

From the Introduction of Methodism Into the City of New York, in 1766,

by Nathan Bangs

The sermon recounts the introduction of Methodism in New York, highlighting the challenges faced by the early Methodists and the significance of key figures such as Philip Embury and Captain Webb in establishing the society.

Scripture: Psalm 127:1, Proverbs 16:9, Acts 2:47, 1 Corinthians 3:6, Philippians 1:6, Hebrews 10:24

Topics: "Church History", "Methodist Revival"

Description

Nathan Bangs preaches about the humble beginnings of Methodism in New York in 1766, highlighting how the movement started without human foresight or elaborate plans, yet played a significant role in shaping the nation's history. The early Methodist society, led by Philip Embury, faced challenges but was revived by a zealous woman's call to preach, leading to the first Methodist sermon in America. The arrival of Captain Webb, an officer in the British army, further fueled the growth of Methodism, resulting in conversions and the need for a larger place of worship. Despite initial difficulties, the society persevered, purchased land, and built Wesley Chapel, the first Methodist meeting house in America in 1768.

Transcript

From the introduction of Methodism into the city of New York, in 1766,

to the landing of the first missionaries in 1769.

The introduction of Methodism into these United States was attended with those circumstances which show how great events often result from comparatively insignificant causes. Like the entire structure of Methodism, it originated without any foresight of man, without any previous design in the instruments to bring about such an event, and without any of those previously devised plans which generally mark all human enterprises. And yet it will doubtlessly mark an era in the history of our country, on which its future historians will stop and pause, as having a bearing, it is hoped for good, on its destinies. The spirit of discontent had already begun to vent itself in low murmurings and secret whispers against the supposed wrongs and oppressions of the mother country, when Methodism commenced its leavening influence on the minds of a few obscure persons in the city of New York. And although it formed no part of the design of its disciples to enter into the political speculations of the day, nor to intermeddle with the civil affairs of the country, yet it is thought that its extensive spread in this country, the hallowing influence it has exerted on

society in uniting in one compact body so many members, through the medium of an itinerant ministry, interchanging from north to south, and from east to west, has contributed not a little to the union and prosperity of the nation.

Let us, however, hasten to lay before the reader the facts and circumstances indicated at the head of this chapter.

We have already stated, that the first Methodist society was established in the city of New York, in the year 1766. This was done by a small number of pious emigrants from Ireland, who, previously to their removal to this [country], had been members of a Methodist society in their own country. Among their number was Mr. Philip Embury, a local preacher. Though they had been attached to Wesleyan Methodism at home, it appears that, on their arrival here, they came very near making "shipwreck of faith and a good conscience." They were strangers in a strange land; and not finding any pious acquaintances with whom they could associate, they gradually lost their relish for divine things, and sunk away into the spirit of the world. In this state of lukewarmness and worldly mindedness they were found the next year on the arrival of another family from Ireland, among whom was a pious "mother in Israel," to whose zeal in the cause of God they were all indebted for the revival of the spirit of piety among them. Soon after her arrival, she ascertained that those who had preceded her had so far departed from their "first love" as to be mingling in the frivolities and sinful amusements of life. The knowledge of this painful fact aroused her indignation, and with a zeal which deserves commemoration, she suddenly entered, the room where they were assembled, seized the pack of cards with which they were playing, and threw them into the fire. Having thus unceremoniously destroyed their "playthings," she addressed herself to them in language of expostulation; and turning to Mr. Embury, she said, "You must preach to us, or we shall all go to hell together, and God will require our blood at your hands!" This pointed appeal had its intended effect, in awaking his attention to the perilousness of their condition. Yet, as if to excuse himself from the performance of an obvious duty, he tremblingly replied, "I cannot preach, for I have neither a house nor congregation." "Preach in your own house first, and to our own company," was the reply. Feeling the responsibility of his situation, and not being able any longer to resist the importunities of his reprover, he consented to comply with her request; and accordingly preached his first sermon, "in his own hired house," to five persons only. This, it is believed, was the first Methodist sermon ever preached in America.

