Chapter IX - Society and Class

WESLEY never forgot the words of the "serious man" who told him that if he would serve God and reach heaven he must find companions or make them, saying, "The Bible knows nothing of solitary religion." He had seen the usefulness of the "societies" which had once existed in the Church of England, and he had profited by the fellowship meetings of the Moravians. In April, 1739, and a little later in London, he mentions fellowship meetings among the newly won converts. He took the names of the three women at Bristol who "agreed to meet together weekly," and also the names of the four men who agreed to do the same. "If this work be not of God, let it come to naught. If it be, who can hinder it." He dates, however, the actual commencement of organized Wesleyan Methodism a few months later in the same memorable year of "First things." His account was first published in 1743 as preface to that most important of early Methodist documents, The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies, in London, Bristol, Kingswood, and Newcastle-upon-Tyne:

"In the latter part of the year 1739 eight or ten persons, who appeared to be deeply convinced of sin and earnestly groaning for redemption, came to Mr. Wesley in London. They desired, as did two or three more the next day, that he would spend some time with them in prayer and

advise them how to flee from the wrath to come, which they saw continually hanging over their heads. That he might have more time for this great work he appointed a day when they might all come together; which from thenceforward they did every week, namely, on Thursday, in the evening. To these and as many more as desired to join with them (for their number increased daily) he gave those advices from time to time which he judged most needful for them; and they always concluded their meeting with prayer suited to their several necessities. This was the rise of the United Society, first in London, and then in other places."

Wesley took down their names and places of abode in order to call upon them at their homes. He was moving in the same path as the apostles. "In the earliest times," says he, "those whom God had sent forth preached the Gospel to every creature. And the body of hearers were mostly Jews or heathens. But as soon as any of these were so convinced of the truth as to forsake sin and seek the Gospel salvation, they immediately joined them together, took an account of their names, advised them to watch over each other, and met these catechumens (as they were then called) apart from the great congregation, that they might instruct, rebuke, exhort, and pray with them, and for them, according to their several necessities."

"Thus arose, without any previous design on either side, what was afterward called a society; a very innocent name, and very common in London for any number of people associating themselves together."

When this society at the Foundry was begun - the first society under the direct control of Wesley - the society in Fetter Lane was still attended by the Methodist converts, but they seceded from it on account of internal dissensions on July 20, 1740. About seventy-two of the members adhered to them, joining the new society at the Foundry.

Wesley describes the next step in the organization of Methodism with characteristic simplicity: "The people were scattered so wide, in all parts of the town from Wapping to Westminster, that I could not easily see what the behaviour of each person in his own neighbourhood was; so that several disorderly walkers did much hurt before I was apprised of it. At length, while we were thinking of quite another

thing, we struck upon a method for which we have cause to bless God ever since." This was the method of the class meeting, which was first adopted at Bristol in 1742. There still remained a large debt on the meeting-house built in the Bristol "Horsefair" three years before, and Wesley called together the principal men for consultation. How should the debts be paid? Captain Foy said, "Let every member of the society give a penny a week till all are paid."

Another answered, "But many of them are poor, and cannot afford to do it."

"Then," said Foy, "put eleven of the poorest with me, and if they can give anything, well; I will call on them weekly, and if they can give nothing, I will give for them as well as for myself. And each of you call on eleven of yore neighbours weekly, receive what they give, and make up what is wanting."

"It was done," says Wesley. "In a while, some of these informed me, they found such and such an one did not live as he ought. It struck me immediately, 'This is the thing; the very thing we have wanted so long.'"

The layman conceived the idea that solved the financial problem, and that quickened in the preacher's mind the plan by which the spiritual welfare of every member might be secured.

Wesley called together all the leaders of the classes - as they were now termed - and desired each to make particular inquiry into the behaviour of those he visited. This was done, and "many disorderly walkers were detected." Some turned from the evil of their ways; others were put out of the society. Thus was found a plan by which discipline might be maintained, the unworthy admonished or dismissed, and the consistent encouraged.

On Thursday, April 25, Wesley called together in London several earnest and sensible men, told them of the difficulty of knowing the people who desired to be under his care, and after a long conversation they adopted the new plan of classes. "This was the origin of our classes at London," writes Wesley, "for which I can never sufficiently praise God; the unspeakable usefulness of the institution having ever since been more and more manifest."

It was soon found impracticable for the leader to visit each member at his own house, and so it was agreed that the members of each class should come together at some suitable place once a week. Wesley writes: "It can scarce be conceived what advantages have been reaped by this little prudential regulation. Many experienced that Christian fellowship of which they had not so much as an idea before. They began to bear one another's burdens, and naturally to care for each other's welfare. And as they had daily a more intimate acquaintance, so they had a more endeared affection for each other."

