

# ADVICE TO A PEOPLE CALLED METHODIST

John Wesley (1703–1791)

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By Methodists I mean, a people who profess to pursue (in whatsoever measure they have attained) holiness of heart and life, inward and outward conformity in all things to the revealed will of God; who place religion in an uniform resemblance of the great object of it; in a steady imitation of Him they worship, in all his imitable perfections; more particularly, in justice, mercy, and truth, or universal love filling the heart, and governing the life.

You, to whom I now speak, believe this love of human kind cannot spring but from the love of God. You think there can be no instance of one whose tender affection embraces every child of man, (though not endeared to him either by ties of blood, or by any natural or civil relation,) unless that affection flow from a grateful, filial love to the common Father of all; to God, considered not only as his Father, but as “the Father of the spirits of all flesh;” yea, as the general Parent and Friend of all the families both of heaven and earth.

This filial love you suppose to flow only from faith, which you describe as a supernatural evidence (or conviction) of things not seen; so that to him who has this principle,

The things unknown to feeble sense,  
Unseen by reason’s glimmering ray,  
With strong commanding evidence  
Their heavenly origin display.

Faith lends its realizing light,  
The clouds disperse, the shadows fly;  
The’ Invisible appears in sight,  
And God is seen by mortal eye.

You suppose this faith to imply an evidence that God is merciful to me a sinner; that he is reconciled to me by the death of his Son, and now accepts me for his sake. You accordingly describe the faith of a real Christian as “a sure trust and confidence” (over and above his assent to the sacred writings) “which he hath in God, that his sins are forgiven; and that he is, through the merits of Christ, reconciled to the favour of God.”

You believe, farther, that both this faith and love are wrought in us by the Spirit of God; nay, that there cannot be in any man one good temper or desire, or so much as one good thought, unless it be produced by the almighty power of God, by the inspiration or influence of the Holy Ghost.

If you walk by this rule, continually endeavouring to know and love and resemble and obey the great God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, as the God of love, of pardoning mercy; if from this principle of loving, obedient faith, you carefully abstain from all evil, and labour, as you have opportunity, to do good to all men, friends or enemies; if, lastly, you unite together, to encourage and help each other in thus working out your salvation, and for that end watch over one another in love, you are they whom I mean by Methodists.

The First general advice which one who loves your souls would earnestly recommend to every one of you is: “Consider, with deep and frequent attention, the peculiar circumstances wherein you stand.”

One of these is, that you are a new people: Your name is new, (at least, as used in a religious sense,) not heard of, till a few years ago, either in our own or any other nation. Your principles are new, in this respect, that there is no other set of people among us (and, possibly, not in the Christian world) who hold them all in the same degree and connexion; who so strenuously and continually insist on the absolute necessity of universal holiness both in heart and life; of a peaceful, joyous love of God; of a supernatural evidence of things not seen; of an inward witness that we are the children of God; and of the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, in order to any good thought, or word, or work. And perhaps there is no other set of people, (at least, not visibly united together,) who lay so much and yet no more stress than you do on rectitude of opinions, on outward modes of worship, and the use of those ordinances which you acknowledge to be of God. So much stress you lay even on right opinions, as to profess, that you earnestly desire to have a right judgment in all things, and are glad to use every means which you know or believe may be conducive thereto; and yet not so much as to condemn any man upon earth, merely for thinking otherwise than you do; much less, to imagine that God condemns him for this, if he be upright and sincere of heart. On those outward modes of worship, wherein you have been bred up, you lay so much stress as highly to approve them; but not so much as to lessen your love to those who conscientiously dissent from you herein. You likewise lay so much stress

on the use of those ordinances which you believe to be of God, as to confess there is no salvation for you if you willfully neglect them: And yet you do not judge them that are otherwise minded; you determine nothing concerning those who, not believing those ordinances to be of God, do, out of principle, abstain from them.

Your strictness of life, taking the whole of it together, may likewise be accounted new. I mean, your making it a rule, to abstain from fashionable diversions, from reading plays, romances, or books of humour, from singing innocent songs, or talking in a merry, gay, diverting manner; your plainness of dress; your manner of dealing in trade; your exactness in observing the Lord's day; your scrupulosity as to things that have not paid custom; your total abstinence from spirituous liquors (unless in cases of necessity); your rule, "not to mention the fault of an absent person, in particular of Ministers or of those in authority," may justly be termed new: Seeing, although some are scrupulous in some of these things, and others are strict with regard to other particulars, yet we do not find any other body of people who insist on all these rules together. With respect, therefore, both to your name, principles, and practice, you may be considered as a new people.