As they continued to assemble together for mutual edification, so their numbers were gradually increased, and they were much comforted and strengthened by "exhorting one another daily." They were too few in number, however, to attract much public attention, and for some time they remained in apparent obscurity. As might be expected, they gradually gained more and more notoriety; for the name of WESLEY, as well as of METHODIST, was not unknown in this country; and the very reproach which was heaped upon him and his followers gave him and them a notoriety which otherwise they might never have gained. Notwithstanding, therefore, the fewness of their number, and the secluded manner in which they held their meetings, they soon found that they must either procure a larger place, or preclude many from their meetings who were desirous to attend. They accordingly rented a room in the neighborhood of larger dimensions, the expense of which was defrayed by voluntary contributions. Here they assembled for mutual edification, Mr. Embury continuing to lead their devotions, and to expound to them the word of God. An event happened about this time which tended to bring them more into notice, and to attract a greater number of hearers. This was the arrival of Captain Webb, an officer in the British army, at that time stationed in Albany, in the state of New York. He had been brought to the "knowledge of salvation by the remission of sins," under the ministry of Mr. Wesley, in Bristol, England, about the year 1765; and though

a military character, such was his love for immortal souls, that he was constrained to declare unto them the loving-kindness of God. This he did, first to his fellow-soldiers, and afterward to all who were willing to hear him. His first appearance as a stranger among the "little flock" in New York, in his military costume, gave them no little uneasiness, as they were fearful that he had come to "spy out their liberties," or to interrupt them in their meetings; but when they saw him kneel in prayer, and otherwise participate with them in their worship, their fears subsided; and on forming a more intimate acquaintance, they found that Captain Webb had "partaken of like precious faith" with themselves. He was accordingly invited to preach. The novelty of his appearance in the badges of a military officer excited no little surprise. This, together with the energy with which he spoke in the name of the Lord, drew many to the place of worship, and the room where they assembled soon became too small to accommodate all who wished to hear. But what greatly encouraged them in their "work of faith and labor of love" was, that sinners were awakened and converted to God, and added to the society. These, continuing to walk in the "fellowship of the Holy Ghost," were much strengthened and comforted, while others who beheld their godly conversation were convinced of the power and excellence of their religion.

To accommodate all who wished to hear, they next hired a rigging loft in William Street, and fitted it up for a place of public worship. Here they assembled for a considerable time, edified in faith and holiness by the labors of Mr. Embury, who was occasionally assisted by Capt. Webb. While the society were thus going forward in their work in New York, Capt. Webb made excursions upon Long Island, and even went as far as Philadelphia, preaching, wherever he could find an opening, the gospel of the Son of God, and success attended his labors, many being awakened to a sense of their sinfulness through his pointed ministry, and brought to the knowledge of the truth. In consequence of the accession of numbers to the society, and hearers of the word, the rigging loft also became too small, and hence they began to consult together on the propriety of building a house of worship.

But, for the accomplishment of this pious undertaking, many difficulties were to be encountered. The members of the society were yet few in number and most of them of the poorer class, and of course had but a limited acquaintance and influence in the community. For some time a painful suspense kept them undetermined which way to act. But while all were deliberating on the most suitable means to be adopted to accomplish an object so desirable, and even necessary for their continued prosperity, an elderly lady,¹ one of the Irish emigrants before mentioned, while fervently engaged in prayer for direction in this important enterprise, received, with inexpressible sweetness and power, this answer -- "I, the Lord, will do it." At the same time a plan was presented to her mind, which, on being submitted to the society, was generally approved of, and finally adopted. They proceeded to issue a subscription paper, waited on the mayor of the city and other opulent citizens, to whom they explained their object, and from them received such liberal donations as greatly encouraged them to proceed in their undertaking. Thus countenanced by their fellow citizens, they succeeded in purchasing several lots in John Street, on which they erected a house of worship, 80 feet in length and 42 in breadth calling it, from respect to the venerable founder of Methodism, WESLEY CHAPEL. Such, however, were the municipal relations in the province at that time, that they were not allowed to consecrate the house exclusively for divine worship; they therefore devoted a small portion of it to domestic purposes. This was the first meeting house ever erected by a Methodist congregation in America -- and this was built in the year 1768, and the first sermon was preached in it October 30, 1768, by Mr. Embury.

While this house was in progress, they felt the necessity of procuring the services of a more competent preacher. Though Mr. Embury was a zealous and good man, yet he had but moderate abilities as a

preacher. He was obliged, moreover, to work with his own hands to support himself and family, and therefore could not devote his labors exclusively to the work of the ministry. To supply this deficiency the society wisely determined to apply to Mr. Wesley for help; and the following letter, signed T. T., will show the general state of the society, and the earnestness with which they solicited the requisite aid.

