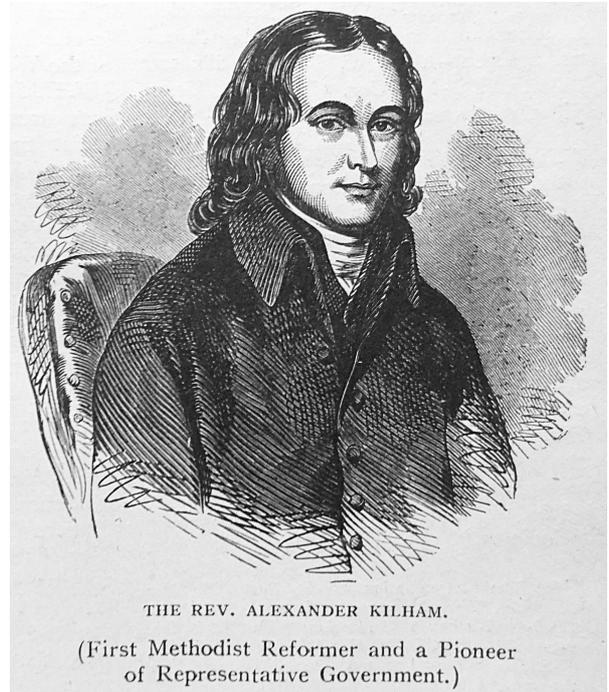


What Christian Democracy Owes to Methodism.
LIFE STORIES OF LEADERS OF THE PEOPLE: FROM WESLEY TO GUTTERY.
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II. _ALEXANDER KILHAM AND LAY RIGHTS IN GOVERNMENT.

THE English people have travelled a long way since Bishop Horsley (1733-1806), of the Anglican Church, delivered the dictum that all the people have to do with the laws of the country is to obey them. A Wesleyan Methodist statesman, the Rev. Dr. Jabez Bunting (1779-1858), a great and good man but gravely mistaken in this departure from Wesley's thought and Methodist principles, declared that "Methodism knows nothing of democracy; Methodism hates democracy as it hates sin." The horrors of the French Revolution, when Liberty became licence and caused a re-action towards rigid conservatism and the repression of natural rights and religious freedom, explain in large measure such utterances as these. That terrible cataclysm on the Continent of Europe alarmed the leaders of English thought and altruistic effort. They wished to do good to the people; but they were sincerely convinced that, if they were to survive to serve, they must keep all power in their own hands. During the last decade of the eighteenth century and the first quarter of the nineteenth, no reform, however innocent and beneficent, was welcomed by statements. Its chance of embodiment in law and regulation was much less. Napoleon, a genius and a tyrant, bestrode Europe like a colossus. The masses of the people, alike in the State and the State church, were expected to obey their rulers. The ancient Free Churches cherished the Scriptural idea of the Priesthood of Believers, with its counterpart of Christian Democracy; but as yet they were not strong enough to affect church life nor that "of the State and nation, generally.



A YOUNG PROPHET.

It was reserved for a young Methodist minister, the Rev. Alexander Kilham (1762-1798) to act as a pioneer in re-stating the principles of Christian Democracy as set forth by our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. He said:

“You are not to be called ‘rabbi,’ for One is your teacher, and you are all brothers; you are not to call any one ‘father’ on earth, for One is your heavenly Father; nor must you be called ‘leaders’ for One is your leader, even the Christ. He who is greatest among you must be your servant.”

Kilham and his coadjutor, the Rev. William Thom, found their ideas and authority in these words and in the simple government of the communities which arose from them—the churches of the New Testament, as recorded by the first church historian, St. Luke, in the Acts of the Apostles. There the apostles, preachers and people united in Church management—Acts vi, 1-6; xi, 22; xv; 1 Cor. xvi, 1-4; 2 Cor. vii, 18-21. Hence Kilham’s famous pronouncement—

Every member of the church is entitled to participate, either personally or representatively, in every act of its legislation and government.

