

WILLIAM BRAMWELL: THE LAST OF THE ANCIENT METHODISTS

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On Monday, September 20, 1853, Thomas Collins, who was stationed in Bradford, took his two daughters, "Emmy and Maria to Westgate Hill, to Bramwell's grave. The spot where rest the remains of that man of prayer is truly lovely."¹ Twenty-two years earlier when he had begun his ministry as a Wesleyan minister at Wark, Northumberland, his father had exhorted him, "Serve Bramwell's God as Bramwell served him, and he will be with thee as he was with him."² No such veneration is paid to Bramwell's memory today. John Kent does not see fit to mention him in his essay on "Wesleyan Methodist to 1849" in the second volume of "A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain;" and W.R. Ward describes him, in what Michael Watts calls a "ludicrous understatement,"³ as "a Methodist preacher with aspirations to be a revivalist."⁴ This of a man who so revived the work of God in every circuit on which he served that in thirty-three years of active ministry at least 4,850 new members were added to the Wesleyan Methodist connexion.⁵

This modern neglect of Bramwell may be due to his being the last great heir to a type of Methodism which was gradually disowned by the Wesleyan connexion in the five years following the death of John Wesley. A type of Methodism referred to by Wesley as "ancient Methodism." This ancient Methodism, according to John Wesley, was founded upon the principle of itinerant preachers. In 1789 Wesley warned the Methodist people that "if itinerancy is interrupted" then Methodism "will speedily come to nothing."⁶ The concept of "ancient Methodism" was intended by Wesley to define the nature of Methodism as a revival movement within the Church of England. The practice of itinerant preaching within the Church of England went back, claimed Wesley, to the sixteenth century "Twelve were appointed by Queen Elizabeth to travel continually, in order to spread true religion through the kingdom."⁷ The concept of ancient Methodism also served to distinguish

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Methodism from Dissent. Although Dissent had its own tradition of itinerating preachers, dissenting chapels were founded upon the principle of each congregation having its own minister. Methodism's system of itinerant preachers traveling a circuit of widely dispersed societies was designed to prevent the preachers from becoming too closely associated with any one particular society. And so Wesley could exhort his preachers, "It is not your business to preach so many times, and to take care of this or that Society, but to save as many souls as you can: to bring as many sinners as you possibly can to repentance."⁸ From this point of view Methodism could be legitimately regarded as "a great agency for the converting of the souls of men."

William Bramwell was an "Ancient Methodist" in the sense that he believed in an itinerant ministry traveling large circuits committed to the task of converting sinners. This was what he called "the old centre" of Methodism. Between 1791 and 1795 Methodism was torn apart by bitter disputes over its future identity. One party wanted to preserve Methodism as a revival movement in its own right with an ordained ministry endowed with the authority to administer the sacraments. This dispute was settled in 1795 with the "Plan of Pacification" which forbade Methodist preachers to be ordained, but did allow Methodist services to be held at the same hours as those in the Church of England, and allowed Methodists preachers to administer the sacraments in those chapels where the majority of members were in favor of the practice.⁹

Bramwell was not happy with the conflict or with the terms of its resolution. The whole episode had been a "labouring for forced unity and external peace," a "debating on forms and shadows," which had distracted the Methodist preachers from "that active vital holiness, that lamenting love, which first actuated the first Methodist preachers: "to seek first the 'enlarging of the Redeemer's kingdom' through the conversion of the souls of men."¹⁰ Bramwell continued throughout his ministry to lament the way in which the rich and mighty Wesleyans "too frequently usurp improper authority, which damps too much the living flame among the simple."¹¹ On two occasions his grief at Methodism's disavowal of its ancient identity moved him to consider leaving the Wesleyan connexion. At Leeds, in 1797, Bramwell and Henry Taylor were involved in secret talks with Alexander Kilham of the New Connexion at which "both spoke freely on the necessity of reform, and seemed determined to have this effected or leave the Connexion."¹² At Leeds, again, at the beginning of 1802, Bramwell did leave the Wesleyan Connexion for a short period with a view to forming his own revival movement because of his dissatisfaction with his superintendent minister's action in stopping the noisy prayer-meetings being held at the newly opened Albion Street chapel, and with the decision to divide the circuit.¹³ On both occasions he was persuaded by his brethren to reconsider his decision.

