

## BRITISH METHODISM AND THE ABOLITION OF SLAVERY

### The Revd Colin Smith

I am a great admirer of David Olusoga, both as a historian and as a broadcaster. I particularly enjoy the different series he has taken part in of *A House Through Time*. When he went to Bristol he explored the history of a house which had been built by and lived in by slavers and how John Wesley and the Methodists had opened a chapel opposite. Olusoga interviewed a local historian who praised the Methodists for their stand on the abolition of slavery. It was the most positive story that the Methodists have been given on television for a very long time.

A few months later I read in the minutes of the Methodist Council that a group of members of the Connexional Team were going to explore how Methodists gained from the slave trade. Since the Methodist response to slavery was first rate I wondered what they thought they would find. I've have recently seen a paper which gives no evidence.

The first thing to say is that Samuel Wesley, the father of John and Charles and a lot more children, was the first person to publish articles calling for the abolition of slavery. This was in the late 1690s when he was a contributor to a publication called *The Athenian Mercury or Gazette* which answered difficult questions from the readers. It was edited by his brother-in-law, one of Susannah's brothers. Samuel's views were contemporary to some Quakers and with the Puritan Richard Baxter. There were few people who had abolitionist views in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. Samuel used some new arguments against slavery.

Now Samuel wasn't strictly speaking a Methodist but he was a great influence on his sons. Could the subject of his anti-slavery articles have been raised in discussions at the Epworth rectory?

As everyone knows John and Charles spent some time in America in the 1730s but they spent most of the time in the colony of Georgia which did not introduce slavery until 1751 when the Wesley brothers had long gone. George Whitfield campaigned for slavery to be introduced. He had 50 slaves when he died.

Charles went on a trip to South Carolina which was a slave state. On 2<sup>nd</sup> August 1736 he saw truly horrific abuse of slaves which sickened him. He wrote:

I had obsessed much, and heard more of the cruelty of masters towards their negroes, but now I received an authentic account of some horrid instances thereof.

He gave examples:

The giving of a child a slave of his own age to tyrannize over, to beat and to abuse. Charles believed this to be a common practice.

The nailing up of a slave by the ears and then ordering him to be whipped in the severest manner, and then to have scalding water thrown all over him.

The Wesley brothers both opposed slavery throughout their lives though John became the most active one. Charles offered support to slaves in prison.

On 12<sup>th</sup> February 1772 John Wesley was riding back from Dorking and he later made an entry in his *Journal*:

In returning I read a very different book, published by an honest Quaker, on that execrable sum of all villainies, commonly called the Slave-trade. I read of nothing like it in the heathen world, whether ancient or modern and it infinitely exceeds, in every instance of barbarity, whatever Christian slaves suffer in Mahometan countries.

The 'honest Quaker' was Anthony Benezet who came from a French Protestant family. He became deeply concerned about reports from Africa and the Caribbean regarding the slave trade, corresponding with Wilberforce, Sharp and Clarkson in England. Amongst other publications, he wrote a book in 1766 entitled, *A Condition and Warning to Great Britain and her Colonies, in a short Representation of the calamitous State of the enslaved Negroes in British Dominions*. It went through many editions and many copies circulated in London, as did a later book *Historical Account of Guinea* both of which inspired John Wesley. He wrote a book, based on Benezet's books called *Thoughts upon Slavery* in 1774. It sold very well in Britain, America and the European continent. It became the favourite of antislavery groups everywhere. Thirteen new editions appeared in America. It is said that there is a copy in George Washington's library.

In Britain The Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade was formed in 1787. John Wesley wrote a powerful anti-slavery letter from Guernsey in support. His very last letter was sent to William Wilberforce in February 1791, a few days before his death. He wrote:

Reading this morning a tract wrote by a poor African, I was particularly struck by that circumstance, that a man who has a black skin, being wronged or outraged by a white man, can have no redress; it being a law in our Colonies that the oath of a black against a white goes for nothing. What villainy is this? That He who has guided you from your youth up may continue to strengthen you in this and all things is the prayer of, dear sir, your affectionate servant, John Wesley.

