WELSH

CALVINISTIC METHODISM

A Historical Sketch.

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CHAPTER III.

Attachment to the Church—Societies—Exhorters—Organization—Overseers—Moderators—Districts—Reports of Overseers—Rules for admission of Exhorters—Strict discipline—Great poverty—Richard Tibbot.

The men whom God in His Providence raised to inaugurate this great movement had no idea that the steps which they felt it their duty to take would result in the rise of a new denomination. They belonged to the Establishment, and had neither the intention nor the wish to separate themselves from it. Their fellow-countrymen were ignorant of the first principles of Christianity, and they sought to enlighten them. They were indifferent to religion, and they sought to rouse them from their deadly apathy. They saw that a great work required to be done, felt themselves impelled to attempt it, and entered upon it with a fiery enthusiasm. They began by preaching to their immediate neighbours, and the success of their efforts at home encouraged them, while their sense of the wants of their country impelled them to extend their labours to other dis­tricts. Those who had the charge of religion had suffered it to degenerate into superstition—a mere round of religious rites heedlessly and hastily performed in the intervals of self-indulgence, and exert­ing no influence at all over the every-day life of the people. Those whose duty it was to rebuke sin were themselves carried away by its mighty flood. There were exceptions, but those were few, and for the most part feeble. It was to correct those evils that the “Fathers of Methodism” addressed them­selves with self-sacrificing zeal and untiring perse­verance. In going beyond their own parishes, and intruding upon districts assigned to the care of others, they acted irregularly; but their apology is found in the fact that those others, almost without exception, neglected their solemn charge. They loved order, but they loved Christ and immortal souls more, and they sacrificed the lesser to the greater. They suffered not the laws of the Church to deter them from pursuing that course which was dictated to their consciences by the law of love.

Their ministry told upon thousands, and it was soon found necessary, for the benefit of those numer­ous converts, to form some kind of organization. Accordingly, a “Society” was formed in each locality where a few disciples could be brought together, and each Society was placed under the charge of an exhorter. A number of those Societies were grouped together into districts, and each district was placed under the care of an “overseer.” But they regarded themselves, and the whole body that they thus formed and controlled, as belonging to the Church, and were therefore careful in all the measures they took to avoid as far as possible giving offence to Church susceptibilities. In deference to this feeling, those who preached without episcopal ordination were not designated preachers, but “exhorters.” The com­munities of Christians that were gathered together in the various localities were not designated Churches, but “Societies.” Those who were placed in charge of them were not “ministers,” nor yet “pastors,” but “overseers,” and the men who discharged the duties devolving upon the *deacons* of the present day, were “*private* exhorters,” and sometimes “stewards of Societies.” The quarterly gatherings of the repre­sentatives of the whole body were not Synods, but “Associations.” Eleven years had passed away after the beginning of the movement before any place of worship was erected; and when it was found neces­sary to make a move in that direction, our cautious fathers seem to have been at a loss to determine by what name to call the building. To call it a chapel would clash with the Church, for there were numerous chapels belonging to the Establishment; and to call it a “meeting-house” would savour of dissent, for the few dissenting places of worship that were then existing in Wales were called “meeting-houses.” To avoid danger on either side, it was necessary to devise for it a name that was unknown to any exist­ing ecclesiastical vocabulary. Accordingly, among the minutes of an Association held at Porthyrhyd, October 3, 1744, we have the following resolution : “Agreed that *a House for Religious Purposes* be erected at Llansawel.” This resolution was not carried into effect, for the first place of worship was not erected until three years after it was passed, and that not at Llansawel, but at Builth, in the county of Brecon.

