

A fifth Decade of Evangelistic Toil (1781-1790)

We now enter upon the fifth, the last, decade of Wesley's remarkable Evangelistic career. It comprises the period, from the seventy-seventh to the eighty-seventh year of his life. Surprising as it may seem, there is no diminution traceable, either of his traveling or of his preaching, until the last two years of the period.

Many important events occurred during this decade, that had relation rather to the consolidation of Methodism than to Wesley's personal history; and these must be briefly referred to.

The Conference of 1781 was distinguished by a very remarkable service held in the parish church of Leeds. Wesley preached. There were eighteen clergymen present; and at the Sacrament about eleven hundred communicants. Seventy preachers attended the Conference. Wesley desired Fletcher, Dr. Coke, and four others to meet him every evening, that they might consult together on any difficulty that occurred. This was rendered necessary by the renewed conflict of opinion on the Church question, which continued to be acute to the end of Wesley's days, and, indeed, for some years after. One of the Societies, which represented many others, wrote to Wesley, saying that they had, according to his advice attended the Church services, but the clergyman preached what they believed to be erroneous doctrines. The decision of the Conference was, that those who had been 'bred in the Church' should attend the services there as often as possible; but that if the minister began either to preach the absolute decrees or to rail at: And ridicule Christian perfection, they should go quietly out of the Church, yet attend it again on the next opportunity. .

The following year, Wesley, with Coke assistance, instituted a 'Society for the Distribution of Religious Tracts among the Poor.'

Very serious trouble arose at Birstal in 1782 respecting the authority by which the appointment of the preachers to the chapel there should be determined; the question being, whether the decision should rest with the Conference or with the Trustees. The same trouble arose also in other places—notably at Dewsbury — where the chapels were not settled on the terms of the Model Deed of 1763. This occasioned much strife, and occupied Wesley's time and attention, which could have been better employed; and so, in some degree, arrested the good work he had in hand. The difficulty was not overcome for several years.

A depression in the state of Kingswood School occurred in 1783, but energetic measures effected a change, and he was subsequently able to write:

'Friday, September 11, 1789.—I went over to Kingswood. Sweet recess! where everything is now just as I wish. But

"Man was not born in shades to lie."

'Let us work now; we shall rest by-and-by.

'Saturday, 12.—I spent some time with the children, all of whom behaved well; several are much awakened, and a few rejoicing in the favour of God.'

Another matter of the gravest importance was the preparation in 1784 of what was called A DEED OF DECLARATION. In 1763 was drawn up the form of Deed, just referred to, for the settlement of the chapels, which, amongst other items, provided 'that the Trustees should permit such persons as shall be appointed at the yearly Conference... and no others, to have and enjoy the said premises,' etc. But the Conference consisted of Wesley, and such other persons as he chose to invite to confer with him. It was pointed out to him that, in anticipation of his death, it was necessary more strictly to define the word 'Conference,' determining its individual constituents, and providing for its continuity. This was accomplished by a 'DEED OF DECLARATION AND ESTABLISHMENT OF THE CONFERENCE OF THE PEOPLE CALLED METHODISTS.' This Deed was enrolled in the Court of Chancery, March 9, 1784, and gave to the Conference a legal definition which hitherto it had lacked. Wesley was in some difficulty in determining the number of preachers who should constitute the Conference. He finally decided upon one hundred. Some of those who were not chosen, taking offence at their exclusion, created great unpleasantness at the ensuing Conference. The contention was so sharp that Mr. Fletcher besought the contending parties, literally on his knees, to stay the contest and be reconciled. Fears were entertained by many of the preachers that the 'Hundred,' without whose vote no transaction of the Conference was legal, would take advantage of their position to the detriment of the rest. Wesley in anticipation of this wrote a letter, in which he exhorted the 'Hundred' not to take advantage of their position by assuming any superiority over their brethren. This letter he consigned to the care of Joseph Bradford, to be read at the assembling of the first Conference after Wesley's death. The letter was so read, and the Conference unanimously resolved, 'That all the preachers, who are in full connexion with them, shall enjoy every privilege that the members of the Conference enjoy, agreeably to the above written letter.' To this hour that promise has been honourably observed. All duly qualified preachers vote on every subject, the 'legal hundred' always affirming their vote.

