TWO EARLY METHODISTS IN PRISON

by Maldwyn Edwards

The story of Methodism in Bradford, England, in John Wesley’s day falls into two parts. At first the Journal entries are distinctly depressing. There was not only opposition from outside but convulsion within. Benjamin Ingham, in charge of so many societies in that area, was unstable in his ideas. Moravianism in its less healthy aspects appealed to him, and his undeniable fervor and devotion only agitated and weakened Methodists the more. Wesley was forced to record after one visit that “not one soul was left in Bradford.” The feebly smoldering fire had gone out. What remained?

Suddenly came not a funeral dirge but a peal of bells. Wesley commented almost casually on a change in the mood of Bradford Methodism. On one visit all the crowd behaved well except the curate. On another visit he preached powerfully on the text, “One thing I do,” to a “quiet congregation” and after this meeting, Thomas Mitchell joined the society.

On May 29, 1755, Wesley found the people so quiet and responsive that he sought the reason, and recorded in his Journal the memorable words, “Such a change has God wrought in the hearts of the people since John Nelson was in the dungeon here.” Even after that date a certain W. Crabtree tried to inject his Calvinism and “perplexed and unsettled the minds of several,” but Wesley noted with quiet satisfaction that the people were “less ignorant of Satan’s devices.” A little later the disappointed left the society and Wesley said that all was peace. Henceforward his Journal speaks of great crowds and an eager response to his preaching. On one occasion he found the numbers were greater than any since he had left London. On his very last visit (1788) he rejoiced not only in a crowd as large as ever he had seen there, but one “deeply attentive.” He was doubly pleased to find that great numbers were waiting to hear him at five o’clock the next morning.

It is Wesley himself who gives John Nelson’s incarceration in the Bradford dungeon as the greatest single reason for the change from struggles to success. Preachers have often spoken of Paul in prison at Rome, or John Bunyan in Bedford jail, and described the good that came out of seeming adversity. They were prisoners, but the word of God was not bound. Bradford Methodists have an excellent reason for regarding John Nelson’s dungeon in their city as a dark place from which a great light shone.

In John Nelson’s Journal, written by himself, the story is simply and movingly told. He was a stonemason of Birstall who, coming to London, heard George Whitefield preach. “He was to me as a man who could play well on an instrument, for his preaching was pleasant. . . . but I did not understand him.” He likened himself to a
wandering bird cast out of the nest until John Wesley came to preach
his first sermon in Moorfield. “That was,” he said, “a blessed morning
to my soul.” His heart “beat like the pendulum of a clock.” When
Wesley had finished, John Nelson exclaimed, “This man can tell the
secrets of my heart but he hath not left me there; for he hath
showed me the remedy, even in the blood of Jesus.” From that time
John Nelson was a soldier of the Lord.

It was while Nelson was busily engaged in a twofold sense in
breaking stones that “the parson and ale-house keepers pressed him
for a soldier.” The case laid before the commissioners was that he had
no visible way of getting his living. Nelson protested that he had
been at his trade yesterday and all the week before and could earn
his living as well as any man in England. When he realized they
were not to be thwarted, he recorded that God kept his soul in
perfect peace.

Whilst Thou, O my God, art night,
My soul disdains to fear;
Sin and Satan I defy,
Still impotently near;

Earth and hell their wars may wage,
Calm I mark their vain design,
Smile to see them idly rage
Against a child of Thine.

Closely guarded, Nelson was taken to Halifax and then to Brad-
ford jail. When he came into the town many were distressed to see
him in such an unhappy plight. He said to them, “Fear not, God hath
His way in the whirlwind, and He will plead my cause. Only pray
for me, that my faith fail not.” Later he recorded that when he came
into the dungeon that stank worse than a hogstye by reason of the
blood and filth which sank from the butchers who killed over it, his
soul was so filled with the love of God that it was a paradise to him.
His first act on entering his cell was to fall down on his knees and
give thanks for the glorious liberty of the sons of God. He prayed
for his enemies and wished they were as happy in their own houses
as he was in the dungeon. At ten in the evening Methodist people
came to the dungeon door and brought some candles, as well as
forcing meat and water through the hole of the door. After he had
eaten, John Nelson and his friends sang hymns “almost all night;
they without and I within.” The man who shared the same straw in
the cell said wonderingly, “Pray sir, are all these your kinsfolk that
they love you so well? I think they are the most loving folk that I
ever saw in my life.” At four in the morning his wife and several
others came to the dungeon and spoke strong and comforting words
through the hole in the door. Slowly came the dawn and at 5 a.m. he
was taken out and brought to Leeds.
The long weeks slowly passed and Nelson still suffered hardship because he obstinately refused to be a soldier. Finally the efforts of John Wesley were successful and John Nelson was brought before the major. The major said to the officers in the room, "I wish all the men in the regiment would behave as well as Mr. Nelson has done since he has been amongst us; it would be better for us, and them too." Then the lieutenant added, "Indeed he has done much good since he came among us: for we have not had one third of the cursing and swearing in the regiment which we had before he came." To which the major replied, "I wish I had a regiment of such men as he is in all respects, save that of his refusing to fight: I would not care what enemy I had to meet or where my lot was cast."

