

EARLY METHODIST GROUPS

By The Rev. GEORGE WALKER

EACH generation coins its own vocabulary, but often the novelty is not the idea but the form. The word which has special significance in modern religious experience is "Group," and, with its prefix "Oxford," it has become the challenge, the irritant, and the hope of such as are concerned with the souls of men. Those most closely linked with the Groups would be most ready to disclaim novelty for its teaching or methods. Is it not the First Century Fellowship? Yet those who question might find doubts resolved if they realised how near akin is the modern Group to a procession of precursors.

Two hundred years ago John Wesley was one of a company of devout young men who met for mutual improvement of mind and soul; they met regularly for fellowship, and their reputation for eccentric and dangerous godliness attracted young Whitfield, who sought out their company, but repelled others who nicknamed them the Holy Club and the Oxford Methodists. Afterwards there were the varied experiences which led to the transforming wonder of Wesley's second conversion. In the glow of his changed life he is led to follow the example of others and to preach in the open air, the scene of his earliest triumphs being Bristol, then one of the most degraded districts in England. What should be done with those who were changed through his preaching? Adopting a method he had met amongst the Moravians he gathered his converts into "bands."

The Group method is two or more meeting in full confidence in "sharing" fellowship. This is the great stumbling block to the modern, but it should present no difficulties to the Methodist. Whitfield and Wesley spoke of "bands" when to-day we speak of "groups," but the soul goes marching on from age to age despite the name. On April 4, 1739, Wesley says in his Journal: "In the evening three women agreed to meet together weekly, with the same intention as those in London, viz., to confess their faults one to another, and pray for one another, that they may be healed. Four young men agreed to meet in pursuance of the same design." Here are Methodist examples for the Group method of meeting together, men with men and women with women, and sharing such experiences of need and victory as would be mutually helpful. As Dr. Dimond describes it this is "a Moravian graft upon an Oxford stock," but actually it is the natural expression of a deeply seated need of the changed, and the Methodist expression is only the most thoroughly organised of the methods.

"Bands" at Bristol

The history of Methodism records that within a few years of the first "bands" at Bristol there were thousands meeting in like fashion, in separate or in mixed groups as is the custom to-day, from Bristol to the Tyne. Later other features were added, which gradually changed the character of the bands into the wonderful organisation into classes, each with its own leader, which was the only bond of Methodist membership until yesterday.

The Oxford Groups have recovered the method of personal evangelism,

each changed life, is source of other change, and of working in a team with others. When in the travail of quest between Oxford and Fetter-lane, John Wesley was told by "a serious man": "Sir, you wish to serve God and go to Heaven? Remember, you cannot serve Him alone. You must therefore find companions or make them; the Bible knows nothing of solitary religion." From this conviction was born the group formation of Methodism. In the earliest definition of a Methodist Society the rule reads: "A company of men having the form and seeking the power of godliness, united in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they may help each other to work out their salvation." But for modern changes in vocabulary how better could an Oxford Group be described?

Wesley and "Guidance"

Another stumbling block to those outside the "Groups" is guidance. Bishop Gibson wrote in a fashion, apart from difference of acid content, to have delighted the Bishop of Durham; only the one was criticising the eighteenth century fellowships, the other the twentieth. Bishop Gibson saw the distinguishing feature of Methodism as guidance, "a strong persuasion on the mind that they are guided by the immediate impulses of the Spirit of God." So convinced was Wesley of guidance as the direction of the individual by the Divine Spirit that he sought at the forked roads for the Voice which said: "This is the way." Often by methods which moderns would not use, a dip into the Scriptures, the casting of lots, but even then by checking his guidance by the guidance of others, notably his brother Charles. The bands were to aid the brethren to form a judgment on questions of conduct, and to prevent individual mistakes by the help of the group consciousness.

The standards are Oxford Group, Christian Perfection, Oxford Methodist; both mean the same thing. "Loving God with all our hearts and our neighbour as ourselves" is primitive Christianity, to be as perfect as the Father Christ's ideal. Buchman speaks of "quality of life," Wesley of "right tempers," both mean "loving the things which God commandeth," and translating the vision of the mountain into the terms of common life. The early Methodists had their trophies who told how God had delivered from evil, as the man who had used all the forms of religion and yet was enslaved in sin—especially drunkenness—and could cry out in ecstasy: "Christ has set me free," and Wesley adds "According to his faith it was unto him." What made Methodism an enduring quality in the life of England was neither the organisation of John nor the preaching of Whitfield, nor the hymns of Charles, but the changed lives of a great multitude who witnessed to the power of Christ and cried continually: "Oh, let me commend my Saviour to you."

In this, too, history has its repetitions, and the Group witness to the redemptive power of the Crucified is that which will ensure its continuance until such times as peculiar phrases no longer betoken a vital experience.