

“THOUGHTS UPON METHODISM” from *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley: Tracts and Letters on Various Subjects*

I AM not afraid, that the people called Methodists, should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid, lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this undoubtedly will be the case, unless they hold fast both the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out.

2. What was their fundamental doctrine ? That the Bible is the whole and sole rule both of Christian faith and practice. Hence they learned, 1. That religion is an inward principle; that it is no other than the mind that was in Christ: or in other words, the renewal of the soul after the image of God, in righteousness and true holiness: 2. That this can never be wrought in us, but by the power of the Holy Ghost: 3. That we receive this and every other blessing, merely for the sake of Christ; and, 4. That whosoever hath the mind that was in Christ, the same is our brother, and sister, and mother.

3. In the year 1729, four young students in Oxford, agreed to spend their evenings together. They were all zealous members of the Church of England, and had no peculiar opinions, but were distinguished only by their constant attendance on the Church and sacrament. In 1735, they were increased to fifteen : when the chief of them embarked for America, intending to preach to the Heathen Indians. Methodism then seemed to die away; but it revived again in the year 1738. Especially after Mr. Wesley (not being allowed to preach in the Churches) began to preach in the fields. One and another then coming to inquire, What they must do to be saved, he desired them to meet him all together, which they did, and increased continually in number. In November, a large building, the foundry, being offered him, he began preaching therein, morning and evening; at five in the morning, and seven in the evening, that the people's labour might not be hindered.

4. From the beginning, the men and women sat apart, as they always did in the primitive Church. And none were suffered to call any place their own, but the first comers sat down first. They had, no pews; and all the benches for rich and poor, were of the same construction. Mr. Wesley began the service with a short prayer; then sung a hymn and preached, (usually about half an hour) then sang a few verses of another hymn, and concluded with prayer. His constant doctrine was, salvation by faith, preceded by repentance, and followed by holiness.

5. But when a large number of people was joined, the great difficulty was, to keep them together. For they were continually scattering hither and thither, and we knew no way to help it. But God provided for this also, when we thought not of it. A year or two after, Mr. Wesley met the chief of the society in Bristol, and inquired, "How shall we pay the debt upon the preaching-house?" Captain Foy stood up and said, "Let every one in the society give a penny a week, and it will easily be done." But many of them," said one, "have not a penny to give." True," said the Captain: then put ten or twelve of them to me. Let each of these give what they can weekly, and I will supply what is wanting." Many others made the same offer. So Mr. Wesley divided the societies among them: assigning a class of about twelve persons, to each of these who were termed leaders.

6. Not long after one of these informed Mr. Wesley that, calling on such a one in his house, he found him quarreling with his wife. Another was found in drink. It immediately struck into Mr. Wesley's mind, This is the very thing we wanted. The leaders are the persons, who may not only receive the contributions, but also watch over the souls of their brethren. The society in London being informed of this. willingly followed the example of that in Bristol. As did every society from that time, whether in Europe or America. By this means it was easily found, if any grew weary or faint, and help was speedily administered. And if any walked disorderly, they were quickly discovered, and either amended or dismissed.

7. For those who knew in whom they had believed, there was another help provided. Five or six, either married or single men, met together at such an hour as was convenient, according to the direction of St. James, "Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, and ye shall be healed." And five or six of the married or single women met together for the same purpose. Innumerable blessings have attended this institution, especially in those who were going on to perfection. When any seemed to have attained this, they were allowed to meet with a select number, who appeared, so far as man could judge, to be partakers of the same great salvation.

8. From this short sketch of Methodism. (so called) any man of understanding may easily discern, that it is only plain, scriptural religion, guarded by a few prudential regulations. The essence of it is holiness of heart and life: the circumstantial all point to this. And as long as they are joined together in the people called Methodists, no weapon formed against them shall prosper. But if even the circumstantial parts are

despised, the essential will soon be lost. And if ever the essential parts should evaporate, what remains will be dung and dross.

9. It nearly concerns us to understand how the case stands with us at present. I fear, wherever riches have increased (exceeding few are the exceptions) the essence of religion, the mind that was in Christ, has decreased in the same proportion. Therefore I do not see how it is possible, in the nature of things, for any revival of true religion to continue long. For religion must necessarily produce both industry and frugality. And these cannot but produce riches. Riches increase, so will pride, anger, and love of the world in all its branches.

10. How then is it possible that Methodism, that is, the religion of the heart, though it flourishes now as a green bay-tree, should continue in this state? For the Methodists in every place grow diligent and frugal: consequently they increase in goods. Hence they proportionably increase in pride, in anger, in the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, and the pride of life. So, although the form of religion remains, the spirit is swiftly vanishing away.

11. Is there no way to prevent this? This continual declension of pure religion? We ought not to forbid people to be diligent and frugal: we must exhort all Christians, to gain all they can, and to save all they can: that is, in effect, to grow rich! What way then (I ask again) can we take that our money may not sink us to the nethermost hell? There is one way, and there is no other under heaven. If those who gain all they can, and save all they can, will likewise give all they can, then the more they gain, the more they will grow in grace, and the more treasure they will lay up in heaven.

London, Aug. 4, 1786.