"New York, 11 April, 1768

"Rev. and Very Dear Sir, -- I intended writing to you for several weeks past; but a few of us had a very material transaction in view. I therefore postponed writing until I could give you a particular account thereof; this was the purchasing of ground for building a preaching house upon, which, by the blessing of God, we have now concluded. But before I proceed, I shall give you a short account of the state of religion in this city. By the best intelligence I can collect, there was little either of the form or power of it until Mr. Whitefield came over, thirty years ago; and even after his first and second visits, there appeared but little fruit of his labors. But during his visit fourteen or fifteen years ago, there was a considerable shaking among the dry bones. Divers were savingly converted; and this work was much increased in his last journey, about fourteen years since, when his words were really like a hammer and like a fire. Most part of the adults were stirred up: great numbers pricked to the heart, and, by a judgment of charity, several found peace and joy in believing. The consequence of this work was, churches were crowded, and subscriptions raised for building new ones. Mr. Whitefield's example provoked most of the ministers to a much greater degree of earnestness. And by the multitudes of people, old and young, rich and poor, flocking to the churches, religion became an honorable profession. There was now no outward cross to be taken up therein. Nay, a person who could not speak about the grace of God, and the new birth, was esteemed unfit for genteel company. But in a while, instead of pressing forward, and growing in grace, (as he exhorted them,) the generality were pleading for the remains of sin and the necessity of being in darkness. They esteemed their opinions as the very essentials of Christianity, and regarded not holiness, either of heart or life.

The above appears to me to be a genuine account of the state of religion in New York eighteen months ago, when it pleased God to rouse up Mr. Embury to employ his talent (which for several years had been hid, as it were, in a napkin) by calling sinners to repentance, and exhorting believers to let their light shine before men. He spoke at first only in his own house. A few were soon collected together and joined into a little society, chiefly his own countrymen, Irish Germans. In about three months after, brother White and brother Souse, from Dublin, joined them. They then rented an empty room in their neighborhood, which was in the most infamous street in the city, adjoining the barracks. For some time few thought it worth their while to hear: but God so ordered it by his providence, that about fourteen months ago Captain Webb, barrack-master at Albany, (who was converted three years since at Bristol,) found them out, and preached in his regimentals. The novelty of a man preaching in a scarlet coat soon brought greater numbers to hear than the room could contain. But his doctrines were quite new to the hearers; for he told them point-blank, 'that all their knowledge and religion were not worth a rush, unless their sins were forgiven, and they had "the witness of God's Spirit with theirs that they were the children of God." ' This strange doctrine, with some peculiarities in his person, made him soon taken notice of; and obliged the little society to look out for a larger house to preach in. They soon found a place that had been built for a rigging house, sixty feet in length and eighteen in breadth.

"About this period Mr. Webb, whose wife's relations lived at Jamaica, Long Island, took a house in that neighborhood, and began to preach in his own house, and several other places on Long Island. Within six months, about twenty-four persons received justifying grace, nearly half of them whites, -- the rest

Negroes. While Mr. Webb was (to borrow his own phrase) 'felling trees on Long Island,' brother Embury was exhorting all who attended on Thursday evenings, and Sundays, morning and evening, at the rigging house, to flee from the wrath to come. His hearers began to increase, and some gave heed to his report, about the time the gracious providence of God brought me safe to New York, after a very favorable passage of six weeks from Plymouth. It was the 26th day of October last, when I arrived, recommended to a person for lodging; I inquired of my host (who was a very religious man) if any Methodists were in New York; he answered that there was one Captain Webb, a strange sort of man, who lived on Long Island, and who sometimes preached at one Embury's, at the rigging house. In a few days I found out Embury. I soon found of what spirit he was, and that he was personally acquainted with you and your doctrines, and that he had been a helper in Ireland. He had formed two classes, one of the men, and the other of the women, but had never met the society apart from the congregation, although there were six or seven men, and as many women, who had a clear sense of their acceptance in the Beloved.