Another matter of the most serious interest, which involved Wesley in much controversy, related to the American Societies. Methodism had rapidly grown in what were now the United States of America. Stevens, the eloquent American historian of Methodism, says, 'The Revolution had dissolved not only the civil but also the ecclesiastical relations of the colonies to England. Many of the English clergy, on whom the Methodist Societies had depended for the Sacraments, had fled from 'the land, or had entered political or military life, and the Episcopal Church had been generally disabled. In Virginia, the centre of its colonial strength, it had rapidly declined, morally as well as numerically. At the conclusion of the contest many of her churches were in ruins, nearly a fourth of her parishes extinct or forsaken, and thirty-four of the remaining seventy-two were: without pastoral supplies; twenty-eight only Of her ninety-one clergymen remained, and these, with an addition, soon after the war, of eight from other parts of the country, ministered in but thirty-six parishes. Under these circumstances the Methodists demanded of their preachers the administration of the Sacraments. Many, of the societies had been months, some of them years, without them. The demand was not only urgent, it was logically right.... What could Wesley do under these circumstances What but exercise the right of Ordination, which he had for years theoretically claimed, but practically and prudently declined . . . If there was any imprudence on the part of Wesley in this emergency, it was certainly in his long-continued patience. When he yielded, it was only after the acknowledged independence of the American colonies, and not then till urged to it by his most revered counsellors. Fletcher of Madeley was one of them.'

Wesley explains his own action in the matter. He writes:

'Lord King's account of the primitive Church convinced me,' many years ago, that Bishops and Presbyters are the same Order, and consequently have the same light to ordain, For many years I have been importuned, from time to time, to exercise this right, by ordaining part of our travelling preachers. But I have still refused; not only for peace' sake, but because I was determined, as little as possible, to violate the established order of the national Church to which I belonged.'

But the case is widely different between England and North America. Here there are Bishops, who have a legal jurisdiction; in America there are none, neither any parish minister; so that for some hundreds of miles together, there is none either to baptize, or to administer the Lord's Supper. Here, therefore, my scruples are at an end, and I conceive myself at full liberty, as I violate no order, and invade no man's rights, by appointing and sending labourers into the harvest.

'I have accordingly appointed Dr. Coke and Mr. Francis Asbury to be joint Superintendents over our brethren in North America; as also Richard Whatcoat and Thomas Vasey to act as elders among them, by baptizing and administering the Lord's Supper. And I have prepared a liturgy, little differing from that of the Church of England (I think the best constituted national Church in the world), which I advise all 'the travelling preachers to use on the Lord's Day, in all the congregations, reading the Litany only on Wednesdays and Fridays, and praying extempore on all other days. I also advise the Elders to administer the Supper of the Lord, on every Lord's Day.

'If any one will point out a more rational and scriptural way of feeding and guiding these poor sheep in the wilderness, I will gladly embrace it. At present, I cannot see any better method than that I have taken.'

It is perhaps unnecessary to say that this proceeding had no countenance from Charles Wesley.

In this year (1784) a 'Society for the Establishment of Missions among the Heathen' was founded by Dr. Coke.

The question of separation from the Church was debated again and again in the Conference; but Wesley, to the end of his days, held himself and his preachers in as close a connection with it as he could. As late as April 4, 1790, he wrote, 'I advise all our brethren that have been brought up in the Church to continue there, and there I leave the matter. The Methodists are to spread life among all denominations; which they will do, till they form a separate sect.'

The record of Wesley's personal history, his travels and public services (contained in his Journal and in his letters), is as full and as interesting as at any period of his life, and reveals his surprising energy, and his undiminished devotion to the great work of his life. But death, whose ruthless hand breaks up all earthly relations, was busy amongst the ranks of his friends. The following entry occurs: 'Friday, October 11, 1781. —I came to London, and was informed that my wife died on Monday. This evening she was buried, though I was not informed of it till a day or two after.'

