

Bible.

Steadily and surely the darkness of ignorance and superstition was dispelled by the blessed light of the gospel. Freed from Romish oppression, the nation attained to a strength and greatness it had never before reached. Sweden became one of the bulwarks of Protestantism. A century later, at a time of sorest peril, this small and hitherto feeble nation—the only one in Europe that dared lend a helping hand—came to the deliverance of Germany in the terrible struggles of the Thirty Years' War. All Northern Europe seemed about to be brought again under the tyranny of Rome. It was the armies of Sweden that enabled Germany to turn the tide of popish success, to win toleration for the Protestants,—Calvinists as well as Lutherans,—and to restore liberty of conscience to those countries that had accepted the Reformation.

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14. Later English Reformers.



While Luther was opening a closed Bible to the people of Germany, Tyndale was impelled by the Spirit of God to do the same for England. Wycliffe's Bible had been translated from the Latin text, which contained many errors. It had never been printed, and the cost of manuscript copies was so great that few but wealthy men or nobles could procure it; and furthermore, being strictly proscribed by the church, it had had a comparatively narrow circulation. In 1516, a year before the appearance of Luther's theses, Erasmus had published his Greek and Latin version of the New Testament. Now for the first time the word of God was printed in the original tongue. In this work many errors of former versions were corrected, and the sense was more clearly rendered. It led many among the educated classes to a better knowledge of the truth, and gave a new impetus to the work of reform. But the common people were still, to a great extent, debarred from God's word. Tyndale was to complete the work of Wycliffe in giving the Bible to his countrymen.

A diligent student and an earnest seeker for truth, he had received the gospel from the Greek Testament of Erasmus. He fearlessly preached his convictions, urging that all doctrines be tested by the Scriptures. To the papist claim that the church had given the Bible, and the church alone could explain it, Tyndale responded: "Do you know who taught the eagles to find their prey? Well, that same God teaches His hungry children to find their Father in His word. Far from having given us the Scriptures, it is you who have hidden them from us; it is you who burn those who teach them, and if you could, you would burn the Scriptures themselves."³⁶¹ [246]

Tyndale's preaching excited great interest; many accepted the truth. But the priests were on the alert, and no sooner had he left the field than they by their threats and misrepresentations

³⁶¹ D'Aubigné, b. 18, ch. 4.

endeavored to destroy his work. Too often they succeeded. "What is to be done?" he exclaimed. "While I am sowing in one place, the enemy ravages the field I have just left. I cannot be everywhere. Oh! if Christians possessed the Holy Scriptures in their own tongue, they could of themselves withstand these sophists. Without the Bible it is impossible to establish the laity in the truth."³⁶²

A new purpose now took possession of his mind. "It was in the language of Israel," said he, "that the psalms were sung in the temple of Jehovah; and shall not the gospel speak the language of England among us?... Ought the church to have less light at noonday than at the dawn?... Christians must read the New Testament in their mother-tongue." The doctors and teachers of the church disagreed among themselves. Only by the Bible could men arrive at the truth. "One holdeth this doctor, another that.... Now each of these authors contradicts the other. How then can we distinguish him who says right from him who says wrong?... How?... Verily by God's word."³⁶³

It was not long after that a learned Catholic doctor, engaging in controversy with him, exclaimed, "We were better to be without God's laws than the pope's." Tyndale replied, "I defy the pope and all his laws; and if God spare my life, ere many years I will cause a boy that driveth the plow to know more of the Scripture than you do."³⁶⁴

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The purpose which he had begun to cherish, of giving to the people the New Testament Scriptures in their own language, was now confirmed, and he immediately applied himself to the work. Driven from his home by persecution, he went to London, and there for a time pursued his labors undisturbed. But again the violence of the papists forced him to flee. All England seemed closed against him, and he resolved to seek shelter in Germany.

³⁶² Ibid.

³⁶³ Ibid.

³⁶⁴ Anderson, "Annals of the English Bible," p. 19 (rev. ed. 1862).

Here he began the printing of the English New Testament. Twice the work was stopped; but when forbidden to print in one city, he went to another. At last he made his way to Worms, where, a few years before, Luther had defended the gospel before the Diet. In that ancient city were many friends of the Reformation, and Tyndale there prosecuted his work without further hindrance. Three thousand copies of the New Testament were soon finished, and another edition followed in the same year.

