

9. From Leeds to London

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At the beginning of 1934, Weatherhead was invited by a Leeds businessman friend, Ernest Appleyard, to join him and his family on a visit to the Holy Land. The insights gained on this tour, together with his already considerable knowledge of the culture and customs of the Middle East acquired during his war service among the Arabs, enabled him to bring the Bible imaginatively to life in his books and sermons. He produced a series of articles on his visit for the *Leeds Mercury* and the *Methodist Recorder*, which he expanded into two books, *It Happened in Palestine* (1936) and *A Shepherd Remembers* (1937).

Most of the extensive reviews, which were generally favourable, mentioned that there had been a number of travel books recently published about visits to Palestine, most notably, H. V. Morton’s *In The Steps of the Master*, which topped the *Bookseller’s* list for Christmas 1936, outstripping *Gone With the Wind* which came second. Weatherhead’s book was well up the list, ahead of works by such well-known authors as H.E. Bates, Phillip Gibbs and Maurice Baring. *It Happened in Palestine* was greeted as not just another travel book, but as ‘a practical examination of the Gospel history with a view to understanding and appreciation by the realisation of close contact.’

Foyle’s chose it as its ‘Religious Book of the Month’ as did the Religious Book Club. The reviewer in the *Manchester Guardian* (15 December 1936) wrote:

This book will help to explain Mr. Weatherhead’s extraordinary popularity as a preacher. He has the gift of conveying, with simplicity and directness to reader or to hearer, his own vivid and vital self. For my own part, I laid down this book with profound thankfulness that the man who at this moment is reaching a larger number of his fellows than any other living preacher can write so winningly and with such glowing sincerity, of Jesus Christ.

Weatherhead attracted criticism for his dismissal of the Old Testament, which he confessed to rarely reading, his psychological interpretation of the healing miracles of Jesus and rational explanations of the nature miracles, and for his emphasis on the human personality of Jesus, with the use of such phrases about him as ‘elder brother’ and ‘best friend’. Roger Lloyd, in a generally favourable review in the *Observer*, objected to his use of such terms as ‘fun and good-fellowship’ in referring to Jesus, and calling him ‘the first gentleman’ (the title of a popular play at the time), which Lloyd considered was lacking a proper reverence and homage towards ‘the High and Holy One that inhabiteth Eternity.’ The most hostile review came from an unnamed reviewer in the *Congregational Quarterly* who objected that ‘Weatherhead writes as a psycho-therapist’ and that he ‘always gets in front of his subject . . . we cannot forget him in the

Garden of Gethsemane or on the road to Jericho.’ He dismissed the book as ‘obviously quickly written’ and as such would make no ‘lasting impression.’ The book went into twelve impressions by 1948, and Hodders produced a new edition in 1956.

During 1934 Weatherhead had given a series of lectures on the problem of pain to the Leeds Y.M.C.A. and produced articles on this topic for the *Leeds Mercury*. From this came another book, *Why Do Men Suffer?* (1935). The problem of pain was one that acutely troubled him. He was exceptionally sensitive to suffering in any creature, and actively supported the League for the Prohibition of Cruel Sports, writing articles supporting its policies in the *Leeds Mercury*. He was invited to speak on its behalf at a meeting at the Royal Albert Hall in November 1933. Only another engagement prevented him from doing so. He did however send a telegram expressing his sympathy with the cause and his good wishes for the success of the meeting. He also supported the work of the R.S.P.C.A., arguing that not only was it always wrong to inflict suffering wantonly, but that the effect was ‘worse for the inflictor than the victim’ because it was ‘debasement and brutalising’. He attacked fox hunting as ‘degrading’ and ‘giving run to primitive and savage blood lust’, and hoped that it would be made illegal.

His hatred of unnecessary suffering also made him an active member of the Euthanasia Society, and though this brought him much criticism, he frequently spoke out in favour of allowing those who were incurably ill and suffering from excruciating pain to have their suffering terminated and to die with dignity instead of in agony. The *Methodist Times and Leader* (12 March 1936) included an article by him headed: ‘The Right to Die’. In this he describes visiting a man in hospital who had a cancerous growth behind the eye.