John Nelson used his freedom to preach the Gospel at different towns until he came back to Birstall to see once more his wife and his children.

Wesley had seen John Nelson shortly before his release and had uttered prophetic words. He told Nelson to watch and pray and declared that his captivity would turn to the glory of God and the furtherance of the Gospel. The major and lieutenants were not the only ones to declare that his life and conversation had borne fruit even amongst his regiment, for on the night of his discharge several soldiers listened to his preaching. Some wept and said to Nelson, "We are glad you are set at liberty but sorry to part with you." When John Nelson revisited several of the places through which he had passed he found that many had been converted and the societies strengthened. In York, for example, he found nineteen had found peace with God, and twice as many were under conviction, though there had been no one to instruct them. But John Nelson does not mention Bradford. He could not have believed that one night's incarceration in a dungeon there would produce lasting results. Yet Wesley, years later, could attribute the change in Bradford to the way in which John Nelson accepted his sufferings joyfully as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. As he lay in the stench and filth of that foul dungeon he preached, by his serene assurance of God's mercy, a more powerful sermon than words could frame. It was a sermon which changed doubt into confidence and made a people in that town whom so often Wesley described as "alive unto God."

It was a glad day when a stonemason from Birstall was brought to Bradford jail as a prisoner and ordered by the captains to be put into the dungeon, in order, as John Wesley himself said, that the servant should not be above his Lord. The most honorable place in Bradford is one worse than a hogstye, where a man inside, and his friends outside, sang praises all night to the glory of God.

If in Wesleyan Methodism of Great Britain there is Bradford jail and the story of suffering accepted and transformed, the Primitive
Methodists remember how in Stafford jail a man was wrongly imprisoned for many long and weary months so that under rigorous treatment his body, but not his spirit, was broken. When he emerged, he discovered that by his stripes others had been healed. He preached a silent sermon that lasted two years to a congregation completely out of earshot. When it was over, his hearers were numbered by the thousand and the cause of true religion was quickened to a flame. To understand the story, however, one must understand the setting, for Joseph Capper cannot be separated from the struggles and aspirations of the people amongst whom his lot was cast. He lived and died in the Potteries and his life is a clue to the astonishing hold which Primitive Methodism exercised over the people in that area.

Those who visit the Potteries know that in all England there is not another area with such a strongly defined character. Part of the reason lies in the very name. Where the people are engaged directly or indirectly in one industry, they create traditions, habits and a common outlook which whilst binding them together serve also to separate them from the rest of the community.

The squat and ugly chimneys and the pall of smoke lying heavy over the six towns are no invitation to the casual visitor. It is true that a lovely countryside laps the area on every side and how eagerly the crowds must have streamed out to Mow Cop not only to hear those bold unconventional preachers and to share the fervor of camp meetings, but to “exchange beauty for ashes” by escaping into unspoiled hill and dale.

Wesleyanism, already grown respectable long before Wesley’s death, did not strike deep roots amongst a people subject to unnaturally hard conditions of labor with so little respite and so small reward. The camp meetings, however, brought the color, excitement and gaiety so greatly needed. Primitive Methodism satisfied the needs of an emotionally starved people; its rousing evangelical appeal assured the hard pressed workers of a standing in God’s eyes, and a place in His Kingdom, strangely at variance with their normal lot. The early struggles for recognition within a Wesleyanism suspicious of new techniques and unauthorized leadership only prompted the people, likewise suffering under authority, to support Hugh Bourne. The Liverpool Conference of 1807 condemned the Mow Cop camp meetings as “highly improper and likely to be of considerable mischief.” In June 1808, after the holding of a third camp meeting at Norton-on-the-Moors, Hugh Bourne was expelled by the Burslem Circuit Quarterly Meeting. Even so the societies formed by him were given loose protection, until in March 1810 the Burslem Circuit refused to take over the society at Stanley. In September of that year the Burslem society expelled William
Clowes for attending camp meetings. Many followed voluntarily out of sympathy and admiration for the man and his convictions. They met for worship in a house at Tunstall and for two years a weekly service was held. This “Kitchen Church” was strongly disapproved of by official Methodism in Burslem, and James Steele was deprived of his Sunday school superintendency and his leadership of two classes because he took part in a love feast there. These men, however, were not to be intimidated and soon the kitchen church became the head of a small circuit. In 1811 common cause was made with the Camp Meeting Methodists, and on May 30 it was decided to issue society tickets. At successive meetings in 1811 William Clowes and Crawfoot were set apart from the work of evangelism and on February 13, 1812, the title Primitive Methodism was adopted.

