



BOURNE AGAIN!

Tim Woolley

TIM WOOLLEY REFLECTS UPON THE LIFE AND MINISTRY OF HUGH BOURNE, THE FOUNDER OF PRIMITIVE METHODISM, AND SHARES LESSONS FOR TODAY.

Last year, Methodists celebrated the 250th anniversary of the birth of one of the most influential figures in our history; indeed, in terms of the spread of Methodism as a movement and its formation as a church, arguably the second most influential after John Wesley. Hugh Bourne was born at Fordhays Farm, Stoke-on-Trent, on 3 April 1772. Throughout his life, Bourne was a voracious reader and John Wesley's sermons were instrumental in preparing him for his conversion in 1799 at a Wesleyan Methodist love-feast, after which he became a member of their Ridgeway society. He was quite shy in his youth and so needed some persuading to become a preacher. Nevertheless his first sermon, preached in true Wesleyan fashion out of doors, came in 1801. The following year he built a chapel at Harriseahead, at his own expense, which he duly handed over to the Wesleys.

The group that met there, led in class by Bourne's cousin Daniel Shubotham, became fervent in prayer and increasingly fascinated by the reports of Camp Meetings in America which appeared in the Wesleyan Methodist Magazine. These protracted open-air meetings drew wagons full of campers for preaching and prayer. One of the preachers, Lorenzo Dow, visited England for a few years in 1805 and upon hearing him, Bourne, Shubotham and other Wesleyan Methodists in the area decided to hold their own meeting, at Mow Cop on the Staffordshire-Cheshire border on 31 May 1807. The meeting was a great success and encouraged the organisers to think of holding more. At this point the Burslem Wesleyan circuit forbade such unauthorised meetings taking place and they were backed up by a resolution at the Wesleyan Conference, held that year in Liverpool.

Bourne and the Harriseahead Methodists pressed on with the meetings nevertheless and he was expelled from the Wesleyan society on 27 June 1808, ostensibly because of his neglect of meeting in his appointed class owing to his evangelistic work elsewhere. Another

preacher, William Clowes was also expelled in 1810 and so reluctantly the contours of a new denomination began to take shape under the leadership of the two men. In 1811 tickets of membership were issued and a chapel was built at Tunstall. The following year the name 'Society of Primitive Methodists' was adopted, the use of the word 'Primitive' meaning 'original,' to signify that Bourne and Clowes believed they were following the practice of the early Methodists of Wesley's day in meeting outdoors. A preaching plan for the Tunstall Circuit, printed in 1812, confirmed the 'Prims' as a separate Methodist denomination. By the time of Bourne's death on 11 October 1852 the Primitive Methodist Connexion had grown into a national church of 109,984 members, 1,723 chapels, 560 ministers and 9,350 local preachers.

What can we learn from Hugh Bourne's life in terms of evangelism and mission today? No historian worth their salt would pretend that outlooks or attitudes from a life lived two centuries ago can be simplistically applied to a very different world today, but there are glimpses into Hugh Bourne's mindset which may be helpful to us in our own

what he wants – and in the Bible we have God’s word written. John Wesley said it like this:

I want to know one thing, the way to heaven. God himself has condescended to teach me the way. He hath written it down in a book. Give me that book; at any price give me the book of God! I have it; here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be a man of one book. I sit down alone; only God is here. In his presence I open, I read his book; for this end to find the way to heaven.

From the Preface to John Wesley’s Sermons on Several Occasions

Worship is our delight and praying our fuel. But how thrilled we are to know that, within the Trinity itself, we have One praying for us, who not only perfects our prayers, but our praises too. In a staggering insight, the writer to the Hebrews describes the church as being led in worship of Jesus by none other than Jesus himself (Hebrews 2:12) – and this assembly is surrounded by ‘innumerable angels in festal gathering’ (Hebrews 12:22).

THE NEWNESS OF THE CHURCH

In this company of ‘the-born-again-into-a-living-hope’ (1 Peter 1:3) who seek to follow Jesus for the good of the world, there is a delightful sense of newness. In John’s first epistle, the apostle reminds us:

- We have a new obedience
- We have a new love for God
- We have a new hatred for sin
- We have a new love for our brothers and sisters
- We have a new peace
- We have a new enemy
- But we have a new power over evil

(1 John 2:3; 2:15; 3:9; 3:14; 3:21; 5:18,19; and 5:4)

Much of our knowledge and experience of church life (let’s be honest) doesn’t reflect this. We live in a grey world, whereas God wants a multicoloured polychromatic universe, restored to glory. We settle for a dull predictability, whereas God wants his Spirit to break out all over the place in exuberance and creativity. We glibly pronounce the blessing at the end of our services, not expecting much to happen, whereas God wants heaven to touch earth. We have never come to terms with what God has promised – that he wants to accomplish infinitely more than we can ask or think ... where? In the church and in Christ Jesus (see Ephesians 3:20, 21). It has made shocking little difference to us that the risen triumphant Christ lives in us. There is often nothing about the church which leaves the non-Christian guessing, nothing that strikes him or her as remarkable. There is little in us that he or she doesn’t feel equally capable of being and doing. It is only when the quality of our life baffles the non-believing world; when what is in us can only be explained by the power of the Living Christ living in us that the world’s interest is aroused. Do you remember the glorious sense of newness you experienced when first

you came to Christ? We were new creations revelling in our recreation and renewal. From what heights we have fallen! Lord, renew us again for Christ’s sake!

