

## Chapter 1

# PROSPECTS FOR METHODIST TEACHING AND CONFESSING

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The original concept of the Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies was that of a gathering of Methodist scholars in the city which was so influential in the lives of John and Charles Wesley and the beginnings of Methodism in order to recover something of our Methodist or Wesleyan identity and explore the received faith together. Over the years the character and focus of the Institute have changed. It has become far more comprehensive in its membership, including more countries of the world, and embracing also those churches and traditions which look to Wesley for their origins and inspiration but distinguish themselves from the Methodist Churches as they are known today. As a consequence it has grown in size. In its tendency the Institute has shifted from being a gathering of Methodists discussing theology to being a gathering of theologians discussing Methodism. The topics of the various Institutes illustrate this: in 1958 "Biblical Theology and Methodist Doctrine," in 1962 the "Doctrine of the Church," in 1965 the "Finality of Christ," in 1969 the "Living God," in 1973 the "Holy Spirit," in 1977 "Sanctification and Liberation," and in 1982 "The Future of the Methodist Theological Traditions." In its style of working, much more emphasis is now placed on group work, each group having its particular program, rather than simply discussing the plenary papers, and a continuity between Institutes has been established with the category of associate membership and the publication of *Oxford Notes*.

This Institute is designed to pick up where its predecessor left off. The structure is constituted by working groups and a distinguished panel of lecturers who will introduce various aspects of the theme, not necessarily tied to one of the group programs, which are relevant to all our work. Our gathering is from some thirty countries, including South Africa and countries in Eastern Europe, and it is good to record our gratitude to the World Methodist Council and to Boards and Divisions in the United States and

Great Britain, which through their financial aid have made so widely representative a gathering possible.

The theme of this Institute is "The Significance of Methodist Teaching and Practice for Confessing the Apostolic Faith." I should like to offer some very general reflections on that theme. Most of what I have to say can be grouped around two words in the title, "Methodist" and "Apostolic."

Let us first turn to the word "Methodist" which reminds us that we are engaged in an exploration of our common identity. We are trying to state who we are. Though almost all of us are representatives of the Methodist/Wesleyan tradition, that is a much more complex fact than we sometimes recognize. It is more accurate to say, for example, that we are representatives of Methodist/Wesleyan traditions; that is, we belong to distinct churches and communities, each of which has its own version of that tradition. And these different versions of the tradition have been formed not only by our common historical origins in the life and work of John and Charles Wesley and our common possession of their writings, but by our very different subsequent histories, from the end of the eighteenth century to today. Those subsequent histories do not just comprise theological developments but a whole host of factors which have made our various churches what they are now. Events in secular history, our social and economic context, our experience of colonialism, or of a dominant Hindu culture, or of slavery, or economic dependence, internal conflict, language barriers, revival movements, to give a few examples, all these have helped to shape what we have become and the way we do things and see things. Our differing theological traditions are in part at least the result of reflection upon what we are, and we shall not understand those traditions without attention to all the factors which have shaped them.

Let us remind ourselves therefore that, like all Christians but more sharply than some, we stand as individuals, each of us in a dialectical relation to our particular church's tradition, partly molded by it, partly critical of it. No one individual wholly represents his or her church. No one individual can do so, or even wholly understand that tradition, for the corporate tradition is wider than the individual.

This is especially true of academics. Most of us who gather here represent at least two traditions: the Methodist/Wesleyan tradition to which we belong ecclesiastically, and the academic tradition, the discipline of study and research in history, theology, Bible, economics, whatever it is, in which we were trained and in which some of us serve professionally. This tradition is international. It has of course its own schools and fashions and variants, but they do not coincide with denominational boundaries. In a gathering like this both types of traditions meet. The Methodist traditions are modified by the academic. Perhaps the academic traditions may be

modified by the Methodist, though I think that is less likely. The field of biblical studies is a prime case of what I mean. It is possible that I interpret certain texts in a particular way because I am a Methodist; Romans 7 would be a test case. But I am quite clear that for the most part my teachers are Joachim Jeremias and Ernst Käsemann and Raymond Brown and not John Wesley. That applies to other areas of study as well. In other words we have to remember to ask the question, how representative are we of the Methodist tradition to which we belong?

