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TSF BULLETIN

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Pastor and Evangelist

By THE REV. JOHN TILLER MA, *St Cuthbert's, Bedford. A discussion of the ministry of William Grimshaw and the Evangelical Revival in the light of the recent study,* William Grimshaw, 1708-63, *by Frank Baker (Epworth Press, 1963, 288pp. 45s.).*

William Grimshaw was one of those picturesque figures whose lives inevitably acquire legendary associations within a very short time of their deaths. Today he stands pre-eminent among a number of eighteenth-century exhibits on pastoralia, for the edification of modern Evangelicals. But his real importance lies rather in the fact that, placed in true historical perspective, his ministry is seen to have been unique and unrepeatable. Adopting the evangelical doctrines without any contact with the Wesleys or Whitefield; exercising a full ministry both as parish 'priest' and as Methodist itinerant preacher; dying before the new groupings became hard and fast — Grimshaw enables us to understand the circumstances in which Methodism was born in a way which is not paralleled by the life of any other leader, including John Wesley. When all is said, Wesley was himself one of the factors creating tension between the Established Church and the Methodist Societies. If we wish to know how far a Methodist could remain a 'good Anglican' (and what question could be more relevant today?) we must turn to the life of Grimshaw.

The answer has been fully given and a great need met by Frank Baker's recent and excellent biography of Grimshaw. His conclusion is that 'the story might have been, would have been, different, had he lived and laboured along with the Wesleys for another thirty years'. This does not mean that the wheels of the disciplinary machinery were incredibly slow to get moving in the eighteenth-century Church of England. Nor does it mean that the curate of Haworth may only be reckoned irregular and inconsistent for opening a Methodist preaching-house in his parish and directing the activities of a band of lay-preachers who were entirely outside the jurisdiction of any diocesan bishop. It is easy to feel some ulterior motive must have been at work to make the Methodists continue to pay lip-service to the Church of England. Without the understanding that the life of Grimshaw gives us, it is hard to realize that it was not 'being consistent' for Methodists either to remain or to withdraw into dissent, at any rate before the 1780s. They lived in that intolerable age of old wineskins.

THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND AND THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

The basic fact about the eighteenth century in England is that just when powerful forces were at work to alter the whole structure of society, politics, religion and industry, the general attitude was accepted that after all the upheavals of the previous century a state of perfection had been reached at last in both civil and ecclesiastical government. Many of the apparent anomalies and inconsistencies of the age resulted from the refusal to see any need for change. Convocation was suspended indefinitely in 1717, the assumption being that no new canons would be needed by the Church. So for the rest of the century this supposition of constitutional perfection was maintained. It is, incidentally, significant to note the influence of the American colonies in the eventual dispersion of this dream both in Church and State.

The authorities were not ignorant of the fact that the whole balance of population was shifting; but once again, there seemed no need for any change. It was impossible for people to move beyond the bounds of the parochial system. Unfortunately, in Lancashire and Yorkshire, where the new industrial towns were beginning to grow, the parishes were among the largest in England. Blackburn, the ancestral home of the Grimshaws, was one of the largest of all with an area of 14 x 10 miles. Grimshaw's cures at Todmorden and Haworth were within the parishes of Rochdale and Bradford respectively. More or less independent chapels-of-ease within these old parishes were a poor solution to the population explosion. For one thing, they were invariably poorly endowed (although Todmorden is an example of how 'Queen Anne's Bounty' had done much to alter a situation in which pluralism was often a necessity, to one in which it was an eradicable evil). Then again, the habitual ill-feelings between the parishioners of Haworth and the Vicar of Bradford illustrate how disputes over legal rights in this type of arrangement prevented the growth of a healthy local church life. Finally, of course, not many of these chapels-of-ease were new structures built to meet the demands of recent expansion. Grimshaw discovered some of the difficulties of church-building when he set about enlarging his church at Haworth.

THE COMPLEXITY OF THE REVIVAL

This rigid framework was shaken to the foundations by the revival movement of which Methodism formed but a part. Moravians and Inghamites, Establishment and Dissent all come into the story. 'The revival of religion in the eighteenth century was a complex growth whose origins were not confined to the Wesleys nor even to the British Isles. Nor was it a steady unified process, but punctuated by sporadic outbursts in apparently unrelated areas.' Frank Baker's observation is important because there has so often been a failure to point out (*e.g.* in Balleine's *History of the Evangelical Party*) that John Wesley was not the fountain-head of the whole movement. Some of the early leaders never were particularly influenced by Wesley. Once again, the case of Grimshaw is most instructive, not only because the Haworth revival involved Quakers and Baptists as well as Methodists and Inghamites, but also because the leader himself had followed such a solitary path to evangelical faith. His journey lasted from 1734 to 1742, but it ended with him still in ignorance of the Methodists. When John Nelson, a lay preacher, visited Haworth in the following year, Grimshaw warned his people not to go near him. Yet Grimshaw was at this time already preaching the same doctrines and employing in evangelism and organization ideas remarkably similar to those of the Methodists.

