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WESLEY AS A CHURCHMAN.

WESLEY AS A CHURCHMAN.

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THE relation of John Wesley and early Methodism to the Church of England is one of the disputed questions of Church History. It has practical interest as well on account of the repeated attempts to induce the Methodists to return to the Church of England on the ground of the alleged unflinching loyalty of Wesley to the Church, and especially on account of his alleged High-Church notions. From documents lately printed some think that the common notion that Wesley maintained strictly evangelical notions after 1738 must be revised. It is therefore of interest to inquire what was Wesley's real attitude toward the Church of his fathers.

It is acknowledged on all hands that previous to his conversion in 1738 Wesley was an ardent High Churchman. He recommended confession, he practised weekly communion, he observed all the festivals, he observed the fasts on Wednesdays and Fridays, he mixed the sacramental wine with water, and in other respects anticipated the churchly enthusiasm of the Oxford reformers of 1833. Now it would be indeed remarkable if no trace of these sentiments appeared after the spiritual revolution of 1738, if all of this ritualistic fervor completely died at his conversion. I think there are traces of High-Church ideas after this. Wesley always maintained a strict theory as to the Lord's Supper. In 1788 he republished a sermon he had written in Oxford in 1733, and he says in the preface: "I have added very little, but retrenched much, as I then used more words than I do now. But I thank God that I have not seen cause to alter my sentiments in any point which is therein delivered."

He here calls the sacrament the "Christian sacrifice," but it is evident this is not to be interpreted too literally, as he thought that the body and blood of Christ are to be received in a spiritual manner. He says: "As our bodies are strengthened by bread and wine, so are our souls by these tokens of the body and blood of Christ." "The design of this sacrament is the continual remembrance of the death of Christ by eating bread and drinking wine, which are the outward signs of the inward grace, the body and blood of Christ." In this sermon he also urges "constant communion," that is, not simply weekly communion but communion as frequent as possible. In 1745 he printed extracts from a eucharistical volume by Dr. Brevint as a preface to some sacramental hymns by him and Charles. This volume is quoted at length by High-Church writers as evidence of Wesley's sacramentarianism. I have read all the parts which seem to look in this direction, and I have not found anything inconsistent with the historic doctrine of the English Church that the body and blood of Christ are partaken of in the sacrament in a spiritual manner. Wesley undoubtedly held to the real presence of Christ in the sacrament, but that presence was spiritual and not corporeal. Brevint teaches that the sacrament is a sacrifice, but only in a figurative or symbolic sense. As to baptism, Wesley continued to hold to a theory of baptismal regeneration. "It is certain," he says, "that our Church supposes that all who are baptized in their infancy are at the same time born again, and it is allowed that the whole office for the baptism of infants proceeds upon this supposition." As to adults, he held that baptism had no efficacy in itself. "Whatever be the case with infants, it is sure that all of riper years who are baptized are not at the same time born again." In his note on Acts xxii., 16, speaking of adults he says: "Baptism administered to real penitents is both a means and seal of pardon. Nor did God ordinarily, in the primitive Church, bestow this on any except through this means." But this opinion as to infants' baptismal regeneration he held privately, and never tried to enforce it on his preachers, many of whom rejected

it; and when he prepared his Sunday Service in 1784, he eliminated all signs of the doctrine in his revision of the XXXIX Articles, a fact which shows that his final conclusion was not to insist on the doctrine in any sense.¹

Mr. Urlin, the High-Church biographer and enthusiastic student and lover of Wesley, came into possession of certain papers which he published for the first time. Among them was a fragment by Wesley which Mr. Urlin dates about 1741, and which reads as follows:—

“I believe [myself]² it a duty to observe [so far as I can without breaking communion with my own church]³ :

“1. To baptize by immersion.

“2. To use water, Oblation of Elements, Invocation, Alms, a Prothesis to the Eucharist.

“3. To pray for the faithful departed.

“4. To pray standing on Sunday in Pentecost.

“5. To observe Saturday and Sunday Pentecost as festival. I think it prudent (our own Church not considered)—

“1. To observe the Stations [protracted services on certain days accompanied by fast].

“2. Lent, especially the Holy Week.

“3. To turn to the East at the Creed.”

