

THE

LIFE OF THE REV. JOHN WESLEY

BOOK FIRST.

CONTAINING AN ACCOUNT OF THE FAMILY.

CHAPTER I.

Of his Great Grandfather, and Grandfather Wesley.

So far as we can trace back any account of the family, Mr. Wesley's ancestors appear respectable for learning, conspicuous for piety, and firmly attached to those views of Christianity which they had formed from the sacred Scriptures. Bartholomew Wesley, his great grandfather, was educated in one of our universities, and afterwards held the living of Allington in Dorsetshire. When the act of uniformity took place in 1662, he was ejected from his living, and enrolled on the list of fame with those illustrious names, who chose rather to suffer the loss of all things than violate conscience. If we judge from the circumstances of the nation, and the temper of the people at this time, we shall be led to conclude, that the act of uniformity originated with a party; that it was founded in revenge, and had cruelty and oppression for its object. It was however, the means under God, of raising up a cloud of witnesses, who testified to the world by their sufferings, that religion is not a mere engine of the state, but something real, in comparison of which those who feel its influence count all other things but dung and dross. While in the university, Mr. Wesley had applied himself to the study of physic as well as divinity; a practice which had been frequent, and not then fallen wholly into disuse. He was often consulted as a physician while he held his living, and after his ejection applied himself chiefly to the practice of physic, though he still preached occasionally. It is said that he used a peculiar plainness of speech, which hindered him from becoming a popular preacher. He lived several years after he was silenced; but the death of his son, John Wesley, of whom I shall next speak, affected him so much, that he afterwards declined apace, and did not long survive him.*

* See Nonconformist's Memorial, vol. i. p. 442.

John Wesley, M. A., of New-Inn Hall Oxford, son of the above mentioned gentleman, was grandfather of the late Rev. John Wesley. We have no certain account of the time of his birth, nor of the year when he died. It pleased God to incline him to remember his Creator in the days of his youth, a circumstance which always affords comfort in the future part of life. He had a very humbling sense of sin, and a serious concern for his salvation when a school-boy; and soon after began to keep a diary, in which he recorded the remarkable instances of providential care over him, the method of God's dealings with his soul, and how he found his heart affected under the means of grace, and the occurrences of providence, whether prosperous and pleasing, or afflictive. This method he continued, with very little intermission, to the end of his life.*

During his stay at Oxford, he was taken notice of for his seriousness and diligence. He applied himself particularly to the study of the oriental languages, in which he made great progress. Dr. John Owen, who was at that time vice-chancellor, had a great regard for him, which affords strong evidence both of his abilities and piety at this early period of life. He began to preach occasionally at the age of twenty-two, and in May, 1658, was sent to preach at Whitchurch in Dorsetshire. Soon after the restoration, some of his neighbors gave him a great deal of trouble, because he would not read the common prayer. They complained of him to the Bishop of Bristol, and laid many heavy things to his charge. Mr. Wesley being informed that the bishop desired to speak with him, he waited on his lordship, and has recorded in his diary the conversation that took place on this occasion.

Mr. Wesley's defence of himself turns chiefly on two points, his allegiance to the king; and, his right to preach the Gospel without being ordained according to the rites of the established church. With respect to the first, he solemnly assures the bishop, that the things alleged against him were either invented or mistaken; that, whatever his bitter enemies might say against him, there were others who would give a different character of him; that Mr. Glisson had done it; and that Sir Francis Fulford, being his hearer, would acquit his lordship concerning him: that he did not think the old Nonconformists were his Majesty's enemies; and that he had conscientiously taken the oath of allegiance, and had faithfully kept it.

With respect to the second point, the bishop informs Mr. Wesley, that if he preached, it must be upon ordination, according to the order of the church of England. Mr. Wesley answers, that, if he meant by ordination the sending spoken of Rom. x., he had it; that he had a mission from God and man; but he was not satisfied in his

* I have taken some pains to discover whether this manuscript be anywhere preserved; but I have not obtained any satisfactory information concerning it. The extracts from it have been preserved by Calamy.

conscience concerning the ordination in the church of England. As to his abilities, he offers to submit to any examination his lordship would appoint; to give him a confession of his faith, or to take any other method that might be required. He then states the reasons which satisfied him, that he ought to preach. These are, 1. That he was devoted to the service from his infancy. 2. That he was educated for it, at school and in the university. 3. That, as a son of the prophets, after having taken his degrees, he preached in the country, being approved of by judicious, able Christians, ministers and others. 4. That it pleased God to seal his labors with success in the conversion of several souls from ignorance and profaneness, to the power of godliness; that such conversions had taken place wherever he had been called to preach; at Radpole, Melcomb, Turnwood, Whitchurch, and at sea. He declares, that if this was not found to be the case upon examination, he was willing to be discharged from his ministry. "I will stand or fall, says he, on the issue thereof." He adds, 5. That the church seeing the presence of God going along with him, they did, by fasting and prayer, in a day set apart for that end, seek an abundant blessing on his endeavors. "A particular church! exclaims the bishop: yes, my lord, says Mr. Wesley, I am not ashamed to own myself a member of one. Bishop. You have no warrant for your particular churches. Wesley. We have a plain, full, and sufficient rule for gospel worship in the New Testament, recorded in the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles. B. We have not. W. The practice of the apostles is a standing rule in those cases which were not extraordinary. B. Not their practice, but their precepts. W. Both precepts and practice. Our duty is not delivered to us in Scripture only by precepts, but by precedents, by promises, by threatenings mixed, not common-place wise. May it please your lordship, we believe that *cultus non institutus est indebitus*. B. It is false. W. The second commandment speaks the same; Thou shalt not make unto thyself any graven image. B. That is forms of your own invention. W. Bishop Andrews taking notice of *non facies tibi*, satisfied me, that we may not worship God but as commanded. B. You take discipline, church government, and circumstances, for worship. W. You account ceremonies parts of worship. B. Well then, you will justify your preaching, will you, without ordination according to law? W. All these things laid together are satisfactory to me for my procedure therein. B. They are not enough. W. There has been more written in proof of the preaching of gifted persons, with such approbation, than has been answered by any one yet. B. I am glad I heard this from your own mouth. You will stand to your principles, you say? W. I intend it, through the grace of God; and to be faithful to the King's Majesty, however you may deal with me. B. I will not meddle with you. W. Farewell to you, sir. B. Farewell, good Mr. Wesley."