The work had begun in the Potteries and the leaders were local men. Their protest in one aspect had been in the name of liberty against authority. They protested against the inelasticity of Wesleyan Methodism and sought less stereotyped methods of reaching the people. They had more confidence in lay leadership and sought a wider democratic basis of government.

Small wonder that people in the Potteries, longing, however inarticulately, for a redress of grievances and wider freedom of opportunity, should find religious self-expression in this new and robust faith. The history of the Potteries cannot be understood without a knowledge of the way Primitive Methodism shaped the lives and outlook of the people. It gave to them a new sense of dignity and a quickened impatience against social and political wrong. It threw up leaders whose love of God and neighbor only sharpened their indictment against prevailing injustice. And so we come to the massive, compelling, strangely attractive figure of Joseph Capper.

He was converted at Mow Cop in 1807 and quickly became a local preacher when the Primitive Methodist Church was formed. Although he was so capable a blacksmith that his affairs prospered and he became the owner of two houses, nothing was allowed to interfere with his Sunday preaching and his week-night meetings. In the true tradition of John Wesley he was at once an evangelist and a social reformer. In the famous Reform Bill elections of 1832 he strenuously worked for the return of the Radical candidate, and was grievously disappointed when the two Tory candidates were elected. It made him ready to support the wider demands of the Chartists. He believed in the six heads of the Charter—universal suffrage, payment of members, ballot vote, abolition of property qualification, annual Parliaments, and equal electoral districts.

Those demands seem moderate now, and all the claims except one have been conceded. In Capper’s day, however, they had a subversive revolutionary ring, and he had his bitter enemies. He spoke
at many meetings and on June 24, 1842 he addressed a large crowd in the Tunstall market place. Like a good local preacher he announced a text, “To your tents O Israel,” and delivered a rousing oration on the need to fight for one's liberties. Joseph Capper had no sympathy with the “physical force” Chartists. Nevertheless it is easy to see how his words could be misinterpreted especially by the malicious and the over fearful. On August 15 he spoke with Thomas Cooper at a great meeting at the Crown Bank, Hanley. He urged the crowd peacefully but resolutely to secure their rights. Next day a mob, thousands strong, swept into Burslem and could not be dispersed until troops under Major Parry's command had opened fire. One man was killed and many wounded. Meanwhile Joseph Capper had returned to his anvil and had neither lot nor sympathy with the rioters. On the following Sunday he attended his chapel as usual and afterward was engaged in reading the Bible. His wife, his son and daughter were with him in this family worship when four men burst in without ceremony. “Well gentlemen,” said the old man, “what is your will?” Two seized him roughly. “You are the man we want, Joseph Capper.” His son, a man of more than ordinary strength, laid one of them low with a swinging blow. He would have dealt with the other had not his father restrained him by a quiet reproof. The old man offered no resistance and next morning was committed for trial on charges of sedition, conspiracy and rioting. In October he was tried and most unjustly sentenced to two years' imprisonment. After six months' rigorous imprisonment he was tried a second time, alongside Thomas Cooper, for conspiracy. Once again he defended himself and showed that fourteen witnesses he had brought to Stafford had to wait so long that they were compelled to return to work. He spoke of his desire for a better world not to be effected through force of arms but through the triumph of justice. Despite his sincere and moving words, his sentence was allowed to stand. He served his two years in Stafford jail and came out broken in health but as strong in his religious faith and political convictions as ever. The “Old Potter” writing of Capper's release, said that “as he went on his way through the Potteries home he was applauded by thousands who believed in his perfect innocence of the charge for which he had so cruelly suffered. In all the years of his life after this no man in Tunstall commanded more regard and honor and reverence.”

His friends were able on one notable occasion to show their esteem. A great meeting was held at Tunstall in 1850 so that the Papal Bull of 1850 conferring territorial titles on English Roman Catholic bishops could be burnt. “Old Capper” was selected as the one man to burn a copy of the bull. When he rose to speak, the whole company rose and cheered and cheered again. Indignation against the
papacy was most violent, but in three minutes it was lost in a spontaneous tribute from clergymen, magistrates and people assembled there, to the hero in their midst.

The old man spoke simply of the faith once delivered to the saints and then lit the paper and held it until the last shred feebly flickered away. Those present were dimly aware that the details of that meeting would not fade and that the memory would dwell most fondly on Joseph Capper who had spoken of a faith which he exemplified in his life.

The story of the Potteries cannot be separated from the stirring story of Primitive Methodism. And when the story is told the name of Joseph Capper will not be forgotten.

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