After the division of the society into classes there came the institution of weekly leaders' meetings. The leaders were untrained men, and the objection was raised that they had neither gifts nor graces for such a divine employment. Wesley, however, quietly remarked, "It may be hoped they will all be better than they are, both by experience and by observation, and by the advices given them by the minister every Tuesday night, and the prayers (then in particular) offered up for them."

On February 23, 1743, John Wesley sent forth the General Rules in his own name, and on May 1 Charles Wesley's name was signed to the important pamphlet. The society was defined as "a company of men, having the form and seeking the power of godliness, united in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they may help each other to work out their salvation." There was only one condition required for admission into these societies - "a desire to flee from the wrath to come, and to be saved from their sins." But wherever this is really fixed in the soul it will be shown by its fruits. It was therefore expected of all who desired to continue therein that they should continue "to evidence their desire of salvation, first, by doing no harm, by avoiding evil in every kind, especially that which is most generally practised." One special test was in the "avoiding such diversions as cannot be used in the name of the Lord Jesus." A further evidence of sincerity was to be shown by "doing good of every possible sort, and as far as is possible, to all men." The third evidence of desire for salvation was by "attending on all the ordinances of God," such as public worship, the

ministry of the word, the Lord's Supper, family and private prayer, searching the Scriptures, and fasting or abstinence. Thus in well-built sections was laid the broad platform of Methodism.

The quarterly visitation of the classes by Wesley and his preachers, and the use of a ticket of membership, appear to have begun in 1742. Soon a voluntary subdivision of the class, called the "band," was instituted. There were bands for married men, married women, single men, and single women. The love feast, the agape of the early Christians, was revived by Wesley, and celebrated quarterly. At first band members, and, later, all members of the society holding class tickets, were admitted. "A little plain cake and water" were partaken of as a sign of fellowship, and the service consisted of a joyous testimony of Christian experience.

Another institution peculiar to Methodism was the watch night. The colliers at Kingswood had heretofore given many a night, and especially the last night of the year, to drunken revels and song. When they became Christians their social customs underwent a transformation, and they met as often as possible, and spent the greater part of the night in prayer and praise. Objectors arose, and Wesley was urged to stop the meetings. He remembered that the early Christians spent whole nights in prayer, giving to them the name vigilea, and he saw in them an agency for good. So he sent the members word that on Friday night nearest full moon (that there might be light) he would watch with them and preach. He began the meeting between eight and nine, and continued it until after twelve, "a little beyond the noon of night," as Wesley remarked. The first meeting at the end of the year was held at Kingswood, on Wednesday, December 31, 1740. The first watch night in London was held on Friday, April 9, 1742. The custom extended to other places, The meetings in time ceased to be monthly, and were held quarterly, but in recent years they have been confined to New Year's Eve. Charles Wesley wrote some triumphant hymns for use on these occasions, including the song in which every English watch-night service concludes to-day, "Come, let us anew our journey pursue." Another service of which Wesley made much was one "for renewing the

covenant."
Very soon Wesley was driven, "sorely against his own will," says Dr. Rigg, to make a distinct separation of his societies in London and Bristol from the Church of England. The clergy not only excluded the Wesleys from their pulpits, but in 1740 repelled them and their converts from the Lord's table. At Bristol especially, in that year, this was done with much harshness. The brothers, therefore, administered the sacrament in their own preaching rooms. The practice having been established at Bristol, the London society at the Foundry claimed the same privilege. Thus full provision was made for the spiritual wants of the societies quite apart from the services of the Church of England, although for many years many of the Methodist members attended the communion service of the Anglican Church.
Susanna Wesley was providentially at hand to counsel and encourage her son when he was laying the foundation of organized Methodism. She stood by his side when he preached at Kennington Common to twenty thousand people. She was present when the question of separation from the Fetter Lane society was discussed, and approved of the withdrawal of the members to the Foundry. About this time she was brought into fuller sympathy than ever with her son's views of the possibility of conscious forgiveness. John Wesley records a conversation in which she said that until recently she never dared ask this blessing for herself. "But two or three weeks ago, while my son Hall was pronouncing these words in delivering the cup to me, 'the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ which was given for thee,' the words struck through my heart, and I knew God for Christ's sake had forgiven me all my sins." "I asked her," says Wesley, "whether her father (Dr. Annesley) had not the same faith, and whether she had not heard him preach it to others. She answered: 'He had it himself, and declared a little before his death that for more than forty years he had no darkness, no fear, no doubt at all of his being accepted in the Beloved.' But that, nevertheless, she did not remember to have heard him preach, no, not once, especially upon it; whence she supposed he looked upon it as the peculiar blessing of a few; not as promised to all the people of God." At the Foundry Mrs. Wesley enjoyed the society of