That is certainly a pretty formidable list of ritualistic observances. Mr. Urlin argues, but on what must be considered frail ground, that this MS. belongs to 1741.³ I think on the contrary, from internal evidence, there being no external evidence whatever, that this bit of High-Church literature antedates 1738, and belongs either to Wesley's Oxford or Georgia life. The observances mentioned in the list are thoroughly consonant with Wesley's notions and manner of life at that time, but after he began his evangelistic career they are thoroughly out of tune with all his teaching, and besides it was physically impossible to observe them. The fact that Wesley never published these notes shows that he

¹ Cf., Rigg, *Churchmanship of John Wesley*, Lond., 1879; new ed., 1893.

² These words in brackets appear to have a line drawn through them with the pen.

³ See R. Denny Urlin, *Wesley's Place in Church History*, Lond., 1870, and his *Churchman's Life of John Wesley*, Lond., 1886.

considered them not to represent his matured convictions, and the fact that he did not destroy them shows that he considered them important in giving a view of his spiritual history.

A strong indirect evidence of the persistent influence of Wesley's early ritualistic enthusiasm, though turned into another channel, is the earnest, almost stern, ascetic ethical and religious precepts which were embodied in his Rules for preachers, in his Rules for the Societies, and in his Rules for the Bands. I do not know of any one who has called attention to this.

Let us now seek an actual history of Wesley's attitude toward the Church of England. His association with the Moravians had profoundly affected him, and their explanation of the way of salvation convinced him that salvation may be instantaneous, and that it is to be sought by faith. This led to that remarkable experience in Aldersgate Street in May, 1738, which Wesley himself called his "conversion," a word which he afterwards retracted as too strong. A few days afterward he went so far as to declare that previous to that experience he had never been a Christian at all, but later reflection led him to correct this, and to say that he had indeed the faith of a servant, that he had been all along a Christian, but that he served God in a servile way without the gladness and triumph that comes from the full trust of a child. At any rate in that Aldersgate experience Methodism was born. On the strength of that he went forth calling sinners to immediate repentance and salvation. Miss Wedgwood, in her thoughtful study of Wesley and the Evangelical Revival, has correctly judged the immense importance of that experience. She says that it meant that the emphasis of Wesley, and so of modern Protestantism, was to be changed from baptism to conversion.¹ That experience cut up Wesley's High-Church theology by the roots. I mean in its essential feature. No longer was the stress to be laid upon the sacraments, upon observances and rites as means of salvation, but solely upon faith, and the

¹ *John Wesley and the Evangelical Reaction of the 18th Century*, p. 157.

great means of conversion was preaching and not catechizing and worship. From this all the important features of the Methodist revival followed as a matter of course: (1) the organization of the converted into societies and classes, where those who had been made kings and priests unto God testified of their experience in divine things; (2) the employment of lay-preachers, who were sent forth everywhere preaching the Gospel, and bringing multitudes to Christ; (3) extemporaneous prayer in the divine service. It followed also that sacramentarian theology disappeared, and the theology of Christian experience took its place.

Any one with the least discernment could see that such a movement as that foreboded ill to the established Church, that it had within it the seed of separation. As early as October, 1739, Wesley's brother Samuel, who bitterly lamented the new departure, wrote as follows to his mother:

"It was with exceeding concern and grief that I heard you had countenanced a spreading delusion, so far as to be one of Jack's congregation. Is it not enough that I am bereft of both my brothers, but must my mother follow too? I earnestly beseech the Almighty to preserve you from joining a schism at the close of your life, as you were unfortunately engaged in one at the beginning of it. It will cost you many a protest, should you retain your integrity, as I hope to God you will. They boast of you already as a disciple. They design separation. They are already forbidden all the pulpits in London; and to preach in the diocese is actual schism. In all likelihood, it will come to the same all over England, if the bishops have courage enough. They leave all the liturgy in the fields, and though Mr. Whitefield expresses his value for it, he never once read it to his tatterdemalions on a common. Their societies are sufficient to dissolve all other societies but their own. Will any man of common sense, or spirit, suffer any domestic to be in a band, engaged to relate to five or to ten people everything, without reserve, that concerns the person's conscience, how much soever it may concern the family? Ought any married persons to be there unless husband and wife be there together? This is literally putting asunder what God has joined together.