The Rev. Vincent Perronet, M.A., Vicar of Shoreham, died on May 9, 1785. He was the attached friend of the Wesleys for more than forty years, He sympathized very heartily with all their aims, helped them with his counsels, and wrote in their defence. Charles Wesley called him the Archbishop of Methodism. He continued in his parochial work, but made his house the home of all the Methodist preachers who visited Shoreham, and two of his sons joined their ranks. He was a peaceful, happy, devoted Christian minister, living in close communion with God. Wesley was away in Ireland when he heard of and recorded the death of his friend, adding, 'I follow hard upon him in years, being now in the eighty-second year of my age. O that I may follow him in holiness; and that my last end may be like his!'

But a severer blow was struck to the heart of the evangelist when, within little more than three months after the death of Mr. Perronet,

his bosom friend Fletcher also passed away. Fletcher stands at the head of all the leaders of the Methodist revival for the serene saintliness of his character. But not this alone distinguished him. Sanctity was the spirit that pervaded all his powers and all his work. His fitness for great service in the religious upheaving then in progress is thus summed up by Wesley, than whom no one was better qualified to form a correct judgment of him: 'I can never believe 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. He was full as much Called to sound an alarm through all the nation as Mr. Whitefield himself. Nay, abundantly more so, seeing he was far better qualified for that important work He had a more striking person, equal good breeding, an equally winning address; together with a richer flow of fancy, a stronger understanding, a far greater treasure of learning, both in languages, philosophy, philology, and divinity; and, above all (which I can speak with fuller assurance, because 'I had a thorough knowledge of both one and the other), a more deep and constant communion with the Father and with the Son, Jesus Christ.'

He also bears this testimony to the character of his friend: 'I was intimately acquainted with him for 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 an improper word, or saw him do an improper action. To conclude. Within fourscore years, I have known many excellent men, holy in heart and life. But one equal to him I have not known; one so uniformly and deeply devoted to God. So unblameable a man in every respect, I have not found either in Europe or America. Nor do I expect to find another such on this side eternity.'

But a yet more painful stroke awaited him. For some years his brother had been in failing health. After he had ceased from travelling, and, as his brother thought, probably as the result of it, he suffered gradually more and more from Weakness and gout (a family complaint), inducing nervous sensibility. At length his strength utterly failed. 'For some months,' his daughter wrote, 'he seemed totally detached: from earth. He spoke very little, nor wished to hear anything read but the Scriptures.' A few days before his death he called his wife to his bedside, and bade her write, while he dictated, the following lines:

'In age and feebleness extreme,

Who shall a helpless worm redeem

Jesus, my only hope Thou art,

Strength of my failing flesh and heart;

O could I catch a smile from Thee,

And drop into eternity!'

On March 29, 1788, when he was in his eightieth year, the end came, which 'was, what he particularly wished it might be, peace,' Wesley was away, preaching in Shropshire, and at the time of his brother's death was, with his congregation, singing Charles's own pathetic words:

Come, let us join our friends above

That have obtained the prize,

And on the eagle wings of love

To joys celestial rise:

Let all the saints terrestrial sing,

With those to glory gone;

For all the servants of our King,

In earth and heaven, are one.

'One family we dwell in Him,

One church, above, beneath,

Though now divided by the stream,

The narrow stream of death:

One army of the living God,

To His command we bow;

Part of His host have crossed the flood,

And part are crossing now.'

Through the misdirection of a letter, Wesley was not made acquainted with the sad news until the day before the funeral, when he was in Macclesfield, and therefore quite unable to be present.

The interment was, by Charles's own direction, in the churchyard of St. Marylebone, the parish in which he resided; and on the tombstone are the appropriate words from his own pen, written on the death of one of his friends:

'With poverty of spirit blest,

Rest, happy saint, in Jesus rest;

A sinner saved, through grace forgiven,

Redeemed from earth to reign in heaven!