This vacillating behavior brought Bramwell a scathing rebuke from Lorenzo Dow, the American revivalist. "It appears to me that Wm. B. ought to have launched out as a champion for God, but unbelief to trust God with his family, &c. caused him apparently to shrink.... It appears that he saw the formality and danger into which the English Connexion were exposed, and sinking: he came out for a space, and God began to open his way, but through unbelief, the reasoning of Satan, and the solicitation of his brethren, he was prevailed upon to shrink, recant in part and return: in consequence of which, some pious ones, who requested Christian liberty to pray with mourners, &c. and united

with him to dissent, were left in a dilemma here."¹⁴

Bramwell's peers have given us a more balanced appreciation of him. His official conference obituary reads:

WILLIAM BRAMWELL who was a man of eminent piety, of considerable preaching talents, and of great resolution and industry. In humility, in self-denial, and a readiness to take up his cross daily—in ardent love to God, compassion for perishing sinners, and in holy zeal for the prosperity of Zion, he shone with distinguished lustre. He most cordially believed the Methodist doctrines, and set them forth in the most prominent manner. He was an excellent disciplinarian, ever aiming to promote the spiritual improvement of those among whom he laboured, both by precept and by example. If, at any time, there appeared an instability of conduct in his attachment to the Methodist body, it ought to be attributed rather to error of judgment, and the undue influence of individuals who endeavored to warp his affection, than to want of cordial attachment. As he advanced in years he grew in grace. His communion with God was constant, and as he approached towards the eternal world, he evidently ripened for the heavenly garner. His conversation was truly spiritual, especially towards the close of his life; and he often expressed an earnest 'desire to depart and be with Christ.' He was a man of much prayer and strong faith—a burning and shining light—and lived in a blessed readiness for that sudden death, which removed him from earth to the unfading glories of heaven. This has comforted his bereaved friends, and enabled them to mingle sentiments of joy for his gain, with feelings of sorrow for their own loss.¹⁵

William Bramwell was born at Elswick, Lancashire, 1759. His parents were devout Anglicans and he was devoutly religious from childhood. As an adolescent he sought to relieve a troubled conscience by a series of austerities involving kneeling for hours on his bare knees on a sanded floor while he confessed his sins and repeated his prayers; meditating in the solitude of woods; and fasting and taking lonely walks throughout the night. Apprenticed to a currier at Preston, and while attending the sacrament in the parish church at Preston, he received some insight into the nature of saving faith. He was led by a Methodist to attend a cottage meeting addressed by Christopher Hopper. At the second meeting he joined the Society. He finally attained the assurance of the forgiveness of his sins at a service conducted by John Wesley who recognized his spiritual state of mind. "Dear brother, can you praise God?," Wesley asked him. "No sir." "Well, perhaps you can tonight," rejoined Wesley, lifting up his hands and smiling upon the doubting youth. Bramwell became an active Methodist to the displeasure of his parents who threatened to disown him. He conducted the 5 a.m. prayer meeting, became a class leader and local preacher. Thanks to his efforts, and those of four other dedicated young men revival took place, the membership doubled, a large preaching house built, and the prejudice against the Methodists removed.¹⁶

Bramwell became a traveling preacher in 1785.¹⁷ He was a model Methodist preacher. He accepted Wesley's teaching that it was his duty to preach the gospel in order to save souls, and to consolidate the conversions he achieved by observing the system of

Methodist Discipline as drawn up by Wesley. His mornings were spent in his study. He was a self-educated man well versed in the biblical languages, and in French. His afternoons were spent in visiting from house to house: "These visits were short and spiritual. If possible he would have the whole family collected, and having ascertained their several religious states he would pray for each by name."¹⁸ The theme of his preaching was entire sanctification; "He preached a present and full salvation through faith in the Redeemer's blood...on the entire destruction of sin and the complete renewal of the heart in holiness.... This was his constant, his favourite theme." It was Bramwell's conviction that "evangelising success varied directly with fidelity to the preaching of sanctification." In this conviction he was of one mind with John Wesley who wrote of the growth of Methodism at Launceston: "Here I found the plain reason why the work of God has gained no ground in this Circuit all the year. The preachers have given up the Methodist testimony. Either they did not speak of perfection at all (the peculiar doctrine committed to our trust), or they spoke of it only in general terms, without urging the believers to 'go on unto perfection' and to expect it every moment. And wherever this is not earnestly done, the work of God does not prosper."¹⁹ As a result the normal round of Methodist meetings became occasions for conversions: "Sometimes in a single Love-feast a score of souls were renewed . . . at a single band or prayer-meeting as many as seven or eight were saved."