You will not wonder at my being agreeably surprised in meeting with a few here who have been and desire again to be in connection with you. God only knows the weight of affliction I felt on leaving my native country. But I have reason now to conclude God intended all for my good. Ever since I left London, my load has been removed, and I have found a cheerfulness in being banished from all near and dear to me, and I made a new covenant with my God, that I would go to the utmost parts of the earth, provided he would raise up a people with whom I might join in his praise. On the great deep I found a more earnest desire to be united with the people of God than ever before. I made a resolution that God's people should be my people, and their God my God: and, bless his holy name, I have since experienced more heartfelt happiness than ever thought it possible to have on this side eternity. All anxious care about my dear wife and children is taken away. I cannot assist them, but I daily and hourly commend them to God in prayer, and I know he hears my prayers, by an answer of love in my heart. I find power daily to devote myself unto him; and I find power also to overcome sin. If any uneasiness at all affects me, it is because I can speak so little of so good a God.

"Mr. Embury lately has been more zealous than formerly; the consequence of which is, that he is more lively in preaching; and his gifts as well as graces are much increased. Great numbers of serious persons came to hear God's word as for their lives; and their numbers increased so fast that our house for six weeks past would not contain half the people.

"We had some consultations how to remedy this inconvenience, and Mr. Embury proposed renting a small lot of ground for twenty-one years, and to exert our utmost endeavors to build a wooden tabernacle; a piece of ground was proposed; the ground rent was agreed for, and the lease was to be executed in a few days. We, however, in the meantime, had several days for fasting and prayer, for the direction of God and his blessing on our proceedings; and Providence opened such a door as we had no expectation of. A young man, a sincere Christian and constant hearer, though not joined in society, not giving any thing toward this house, offered ten pounds to buy a lot of ground, went of his own accord to a lady who had two lots to sell, on one of which there is a house that rents for eighteen pounds per annum. He found the purchase money of the two lots was six hundred pounds, which she was willing should remain in the purchasers' possession, on good security. We called once more on God for his direction, and resolved to purchase the whole. There are eight of us who are joint purchasers: among whom Mr. Webb and Mr. Lupton are men of property. I was determined the house should be on the same footing as the orphan house at Newcastle, and others in England; but as we were ignorant how to draw the deeds, we purchased for us and our heirs, until a copy of the writing is sent us from England, which we desire may be

sent by the first opportunity.

"Before we began to talk of building, the devil and his children were very peaceable: but since this affair took place many ministers have cursed us in the name of the Lord, and labored with all their might to stop their congregations from assisting us. But He that sitteth in the highest laughed them to scorn! Many have broken through, and given their friendly assistance. We have collected above one hundred pounds more than our own contributions; and have reason to hope in the whole we shall have two hundred pounds: but the house will cost four hundred pounds more, so that unless God is pleased to raise up friends we shall yet be at a loss. I believe Mr. Webb and Mr. Lupton will borrow or advance two hundred pounds, rather than the building should not go forward; but the interest of money here is a great burden -- being seven per cent Some of our brethren proposed writing to you for a collection in England: but I was averse to this, as I well know our friends there are overburdened already. Yet so far I would earnestly beg: if you would intimate our circumstances to particular persons of ability, perhaps God would open their hearts to assist this infant society, and contribute to the first preaching house on the original Methodist plan in all America, (excepting Mr. Whitefield's orphan house in Georgia:) but I shall write no more on this subject.

"There is another point far more material, and in which I must importune your assistance, not only in my own name, but also in the name of the whole society. We want an able and experienced preacher; one who has both gifts and grace necessary for the work. God has not, indeed, despised the day of small things. There is a real work of grace begun in many hearts by the preaching of Mr. Webb and Mr. Embury; but although they are both useful, and their hearts in the work, they want many qualifications for such an undertaking; and the progress of the gospel here depends much upon the qualifications of preachers.

In regard to a preacher, if possible we must have a man of wisdom, of sound faith, and a good disciplinarian: one whose heart and soul are in the work; and I doubt not but by the goodness of God such a flame will be soon kindled as would never stop until it reached the great South Sea. We may make many shifts to evade temporal inconveniences; but, cannot purchase such a preacher as I have described. Dear sir, I entreat you, for the good of thousands, to use your utmost endeavors to send one over. I would advise him to take shipping at Bristol, Liverpool, or Dublin, in the month of July, or early in August: by embarking at this season he will have fine weather in his passage, and probably arrive here in the month of September. He will see before winter what progress the gospel has made.

"With respect to money for the payment of the preachers' passage over, if they could not procure it, we would sell our coats and shirts to procure it for them.

"I most earnestly beg an interest in your prayers, and trust you, and many of our brethren, will not forget the church in this wilderness.