Thy labours of unwearied love,

By thee forgot, are crowned above;

Crowned, through the mercy of thy Lord,

With a free, full, immense reward!'

The names of John and Charles Wesley must always be linked together in the history of the great revival. They were one in their aim, and in their consecration to it; and they were to the end one in strong fraternal devotion. The difference in their views on ecclesiastical questions, which for a time interfered with their united action, did not weaken their mutual affection.

The help rendered by Charles to the great upheaving is incalculable. And as the spiritual influence of the revival extended far beyond the bounds of Methodism, so the sweet sounds of Charles Wesley's incomparable hymns, in which all the great truths of the revival are enshrined, have to this day been wafted on every breeze over the vast fields of Christendom, cheering, exalting, stimulating the Christian life wherever their cadences vibrate. And yet Wesley's estimate of his brother's powers sets down his poetry as 'his least gift.'

His. was a loving, impulsive spirit, of great tenderness, capable of ecstatic exaltation, but not without a liability to equal depression. To a warm heart, that made for him many friends, was added a somewhat sensitive temper, which made him some enemies; for he had not the self-control of his brother, or his knowledge of men, or his power to deal with them.

No festival of the Church was so much endeared to Wesley as was All Saints' Day. It was his habitual delight to contemplate the true communion of saints on earth and in heaven. He was also wont so much to rejoice over the departed, in the words of his brother's jubilant funeral hymns, that the death of one and another seemed to leave but little, if any, shadow on his spirit.

That the two deaths just referred to were a severe trial to Wesley, now so truly alone, cannot be doubted. He preached a funeral sermon in memory of his friend, and afterwards published a brief but tender Life. He also applied himself to the collection of material for a memoir of his brother. But before this could be completed his own hand had forgotten its cunning.

The incidents in Wesley's personal history during this decade are many of them of a very striking character. He wrote, in 1783, 'I preached at St. Thomas's Church in the afternoon, and at St. Swithin's in the evening. The tide is now turned; so that I have more invitations to preach in churches than I can accept of.' It is observable how tenaciously he held to his adopted methods. They seem to be invested in his view with an almost sacred character. The early morning preaching, begun when he was in Georgia, where it was suitable to the climate to be early astir, he introduced into England in 1738, when he began his work. To him the early service was a pleasure; but, though at first his preachers in their early zeal maintained the practice, yet at length it became irksome both to them and to the people. Finding these services were falling off, he says, 'If this be the case While I am alive, what must it be when I am gone Give

up this, and Methodism too will degenerate into a mere sect, only distinguished by some opinions and modes of worship.' Similar remarks occur elsewhere in his later Journals. Is there not here a lack of discernment between what is essential and what is merely accidental This is not the only particular in which the same thing appears.

Nothing in the years of this decade is more surprising than the exertion which he continued to put forth in the pursuit of his great work. He preached almost as frequently as at any period of his life. His persistent devotion is seen in his pacing the streets of London for five days in 1785, often ankle-deep in sludge and melting snow, to beg 200 to buy clothing for the poor! In March of this year he started off to Ireland, preaching all the way to Liverpool, frequently in the open air, notwithstanding frost and snow. Having spent a week in Dublin, he set out for the provinces. Two months were occupied in this employment. His labours were almost incredible. He preached twice or thrice a day, not only in Methodist meeting-houses, but in churches, in Presbyterian chapels, in factories, in bowling-greens, in assembly-rooms, in court-houses, in barns, in 'sloping meadows,' in churchyards, and streets— anywhere wherever he had a chance.

Early in the next year we find him varying his public addresses by a sermon to five hundred children, none of his words being of more than two syllables in length. He occupied a month in a visit to Holland, with two of his preachers, not, however, as a mere pleasure trip. Taking boat at the Hague, he found he could write as well in the boat as in his study; and continued to write whenever he was on board. One day he spent 'very quietly in writing, and visiting a few friends,' and in the evening spoke to a little company in his lodgings. On another he found abundant occupation, partly in conversation, in Latin, with the clergy, partly in preaching, his sermons being translated for him; but chiefly in writing—probably his *Life of Fletcher*, the preface of which is dated at Amsterdam. On his return, he applied himself in earnest to this tribute of esteem and affection, even in the midst of his journeys; and when in London he dedicated to it all the time he could spare 'till November, 'from five in the morning till eight at night. These are my studying hours,' says he, 'I cannot write longer in a day without hurting my eyes.'