The outbreaks of revival 'in apparently unrelated areas' are not accounted for solely in terms of the conversions of the leaders. But the lack of co-ordination in these conversions is a significant factor. As with Grimshaw, the leaders were engaged in ministry before the revival, and indeed before their own conversions. Bitter experience of ineffectiveness in this ministry and lack of spiritual power is an element undoubtedly common to many of them. It was so with Wesley, and with Grimshaw, Walker, Berridge, Venn, and Romaine. Frank Baker mentions Grimshaw's pitiful counsel to a young mother wounded mentally and spiritually by the death of her child aged five weeks. When this did not work he confessed himself helpless to advise. Such experiences drove many a clergyman to his knees. In scattered places men were engaged in the same solitary struggle that Luther knew, and like him they knew not where to turn for advice except to the Scriptures. Some were helped by the mediation of friends or books (Wesley, indeed, by Luther himself); but it remained an utterly personal and inner contest involving the individual's whole idea of his vocation. Perhaps J. C. Ryle comes as near as anyone to explaining the whole movement when he applies Luther's dictum to Grimshaw: 'Prayer and temptation, the Bible and meditation, make a true minister of the Gospel.'

METHODISM AND THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

Once having grasped his vocation as a minister of the gospel, the evangelical clergyman immediately became concerned about how best to minister this gospel to those in need. For some, such as Samuel Walker, it meant a new self-respect and a new message of power in their parishes. But it was difficult to evade the problem of the sheep plainly not being fed elsewhere, or to dissuade those who came from elsewhere from listening to the new preaching. Inevitably, therefore, parochial boundaries became a problem. And especially in the North was it plain to Evangelicals that the parochial system was not adapted to changes in population. The only answer, to one way of thinking, was to go to the people where they were, preaching in the open air if need be. G. R. Balleine consequently divides the leaders into Methodists and Anglicans on the basis of their attitude to the parochial system.

William Grimshaw perhaps stands alone as a minister engaged fully in both parochial and itinerant work at the same time. There was also John Berridge, but all his travelling did not make him a Methodist; whereas it is clear from such evidence as the trust deeds of the Methodist preaching-houses that Grimshaw was looked upon as John Wesley's probable successor. How was it possible for a man to be organizer of Methodism in the North of England, and at the same time in the fullest sense a parish minister? Physically the answer lies in the extraordinary character of Grimshaw; but in terms of allegiance it lies in the fact that neither he nor anyone else knew as yet whether itinerant evangelism might not become the official solution of the Church of England to the population problem. In an age which took the existing parochial organization for granted it was difficult to foresee the carving out wholesale of completely new parishes. Such a step would have meant a major constitutional revolution. And there was nothing to suggest that itinerant evangelism was inherently incompatible with the parochial system: the Methodists followed in the tracks of the medieval friars; and Frank Baker has drawn attention to the existence since Elizabethan times of itinerant preachers under royal licence. One of these, John Milner, was a friend of Wesley and Grimshaw and like the latter had a cure as well as a circuit. Among the Methodists John Wesley, as a Fellow of an Oxford College, had a general licence to preach.

Once the historical context of Grimshaw's ministry is taken into account it will be appreciated that perhaps only during his life-time was it possible to adopt both surplice and saddle-bags with equal comfort. Grimshaw was both guide to a great company of Methodist preachers, and inspiration of such leaders of Anglican evangelicalism as Romaine, Newton and, above all, Venn. Not that even Grimshaw experienced no tensions from his dual role. Once he wrote: 'I did not expect to be turned out of my parish on this occasion, but if I had, I would have joined my friend Wesley, taken my saddle-bags and gone to one of his poorest circuits.' And then, during the dispute over the administration of Holy Communion by lay preachers in 1760, he wrote: 'I disclaim all further and future connection with the Methodists.' In the event, however, he was

obliged to stand by neither statement. Perhaps insufficient attention has been paid to the question of why Grimshaw and Charles Wesley should have been so sensitive on the question of lay administration, compared with John Wesley's relative equanimity. The issue, however, became larger than any of the personalities involved, and we are left to ask whether 'the Grimshaw phase' must remain for ever unique. Today, with a growing population in a state of almost continuous mobility, largely unreached by the Church, and for whom a permanent church building of any kind will scarcely serve, there is a case for wondering whether Methodist itinerancy might again become the Anglican way.