

## BISHOP LAVINGTON AND THE METHODISTS

**A**MONG the hundreds of printed attacks on Methodism during the lifetime of John Wesley, the largest was the three-pronged fork of Bishop Lavington's *Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists Compar'd*, whose instalments grew progressively longer—92 pages for part one (1749), 228 for part two (1749), and 421 for part three (1751). Collected into two volumes in 1754, the work was reprinted as late as 1833 by Richard Polwhele in an octavo volume of over eight hundred pages including introduction, notes, and appendix. Paraphrasing Charles Wesley, we may exclaim :

See how great a flame aspires,  
Kindled by a spark of *hate* !

The attack itself is well known to students of Methodist history. The story behind its appearance is too little known, and is well worth documenting.<sup>1</sup>

Persecution of the Methodists, which had flared up during the '45 rebellion, died down after the battle of Culloden on 16th April 1746, though even in July 1747 John Wesley could write from Cornwall that some of the gentlemen there were still noisily insisting that the Methodists were agents of the Pretender.<sup>2</sup> In February 1747 George Lavington was consecrated Bishop of Exeter. A notorious pluralist before his consecration, he was hardly the model evangelical cleric, and one suspects that his primary visitation charge to the clergy of his diocese contained some caustic remarks about the Methodists proliferating so rapidly in Cornwall, if not in Devon. This charge does not appear to have been printed, but someone with a mischievous sense of humour—and probably no more than that—circulated in manuscript a supposed extract from the discourse which absurdly made out that the new bishop favoured the Methodists.

This extract reached London, where some people who might have known better took it seriously. Not George Whitefield, however, who had just returned from nearly four years in America. London friends sent him a copy to Bristol at the end of July 1748, and his immediate reaction was that it could not possibly be "his Lordship's production". When he returned to London early in August and discovered that an "officious printer" had set the matter up as a tiny handbill, Whitefield "blamed him very much".<sup>3</sup> Apparently

<sup>1</sup> Luke Tyerman gives a brief account in his *Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley* (1870), ii, pp. 23-5, and in his *Life of the Rev. George Whitefield*, 2nd edn. (1890), ii, pp. 201-2, but the details were not sufficiently full to prevent misunderstanding by Richard Green in his *Anti-Methodist Publications*, No. 207. A useful summary appears in the article on Lavington in the *Dictionary of National Biography*.

<sup>2</sup> *Letters*, ii, p. 107.

<sup>3</sup> Whitefield's *Works* (1771), ii, p. 190. Whitefield landed at Deal on 5th July, and after nearly three weeks in London went to Bristol for a week, on to Wales, back to London, and then north to Scotland. He wrote from Glasgow on 5th

he tried to suppress the leaflet, but was not quite successful. At least one copy survived, which is now treasured in the library of the Garrett Biblical Institute, Evanston, Illinois, where it is bound up with other items illustrating the history of Lavington's famous work. Grateful acknowledgement is hereby made to the Librarian, Mr. Raymond Sutup. The fictitious extract, as put out by the "official printer", reads thus:

My Brethren, I Beg you will rise up with me against moral\* preaching. We have been long attempting the reformation of the nation by discourses of this kind. With what success? Why none at all. On the contrary, we have very dexterously preached the people into downright infidelity.—We must change our voice—we must preach Christ and him crucified.—Nothing but gospel is; nothing will be found to be the power of God unto salvation besides.—Let me therefore again and again request, may I not add, Let me CHARGE you to preach Jesus and salvation thro' his name—preach the Lord who bought us—preach redemption through his blood—preach the saying of the great high-priest, "He Who believeth shall be saved."—Preach repentance toward God, and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

There are some who are gone out from us, refusing to be under political government, and therefore no friends to the Hierarchy; of whom, yet it must be said, their preaching is right and good in the main; though the persons are † immethodical in their practice.

To this were added in italics the following footnotes, apparently the editor's own:

\* However moral preaching may be admired by some people, it is clearly evident to all intelligent persons, that it is too weak to work a reformation; whereas the preaching of CHRIST and his RIGHTEOUSNESS, will not only beat down Satan under our feet, but establish morality in God's own way.

