of the most active worshipping days in the year, complicated occasionally by a wedding or a funeral. Three succeeding years in the diary and letters of Charles Wesley furnish us with typical examples. Christmas 1747 he spent in Dublin as the pioneer of Methodism in Ireland. The day opened with a kind of spiritual Christmas party at his lodgings, the guests assembling between 3-0 and 4-0 a.m. Although Charles Wesley does not mention the fact we can be pretty sure that there was a Methodist invasion of St. Patrick's Cathedral for communion. Charles Wesley summarised it as "a day of rejoicing." In 1748 he was in London. Again the day began at 4-0 a.m., with a service in the crowded Foundry Chapel. John Wesley "Preached the glad tidings" and Charles "Prayed after God"—i.e., extempore. Charles writes: "We all sung and rejoiced for two hours, with Joy unspeakable, and full of Glory." Later in the morning there was another service in the Foundry, when Charles Wesley preached on "Unto us a Child is Born." This was followed by Communion, and Communion by a Prayer Meeting, when "ye Spirit of Grace and Supplication was poured out in a full Stream." In the evening there was either a Society Meeting or (more probably) a Love-feast—"a Solemn Assembly: for Emanuel was in the midst." We may exclaim, "Ah yes! But in 1748 Christmas Day fell on a Sunday; that was the reason for the numerous services and meetings." Look

then at 1749, when Christmas Day fell on a Monday. This time Charles Wesley was in Bristol:

"Christmas-day. The room was full as it could contain. We rejoiced from four to six, that, to us a Son is born, to us a Child is given. I received the Sacrament at the College. In the evening, all were melted down at our solemn love-feast."

The pattern set by the Methodists in London, Bristol, and Dublin, was followed in other parts of the country, even though the Wesleys themselves were not present. The diary of a budding young local preacher of the West Riding contains interesting pictures of Christmas and the preparations for it—and its aftermath—in 1755 and 1756. We see the killing of the pig on the 23rd, the visits to distant relations on Christmas Day and the days following. We notice how "Christ-

mas Dinner" is still being eaten on the 27th. We see how for the worldly card-playing and "mumming" are the great activities, and for the Methodists preaching and love-feasts. Thomas Illingworth's diary for 1755 reads thus:

"Thursday 25th. Being Christmas day Grace and I set off to see our Relations. When we got to Bradford we were told they were gone to a Preaching, so we hasted after but was rather late. After that was over Jonathan Catley (who was their Preacher that Day) told us in about an hour's time he shou'd preach again, so we staid the latter too, and then went to Wibsey where we lodg'd Friday morning. Before I got up I had some discourse with my Bedfellow a Young Man who was convinc'd of the Necessity of the New-birth, yet so unconcern'd or rather desperate yt. I could not diswade him from going to a Mumming."

To be continued next week.

Christmas amongst the Early Methodists—(cont.)

REV. DR. FRANK BAKER.

Things have changed in Methodism as in English Society generally. At least one part of the crowded religious observance of the early Methodist Christmas does remain to us, however, in addition to the Birth of Christ as recorded in Holy Scripture and re-enacted in the heart of the believer. We still have Charles Wesley's glorious Nativity hymns. They are, indeed, among the most precious heritages of the Christian Church. "Hark the herald angels sing" was first published in 1739 as "Hark how all the welkin rings," and Charles Wesley continued to write Christmas hymns until his death in 1788. Among his greatest contributions to Christian worship, however, was *Hymns for the Nativity*, a slender pamphlet containing eighteen hymns, first published in 1744. True, John Wesley regarded one or two as "namby-pambical" or sentimental. His own favourite was "All Glory to God in the Sky"—now No. 902 in the *Methodist Hymn Book*, in the section for "World Peace and Brotherhood."

To us it seems almost unthinkable to place a Christmas hymn in other than the Christmas section of the hymn book. Yet this very fact helps us to realise that Charles Wesley's characteristic emphasis was not on sentimentality, not on the incidental features of the Nativity, but on the Incarnation. He mentions the star, the Magi, the angels, the shepherds, the stable, the manger-cradle, but throughout this emphasis is what God has done for man in the birth of Christ. This is why his Christmas hymns are all too often neglected. They are too solid and scriptural for many people, who prefer the sweetly

"God was before me all the day long. I sought and found Him in every place; and could truly say, when I lay down at night, "Now I have lived a day.""