With great earnestness and perseverance he continued his labors. Notwithstanding the English authorities had guarded their ports with the strictest vigilance, the word of God was in various ways secretly conveyed to London, and thence circulated throughout the country. The papists attempted to suppress the truth, but in vain. The bishop of Durham at one time bought of a bookseller who was a friend of Tyndale, his whole stock of Bibles, for the purpose of destroying them, supposing that this would greatly hinder the work. But on the contrary, the money thus furnished, purchased material for a new and better edition, which, but for this, could not have been published. When Tyndale was afterward made a prisoner, his liberty was offered him on condition that he would reveal the names of those who had helped him meet the expense of printing his Bibles. He replied that the bishop of Durham had done more than any other person; for by paying a large price for the books left on hand, he had enabled him to go on with good courage.

Tyndale was betrayed into the hands of his enemies, and at one time suffered imprisonment for many months. He finally witnessed for his faith by a martyr's death; but the weapons which he prepared have enabled other soldiers to do battle through all the centuries even to our time. [248]

Latimer maintained from the pulpit that the Bible ought to be read in the language of the people. The Author of Holy Scripture, said he, "is God Himself;" and this Scripture partakes of the might and eternity of its Author. "There is no king, emperor,

magistrate, and ruler ... but are bound to obey ... His holy word.”
 “Let us not take any by-walks, but let God's word direct us: let us not walk after ... our forefathers, nor seek not what they did, but what they should have done.”³⁶⁵

Barnes and Frith, the faithful friends of Tyndale, arose to defend the truth. The Riddleys and Cranmer followed. These leaders in the English Reformation were men of learning, and most of them had been highly esteemed for zeal or piety in the Romish communion. Their opposition to the papacy was the result of their knowledge of the errors of the “holy see.” Their acquaintance with the mysteries of Babylon, gave greater power to their testimonies against her.

“Now I would ask a strange question,” said Latimer. “Who is the most diligent bishop and prelate in all England? ... I see you listening and hearkening that I should name him.... I will tell you: it is the devil.... He is never out of his diocese; ... call for him when you will, he is ever at home; ... he is ever at his plow.... Ye shall never find him idle, I warrant you.... Where the devil is resident, ... there away with books, and up with candles; away with Bibles, and up with beads; away with the light of the gospel, and up with the light of candles, yea, at noondays; ... down with Christ's cross, up with purgatory pick-purse; ... away with clothing the naked, the poor, and impotent, up with decking of images and gay garnishing of stocks and stones; up with man's traditions and his laws, down with God's traditions and His most holy word.... O that our prelates would be as diligent to sow the corn of good doctrine, as Satan is to sow cockle and darnel!”³⁶⁶

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The grand principle maintained by these Reformers—the same that had been held by the Waldenses, by Wycliffe, by John Huss, by Luther, Zwingle, and those who united with them—was the infallible authority of the Holy Scriptures as a rule of faith and

³⁶⁵ Latimer, “First Sermon Preached before King Edward VI.” (ed. Parker Society).

³⁶⁶ Latimer, “Sermon of the Plough.”

practice. They denied the right of popes, councils, Fathers, and kings, to control the conscience in matters of religion. The Bible was their authority, and by its teaching they tested all doctrines and all claims. Faith in God and His word sustained these holy men as they yielded up their lives at the stake. "Be of good comfort," exclaimed Latimer to his fellow-martyr as the flames were about to silence their voices, "we shall this day light such a candle, by God's grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out."³⁶⁷

In Scotland the seeds of truth scattered by Columba and his co-laborers had never been wholly destroyed. For hundreds of years after the churches of England submitted to Rome, those of Scotland maintained their freedom. In the twelfth century, however, popery became established here, and in no country did it exercise a more absolute sway. Nowhere was the darkness deeper. Still there came rays of light to pierce the gloom, and give promise of the coming day. The Lollards, coming from England with the Bible and the teachings of Wycliffe, did much to preserve the knowledge of the gospel, and every century had its witnesses and martyrs.