At this time he affirms that his health was better these last ten years than it had been for ten years together, since he was born. Some of his labours were astonishing for a man of his age. The year 1787 was begun with the accustomed service at four o'clock in the morning, an unusually large congregation having assembled; and he preached again twice afterwards. Again, on one day, after preaching at West Street, and at the new chapel in City Road, he took the mail coach and travelled down to Exeter by ten the next evening. On another journey, after preaching twice at Manchester, and assisting at the administration of the Lord's Supper to nearly thirteen hundred persons, he started at midnight, and, after nineteen hours' travelling, reached Birmingham at seven o'clock, went directly to the chapel, and preached, thankful that he had 'no more weariness than if he had rested all the day.' He left the next morning before five o'clock, travelled nearly eleven hours, and preached at Gloucester; the next morning he left at two, travelling until half-past four in the afternoon, and preached in the evening at Salisbury. The following morning he was on his way to Southampton, where he preached twice, and then embarked for the Channel Islands.

On his birthday in 1788, he wrote: 'I this day enter on my eighty-fifth year: And what cause have I to praise God, as for a thousand spiritual blessings, so for bodily blessings also. How little have I suffered yet, by "the rush of numerous years!" It is true I am not so agile as I was in times past. I do not run or walk so fast as I did; my sight is a little decayed; my left eye is grown dim, and hardly serves me to read.' He had a little pain in the right eye and temple, occasioned by a blow received some months before. He had some decay of memory, but none in hearing, smell, taste, or appetite; nor did he feel weary either in travelling or in preaching; nor was he conscious of any decay in writing sermons. All this he imputed to the power of God, fitting him for the work to which he was called; subordinately, to the prayers of his 'children,' and to the natural means already spoken of. Then he joyfully sings:

'My remnant of days

I spend to His praise

Who died the whole world to redeem:

Be they many or few,

My days are His due,

And they all are devoted to Him.'

But these labours were drawing towards a close. In 1789, however, he visited Ireland once more. Here he suffered from an attack of diabetes. Yet he was incessant in his labours, which were still very great, notwithstanding his diminishing strength.

On Easter Day he writes, 'We had a solemn assembly indeed; many hundred communicants in the morning; and in the afternoon far more hearers than our room would contain; though it is now considerably enlarged. Afterwards I met the Society, and explained to them at large the original design of the Methodism, viz. not to be a distinct party, but to stir up all parties, Christians or heathens, to worship God in spirit and in truth; but the Church of England in particular, to which they belonged from the beginning. With this view I have

uniformly gone on for fifty years, never varying from the doctrine of the Church at all; nor from her discipline, of choice, but of necessity. So, in a course of years, necessity was laid upon me (as I have proved elsewhere), (1) to preach in the open air; (2) to pray extempore; (3) to form societies; (4) to accept of the assistance of lay preachers; and, in a few other instances, to use such means as occurred to prevent or remove evils that we either felt or feared.'

His health now compelled him at times to be a' hearer, when he would fain have preached; but still he preached frequently, and sometimes under trying circumstances. One day he set out at five, reached Castlebar between three and four, and in the evening preached at Killchrist to so large a congregation that he was obliged to do so out of doors, though it rained all the time.

