

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

THE
CHURCHMAN

APRIL, 1898.

ART. I.—WESLEYANISM.

IN taking a survey of the movement initiated by Wesley, and in trying to form an estimate of his attitude and that of his followers, one obvious remark occurs to us at the very outset, and it is this: That whereas other bodies of English Nonconformists or movements of dissent have begun from some point of disagreement with the Church, this has not been the case with the Wesleys and Wesleyanism.

The Rev. John Wesley, who was the originator of the movement that bears his name, was, as everyone knows, a clergyman of the Church of England. After his ordination, for a short time he served as his father's curate. In 1726 he was elected Fellow of Lincoln College, Oxford, and in 1729 he returned to Oxford, apparently with the intention of residing there permanently as a tutor. He had previously been deeply impressed by spiritual convictions, and had recognised the importance and necessity of cultivating personal holiness and of leading a pious life. But, although during his earlier residence he had to some extent endeavoured to communicate these ideas to others, it was on his return to Oxford that he seems to have set before himself this task deliberately and of set purpose.

With his brother Charles, and probably some twelve or thirteen others, he determined to live under a common rule of strict and serious conduct, to attend at Holy Communion every week, and to observe a methodical and conscientious arrangement of their time. It was in this way, no doubt, that the very name *Methodist* came to be given to those who formed this little company, as well as to the larger numbers of those who may be regarded as afterwards their followers. The resolution which led to such a systematic course of conduct is probably traceable in a large degree to the influence of Wesley's

mother, who, in a letter to one of her sons, gives the following advice: "I would advise you as much as possible to throw your business into a certain *method*. Appoint so much time for sleep, eating, company, etc. In all things, endeavour to act on principle."

In narrating the genesis of Methodism, it is all-important to bear in mind the condition of the Church and of religion generally in the early part of the eighteenth century. Coldness, apathy, and indifference as regards spiritual things, accompanied by worldly-mindedness and love of pleasure, were leading characteristics. Dry rationalism and barren theories of morality were well-nigh the highest outcome of the serious thought of the time, whilst the organization and official positions of the Church were largely held by persons steeped in the spirit of the age, who, so far from setting themselves to right the state of things around them, saw in it the opportunity for self-gratification and enrichment.

In periods such as this, no less than in times of intense spiritual enthusiasm and activity, the promise of the great Head of the Church is verified, "Lo, I am with you always." And so at the particular time of which we are speaking, we cannot but believe that the Holy Spirit was using Wesley and his friends, as at other times and in other places other agencies were used, to counteract the hardening and deadening influences that prevailed. Their action and their activity were, at all events, amongst the means used by the Divine Spirit for energizing the religion of the land, and for preserving and promoting real godliness. Indeed, the claim set forth on the tombstone of John Wesley, that "This great light arose (by the singular providence of God) to enlighten these nations, and to revive, enforce, and defend the pure apostolical doctrines and practices of the Primitive Church," does not seem excessive. In agreement with this claim, indeed, we may quote here the words of Mr. Curteis in his Bampton Lectures on *Dissent in its relation to the Church of England*: "In short, the Wesleys were in those days very much what would now be called 'Ritualists.' They did not profess to invent new practices of devotion, but simply to revive what the Church already had."

John Wesley himself describes as follows the origin and objects of the societies that he founded: "One, and another, and another came to us, asking what they should do, being distressed on every side, as everyone strove to weaken, and none to strengthen, their hands in God. We advised them, 'Strengthen you one another. Talk together as often as you can, and pray earnestly with and for one another, that you may "endure to the end, and be saved."' Against this advice

we presumed there could be no objection, as being grounded on the plainest reason, and on so many Scriptures, both of the Old Testament and New, that it would be tedious to recite them. They said, 'But we want you likewise to talk with us often, to direct and quicken us in our way, to give us the advice which you well know we need, and to pray with us, as well as for us.'” He then explains that the numbers who desired this spiritual help were so great that he could not deal with them individually. He therefore arranged that they should meet together every Thursday evening, when he said he would gladly spend some time with them in prayer, and give them the best advice he could. And then he goes on to say: “They therefore united themselves in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they might help each other to work out their salvation. There is one only condition previously required in those who desire admission into this society—a desire to flee from the wrath to come, to be saved from their sins.”

It will thus be seen that Wesley's action, and the movement of which he was the head, did not mean opposition to the Church, its doctrines, discipline, or worship, but to the apathy, irreligion, and worldliness that prevailed.