† The reason of this seems to be, because the regular clergy among them were turned out of the parish churches FOR preaching the very doctrine that the clergy are above CHARGED to preach: And people of all denominations adhering to them, seems to be the cause that they so little regard Hierarchy.—But, according to their Prayers and their whole behaviour, they are heartily attached to the civil Government.

As it stands, this document is relatively innocuous. Neither the bishop nor the Methodists are named, though both are hinted at in the capitalized "charge" and the adjective "immethodical". Nothing here for a slander suit, but plenty for drawing-room gossip! Clearly it was a trumpet-blast in favour of evangelical preaching, and its second paragraph a thinly-veiled endorsement of the Methodists, in spite of their unconventional practices. On the heels of this leaflet, possibly encouraged by seeing the material already in print, came further support for this supposed episcopal pronouncement, in the shape of a 24-page pamphlet by an anonymous and disinterested clergyman, who claimed that he knew neither the Wesleys nor

October about this document "sent to me in manuscript from London to Bristol", about the leaflet, and then about the pamphlet. This letter was printed in full in *Proceedings*, xxxiii, p. 106.

Whitefield. Again it was printed in London, and entitled *A Letter to the Right Reverend Father in God George, Lord Bishop of Exeter, occasioned by his Lordship's late Charge to the Clergy of his Diocese* [sic]: *in Defence of those Principles of the Methodists, objected to in his Lordship's Charge*. The author congratulates the bishop on his stand against "moral preaching", but points out that he misrepresents the Methodists in describing them as "gone out from among us" when in fact they have been *driven* out. He suggests that this can be corrected by once more opening church pulpits to them. The pamphlet was signed and dated at the end: "A Clergyman. Aug. 12, 1748". At least two editions were published, one reprinting the supposed extract. From the fact that both in the extract and in the text the author introduces the word "among" into the phrase given in the leaflet as "gone out from us", it seems that his work is based on the original manuscript version.<sup>4</sup>

The *Letter* was advertised in the *Gentleman's Magazine* and the *Scots Magazine* for August. Whitefield was still more distressed, and on several occasions he publicly "urged the injustice as well as imprudence thereof, and said it would produce what it did, . . . a declaration from his Lordship, that he was no Methodist."<sup>5</sup> Sure enough, at the beginning of September the bishop published an advertisement in the *Daily Advertiser* and other papers, running thus:

Exeter, Sept. 5, 1748.

A Written Paper, call'd "An Extract from Dr. Lavington the Bishop of Exeter's Charge to his Clergy, 1748," having been dispersed about London, &c. and afterwards printed (tho' without a Title,) I think myself obliged to declare, that it was no Part of my Charge, but the Product of mere Fiction.

Upon this pretended Extract has been grounded a printed Pamphlet, call'd "A Letter to the Lord Bishop of Exeter, occasion'd by his late Charge to the Clergy of his Diocese, &c.;" which, being only fighting with a shadow, needs no other answer than his own words, p. 15. Oh! Sir, how have you been imposed upon?

But because I would not have the Methodists be imposed upon themselves, or any more impose upon the Public, as if I were any way a Favourer of their Sect; I freely declare my Sentiments, "that there are several well meaning ignorant People among them,—that the Sect in general is actuated by a Spirit of Enthusiasm and Delusion,—and that as to some of them, especially of their Leaders and Teachers, I have reason to believe something worse."

G. EXON.

This rebuttal was also printed as a news item in the August issue of the monthly *Scots Magazine*, but not in its English counterpart the *Gentleman's Magazine*.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> The Garrett volume contains the 24-page pamphlet; my own collection has both this and the 12-page edition which reprints the extract, with the title "The Bishop of Exeter's Charge to his Clergy", but with no footnotes.

<sup>5</sup> Whitefield's *Works*, ii, p. 190.

<sup>6</sup> p. 456, the editor stating that "The following advertisement is published in several papers". A copy of the original advertisement is included in the volume at Garrett.