With the opening of the Great Reformation came the writings of Luther, and then Tyndale's English New Testament. Unnoticed by the hierarchy, these messengers silently traversed the mountains and valleys, kindling into new life the torch of truth so nearly extinguished in Scotland, and undoing the work which Rome for four centuries of oppression had done.

Then the blood of martyrs gave fresh impetus to the movement. The papist leaders, suddenly awakening to the danger that threatened their cause, brought to the stake some of the noblest and most honored of the sons of Scotland. They did but erect a pulpit, from which the words of these dying witnesses were heard throughout the land, thrilling the souls of the people with [250]

³⁶⁷ "Works of Hugh Latimer," Vol. I, p. xiii (ed. Parker Society).

an undying purpose to cast off the shackles of Rome.

Hamilton and Wishart, princely in character as in birth, with a long line of humbler disciples, yielded up their lives at the stake. But from the burning pile of Wishart there came one whom the flames were not to silence, one who under God was to strike the death-knell of popery in Scotland.

John Knox had turned away from the traditions and mysticisms of the church, to feed upon the truths of God's word; and the teaching of Wishart had confirmed his determination to forsake the communion of Rome, and join himself to the persecuted Reformers.

Urged by his companions to take the office of preacher, he shrunk with trembling from its responsibility, and it was only after days of seclusion and painful conflict with himself that he consented. But having once accepted the position, he pressed forward with inflexible determination and undaunted courage as long as life continued. This true-hearted Reformer feared not the face of man. The fires of martyrdom, blazing around him, served only to quicken his zeal to greater intensity. With the tyrant's axe held menacingly over his head, he stood his ground, striking sturdy blows on the right hand and on the left to demolish idolatry.

When brought face to face with the queen of Scotland, in whose presence the zeal of many a leader of the Protestants had abated, John Knox bore unswerving witness for the truth. He was not to be won by caresses; he quailed not before threats. The queen charged him with heresy. He had taught the people to receive a religion prohibited by the state, she declared, and had thus transgressed God's command enjoining subjects to obey their princes. Knox answered firmly:

“As right religion took neither original strength nor authority from worldly princes, but from the eternal God alone, so are not subjects bound to frame their religion according to the appetites of their princes. For oft it is that princes are the most ignorant

of all others in God's true religion.... If all the seed of Abraham had been of the religion of Pharaoh, whose subjects they long were, I pray you, madam, what religion would there have been in the world? Or if all men in the days of the apostles had been of the religion of the Roman emperors, what religion would there have been upon the face of the earth?... And so, madam, ye may perceive that subjects are not bound to the religion of their princes, albeit they are commanded to give them obedience.”

Said Mary, “Ye interpret the Scriptures in one manner, and they [the Roman Catholic teachers] interpret in another; whom shall I believe, and who shall be judge?”

“Ye shall believe God, that plainly speaketh in His word,” answered the Reformer; “and farther than the Word teaches you, ye neither shall believe the one nor the other. The word of God is plain in itself; and if there appear any obscurity in one place, the Holy Ghost, which is never contrary to Himself, explains the same more clearly in other places, so that there can remain no doubt but unto such as obstinately remain ignorant.”³⁶⁸

Such were the truths that the fearless Reformer, at the peril of his life, spoke in the ear of royalty. With the same undaunted courage he kept to his purpose, praying and fighting the battles of the Lord, until Scotland was free from popery.

In England the establishment of Protestantism as the national religion diminished, but did not wholly stop, persecution. While many of the doctrines of Rome had been renounced, not a few of its forms were retained. The supremacy of the pope was rejected, but in his place the monarch was enthroned as the head of the church. In the service of the church there was still a wide departure from the purity and simplicity of the gospel. The great principle of religious liberty was not as yet understood. Though the horrible cruelties which Rome employed against heresy were resorted to but rarely by Protestant rulers, yet the

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³⁶⁸ Laing, “Works of John Knox,” Vol. II. pp. 281, 284 (ed. 1895).

right of every man to worship God according to the dictates of his own conscience was not acknowledged. All were required to accept the doctrines and observe the forms of worship prescribed by the established church. Dissenters suffered persecution, to a greater or less extent, for hundreds of years.