Then again let us remind ourselves that all our traditions, and all of us as individuals, have been deeply influenced by ecumenical contact and dialogue. There has been cross-fertilization in the last hundred years, which means that the traditions we have today, traditions both of faith and practice, are not just the simple growth of seedlings planted in the eighteenth century, nor just the more complex flowerings of regional varieties produced by the interaction of the original stock with different environments in different parts of the world, but to some extent hybrid things, the product of the interaction of Methodism with the wider church. This has always been true of our hymnody. It is evident nowadays in my own church in the realm of liturgy, and of course in the growing questioning of the doctrine and practice of infant baptism. But then our beginnings also had an ecumenical stamp upon them before we tended to draw into ourselves.

When we talk about Methodist teaching and practice or about the Methodist or Wesleyan tradition, therefore, we are talking about a very varied thing with many manifestations, the product of many influences which is constantly in movement. For every strand of the tradition and for every individual within it there is a tension between past and future, between the direction in which we are moving and the direction in which we ought to move. Each one of us has a question of identity. So our exploration of our common identity involves a search for authenticity. There are ways of expressing our traditions which are true to them and ways that are false; ways of developing those traditions, moving them on, which will fulfill them and enable them to flower, and ways which will distort and deny them. How is authenticity to be judged? Which elements of what we believe and do are to be recognized as truly Methodist, the genuine thing, and which are not?

Some of us, perhaps all, have inherited doctrinal standards, which in some sense or another lay down a norm. For British Methodism they include the first four volumes of John Wesley's *Sermons* and the *Notes on the New Testament*. Wesley chose them himself and laid them upon posterity. Whether that was a wise decision is open to debate, for they are hardly specific enough to serve as a test of authentic Methodism, and I cannot imagine a doctrinal trial, for instance, where the verdict of guilty or in-

nocent would be settled by reference to one of the sermons or Wesley's exposition of a particular verse. The 1932 Deed of Union of the British Church betrays our embarrassment when it says, "The Notes on the New Testament and the 44 Sermons are not intended to impose a system of formal or speculative theology on Methodist Preachers, but to set up standards of preaching and belief which should secure loyalty to the fundamental truths of the Gospel of Redemption and ensure the continued witness of the Church to the realities of the Christian experience of salvation." Looking through the opening pages of the 1984 *United Methodist Book of Discipline* I notice that the problem is not peculiar to British Methodism.

If this is not an adequate test of authenticity, what is? Is there some other "canonical" or "normative" point of reference? Are there other particular Wesleyan writings? Is there a golden age in our history, to which we can look back as giving us the key, the test, for the authenticity of our Methodism today? In popular thought it is often the teaching and example of John Wesley himself. Fairly often I get letters in my office pointing out that if only the Methodist Church in Great Britain returned to the teaching and evangelical zeal of John Wesley, Britain would be converted once again. But as our historians are always pointing out, such an ideal of John Wesley is highly selective. My correspondents, for example, do not intend modern Methodism to return to horse riding or experiments with electricity. No alleged golden age is uniformly gold. And if, as our historians insist, we add the later Wesley to the earlier, the problems get worse. Not every development in Wesley's thought, surely, was necessarily an improvement, nor, on the other hand, necessarily a sign of senile decline. So by what are we to be guided? And when we remember that the later Wesley sometimes republished earlier works unedited alongside later writings with a different slant, our difficulties increase. But why should Wesley provide the golden example? Or why Wesley alone? Why should authentic Methodism be judged by the eighteenth century rather than the nineteenth or twentieth?

Does this mean that the search for authenticity is futile? That there can be no authentic Methodism but only undifferentiated manifestations of Methodism? Can we do no more than ask of any new development, in belief or practice, whether it has happened before? Can we go no further than legitimization by precedent? This was a point forced upon me in a recent project where we were exploring ways in which we could restructure our annual Conference. It was easy to find historical precedents for the changes we were considering; it was harder to show that they were precedents which deserved to be followed. One answer to our problem (and here especially the systematic theologian has a part to play) is to introduce the notion of coherence. What are those features of the Methodist movement,

the concepts, the ideas, the practices, which are typical of it, which tend to persist with the passage of time and somehow account for other features? On the other hand, what are the features which are merely incidental, which could be lost or jettisoned without damage or distortion? If we could detect a web or network of central features which supported each other, which cohered with each other in an intelligible pattern, it might be possible to develop a test for authenticity. We could ask of any modern development in doctrine or practice whether it cohered with this central core, whether logically, naturally, theologically, it followed from it, belonged to it, could be fitted into it, or whether it had to be seen as an alien intrusion, even a contradiction.