Thereupon the stewards of Wesley's Foundery preaching-house, London, entered the fray. (John Wesley himself was in London, but his hands were full, and the following week he was to open the newly-enlarged preaching-house at Bristol; Charles Wesley was in Ireland.) They also used the columns of the *Daily Advertiser*, publishing a document which refuted the bishop's criticisms point by point. A copy of this also is in the volume at Evanston, and it merits quotation in full:

London, Foundery, September 8, 1748.

To the PUBLICK.

We the Stewards of the Society under the Inspection of the Rev. Mess. John and Charles Wesley, do hereby, in behalf of ourselves and Brethren, testify to the sober and unprejudiced Part of the Nation, that it was with great Satisfaction we read what was call'd "An Extract of the Charge deliver'd by his Lordship of Exeter;" although we were under some discouraging Apprehensions least that *Extract* should not be genuine. In this Uncertainty we were much surpriz'd and grieved to find a Pamphlet publish'd in Answer to it; which Answer met with our Disapprobation, as we judged it ill-tim'd, and not likely to promote the Cause of Christ, though it contain'd many great and serious truths.

In this Day's *Daily Advertiser* his Lordship of Exeter declares, "that the said Extract was *no Part* of his Charge:" which we are heartily sorry to hear. And we are likewise sorry that his Lordship should use so severe Expressions concerning a whole Body of People, who are known to be well attached to Church and State.

What his Lordship declares to be his Sentiments concerning us, "that there are several well-meaning ignorant People among us", intimates a settled Contempt, unbecoming any one that believes himself mere Dust and Ashes with ourselves. His Lordship *may* (as others *do*) know, that amongst us are Men, who, if not Methodists, might be esteemed Men of Learning and Good Sense; yea, and those too well-meaning People. His Lordship must know, a general Charge is nothing but the Effect of—not knowing the real Case, in the Judgment of wise and candid People; therefore his calling us "a Sect actuated by a Spirit of Enthusiasm and Delusion", is only a Flourish, such as many of the Heathen Writers used to blacken the Primitive Christians.

But the last Article is what we never could have expected from a Bishop in the Church of Christ. We acknowledge ourselves *Leaders* in this Society of Men; yet we trust that we are not *actuated by a Spirit of Enthusiasm or Delusion*, nor do we *know* of any sinister Ends we have in being Members of this Society; and we seriously desire any sober Person to convince us of any, if they know more than we do. And as for our worthy Ministers and Teachers, we have as great Reason to believe *that they are free from Enthusiasm or Delusion, or something worse*, as we have to believe the Lord Bishop of Exeter *is no Friend to or Favourer of them*.

This we thought proper to declare; and rest the Friends of all Mankind.

The Countess of Huntingdon also sprang to the defence of the maligned Methodists, urging the bishop to acknowledge that his

criticism had gone too far on the mistaken assumption that the supposed *Extract* had been issued with their connivance. Her letter enclosed "an acknowledgment on the part of the printer, that the publication of the charge was *solely* his deed—that he had got the manuscript from one entirely unconnected with the Methodists—and that he was ready to verify this statement on oath when required." Her letter was ignored. She then threatened to disgrace Lavington publicly, whereupon he sent her an apology for her to transmit to the chief sufferers. One of them, George Whitefield, had some converse with the bishop himself, being in his diocese, and his letter to the countess reveals with what bad grace the apology had been given: "I hear how your ladyship has been, by the B—p. Alas! how does the enmity of the heart sometimes make persons to forget good manners!"<sup>7</sup> The bishop's letter ran thus:

The Bishop of Exeter having received the most positive assurance from the Countess of Huntingdon, and other respectable persons, that neither Mr. Whitefield nor Mr. Wesley, nor any one in connexion with, or authorised by them, had any concern in the fabrication and publication of a Charge said to be delivered by him to the Clergy of his Diocese takes this opportunity of apologising to her Ladyship, and Messrs. Whitefield and Wesley, for the harsh and unjust censures which he was led to pass on them, from the supposition that they were in some measure concerned in, or had countenanced the late imposition on the public.

