

II. THE FELLOWSHIP MEETING AND THE PRAYER MEETING

THE FELLOWSHIP MEETING (*Y Seiat*)

Two week-night services were regularly held in the Calvinistic Methodist Church. These were the fellowship meeting and the prayer service. There were, to be sure, other week-night services on occasion, the number of which varied according to time and place. Among these were singing schools, special services for children, temperance meetings, and, in more recent decades, regular choir practice nights, missionary society meetings, and devotional services for young people. But the two fundamental regularly established services of the Church were the fellowship meeting and the prayer meeting. If reduced to one service, as fundamental to the genius of Calvinistic Methodism, the *seiat* (fellowship meeting) would have the preference; for in it prayer also had its place. In the *seiat* we find the genius of Calvinistic Methodism, its essential characteristic institution.

The word *seiat*, as pronounced by the people of South Wales, or *seiat*, as pronounced in North Wales, is a Welshized and abbreviated form of the English word society, just as the word *sasiwn* is a derived and abbreviated form of the English word association. *Sasiwn y Bala* means the association meeting held at Bala. The word *seiat* formerly was pronounced *syseieti*, *syseiet*, and *seieti*. These now are obsolete, but all of them suggest varied pronunciations of the English word society when spoken in Welsh.

The *seiat*, as fundamental to Calvinistic Methodism, may be traced back to the great religious awakening of the eighteenth century, inspired by the teaching of the Puritan fathers and guided by Whitefield rather than by Wesley on the points where those two reformers differed. Howell Harris, of Trevecca, by his powerful preaching stirred the community wherever he went. His converts who had experienced deep religious convictions sought

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one another and came together in small social groups. They did this naturally, and of their own volition, without inquiring as to whether such gatherings had ever been held in the Christian Church before. Their purpose in so assembling was to nourish the spirit of religion in the heart, to strengthen religious experience in its social aspect, and to bring it into expression in holy conduct.

The first and fundamental institution of the Calvinistic Methodist Church grew spontaneously out of the experiences of the people and, from that day to the present, it is the institution which is chiefly characteristic of the Church.

The *seiat*, comprising all communicant members of the church together with their children, was a sort of miniature democracy. Its power resided in the elders and other communicant members—not in the minister. The minister, while usually present, was not essential to the working of the system; when present, he was the spokesman of the *seiat*, not its ruler. It was in this institution of the Church that the Welsh people of two centuries ago and later learned the art of self-government; for here it was that the laity learned to manage their organizations with remarkable skill and success. Here, it may be observed, is where the polity of the Calvinistic Methodist Church is almost the direct antithesis of that of the Established Church of England, where the clergyman is responsible for practically everything. This also is an institution of Welsh origin, and not a part of an organization with its center in England or Scotland. Furthermore, the Calvinistic Methodist Church is the only religious organization in Wales that has endured without a schism—without breach of continuity or disruption—for about two hundred years; and the same was true of the American branch of the Church during its one hundred years of service on this continent, until in 1920 it united with the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America.

The presiding officer in the *seiat* was an elder, generally the senior elder of the church. Sometimes, in more recent years, the elders would rotate in the matter of leading the *seiat*. But this was not a practical method. Many elders, while very useful men in some capacities, were not natural leaders of the fellowship meeting. They lacked the genius for that service; experience would

not develop it, if they did not possess the special gift. In America, in more recent years, the pastor of the church frequently took a prominent part in conducting the service; but the office as such belonged to an elder. It was in the fellowship meeting, more than anywhere else, that elements of Congregationalism were to be seen in the Calvinistic Methodist system. It was by the fellowship meeting, not by the session, that new members were received, letters of dismissal granted, and disciplinary matters settled. If matters of such serious concern came to attention as to require unusual counsel, the fellowship meeting, through the elders, brought such questions to the presbytery for advice, and, if necessary, for ruling in difficult cases. In other words, items usually transacted by the session in the Presbyterian Church were, for the most part, carried on in the fellowship meeting in the Calvinistic Methodist Church.

The order of conducting a fellowship meeting, with some slight variations, was as follows: The elder in charge called upon a brother to open the meeting. The brother came forward and led a hymn, read a chapter of Scripture, announced another hymn to be sung, and then knelt in prayer. Then came a short business session to receive a new member, or dismiss one, and for this a vote of the church, represented by those present, was required.

Following this very brief business session, the children were called forward to repeat their verses of Scripture. Here, it may be observed, the fellowship meeting undertook the religious education of the children. The leader called upon a brother to hear the children repeat their verses. All children under fifteen years of age, or thereabout, came forward and stood in a row facing the audience. It was the rule that the children were to repeat one of the verses which the preacher had used as his text the preceding Sunday. It often happened that all the children, or nearly all of them, repeated the same verse one after another. This idea of having the children learn the text had a real purpose, for it meant that generally the children learned a new verse. Thus the danger of repeating the same verse week after week was avoided. Still more important was the fact that the children were adding to their treasury of Scripture verses stored away in their minds and hearts. When the reciting was done, the elder questioned the chil-

dren on the verses. His questions were along the line of the preacher's sermon. Parents prepared their children for such questions along probable lines of inquiry. The children might recite, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation." The questioner might ask the children: "Where is that verse to be found? Who were the Romans? Who was Paul? Was he particularly interested in the gospel of Christ? Why? What do you understand by 'salvation'? What is 'the power of God unto salvation'? Yes, it is the gospel of Christ. Do you believe this gospel, my children? And do you love Jesus Christ and accept him as your Saviour? Well done, my children, and that will do for to-night." That simple exercise had permanent religious value for the child.