In the seventeenth century thousands of pastors were expelled from their positions. The people were forbidden, on pain of heavy fines, imprisonment, and banishment, to attend any religious meetings except such as were sanctioned by the church. Those faithful souls who could not refrain from gathering to worship God, were compelled to meet in dark alleys, in obscure garrets, and at some seasons in the woods at midnight. In the sheltering depths of the forest, a temple of God's own building, those scattered and persecuted children of the Lord assembled to pour out their souls in prayer and praise. But despite all their precautions, many suffered for their faith. The jails were crowded. Families were broken up. Many were banished to foreign lands. Yet God was with His people, and persecution could not prevail to silence their testimony. Many were driven across the ocean to America, and here laid the foundations of civil and religious liberty which have been the bulwark and glory of this country.

Again, as in apostolic days, persecution turned out to the furtherance of the gospel. In a loathsome dungeon crowded with profligates and felons, John Bunyan breathed the very atmosphere of heaven; and there he wrote his wonderful allegory of the pilgrim's journey from the land of destruction to the celestial city. For over two hundred years that voice from Bedford jail has spoken with thrilling power to the hearts of men. Bunyan's "Pilgrim's Progress" and "Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners" have guided many feet into the path of life.

Baxter, Flavel, Alleine, and other men of talent, education, and deep Christian experience, stood up in valiant defense of the faith which was once delivered to the saints. The work

accomplished by these men, proscribed and outlawed by the rulers of this world, can never perish. Flavel's "Fountain of Life" and "Method of Grace" have taught thousands how to commit the keeping of their souls to Christ. Baxter's "Reformed Pastor" has proved a blessing to many who desire a revival of the work of God, and his "Saints' Everlasting Rest" has done its work in leading souls to the "rest that remaineth for the people of God."

A hundred years later, in a day of great spiritual darkness, Whitefield and the Wesleys appeared as light-bearers for God. Under the rule of the established church, the people of England had lapsed into a state of religious declension hardly to be distinguished from heathenism. Natural religion was the favorite study of the clergy, and included most of their theology. The higher classes sneered at piety, and prided themselves on being above what they called its fanaticism. The lower classes were grossly ignorant, and abandoned to vice, while the church had no courage or faith any longer to support the downfallen cause of truth.

The great doctrine of justification by faith, so clearly taught by Luther, had been almost wholly lost sight of; and the Romish principle of trusting to good works for salvation, had taken its place. Whitefield and the Wesleys, who were members of the established church, were sincere seekers for the favor of God, and this they had been taught was to be secured by a virtuous life and an observance of the ordinances of religion.

When Charles Wesley at one time fell ill, and anticipated that death was approaching, he was asked upon what he rested his hope of eternal life. His answer was, "I have used my best endeavors to serve God." As the friend who had put the question seemed not to be fully satisfied with his answer, Wesley thought, "What! are not my endeavors a sufficient ground of hope? Would he rob me of my endeavors? I have nothing else to trust to."³⁶⁹

³⁶⁹ Whitehead, John, "Life of the Rev. Charles Wesley," p. 102 (2d Am. ed. 1845).

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Such was the dense darkness that had settled down on the church, hiding the atonement, robbing Christ of His glory, and turning the minds of men from their only hope of salvation,—the blood of the crucified Redeemer.

Wesley and his associates were led to see that true religion is seated in the heart, and that God's law extends to the thoughts as well as to the words and actions. Convinced of the necessity of holiness of heart, as well as correctness of outward deportment, they set out in earnest upon a new life. By the most diligent and prayerful efforts they endeavored to subdue the evils of the natural heart. They lived a life of self-denial, charity, and humiliation, observing with great rigor and exactness every measure which they thought could be helpful to them in obtaining what they most desired,—that holiness which could secure the favor of God. But they did not obtain the object which they sought. In vain were their endeavors to free themselves from the condemnation of sin or to break its power. It was the same struggle which Luther had experienced in his cell at Erfurt. It was the same question which had tortured his soul,—“How should man be just before God?”³⁷⁰

The fires of divine truth, well-nigh extinguished upon the altars of Protestantism, were to be rekindled from the ancient torch handed down the ages by the Bohemian Christians. After the Reformation, Protestantism in Bohemia had been trampled out by the hordes of Rome. All who refused to renounce the truth were forced to flee. Some of these, finding refuge in Saxony, there maintained the ancient faith. It was from the descendants of these Christians that light came to Wesley and his associates.