"As I told Jack, I am not afraid the Church should excommunicate him (discipline is at too low an ebb), but that

he should excommunicate the Church. It is pretty near it. Holiness and good works are not so much as conditions of our acceptance with God. Love feasts are introduced, and extemporary prayers, and expositions of Scripture, which last are enough to bring in all confusion; nor is it likely they will want any miracles to support them. He only who ruleth the madness of the people can stop them from being a formed sect. Ecclesiastical censures have lost their terrors; thank fanaticism on the one hand, and atheism on the other. To talk of persecution from thence is mere insult. It is

“ ‘ To call the bishop, Grey-beard Goff,
And make his power as mere a scoff,
As Dagon, when his hands were off.’ ”¹

It does not argue well for Wesley's own prescience that he did not have the sagacity of his brother in discerning the trend of his movement. In fact there is evidence that he did, and he never seemed to lose any sleep over the prospect, although he was all the while conscientiously and earnestly attached to the Church. At the first conference in 1744, it was resolved (1) to defend the doctrine of the Church of England, both by their preaching and living; (2) to obey the bishops in all things indifferent; (3) to observe the canons of the Church as far as they could with a safe conscience; and, finally, to exert themselves to the utmost not to entail a schism in the Church by their hearers forming themselves into a distinct sect. They agreed, however, that they must not reject the present opportunity of saving souls for fear of consequences which might possibly or probably happen after they were dead.² Thus at the very first conference Wesley and his preachers laid down a programme to which they continually adhered as long as the founder lived, viz., a qualified adherence to the Church, but at the sacrifice of no principle, at the expense of no limitation on the Movement, and with no fear of far-off consequences.³

There is no doubt that Wesley had great respect for Episcopal church government, and that he firmly believed that

¹ Priestley's *Letters*, p. 108, Tyerman, *Life of Wesley*, i., 286-87.

² Tyerman, i., 444.

³ The same principles appear in *Works*, i., 486-89, last Lond. ed.

for the sake of order no unordained man should administer the sacraments. But how early his High-Church theories were superseded, or were in the process of being superseded, is afforded by this minute in his second conference, 1745, which is certainly ingenious and interesting, whatever else may be said of it.

"Q. 1. Can he be a spiritual governor of the Church who is not a believer or a member of it?

"A. It seems not; though he may be a governor in outward things by a power derived from the king.¹

"Q. 2. What are properly the laws of the Church of England?

"A. The Rubrics; and to those we submit as the ordinance of man, for the Lord's sake.

"Q. 3. Is not the will of one governor a law?

"A. No; not of any governor, temporal or spiritual. Therefore, if any bishop wills that I should not preach the Gospel his will is no law to me.²

"Q. 4. But what if he produce a law against your preaching?

"A. I am to obey God rather than man.

"Q. 5. Is Episcopal, Presbyterian, or Independent church government most agreeable to reason?

"A. The plain origin of church government seems to be this: Christ sends forth a preacher of the Gospel. Some who hear him repent and believe the Gospel. They then desire him to watch over them, to build them up in the faith, and to guide their souls in the paths of righteousness. Here, then, is an independent congregation, subject to no pastor but their own, neither liable to be controlled in things spiritual by any other man or body of men whatever. But soon after, some from other parts, who are occasionally present while he speaks in the name of Him that sent him, beseech him to come over to help them also. Knowing it to be the will of God, he consents, yet not till he has conferred with the wisest and holiest of his congregation, and with their advice, appointed one or more who have gifts and grace to

¹ In this Wesley releases himself from obedience to all unconverted bishops.

² Compare with this John Henry Newman's respect for his bishops in his Tractarian period. "What to me was *jure divine* was the voice of my bishop in his own person. My own bishop was my pope."—*Apologia pro Vita Sua*, 5th ed., N. Y., p. 97.

watch over the flock till his return. If it pleases God to raise another flock in the new place, before he leaves them he does the same thing, appointing one whom God has fitted for the work to watch over these souls also. In like manner, in every place where it pleases God to gather a little flock by his word, he appoints one in his absence to take the oversight of the rest, and to assist them of the abilities which God giveth. These are deacons or servants of the Church, and look on the first pastor as their common father. And all these congregations regard him in the same light, and esteem him still as the shepherd of their souls. These congregations are not absolutely independent, they depend on one pastor, though not on each other. As these congregations increase, and as their deacons grow in years and grace, they need other subordinate deacons and helpers, in respect to whom they may be called presbyters or elders, as their father in the Lord may be called the bishop or overseer of them all.

