

John Wesley the Methodist

Chapter XIV - Doctrinal Wars

Antinomianism.--The Minute of 1770.--Fletcher's Checks.--The Hills, Toplady, anti Berridge.--Wordy Wars.

METHODISM owes one of its doctrinal standards, The Notes on the New Testament, to an illness which confined John Wesley to a sanitarium at the Hot-wells, Bristol, early in 1754. It was "a work," he says, "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." He had been attacked with a cough in November, and showed alarming symptoms of a rapid decline. Believing that his end was near, "to prevent vile panegyric," he then wrote his own epitaph, which, happily, was not needed: Here lieth the body of JOHN WESLEY. A brand plucked out of the burning: Who died of consumption in the fifty-first year of his age, Not leaving, after his debts were paid, Ten pounds behind him; Praying, God be merciful to me, an unprofitable servant

A far more serious trouble to Wesley than any personal affliction was the antinomianism which threatened his societies with mortal disease. He was ever awake to the dangers which arise from the perversions of evangelical doctrine. "The antinomian proper," says Dr. Pope, the Methodist theologian, "is one who treats the requirements of perfect holiness as met by Christ, and refuses to measure his own conduct by any law whatever."

Wesley carefully guarded his own doctrine of Christian perfection from this peril. He considered antinomianism the worst of all heresies. Most strenuously and persistently did he teach that the profession of justification by faith should ever be tested by right conduct.

"I would not advise to preach the law without the Gospel any more than the Gospel without the law," wrote John Wesley, referring to the so-called Gospel preaching which he disowned. "Undoubtedly both should be preached in their turns; yea, both at once, or both in one." And he sums up the Christian ethics taught by himself and John Nelson in these words:

"God loves you; therefore love and obey him. Christ died for you; therefore die to sin. Christ is risen; therefore rise in the image of God. Christ liveth evermore; therefore live to God till you live with him in glory." "So we preached; and so you believed! This is the scriptural way, the Methodist way, the true way. God grant we may never turn therefrom, to the right hand or to the left."

Wesley's intense conviction of the importance of practical morality led him to take drastic measures to aid his society of antinomian teachers, and their perversions of evangelical truth. But, as Fletcher says, antinomianism had "spread like wildfire" among some of the societies. Most of Wesley's preachers, like John Nelson, never ceased to urge the people to maintain good works. But a few were using the cant phrases and catchwords of a perverted Calvinism. It would be unjust to call the leading Calvinistic clergy antinomians. Wesley did not do so. But the teaching of some of them provided little safeguard against immorality at a time when antinomianism was doing fatal damage to the cause of religion. They held, practically, that since salvation was all of grace through faith, they were not required to maintain good works; their standing in Christ was secured by election, and, clothed in his imputed righteousness, their own righteousness was a matter of indifference. It was not merely a logical deduction on Wesley's part that looseness of life might result from such loose doctrine. He had painful evidence that immorality was the actual result. He claimed the right to deal with the matter in his own Conference of preachers which met in London a month before the death of Whitefield. Hence arose the famous Minutes of 1770, the outburst of a controversy which lasted for eight years, and the publication of Fletcher's celebrated Checks to Antinomianism.

The Minute which provoked the new controversy declared: "We said in 1744, 'We have leaned too much toward Calvinism.' Wherein

"1. With regard to man's faithfulness. Our Lord himself taught us to use the expression. And we ought never to be ashamed of it. We ought steadily to assert, on his authority that if a man is not 'faithful in the unrighteous mammon, God will not give him the true riches

"2. With regard to working for life. This also our Lord has expressly commanded us. 'Labor' (eogazesqe) 'work,' 'for the meat that endureth to everlasting life.' And, in fact, every believer, till he comes to glory, works for as well as from life.

"3. We have received it as a maxim that 'a man is to do nothing in order to justification.' Nothing can be more false. Whoever desires to find favor with God should 'cease from evil, and learn to do well. 'Whoever repents should do' works meet for repentance.'"

Then followed a review of the whole affair, concluding that "we are every hour and every moment pleasing or displeasing to God, according to our works; according to the whole of our inward tempers and our outward behavior."

