

The Accent of Wesley's Teaching

by Samuel Chadwick

The sermon highlights the distinctive teachings of John Wesley, including the universality of the gospel, assurance, and Christian perfection, and their influence on the Methodist Revival and the Evangelical Revival.

Scripture: Matthew 5:48, Acts 1:8, Romans 10:13, Galatians 3:28, 1 John 4:19

Topics: "Christian Perfection", "Personal Conversion"

Description

Samuel Chadwick preaches about the birth and growth of Methodism in the warmed heart of its founder, John Wesley, emphasizing personal conversion as the basis of membership and the nourishment of the soul through ordinances. Wesley's teaching focused on the universality of the gospel, the assurance of salvation, and the pursuit of Christian perfection, all rooted in his own experiences of God's grace. The Methodist movement brought a revolutionary gospel of equality before God, challenging the Calvinistic doctrines of the time and reshaping national life. Chadwick highlights the ongoing mission of Methodism to spread the universal gospel, assurance of salvation, and the pursuit of holiness in a world still in need of the transformative power of the gospel.

Transcript

Methodism was born of God in the warmed heart of its founder. It grew with his growth. All its developments have their correspondence in his experience. Membership is based on personal conversion, the ordinances are ordered for the nourishing of the soul, and all things are made subservient to the bringing of men to the knowledge of the truth.

John Wesley had no doctrinal eccentricities. To the end he was an orthodox clergyman of the Church of England. He protested that he had always been loyal to both her doctrine and her discipline. He made no new discovery, invented no new theory, denied no dogma. The peculiarity of his teaching lay in its accent. It gave a new emphasis. It proclaimed the old truth with a living voice, spoken out of the depths of a living soul. Academic truth kills; truth vitalized by experience quickens and saves, Wesley preached Christ as he had realized Him in his own soul. The Methodist doctrines of conversion, assurance, and full salvation can be traced to marked crises in his own experience of the saving grace of God. The Methodist peculiarities of fellowship, testimony, and aggression, were all first exemplified in the religious life of the first Methodist. He is the explanation of every essential peculiarity of the great Methodist movement. He anticipated the developments of two hundred years, and every forward movement is discovered to be but a return to first principles.

THE DEMOCRACY OF THE KINGDOM

The first distinctive note of his creed was the universality of the gospel of Christ. He who claimed the world for his parish preached a gospel worthy of the claim. Christ died for all; the gates of the eternal kingdom were flung wide for all; the feast of the Father's house was spread for all. There was no limitation, exemption, or preference. He had heard the voice of God commanding him to go forth everywhere, calling upon all men to turn and live. The secret of his confidence was his own experience of the grace of God. From the moment he himself was accepted, he was debtor to all, and despaired of none.

It is difficult for us to realize the startling novelty of such teaching in Wesley's day. To us it is a commonplace; to the eighteenth century it was a revelation. It was novel as a doctrine, and still more novel as a testimony. The England to which the great revival came was wrapped in dense darkness. Rationalism had quenched the altar fire, and brutality had taken possession of the people. The dissenting Churches were taking their ease after their heroic struggles with principalities and powers. In the zeal for liberty the zeal for souls had suffered loss, and in the reaction it was not regained. If the Established Church was asleep in the dark, the Dissenters were as truly asleep in the light. In both Churches there were some who were awake. Bishop Butler had answered and routed the deists, and in many a sanctuary the candle of the Lord was kept alight. But religion was a thing apart, and its followers were elect and separate from the common ruck of men. Calvinism was the dominant creed, and Calvinism in its baldest form means monopoly, privilege, caste. Wesley fought Calvinism with all his might, and better still, he preached everywhere the gospel of universal love. It brought to men a new conception of God, gave them a new idea of religion, and, not least, it revealed to them the value of manhood in the sight of God. It offered salvation to all on equal terms. It was for the boy in the stable, as much as for the heir in the palace; for the man at the plow as truly as for the man in the pulpit; for the sinner in the gutter, as well as for the saint in the curtained pew. The word startled men into life. Respectable people were shocked beyond measure, for respectability is always ready to imagine itself entitled to a monopoly of heaven's favor and gifts. Pious people were scandalized that the vulgar and reprobate should be welcomed to the privileges of the Father's house. Still, they came, and the land was filled with the hallelujahs of converted ruffians who had wept their way back to God. Wesley was the first great evangelist in this country to whom was given the privilege of preaching through the length and breadth of the land this glorious gospel in which there is no restriction, limitation, or reserve. What John preached, Charles sang. The Methodist Hymn-book is the manual of Methodist theology and the expression of Methodist experience. The hymns everywhere strike the note of universality. Listen to this:

