



DISCOVERY

Edited by
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A Challenging History

Looking over my bookshelves one day I took in my hands once more a slim volume entitled *For Ever Beginning, or Two Hundred Years of Methodism in the Western Area*. The "Western Area" is the West Indies particularly the section around Jamaica. On my shelves, next to this book, is a first edition of the three-volume study of the West Indies by Thomas Coke, and standing next to these is an original copy of *Extracts of the Journals of the Rev. Dr. Coke's Five Visits to America*. Combining these and other sources into one magnificent biography is another book, *Thomas Coke, Apostle of Methodism* by John Vickers. The six books form a library for study about Methodism in the West Indies.

Although the Coke pieces are valuable collectors' items, and the Vickers biography an outstanding work, I value especially the slim volume *For Ever Beginning*. On the front fly-leaf the following is written in a very neat flowing handwriting: "Dr. and Mrs. F. Maser Remembering their visit to the M.C.C.A. Conference Centre 2nd of February, 1972. Claude L. Cadogan, Secretary." Dr. Cadogan later became President of the Conference and gave strong, enlightened leadership to that body. He now is retired and living in Jamaica. The slim volume Dr. Cadogan presented to us is an exciting history of Methodism in the West Indies. If, in a Seminary library or elsewhere, you can find the book, which I understand is now out of print, it is worth a careful reading.

It is a significant fact that as with the beginnings of Methodism in America, laymen and laywomen took the leadership in establishing Methodism in the West Indies. Only after Methodism was firmly rooted did the regular clergy come to organize and strengthen its witness.

Nathaniel Gilbert is recognized as the founder of Methodism in the West Indies. He was the descendant of Sir Humphrey Gilbert, the English navigator. For a time he was Speaker of the House of Assembly in Antigua. He was greatly aided in his work for Methodism by his daughter Mary and Mrs. Gilbert. Later his brother Francis joined him in his work. Francis, after a wayward youth, was converted and aided his brother in the West Indies by conducting evangelistic campaigns. In addition, helping with work among the slaves was a slave-girl named "Bessie." She was probably the one converted under the preaching of John Wesley who said of her, "[She] rejoices in God her Saviour, and is the first African Christian I have known" (Journal, IV, 292).

Two other remarkable laymen were John Baxter and Black Harry. Baxter was a skilled shipwright from Chatham, England, who landed at Antigua on April 2, 1778. He was a Methodist local preacher who had heard of the work and later the death of Gilbert and came to the West Indies to give strength to the movement which was now without a leader. He worked at his trade during the day and preached and formed Methodist classes at night. Within a year he had gathered six hundred slaves into Society classes and retained the good will of their owners. He was greatly aided in his work by Mrs. Francis Gilbert who worked by his side for ten years. In 1783 he built the first Methodist chapel in the West Indies. In 1784, though not present at the organizing conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America held in Lovely Lane Chapel in Baltimore, he was elected an Elder and appointed to the West Indies. He was ordained by Thomas Coke in Baltimore the following summer. Thus, the Methodist Episcopal Church may have been the first Protestant denomination to appoint a minister to the West Indies.

The work of Thomas Coke in the West Indies is too well known to need rehearsal here; but little is known of the extensive work of a slave named Black Harry. When Coke came to St. Eustatius he found Methodism already planted through the preaching of Black Harry among the slaves. At first the Governor approved of Harry's work but later Black Harry's preaching alarmed the slave owners. When Coke arrived, Harry had been forbidden to preach and Coke himself was looked upon with suspicion.

By 1788, when Coke again returned to St. Eustatius, violent persecution had broken out. Black Harry was flogged, imprisoned in a lightless and airless cell known as "the sweater," and later banished, that is, sold to an owner in a distant land. The circumstances of Harry's treatment began, incredible as it seems, by a law against prayer. Part of the law read, "if a coloured man should be found praying—for the first offense he should receive thirty-nine lashes; and for the second, if free, he should be whipped and banished; but if a slave, be whipped every time." When Harry appeared before the Governor and Council for the "crime" of praying with people, one of the Council said, "Harry you must be flogged." He calmly replied, "Christ was flogged, and why should not I?"

The persecutions continued. Coke, himself, was asked to leave the island, and the Methodist Church was closed. For seventeen years St. Eustatius disappeared from the stations of Methodism.

A curious sidelight to the historical events is that the nephew of the Governor, disgusted by his uncle's cruelty, dedicated his life from his youth to the service of those whom his uncle had persecuted. He became a Methodist leader.

These are only a few incidents of an exciting history too little known among Methodists and Methodist historians.

The title of the slim volume is taken from what is purported to be a poem of Charles Wesley containing the words:

We all shall commend
The love of our Friend
FOR EVER BEGINNING what never shall end.