

John Wesley the Methodist

Chapter XVIII - Setting His House in Order

Thou Art the Man!--Methodist Clergy.--The Swiss Recruit.--Fletcher's Proposals.--The Deed of Declaration.--The Ordinations.--The Rubicon Crossed.

JOHN WESLEY completed his seventieth year in 1773. His health was apparently failing, and the great itinerant began to feel the necessity to set his house in order as one who goes on a long journey. He had been revising his manuscripts for his literary executor, but was concerned for the future conduct of the complex system of work which had resulted from his labors.

"What an amazing work has God wrought in these kingdoms in less than forty years!" he writes. "And it not only continues, but increases, throughout England, Scotland, and Ireland; nay, it has lately spread into New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Maryland, and Carolina. But the wise men of the world say, 'When Mr. Wesley drops, then all this is at an end.'" And Wesley himself fears this, "unless, before God calls me hence, one is found to stand in my place I see more and more, unless there be one proestwz, the work can never be carried on." At present he fears the preachers will not submit to one another. A leader they must have. "But who is sufficient for these things"

Then, after describing the type of leader needed, Wesley declares to John Fletcher: "Thou art the man!"

Fletcher stands easily foremost among the clergy of the Church of England who became identified with the Methodist movement. Some of these gave up parochial work in the Church of England and became itinerant preachers like Whitefield. Others continued in their church livings and were at the same time Methodist assistants (superintendents) and had a Methodist circuit extending far beyond their own parishes, like Grimshaw, of Haworth.

A third class attended the Conferences, welcomed the Methodist leaders to their homes and pulpits, and assisted them in the administration of the sacraments, without leaving or extending their parochial work, like Vincent Perronet, of Shoreham, to whom Wesley addressed his Plain Account of the People Called Methodists, and Henry Venn, of Clapham, to whom Wesley wrote in 1765 the spirited letter in which the motto of the Epworth League is found: "I desire to have a league offensive and defensive with every soldier of Christ. We have not only one faith, one hope, one Lord, but are directly engaged in one warfare. We are carrying the war into the devil's own quarters, who therefore summons all his hosts to war. Come, then, ye that love him, to the help of the Lord--to the help of the Lord against the mighty! I am now well-nigh miles emeritus senex, sexagenarius [an old soldier who has served out his time, and is entitled to his discharge--a sexagenarian]; yet I trust to fight a little longer."

But of all the evangelical clergy who, with or without their consent, were classed as Methodists the vicar of Madeley stands preeminent for saintliness, learning, and as a defender of the faith.

Jean Guillaume de la Fleehere, for so he was christened, was a Swiss, born at Nyon of excellent family in 1729. Though educated for the Reformed ministry, he rejected its Calvinistic creed and turned to a life of adventure. A train of remarkable providences landed him in England, where he was coaching the sons of a member of Parliament when in 1754 he fell in with the Methodists and joined class at the Foundry. Wesley's Journal helped him to understand his spiritual needs and the way of salvation, and on January 23, 1755, he recognized himself "a new creature" in Christ Jesus. He entered the ministry of the Church of England, and performed his first ministerial service in assisting Wesley with the sacraments in Snowsfield Chapel.

"How wonderful," wrote Wesley, "are the ways of God! When my bodily strength failed, and none in England were able and willing to assist me, he sent me help from the mountains of Switzerland, and an helpmate for me in every respect; where could I have found such another"

Fletcher's charming personality and rare spiritual gifts gained him immediate adoption into the little group of the clergy who favored the revival work. In 1760 he was appointed to the living of Madeley, and in that rural parish of miners and colliers he preached and lived the Gospel for twenty-five years. His converts were formed into classes on the Wesleyan plan, and his parish was administered according to Wesley's ideal.