“Q. 6. Is mutual consent absolutely necessary between the pastor and his flock?

“A. No question. I cannot guide any soul unless he consent to be guided by me. Neither can any one soul force me to guide him if I consent not.

“Q. 7. Does the ceasing of this consent on either side dissolve that relation?

“A. It must in the very nature of things. If a man no longer consent to be guided by me, I am no longer his guide. I am free. If one will not guide me any longer I am free to seek one who will.”¹

This simple and unaffected exposition of primitive church polity, after the strictest Congregational pattern, is a remarkable production for an ardent son of the Church of England. It is certainly a rare document to come from one whom some writers claim, and with plausible reason, as at this time a High Churchman. This exposition was not concealed among his papers, but published immediately in the authoritative Minutes of his Conference. And yet it is an illustration of one of those strange transitions in Wesley's thought, and of his holding apparently contradictory positions, a fact which has given so much trouble to both Methodists and Anglicans—that in December of that same

¹ *Minutes of Conference*, i., 26-27 (last London ed.).

year, 1745, he wrote to his brother-in-law, Westley Hall, who had urged him to renounce the Church of England, a letter in which he came out strongly for the apostolic authority of the threefold ministry. He says:

"We believe it would not be right for us to administer either baptism or the Lord's supper, unless we had a commission to do so from those bishops whom we apprehend to be in a succession from the apostles. And yet we allow these bishops are the successors of those who were dependent on the bishop of Rome.

"We believe there is and always was in every Christian Church, whether dependent on the bishop of Rome or not, an outward priesthood, ordained by Jesus Christ, and outward sacrifice offered therein, by men authorized to act as ambassadors of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God.

"We believe that the threefold order of ministers, which you seem to mean by papal hierarchy and prelacy, is not only authorized by its apostolical institution, but also by the written word."¹

This is certainly explicit enough to satisfy any High Churchman. In the same letter he says he will follow the laws of the Church of England only as far as his conscience will permit. But notice this. On the same page of his Journal, under date of Jan. 20, 1746, Wesley writes:

"I set out for Bristol. On the road I read over Lord King's account of the Primitive Church. In spite of the vehement prejudice of my education, I was ready to believe that this was a fair and impartial draught; but if so, it would follow that bishops and presbyters are (essentially) of one order, and that originally every Christian congregation was a Church independent of all others."

In spite, therefore, of his bold words to Hall, it would seem after all that the declaration of his Conference of 1745, in which he virtually styled his preachers deacons and presbyters, would stand. But at his next Conference he tried to come to a middle position. After calling a national Church a "merely political institution," he says:

¹ *Works*, ii., 4.

"Q. Are the three orders of bishops, priests, and deacons plainly described in the New Testament?"

"A. We think they are; and believe they generally obtained in the Apostolic age.

"Q. But are you assured that God designed the same plan should obtain in all Churches, throughout all ages?"

"A. We are not assured of this; because we do not know that it is inserted in Holy Writ.

"Q. If this plan were essential to a Christian Church, what must become of all foreign reformed Churches?"

"A. It would follow that they are no parts of the Church of Christ. A consequence full of shocking absurdity.

"Q. In what age was the divine right of episcopacy first asserted in England?"

"A. About the middle of Queen Elizabeth's reign. Till then all the bishops and clergy in England continually allowed, and joined in, the ministrations of those who were not episcopally ordained.

"Q. Must there not be numberless accidental varieties in the government of the various Churches?"

"A. There must in the nature of things. For, as God variously dispenses his gifts of nature, providence, and grace, both the offices themselves and the officers in each ought to be varied from time to time.

"Q. Why is it that there should be no determinate plan of Church government appointed in Scripture?"

"A. Without doubt, because the wisdom of God had regard to a necessary variety.

"Q. Was there any thought of uniformity in the government of all Churches until the time of Constantine?"