Come, sinners, to the gospel feast,

Let every soul be Jesus' guest;

Ye need not one be left behind,

For God hath bidden all mankind.

Sent by my Lord, on you I call;

The invitation is for all:

Come, all the world; come, sinner, thou!

All things in Christ are ready now;

There is no possibility of mistaking the invitation, and the same note runs through all their songs. They went everywhere, saying to every man:

"O let me commend my Saviour to you."

Wesley did not give himself to academic discussion, but to the preaching of the Word, and by his persistent testimony he gave the death-blow to the doctrine which limited the possibility of salvation to the favored few.

AN ASSURED SALVATION

Not less conspicuous than the doctrine of universality was Wesley's teaching of Assurance. Not only might every man be saved, but it was his privilege to be conscious of his acceptance in Christ. This was a prominent feature of Wesley's own conversion. Here is his own account of it: "In the evening (May 24, 1738) I went very unwillingly to a Society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart, through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."

An assurance was given him, and to that assurance he testified openly on the spot. He lived in the enjoyment of an assured acceptance, and preached its privilege to all who would trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation. This also gave great offense and occasion of stumbling, but the Methodists exulted and sang with the gladness of those who know. Some, doubtless, dwelt in a false security, and mistook emotion for divine impression. Here and there the corresponding evidence of righteousness was wanting. In every movement which stirs the soul's depths there are those who take up professions without conviction, but multitudes rejoiced in the witness of God's Spirit to their adoption. Wesley fostered their faith, fanned their enthusiasm, and guarded at every point against fanaticism. Those who testified loudly and walked crookedly he mercilessly expelled. On the other hand, he urged all to seek the full assurance of faith, and to make open confession of the same. The converts were gathered into Society Classes, where all spoke frankly of the experience of God in the soul. Love-feasts became great rallying centers, where men and women testified of the wonderful works of God. No wonder they sang! They were children of God and heirs of heaven. Poverty lost its sting in the vision of glory. All distinctions of rank, wealth, and culture disappeared. All were one in Christ. The Methodist people became a brotherhood; a radiant jubilant family of God. The witness of the Spirit is now conceded to be the privilege of sonship by all the evangelical churches, but it was the Wesleys who brought it to the people. Wherever Methodists gathered, it was preached and sung.

What was once denounced as presumption is now acknowledged to be the natural right of every child. Surely, if God be Father, it is reasonable to expect that He will assure His children of their parentage. It is the very first thing a child is taught to know. The knowledge is necessary to the child. Uncertainty secures no good purpose, and does much harm. It fills the heart with perplexity, suspicion, and resentment. It destroys filial instinct, and robs sonship of its inspiration, affection, and joy. Instead of keeping the soul humble, it turns it sour. God seeks the love of sons, not the service of slaves. If God speaks of anything to man He must speak of this. His nature demands it, for love must speak; the rights of sonship require it; and so, "Because we are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, Abba, Father." The Methodists hailed the Spirit's cry with a glorious shout of praise.