Another peculiar circumstance of your present situation is, that you are newly united together; that you are just gathered, or (as it seems) gathering rather, out of all other societies or congregations; nay, and that you have been hitherto, and do still subsist, without power, (for you are a low, insignificant people,) without riches, (for you are poor almost to a man, having no more than the plain necessaries of life,) and without either any extraordinary gifts of nature, or the advantages of education; most even of your Teachers being quite unlearned, and (in other things) ignorant men.

There is yet another circumstance, which is quite peculiar to yourselves: Whereas every other religious set of people, as soon as they were joined to each other, separated themselves from their former societies or congregations; you, on the contrary, do not; nay, you absolutely disavow all desire of separating from them. You openly and continually declare you have not, nor ever had, such a design. And whereas the congregations to which those separatists belonged have generally spared no pains to prevent that separation; those to which you belong spare no pains (not to prevent, but) to occasion this separation, to drive you from them, to force you on that division to which you declare you have the strongest aversion.

Considering these peculiar circumstances wherein you stand, you will see the propriety of a Second advice I would recommend to you: "Do not imagine you can avoid giving offence:" Your very name renders this impossible. Perhaps not one in a hundred of those who use the term Methodist have any ideas of what it means. To ninety-nine of them it is still heathen Greek. Only they think it means something very bad, — either a Papist, a heretic, an underminer of the Church, or some unheard-of monster; and, in all probability, the farther it goes, it must gather up more and more evil. It is vain, therefore, for any that is called a Methodist ever to think of not giving offence.

And as much offence as you give by your name, you will give still more by your principles. You will give offence to the bigots for opinions, modes of worship, and ordinances, by laying no more stress upon them; to the bigots against them, by laying so much; to men of form, by insisting so frequently and strongly on the inward power of religion; to moral men, (so called,) by declaring the absolute necessity of faith, in order to acceptance with God. To men of reason you will give offence, by talking of inspiration and receiving the Holy Ghost; to drunkards, Sabbath-breakers, common swearers, and other open sinners, by refraining from their company, as well as by that disapprobation of their behaviour which you will often be obliged to express. And indeed your life must give them continual offence: Your sobriety is grievously offensive to a drunkard; your serious conversation is equally intolerable to a gay impertinent: and, in general, that "you are grown so precise and singular, so monstrously strict, beyond all sense and reason, that you scruple so many harmless things, and fancy you are obliged to do so many others which you need not," cannot but be an offence to abundance of people, your friends and relations in particular. Either, therefore, you must consent to give up your principles, or your fond hope of pleasing men.

What makes even your principles more offensive is, this uniting of yourselves together: Because this union renders you more conspicuous, placing you more in the eye of men; more suspicious, — I mean, liable to be suspected of carrying on some sinister design (especially by those who do not, or will not, know your inviolable attachment to His present Majesty); more dreadful, to those of a fearful temper, who imagine you have any such design; and more odious to men of zeal, if their zeal be any other than fervent love to God and man.

This offence will sink the deeper, because you are gathered out of so many other congregations: For the warm men in each will not easily be convinced, that you do not despise either them or their teachers; nay, will probably imagine, that you utterly condemn them, as though they could not be saved. And this occasion of offence is now at the height, because you are just gathered, or gathering rather, so that they know not where it will end; but the fear of

losing (so they account it) more of their members, gives an edge to their zeal, and keeps all their anger and resentment in its strength.

Add to this, that you do not leave them quite, you still rank yourselves among their members; which, to those who know not that you do it for conscience' sake, is also a provoking circumstance. "If you would but get out of their sight!" But you are a continual thorn in their side, as long as you remain with them.

And (which cannot but anger them the more) you have neither power, nor riches, nor learning; yet, with all their power, and money, and wisdom, they can gain no ground against you.

You cannot but expect, that the offence continually arising from such a variety of provocations will gradually ripen into hatred, malice, and all other unkind tempers. And as they who are thus affected will not fail to represent you to others in the same light as you appear to them, — sometimes as madmen and fools, sometimes as wicked men, fellows not fit to live upon the earth; the consequence, humanly speaking, must be, that, together with your reputation, you will lose, first, the love of your friends, relations, and acquaintance, even those who once loved you the most tenderly; then your business, for many will employ you no longer, nor "buy of such an one as you are;" and, in due time, (unless He who governs the world interpose,) your health, liberty, and life.