Such was Fletcher of Madeley when, in 1763, John Wesley, looking about for a successor, said: "Thou art the man God has given you a measure of loving faith and a single eye to his glory. He has given you some knowledge of men and things, particularly of the old plan of Methodism. You are blessed with some health, activity, and diligence, together with a degree of learning. And to all these he has lately added, by a way none could have foreseen, favor both with the preachers and the people. Come out, in the name of God! Come to the help of the Lord against the mighty! Come while I am alive and capable of labor! . . . Come while I am able, God assisting to build you up in faith, to ripen your gifts, and introduce you to the people! Nil tanti. What possible employment can you have which is of so great importance"

Fletcher did not definitely decline Wesley's proposal, but he stated that he "needed a fuller persuasion that the time is quite come" to leave his work at Madeley. He hopes that Wesley may outlive him, but he promises, "Should Providence call you first, I shall do my best . . . to help your brother to gather the wreck, and keep together those who are not absolutely bent on throwing away the Methodist doctrines and discipline." Six months later the call was repeated without success. Thirteen years afterward Wesley still doubted if his friend had done right in remaining in his parish. "I can never believe," says he, "it was the will of God that such a burning and shining light should be hid under a bushel. No; instead of being confined to a country village it ought to have shone in every corner of our land."

Although Fletcher did not accept Wesley's commission of lieutenancy, and was survived by him, he is known as his "designated successor." That he gave deep thought to the problem of Methodism after Wesley we know from a comprehensive statement of his conclusions in a letter written to Mr. Wesley in August, 1775, in which he exhorts his correspondent as an Englishman, a Christian, a divine, and an extraordinary messenger of God, to take positive steps toward the reformation of the Church of England, "which I love," says Fletcher, "as much as you do, but I do not love her so much as to take her blemishes for ornaments." Some of the leading points in the program of reform are thus stated:

"(1) That the growing body of the Methodists in Great Britain, Ireland, and America be formed into a general society--a daughter Church of our holy mother. (2) That this society shall recede from the Church of England in nothing but in some palpable defects, about doctrine, discipline, and unevangelical hierarchy. (3) That this society shall be the Methodist Church of England, ready to defend the as yet unmethodized Church against all the unjust attacks of the Dissenters--willing to submit to her in all things that are not unscriptural--approving of her ordination, partaking of her sacraments, and attending her service at every convenient opportunity. (4) That a pamphlet be published containing the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England. rectified according to the purity of the Gospel, 'together with some needful alterations in the liturgy and homilies, such as the expunging of the damnatory clauses of the Athanasian Creed, etc. (5) That Messrs. Wesley, the preachers, and the most substantial Methodists in London, in the name of the societies scattered through the kingdom, would draw up a petition and present it to the Archbishop of Canterbury, informing his grace, and by him the bench of the bishops, of this design; proposing the reformed Articles of Religion, asking: the protection of the Church of England, begging that this step might not be considered as a schism, but only as an attempt to avail ourselves of the liberty of Englishmen and Protestants to serve God according to the purity of the Gospel, the strictness of primitive discipline, and the original design of the Church of England, which was to reform, so far as time and circumstances would allow, whatever needed reformation. (6) That this petition contain a request to the bishops to ordain the Methodist preachers which can pass their examination according to what is indispensably required in the canons of the Church. That instead of the ordinary testimonials the bishops would allow of testimonials signed by Messrs. Wesley and some more clergymen, who would make it their business to inquire into the morals and principles of the candidates for orders. And that, instead of a title, their lordships would accept of a bond signed by twelve stewards of the Methodist societies, certifying that the candidate for holy orders shall have a proper maintenance. That if his grace, etc., does not condescend to grant this request, Messrs. Wesley will be obliged to take an irregular (not unevangelical) step, and to ordain upon a Church of England independent plan such lay preachers as appear to them qualified for holy orders."

Then follow suggestions as to the trial of candidates and the exercise of discipline, and under (9), "that when Messrs. Wesley are dead the power of ordination be lodged in three or five of the most steady Methodist ministers, under the title of moderators, who shall overlook the flocks and the other preachers as Mr. Wesley does now." Under (10--12) the Prayer Book is to be revised, confirmation is to be performed with the utmost solemnity by Mr. Wesley or the moderators, and (13) enjoins that the doctrine of grace shall be preached against the Socinians, the doctrine of justice against the Calvinists, and the doctrine of holiness against all the world. The letter closes with a proposal that Kingswood School shall be used for the training of candidates for "Methodist orders," the education of the preachers' children, and as a home for worn-out ministers.