her sons and several of her daughters, and attended all the meetings of the infant Methodist Church.
But Samuel Wesley, at Tiverton, was greatly distressed by the doctrinal and the ecclesiastical irregularities of his younger brothers. He declared in a letter to his mother shortly before his death, November 6, 1739, that he would "much rather have them picking straws within the walls than preaching in the area of Moorfields " - alluding to the lunatic asylum. "It was with exceeding concern and grief 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 .... 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 .... He only who ruleth the madness of the people can stop them from being a formed sect in a very little time." This letter faithfully presents the views of many a clergyman of the time.
Although some Anglican and Methodist writers have stated that Wesley did nothing that was inconsistent with the laws of the Established Church, it must be granted that his "irregularities" were calculated to alarm the "orderly" prelates of his day. When he organized his societies, built and registered meeting-houses for worship, and, later, ordained ministers not only to preach, but to administer the sacraments, he practically separated from the State Church in the eyes of orderly clergy. His brother Samuel, as we have seen, very early called his action "schismatic." A recent Methodist newspaper observes that there could be no more curious illustration of the way in which our wishes can destroy our logic than the fact that Wesley persuaded himself to the end that he had not separated from the Church of England. Abel Stevens, breathing the free air of the New World, has said that English writers have deemed it desirable, and have not found it a difficult task, to defend Wesley against imputations of disregard for the authority and "order" of the State Church, "but it may hereafter be more difficult to defend him before the rest of the

Christian world for having been so deferential to a hierarchy whose moral condition at the time he so much denounced, and whose studied policy throughout the rest of his life was to disown if not to defeat him."

Within five weeks of John Wesley's return from Germany he and his brother Charles were summoned before the Bishop of London, Dr. Edmund Gibson, and questioned with great strictness. When the Wesley brothers appeared before him, charged with preaching an absolute assurance of salvation, he heard them fairly, and said: "If by assurance you mean an inward persuasion whereby a man is conscious in himself, after examining his life by the law of God and weighing his own sincerity, that he is in a state of salvation, and acceptable to God, I don't see how any good Christian can be without such an assurance." To the charge of preaching justification by faith only, the Wesleys replied: "Can anyone preach otherwise who agrees to our Church and the Scriptures" John Wesley inquired if his reading in a religious society made it a conventicle. The bishop warily replied: "No, I think not. However, you can read the acts and laws as well as I. I determine nothing." But in 1739 the bishop issued a pastoral letter in which he charges the Methodists with "enthusiasm," or "a strong persuasion in their mind that they are guided in an extraordinary manner by immediate impulses and impressions of the Spirit of God." They were guilty of "boasting of sudden and surprising effects, wrought by the Holy Ghost, in consequence of their preaching." He supported the churchwardens of Islington against their vicar and excluded Charles Wesley from the pulpit.

We find John Wesley again facing the bishop in 1740. What did he mean by perfection was the question. When Wesley had replied, the bishop said, "Mr. Wesley, if this be all you mean, publish it to the world." And Wesley gladly obeyed by publishing his sermon on Christian Perfection. But a little later the rise of the societies and the field-preaching, with its sensational accompaniments, again alarmed the bishop. He wrote a pamphlet against this "sect," in which he charged them with "having had the boldness to preach in the fields and other open places, and inviting the rabble to be their hearers," in

defiance of a statute of Charles II. Wesley replied in his “Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion.” He declares that the clergy, who will not suffer him to preach in the churches, are accountable for his preaching in the fields. Besides, "one plain reason why these sinners are never reclaimed is this, they never come into a church. Will you say, as some tender-hearted Christians I have heard, 'Then it is their own fault; let them die and be damned!' I grant it may be their own fault, but the Saviour of souls came after us, and so we ought to seek to save that which is lost." The able and sincere Bishop Gibson could not shake himself free from the prejudices and Church "order" which stood in the way of the salvation of the despised "rabble," and in another of his pastorals he classes the Methodists with "deists, papists, and other disturbers of the kingdom of God."