This restatement of doctrine was intended for the preachers, and as a counterblast to antinomianism. Lady Huntingdon and her Calvinistic friends, however, regarded it as an attack on their doctrine of "imputed righteousness" and "justification by faith." Wesley seldom used the former term, on account of its frequent abuse, but the tenor of his preaching for thirty years and his recent sermon on

the death of Whitefield ought to have convinced them of his loyalty to the great doctrine of the Reformation, justification by faith.

Lady Huntingdon 'broke off her friendship with the Wesleys, and declared that she "could burn against" the Minute.

Joseph Benson and John Fletcher had to leave her college at Trevecca for endorsing its position, which that elect lady and her cousin and adviser, Rev. Walter Shirley, branded as "popery unmasked." A peace was patched up on the basis of concessions, but not until the ground had been laid for the five pamphlets by Fletcher--the Checks to Antinomianism, which constitute the greatest prose contribution to the literature of the Methodist awakening as do Charles Wesley's hymns to its poetry.

"It appears, if I am not mistaken," writes Fletcher in the first of his famous Checks, "that we stand now as much in need of a reformation from antinomianism as our ancestors did of a reformation from popery. People, it seems, may now be 'in Christ' without being new creatures, and new creatures without casting old things away. They may be God's children without God's image." This was Fletcher's main reason for the publication of the five pamphlets in which he defended the chief points of the Methodist belief with matchless logic and the finest literary expression.

Very pathetic is Fletcher's protest against the unkindness with which Wesley has been treated: "A gray-headed minister of Christ, an old general in the armies of Immanuel, a father who has children capable of instructing even masters in Israel, one whom God made the first and principal instrument of the late revival of true religion in Israel," should have met with more consideration. In another paragraph, as beautiful in style as in spirit, he incidentally pays a generous tribute to the Calvinist Whitefield as "one of the two greatest and most useful ministers I ever knew." "The other [Wesley], after amazing labors, flies still with unwearied diligence through the three kingdoms, calling sinners to repentance and to the healing fountain of Jesus' blood. Though oppressed with the weight of near seventy years, and the care of near thirty thousand souls, he shames still, by his unabated zeal and immense labors, all the young ministers in England, perhaps in Christendom. He has generally blown the Gospel trump and rode sixteen or twenty miles before most of the professors who despise his labors have left their downy pillow. As he begins the day, the week, the year, so he concludes them, still intent upon extensive services for the glory of the Redeemer and the good of souls. And shall we lightly lift up our pens, our tongues, our hands, against him No; let them rather forget their cunning.

If we will quarrel, can we find nobody to fall out with but the minister upon whom God puts the greatest honor Our Elijah has lately been translated to heaven. Gray-headed Elisha is yet awhile continued upon earth. And shall we make a hurry and noise to bring in railing accusations against him with more success"

Fletcher's masterpiece remains to this day a really valuable contribution to the literature of an age-long dispute. Every Methodist preacher reads the Checks as an indispensable part of his studies, and they are found at all points of the globe whither Methodist preachers have borne the cross. "They have been more influential in the denomination than Wesley's own controversial writings on the subject; for he was content to pursue his itinerant work, replying but briefly to the Hills, and leave the contest to Fletcher." They have influenced, if not directly through Fletcher's writings, yet indirectly through Methodism, the subsequent tone of theological thought in much of the Protestant world.

The chief champions of Calvinism were Sir Richard Hill and his brother, Rev. Rowland Hill, Rev. A.M. Toplady, the author of the hymn, "Rock of Ages," and John Berridge. That these Calvinistic friends were exasperated by Wesley's comparative silence is evident. Toplady writes: "Let Mr. Wesley fight his own battles, but let him not fight by proxy; let his cobblers keep to their stalls, his tinkers mend their brazen vessels, his barbers confine themselves to their blocks and basins, his blacksmiths blow more suitable coals than those of controversy; each man in his own order." Wesley is elegantly described as "slinking behind one of his drudges." Some of the terms used respecting this venerable servant of God, who had grown gray in unparalleled labors for Christ, are almost too bad to be transcribed, but they serve to show the spirit of the age. Here are a few: "An old fox, tarred and feathered;" "a designing wolf;" "... the most perfect and holy and sly that e'er turned a coat, or could pilfer and lie;" "a dealer in stolen wares, as unprincipled as a rook and as silly as a jackdaw;" "a gray-headed enemy of all righteousness;" "a venal profligate;" "an apostate miscreant;" "the most rancorous hater of the Gospel system that ever appeared in this land; a low and puny tadpole in divinity." He is charged with "low, serpentine cunning," and with "driving a larger traffic in blunders and blasphemies than any other blunder-merchant this island has produced."