CHRISTIAN PERFECTION

Still more distinctive was Wesley's teaching of Christian Perfection. Its accent was very marked. He preached it, expounded it, defended it, and insisted upon it continually. It laid him open to scurrilous attack and scandalous misrepresentation, but he never wavered. Its statement was the greatest work of his life, and its literature his unique contribution to the doctrines of the Church. He escaped many perils common to definitions by confining himself to scriptural expressions. Writing on the subject in 1769, he said, "By Christian Perfection I mean -- (1) Loving God with all our heart; (2) A heart and life all devoted to God; (3) Regaining the whole image of God; (4) Having all the mind that was in Christ; (5) Walking uniformly as Christ walked. If anyone means anything more or anything less by perfection, I have no concern with it."

He wrote A Plain Account of Christian Perfection, which is to this day unsurpassed, if not unrivaled, as a statement and defense of the doctrine. It is a great testimony to his sanity, caution, and scriptural fidelity that, after a century and a half of Christian progress, nothing has been added, nor has any defect been discovered in his teaching upon the subject. His steady, clear light is still the best guide to the Canaan of perfect love. In this, as in everything else, he was a man of action. He inquired of all his preachers, regularly, whether they had received the gift of perfect love. If their testimony was not very clear the question was followed by another: "Are you groaning after it?" In the Societies it was the same. Everywhere he inquired if believers were living in the enjoyment of entire sanctification. Nothing less was sufficient. Even new converts were urged to seek full salvation, the deliverance from the very presence of inbred sin. He observed that where the blessing was neglected the cause languished. The entire sanctification of believers was followed by the conversion of the ungodly.

On this subject the Methodist Hymn-book is the best guide to the doctrine. The hymns classed under the heading, "Seeking for Full Redemption," are probably unique in the hymnology of the Church. They throb with the holiest aspirations of the soul, and pulsate with the indwelling life of God. As Paul's prayers are the best exposition of his theology, so these Methodist hymns are the best exponents of the Methodist doctrine. Selection is difficult in such profusion, but here is one:

O come, and dwell in me,
Spirit of power within!
And bring the glorious liberty
From sorrow, fear and sin.
The seed of sin's disease,
Spirit of health, remove,
Spirit of finished holiness,
Spirit of perfect love.
Hasten the joyful day
Which shall my sins consume,
When old things shall be passed away,

And all things new become.

The original offense

Out of my soul erase;

Enter Thyself, and drive it hence,

And take up all the place.

In those lines is the very kernel of the Methodist conception of scriptural holiness.

Here is another:

O grant that nothing in my soul

May dwell, but Thy pure love alone;

O may Thy love possess me whole,

My joy, my treasure, and my crown!

Strange flames far from my heart remove,

My every act, word, thought, be love.

This blessing was declared to be the gift of God through faith, and wrought in the soul by the sanctifying spirit of truth. It is not of works, any more than pardon is of works. It is not by striving, any more than peace is by striving. It is preceded by conviction, and received through faith. The act of claiming is set forth in lines familiar to every Methodist:

Saviour, to Thee my soul looks up,

My present Saviour Thou!

In all the confidence of hope,

I claim the blessing now.

'Tis done! Thou dost this moment save,

With full salvation bless;

Redemption through Thy blood I have,

And spotless love and peace.

This is the scriptural holiness Wesley declared Methodists were raised up to spread through the land. This is the gospel he preached; a gospel of present, free, universal salvation; a gospel of assured acceptance in the love of God; a gospel of complete deliverance from all inward and outward sin; a gospel of grace so perfect, that the whole life is maintained in the will of God. Its accent was in the greatness of man's need, and the sufficiency of God's grace in Christ Jesus.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE METHODIST REVIVAL