A final point to make in this little discussion of authenticity is that judgements about what is authentic in our tradition cannot be taken simply by reference to the past, nor are they simply intellectual judgments. To discern what is authentic in the tradition is a judgment of today's church, a collective response, in which the church of the past in its historical context, with all the limitations that implies, speaks to the church of today, to us, in our context, with all our limitations, and offers us insight, stimulus, and challenge for our life and work; and we recognize its authenticity because in our situation it "fits." To discern authenticity is a gift of the Holy Spirit, the interpreter of the past, who illuminates the present with the truth of God.

There is one other point to address before we leave the general topic of the search for identity. It is sometimes assumed that in a gathering like this we are looking for a Methodist convergence. We come with our various versions of the Methodist inheritance. How close are we seeking to bring them together? Can we look for a doctrinal statement of World Methodism, a formulation of the faith which will bring together all our different varieties in a single blend and somehow supersede them, so that in the future we may all speak with one voice? We have one recent example of that in the World Methodist Statement "Saved by Grace," the so-called Jerusalem Statement. Can we go beyond that and work out a common position in more detail? Is there a World Methodist gospel? This is an attractive proposition. It would make international confessional dialogues much easier if we did not have to qualify almost every statement by pointing out the differences in our own ranks. But I doubt whether it is possible, or really desirable, precisely because we come from so many different settings and have been shaped by such different histories. As I shall want to emphasize again shortly, our task is not to formulate a doctrinal position for its own sake, but to address our particular contexts in the name of Christ. Since those contexts differ, our expression of the faith must also differ if we are to address the world from where we are.

The goal of our discussions is not Methodist convergence, still less uniformity, but mutual enrichment. The emphasis in some parts of the world, for example, on the gospel of and for the poor should alert us all to the presence of that concern in our common tradition and the need of it for all of us in our different settings if we are to witness to the gospel in its wholeness, even if we give expression to it in different ways.

So far we have been looking at a group of issues raised for us by the presence of the word "Methodist" in our title, "The Significance of Methodist Teaching and Practice for Confessing the Apostolic Faith." Now we turn more briefly to a cluster of thoughts which gather around the word "Apostolic."

Our title was deliberately chosen, not just as a test of how many words you can say without drawing breath, but because it echoes the theme of the World Council of Churches' Faith and Order program, "Toward the Common Expression of the Apostolic Faith." Our work is designed as a contribution to a wider ecumenical dialogue. The reality of that wider setting is brought home to us in the Institute in other ways also, by the presence of ecumenical observers from the Church of England, the Roman Catholic Church, and the United Reformed Churches, by the reports we shall receive on bilateral dialogues, and by the contributions of Dr. Günther Gassmann of the World Council of Churches and Professors Adrian Hastings and Gillian R. Evans.

It is vital that we should have this wider setting if we are to get a true perspective of ourselves. We are not the whole embodiment of the church of Christ, and our understanding of the gospel is not a total understanding. To imagine otherwise or to think that we alone were the true church would be to retreat into sectarianism.

It is important to set our conversations in a wider framework also because it is in the questions and comments which others put to us that we are enabled to see ourselves more clearly. The questions I have tried to raise about the Methodist traditions, about diversity and identity and authenticity, are the questions that have to be resolved with regard to ecumenical diversity and catholic identity and authenticity among all the Christian traditions. It is at least as hard to decide what is "apostolic" as to decide what is Methodist. Reflecting on these questions in one setting is likely to help our reflection in another.

I draw attention, however, particularly to the word "confessing," "confessing the apostolic faith." It points to two types of activity, although of course they are linked. On the one hand, there is worship. The faith is confessed when we worship God (Heb. 13:15), affirm the creed, declare the wonderful deeds of him who brought us out of darkness into light (1 Pet. 2:9), baptize, and celebrate the Eucharist. Faith itself is a confession of the

glory of God (Rom. 10:9ff.). The other kind of confession, of course, is in witness to the world, the willingness, whatever the cost, to speak and live in such a way that the gospel is made known. The "confessors" *par excellence* have been those who have been willing to lay their lives on the line rather than deny the faith by which they live.