"A. It is certain there was not, and would not have been then, had men consulted the word of God only." ¹

If, therefore, Wesley spoke as a High Churchman to Hall in December, 1745, he spoke as a Low Churchman in the summer of 1747. Tyerman says that ever after this the opinions of Wesley on ecclesiastical polity were substantially those of dissenters, and although this on the whole is a fair induction, there are incongruous and perplexing elements yet left in the question of Wesley's Churchmanship.

Nearly ten years after this, we find Wesley still firm in his broad views as to the Church, and confirmed in them by

¹ *Minutes*, ed. 1862, i., 36; Tyerman, i., 509.

Bishop Stillingfleet's *Irenicon*. In a letter to a clergyman dated July 3, 1756, he says :

"I still believe the Episcopal form of Church government to be scriptural and apostolical. I mean, well agreeing with the practice and writings of the apostles. But that it is prescribed in Scripture, I do not believe. This opinion, which I once zealously espoused, I have been heartily ashamed of ever since I read Bishop Stillingfleet's *Irenicon*. I think that he has unanswerably proved that neither Christ nor his apostles have ever prescribed any form of Church government, and that the plea of divine right for diocesan episcopacy was never heard of in the primitive Church.

"As to heresy and schism, I cannot find one text in the Bible where they are taken in the modern sense. I remember no one Scripture wherein heresy signifies error in opinion, whether fundamental or not, nor any wherein schism signifies a separation from the Church, whether with cause or without."¹

In 1761 Wesley, answering a Roman Catholic, claims a true succession for the Reformed Churches, but it is a spiritual succession, and he says that the Apostolical Succession, on which the validity of the Roman Catholic bishops rests, has no evidence. "I could never see it proved; and I am persuaded I never shall."² And far on in the evening of his life, he declared himself to the same intent. In a letter to his brother Charles, who had upbraided him severely for ordaining preachers for America, he says (1785):

"For these forty years I have been in doubt concerning the question—what obedience is due to

'Heathenish priests and mitred infidels.'³

I have from time to time proposed my doubts to the most pious and sensible clergymen I know. But they gave me no satisfaction. Rather, they seemed to be puzzled as well

¹ Tyerman, ii., 244.

² *Journal*, February, 1761 (*Works*, iii., 425).

³ This is a quotation from one of Charles Wesley's early poems, in which he describes the Church clergy. This sentiment Charles afterward withdrew as too strong.

as me. Obedience I always paid to the bishops, in obedience to the laws of the land. But I cannot see that I am under any obligations to obey them further than those laws require. It is in obedience to these laws that I have never exercised in England the power which I believe God has given me. I firmly believe I am a scriptural *Ἐπίσκοπος* as much as any man in England, or in Europe: for the uninterrupted succession I know to be a fable, which no man ever did or can prove.”¹

The question of the separation of the Methodists from the Church of England was a question in perpetual discussion in the Conferences from the first Conference almost to the close of Wesley's life. The very fact that Wesley allowed it to come up constantly, that it was always a mooted question, and that Wesley's solution of it was: For the present we remain in the Church, let the future take care of itself—thus referring its final solution to his successors, shows that his attachment to the Church of England, though hearty, rested on expediency and not on divine obligation. I have read the decision of all the Conferences on this question, and Wesley's voluminous correspondence, and I say that the sum of it is: Whether or no separation is lawful, it is not expedient. Sometimes he was more concerned for union, at other times he was less concerned. At one time he waives it aside as an external question of no consequence. “I dare not, in conscience,” he says, speaking of this, “spend my time and strength on externals. If, as my Lady [Huntingdon] says, all outward establishments are Babel, so is this establishment. Let it stand for me. I neither set it up, nor pull it down. But let you [he is writing to Charles] and I build up the city of God.”² A most important document is the letter of Wesley to the Rev. Samuel Walker, a zealous clergyman in Truro, written after the Conference of 1755. In this he gives the reasons brought forward in the debates by those who favored separation. 1. Though the liturgy is excellent, it is “absurd and sinful to declare such

¹ Jackson, *Life of Charles Wesley*, pp. 730-31 (N. Y. ed.), ii., 394-96 (1st Lond. ed.).

