

The Late Work of God in North America

by John Wesley

"The appearance was as it were a wheel in the middle of a wheel." - Ezek. 1:16

Whatever may be the primary meaning of this mysterious passage of Scripture, many serious Christians, in all ages have applied it in a secondary sense, to the manner wherein the adorable providence of God usually works in governing the world. They have judged this expression manifestly to allude to the complicated wheels of his providence, adapting one event to another, and working one thing by means of another. In the whole process of this, there is an endless variety of wheels within wheels. But they are frequently so disposed and complicated, that we cannot understand them at first sight; nay, we can seldom fully comprehend them till they are explained by the event.

Perhaps no age ever afforded a more striking instance of this kind than the present does, in the dispensations of divine providence with respect to our colonies in North-America. In order to see this clearly, let us endeavour, according to the measure of our weak understanding,

First, to trace each wheel apart: And,

Secondly, to consider both, as they relate to and answer each other.

I. And, First, we are to trace each wheel apart.

It is by no means my design to give a particular detail of the late transactions in America; but barely to give a simple and naked deduction of a few well-known facts.

I know this is a very delicate subject; and that it is difficult, if not impossible, to treat it in such a manner as not to offend any, particularly those who are warmly attached to either party. But I would not willingly offend; and shall therefore studiously avoid all keen and reproachful language, and use the softest terms I can, without either betraying or disguising the truth.

In the year 1736 it pleased God to begin a work of grace in the newly planted colony of Georgia, then the southernmost of our settlements on the continent of America. To those English who had settled there the year before, were then added a body of Moravians, so called; and a larger body who had been expelled from Germany by the Archbishop of Salzburg. These were men truly fearing God and working righteousness. At the same time there began an awakening among the English, both at Savannah and Frederica; many inquiring what they must do to be saved, and "bringing forth fruits meet for repentance."

In the same year there broke out a wonderful work of God in several parts of New-England. It began in Northampton, and in a little time appeared in the adjoining towns. A particular and beautiful account of this was published by Mr. Edwards, Minister of Northampton. Many sinners were deeply convinced of sin, and many truly converted to God. I suppose there had been no instance in America of so swift and deep a work of grace, for an hundred years before; nay, nor perhaps since the English settled there.

The following year, the work of God spread by degrees from New-England towards the south. At the same time it advanced by slow degrees, from Georgia towards the north. In a few souls it deepened likewise; and some of them witnessed a good confession, both in life and in death.

In the year 1738 Mr. Whitefield came over to Georgia, with a design to assist me in preaching, either to the English or the Indians. But as I was embarked for England before he arrived, he preached to the English altogether, first in Georgia, to which his chief service was due, then in South and North Carolina, and afterwards

in the intermediate provinces, till he came to New-England. And all men owned that God was with him, wheresoever he went; giving a general call to high and low, rich and poor, to "repent, and believe the gospel." Many were not disobedient to the heavenly calling: They did repent and believe the gospel. And by his ministry a line of communication was formed, quite from Georgia to New-England.

Within a few years he made several more voyages to America, and took several more journeys through the provinces. And in every journey he found fresh reason to bless God, who still prospered the work of his hands; there being more and more, in all the provinces, who found his word to be "the power of God unto salvation."

But the last journey he made, he acknowledged to some of his friends, that he had much sorrow and heaviness in his heart, on account of multitudes who for a time ran well, but afterwards "drew back unto perdition." Indeed, in a few years, the far greater part of those who had once "received the word with joy," yea, had "escaped the corruption that is in the world," were "entangled again and overcome." Some were like those who received the seed on stony ground, which "in time of temptation withered away." Others were like those who "received it among thorns: "the thorns" soon "sprang up, and choked it." Insomuch that he found exceeding few who "brought forth fruit to perfection." A vast majority had entirely "turned back from the holy commandment delivered to them."

And what wonder! for it was a true saying, which was common in the ancient Church, "The soul and the body make a man; and the spirit and discipline make a Christian." But those who were more or less affected by Mr. Whitefield's preaching had no discipline at all. They had no shadow of discipline; nothing of the kind. They were formed into no societies: They had no Christian connection with each other, nor were ever taught to watch over each other's souls. So that if any fell into lukewarmness, or even into sin, he had none to lift him up: He might fall lower and lower, yea, into hell, if he would, for who regarded it?

Things were in this state when about eleven years ago I received several letters from America, giving a melancholy account of the state of religion in most of the colonies, and earnestly entreating that some of our Preachers would come over and help them. It was believed they might confirm many that were weak or wavering, and lift up many that were fallen; nay, and that they would see more fruit of their labours in America than they had done either in England or Ireland.