It will be seen that Fletcher thought that Wesley might secure the much-needed reform "without perverting;" that Methodism might exist in ecclesiastical form as a Church with-in a Church, or as a Church branch of the Mother Church, but with a power of expansion to Ireland, the colonies, and the work beyond; the Articles and Prayer Book might be purged from unevangelical elements, to meet the scruples of many Methodists, and the damnatory clauses of the Athanasian Creed might be omitted. The Methodist superintendent preachers might be episcopally ordained presbyters, and their helpers deacons. If the bishops would not ordain, let the Wesleys do so. Wesley did not see his way to do more than very partially to act upon Fletcher's very striking and comprehensive proposals. He did partially act upon them in some important respects. He drew up a revised Prayer Book or Sunday Service for the independent Methodist Church, afterward the Methodist Episcopal Church of America. In this book the Thirty-nine Articles are reduced to twenty-four, the Athanasian Creed disappears, the Psalms are abridged. All is adapted to a new people in a homely, pastoral country. Provision is made for independent Methodist ordination of deacons, presbyters, or elders, and the setting apart of superintendents, or "bishops," to use the word which early became current in America and which has almost displaced the other designation.

The suggestion (9) in regard to moderators was an extension of that which Wesley had himself proposed in 1769. It resembles more closely the American plan of general superintendence.

Both Fletcher (1759) and Perronet (1762) had previously described the Methodist society as the "Methodist Church." And Wesley himself was now using the term, so that this was not a new departure. But "what was new was the frank boldness with which Fletcher

would one hundred and twenty years ago have spread before the world and all the churches of the world the fact that by the labors of the Wesleys and their followers a new great Church--for not one nation, but all nations, something greater in its idea and its potentiality than a mere national Church had actually been created; and that it was destined to prevail until it had replenished the earth. Here the independent race and nationality--the independent churchly ideas also--of the Swiss Reformed Churchman found voice and utterance. To Fletcher, Methodism was already a great Church, potentially the greatest Church of the world."

All accounts agree that Fletcher was a man of exceptional purity of character. Canon Overton, the High Churchman, writes: "Never, perhaps, since the rise of Christianity has the mind which was in Christ Jesus been more faithfully copied than it was in the vicar of Madeley."

The philosophic critic, Isaac Taylor, concludes that "the Methodism of Fletcher was Christianity, as little lowered by admixture of human infirmity as we may hope to find it anywhere on earth." "In a genuine sense he was a saint; . . . as unearthly a being as could tread the earth at all."

Yet the Protestant saint was no recluse. John Fletcher's pure and lofty heavenly mindedness did not alienate him from his age. His asceticism, as Mr. Macdonald has remarked, was "the asceticism of love, and not of bondage or of fear." He was a Methodist of the Methodists, and he was delighted when Wesley succeeded in persuading the converts at Madeley to meet in class. He built a Methodist meetinghouse in his village, and regarded Christian fellowship as essential to a New Testament Church. He greeted the lay preachers as brethren, and his appearance at Wesley's Conferences produced the same remarkable spiritual impression on them as it did on his visitors and hearers elsewhere.

At one of the most important Conferences Wesley ever had Fletcher was present (1784). Dr. Coke had just begun the Foreign Missionary Society, and Wesley had just signed his famous Deed of Declaration constituting the Legal Conference. When Fletcher preached at seven on the Sunday morning, Henry Moore records, "The shadow of the divine presence was seen among us, and his going forth was in our sanctuary." The Conference was a critical one, and for seven days the new "deed" was debated. Fletcher was at prayer at two or three every morning. Turbulent brethren appealed against Wesley, but Fletcher acted as mediator. To Wesley, now eighty-one years of age, he said, "My father! my father! they have offended, but they are your children." To the disputing preachers, "My brethren! my brethren! he is your father!" Then he fell upon his knees and prayed until many were in tears and sobbed aloud.