"I remain with sincere esteem, Rev. and dear sir,

"Your very affectionate brother and servant,

"T. T."

Mr. Wesley refers to these circumstances in his Works, and says, "Tuesday, August 1, our conference began at Leeds. On Thursday, I mentioned the case of our brethren in New York. For some years past, several of our brethren from England and Ireland, (and some of them preachers,) had settled in North America, and had in various places formed societies, particularly in Philadelphia and New York. The

society at New York had lately built a commodious preaching house, and now desired our help, being in great want of money, but much more of preachers. Two of our preachers, Richard Boardman and Joseph Pillmore, willingly offered themselves for the service; by whom we determined to send over fifty pounds as a token of our brotherly love." These brethren, who were the first regular itinerant Methodist preachers who visited this country, landed at Gloucester Point, six miles below Philadelphia, October 24, 1769. They immediately entered upon their Master's work, Mr. Boardman taking his station in New York, and Mr. Pillmore in Philadelphia, occasionally changing with each other, and sometimes making short excursions into the country. They found a people ripe for the gospel; for in all places whither they went, multitudes flocked to hear the word, and many were induced to seek an interest in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Having thus traced the commencement of this work of God in the city of New York, where the seeds of Methodism were first planted in American soil, we will turn our attention to another part of the Lord's vineyard, where similar efforts were made with the like success. About the same time that Mr. Embury was laying the foundation for this spiritual edifice in New York, and Captain Webb was, to use his own language, "felling the trees on Long Island," and some other places, Mr. Robert Strawbridge, another local preacher from Ireland, came over and settled in Frederick county, in Maryland; and being a pious and zealous man, he commenced preaching in his own house, and other private houses, the doctrines of Jesus Christ as held and taught by Mr. Wesley. His word was attended "with the power and demonstration of the Spirit," and very soon a society was collected of such as "desired to flee the wrath to come, and to be saved from their sins." Mr. Strawbridge succeeded in building a house of worship, near Pipe Creek, in Maryland, called the Log Meeting House, in which he continued for some time to preach to the people, and to watch over the society he had formed. The following anecdote is related of this good man by Mr. Garrettson: -- "He came to the house of a gentleman near where I lived to stay all night. I had never heard him preach; but as I had a great desire to be in company with a person who had caused so much talk in the country, I went over and sat and heard him converse until nearly midnight; and when I retired it was with these thoughts -- I have never spent a few hours so agreeably in my life. He spent most of the time in explaining Scripture, and in giving interesting anecdotes; and perhaps one of them will do to relate here A congregation came together in a certain place, and a gentleman who was hearing thought that the preacher had directed his whole sermon to him, and he retired home after the sermon in disgust. However, he concluded to hear him once more, and hide himself behind the people, so that the preacher should not see him; it was the old story -- his character was delineated. He retired dejected; but concluded that possibly the preacher saw him, and said, 'I will try him once more;' he did so, and hid himself behind the door. The preacher took for his text, 'And a man shall be as a hiding place, &c.' In the midst of the sermon, the preacher cried out, 'Sinner, come from your scouting hole!' The poor fellow came forward, looked the preacher in the face, and said, 'You are a wizard, and the devil is in you; I will hear you no more.'"

Thus was at foundation laid by these two men of God, [Philip Embury and Robert Strawbridge] who probably came to America for other purposes than that of preaching the gospel, for a permanent work of God in this country; and it was the Macedonian cry which was sent to England by these people, and more especially those in New York, which moved Mr. Wesley to send them, in answer to their petition, the help they so much needed.

ENDNOTES

1 The name of this pious woman was Hick, the mother of the late Paul Hick, who became a member of the Methodist E. Church in his youth, and was subsequently a class leader and trustee, in which offices he

continued until near the close of life, and finally died in the triumphs of faith in the 74th year of his age. He has children and grandchildren now members of the church in the city of New York. He has often conversed with the writer respecting the circumstances and incidents of these early days of Methodism, with much apparent delight and gratitude. When quite a lad, his mother used to lead him by the hand to the meetings; and, said he, "the first sixpence I could ever call my own, I put into the plate which was carried around to receive the contributions of the people, and I felt, in so doing, an inexpressible pleasure." God abundantly rewarded him in after life, with both temporal and spiritual blessings, and he lived to see this "seed of the kingdom spring up and bear fruit, even a hundredfold." Several of the facts above narrated were received by the writer from Mr. Hick and other members of the family.

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