This was considered at large in our yearly Conference at Bristol, in the year 1769: And two of our Preachers willingly offered themselves; viz., Richard Boardman and Joseph Pillmoor. They were men well reported of by all, and (we believed) fully qualified for the work. Accordingly, after a few days spent in London, they cheerfully went over. They laboured first in Philadelphia and New-York; afterwards in many other places: And everywhere God was eminently with them, and gave them to see much fruit of their labour. What was wanting before was now supplied: Those who were desirous to save their souls were no longer a rope of sand, but clave to one another, and began to watch over each other in love. Societies were formed, and Christian discipline introduced in all its branches. Within a few years after, several more of the Preachers were willing to go and assist them. And God raised up many natives of the country who were glad to act in connexion with them; till there were two-and-twenty Travelling Preachers in America, who kept their circuits as regularly as those in England.

The work of God then not only spread wider, particularly in North Carolina, Maryland, Virginia, Pennsylvania, and the Jerseys, but sunk abundantly deeper than ever it had done before. So that at the beginning of the late troubles there were three thousand souls connected together in religious societies; and a great number of these witnessed that the Son of God hath power on earth to forgive sin.

But now it was that a bar appeared in the way, a grand hindrance to the progress of religion. The immense trade of America, greater in proportion than even that of the mother-country, brought in an immense flow of wealth; which was also continually increasing. Hence both merchants and tradesmen of various kinds accumulated money without end, and rose from indigence to opulent fortunes, quicker than any could do in Europe. Riches poured in

upon them as a flood, and treasures were heaped up as the sand of the sea. And hence naturally arose unbounded plenty of all the necessaries, conveniences, yea, and superfluities, of life.

One general consequence of this was pride. The more riches they acquired, the more they were regarded by their neighbours as men of weight and importance: And they would naturally see themselves in at least as fair a light as their neighbours saw them. And, accordingly, as they rose in the world, they rose in their opinion of themselves. As it is generally allowed,

A thousand pound supplies
The want of twenty thousand qualities;

so, the richer they grew, the more admiration they gained, and the more applause they received. Wealth then bringing in more applause, of course brought in more pride, till they really thought themselves as much wiser, as they were wealthier, than their neighbours.

Another natural consequence of wealth was luxury, particularly in food. We are apt to imagine nothing can exceed the luxurious living which now prevails in Great Britain and Ireland. But alas! what is this to that which lately prevailed in Philadelphia, and other parts of North America? A merchant or middling tradesman there kept a table equal to that of a nobleman in England; entertaining his guests with ten, twelve, yea, sometimes twenty dishes of meat at a meal! And this was so far from being blamed by any one, that it was applauded as generosity and hospitality.

And is not idleness naturally joined with "fullness of bread?" Doth not sloth easily spring from luxury? It did so here in an eminent degree; such sloth as is scarce named in England. Persons in the bloom of youth, and in perfect health, could hardly bear to put on their own clothes. The slave must be called to do this, and that, and everything: It is too great labour for the master or mistress. It is a wonder they would be at the pains of putting meat into their own mouths. Why did they not imitate the lordly lubbers in China, who are fed by a slave standing on each side?

Who can wonder, if sloth alone beget wantonness? Has it not always had this effect? Was it not said near two thousand years ago,

Quaeritur, Aegisthus quare sit factus adulter?
In promptu causa est; Desidiosus erat.

[The following is Tate's translation of this quotation from Ovid: --

"The adulterous lust that did Aegisthus seize,
And brought on murder, sprang from wanton ease." -- Edit.]

And when sloth and luxury are joined together, will they not produce an abundant offspring? This they certainly have done in these parts. I was surprised a few years ago at a letter I received from Philadelphia, wherein were (nearly) these words: "You think the women in England (many of them, I mean) do not abound in chastity. But yet the generality of your women, if compared with ours, might almost pass for vestal virgins." Now this complication of pride, luxury, sloth, and wantonness, naturally arising from vast wealth and plenty, was the grand hindrance to the spreading of true religion through the cities of North-America.

II. Let us now see the other wheel of divine providence.

It may reasonably be supposed that the colonies in New-England had, from their very beginning, an hankering after independency. It could not be expected to be otherwise, considering their families, their education, their relations, and the connections they had formed before they left their native country. They were farther inclined to it by the severe and unjust treatment which many of them had met with in England. This might well create in them a fear lest they should meet with the like again, a jealousy of their governors, and a desire of shaking off that

dependence, to which they were never thoroughly reconciled. The same spirit they communicated to their children, from whom it descended to the present generation. Nor could it be effaced by all the favours and benefits which they continually received from the English Government.