Bishop Butler, author of the great Analogy, summoned Wesley, and after a conversation on justification by faith, for which the Methodist claimed the support of the Anglican Homilies, said:

"You have no business here; you are not commissioned to preach in this diocese. Therefore I advise you to go hence." "My Lord, my business on earth is to do what good I can," replied Wesley. "Wherever, therefore, I think I can do most good, there must I stay so long as I think so. At present I think I can do most good here; therefore here I stay.... Being ordained a priest, by the commission I then received I am a priest of the Church universal; and being ordained as fellow of a college, I was not limited to any particular cure, but have an indeterminate commission to preach the word of God in any part of the Church of England. I do not, therefore, conceive that in preaching here by this commission I break any human law. When I am convinced I do then it will be time to ask, 'Shall I obey God or man.' But if I should be convinced in the meanwhile that I could advance the glory of God and the salvation of souls in any other place more than in Bristol, in that hour, by God's help, I will go hence; which till then I may not do."

Wesley took his own time and did not leave Bristol until persuaded that it was his duty to labour elsewhere. There was a deluge of pamphlets and articles against the Methodists, in which Wesley was branded as "a restless deceiver of the people," "a newfangled teacher

setting up his own fanatical conceits in opposition to the authority of God," "a Jesuit in disguise," and, worst of all, "a Dissenter." The Methodists were denounced as "young quacks in divinity," "buffoons in religion," "bold movers of sedition, and ringleaders of the rabble." The magazines and newspapers conducted a hot crusade against them, "stirring up the people," writes Wesley, "to knock these mad dogs on the head at once;" and we shall find that mob violence soon followed these appeals of the press and censures of the prelates.

In answer to a clergyman who forbade his preaching in his parish, Wesley gave utterance to the famous saying which appears on the Wesley tablet in Westminster Abbey. He wrote: "God in Scripture commands me, according to my power, to instruct the ignorant, reform the wicked, confirm the virtuous. Man forbids me to do this in another's parish; that is, in effect, not to do it at all, seeing I have now no parish of my own, nor probably ever shall. Whom, then, shall I hear, God or man .....I look upon all the world as my parish; thus far I mean that, in whatever part of it I am, I judge it meet, right, and my bounden duty to declare unto all that are willing to hear the glad tidings of salvation. This is the work which I know God has called me to, and sure I am that his blessing attends it."

In 1742 John Wesley began to occupy a larger portion of his boundless parish. During the year he spent about twenty-four weeks in London, fourteen in Bristol and its neighbourhood, one in Wales, and thirteen in making two tours to Newcastle-on-Tyne, the metropolis of the busy North.

His own account of his Newcastle visit is graphic. He had never seen and heard before in so short a time so much drunkenness, cursing, and swearing - even from the mouths of little children. He writes:

At seven I walked down to Sandgate, the poorest and most contemptible part of the town, and, standing at the end of the street with John Taylor, began to sing the 100th psalm. Three or four people came out to see what was the matter, who soon increased to four or five hundred. I suppose there might be twelve or fifteen hundred before I had done preaching, to whom I applied those solemn words, "He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our

iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and by his stripes we are healed."
Observing the people, when I had done, to stand gaping and staring upon me with the most profound astonishment, I told them: "If you desire to know who I am, my name is John Wesley. At five in the evening, with God's help, I design to preach here again."
At five the hill on which I designed to preach was covered from the top to the bottom. I never saw so large a number of people together, either in Moorfields or at Kennington Common. I knew it was not possible for the one half to hear, although my voice was then strong and clear; and I stood so as to have them all in view, as they were ranged on the side of the hill. The word of God which I set before them was, "I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely." After preaching the poor people were ready to tread me under foot, out of pure love and kindness. It was some time before I could possibly get out of the press. I then went back another way than I came; but several were got to our inn before me, by whom I was vehemently importuned to stay with them, at least a few days, or, however, one day more. But I could not consent, having given my word to be at Bitstall, with God's care, on Tuesday night. Four months before his mother's death Wesley revisited his birthplace, Epworth. The curate was now Mr. Romley, who had been schoolmaster at Wroote, had been assisted by Wesley's father in preparing for Oxford, and had been his secretary and curate. On Sunday morning Wesley offered to assist Mr. Romley either by preaching or reading the prayers, but the curate would have none of his help. In the afternoon Wesley took his seat in the church, which was crowded in consequence of a rumour that he would preach. Romley preached a florid and rhetorical sermon against "enthusiasm" with evident reference to Methodism.
But the people were not to be disappointed. As they came out John Taylor announced that Mr. Wesley, not being permitted to preach in the church, would preach in the churchyard at six o'clock. At that hour he stood on his father's tombstone and preached to the largest congregation ever seen in Epworth. "The scene was unique and inspiring - a living son preaching on a dead father's grave because the