John and Charles Wesley, after being ordained to the ministry, were sent on a mission to America. On board the ship was a company of Moravians. Violent storms were encountered on the passage, and John Wesley, brought face to face with death, felt

³⁷⁰ Job 9:2 (margin).

that he had not the assurance of peace with God. The Germans, on the contrary, manifested a calmness and trust to which he was a stranger.

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“I had long before,” he says, “observed the great seriousness of their behavior. Of their humility they had given a continual proof, by performing those servile offices for the other passengers which none of the English would undertake; for which they desired and would receive no pay, saying it was good for their proud hearts, and their loving Saviour had done more for them. And every day had given them occasion of showing a meekness which no injury could move. If they were pushed, struck, or thrown down, they rose again and went away; but no complaint was found in their mouth. There was now an opportunity of trying whether they were delivered from the spirit of fear, as well as from that of pride, anger, and revenge. In the midst of the psalm wherewith their service began, the sea broke over, split the mainsail in pieces, covered the ship, and poured in between the decks as if the great deep had already swallowed us up. A terrible screaming began among the English. The Germans calmly sung on. I asked one of them afterward, ‘Were you not afraid?’ He answered, ‘I thank God, no,’ I asked, ‘But were not your women and children afraid?’ He replied mildly, ‘No; our women and children are not afraid to die.’”³⁷¹

Upon arriving in Savannah, Wesley for a short time abode with the Moravians, and was deeply impressed with their Christian deportment. Of one of their religious services, in striking contrast to the lifeless formalism of the Church of England, he wrote: “The great simplicity as well as solemnity of the whole almost made me forget the seventeen hundred years between, and imagine myself in one of those assemblies where form and state were not; but Paul, the tent-maker, or Peter, the fisherman, presided; yet with the demonstration of the Spirit and of power.”³⁷²

³⁷¹ Whitehead, “Life of the Rev. John Wesley,” p. 10 (Am. ed. 1845).

³⁷² *Idem*, pp. 11, 12.

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On his return to England, Wesley, under the instruction of a Moravian preacher, arrived at a clearer understanding of Bible faith. He was convinced that he must renounce all dependence upon his own works for salvation, and must trust wholly to the "Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world." At a meeting of the Moravian society in London, a statement was read from Luther, describing the change which the Spirit of God works in the heart of the believer. As Wesley listened, faith was kindled in his soul. "I felt my heart strangely warmed," he says. "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."³⁷³

Through long years of wearisome and comfortless striving,—years of rigorous self-denial, of reproach and humiliation,—Wesley had steadfastly adhered to his one purpose of seeking God. Now he had found Him; and he found that the grace which he had toiled to win by prayers and fasts, by almsdeeds and self-abnegation, was a gift, "without money, and without price."

Once established in the faith of Christ, his whole soul burned with the desire to spread everywhere a knowledge of the glorious gospel of God's free grace. "I look upon all the world as my parish," he said; "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."³⁷⁴

He continued his strict and self-denying life, not now as the *ground*, but the *result* of faith; not the *root*, but the *fruit* of holiness. The grace of God in Christ is the foundation of the Christian's hope, and that grace will be manifested in obedience. Wesley's life was devoted to the preaching of the great truths which he had received,—justification through faith in the atoning blood of Christ, and the renewing power of the Holy Spirit upon

³⁷³ Whitehead, "Life of John Wesley," p. 52.

³⁷⁴ Idem, p. 74.

the heart, bringing forth fruit in a life conformed to the example of Christ.

Whitefield and the Wesleys had been prepared for their work by long and sharp personal convictions of their own lost condition; and that they might be able to endure hardness as good soldiers of Christ, they had been subjected to the fiery ordeal of scorn, derision, and persecution, both in the university and as they were entering the ministry. They and a few others who sympathized with them were contemptuously called Methodists by their ungodly fellow-students,—a name which is at the present time regarded as honorable by one of the largest denominations in England and America. [257]

As members of the Church of England, they were strongly attached to her forms of worship, but the Lord had presented before them in His word a higher standard. The Holy Spirit urged them to preach Christ and Him crucified. The power of the Highest attended their labors. Thousands were convicted and truly converted. It was necessary that these sheep be protected from ravening wolves. Wesley had no thought of forming a new denomination, but he organized them under what was called the Methodist Connection.