After the children's part in the fellowship meeting, the experiences or testimonies of the adults were related. Every adult present gave some testimony, which might be in the form of a verse of Scripture with a brief comment on the same, or a couplet or stanza from a favorite hymn which revealed an experience, or it might be a word of testimony of one's recent personal religious experience. In one form or another everyone present took part, unless the number present was very large. In large churches the leader aimed at selecting different groups, from week to week, to avoid oversight of some and of constant overlapping of others. Responses as a rule were freely made. Sometimes the meeting dragged, but that was not the rule. Holding up the interest depended, to a large degree, on the personality and gifts of the elder in charge, upon his power to "draw out" the testimony of experience and to sustain and encourage the feeble and inexperienced in giving testimony. Some old elders had a remarkable gift for strengthening the weak and admonishing the erring and encouraging timid souls; of sympathizing with the sorrowing, comforting the distressed, and turning what appeared to them as defeats into spiritual victories. The leader in the fellowship meeting did not pose as a teacher. His function was not that of conducting an examination of religious experience. He sometimes asked questions, but his purpose in so doing was to help the saints to express themselves—not to intimidate the ignorant, but to help them.

It is interesting to note how the genuine religious experience of one Christian will help another. This was the secret of the success of the fellowship meeting. Some of the old saints had a wealth of experience to relate, and they expressed it in a most stimulating and edifying way. Referring to the fellowship meeting, one aged man remarked, "Here it is that they open their cabinet and bring forth gems most precious." Another saintly minister said, "A good fellowship meeting is the thing more like unto heaven than anything else on earth."

One criticism of the fellowship meeting offered by young people was that good men used to dwell so much on the gloomy side of life. But youth came to know that every good Christian is so much more conscious of that which is sinful within him than he is of his holiness. Of the adults who took part in the meeting, it was the habit of many to refer to helpful remarks in the sermon of the Sunday preceding, and to point out ideas that were helpful to them. Many elders were expert at summing up, giving a brief résumé of a sermon, and making practical and effective applications—a thing which is an art in itself. After a half hour of testimonies and exchange of experiences, the leader called upon some one to close the meeting, which was done by announcing and singing a hymn and kneeling in prayer. If a minister was present he might be invited to say a word before the meeting adjourned, or he might not. The seiat, or fellowship meeting, lasted one hour. It seldom ran over the hour except when testimonies, on occasion, persisted unchecked.

Scores of men of Welsh nationality, in the ministry and in other walks of life, owe much to the influence of the fellowship meeting. It was the genius of Calvinistic Methodism. The Church was built upon it, and to know it thoroughly from actual experience is to know the Church.

THE PRAYER MEETING (*Y Cyfarfod Gweddi*)

The prayer service in the Calvinistic Methodist Church was as unique as was the fellowship meeting. To the uninitiated—those not Welsh—it might appear to be too formal and almost stereo-

typed. It was formal. It had a set form. But the spirit which prevailed, as old men prayed and as congregations sang the favorite hymns, is an experience which forever lingers in the heart and memory of one who habitually attended. We shall not dwell at length on the Welsh prayer meeting. We shall simply give a description of it.

The leader of the meeting, a minister or an elder, called upon a brother to come forward to open the meeting. This was done by announcing a hymn to be sung. After the singing a chapter from the Bible was read and, following that, another hymn was sung. Then he knelt in prayer. A second man was called upon to take part, which he did by announcing a hymn and kneeling in prayer. He was followed by a third who was called upon to take part, who, in turn, led a hymn and knelt in prayer. Then a fourth brother was called upon to close the meeting. He, like the others, announced a hymn and, after the singing, knelt to pray. This ended the meeting, unless perchance a few minutes of the hour remained, and in that case another closing hymn might be announced.

Such was the order of the prayer meeting in the Calvinistic Methodist Church. Testimony was not given in the prayer meeting, as a rule; that was reserved for the fellowship meeting. Non-communicant members of the congregation, not admitted to the fellowship meeting, were welcome to attend the prayer service. Variations from the form of service here described were few and inconsiderable. If the congregation was small, perhaps only three would be called upon to participate instead of four, but the writer has never known of five being called upon to take part. The prayer service lasted just about one hour. The spirit and inspiration of the services have followed men down the aisles of the decades. The writer can call to mind, even now, striking phrases employed in fervent petitions of godly men who knelt before the throne of grace in the days of his childhood and youth. The old Welsh prayer meeting, with all its formal and stereotyped appearance, was a veritable dynamo of spiritual power.