They continued for many years to communicate in the Church, but it appears from a resolution, passed at the first Association of the body, held at Walford, January 5th and 6th, 1742, that some of the brethren felt serious scruples on that subject. It was then “resolved, That those brethren who feel an objection to receive the Communion in the Church, on account of the ungodliness of the ministers and of the other communicants, and object likewise to communicate with dissenters on account of their lukewarmness, be requested to continue to communicate in the Church until the Lord opens for them a clear way to leave its communion.” At a subsequent Association held at the same place, October 3, 1744, a charge was brought against one of the brethren who was an overseer, Thomas Williams by name, that he had spoken against Church-vestments, and especially against the gown and cassock; but upon his explaining that he had never spoken against those things “in themselves,” only against “the idolatrous regard in which they were held by some people,” he was excused. They were persecuted, as we shall hereafter show, in the most merciless manner, only because they persisted in adhering to the Church. The Act of Toleration had been long in force, and gave ample protection to Nonconformists; but they endured persecution, they suffered fines and imprisonment, and all manner of bodily abuse, rather than avail themselves of the pro­tection afforded by that Act,—for they were not willing to declare themselves “dissenters.” At an Association held at Blaenyglyn, July 3, 1745, letters were read from Brother John Richard and Brother Richard Tibbot, in which they asked whether it would not be better for them to place themselves beyond the power of their persecutors by taking licenses to preach, inasmuch as they were in immi­nent danger of being taken away by force and sent to the army if they ventured to public places to preach the gospel. After some discussion, it was resolved, “That to take a license to preach at the present time, or, on the other hand, to forsake the work, would be a dishonour to God; that it is the duty of those who are beyond the reach of danger (ordained clergymen, it is presumed) to go to the most public places, while others should go to less public localities, employing at the same time all legitimate means to secure their own safety, inas­much as it is believed that this is a temporary trial, and one not to be regarded in the light of a ‘persecu­tion.’” It was likewise resolved, “That if the per­secution becomes general, and the preaching of the gospel entirely forbidden, it will be necessary to appeal to the Government, and if that fails, to the Bishops; and if our liberty be completely taken away from us, it will then be clear that we must secede.” It would be easy to cite much more to the same effect, but the above will suffice to illustrate the extreme tenacity with which the early Methodists clung to the Establishment.

At the same time they found it necessary to organize; “Societies “were placed under the charge of “private exhorters and stewards.” Over the differ­ent districts some of the “public exhorters” were placed in charge, and in that case they were “over­seers.” Over those overseers every district had its moderator, while over all there was the general moderator of the body. All this seems a little like a hierarchy, but it was nothing of the kind. Mode­rators were simply chairmen of meetings. The gene­ral moderator had no more authority than the rest of his brethren; all that the office involved was the chairmanship of the general meetings. The first chosen to this office was the Rev. George Whitfield. He accordingly presided at the Watford Association, and at the few other meetings of the kind which he was able to attend; but Mr. Howell Harris was chosen as his deputy, and was for a long time the acting moderator of the Connexion. The following is the first distribution of districts, etc.:—

1. Radnor and Montgomery—moderator, William Williams; overseer, Richard Tibbot.

2. Carmarthenshire and part of Cardigan—mode­rator, Daniel Rowlands; overseers, John Richard, James Williams, William John, and David Williams.

3. Breconshire—moderator, Thomas Lewis; over­seers, Thomas James and James Beaumont.

4. Pembrokeshire and the lower part of Cardigan—moderator, Howell Davies; overseers, William Richard, Thomas Meyler, and John Harris.

5. Monmouth and Glamorgan—moderator, John Powell; overseers, Morgan John, Thomas Williams, Morgan John Lewis, and Thomas Price, to whom was afterwards added John Belcher.

It will be seen that the above arrangement em­braces only one of the counties of North Wales, namely, Montgomeryshire. This county was con­venient to Howell Harris’s base of operations, and was therefore visited frequently by him in the first years of his ministry; but it was not until a later period that the work extended to the other districts of the north.

The overseers were required to furnish a periodical report to the Association of the districts or sub-dis­tricts, as the case might be, under their charge, em­bracing the numerical strength of each Society, and, as far as they could ascertain, the spiritual state of its individual members. The following is an ex­ample :—

“Dear Brethren in the Lord,—This is to in­form you what a wide door has been opened unto me by the Almighty God in the Societies named underneath, and what successful progress the gospel makes among them. I verily believe that they excel every other part which is known to me in the Prin­cipality of Wales, in love to God and His gospel, in their carefulness to walk in accordance with its pre­cepts, as well as in their unity with each other: not being persecuted or disturbed by any, excepting a little persecution that happened lately at Lampeter, in the county of Cardigan. While the members of the Society were together singing psalms and praying to God, a Justice of the Peace, with his servants, came upon them to disturb them, and the man who was praying at the time was taken prisoner; but through the providence of God the persecution has somewhat moderated, and the prisoner has been set at liberty, but the Justices continue their threatenings.

“Cayo Society contains 60 members, 27 of whom enjoy liberty, the others are under the law.

“Talley Society contains 68 members, 24 of whom have obtained deliverance through Christ, the others are under the law. William John, exhorter; Thomas Griffith, steward.

“Llangathen Society contains 14 members, 5 of whom are free in Christ, and the others under the law. Morris John, exhorter.

“Llanfynydd Society contains 54 members, 23 of whom are free in Christ, and the others under the law. Morris John is exhorter here also.

“Llansawel Society contains 47 members, 18 of whom are free in Christ, and the others under the law. Joseph John, exhorter, and John David, steward.

“Cilycwm Society contains 26 members; 9 free, and the others under the law. John Thomas, ex­horter, and Isaac David, steward.

“Lampeter Society contains 28 members; 13 free, and the others under the law.

“David Williams, an exhorter at Llanfynydd, has left me and gone to keep a school. Thomas John has not been settled in any place.

“This from your fellow-traveller and unworthy brother in Christ, James Williams.”

Sometimes these reports descended to even more minute details. Take the following examples:—

“BuilthSociety—Thomas James, overseer; Thomas Bowen, exhorter.

“Thomas James, a full and abiding testimony.

“Thomas Bowen, enjoying much liberty.

“Evan Evans, having obtained a testimony, but weak in grace.

“Sarah Williams justified, and coming out of the furnace.

“Sarah Jones, a full testimony, but under heavy bondage.

“Ann Baisdel, a sweet experience, but yet weak.

“Mary Bowen, seeking the Lord Jesus in earnest.” Etc. etc.

The following is from the report of another over­seer, William Richard, who had the charge of Pem­brokeshire and part of Cardigan :—

“Dyffryn Saeth Society—

“Thomas David, believing, but subject to doubts, through the power of temptation; he desires and longs for greater liberty.

“David Morgan has tasted much of the love of God, believes daily, and his experience is very clear.

“David Rees, believing, but under many clouds; has passed through many temptations, but prevails more and more.

“Jenkin John, under temptation for a season; dark and dry in his spirit.

“Jane John enjoys peace with God and goes for­ward happily, leaning on her Beloved.

“Sarah Thomas, enjoying a clear testimony of her salvation through Christ, but in many a battle with sin.

“Ann David, under the law.

“Ann Jenkin, under conviction.

“Eliza Thomas, under convictions, but very dark and very dry.” Etc. etc.

Some may be led to infer, from there being such a great number of exhorters at the time, that many of them were self-appointed,—men who had taken it into their heads to preach, and preached accordingly. But it was not so. No one was permitted to hold forth in public until he had been authorized to do so by the Association, and that authorization was never given but after the most careful inquiry into the character and qualifications of each candidate.

At the Watford Association it was resolved, “That no one is to be regarded as an exhorter among us until he has been first proved and accepted, and that no one go beyond the limits assigned to him without previous consultation.” The following resolution was passed at a later Association:—“When any one offers himself as an exhorter, he must first of all exhort at the meetings of the church to which he belongs—

“1. That he may have the approbation of one or more experienced Christians who have often heard him.

“2. To ascertain the opinions of three or four public or private exhorters and ministers respecting him.

“3. He must undergo a searching examination as to his grace, his calling, his qualifications, his gifts, and his doctrine.”

For a while they were obliged to exhort in and about their own homes, that full proof might be had of their ministry before they were permitted to travel to distant places.

The authorization was not obtained as a matter of course whenever applied for, and the examination was something more than a mere matter of form. We quote a few resolutions passed with reference to this subject at various Associations.

“That the following brethren be restrained until the next Association, viz., James Tomkins, David Prys, Richard Thomas, John David, John Watkin, and Thomas Prys.”

At the following Association it appears that John David and David Prys were permitted to remain for some time longer under probation, but the case of the others was finally disposed of, for it was resolved, “That James Tomkins, Richard Thomas, John Watkin, and Thomas Prys be entirely restrained, as it is considered that they have not been sent of God.”

After those brethren had been authorized to ex­hort, they were kept under strict supervision. The overseers were required to keep their eyes on their private character and public ministry, and report to the Association. The following is extracted from the report of Thomas James, one of the overseers of the Breconshire district:—

“Builth—Thomas Bowen, exhorter. He preaches the gospel in his life and conversation, and is greatly blessed.