This spirit generally prevailed, especially in Boston, as early as the year 1737. In that year, my brother, being detained there some time, was greatly surprised to hear almost in every company, whether of Ministers, gentlemen, merchants, or common people, where anything of the kind was mentioned, "We must be independent! We will be independent! We will bear the English yoke no longer! We will be our own governors!" This appeared to be even then the general desire of the people; although it is not probable that there was at that time any formed design. No; they could not be so vain as to think they were able to stand alone against the power of Great Britain.

A gentleman who was there in the following year observed the same spirit in every corner of the town: "Why should these English blockheads rule over us?" was then the common language. And as one encouraged another herein, the spirit of independency rose higher and higher, till it began to spread into the other colonies bordering upon New-England. Nevertheless the fear of their troublesome neighbours, then in possession of Canada, kept them within bounds, and for a time prevented the flame from breaking out. But when the English had removed that fear from them, when Canada was ceded to the king of Great Britain, the desire then ripened into a formed design; only a convenient opportunity was wanting.

It was not long before that opportunity appeared. The Stamp-Act was passed, and sent over to America. The malcontents saw and pressed their advantage; they represented it as a common cause; and by proper emissaries spread their own spirit through another and another colony. By inflammatory papers of every kind, they stirred up the minds of the people. They vilified, first, the English Ministry, representing them, one and all, as the veriest wretches alive, void of all honesty, honour, and humanity. By the same methods they next inflamed the people in general against the British Parliament, representing them as the most infamous villains upon earth, as a company of base, unprincipled hirelings. But still they affected to reverence the King, and spoke very honourably of him. Not long; a few months after, they treated him in the same manner they had done his ministers and his Parliament.

Matters being now, it was judged, in sufficient forwardness, an association was formed between the northern and southern colonies; both took up arms, and constituted a supreme power which they termed the Congress. But still they affirmed, their whole design was to secure their liberty; and even to insinuate that they aimed at anything more, was said to be quite cruel and unjust. But in a little time they threw off the mask, and boldly asserted their own independency. Accordingly, Dr. Witherspoon, President of the College in New-Jersey, in his address to the Congress (added to a Fast-Sermon, published by him, August 3, 1776,) uses the following words: -- "It appears now, in the clearest manner, that till very lately those who seemed to take the part of America, in the British Parliament, never did it on American principles. They either did not understand, or were not willing to admit, the extent of our claim. Even the great Lord Chatham's Bill for Reconciliation would not have been accepted here, and did not materially differ from what the Ministry would have consented to." Here it is avowed, that their claim was independency; and that they would accept of nothing less.

By this open and avowed defection from, and defiance of, their mother-country, (whether it was defensible or not, is another question,) at least nine parts in ten of their immense trade to Europe, Asia, Africa, and other parts of America were cut off at one stroke. In lieu of this they gained at first, perhaps, an hundred thousand pounds a year by their numerous privateers. But even then, this was, upon the whole, no gain at all; for they lost as many ships as they took. Afterwards they took fewer and fewer; and in the meantime they lost four or five millions yearly, (perhaps six or seven,) which their trade brought them in. What was the necessary consequence of this? Why, that, as the fountain of their wealth was dammed up, the streams of it must run lower and lower, till they were wholly exhausted; so that at present these provinces are no richer than the poorest parts either of Scotland or Ireland.

Plenty declined in the same proportion as wealth, till universal scarcity took place. In a short time there was everywhere felt a deep want, not only of the superfluities, not only of the common conveniences, but even of the necessaries, of life. Wholesome food was not to be procured but at a very advanced price. Decent apparel was not to be had, not even in the large towns. Not only velvets, and silks, and fashionable ornaments, (which might well be spared,) but even linen and woollen clothes, were not to be purchased at any price whatsoever.

Thus have we observed each of these wheels apart; -- on the one hand, trade, wealth, pride, luxury, sloth, and wantonness spreading far and wide, through the American provinces; on the other, the spirit of independency diffusing itself from north to south.

Let us now observe how each of these wheels relates to, and answers, the other; how the wise and gracious providence of God uses one to check the course of the other, and even employs (if so strong an expression may be allowed) Satan to cast out Satan. Probably, that subtle spirit hoped, by adding to all those other vices the spirit of independency, to have overturned the whole work of God, as well as the British Government, in North-America. But he that sitteth in heaven laughed him to scorn, and took the wise in his own craftiness. By means of this very spirit, there is reason to believe, God will overturn every hindrance of that work.

We have seen, how by the breaking out of this spirit, in open defiance of the British Government, an effectual check was given to the trade of those colonies. They themselves, by a wonderful stroke of policy, threw up the whole trade of their mother-country, and all its dependencies; made an Act, that no British ship should enter into any of their harbours; nay, they fitted out numberless privateers, which seized upon all the British ships they could find. The King's ships seized an equal number of theirs. So their foreign trade too was brought almost to nothing. Their riches died away with their trade, especially as they had no internal resources; the flower of their youth, before employed in husbandry, being now drawn off into their armies, so that the most fruitful lands were of no use, none being left to till the ground. And when wealth fled away, (as was before observed,) so did plenty too; -- abundance of all things being succeeded by scarcity of all things.