We have seen that Christmas Day was used by the Wesleys as the occasion for an evening love-feast. This seems to have become a common practice in many parts of the country, and continued a favourite Christmas event long after the deaths of the Wesleys. In most districts it is now only the vaguest of memories or traditions. The members of the Methodist Society from a wide area would gather in one of the central preaching-houses. They gained admittance by showing their current class-tickets, and a few "strangers" might be admitted by a special note of admission signed by the minister in charge. A token meal was shared—perhaps bread, biscuits, semi-sweet buns, seed cake, or fruit cake. It was washed down with a sip of water from a large two-handed mug passed from worshipper to worshipper. The minister gave a brief address. Then, in a framework of hymns, came the opportunity for extempore personal testimonies to the goodness of God, interspersed with brief prayers and verses of hymns. Youthful converts enthused over their newfound experience, old saints bore witness to faith mellowed through the trials of the years. There was plenty of rough dialect, plenty of homespun humour, plenty of pathos and spiritual challenge. It is not surprising that Christmas Day love-feasts were not only popular, but frequently the heralds of revival. In Birstall, in 1793, William Bramwell witnessed fifty conversions at a Christmas Day

too solid and scriptural for many people, who prefer the sweetly sentimental, and are afraid of the shattering experience of being brought face to face with God. A good example of Charles Wesley at his noble best is No. 142 in our *Methodist Hymn Book*—"Let earth and heaven combine." The word "God" comes in every verse, like a hammerblow on the anvil of our praise. It is twice repeated in the last two lines of stanzas 3 and 4, and it furnishes the closing word of the hymn, the climax of the purpose in Heaven of Christ's coming to earth—"And man shall then be lost in God." The opening stanza calls us to worship, not "a baby," but God in Christ, and the closing lines of the stanza form a memorable summary of the mystery of the Incarnation :

Let earth and heaven combine,
Angels and men agree,
To praise in songs divine
Th'incarnate Deity,
Our God contracted to a span,
Incomprehensibly made man.

Christmas a Spiritual Feast.

Truly Christmas was a great festival for our Methodist forefathers. They had their early morning preaching service, sometimes lasting two hours; they fed on bread and wine, the tokens of their Lord's body and blood; they went home to a Christmas dinner which was solid and rather more elaborate than usual; and their Christmas party in the evening was (as likely as not) another spiritual feast, with bread and water shared by way of bodily refreshment, and with testimony, prayer and Charles Wesley's hymns as food for the soul. We can be quite sure that for them it was indeed "a day of rejoicing." Many of them could say with John Wesley (the words occur in his *Journal for Christmas Day, 1744*) :

William Bramwell witnessed ninety conversions at a Christmas Day lovefeast, and at another lovefeast on that same day (a Wednesday), Alexander Mather hailed the beginnings of a revival in Hull. Even as late as 1842 a Christmas love-feast in Hinde Street Chapel, London, led to such a revival that by the following March there had been a net increase of 247 members.

The Boy's Archery Movement

The above is the popular name that has automatically appended itself to the Latimer Youth Movement on account of its major attraction, which is archery. The LYM was founded in 1949 by a group of Christian men in London, of whom only one is still alive. Nevertheless all the gaps have been filled—Lt.-Col. O. C. S. Dobbie, M.B.E., R.A., and the Rev. Francis Dixon, of Lansdowne, Bournemouth, being the joint presidents.

The movement has made phenomenal growth and now has a chain of clubs from Grimsby to Cornwall and enquiries for the Archery Handbook giving the "know-how" for starting a club, are constantly coming in. Exhaustive prayer and work have resulted in a system by which boys can be drawn in and won for Christ in no uncertain manner and the LYM clubs are flourishing in difficult areas where sometimes there has been a history of previous failure.

The LYM is young, energetic and full of punch. Its leaders sometimes report that unheard-of problem of too many applicants for the clubs. What a refreshing change in Christian work! The movement runs regular Archery Tournaments for its clubs and boys strive for the prizes. The lads wear an attractive green beret and doublet, on which a series of badges for Archery skill are shown.

The LYM has a travelling evangelist who demonstrates archery, shows kodachrome slides of the work and gives full advice to new leaders. The movement has a strong spiritual accent and is also very missionary minded. Several of its members are in missionary training and one is on the field in Bolivia.

The office of LYM is at 141, Redhill Drive, Bournemouth, to whom all enquiries should be addressed.

HUGH M. GOOD.

“Christmas Among the Early Methodists, Pt. 1.” *Joyful News* (Dec. 11, 1958), p. 5.; “Pt. 2.” *Joyful News* (Dec. 18, 1958), p. 8.

Christmas Among the Early Methodists [Part 1]

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[Part 2]

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¹*Hymns for the Nativity of our Lord* (1745), 7.

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