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER IN FAITH

In Wesley’s journal we read the following

About three in the morning as we were continuing instant in prayer, the power of God came mightily upon us, in so much that many cried out for exceeding joy, and many fell to the ground. As soon as we recovered a little from that awe and amazement at the presence of his Majesty, we broke out with one voice, ‘We praise Thee, O God, we acknowledge Thee to be the Lord.’

From John Wesley’s Journal, 1 January 1739

I confess to having a real bugbear: it’s when I sit in meetings and hear someone say, ‘Be with us’ or ‘We come into your presence’. I wonder where they have been, as my Bible says we can’t go anywhere without God already being there waiting for us (Psalm 139:7-12). You see, the Lord can’t help being with us! I know what is meant, but such poor theology will rob us of enjoying all that God has for us. God is with us – and he is with us unalterably, inalienably, gloriously, and completely.

This is more than the mere recognition of God’s omnipresence. The Spirit has come to stay. And when he stays he stays not as something static (like a battery which runs down) but as someone dynamic—as living water, as blowing wind, as soothing oil poured out, and as burning fire.

Think of the image used by Ezekiel, in Ezekiel chapter 47. There he talks of the Spirit being like a river. It’s deep water, he says, to swim in. Stand by any river, and which ‘bit’ of the river remains static? You can’t remain by the same ‘bit’ of river – the water moves and hurries past you. Likewise with the Lord, the Spirit: it’s not in his nature to lie low. You can’t have a dormant Holy Spirit! The river of God is full of water. If the wind of God doesn’t blow, it’s not wind. If the fire doesn’t burn, it has no flames and it’s not fire!

My brothers and sisters, it’s just a little bit ludicrous to think of God as being anything but at the height of his powers. He is always hot, never lukewarm in his affections. We talk of the Wesleyan Revival as if it is an extraordinary work of God. Well, that only makes sense if we look at it from a human point of view. It makes no sense to think of God in his very nature as sometimes exerting himself; and at others, because he is tired for example, to be just ‘ticking over’. But he does nothing by halves. He always acts in the full zest of his boundless love and his energetic power and his changeless character. The problem with so-called ‘dead’ churches is not that God has failed to keep his promise, but that dead people don’t recognise his presence with them. Jacob woke up and exclaimed, ‘God is in this place and I knew it not.’ (Genesis 28:16). If you read carefully the account in John’s Gospel, you will see that Jesus is actually listening when Thomas said he didn’t believe Jesus was alive (John 20:24ff).



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As much as he ever was with the Apostles, or as much as he was with the Wesleys, he is with us. As much as he is manifested in the greatest revival, he is with us now. Whatever we feel—it is not our awareness that brings Jesus near.

Where is the God of Elijah? Where is the God of Charles Wesley? Where is the God of wonders who is always calling the lost home? He is right here – when will we trust he is always the same for us and act upon such knowledge?

I began this section with a quotation from John Wesley’s Journal. Six months later we read,

We met at Fetter Lane to humble ourselves before God ... we acknowledged we had grieved him by our manifold divisions ... In that hour, we found God with us as at the first. Some fell prostrate upon the ground. Others burst out, as with one consent, into loud praise and thanksgiving. And many openly testified, there had been no such day as this since January the first preceding.

From John Wesley’s Journal, July 1739; my emphasis.

The Resurrected Christ is here, always here. Reckon on that fact. Step out in it. And his life is moving among us. God will move as we move out in faith.

CONCLUSION

A dear old saint once said that 1 Thessalonians 1:1-6 are some of the happiest words ever written. He went on to say that there would be no troubles in the church or the world if we emulated the Thessalonians in their ‘work of faith’, ‘labour of love’ and ‘patient hope’. This gospel that the Thessalonians received came to them not only in word ‘but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit, and in much assurance.’ The result was that the fact that the Thessalonians had ‘turned to God from idols’ became well known ‘not only in

Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place [their] faith in God [had] gone forth’. That’s what God wants to see happen in our churches too.

How hope-filled are you that God can change the church so that it resembles a glorious bride, without any blemish (see Ephesians 5:27 & Revelation 21:2)? I once saw a cartoon which exactly described the power of biblical hope (believing that God, who is good, and only good, will keep to his word, and bring about his purposes). There were three frames: in the first, there was just a picture of a snail; in the second, a picture of a huge boulder falling from the sky, about to crush the snail to pieces; and in the third, it is the rock that lies in smithereens as the snail just gets on with its snailish life.

No matter how dark it gets, no matter how hard the forces of darkness press on us, the Lord will build his church. Alleluia.

The Revd Canon David White, who died of Pneumonia with Covid in December 2021, was an Anglican Clergyman who served a number of parishes, including St Michael le Belfrey, York; Holy Trinity, St Austell; and St Andrew’s, Chorleywood. Deeply inspired by the Wesleys, he was for many years an Associate Member of MET. He is survived by his ‘best-beloved’ Ruth, their three sons, two daughters-in-law, and six grandchildren. His writing continues to be made available on his website, OfferingTheLight.com