Earlier on 4<sup>th</sup> March 1788, when John was a very old man, he preached at the New Room in Bristol. He advertised that he was going to preach against slavery and the chapel was 'filled from end to end with high and low, rich and poor' for the occasion. John later wrote:

About the middle of the discourse, while there was on every side attention still and night, a vehement noise arose, none could tell why

and shot like lightning through the whole congregation. The terror and confusion was inexpressible. You might have taken a city taken by storm. The people rushed upon each other with the utmost violence, the benches were broken in pieces, and nine-tenths of the congregation appeared to be struck with the same panic.

It's a mysterious passage but it is generally interpreted as a failed attempt to break up the meeting by a pro-slavery mob.

John continued:

We set Friday apart as a day of fasting and prayer that God would remember those poor outcasts of men; and (what seems impossible with men, considering the wealth and power of their oppressors) make way for them to escape, and breathe their chains in sunder.

How influential was John Wesley in the campaign against slavery? He died in 1791 and so was not around in the successful campaign to abolish the slave-trade and then the struggle to abolish slavery itself. Irv Brendlinger, an American historian, published an article in 2006 entitled 'John Wesley and Slavery: Myth and Reality'. He concludes that Wesley was a very significant factor in the abolition of British slavery. He writes:

He and his movement directly influenced those in political leadership, such as William Wilberforce. He and his movement also influenced many of those who would be in Parliament a generation later when the issue was decided. And more broadly, the masses of English, the "common folk" who signed petitions .... were greatly influenced by Methodism.....

I haven't time to talk about the participation of Methodists in the campaigns to bring the slave-trade and then the institution to an end. The Wesleyan Methodist leaders were involved in the public campaign and Methodists collected huge numbers of petition signatures. The lawyer, Richard Matthews a Methodist who came from Histon near to Cambridge, was the secretary of the national anti-slavery society. He had earlier published a pamphlet entitled *The Rights of Man (not the Paines) but the Rights of Man in the West Indies*. The Wesleyan Chapel in Histon became the Richard Matthews Wesleyan Chapel. Dr Brian Beck has published an article on Matthews.

I haven't time to talk about the Wesleyan Missionary William Shrewsbury who was sent to Barbados. He built up a congregation of slaves which upset the Anglican slavers so much that they pulled down the Methodist chapel brick by brick in a riot and Shrewsbury and his wife were threatened with death. They escaped in a boat and Mrs Shrewsbury began to give birth to the child at sea before they reached land. There was subsequently a debate in the House of Commons in 1825. Some of the leading Government ministers took part, including the Foreign Secretary, George Canning, who briefly became Prime Minister, and

Henry Brougham, a future Whig Lord Chancellor. This demonstrates the seriousness with which the events on Barbados were taken. A resolution was passed declaring:

that, (the Members of the House) view with the utmost indignation that scandalous and daring violation of the law; and having seen with great satisfaction the instructions which have been sent out by his majesty's Secretary of State to the governor of Barbadoes, to prevent a recurrence of similar outrages, they humbly assure his Majesty of their readiness to concur in every measure which his majesty may deem necessary for securing ample protection and religious toleration to all his Majesty's subjects in that part of his Majesty's dominions.

One of Shrewsbury's congregation, Sarah Ann Gill, a woman of mixed race and some wealth took over the running of the Methodist Society in absence of a minister and suffered terrible persecution. In recent years she was named as one of the ten National Heroes of Barbados, the only woman so named.

I end with a quotation from a book I bought at the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool entitled *The Legacy of Slavery in Britain* by Nigel Sadler. He writes:

John Wesley ...set up the Methodist movement. When his societies needed houses to worship in, Wesley began to provide chapels, first in Bristol at the New Room, then in London ... and elsewhere. He was a keen abolitionist, and encouraged those within the Methodist Church to oppose the slave trade. At these chapels, slavery and abolition would have been discussed. ....

It may appear to be a bit of a stretch, but in effect all Methodist churches could be seen as illustrating the legacy of emancipation. The non-conformist churches led the way in Britain arguing against slavery, not just at the time of emancipation debate for the British Empire, but throughout many other countries. They also sent missionaries to gather data and to try and lives of enslaved workers easier..... Methodist chapels both in the UK and the West Indies stand as a testament for the widespread campaign.