This kind of growth through the steady exercise of a normal ministry was the general aim of most Methodist Preachers based on the Conference Minutes for 1768 where Wesley proposed promoting revivals through "a diffusion of Methodist literature, field and morning preaching, the enforcement of Methodist Discipline, good singing, quarterly fasts, the preaching of the doctrine of Christian Perfection, house-to-house visitation, attention to the young, continued union with the Established Church, and, above all and more than all, more inward an outward holiness among the preachers...."²⁰ Where Bramwell departed from the norm was in his use of importunate prayer to deliberately "work up" a revival. His aim on entering a circuit was to create a sense of excited expectation for revival. He began by praying each day before breakfast—at four in the morning in summer, and at five in winter. This regular habit of prayer was supplemented by colossal exertions in prayer in circuits where he felt that the spiritual vitality of the people to be at a particularly low ebb. At Leeds he prayed for hours at an end in the woods—and he prayed very loudly! He also used female prayer-leaders—most notably Mary Barit and Ann Cutler. Of Mary Barit's work at Leeds between 1795-1797 he said: "I never knew one man so blessed as this young woman in the salvation of souls."²¹ He attributed the eventual outbreak of the Great Yorkshire Revival in the winter of 1792 and the spring of 1793 to the work of Ann Cutler (one of his converts from his days as a local preacher at Preston) who "joined us in continual prayer to God for the revival of His work. Several, who were the most prejudiced, were suddenly struck, and in agonies groaned for deliverance. The work continued in almost every meeting, and sixty persons in and about Dewsbury received sanctification, and walked in that liberty. Our love-feasts began to be crowded, and people from all the neighbouring circuits visited us. Great numbers found pardon, and some perfect love. The work in a few weeks broke out at Greetland. Ann Cutler went over to Birstal and was there equally blessed in her labours. She went into

the Leeds circuit: and, though vital religion had been very low, the Lord made use of her at the beginning of a revival, and the work spread nearly through the circuit... She and a few more were equally blessed in some parts of the Bradford and Otley circuits. Wherever she went there was an amazing power of God attending her prayers.²²

Bramwell was conscious of the opposition within Methodism towards the noise, disorder, spurious conversions, and loss of converts associated with revivalism and drew up some "Regulations for the conduct of Revival Prayer-Meetings to prevent spurious noise and disorder and unnecessary loss of converts." He recommended that:

- two or three people saying short prayers in succession should open the prayer-meeting. A person in distress should be approached and spoken to in a low voice by only one other person;
- any "praying company" gathered round a "mourner" should pray in succession, and as quietly as possible. While this was going on a "proper person" should continue to lead the meeting, and keep the rest engaged in general prayers and hymn singing until one of the "mourners" was "set at liberty" when all those present would join in acknowledging their "deliverance";
- a person should be appointed to make a note of the names and addresses of the people professing conversion so that they could be contacted later with a view to join a class, and to being introduced into the life of the society;
- great care should be taken in selecting only people of the highest character to lead prayer-meetings; and that care be taken not to depend too much on any particular persons by expecting them to take the most active or useful part therein, lest our dependence be more in man than in God.²³