parish priest would not allow him to officiate in a dead father's church." "I am well assured," writes Wesley, "that I did far more good to my Lincolnshire parishioners by preaching three days on my father's tomb than I did by preaching three years in his pulpit."
He could not resist the appeal to remain a few days longer, and on eight evenings he preached from the tomb-pulpit. In the daytime he visited the surrounding villages. He waited on a justice of the peace, and writes of him as "a man of candour and understanding; before whom (I was informed) their angry neighbours had carried a whole wagon load of these heretics. But when he asked what they had done, there was a deep silence; for that was a point their conductors had forgot. At length one said, 'Why, they pretended to be better than other people; and, besides, they prayed from morning to night.' Mr. S. asked, ' But have they done nothing besides' 'Yes, sir,' said an old man; 'and please your worship, they have converted my wife. Till she went among them she had such a tongue! And now she is as quiet as a lamb.' 'Carry them back, carry them back!' replied the justice, 'and let them convert all the scolds in the town.'"
The churchyard services were attended with amazing power. On the Saturday evening Wesley's voice was drowned by the cries of penitents, and many then and there found rest for their souls. His last service at Epworth lasted three hours, and "yet," says Wesley, "we scarce knew how to part. O let none think his labour of love is lost because the fruit does not immediately appear! Near forty years did my father labour here; but he saw little fruit of all his labour. I took some pains among this people, too, and my strength almost seemed spent in vain; but now the fruit appeared. There were scarce any in the town on whom either my father or I had taken any pains formerly, but the seed sown long since now sprung up, bringing forth repentance and remission of sins."
The next year Wesley again visited Epworth, and, “it being a place under heaven where this should befall me first as my father's house, the place of my nativity, and the very place where, "according to the straitest sect of our religion," I had so long "lived a Pharisee," it was also fit, in the highest degree, that he who repelled me from that very

table where I had myself so often distributed the bread of life should be one who owed his all in this world to the tender love which my father had shown to his as well as personally to himself."
Methodism in Lincolnshire owes its organized churches to the service of Wesley in his father's churchyard. During the forty-eight years that followed Wesley made many visits to his native county, preaching in nearly all its towns and many of its villages. In 1761 he writes, "I find the work of God increases on every side, but particularly in Lincolnshire, where there has been no work like this since the time I preached on my father's tomb." His last visit to Epworth was paid just eight months before his death, when he preached in the market place to a large crowd on "How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation. " At the centenary of his death, in 1891, the Wesleyan Methodist societies of his native county reported a membership of twenty thousand, or one twentieth of the entire membership of the societies in England and Wales; and this in a county the entire population of which is considerably under half a million.

Susanna Wesley, "the mother of the Wesleys" and the "mother of Methodism," lived to see England awakening at the call of her devoted sons, and in the metropolis, the west, and the North of England she heard of multitudes quickened by the new life and enrolled in the new fellowship. The records of her closing days are brief. In the last letter she is known to have written she is rejoicing in the clear assurance which came to her so late in life: "He did by his Spirit apply the merits of the great atonement to my soul, by telling me that Christ died for me ....If I do want anything without which I cannot be saved (of which I am not at present sensible), then I believe I shall not die before that want is supplied."
Her son John was at Bristol when he heard that she was failing fast, and after preaching to a large congregation on Sunday evening, July 18, 1742, he rode off hurriedly to London. He reached the Foundry on the 20th, and wrote in his Journal, "I found my mother on the borders of eternity; but she has no doubt or fear, nor any desire but, as soon as God should call her, to depart and be with Christ." Fifteen years before,

she had told John that she did not want her children to weep at her parting from them, but if they "were likely to reap any spiritual advantage" by being present at her departure, she would be glad to have them with her. Charles was absent from London, but her five daughters were present, as well as John.

On the following Friday they saw that her end was near. John read the solemn commendatory prayer, as he had done seven years before for his father. It was four o'clock when he left her side for a moment to "drink a dish of tea," being faint and weary with watching and emotion. "One called me again to her bedside," he says, "She opened her eyes wide and fixed them upward for a moment. Then the lids dropped and the soul was set at liberty without one struggle or groan or sigh. We stood around the bed and fulfilled her last request, uttered a little before she lost her speech, "Children, as soon as I am released sing a psalm of praise to God!'"

She was buried in "the great Puritan necropolis," Bunhill Fields. A witness records: "At the grave there was much grief when Mr. Wesley said, 'I commit the body of my mother to the earth!'" Then a hymn was sung, and standing by the open grave Wesley preached to a vast congregation which he describes as "one of the most solemn assemblies I ever saw, or expect to see on this side eternity." His subject was "the great white throne" of the Book of the Revelation.