When Wesley received Richard Hill's scurrilous pamphlet a little cool irony fell from his pen as he wrote in his Journal, 1772: "July 11. I was presented with Mr. Hill's Review, a curiosity in its kind. But it has nothing to do with either good nature or good manners; for he is writing to an Arminian." Toplady's translation of Zanchius on Predestination drew from Wesley his well-known summary of Calvinism: "The sum of all is this: one in twenty (suppose) of mankind are elected; nineteen in twenty are reprobated. The elect shall be saved, do what they will; the reprobate shall be damned, do what they can." Toplady recognized Wesley's mental force, and wrote: "I are not insensible to your parts, but, alas what is distinguished ability if not wedded to integrity!" Rowland Hill called Wesley "the lying apostle of the Foundry." But, as Macdonald has well said, "we have no heart to pursue the details of this history. It is complicated and unremunerative in the last degree. It deepened into bitterness and scurrility, till its later literature becomes unreadable for very shame; it separated brethren; it turned allies into adversaries; it offered to a skeptical and ungodly age the spectacle of good men 'smiting one another unfriendly,' and consumed time and strength that were wanted, and more than wanted, for the Christianizing of the country."

Charles Wesley's daughter Sarah has preserved an anecdote which illustrates John Wesley's calm fidelity to his work amid his troubles. Her uncle had promised to take her to Canterbury and Dover, in 1775, and she was looking forward to this with peculiar pleasure. The day before the journey her father heard that Mrs. John Wesley had ransacked her husband's bureau and taken out some letters, on which, by interpolating words and misinterpreting spiritual expressions, she contrived to place a vile construction. These she read to some Calvinists. They were to be sent to the Morning Post. Mr. Russell, a Calvinist, and an intimate friend of Charles Wesley, told him of the plot, suspecting that the letters were partial forgeries. Charles hastened to the Foundry to induce his brother to postpone his journey and remain in town to protect his reputation.

"Never shall I forget," says Miss Wesley, "the manner in which my father accosted my mother on his return home. 'My brother,' said he, is indeed an extraordinary man. I placed before him the importance of the character of a minister; the evil consequences which might result from his indifference to it; the cause of religion; stumbling-blocks cast in the way of the weak; and urged him, by every relative and public motive, to answer for himself, and stop the publication. His reply was: "Brother, when I devoted to God my ease, my time, my life, did I except my reputation No. Tell Sally I will take her to Canterbury to-morrow.""

Miss Wesley adds, "The letters in question were satisfactorily proved to be mutilated, and no scandal resulted from his trust in God." Richard Watson records that in his day some of these letters, mutilated, interpolated, or forged by this unhappy woman, had got into different hands, and were still preserved. There were other Calvinists besides Charles Wesley's friend who protested against the attempt on the part of Rowland Hill, Toplady, and others to defame Wesley's personal character.

Rowland Hill, however, lived to lament the bitter spirit of the controversy, and he said of his own writings, "A softer style and spirit would have better become me." He also suppressed one of his most violent publications. The smoke of the controversy must not conceal from us his noble work as an impressive, witty, warm-hearted preacher.

Within a year of the close of the controversy Toplady died. He had removed from the country parish of Broad Henbury to London, and two months before his death a strange scene occurred in his chapel in Orange Street. He had heard a report that he had expressed a desire to recant his opinions in the presence of John Wesley. His combative but honest soul was greatly stirred. He resolved to appear before his congregation once more and publicly deny the rumor. His physician and family remonstrated in vain. He replied that he "would rather die in harness than die in the stall." He was carried to the pulpit, and there made his "dying avowal" that he was satisfied of the truth of all that he had ever written. He was carried from his pulpit and soon after borne to his grave. He was only thirty-eight when he died; and Bishop Ryle says: "If he had lived longer, written more hymns, and handled fewer controversies, his memory would have been held in greater honor Toplady's undeniable faults should never make us forget his equally undeniable excellencies." Wesleyan Methodists to-day agree with the evangelical bishop. One of them writes of the sturdy polemic: "He was honest in his errors, and had a stout English heart, which commands our wonder, if not our admiration, in spite of his faults."