The counterpart of this, in the life of the state and every local community, is constitutional government by duly appointed representatives. That these rights are now enjoyed by the British people, and are being extended throughout the Empire, is owing in no small measure to the people called Methodists, in co-operation with the ancient Free Churches and with all who practise New Testament principles.*

A TOILER AND SUFFERER.

Alexander Kilham and his works are worthy of study. They are almost unknown, even by many Methodists. That he was expelled by the Wesleyan Methodist Conference from its ministry in 1796, is a fact to be compared with the treatment of St. Paul by the Jewish community, and the treatment of pioneers and reformers generally.

*“The Organisation of the Early Christian Churches,” Hatch, Bampton Lectures, ed. 1909; “A New History of Methodism,” Vol. I., *in loc.*, especially pp. 485-502, 527-530; and “Wesley, Christian Philosopher and Church Founder,” by the present writer.

Kilham's chief fault was that he was before his time, or that he did not wait for the time-process to ripen. He was impatient with slow-moving Methodists who let "I dare not," wait upon "I would." Perhaps he had mystic awareness that the might would soon fall for him. He was only thirty-six when he died. That he was sincere and unselfish, sought nothing for himself, and was anxious only for the cause he espoused, is admitted by all. He was convinced, and I believe rightly convinced, that he was simply carrying out the principles of Wesley's work as Church Founder. These were referred to in our first article. Dr. Benjamin Gregory of the Wesleyan Methodist Church, stated (W.M. Mag., 1883, p. 466), that Methodism owes to Kilham's anticipations "the strict preliminary theological examination of Local Preachers, and the formation of a Local Preachers' Meeting; the strengthening of the Lay element in Methodist administration in the District meetings, in the Connexional Committees, and in the Representative Sessions of the Conference."

NEW TESTAMENT PRINCIPLES AT WORK.

Kilham, like Wesley, was a native of Epworth, Lincolnshire. He was first of all, and chiefly, an evangelist. Wesley called him out to travel as a Methodist preacher, and he was the coadjutor of Robert Carr Brackenbury, a Cambridge Neo-Platonist, minor poet, Methodist country gentleman and preacher. Kilham was an intrepid evangelist and a tireless student. It was while stationed in Aberdeen that he saw the representative principles of government in actual working in the Presbyterian churches there. The system showed the Church as self-governing and apart from State control. It united ministers, lay representatives and church members in law making and action. The people received the Sacraments at the hands of their own ministers in their own churches. These scriptural privileges were not then enjoyed by the Methodists. Kilham saw that only by their enjoyment of these could the Methodists be united in mind and heart, or deliver their testimony, or practise New Testament Church principles.

It became the work of Kilham to explore the New Testament and the early Christian writers and Wesley's principles on these matters of Church polity. It was his aim to unite the evangelical Arminian teaching of Wesley and Fletcher with the principles of presbyterian church government. This he did in the *Constitution* drawn up by himself and William Thom for the New Connexion Methodists. These were the first to secede from the body of Methodists. This occurred in 1797. Wesley died in 1791, six years before. Kilham was ordained by two Methodist ministers in the next year, 1792. His

was the first of such ordinations which we have traced. The memorial of Kilham's character, clear thinking and suffering, is the prevalence of Christian democratic government, in varying degrees, in all the Methodist Churches of the world.

CARRIED INTO POLITICS.

The same principles have been carried by Methodists into the spheres of local, national and international politics and government. At critical stages in their development, the British progressive political parties have been led or largely influenced by Methodist ministers, local preachers and similar workers. These have carried the principles of Christian democracy into the government of their own organizations and advocated the adoption of them by Parliament for the nation. The same has been true in the self-governing States of the British Empire. Strong connections, powers of exposition and expression, with their large and growing numbers, have made the people called Methodists the champions and servants of Christian democracy. All who have traced the underlying influences of progressive development towards orderly constitutional liberty and Christian democracy are aware of the large contribution made thereto by Methodists.

References

Primitive Methodist Magazine 1926/267