It is impossible to trace the influence of the gospel or to gauge its revolutionary power in the world. It began a new era. It quickened the churches, changed the constitution of England, permeated the life of America, carried blessings to the Colonies, freed the slave and inaugurated the missionary enterprise which is destined to save the world. The Evangelical Revival saved England by bringing new conceptions of God, new ideas of religion, new estimates of manhood, a new sense of responsibility and a baptism of power by which ideals could be transmuted into life. No nation can be better than its God. Like God, like people! The character of a people's God is reflected in the life and institutions of the nation. Religion is the formative and dominant power. The fundamental distinctions of races are religious. Every problem is at the root a religious problem. Wesley found England in the grip of the doctrines of election and predestination. Calvinism did reverent homage to the sovereignty of God, and it produced saints of mighty power; but it emphasized God to the neglect of man. Its sovereignty became arbitrary, meretricious, and almost capricious, until it was a caricature of the God and Father of Jesus Christ. The Calvinism of ecclesiasticism had a corresponding Calvinism in secular and national life. The few were elect, the rest were reprobate. The elect monopolized the privileges; the rest existed to be their hewers of wood and drawers of water. Election was not according to merit, but by birth and favor. The elect possessed all things. They had all the land, all the wealth, all the votes, all the learning, and everything else worth having in the nation. A democratic gospel changed all that. The Evangelical Revival carried everywhere a gospel of equality before God. The revival saved the land from revolution. "The man in the street" got the Methodist conception of Christianity, with the result that national life has been remodeled on the pattern of Methodist doctrine. The whole march of progress for more than a century has been a succession of reforms, breaking up monopolies, destroying high fences, and bringing the life of the nation into line with the new conception of the kingdom of heaven. True it is that other forces have been at work. . Scientific discoveries, economic developments, and industrial organizations have done their part; but the result is due more to the revival that sought man as man and judged him apart from the accidents of birth and possessions, than to anything else. It let loose the dynamic, and led the way to the goal. The archetype of a Christian nation's life is the government of heaven, and there, helplessness is the first claim, manhood the supreme value, and righteousness the first law.

The doctrines of the Methodist are now heard in all the churches. All preach the universal gospel, all evangelicals accept the doctrine of Assurance, and the teaching concerning holiness is as zealously taught at Keswick as at City Road. But the mission of Methodism is needed now as much as ever. The wider acceptance of doctrine cannot compensate for the loss of intensity, and the spread of the truth does not always carry with it a corresponding zeal. It is possible to be evangelical without being evangelistic. There is still the same need to seek the lost. In the developments of religious thought the center has been shifted from individual salvation to social condition. Wesley made no such blunder, and there is need for his successors to stand in the old paths. The wider belief in the possibility of assurance has been accompanied by other teaching, which has weakened rather than intensified the experience. Testimony is needed. Abstract truth can never take the place of the living witness. Let the children of Wesley speak openly in clear and certain speech. Scriptural holiness is not yet spread through the land. There are thousands in the churches who have not so much as heard of perfect love as a present possession. The sons of Wesley have a great heritage and a great responsibility. God has wrought great things by them, but greater tasks await them. There are many adversaries. There are perils in the remembrance of the past, and perils in the aspirations for the future. But the God that raised can keep and guide. He is not only the Father of the Wesleys, He is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is head over all things

to His Church. The lineage goes beyond Wesley to Pentecost. Methodism is in the hands of the living Spirit. H, under His blessing, the commemoration be kept, the Ebenezer will become an altar, the starting point of a deeper devotion and a larger service, in which all the nations of the earth shall be blessed. The gospel which made the democracy is the only gospel by which the democracy can be saved. There lies the opportunity and responsibility of Methodism. There Methodism will find her conquest or her grave.

Light of life, seraphic Fire,
Love divine! Thyself impart;
Every fainting soul inspire,
Shine in every drooping heart.
Every mournful sinner cheer,
Scatter all our guilty gloom,
Son of God, appear, appear!
To Thy human temples come.
Come in this accepted hour;
Bring Thy heavenly kingdom in;
Fill us with the glorious power,
Rooting out the seeds of sin.
Nothing more can we require,
We will covet nothing less;
Be Thou all our heart's desire,
All our joy, and all our peace!

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