What further advice can be given to persons in such a situation? I cannot but advise you, Thirdly, "Consider deeply with yourself, Is the God whom I serve able to deliver me? I am not able to deliver myself out of these difficulties; much less am I able to bear them. I know not how to give up my reputation, my friends, my substance, my liberty, my life. Can God give me to rejoice in doing this; and may I depend upon him that he will? Are the hairs of my head all numbered; and does He never fail them that trust in him?" Weigh this thoroughly; and if you can trust God with your all, then go on in the power of his might.

Go on, I would earnestly advise you, Fourthly: "Keep in the very path wherein you now tread. Be true to your principles." Never rest again in the dead formality of religion. Pursue with your might inward and outward holiness; a steady imitation of Him you worship; a still increasing resemblance of his imitable perfections, — his justice, mercy, and truth.

Let this be your manly, noble, generous religion, equally remote from the meanness of superstition, which places religion in doing what God hath not enjoined, or abstaining from what he hath not forbidden; and from the unkindness of bigotry, which confines our affection to our own party, sect, or opinion. Above all, stand fast in obedient faith, faith in the God of pardoning mercy, in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath loved you, and given himself for you. Ascribe to Him all the good you find in yourself; all your peace, and joy, and love; all your power to do and suffer his will, through the Spirit of the living God. Yet, in the mean time, carefully avoid enthusiasm: Impute not the dreams of men to the all-wise God; and expect neither light nor power from him, but in the serious use of all the means he hath ordained.

Be true also to your principles touching opinions and the externals of religion. Use every ordinance which you believe is of God; but beware of narrowness of spirit towards those who use them not. Conform yourself to those modes of worship which you approve; yet love as brethren those who cannot conform. Lay so much stress on opinions, that all your own, if it be possible, may agree with truth and reason; but have a care of anger, dislike, or contempt towards those whose opinions differ from yours. You are daily accused of this; (and, indeed, what is it whereof you are not accused?) but beware of giving any ground for such an accusation. Condemn no man for not thinking as you think: Let every one enjoy the full and free liberty of thinking for himself: Let every man use his own judgment, since every man must give an account of himself to God. Abhor every approach, in any kind or degree, to the spirit of persecution. If you cannot reason or persuade a man into the truth, never attempt to force him into it. If love will not compel him to come in, leave him to God, the Judge of all.

Yet expect not that others will deal thus with you. No: Some will endeavour to fright you out of your principles; some to shame you into a more popular religion, to laugh and rally you out of your singularity: But from none of these will you be in so great danger, as from those who assault you with quite different weapons; with softness, good-nature, and earnest professions of (perhaps real) good-will. Here you are equally concerned to avoid the very appearance of anger, contempt, or unkindness, and to hold fast the whole truth of God, both in principle and in practice.

This indeed will be interpreted as unkindness. Your former acquaintance will look upon this, — that you will not sin or trifle with them, — as a plain proof of your coldness towards them; and this burden you must be content to bear: But labour to avoid all real unkindness, all disobliging words, or harshness of speech, all shyness, or strangeness of

behaviour. Speak to them with all the tenderness and love, and behave with all the sweetness and courtesy, you can; taking care not to give any needless offence to neighbour or stranger, friend or enemy.

Perhaps on this very account I might advise you, Fifthly, “not to talk much of what you suffer; of the persecution you endured at such a time, and the wickedness of your persecutors.” Nothing more tends to exasperate them than this; and therefore (although there is a time when these things must be mentioned, yet) it might be a general rule, to do it as seldom as you can with a safe conscience. For, besides its tendency to inflame them, it has the appearance of evil, of ostentation, of magnifying yourselves. It also tends to puff you up with pride, and to make you think yourselves some great ones, as it certainly does to excite or increase in your heart ill-will, anger, and all unkind tempers. It is, at best, loss of time; for, instead of the wickedness of men, you might be talking of the goodness of God. Nay, it is, in truth, an open, willful sin: It is tale-bearing, back-biting, evil-speaking, — a sin you can never be sufficiently watchful against, seeing it steals upon you in a thousand shapes. Would it not be far more profitable for your souls, instead of speaking against them, to pray for them? to confirm your love towards those unhappy men, whom you believe to be fighting against God, by crying mightily to him in their behalf, that he may open their eyes and change their hearts?

I have now only to commend you to the care of Him who hath all power in heaven and in earth; beseeching Him, that, in every circumstance of life, you may stand “firm as the beaten anvil to the stroke;” desiring nothing on earth; accounting all things but dung and dross, that you may win Christ; and always remembering, “It is the part of a good champion, to be flayed alive, and to conquer!”

Thomas Jackson, ed. *The Works of John Wesley* (1872).