

A Second Decade of Evangelistic Toil (1751-1760)

This decade was marked by affliction and sorrow. Wesley was not, indeed, subjected to mob violence to the same extent as in previous years; but trouble arose from other causes, some of them personal to himself, and others related to the work he had in hand. In the years 1753 and 1754 he suffered much from severe illness. At times his physical prostration was so great that it seemed unlikely he could long continue his work; yet again and again he summoned sufficient strength to preach, though fever and pain and hemorrhage supervened. During one of his attacks he was brought very low, when, as he writes, 'not knowing how it might please God to dispose of me, and to prevent vile panegyric,' he wrote the following epitaph, ordering that this, if any, inscription should be placed on his tombstone: Here lieth the Body of John Wesley, A Brand plucked out of the burning; Who died of a Consumption in the Fifty-first Year of his Age, not leaving, after his Debts are paid, Ten Pounds behind him: Praying, God be merciful to me, an unprofitable Servant!

Early in the following year he retired to Bristol to take the benefit of the Hot Wells, Here he began to write Notes on the New Testament; 'a work,' he says, 'which I should scarce ever have attempted, had I not been so ill as not to be able to travel or preach, and yet so well as to be able to read and write. I now went on in a regular method, rising at my hour [four o'clock] and writing from five to nine at night; except the time of riding, half an hour for each meal, and the hour between five and six in the evening.' Preaching was wholly intermitted for four months. Regaining a little strength, he returned to London, and spent some weeks at Paddington in writing, only going to town on Saturday evening and leaving again on Monday morning. Early in June, at the Foundery he preached, which he had not done in the evening for a long time, although his voice and strength were still impaired. In July he was able to resume his work in the open air after an interval of nine months; but he was not able fully to renew his journeys until April of the following year. After this no prolonged interruption occurred, and he soon began to extend his visits to a much larger number of places than at any previous time, and this continued to the last year of his life.

In his own private affairs the most considerable incident was his marriage to Mrs. Vazeille, which took place on February 19, 1751. Nine or ten days previously he was crossing London Bridge when his foot slipped; his ankle, striking a stone, was seriously injured and one of his legs was severely sprained; yet he Preached, and attempted to do so again in the evening, but the pain was too great. He spent the week at the house of his future wife, 'partly in prayer, reading, and conversation, and partly in writing a Hebrew Grammar and finishing the Lessons for Children.' On the following Sunday he preached at the Foundery kneeling, and the next day, or the day afterwards, was married. He preached again once or thrice, still kneeling. In a fortnight, being able to ride, though not to walk, he set out alone for Bristol, where he held a conference with his preachers, after which he returned to London, and Six days later started on his northern journey, Writing, 'I cannot understand, how a Methodist preacher can answer it to God, to preach one sermon, or travel one day less, in a married, than in a single state. In this respect surely "it remaineth, that they who have wives be as though they had none.'" Scarcely one of his friends at the time, and none of his biographers more recently, could say a word in favour of the marriage. Edward Perronet stands alone as having given his approval of it. Charles Wesley and others, who were much interested in his welfare, deeply deplored it. As far as can be learned he derived little or no help from Mrs. Wesley; while she did much to impair his comfort, subjecting him to many indignities, and finally leaving him. Wesley must have been greatly disappointed in his marriage; and whatever may be said in exculpation of Mrs. Wesley's conduct, on the ground of the very peculiar circumstances in which she was placed, it is clear that, instead of being a source of help and happiness to him, she was the occasion of much sorrow and personal distress. Tyerman has given numerous details of the affair, and has judged it in his usual impulsive style.

One great trouble to him arose from the disturbance of several of his societies by the diffusion amongst them of erroneous, or foolish and divisive views, as by the Predestinarians in Wednesbury and the Mystics and Antinomians in Birmingham, the spread of Antinomian and Calvinistic doctrines in Ireland, and other similar difficulties. These he sought to counteract by careful private teaching wherever he met with them; and he wrote pamphlets for distribution in his absence. The withdrawal of John Bennet from the ranks of his helpers, and especially the prejudicial influence of James Wheatley, another helper, in Ireland, and his subsequent moral defection in Wiltshire and Norwich, with disastrous effects on the society, caused Wesley the keenest pain, and involved him in much unprofitable labour; while it wrought havoc amongst a large number of persons whom Wheatley had drawn around him. All this Wesley combated with the utmost earnestness and courage, and finally with considerable success. But the whole threw threatening clouds for years over the work, and of painfulness and sorrow over Wesley and his fellow-evangelists. Wheatley was the first helper on whom Wesley exercised the extreme discipline of expulsion.