The wheel now began to move within the wheel. The trade and wealth of the Americans failing, the grand incentives of pride failed also; for few admire or flatter the poor. And, being deserted by most of their admirers, they did not altogether so much admire themselves; especially when they found, upon the trial, that they had grievously miscalculated their own strength; which they had made no doubt would be sufficient to carry all before it. It is true, many of them still exalted themselves; but others were truly and deeply humbled.

Poverty, and scarcity consequent upon it, struck still more directly at the root of their luxury. There was no place now for that immoderate superfluity either of food or apparel. They sought no more, and could seldom obtain, so much as plain food, sufficient to sustain nature. And they were content if they could procure coarse apparel, to keep them clean and warm. Thus they were reduced to the same condition their forefathers were in when the providence of God brought them into this country. They were nearly in the same outward circumstances. Happy, if they were likewise in the same spirit!

Poverty and want struck at the root of sloth also. It was now no time to say, "A little more sleep, a little more slumber, a little more folding of the hands to rest." If a man would not work now, it was plain he could not eat. All the pains he could take were little enough to procure the bare necessaries of life: Seeing, on the one hand, so few of them remained, their own armies having swept away all before them; and, on the other, what remained bore so high a price, that exceeding few were able to purchase them.

Thus, by the adorable providence of God, the main hindrances of his work are removed. And in how wonderful a manner; -- such as it never could have entered into the heart of man to conceive! Those hindrances had been growing up and continually increasing for many years. What God foresaw would prove the remedy grew up with the disease; and when the disease was come to its height, then only began to operate. Immense trade, wealth, and plenty begot and nourished proportionable pride, and luxury, and sloth, and wantonness. Meantime the same

trade, wealth, and plenty begot or nourished the spirit of independency. Who would have imagined that this evil disease would lay a foundation for the cure of all the rest? And yet so it was. For this spirit, now come to maturity, and disdaining all restraint, is now swiftly destroying the trade, and wealth, and plenty whereby it was nourished, and thereby makes way for the happy return of humility, temperance, industry, and chastity. Such unspeakable good does the all-wise God bring out of all this evil! So does "the fierceness of man," of the Americans, "turn to his praise," in a very different sense from what Dr. Witherspoon supposes!

May we not observe, how exactly in this grand scene of providence, one wheel answers to the other? The spirit of independency, which our poet so justly terms,

The glorious fault of angels and of gods,

(that is, in plain terms, of devils,) the same which so many call liberty, is over-ruled by the justice and mercy of God, first to punish those crying sins, and afterwards to heal them. He punishes them by poverty, coming as an armed man, and over-running the land; by such scarcity as has hardly been known there for an hundred years past; by want of every kind, even of necessary clothing, even of bread to eat. But with what intent does he do this? Surely that mercy may rejoice over judgment. He punishes that he may amend, that he may first make them sensible of their sins, which anyone that has eyes to see may read in their punishment; and then bring them back to the spirit of their forefathers, the spirit of humility, temperance, industry, chastity; yea, and a general willingness to hear and receive the word which is able to save their souls. "O the depth, both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!" -- unless so far as they are revealed in his word, and explained by his providence.

From these we learn that the spiritual blessings are what God principally intends in all these severe dispensations. He intends they should all work together for the destruction of Satan's kingdom, and the promotion of the kingdom of his dear Son; that they should all minister to the general spread of "righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost." But after the inhabitants of these provinces are brought again to "seek the kingdom of God, and his righteousness," there can be no doubt, but all other things, all temporal blessings, will be added unto them. He will send through all the happy land, with all the necessaries and conveniences of life, not independency, (which would be no blessing, but an heavy curse, both to them and their children,) but liberty, real, legal liberty; which is an unspeakable blessing. He will superadd to Christian liberty, liberty from sin, true civil liberty; a liberty from oppression of every kind; from illegal violence; a liberty to enjoy their lives, their persons, and their property; in a word, a liberty to be governed in all things by the laws of their country. They will again enjoy true British liberty, such as they enjoyed before these commotions: Neither less nor more than they have enjoyed from their first settlement in America. Neither less nor more than is now enjoyed by the inhabitants of their mother country. If their mother-country had ever designed to deprive them of this, she might have done it long ago; and that this was never done, is a demonstration that it was never intended. But God permitted this strange dread of imaginary evils to spread over all the people that he might have mercy upon all, that he might do good to all, by saving them from the bondage of sin, and bringing them into "the glorious liberty of the children of God!"