It should also be noted that, although in certain subsequent incidents of his life he refused to be bound by ecclesiastical custom, and by the rulings of ecclesiastical authorities, yet at the beginning of his career he sought episcopal counsel and encouragement. It was with the Bishop's express leave that he undertook the duty of visiting the gaols, and by his advice he refused to settle down in a country parish. He and his brother Charles had frequent interviews with Bishop Gibson, of London, who warned them against courting unnecessary persecutions; and Archbishop Potter, of Canterbury, gave them the valuable advice not to spend their time in controversy, but in attacking the strongholds of vice, and in promoting practical holiness. Nor can we refuse to moderate our condemnation of Wesley for his resistance to episcopal authority on certain occasions, when we make due allowance for his zeal in promoting his purely spiritual ends at a time when spiritual life in the Church was at a peculiarly low ebb.

It ought further to be borne in mind that there was apparently no intention or desire on the part of Wesley to separate from the Church, or found a sect. Nor amongst his followers does there seem to have been any such intention during his lifetime. In a tract contained in Mr. Wesley's works, entitled “A Short History of Methodism,” we find these statements

descriptive of the attitude of his followers: "They were all zealous members of the Church of England, not only tenacious of all her doctrines, so far as they knew them, but of all her discipline, to the minutest circumstance. . . . The one charge then advanced against them was that they were 'righteous overmuch'; that they were abundantly too scrupulous and too strict, carrying to great extremes. In particular, that they laid too much stress upon the Rubrics and Canons of the Church." On this point Mr. Curteis's words are worthy of being noted: "Even yet secession can hardly be said to be accomplished, when so many Wesleyans habitually avail themselves of the ministrations of the Church; when so many cordially welcome the visits of her clergy; and when, amid all confusions and party cries, there are so many indications abroad that the Methodist societies have never forgotten, and will never be able to forget, their venerable founder's almost dying words: 'I live and die a member of the Church of England, and none who regard my judgment or advice will ever separate from it.' The fact is (as one of their own most intelligent writers affirms), that 'there was no intention in Wesley's mind of a separation from the Church; nor was it even . . . foreseen as a consequence. A necessary consequence it certainly was not.' No; John Wesley's purpose was not secession. It was simply—if we may believe his own words—that of a revival of religion within the Church of England." Mr. Curteis also has the following: "Half a century ago a distinguished Wesleyan could write as follows: 'Though Methodism stands now in a different relation to the Establishment than in the days of Mr. Wesley, *dissent* has never been professed by the body, and for obvious reasons: (1) A separation of a part of the society from the Church has not arisen from the principles assumed by the professed Dissenters, and usually made so prominent in their discussions on the subject of Establishment; (2) a considerable number of our members actually continue in the Communion of the Church of England to this day; (3) to leave that Communion is not in any sense a condition of membership with us.'"

In treating of the doctrines of Wesleyanism, we must necessarily take note of what we may perhaps call its central teachings—viz., Instantaneous and sensible Conversion, and Christian Perfection.

These doctrines were doubtless held strongly by Wesley, and are put forward prominently and authoritatively by his followers. But whilst it cannot be allowed that in the bold and extreme manner in which they are promulgated in these teachings of Wesleyanism, they embody or express the doctrine of the Church, yet, on the other hand, it cannot be said that

there is no trace or element of truth to be found in them. We cannot surely deny that in the case of some there is such a thing as sudden or instantaneous conversion in the sense in which it is understood by those who teach it. In forming an opinion upon such a question as this, very much, I suppose, will depend upon the particular meaning we attach to the word "conversion." Does it mean the knowledge that God is ready to forgive the sinner upon certain conditions, and the conscious realization by the sinner that, so far as he is concerned, those conditions are fulfilled? Or does it mean the actual turning-point from a life of sin to a life of righteousness—from a course of evil to a walk with God—from a state of apathy as regards spiritual things, or opposition to all that is good, to a condition in which personal responsibility is realized and love to God awakened?

Whichever of these two explanations be taken as rightly describing what is meant by conversion—and the second seems to me much nearer the truth than the first—it is quite conceivable that there is such a thing as might be called "instantaneous conversion." Though here I would remark that if, on the one hand, the strict meaning of the word "instantaneous" be insisted upon, the word "conversion" must be taken somewhat loosely; and so, on the other hand, if "conversion" be taken in its strict sense, we must relax to some extent the meaning of "instantaneous."