The Bishop of Exeter feels that it is imperative on him to make this concession to the Countess of Huntingdon; and requests her Ladyship and Messrs. Whitefield and Wesley will accept his unfeigned regret at having unjustly wounded their feelings, and exposed them to the odium of the world.<sup>8</sup>

Probably the bishop did not intend the countess to publish this recantation. If so, she disappointed him. Small wonder that Lavington fumed inwardly, and prepared for a massive onslaught on those who had made him a laughing-stock of polite society. The first part of *The Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists Compar'd* appeared anonymously in March 1749, though from the outset he was reputed to be the author.<sup>9</sup> Answers appeared speedily: by Whitefield in April and by Vincent Perronet in May, both entitled *Some Remarks*. A year later John Wesley published *A Letter to the Author of the Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists compar'd*. By that time Lavington had issued his larger second part, to be followed in 1751 by the third, still with no acknowledgement of authorship. Whitefield's words were so easily twisted against him that he wisely refrained from further reply, but Perronet answered each part as it appeared. Wesley published *A Second Letter to the Author of the Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists Compar'd*, with a prefatory letter addressed "To the Right Reverend the Lord

<sup>7</sup> Whitefield's *Works* (1771), ii, pp. 233-4. The letter is dated "Plymouth, Feb. 21, 1749".

<sup>8</sup> (A. C. H. Seymour): *Life and Times of Selina Countess of Huntingdon* (1840), i, 95-6.

<sup>9</sup> Tyerman's *Whitefield*, ii, p. 219.

Bishop of Exeter". This successfully drew Lavington out into the open with *The Bishop of Exeter's Answer to Mr. Wesley's late Letter to his Lordship* (1752), to which Wesley replied the same year with another *Second Letter*, this one being to the bishop whilst the former one had been to the anonymous author—a nice distinction. In 1754 Lavington issued the three parts of his *Enthusiasm* in two volumes. He seemed determined to have the last word, and apparently succeeded.

It was high time that someone said the last word. For this constant attack needing constant defence apparently sprang not from any serious theological or ecclesiastical convictions on the part of Bishop Lavington, but from pique over a practical joke that was taken too seriously.

FRANK BAKER.

## NEWS FROM OUR BRANCHES

### The East Anglian Branch

With a view to obtaining rather more publicity than is normally possible in the widespread and thinly-populated East Anglia District, the branch departed from its customary procedure, and incorporated its spring meeting with the Synod service of public worship in the St. James's church, King's Lynn, on Wednesday, 8th May. It was a welcome and worthwhile change, and three new members were enrolled, bringing the total to 89. The Chairman of the District, the Rev. Hubert J. Martin (who is also President of the branch) told the large congregation that many members were present, and the Rev. John J. Perry, the branch's chairman, gave a brief survey of its aims and activities.

The Rev. A. Kingsley Lloyd, the guest preacher (himself a member of the Wesley Historical Society) expressed his great pleasure at the branch's participation in the service. After paying tribute to the late Rev. Wesley F. Swift and his great contribution to Wesley studies, Mr. Lloyd observed that although everything said and written by John and Charles Wesley was of interest to students of Methodist history, some parts of their huge legacy were obviously of greater value than others. It was in that respect that the Wesley Historical Society did good service; it was not an anti-quarian body, but sought also to relate the best in Methodist history to modern life.

Mr. Lloyd then preached from the text "We have an altar" (Heb. xiii. 10), with special reference to John Wesley's oft-recurring sentence: "I offered Christ". That, he said, was the essential theme and substance of the mighty Methodist movement in the eighteenth century. In that vital matter both ministry and laity were involved, and should be so now: but neither must ever forget that they had nothing to offer save what had already been divinely bestowed on them.

The next meeting will be at Ipswich (Museum Street church) at 3 p.m. on Saturday, 9th November, when the Rev. G. Osborn Gregory will speak on "Henry Pearce's Eighteenth-century Class-Papers".

W. A. GREEN.

### The North-East Branch

The spring meeting was held at the Durham Road Methodist church,