Mysterious and trying was the opposition which these preachers encountered from the established church; yet God, in His wisdom, had overruled events to cause the reform to begin within the church itself. Had it come wholly from without, it would not have penetrated where it was so much needed. But as the revival preachers were churchmen, and labored within the pale of the church wherever they could find opportunity, the truth had an entrance where the doors would otherwise have remained closed. Some of the clergy were roused from their moral stupor, and became zealous preachers in their own parishes. Churches that had been petrified by formalism were quickened into life.

In Wesley's time, as in all ages of the church's history, men of different gifts performed their appointed work. They did not

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harmonize upon every point of doctrine, but all were moved by the Spirit of God, and united in the absorbing aim to win souls to Christ. The differences between Whitefield and the Wesleys threatened at one time to create alienation; but as they learned meekness in the school of Christ, mutual forbearance and charity reconciled them. They had no time to dispute, while error and iniquity were teeming everywhere, and sinners were going down to ruin.

The servants of God trod a rugged path. Men of influence and learning employed their powers against them. After a time many of the clergy manifested determined hostility, and the doors of the churches were closed against a pure faith and those who proclaimed it. The course of the clergy in denouncing them from the pulpit, aroused the elements of darkness, ignorance, and iniquity. Again and again did John Wesley escape death by a miracle of God's mercy. When the rage of the mob was excited against him, and there seemed no way of escape, an angel in human form came to his side, the mob fell back, and the servant of Christ passed in safety from the place of danger.

Of his deliverance from the enraged mob on one of these occasions, Wesley said: "Many endeavored to throw me down while we were going down hill on a slippery path to the town; as well judging that if I was once on the ground, I should hardly rise any more. But I made no stumble at all, nor the least slip, till I was entirely out of their hands.... Although many strove to lay hold on my collar or clothes, to pull me down, they could not fasten at all: only one got fast hold of the flap of my waistcoat, which was soon left in his hand; the other flap, in the pocket of which was a bank-note, was torn but half off.... A lusty man just behind, struck at me several times, with a large oaken stick; with which if he had struck me once on the back part of my head, it would have saved him all further trouble. But every time the blow was turned aside, I know not how; for I could not move to the right hand or left.... Another came rushing through the press,

and raising his arm to strike, on a sudden let it drop, and only stroked my head, saying, ‘What soft hair he has!’ ... The very first men whose hearts were turned were the heroes of the town, the captains of the rabble on all occasions, one of them having been a prize-fighter at the bear-gardens.... [259]

“By how gentle degrees does God prepare us for His will! Two years ago, a piece of brick grazed my shoulders. It was a year after that the stone struck me between the eyes. Last month I received one blow, and this evening two, one before we came into the town, and one after we were gone out; but both were as nothing: for though one man struck me on the breast with all his might, and the other on the mouth with such a force that the blood gushed out immediately, I felt no more pain from either of the blows than if they had touched me with a straw.”³⁷⁵

The Methodists of those early days—people as well as preachers—endured ridicule and persecution, alike from church-members and from the openly irreligious who were inflamed by their misrepresentations. They were arraigned before courts of justice—such only in name, for justice was rare in the courts of that time. Often they suffered violence from their persecutors. Mobs went from house to house, destroying furniture and goods, plundering whatever they chose, and brutally abusing men, women, and children. In some instances, public notices were posted, calling upon those who desired to assist in breaking the windows and robbing the houses of the Methodists, to assemble at a given time and place. These open violations of both human and divine law were allowed to pass without a reprimand. A systematic persecution was carried on against a people whose only fault was that of seeking to turn the feet of sinners from the path of destruction to the path of holiness.

Said John Wesley, referring to the charges against himself and his associates: “Some allege that the doctrines of these men are

³⁷⁵ Wesley's Works, Vol. III, pp. 297, 298 (ed. 1831).