There seems to be in the teaching of Wesley some confusion with regard to "conversion," "justification," and "regeneration," and he does not certainly mark off with sufficient accuracy the precise shades of meaning to be attached to such terms respectively. At the same time, it is quite possible that his substantial belief was not so erroneous as would seem to be implied by his confused use of certain terms. We cannot, however, shut our eyes to the fact that, whilst we know there may be, and doubtless are, cases of what is known as "instantaneous conversion," yet to teach that this must be the experience of every faithful child of God is foreign to the views and doctrine of the Church.

What the teaching of the Church really is as regards the normal spiritual life and growth of the baptized is surely seen in the passage of the Church Catechism which speaks of their position as a "state of salvation," and suggests hearty thanks to God for its attainment, and earnest prayer for grace to persevere in it. If there is no realization of this, and consequently no discharge of responsibility, but forgetfulness, indifference, or flagrant sin, then indeed there is need for "conversion." But if there is a continuous enlightenment of the conscience, a constant submission of the will, and a regular

growth in holiness, there seems to be no place, or rather no necessity, for conversion in the sense in which it was understood by Wesley—at all events, for what is generally understood by “instantaneous conversion.”

The sharp conflict with the teaching of the Church into which Wesley's views as to conversion led him is perhaps nowhere more plainly shown than in the following passage in one of his sermons: “It follows that baptism is not the new birth: they are not one and the same thing. Many, indeed, seem to imagine that they are just the same; at least, they speak as if they thought so; but I do not know that this opinion is publicly avowed by any denomination of Christians whatever.” In proof of this latter assertion, so far as the teaching of the Church of England is concerned, he goes on to say: “In the Church Catechism likewise the judgment of our Church is declared with the utmost clearness, ‘What meanest thou by this word, Sacrament?—A. I mean an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. Q. What is the outward part or form in baptism?—A. Water, wherein the person is baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Q. What is the inward part, or thing signified?—A. A death unto sin, and a new birth unto righteousness.’ Nothing, therefore, is plainer than that, according to the Church of England, baptism is not the new birth” (Sermon XLV.). The weakness of this conclusion would be apparent if the answer in the Church Catechism were quoted in its entirety. The words omitted, “for being by nature born in sin and the children of wrath, we are hereby made the children of grace,” explain pretty clearly the teaching of the Church to be that the new birth unto righteousness is an essential part of the Sacrament of Baptism.

In commenting upon the other conspicuous doctrine of Wesley, viz., what is called Christian Perfection, it will be necessary to discriminate between that presentation of it which is to be found in the irresponsible utterances of some of his followers, and that account of it which is to be gathered from his writings. I have heard some of those who profess to be guided by the teaching of Wesley speaking in such a tone of confidence as to imply that they believed not only that they were free from sin, but that it could not be otherwise if they were the children of God. Such presentation bears a different complexion from that which Wesley's own language reflects, as, for instance, in the following passage: “The sum of all is this: There are in every person, even after he is justified, two contrary principles, nature and grace, termed by St. Paul the *flesh* and the *spirit*. Hence, although even babes in Christ

are *sanctified*, yet it is only in part. In a degree, according to the measure of their faith, they are spiritual; yet, in a degree, they are carnal. Accordingly, believers are continually exhorted to watch against the flesh, as well as the world and the devil. And to this agrees the constant experience of the children of God. While they feel this witness in themselves, they feel a will not wholly resigned to the will of God. They know they are in Him, and yet find a heart ready to depart from Him, a proneness to evil in many instances, and a backwardness to that which is good. The contrary doctrine is wholly new, never heard of in the Church of Christ from the time of His coming into the world till the time of Count Zinzendorf; and it is attended with the most fatal consequences. . . . Let us, therefore, hold fast the sound doctrine 'once delivered to the saints,' and delivered down by them with the written word to all succeeding generations: That although we are renewed, cleansed, purified, sanctified, the moment we truly believe in Christ, yet we are not then renewed, cleansed, purified altogether; but the flesh, the evil nature, still *remains* (though subdued) and wars against the spirit. So much the more let us use all diligence in 'fighting the good fight of faith.' So much the more earnestly let us 'watch and pray' against the enemy within" (Sermon XIII.).