I used to sit on his bed and he used to grip my hand until, literally he drove his nails through my flesh as wave after wave of anguish rolled over him. He twisted about in the bed in an agony that could not have been exceeded during the tortures of the Spanish Inquisition. At the foot of the bed stood or sat a slim young woman whose face I shall never forget. It seemed possible, day after day, to watch her wilt and fade . . . until at last, when merciful death released her husband, the spectacle of his sufferings had almost killed her too. The experience made me a firm believer in euthanasia.

After he had retired, he was invited by the Oxford Union to speak at a debate opposing the motion ‘That this House believes that under no circumstances should euthanasia be permitted.’ The leading speaker in favour was the distinguished Jesuit, Father Thomas Corbishley. The University magazine, *Isis*, described the debate as ‘Excellent – certainly the best debate of the term and probably the best for a long time’. Weatherhead’s address was ‘A most moving speech, full of humanity and compassion, delivered without sentimentality or sensationalism.’ Weatherhead was so successfully persuasive that the Union rejected the motion, voting 264 against to 178 in favour.

He dedicated the book, *Why Do Men Suffer?* to the memory of his mother and his sister Muriel, both of whom died painfully of cancer. He explains,

The subject of pain has haunted my thinking ever since I began to think for myself at all. My mind has followed every gleam which promised light on so dark a problem. . . . I have studied and pondered and prayed. [p.9]

As he was writing the book, in June, 1935, a severe earthquake occurred in

Quetta, the capital of Baluchistan, and several thousand people were either killed or made homeless. He recognises the effect that such disasters have on people's faith in the existence of a good and loving God, and in reply explains that earthquakes and volcanic eruptions are necessary to the survival of the planet, adding that the damage done by such natural events is often made worse by human folly, ignorance and stupidity. Much suffering is prevented when lessons are learned from the tragedies that occur, and the knowledge gained makes it possible for future disasters to be avoided or mitigated in their effects. For God to intervene would mean that the orderly rule of law which governed the universe would be arbitrarily broken, and could not be depended upon, and mankind would never acquire the knowledge to overcome disease or calamity on any permanent basis.

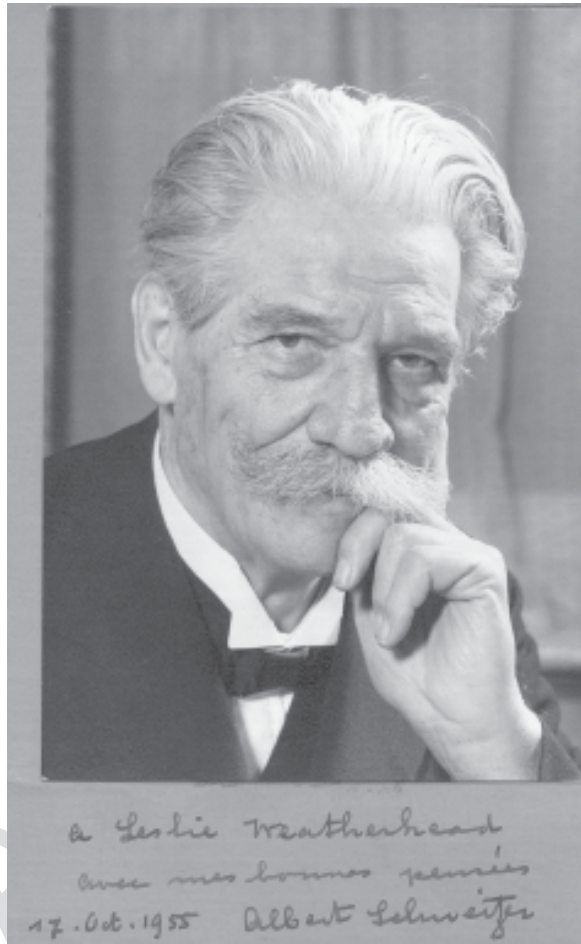
Weatherhead is convinced that God's attitude to suffering is not the detached indifference of a remote transcendent Being. God is intimately involved with every part of his universe, and with every one of his creatures. Such is the nature of this involvement, that he himself suffers at every level according to the degree in which the particular 'medium of His expression' is injured and prevented from fully expressing his purpose for it. The suffering which God endures through his immanence in and sympathy with all his creatures is therefore infinite and awe-inspiring in its extent:

when we petulantly ask of any human tragedy, "Why does God allow this to happen?" we ought to complete the question and ask, "Why does God allow this to happen to Himself?" [p.143f.]