It is to be hoped that the bishop was as good as his word. But there were some persons of influence in his neighborhood who were too much his enemies to permit him to continue quietly at Whitchurch, till the act of uniformity ejected him. For in the beginning of 1662, he was seized on the Lord's day as he was coming out of church, carried to Blandford, and committed to prison. Sir Gerrard Napper was one of the most furious of his enemies, and the most forward in committing him; but meeting with an accident by which he broke his collar-bone, he was so far softened, that he sent some persons to bail Mr. Wesley, and told them if they would not, he would do it himself. How various are the ways by which God brings men to a consciousness of their guilt! Mr. Wesley, however, was set at liberty, though bound over to appear at the next assizes. He appeared accordingly, and came off much better than he expected. On this occasion the good man recorded in his diary the mercy of God to him, in raising up several friends to own him; inclining a solicitor to plead for him, and restraining the wrath of man, so that the judge, though a very passionate man, spoke not an angry word.

Mr. Wesley came joyfully home from the assizes, and preached constantly every Lord's day till August 17th, when he delivered his farewell sermon to a weeping audience, from Acts xx. 32, "And now, brethren, I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified." October the 26th, the place was declared vacant by an apparitor, and orders given to sequester the profits; but his people had given him what was due. On the 22d of February, 1663, he quitted Whitchurch, and removed with his family to Melcomb: upon which the corporation made an order against his settlement there, imposing a fine of £20 upon his landlady, and 5s. per week upon him, to be levied by distress. These violent proceedings forced him to leave the town, and he went to Bridgewater, Ilminster, and Taunton, in which places he met with great kindness and friendship from all the three denominations of Dissenters, and was almost every day employed in preaching in the several places to which he went; and got many good acquaintance, and friends, who were afterwards very kind to him and his numerous family. At length a gentleman who had a very good house at Preston, two or three miles from Melcomb, gave him free liberty to live in it without paying any rent. Thither he removed his family in the beginning of May, and there he continued as long as he lived. He records his coming to Preston with great wonder and thankfulness.

Soon after this he had some debates in his mind whether he ought not to remove beyond sea, to Surinam or Maryland; but after much consideration and advice, he determined to take his lot in his native country. He had some scruples also about attending public worship in the established church; but by several arguments in Mr. Nye's

papers, he was determined to do it. After some time he was called by a number of serious Christians at Pool to be their pastor; and in that relation he continued to the day of his death, administering all ordinances to them as opportunity offered. By the Oxford Act he was obliged for a while to withdraw from Preston, and leave his family and people. But he preached wherever he came, if he could but have an audience. Upon his coming to the place of his retirement in March, 1666, he put this question to himself, "What dost thou here, at such a distance from church, wife, children, &c.?" And in his answer, sets down the oath required by government, and then adds the reasons why he could not take it, as several ministers had done; and particularly, that to do it in his own private sense, would be but juggling with God, with the king, and with conscience. But after all this and a good deal more against taking the oath, he thankfully mentions the goodness of God in so overruling the law-makers, that they did not send the ministers farther from their friends and flocks; and that they had so much time to prepare for their removal, and had liberty to pass on the road to any place. After he had lain hid for some time, he ventured home again, and returned to his labor among his people and among others occasionally. But notwithstanding all his prudence in managing his meetings, he was often disturbed; several times apprehended, and four times imprisoned; once at Pool for half a year, and once at Dorchester for three months: the other confinements were shorter. He was in many straits and difficulties, but wonderfully supported and comforted, and many times very seasonably and surprisingly delivered. The removal of many eminent Christians into another world, who were his intimate acquaintance and kind friends; the great decay of serious religion among many that made a profession, and the increasing rage of the enemies of real godliness, manifestly sunk his spirits. "And having filled up his part of what is behind of the afflictions of Christ in his flesh, for his body's sake, which is the church, and finished the work given him to do, he was taken * out of this vale of tears to that world where the wicked cease from troubling, and the weary are at rest, when he had not been much longer an inhabitant here below than his blessed Master, whom he served with his whole heart, according to the best light he had. The vicar of Preston would not suffer him to be buried in the church."†

There are several things in this account of Mr. Wesley which deserve the reader's notice. 1. He appears to have made himself master of the controverted points in which he differed from those of the established church, and to have taken up his opinions from a conviction of their truth. 2. He showed an ingenuous mind, free from low cunning, in an open avowal of his sentiments to the bishop.

* I conjecture that he died about the year 1670.

† See the Nonconformist's Memorial, vol. i. p. 478 to 486.

3. He appears to have been remarkably conscientious in all his conduct, and a zealous promoter of genuine piety both in himself and others. 4. He discovered great firmness of mind and an unshaken attachment to his principles in the midst of the most unchristian persecution, and a train of accumulated evils which he suffered on that account. These are prominent features in his character, and which we cannot but admire, however we may differ from him in opinion ; they show a mind elevated far above the common level, even of those who have had the advantages of an academical education.