“Llangamarch—Rhys Morgan, exhorter. A kind, humble, and faithful man.

“Merthyr—William Williams, exhorter. A kind and humble Christian, and of clear sentiments.”

Sometimes “reports” were received which were not of such a pleasing character as the above. There was one William Prys who was charged with spread­ing doctrines of an Antinomian tendency. Among other strange things, he asserted that he had not sinned for some time, and that there was no sin either in his understanding, his will, or his conscience, and because he clung stubbornly to these views, he was expelled, and the Societies were warned to beware of his heresies, and the brethren to avoid his society. “After long discussion and prayer,” says the report, “and with great solemnity, we turned him out, while our hearts were overwhelmed with love to his soul and jealousy for the glory of God, and full of fear and anxiety for the safety of the flock.”

There was another brother whose conduct had not been blameless, and the following is the resolution passed in his case:—“Howell Griffith having been overtaken in a fault, but having manifested satisfac­tory evidences of repentance, it was agreed that he should be restored on trial, on condition that he henceforth avoid that which has been the occasion of his fall.”

But purity of doctrine and blamelessness of life were not all that was required in exhorters. They must be faithful and diligent in the discharge of their duties, otherwise they would be brought under discipline. At an Association held at Porthyrhyd, it was resolved, “That Brother Harris should, in the name of the assembled brethren, ad­minister a reproof to John Williams for his negligence in watching over the Society under his charge, and that he give him to understand that he shall be expelled after another month of trial, unless he show evidences of obedience and faithfulness.”

All the moderators and overseers were expected to attend every quarterly Association, or to send a message explaining their absence, otherwise they should hear from the brethren. At one Association it was resolved, “That letters be written to Howell Davies and John Harris, because they have not sent to say why they are absent; and that Thomas Meyler be written to because he neglects attending the Associations.”

But how were these brethren to live ? When they attended meetings and went about the country preaching the gospel, their own worldly affairs were neglected, while those for whose benefit they minis­tered had scarcely any notion at all of contributing anything towards their support. The following is an extract written to one of the Associations by a very excellent man, John Richard, overseer:—

“I have been in great distress during the last quarter, so that I have not been able to visit the Societies more than twice in the three months, in consequence of my own illness, and that of my wife, and so far I am in too straitened circumstances to be able to go about; and yet, through mercy, I am free in my spirit to go, if that will be to the glory of God. The Lord has not left me in want of anything since I threw myself into the arms of His provi­dence. If He were to ask me now, ‘Hast thou wanted anything?’ I could answer with the disciples, ‘Nothing, Lord.’”

After the reading of the above letter it was re­solved, “That Brother John Richard be requested to go about as usual until the next Association, and that in the meantime Mr. Harris visit the Societies under his charge, with a view to induce them to *bear fruit to him.”*

The following resolution was passed at Trevecca, October 18, 1744:—“That the brethren earnestly exhort the people to walk worthily, and to *bear fruit,* as there is a general complaint of great deficiency in this matter.”

There was in those days a very excellent and able man, Richard Tibbot by name, whose whole time the Societies required, but whose temporal necessities they do not seem to have been in a position to supply; hence we find his case coming up frequently at the Associations, and presenting a considerable amount of difficulty. At the Watford Association, already referred to, it was resolved, “That Richard Tibbot be appointed general visitor of the districts.”

At a subsequent Association it was resolved, “That Richard Tibbot open a school in Pembrokeshire.”

Later, it was resolved, “That Richard Tibbot continue to work (with his hands) until he can get a Welsh school.”

April 18, 1744, it was resolved, “That Brother Richard Tibbot be requested to give himself entirely to visiting all the Societies in Montgomeryshire once every week.” This was glorious, provided that the Societies in Montgomeryshire furnished the good brother with means to supply his bodily wants; but unhappily they did not, and consequently in the following October Association it was resolved, “That Brother Richard Tibbot go to Brother John Richard to learn the trade of a bookbinder.”

So it was at the time, and so it continued for many years afterwards. Able men were willing and anxious to devote all their time and energies to the service of the cause, but the Societies were either unable or indisposed to give them the means of living, and they were therefore obliged to turn for subsistence to other sources. This good man, after itinerating for twenty-five years, settled down as Independent minister at Llanbrynmair in Montgom­eryshire, but at the same time he retained as long as he lived his connexion with the Methodists.