In the chapter, 'Is the Universe Justifiable?' he repeats an argument published first in a previous booklet, *Guarded Universe* (1932). 'No scientist could discover anything unless God revealed it; and progress in scientific research might equally accurately be called the progressive revelation of God'. In other words, God controls the release of knowledge, and so protects mankind from making discoveries which would be devastating to his reason and beyond his abilities to control or use; although Weatherhead still expresses concern that scientific discoveries are outstripping mankind's spiritual and moral growth. This need for God to protect mankind applies to the 'psychical sphere' which Weatherhead believes is equally part of the universe with the physical. In a section which indicates Weatherhead's interest in the paranormal and the existence of psychic phenomena, he says,

there is a psychic universe just beyond the one we know. It is a universe we could not bear in plenitude, but it is there. . . . The wall between the universe that we can bear and the universe we could not bear is very thin, but it is there. [p.220]

Since this is 'a guarded universe. God has put sentries round it. Nothing can come in unless it passes them', even what seems a calamity to us is 'the measure of God's trust in us to use our resources, and less than the measure of the gain that may be won from it. "The calamity would not be allowed to break through unless this were true." This means that nothing finally has power to 'destroy the purpose of our lives. There is a limit set to suffering, and He will not ask from us more than we are able to bear.' Weatherhead's certainty that the universe is rational convinces him that even death is not the final calamity we suppose, but that since death is 'the ordinance of God' which must happen to everyone in



Photograph and note from Albert Schweitzer, October 1935

time, then it is natural to suppose that in the experience of dying each person must find themselves cared for as they were when they were born.

Throughout his time in Leeds, Weatherhead spoke out frequently on topical, social and national issues. He supported the Save Our Sunday campaign against the pressure for Sunday sport and Sunday opening of cinemas, believing that the traditional English Sunday was vitally necessary for safe-guarding the spiritual health of the nation.

International matters also troubled him. In 1929 he had been a member of a group led by the Bishop of Ripon which visited Germany as part of the World Alliance for the Promotion of International Friendship through the Churches. He made a number of friends there, and gained an awareness of what was going on in that country. He continued to watch developments there with increasing anxiety, especially after the rise of Hitler to power in 1933. He was earlier than most in realising the possibility of another war with Germany, and gave public expression to his fears in his regular articles for the *Leeds Mercury*: 'Can We

Save Europe?’ (November 1933) ‘If War Breaks Out What Then’ (November 1934) and ‘Abyssinia and the League of Nations’ (September 1935).

In October, 1935, Albert Schweitzer, who was much admired by Weatherhead, and regarded by many as the greatest and most truly good man then living, visited Leeds as the Weatherhead’s guest. Schweitzer spoke at an afternoon meeting at Silcoates School, and in the evening gave a lantern lecture at Brunswick on his work at Lambaréne. The Weatherheads were greatly impressed by his warmth and friendliness, and especially struck by his humility and total lack of self-importance.

When the Methodist Conference for 1935 met in Bristol a great deal of attention was attracted to it by a proposal from Weatherhead that the Conference should appoint a special committee to examine the question of spiritual healing and to report to the Conference the following year. Weatherhead said there were many people whose illnesses were not physical or mental but spiritual in origin, and who could not be adequately treated by physical medicine. He proposed that a committee should be formed of doctors, ministers and laymen to collect evidence and to see in what way co-operation could be secured between the ministerial and the medical professions. Dr. Eric Waterhouse supported Weatherhead by seconding the proposal which was carried unanimously.