² June 28, 1755, Tyerman, ii., 206.

an assent and consent to any merely human composition," as is required to it. 2. Though they did not object to the use of forms, they durst not confine themselves to them. 3. Because they considered the decretals of the Church as the "very dregs of popery," and "many of the canons as grossly wicked and absurd. The spirit which they breathe is throughout popish and anti-Christian. Nothing can be more diabolical than the *ipso-facto* excommunication so often denounced therein, while the whole method of executing the canons in our spiritual courts is too bad to be tolerated, not in a Christian, but in a Mohammedan or pagan nation." 4. Because they feared that many of the Church of England ministers neither lived the Gospel, taught it, nor knew it, and because they doubted "whether it was lawful to attend the ministrations of those whom God had not sent to minister." 5. Because the doctrines preached by these clergymen were "not only wrong, but fundamentally so, and subversive of the whole Gospel." Then Wesley says: "I will freely acknowledge that I cannot answer these arguments to my own satisfaction; so that my conclusion, which I cannot yet give up, that it is lawful to continue in the Church, stands almost without any premises that are able to bear its weight." Certainly that is a strange confession for a High Churchman. He then says: "The original doctrines of the Church of England are sound, and I know her worship is, in the main, pure and spiritual; but if the essence of the Church of England, considered as such, consists in her orders and laws, many of which I myself can say nothing for, and not in her worships and doctrines, those who separate from her have a far stronger plea than I was ever sensible of."¹ I could give many other quotations from Wesley equally significant.

But, as a matter of fact, Wesley had himself in effect separated himself from the Church. He had from the very beginning formally and solemnly set apart men to the work of preaching the Gospel, though not with the laying on of hands, and sent them into parishes of the Church of Eng-

¹ Tyerman, ii., 207-8; *Meth. Mag.*, 1779, p. 371.

land to preach, and to gather the people into societies entirely separate from the Church. This was clearly contrary to the rules of the Church of England and of every other Church. The same thing done to-day would not be tolerated by any Church in the world. Walker, of Truro, Wesley's friend, saw this. He says: "Lay-preachers, being contrary to the constitution of the Church of England, are, as far as that point goes, a separation from it." He refers to the "continual bar kept up between you [Wesley] and any regular clergyman, who cannot in conscience fall in with this measure. The most he can do is not to forbid them; he cannot take them by the hand. And so there must be two disunited ministrations of the word in the same place by people who yet do call themselves of the Church of England."¹ Thomas Adam, rector of Wintringham, also a friend of the Wesleys, is equally explicit as to the fatal breach between Methodism and the Church. Writing in 1756 he says: "Methodism, as to its external form, is such a deviation from the rule and constitution of the Church of England, that all attempts to render it consistent must be vain. Lay-preaching is a manifest irregularity, and would not be endured in any Christian society."² He says there can be no basis of union consistent with the principles of both, and that the Methodists must be left alone. Wesley, over and over again, laid down this platform: "I cannot give up lay preaching, organization of societies, extemporary prayers." These he considered of more importance than Church order. At the same time he would not allow his preachers to administer the sacraments, and in a letter of 1756 he gives the reason. He says that there is absolute necessity for lay preaching, for otherwise thousands of souls would perish everlastingly, but there is not absolute necessity for lay administering, for not one soul will perish for want of it,—a characteristic remark of Wesley, and one which shows the immense drift from his sacramentarianism of 1733 to his evangelicalism of 1756.

¹ *Life of Samuel Walker, of Truro*, p. 207; Tyerman, ii., 245-46.

² *Life of Walker*, p. 224; Tyerman, ii., 251.

Over against this whole tendency of Methodism under John Wesley's hand, a tendency all the time away from the Church of England, not to speak of High Church theories, and over against these repeated testimonies of Wesley, a striking sermon is brought forward. It is the famous Dathan and Abiram sermon of 1789, and is his last effort to prevent administration of the sacraments by his preachers. The upshot of it is this: You were not appointed to administer the sacraments, a function which belongs to the priestly or ministerial office, and therefore you are usurping rights if you do it. Wesley firmly maintained that for the sake of order, and to preserve the full dignity of the clerical office, the sacraments should be kept in the hands of ordained men. He fully believed that he had the power to ordain them for this, and he exercised that power on three separate occasions; but those who were not so appointed should keep to their proper work.