There was another sense in which Bramwell was the last ancient Methodist. In Bramwell's person and ministry the charismatic character of John Wesley's ministry at Bristol in 1739 was revived. Dreams and visions played their part in his revivals. At Bingley (in the Birstal Circuit) in 1793, the trances of the ill-fated young girl, Elizabeth Dickinson, "drew thousands to prayer-meetings." At Nottingham the situation was nicely primed for Bramwell's arrival in 1798 by Thomas Tatham, one of the leaders, who interrupted a Sunday morning service to inform those present that he had been given a divine vision promising a welcome and the forgiveness of sins to the vilest sinner.²⁴ Bramwell, himself was credited with extraordinary powers in the best charismatic traditions. He could read the inmost depths of the human heart. Once he looked earnestly at a woman who had been a member of the Methodist Society for many years and told her she was a hypocrite, and that if she didn't repent and become converted hell would be her everlasting portion! The woman was duly convicted of her guilt, and later that day experienced the conversion Bramwell had told her to obtain.²⁵ Bramwell had the supernatural gift of foreknowledge. On one occasion he warned a woman not to embark upon a voyage to North America. She took heed of his warning, and the boat was duly lost at sea with the loss of all its crew and passengers. He could heal people. At Thorgumbald on the Hull Circuit in 1805 the recovery of a young girl from severe whooping cough was dated from the day he prayed for her restoration to health.²⁶

Bramwell was an imposing figure of a man. "In appearance he was nearly six feet high, and robust; his features were large, strong, and dark, like those of a bronze statue, and his eye piercing as an eagle's."²⁷ His effect upon those who attended his services was described by Alexander Bell, one of his converts. "The gravity of his appearance in the pulpit, his impressive mode of giving out the hymns, his powerful and pleading spirit in prayer when he seemed to commune with his Maker at the mercy-seat, and then the bold, impassioned, and energetic manner of his preaching, not only rivited my attention to his subject, but awakened in my heart such emotions as led me there and then to give myself to God and His people."²⁸

Bramwell, however, was the victim of historical process. Just as the early church "changed from a charismatic movement to a practicable and institutionally consolidated way of life"²⁹ so did Methodism. The "Higher Powers" of Methodism had ambitions to make Methodism into a church, and the revivals sponsored by Bramwell with their independent, undisciplined ways were an unruly, disruptive threat to that ambition that had to be disciplined and brought to heel. The ideal was renewal conceived as steady, consolidated growth in genuine members and piety. The concept of Methodist ministry and growth for the nineteenth century was clearly expressed by George Smith in his "History of Wesleyan Methodism" when he said of the revivals that attended the ministry of Gideon Ouseley and others between 1805 and 1809: "Undue importance should not be attached to those special manifestations of grace usually called 'revivals'—when great numbers of persons are awakened and brought unto God in a comparatively short time—as a means of Methodist progress and increase. The ordinary operation of the Spirit, blessing the word, and leading the hearers to turn from their sins to the Lord, has ever been the means of rearing up and maintaining Methodist Societies. The pious labours of godly ministers, whose word descends as the dew, and under the fructifying influence of the Holy Ghost produces 'the fruits of good living to the praise and glory of God,' has been the normal state of Methodism in all stages of its progress; and the continued existence of this gracious power must ever be the means of prosperity to the Connexion."³⁰

The key figure in this development of Methodism was Jabez Bunting. It is significant that John Kent, who did not see fit to mention William Bramwell, calls Jabez Bunting "the last Wesleyan" in the sense that Bunting understood better than anyone else what Wesley intended for Wesleyan Methodism when he transferred his authority to a Conference composed exclusively of senior traveling preachers.³¹ Bunting's Wesleyanism was destined to be superseded as his Wesleyanism superseded that of William Bramwell. The revivalism of Bramwell, however, was to flourish outside the pail of Wesleyanism. The Primitive Methodists regarded themselves as returning to the primitive simplicity of Bramwell.³² The Holiness revival of the nineteenth century and the charismatic revival of this century are significant developments of Bramwell's kind of revivalism. And in the history of revivalism Bramwell occupies a significant, innovative place. Charles Finney is credited with the idea of "working up" or "inducing" a revival, but the conditions which he identified as necessary for working up a revival were those which characterized the revivals of Bramwell from 1791 onwards.³³ Bramwell therefore was not only the last of the ancient Methodists but also one of the first founding fathers of the Charismatics.