But, although the language in the above passage is clear, and such as to give no countenance to the extravagance of statement which may be laid to the charge of some of his followers, Wesley is sometimes not altogether free from blameworthiness or the imputation of obscurity, as, for instance, when he says in Sermon XL. (on Perfection): "In conformity, therefore, both to the doctrine of St. John and to the whole tenor of the New Testament, we fix this conclusion, *A Christian is so far perfect as not to commit sin*. This is the glorious privilege of every Christian; yea, though he be but *a babe in Christ*. But it is only of those who *are strong* in the Lord, 'and have overcome the wicked one,' or, rather, of those who 'have known him that is from the beginning,' that it can be affirmed they are in such a sense perfect as . . . to be freed from evil thoughts and evil tempers." The distinction made in this passage and elsewhere in his Sermons seems somewhat arbitrary and unsafe. It is a distinction between outward and inward sin. But it will scarcely be held correct to say that the man does not commit sin who, though he abstains from committing murder, yet harbours a thought of hatred in his heart, and therefore any teaching as to freedom from the commission of sin which is based upon such an arbitrary and apparently groundless distinction is scarcely trustworthy.

We may, however, thankfully recognise in Wesley's teaching

as to Christian perfection a strong protest against anti-nomianism, and a splendid call to holy zeal and what we may call *spiritual ambition*. In whatever way, and to whatever extent it was capable of being abused, this doctrine as taught by him was used for the purpose of promoting in his hearers and followers a vigilant and prayerful pursuit of holiness. And none who in any real sense looked up to him as a teacher could be satisfied with deliverance from the guilt of sin whilst the power of sin remained any longer in them.

Two or three obvious remarks remain to be made.

Wesley loved the Church of his birth—our Church—and, notwithstanding what was then her weakness and sluggishness and apparent deadness, he believed in her potentiality for good. He did not despair of her even in that dark hour of her spiritual history in which his lot was cast. For this, amongst other things, we do well to cherish his memory with respect and affection.

We may also regard with grateful satisfaction the emphatic testimony borne by Wesley and his movement to the value of our liturgy, our services, and, we may say, our whole organization. Here was a movement animated by a tone of piety and deep spirituality, and yet there was no revolt against the institutions of the Church such as there had been on other similar occasions when bodies of pious, religious-minded people thought it right to separate and form a distinct sect. The Wesleyans in the early days of their history, and at all events till after the death of their leader, were careful, in accordance with his emphatic teaching, to maintain their attendance at the services and ordinances of the Church and their connection with its organization. And when in the lapse of time and owing to the exigencies of their history they drifted off from the Church, they took with them their old love and respect for our liturgy and services, and also, indeed, the very liturgy and services themselves, modified, it is true, in some important points, and even mutilated, but still bearing eloquent and emphatic testimony to the value of stated services and fixed forms of prayer.

Lastly, whilst we regret that a movement containing within it so much of spiritual vitality and power should have resulted in so large a separation from the Church, we cannot help being thankful that at a period of lamentable and almost unexampled deadness and lethargy such a movement as that led by Wesley took place for the revival of religion and as a testimony to the mission of the Church.

For the Wesleyan movement did both. It may be said to have been the means in God's hand of arousing the spiritual life of the nation, and of bringing into prominence amongst

the masses of the people the importance and necessity of personal religion.

And in doing this, whilst maintaining its love for, and its connection with, the Church's system, it emphasized the duty of the Church, and indicated some of the lines along which that duty might be performed. The beneficial effects of the Wesleyan movement have been, and are being, felt in the Church of England, probably to a greater extent than anywhere else. And much of the spirituality of tone evinced in her to-day, as well as many developments of her methods of work, are, under God, traceable in a great measure to the Wesleyan revival of religion.

JAMES P. ROUNTREE.



ART. II.—THE ATONEMENT.

THE word atonement, as the readers of this article are aware, if taken in its etymological sense, means reconciliation, and in the only passage of the New Testament in which our Authorized Version employs it, it is the translation of *καταλλαγή*, and in its place the revisers have rightly substituted "reconciliation." But in the Old Testament it has a sacrificial reference, and conveys the idea of expiation and propitiation, as in the familiar expression, "to make an atonement for your souls." It is in this vicarious and sacrificial sense that the word is commonly understood, and in which it is here employed, its etymology not really affecting the different opinions regarding its nature. And the object of the writer is not to formulate any theory on the subject, but first to let Holy Scripture speak for itself, and then to add some thoughts—subsidiary, but not unimportant—in support of its (apparent) verdict.

When we speak of the practice and doctrine of sacrifice for sin in the Mosaic ritual, we are well aware that the very fact of its existence among the Jews, and of their regarding it as they did, has been used, *not* to strengthen, but to account for and to explain away the language in which Christ's death is spoken of in the New Testament. Does not rather the very opposite conclusion follow from the same premises? Let us look at the facts. We need not now consider whether sacrifice was originally a Divine institution, or the product of human instinct. Certainly it was adopted in the Levitical code, and an expiatory power attributed to it. And so far as we believe in the Old Testament Dispensation being ordered by special