During his eleven years in Leeds Weatherhead had produced a dozen books which had given him an international reputation, both as a writer of popular devotional works, and as a leading advocate of the use of psychology in the pastoral ministry and of closer co-operation between members of the healing professions. He had become a national figure on radio and drawn crowds to his Brunswick Church, but his liberal theology, attacks on orthodoxy, and imaginative speculations in his preaching, (a typical sermon was ‘Did Jesus go to College?’ – owing more to his imagination than to serious scholarship) attracted much criticism. In particular, his controversial use of hypnotism, his frank attack on sexual ignorance in *The Mastery of Sex*, and his interest in the paranormal had aroused hostility to him in influential circles within Methodism.

Weatherhead’s increasing reputation had brought him attractive offers from outside his own denomination, but such was his love for Methodism and for his people at Brunswick that he chose to stay where he was. As early as 1931 *The Leeds Mercury* reported that he had refused three invitations offering a thousand pounds a year. Two were from Canada: to be Professor of Homiletics and Psychology at McGill University in Montreal, and to be minister of the Metropolitan Church, Toronto. The third was from a famous London Congregational church – Christ Church, Westminster Bridge Road, Lambeth. In 1932 he also declined an invitation from the Hampstead Garden Suburb Free Church.

He had been in his Leeds church longer than it was normal for a Methodist minister to stay in a pastorate, and the Methodist Conference now considered his next appointment. He had long cherished a sentimental ambition to become minister of Wesley’s Chapel in City Road, London – world Methodism’s central shrine and the place where his parents had met. This was being given favourable support when the autocratic Dr. Scott Lidgett objected, saying that he would not agree to a psychologist going to Wesley’s pulpit. Lidgett’s opposition forced Conference to take a vote – something rarely done on the question of

appointments. The result was 157 in favour and 401 against. J.W. Lightly, the Principal of Headingley College, Leeds, had also, but in a more kindly way, suggested that Weatherhead was not the right person for Wesley's Chapel, since he would be required to be the warden of Wesley's House as well. But it was Lidgett's intervention that effectively blocked the appointment, and Weatherhead's long-held ambition was denied. He was bitterly disappointed, and this refusal continued to rankle with him. Several years later, in June 1941, after the City Temple had been destroyed and he was being offered the generous hospitality of St. Sepulchre's Anglican church, he contrasted his treatment by the Anglicans with the way he had been treated by members of his own denomination, referring to himself as a Methodist Minister 'deprived six years ago by the prejudice of a Methodist from regularly ministering from Wesley's pulpit in the historic chapel where his parents met and were married.'

As Conference was making this decision, two important London Congregational churches were seeking a new minister. The first of these was Christ Church, Westminster Bridge Road, which now approached him once again. Christ Church had been founded in 1785 by the evangelical, Rowland Hill, and there the Baptist, Dr. F.B. Meyer, had exercised a famous ministry. Weatherhead was attracted to the building, which was a vast, cathedral-like, gothic structure, but discovered that some of the deacons disapproved of his modernist views, particularly regarding the Virgin Birth and the miracles of Christ. He was further put off by the church's Trust Deeds, which laid down a strictly conservative creed for the church. Unable to subscribe to this, he once again declined the call.

The other church was the City Temple, which was seeking a successor to its distinguished Australian Baptist minister, F.W. Norwood. Weatherhead was already well known to the Temple congregation, having first preached there in 1928, and lectured annually to the church's Literary Society in the following years. He was not however the church's first choice. There was a strong feeling that it was time the church found a minister from within its own tradition, since it had not had a Congregationalist as its minister since R.J. Campbell resigned from the pastorate in 1915. The church had therefore approached Dr. John S. Whale, then President of Cheshunt College, Cambridge, and only when he declined did they turn again to someone outside their denomination, and invite Weatherhead.