At Dublin he visited all the classes, though there were above a thousand members. On his birthday he writes: 'This day I enter on my eighty-sixth year. I now find I grow old: 1. My sight is decayed; so that I cannot read a small print, unless in a strong light. 2. My strength is decayed; so that I walk much slower than I did some years since. 3. My memory of names, whether of persons or places, is decayed; till I stop a little to recollect them.' He met the Irish preachers once more in conference, delighted to find such a body of men, 'of so sound experience, so deep piety, and so strong understanding;' held a day of fasting and prayer, chiefly for the increase of the work of God, and followed the whole with a watch-night. His parting from his Irish people was very impressive. Before he went on board he read a hymn, and the crowd, as far as emotion would allow them, joined the Saintry patriarch in singing. Falling on his knees, he asked God to bless them, their families, the Church, and Ireland. They shook the tremulous hand; many wept profusely, and fell upon his neck and kissed him. He stepped on deck, lifted his hands in prayer, and passed out of the view of a people whom he dearly loved, The sea being smooth, he shut himself up in his chaise, which was on board, and read, In the evening a hymn was sung on deck, and he preached. Again and again his efforts during the remaining months of the year were greater than can well be imagined.

The year 1790 opens with the confession, 'I am now an old man, decayed from head to foot. My eyes are dim; my right hand' shakes much; my mouth is hot and dry every morning ...However, blessed be God, I do not Slack my labour: I can preach and write still And so he did, to the end of the year, as the Itinerary for the year will show. But his work was the work of one whose bodily frame was in great feebleness, though his spirit soared aloft in holy purpose; and again and again, in spite of his Physical decay, his doings were really astonishing. But lack of space forbids detailed accounts, though they are full Of interest. One incident must be related. In the midst of his still-continued evangelistic efforts, he wrote, 'I went over to that poor skeleton of ancient Winchelsea. It is beautifully situated on the top of a steep hill, and was regularly built in broad Streets, crossing each other, and encompassing a very large square; in the midst of which was a large church now in ruins. I stood under a large tree, on the side of it, and called to most of the inhabitants of the town, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand; repent, and believe the gospel." It seemed as if all that heard were, for the present, almost persuaded to be Christians.'

The primary aim of these pages, an aim steadily kept in view throughout, has been to give the utmost possible prominence to Wesley's evangelistic labours, as constituting the supreme work of his life; and special emphasis has been laid upon his open-air services, as the one means by which he came directly into contact with the bulk of the English population, whom he could not possibly have reached in any other way: the churches they did not, and would not, enter. Wesley preached his first open-air sermon in Bristol on Monday, April 2, 1739. The one at Winchelsea, referred to above, was the last. A period of more than fifty years intervenes, and it was within that period that he ceased not to make his voice heard in clear, earnest, tender, and effectual appeals to the conscience and conviction of the nation. These two events mark the beginning and the end of that great work. An eye-witness of the latter incident says, 'The word was attended with power, and the tears of the people flowed in torrents.' The scene was very impressive. This venerable man, eighty-seven years of age, worn, but not weary, his snow-white locks falling upon his shoulders, his tremulous hand holding up for the last time his little pocket Bible—his constant companion—his eyes well-nigh closed, his face upturned, his placid, peaceful countenance revealing the calm, unruffled mind within. Well might the people weep. For fifty years, without let or hindrance, this faithful apostle of righteousness had raised his voice 'abroad,' clear in its truth as in its tones, preaching faithfully, almost ceaselessly, the glorious gospel of the blessed God, in all parts of the kingdom, probably to more people than any teacher of that gospel had ever addressed before. On that October day, beneath that spreading ash tree, under the shadow of Old Winchelsea Church, Wesley's happy, holy, useful work of open-air preaching ceased. He then pursued his way and his work together, both ending in London. But an abrupt termination to his Journals closes the revelations of that interesting document. A fifth decade is completed.

Little has been said respecting Wesley's work for the press during the last two decades. Although it was less in amount than he had previously written, it was considerable, especially in view of his other work. In addition to what has been already mentioned, he issued more than one hundred and fifty separate publications, including several volumes of an edition of his Collected Works; a Compendium of Natural Philosophy in five volumes; an Ecclesiastical History in four volumes; A History of England, in four volumes also; and a revision of his own translation of the text in his Notes on the New Testament. In each volume of the Arminian Magazine, also, were many articles from his pen.