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false, erroneous, and enthusiastic; that they are new and unheard-of till of late; that they are Quakerism, fanaticism, popery. This whole pretense has been already cut up by the roots, it having been shown at large that every branch of this doctrine is the plain doctrine of Scripture interpreted by our own church. Therefore it cannot be either false or erroneous, provided the Scripture be true." "Others allege, 'Their doctrine is too strict; they make the way to heaven too narrow.' And this is in truth the original objection, (as it was almost the only one for some time,) and is secretly at the bottom of a thousand more, which appear in various forms. But do they make the way to heaven any narrower than our Lord and His apostles made it? Is their doctrine stricter than that of the Bible? Consider only a few plain texts: 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy mind, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength.' 'For every idle word which men shall speak, they shall give an account in the day of judgment.' 'Whether ye eat, or drink, or whatever ye do, do all to the glory of God.'

"If their doctrine is stricter than this, they are to blame; but you know in your conscience it is not. And who can be one jot less strict without corrupting the word of God? Can any steward of the mysteries of God be found faithful if he change any part of that sacred depositum? No. He can abate nothing, he can soften nothing; he is constrained to declare to all men, 'I may not bring down the Scripture to your taste. You must come up to it, or perish forever.' This is the real ground of that other popular cry concerning 'the uncharitableness of these men.' Uncharitable, are they? In what respect? Do they not feed the hungry and clothe the naked? 'No; that is not the thing: they are not wanting in this: but they are so uncharitable in judging! they think none can be saved but those of their own way.'"³⁷⁶

The spiritual declension which had been manifest in England

³⁷⁶ Wesley's Works, Vol. III, pp. 152, 153.

just before the time of Wesley, was in great degree the result of Antinomian teaching. Many affirmed that Christ had abolished the moral law, and that Christians are therefore under no obligation to observe it; that a believer is freed from the “bondage of good works.” Others, though admitting the perpetuity of the law, declared that it was unnecessary for ministers to exhort the people to obedience of its precepts, since those whom God had elected to salvation would, “by the irresistible impulse of divine grace, be led to the practice of piety and virtue,” while those who were doomed to eternal reprobation “did not have power to obey the divine law.” [261]

Others, also holding that “the elect cannot fall from grace nor forfeit the divine favor,” arrived at the still more hideous conclusion that “the wicked actions they commit are not really sinful, nor to be considered as instances of their violation of the divine law, and that consequently they have no occasion either to confess their sins or to break them off by repentance.”³⁷⁷ Therefore, they declared that even one of the vilest of sins, “considered universally an enormous violation of the divine law, is not a sin in the sight of God,” if committed by one of the elect, “because it is one of the essential and distinctive characteristics of the elect, that they cannot do anything that is either displeasing to God or prohibited by the law.”

These monstrous doctrines are essentially the same as the later teaching of popular educators and theologians,—that there is no unchangeable divine law as the standard of right, but that the standard of morality is indicated by society itself, and has constantly been subject to change. All these ideas are inspired by the same master-spirit,—by him who, even among the sinless inhabitants of heaven, began his work of seeking to break down the righteous restraints of the law of God.

The doctrine of the divine decrees, unalterably fixing the char-

³⁷⁷ McClintock and Strong's Cyclopædia, art. Antinomians (ed. 1871).

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acter of men, had led many to a virtual rejection of the law of God. Wesley steadfastly opposed the errors of the Antinomian teachers, and showed that this doctrine which led to Antinomianism was contrary to the Scriptures. “The grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to *all men*.” “This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour; who will have *all men* to be saved; and to come unto the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; who gave Himself a ransom for *all*.”³⁷⁸ The Spirit of God is freely bestowed, to enable every man to lay hold upon the means of salvation. Thus Christ, “the true Light,” “lighteth every man that cometh into the world.”³⁷⁹ Men fail of salvation through their own wilful refusal of the gift of life.

