

INTRODUCTION

John Wesley's account of his transforming experience at a mid-week service on Aldersgate Street in London is one of the classics in the history of spiritual growth. This summer while in London attending the World Methodist Conference, after attending Sunday morning worship at St. Paul's Cathedral, my wife and I walked to Aldersgate Street and made our pilgrimage to the site where that spiritual experience is supposed to have taken place. As I reflected upon the account of that experience as it was recorded by Mr. Wesley himself, one word stepped out to impress itself upon me as it had never done before - the word, "unwillingly". Listen to Mr. Wesley's words:

"In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed...."

But what a strange prelude to such a mighty experience. Here was a man on his way to the most important event in his life, and yet as he later confessed, "I went very unwillingly".

DEVELOPMENT

Perhaps the word startles us the more because we live in a time when the disciplines, both internal and external, have been so largely reduced. The emphasis now is on permissiveness and self-expression. From Johnny in nursery school to Janie in college, and indeed to their parents and their grandparents in retirement, the climate of our time seems to encourage people to rebel at restraints, to insist upon their right to have what they want when they want it. The word "unwillingly" is not exactly at home in our era or our experience.

When I read in the papers and magazines about what is going on in many of our universities and how the rules are being changed and how curfews for students are being lifted and how students more and more seem to be running things, I sense the extent to which the pendulum has swung in the removal of restrictions in just the past fifteen years since I graduated from college. I went to a small New England college where we even had compulsory chapel three days a week and every other Sunday. And it was not a church-related college. Can you imagine having such a thing on a college campus today, requiring students, shall we say at Berkeley, to attend chapel. How the climate has changed. But what is happening on college campuses across our land is but a typical scene in the drama of modern life. The emphasis is on enjoyment and expression - certainly not on duty and discipline. (disruptive violence, rebellion)

Now if anyone is thinking that I am about to make a plea for a return to a kind of painful Puritanism, let me quickly correct the impression. It's not at all difficult to understand how we have arrived at our present state of irresponsible freedom when we contemplate a former state of almost impossible restraints. If the status of students on the college campus in 1966 gives one cause for concern, listen to these rules for students at Mt. Holyoke a century ago:

1. No young lady shall become a member of this school who cannot kindle a fire, wash potatoes, or repeat the multiplication table.
2. No cosmetics, perfumeries or fancy soap shall be allowed.
3. Every member of this school shall walk at least a mile a day, unless an earthquake or some other calamity prevents it.

Career in the arts

You can translate that from sports to studies to vocation to any field of achievement. If a person is going to begin to fulfill the possibility of his life, there will be some times, without any hint of glamour or any sound of applause, when he deliberately goes the way of discipline and self-denial.

And as John Wesley discovered, the same principle holds with regard to spiritual growth and fulfillment. We sing "Spirit of God....descend upon my heart", but this seldom happens in a vacuum. There are some disciplines that must be followed - study, prayer, worship, service - if one is to arrive at any sort of spiritual summit. "In the evening, I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street. I felt my heart strangely warmed".

Moreover, all along the Christian journey, a person must be ready to travel some unwilling routes, if he is to arrive anywhere in his Christian action and influence. Bishop Kennedy tells of reading a letter which a young man who had been active in civil rights demonstrations had sent in response to the appeal of his school alumni fund. The man wrote, "I have no money to give.....because as a practicing Christian, I spend most of my time in jail". That letter should make us stop and think.

Some of you
~~Many~~ would perhaps dispute the fact or the implication that a practicing Christian must be an imprisoned Christian. Although there is some good historical basis for the connection between the two. But nonetheless that letter should disturb us in its reminder that genuine Christianity costs as well as comforts. Belief in the work of the church is not enough. Any person who sincerely believes in what the church stands for and in what it is trying to accomplish will, I feel, support it financially. And there had better be some moments in any Christian's life when, albeit unwillingly, he gets out of his comfortable chair, whether to take an unpopular stand, or to share his brother's burden, to assume some Christian responsibility in response to the light and the love that he has found in Jesus Christ.

"He had to pass through Samaria". If a person is ever going to be anything more than a moral or spiritual pygmy, let him have the courage to choose some routes which loom as the unwilling avenues.

BEING THRUST INTO UNWILLING AVENUES Now come at this truth from another angle, and reflect, too, that there are some unwilling avenues into which a person is simply thrust and he has no choice in the matter. A person is transferred to a new territory from a situation in which he felt so gladly at home; a person is confronted with some inevitable adjustment in his life, from induction into the army to an enforced retirement; or a person comes into a stretch of sickness or of sorrow. How many times in life, when we have planned to reside for a time on easy street, we find that our address is suddenly changed to an unwilling avenue.

I remember a few years ago a lovely family moved to this vicinity from another part of the country. But from the first, the wife met the move with resistance and resentment. She didn't like the city; she went back home as often as she could for as long as she could, and all the while she kept upon an insistent pressure upon her husband and his company, until in the end, all other considerations to the contrary, she prevailed, and they moved back to where they had come from. I have seen it in reverse, too - as persons have been transferred away from this city and have looked back with such persistent longing as to make more difficult the transition and adjustment.

The more I see of life, the more I'm convinced that one of the greatest gifts and graces of life is the grace of acceptance - acceptance of a person's residence,

acceptance of some limitation, acceptance of an interruption, acceptance of a separation. This was part of the victory of the Apostle Paul when he could say, "I have learned in whatever state I am to be content". It certainly was not that whatever state he was in was enjoyable. No one would relish the rocks and the ridicule which came into his life. But he was given to understand that God was in it, with him, and beneath the outer turmoil, there was a peace which the world could not give nor take away. The grace of acceptance. How important it is.

Little does anyone know all of the streets marked "unwilling" where persons in this congregation have been forced to take residence. But rare is the life which does not encounter circumstances that at first seem bleak and hopeless. Then it is that the Christian faith quietly affirms that no situation is hopeless or Godless. We make this affirmation in the light of the cross, for if ever there was a man who found himself on the street of dark discouragement and despair, it was the man from Nazareth. And the Christian faith rests its case on the declaration that God was there, and in the persistent light of the cross, no road on which you and I travel need ever be considered a dead-end street of defeat or despair. There is some possibility of growth and goodness in it, if we will accept the street where we live as the place where God can work for good with those who love him.

Let me read you the words of that Confederate soldier, penned a century ago. They could well have been written by the Apostle Paul, in his journey from reluctance to fulfillment:

"I asked God for strength, that I might achieve - I was made weak,
that I might learn humbly to obey.
I asked that I might do greater things - I was given infirmity,
that I might do better things.
I asked for riches, that I might be happy - I was given poverty,
that I might be wise.
I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life - I was given life,
that I might enjoy all things.
I got nothing that I asked for - but everything I had hoped for.
Despite myself, my prayers were answered. I am, among all men,
most richly blessed"

John Wesley spoke a word for our common humanity when he wrote, "I went very unwillingly....." But he also traced the map of Christian experience when he recorded that at the end of his reluctant journey, he was in a sense singing the "Hallelujah Chorus". So it was with His Master before him. So to some degree at least, it can be with those who come after him.

LET US PRAY What we have tried to put into words, do Thou by thy grace, put into our lives this day. Lift us out of resentment and self-pity over some rough pavement that we must walk, and lead us on to the strength and stature that thou dost have in store for us. In the spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen