

WESLEYAN METHODISM

1784 was the year in which the Leeds Conference of Wesleyans “set aside” Richard Whatcoat and Thomas Vasey to go to America as additional preachers together with Thomas Coke.

This Conference also set up “The Legal Hundred”-100 preachers who would have the powers to pass and enforce legislation and administer the property of Methodism after Wesley’s death.

1791 Following John Wesley’s death in March, the Wesleyans began to squabble amongst themselves. Some wanted things to go on as they were; another group urged reunion with the Anglican Church, while a third group wanted Methodism to be free from the Anglican Church with the Conference as the governing body and with members having a share of the government of a Wesleyan Church.

They agreed on one major issue – to elect a President and a Secretary of Conference by vote annually, to divide Methodism into Districts and to set up Committees to manage Methodism between Conferences.

1795 As dissent grew, the 1795 Conference sought an agreed way forward with a “Plan of Pacification.” Conference would continue to appoint preachers [this was some years before preachers had any formal training] and would publish financial statements. The Leaders’ Meeting of a Wesleyan Society would have the powers to admit and expel members and to appoint and displace stewards and to ask Conference to reconsider any rules to which they objected.

1795-1796 Alexander Kilham led the first rebellion by demanding that Methodists should administer the sacraments in their own chapels and laymen should share in the government of the Church. At this time Methodists still went to the Anglican Church to receive the sacraments. Kilham was expelled and was supported by representatives from Manchester, Huddersfield, Stockport and Sheffield. Totally isolated, they met in Leeds and formed a breakaway Church – the Methodist New Connexion.

1807 –1811 The Primitive Methodists broke from the Wesleyan Church

1815 In spite of these breakaway Churches being formed, the Wesleyan Church flourished with membership growing from 100,000 in 1796 to 200,000 in 1815. Much of this increase is attributed to the introduction of gas lighting in many towns and cities which encouraged people to attend Sunday evening services and week night meetings, as well as to the zeal of the Wesleyan preachers.

Jabez Bunting

For much of the first half of the Nineteenth Century, the Wesleyan Church was dominated by Jabez Bunting - President of the Conference on 4 occasions, Secretary of the Conference on 10 occasions, the founding father of the Missionary Society, a firm advocate of better training for the ministry and a powerful promoter of Wesleyan Sunday Schools and Day Schools. He also encouraged laymen to take an increasing share in the government of the Church, but didn’t allow them to question the authority of the Conference.

In this period, “travelling Preachers” became “ministers” and preachers who had travelled for 4 years were received into “Full Connexion” as Wesleyan ministers and given the authority to administer the sacraments in their Chapels.

The Wesleyans were prominent campaigners for the complete abolition of the Slave Trade and out of 354,000 signatories on an anti-slavery petition in 1830, 224,000 were Methodists.

1839 Wesleyan Methodism celebrated its Centenary - £220,000 was raised by the Centenary Fund from a membership of 420,178 which included members in missionary stations overseas and in Canada.

Sadly, Bunting became more and more authoritarian in his later years and in 1844 during his fourth Presidency declared that he would dissolve Conference because a resolution had been passed of which he did not approve. This attitude led to the publication of 4 anonymously written "Fly Sheets" which threatened to tear the Wesleyan Church apart.

The Fly Sheets

Between 1846 and 1848, four "Fly Sheets" were published anonymously in which the writers complained bitterly about officials who stayed too long in office, that many of the best men were permanently stationed in London, that officials were almost always chosen from London and that the Wesleyan Church was riddled with cliques and intrigues. The Fly Sheets also attacked the role of the President of Conference, the Connexional Committees, the role of the Legal Hundred and the Stationing Committee. In 1849, an equally scurrilous counterblast was published and the whole issue became a national topic. The Wesleyan Conference decided to flush out the anonymous authors of the Fly Sheets by instituting a "test" which all Wesleyan preachers had to sign. By the opening of the 1849 Conference, almost all the preachers had signed but a small number refused to sign largely on grounds of conscience. – were the anonymous authors among this group? Some evidence pointed to three ministers – James Everett, Samuel Dunn and William Griffith. They were challenged but neither admitted or denied the charge and in the end were expelled by the Conference. This decision was roundly condemned by the national press, especially by "The Times" which likened the Conference to the Star Chamber. There were mass meetings across the country which led to many members being expelled or resigning for sympathising with the three ministers. Within a year of the 1849 Conference decision, membership of the Wesleyan Church had fallen by 57,000 and by 1854 this figure had reached 100,000. Some of the dissenters followed the three ministers and joined the Wesleyan Methodist Association and the Protestant Methodists to form the United Methodist Free Churches. Others may have joined other Methodist Churches, but the majority were lost to Methodism and to the Church as a whole.

The bitterness arising from the Fly Sheets and the decision of the 1849 Conference affected all branches of Methodism. The Primitives who had been expanding rapidly gained only 1000 members between 1849-1854 while both the Methodist New Connexion and the Bible Christians reported decreased membership in this period.