NOTES

1. Samuel Coley, *The Life of the Rev. Thomas Collins* (London: Wesleyan-Methodist Book Room, nd. 1865?), p. 355.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
3. Michael R. Watts, *The Dissenters*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p. 139, n. 524.
4. W.R. Ward, *Religion and Society in England 1790-1850* (New York: Schocken Books, 1973), p. 81.
5. Kent (1785-1787) 450; Dewsbury (1791-1793) 100-200; Birstal (1793-1795) 600; Sheffield (1795-1798) 1250; Nottingham (1798-1801) 1400; Hull (1804-1806) 450; Sunderland (1806-1808) 1000 and Birstal (1812-1814) 500. Figures from Thomas Harris, *A Memoir of the Rev. William Bramwell* (London: Wesleyan-Methodist Book Room, nd. 1870?).
6. John Telford, ed., *Letters of John Wesley*, vol. 8 (London: Epworth Press, 1931), p. 169.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 168.
8. Henry Carter, *The Methodist Heritage* (London: Epworth Press, 1951), p. 193.
9. For a discussion of the issues involved see John C. Bowmer, *Pastor and People* (London: Epworth Press, 1975), pp. 19-67.
10. C.W. Andrews, *William Bramwell: Revivalist* (London: R. Culley, 1909), pp. 27-28.
11. Watts, *The Dissenters*, p. 139.
12. Sam Hulme, ed., *The Jubilee of the Methodist New Connexion* (London: John Blackwell, 1848), pp. 104-105.
13. D. Colin, *Oxford Place Methodist Centre 1835-1985* (Leeds, England: Oxford Place Methodist Centre, 1985), p. 5. See also Watts, p. 138.
14. Lorenzo Dow, *The Dealings of God, Man, and The Devil as Exemplified in the Life, Experience and Travels of Lorenzo Dow in a Period of More Than a Half Century* (New York: Laport, Blakeman & Law, 1853), p. 214.
15. *Methodist Magazine* 1819, p. 392.
16. Abel Stevens, *History of Methodism*, 2:243-244 and W. Pilkington, *Flashes of Preston Methodism* (1916), pp. 15-27.
17. Bramwell traveled on the following circuits: Kent (1786), Lynn (1787), Blackburn (1788), Colne (1789), Dewsbury (1791), Birstal (1793), Sheffield (1795), Nottingham (1798), Leeds (1801), Wetherby (1803), Hull (1804), Sunderland (1806), Liverpool (1808), Sheffield (1810), Birstal (1812), London West (1814), Newcastle (1815), Manchester (1817-1818) I.K.B. Garlick, *Mr. Wesley's Preachers 1739-1818* (London: Pinhoms for the World Methodist Society, 1977), pp. 11-12.]
18. James Sigston, *Memoir of the Venerable Bramwell* (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1860), p. 105.
19. Thomas Jackson, ed., *Works of John Wesley*, vol. IV (London: John Mason, 1865), p. 78.
20. Luke Tyerman, *Life of Wesley*, vol. III (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1872-75), pp. 22-23.
21. Deborah M. Valenze, *Prophetic Sons and Daughters* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 57.
22. Stevens, *History of Methodism*, p. 86; Zechariah Taft, *Biographical Sketches of the Lives of Various Holy Women*, vol. 1 (London: Printed by Author, sold by Mr. Kershaw, 1825-1828), pp. 313-331.
23. *Methodist Magazine* 1798, pp. 243-244. The regulations were part of an article entitled, "Thoughts on the Revival of Religion in the Prayer-Meetings" by "A Well Wisher to Zion." Since they are similar to less detailed regulations given in C.W. Andrews' memoir of Bramwell it would appear that Bramwell (rather than someone like Alexander Mather) was the author.
24. Julia S. Werner, *The Primitive Methodist Connexion, Its Background and Early History* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), pp. 40-42.

25. Sigston, *Memoirs of Bramwell*, pp. 40-41.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 144.
27. Stevens, *History of Methodism*, p. 245.
28. Harris, *Life of William Bramwell*, p. 167.
29. Gerd Theissen, *Social Reality and the Early Christians* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), p. 257.
30. George Smith, *The History of Wesleyan Methodism*, vol. II (London: Longman, 1859), p. 18, 422.
31. John Kent, *The Age of Disunity* (London: Epworth Press, 1966), xii (The title of his W.H.S. lecture for 1955) and see pages 125-126 for a summary of what Kent means by the title.
32. See Werner, *The Primitive Methodist Connexion*, pp. 174 and 199, n. 36.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 49.