The Methodist Conference unanimously agreed to his accepting the call (although Maltby had done his best to persuade him not to). In their letter officially confirming this approval, the President of the Conference, C. Ensor Walters, and the Conference Secretary, Robert Bond, wrote to him,

In granting you permission to become Minister of the City Temple, the Conference wishes to express its deep sense of the noble service you have rendered to Methodism abroad and at home, and to assure you of its earnest prayer that your ministry in the great historic London centre may be crowned with God's richest blessing, and may bring life and joy to hosts of those who will look to you for spiritual guidance. We are confident God Himself will be with you.

Walter Armstrong, a Methodist minister friend of Weatherhead's, who had spoken out strongly in favour of his going to Wesley's Chapel, addressing the



'The last Interruption', inside the old City Temple.

public meeting held at the City Temple to welcome its new minister, described the Conference as it considered the City Temple's invitation:

I have seen the Methodist Conference in strange moods, – but seldom have I seen it so hearty and enthused as it was when . . . with splendid acclamation, that great Conference gave its unanimous assent. I think it did this for two reasons. First, because of the really remarkable affection and esteem in which Mr. Weatherhead is held by us. For he is not a soul that dwells apart. He is not like some great mountain peak towering above all others, and looking down upon them. Mr. Weatherhead is greatly loved and greatly liked, because he has made himself like unto his brethren . . . there is a charm about his fellowship as well as a charm about his preaching which many of us greatly rejoice in. . . . The second reason was that Conference really did appreciate the very high honour you paid the Methodist Church by asking Mr. Leslie Weatherhead to be the Minister of this historic sanctuary – surely the greatest Free Church pulpit in the whole world.

Weatherhead had made a request to Conference that he might be allowed to remain within the Methodist ministry, and this was readily accepted by the Methodist authorities and also by the City Temple. He was staunchly Methodist at heart, in spite of his independent views and impatience with authority, and, such was his reputation, that during his time at the City Temple, the fact that he was a Methodist tended to be more widely known than the fact that his church was not.

Weatherhead had been attracted to both Christ Church and the City Temple because of what he termed their 'supra-denominational' character, as he explained in a letter,

I was invited to be minister of Xt Church & it was because it was supra-denominational that I was attracted & came down from Leeds & preached &

met the deacons but in those days they wanted me to sign that I believed in the V.B. etc etc. I told them I did not know or respect anyone who would sign such a document. The C.T. attracted me because it was SUPRA Denominational & a world pulpit & I could remain a Methodist Minister while I was its minister. (It hasn't had a Congregationalist for 50 years!)¹ Although he respected the Congregationalism of the City Temple and was genuinely proud to be invited to so famous a pulpit, denominational allegiances mattered very little to him, and he was apparently indifferent to the fact that it was the Congregational character of both churches which enabled them to be above denomination in the way that he felt they were. (Although Dr. Sidney Berry, the General Secretary of the Congregational Union, had made this point in his speech of welcome.)

Weatherhead's decision to go to a church of another denomination brought him considerable criticism from among Methodists, some of whom accused him of deserting Methodism, and never forgave him for it. Yet it is difficult to see where else he could have gone within Methodism after Brunswick if Wesley's Chapel was barred to him. In London, the young Donald Soper had just begun his long and distinguished ministry at Kingsway, and Dinsdale Young was still exercising his at the Westminster Central Hall. The Central Halls were Methodism's main preaching platforms, but their ethos and style were too unchurch-like for Weatherhead to be comfortable in them. The visual surroundings of a beautiful building meant a great deal to him, and he always sought to create an atmosphere of quiet and reverence in worship. Noisy tip-up seats and Moody and Sankey hymns did not fit well with his gentler, conversational style of preaching and his thoughtful and penetrating prayers. Nevertheless, as was later admitted, Weatherhead's subsequent career in a church of another denomination caused

Many of an older generation of Methodists wistfully [to] speculate on what might have happened if Leslie had been allowed to accept the invitation to Wesley's Chapel.²

This failure to find a place for Weatherhead within Methodism was greatly regretted by those who felt that an opportunity had been missed when he was denied the pulpit he coveted, and this remains still one of the great 'might-have-beens' of modern Methodism.

1. Letter 22 November 1967. Weatherhead to Travell.
2. *The Methodist Recorder* Editorial, 8 January 1976.