In answer to the claim that at the death of Christ the precepts of the decalogue had been abolished with the ceremonial law, Wesley said: “The moral law, contained in the ten commandments and enforced by the prophets, He did not take away. It was not the design of His coming to revoke any part of this. This is a law which never can be broken, which ‘stands fast as the faithful witness in heaven.’ ... This was from the beginning of the world, being ‘written not on tables of stone,’ but on the hearts of all the children of men, when they came out of the hands of the Creator. And however the letters once wrote by the finger of God are now in a great measure defaced by sin, yet can they not wholly be blotted out, while we have any consciousness of good and evil. Every part of this law must remain in force upon all mankind, and in all ages; as not depending either on time or place, or any other circumstances liable to change, but on the nature of God, and the nature of man, and their unchangeable relation to each other.

“‘I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil.’ ... Without question, His meaning in this place is (consistently with all that goes before

³⁷⁸ Titus 2:11; 1 Tim. 2:3-6.

³⁷⁹ John 1:9.

and follows after),—I am come to establish it in its fulness, in spite of all the glosses of men: I am come to place in a full and clear view whatsoever was dark or obscure therein: I am come to declare the true and full import of every part of it; to show the length and breadth, the entire extent, of every commandment contained therein, and the height and depth, the inconceivable purity and spirituality of it in all its branches.”³⁸⁰ [263]

Wesley declared the perfect harmony of the law and the gospel. “There is, therefore, the closest connection that can be conceived, between the law and the gospel. On the one hand, the law continually makes way for, and points us to, the gospel; on the other, the gospel continually leads us to a more exact fulfilling of the law. The law, for instance, requires us to love God, to love our neighbor, to be meek, humble, or holy. We feel that we are not sufficient for these things; yea, that ‘with man this is impossible:’ but we see a promise of God to give us that love, and to make us humble, meek, and holy: we lay hold of this gospel, of these glad tidings; it is done unto us according to our faith; and ‘the righteousness of the law is fulfilled in us,’ through faith which is in Christ Jesus....

“In the highest rank of the enemies of the gospel of Christ,” said Wesley, “are they who openly and explicitly ‘judge the law’ itself, and ‘speak evil of the law;’ who teach men to break (to dissolve, to loose, to untie the obligation of) not one only, whether of the least or of the greatest, but all the commandments at a stroke.... The most surprising of all the circumstances that attend this strong delusion, is that they who are given up to it, really believe that they honor Christ by overthrowing His law, and that they are magnifying His office while they are destroying His doctrine! Yea, they honor Him just as Judas did when he said, ‘Hail, Master, and kissed Him.’ And He may as justly say to every one of them, ‘Betrayest thou the Son of man with a

³⁸⁰ Wesley's Works, Sermon 25.

kiss?’ It is no other than betraying Him with a kiss, to talk of His blood, and take away His crown; to set light by any part of His law, under pretense of advancing His gospel. Nor indeed can any one escape this charge, who preaches faith in any such a manner as either directly or indirectly tends to set aside any branch of obedience: who preaches Christ so as to disannul, or weaken in any wise, the least of the commandments of God.”³⁸¹

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To those who urged that “the preaching of the gospel answers all the ends of the law,” Wesley replied: “This we utterly deny. It does not answer the very first end of the law, namely, the convincing men of sin, the awakening those who are still asleep on the brink of hell.” The apostle Paul declares that “by the law is the knowledge of sin;” “and not until man is convicted of sin, will he truly feel his need of the atoning blood of Christ.... ‘They that be whole,’ as our Lord Himself observes, ‘need not a physician, but they that are sick.’ It is absurd, therefore, to offer a physician to them that are whole, or that at least imagine themselves so to be. You are first to convince them that they are sick; otherwise they will not thank you for your labor. It is equally absurd to offer Christ to them whose heart is whole, having never yet been broken.”³⁸²

Thus while preaching the gospel of the grace of God, Wesley, like his Master, sought to “magnify the law, and make it honorable.” Faithfully did he accomplish the work given him of God, and glorious were the results which he was permitted to behold. At the close of his long life of more than fourscore years—above half a century spent in itinerant ministry—his avowed adherents numbered more than half a million souls. But the multitude that through his labors had been lifted from the ruin and degradation of sin to a higher and a purer life, and the number who by his teaching had attained to a deeper and richer experience, will never be known till the whole family of the redeemed shall be

³⁸¹ Ibid.

³⁸² Wesley's Works, Sermon 35.