But a deeper trouble arose from a current of antichurch feeling, which at times ran with considerable strength. Some of Wesley's helpers and many of his people had never held any vital connection with the Church of England. Wesley strove to unite them to it, and endeavoured to persuade - sometimes almost to compel-them to attend the services and the sacraments in their parish churches, always setting the example of attendance, and refusing himself to conduct services in 'church hours.' But the treatment meted out to them by some of the clergy was not encouraging; in not a few instances it was positively repellant. It was not, therefore, surprising that they should desire that the sacraments might be administered to them by the men through whom they had received spiritual benefit. Wesley's moderation in dealing with them contrasted with his brother's more summary and uncompromising spirit. The controversy at

times waxed warm, and was prolonged through many years. It was debated again and again in the Conferences, when Wesley was generally able to secure unanimity in the resolve not to separate from the Church. Charles Wesley was first a Churchman, then a Methodist. Wesley, though firm to the end in his attachment to the Church, set 'the work of God' primarily before him. Charles said it was not lawful to separate: John said it was not expedient; but he also said, 'Church or no Church, I must save souls.' This diversity of view, together with other disturbing circumstances, caused a measure of estrangement between the brothers during this decade. But it did not last long. The old brotherly love flamed up again in spite of all. But the itinerant work and the care of the societies throughout the country generally, rested almost exclusively upon the shoulders of Wesley, for Charles, partly driven off by a spirit with which he could not sympathize, and partly drawn away by the attractiveness of his happy home life, gradually withdrew from the itinerancy, and his labours after a time were mainly restricted to London and Bristol.

Wesley was also troubled by controversialists, some of whom he could not ignore, as he did most of his assailants. He replied to Bishop Lavington in three separate publications, though his lordship's production little deserved an answer. He also wrote his *Predestination Calmly Considered*, to correct the growth of error in Ireland, as well as several other controversial pieces. This was to him 'heavy work,' such as he 'should never choose, but it must be done.' The vileness of a filthy Press that attacked Methodism with the bitterest venom found its climax in the corrupt writings of Foote, whose *Youlest* production, *The Minor: A Comedy*, was exhibited to depraved and sympathizing audiences at the Haymarket for several months.

Wesley's more serious works were a volume entitled *The Doctrine of Original Sin*, in answer to Dr. Taylor, of Norwich, the most complete theological treatise that he published; *A Preservative against Unsettled Notions in Religion*, for the special use of his young preachers; forty-nine volumes of the *Christian Library*, *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*, with a revised translation of the text; *Reasons against a Separation from the Church of England*; and a *Treatise on Electricity*. These, with many other minor publications, including a hymn-book for the use of his people - *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* - and various pamphlets of hymns, show with how much diligence and care his time that was not spent in direct evangelistic work was sacredly redeemed.

But though the decade was characterized by many troublous circumstances, it was not all dark. The work progressed, the sphere of Wesley's activity was extended: he paid four visits to Scotland, the first in 1751; he also preached in many places in England not previously visited. His helpers increased in number; sixty-five additional itinerants were enrolled, so that at the close of the decade ninety were engaged, and many 'local' helpers. More than fifty chapels, or preaching-houses, were occupied. Further signs of spiritual awaking presented themselves; Wesley wrote, 'In the beginning of the year 1760 there was a great revival of the work of God in Yorkshire.' This was the presage of a very great work throughout the kingdom. The secular affairs of the societies, especially those connected with his publishing enterprises, were committed to stewards, leaving Wesley more free for his spiritual labour. Several more of the clergy - Berridge, Milner, and others - sympathized with the Methodist work, and imitated it. His old friend Whitefield was 'all love and tenderness.' But a richer source of help, of blessing, and of joy was at hand. Wesley writes, 'On Sunday, March 13, 1757, finding myself weak at Snowfields, I prayed (if He saw good) that God would send me help at the chapel [in West Street]; and I had it. A clergyman whom I never saw before, came and offered me his assistance; and as soon as I had done preaching Mr. Fletcher came, who had just then been ordained priest, and hastened to the chapel on purpose to assist, as he supposed me to be alone.'

The coming of Fletcher (William de la Fliche, of Nyon, in Switzerland) to Wesley's help is too interesting and important an event in this history to be hastily passed over. As we have seen, Charles Wesley had relaxed his itinerant labours, and before the end of the decade they had become limited to London and Bristol. Happily on all hands helpers were springing up, or the work could not have advanced, nor could Wesley have been at liberty to pursue his evangelistic tours through the country. Fletcher did not enter Wesley's corps of itinerants, but he became an invaluable counsellor and friend; and, by his occasional visits to some of the societies, brought to bear upon them the influence of his saintly character and spiritual ministry. His able and ready pen was freely used, and with singular power, in rebutting Wesley's opponents, and in defending his teaching and his work, while his gracious, lofty, and seraphic spirit was a hallowed inspiration and comfort.

Wesley's itinerant labours through the decade are illustrated in the itinerary for the last year of the period, which is given on the following pages, though even this does not supply the names of all the places at which in his journeys he stopped to preach. The barriers of prejudice were in some instances beginning to yield, though as yet only a few of the churches were open to him. Near the close of the decade he was, however, greatly cheered by joining with his friend Berridge in some very remarkable services in Everton Church.

The gradually enlarging Conferences were seasons of much blessing, and were marked by unanimity, love, and the control of a supreme resolve to carry on the work, in spite of all hardships - and they were many - and not to separate from the Church.

In the following Itineraries, taken mainly from his Journals, the names of the towns through which he passed and only stopped to preach are in italics. Several names are omitted through lack of space.