Fletcher's last sermon was preached in Madeley Church, August 7, 1785, and after the service he was carried fainting to his room. A week later he died, in the fifty-sixth year of his age. "I was intimately acquainted with him," says John Wesley, "for about thirty years. I conversed with him morning, noon, and night, without the least reserve, during a journey of many hundred miles; and in all that time I never heard him speak one improper word nor saw him do an improper action. Many exemplary men have I known, holy in heart and life, within fourscore years; but one equal to him! have not known; one so inwardly and outwardly devoted to God. So unblamable a character in every respect I have not found either in Europe or America, and I scarce expect to find such another on this side of eternity." "A pattern of all holiness, scarce to be paralleled in a century!" His widow, Mary Bosanquet, continued for many years as an evangelist and loving benefactress of her kind.

Fletcher's refusal to assume the responsibilities of the work left John Wesley without an apparent successor. But in 1784 he promulgated his plan for perpetuating the Methodist organization. This was the Deed of Declaration--sometimes named in legal phrase the Poll Deed--which he executed February 28, 1784. It legally defined the "Conference of the people called Methodists," and declared "how the succession and identity thereof is to be continued."

Wesley's Poll Deed contained the names of a hundred preachers who were to be in the eye of the law what Wesley himself had been for forty years in relation to his societies and trust property. He had been carefully training his preachers for his responsibility. In a letter dated 1780 he had written, "I chose to exercise the power which God had given me through the Conference--both to avoid ostentation, and gently to habituate the people to obey them when I should be taken from their head." This Wesley now carried out more fully by merging his own authority in that of the Legal Conference. The Conference was to meet annually, fill up vacancies in its number, elect a president and secretary, station the preachers, admit preachers on trial and into full connection, and maintain the discipline and general oversight of the societies. The term of appointments for itinerant preachers was limited to three years. The deed was not kept in reserve until Wesley's death, as some writers have assumed, but five months after its execution it was acted upon at the Conference by the election of two preachers to fill vacancies in the Hundred, and by the formal signing of the Minutes. Wesley was chosen president year by year until his death. Five or six preachers who were annoyed by the omission of their names from the Hundred severed their connection with Wesley, but at the Conference of 1785 all the preachers present signed a document approving both of the substance and design of the deed.

"Viewed in the light of outward appearances," wrote William Arthur, "the enrollment of the Deed Poll of John Wesley would be one of the most commonplace of events. Viewed in the light of the attention given to it at the time by men of thought, of taste, or of affairs, it would rank as one of the most insignificant; not of more consequence than the execution of his will by an ordinary proprietor, or that of his deed of donation by the founder of some local charity. Viewed in the light of its moral intent, however, it rose to the rank of acts noble and

wise. Viewed in its relations to Christianity as a collective body of Churches, it belonged to the category of great ecclesiastical events; and viewed in the light shed back upon it to-day by its historical results, as developed up to the present time, it must be placed among those pregnant acts in human affairs to which in successive generations other pregnant acts have to trace up their own origin."

Three years later (November, 1787) Wesley took another step by which, as Dr. Stoughton observes, "he became practically a Dissenter," however strongly he might repudiate the term. He decided that the safest way to safeguard his work was to secure legal licenses for his chapels and preachers, "not as Dissenters," he says, "but simply as preachers of the Gospel." By his repeated ordinations of preachers to minister the sacraments "according to the usages of the Church of England," he finally broke with the Church, though he insisted to the end that he remained within the pale.

After quoting many of Wesley's appeals to the Methodists against separation from the Church of England, Canon Overton asks: "But some years before Wesley uttered these words, had he not himself done the very thing which he deprecated Consciously and intentionally, No! a thousand times no; but virtually, as a matter of fact, we must reluctantly answer, Yes. Lord Mansfield's famous dictum, 'Ordination is separation,' is unanswerable. When, in 1784, Wesley ordained Coke and Asbury to be superintendents, and Whatcoat and Vasey to be elders, he to all intents and purposes crossed the Rubicon."

With conspicuous fairness this able Anglican historian finds "the true explanation of Wesley's conduct in this matter in the intensely practical character of his mind. His work... seemed likely to come to a deadlock for want of ordained ministers. Thus we come back to the old notion. Everything must be sacrificed for the sake of his work. Some may think this was doing evil that good might come, but no such notion ever entered into Wesley's head; his rectitude of purpose, if not the clearness of his judgment is as conspicuous in this as in the other acts of his life."