"Confession" is a word which joins together word and action in an obedient declaration to the world of the God we worship. If we discuss confessing the faith in this Institute, then we cannot confine ourselves to the formulation of doctrine. We must also talk about prayer and living and mission and evangelism. All alike are modes of confessing the faith.

Let us come to this same point by a more Methodist route. In 1744 John Wesley and a tiny handful of friends held the first Methodist Conference. There were three items on the agenda: What to teach, How to teach, What to do? Those men also were engaged, like us, in a search for identity. They were engaged in controversy with others on important doctrinal issues. They were attacked by detractors. They were working for the most part separately and needed to know where they stood, and where those who might join them would be standing, too. But the questions they asked were intensely practical questions. They were doctrinal issues about justification and quietism and the established church, but they had a missionary slant. It was not "What to believe" but What, and How, to teach, and What to do, How to regulate the common life of those who respond to the teaching. These were men under compulsion: they had been taken over by a deep conviction of the grace of God and were under obedience to live out its implications and proclaim it for others. Their conference had a clear evangelistic and missionary emphasis.

It is in keeping with this that our Institute theme refers to Methodist teaching and practice, and (in the missionary sense of the word apostolic) to the apostolic faith. We should keep ourselves in that dimension, so that living and doing, evangelism and mission, in short the praxis of the apostolic faith, is the thrust of all our work. What are the implications of our work for our preaching and our living, our service, our engagement in conflict, our prayer?

These remarks may help to give a setting for the work of the six groups. For the first time a group is dealing specifically with biblical issues. In earlier Institutes there was a period of Bible study for all at the beginning of the day. It never seemed to be very successful, partly because people came with different expectations and levels of preparedness, partly because it was difficult to integrate the studies with the theme of the Institute as a whole. This time there is a group to work on specific biblical questions. It is obvious why it is needed. When one considers how not only the Wesleys but all their successors throughout the nineteenth century at least founded

their work on biblical texts, it is important to ask how far in the light of contemporary biblical studies the foundations have shifted or even crumbled away. What would a late twentieth-century doctrine of holiness, for example, based on a late twentieth-century reading of the Bible, look like?

Some of the other groups continue work begun at the last Institute, though with a different slant. The Wesley Studies group is responsible for giving attention to Wesley's understanding of the faith as revealed by what he did, his style of ministry, and the media by which he developed his thought. The group on Methodist Economic and Social Teaching and the Challenge of Liberation Theology focuses on the place of the poor, the group on Evangelism and Doctrine on the varieties of our traditions and on the integration of the personal, social, and political dimensions of the good news of the kingdom. Just as the doctrinal group at the last Institute concentrated on the Lima Statement, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, so the present group on Contemporary Methodist Theology and Doctrinal Consensus addresses the issues raised by the World Council of Churches' study on the apostolic faith and related papers.<sup>1</sup>

The other new group this time is the one on the Nineteenth Century. As a logical development of our work last time, we were made to see very clearly that Methodist tradition could not be arbitrarily defined as that period in John Wesley's life from around 1720 to some time shortly after 1738. As I have already argued, our traditions are formed for good and ill by all our history and in various ways. The nineteenth century is of course the period concerning which most of us know least about each other. In our geographical separation we went our separate ways, and in our different settings developed differently. If we concentrate exclusively on the Wesley of Oxford and Aldersgate and the field preaching, we allow ourselves to ignore these varied directions and are surprised by the differences we discover when we meet. A closer study of the intervening two centuries and a better sharing of the study will help us all not only to understand one another's peculiarities but also to learn from each other.

This Institute attempts to develop further what we did experimentally last time, that is, interdisciplinary work. In a university setting, of all places, where the ideal is that those who belong to different branches of learning should converse and educate each other, it would be disastrous for the Institute to fragment into six mini-Institutes, each pursuing a separate theme. In any case these different lines of inquiry are touching on common themes, the significance of the poor, for example, and can benefit each other, and we all need to learn what historians are saying about Wesley, or biblical scholars about the Bible, if we are to build on those foundations.

There is provision in the program of the second week for a disputation. Those with memories of earlier Institutes look back on such events as the



highlights of the meetings as some issue emerged and was debated, often with considerable vigor. It is not an event which can be manufactured, but which must arise naturally as the work progresses. In such a gathering one cannot expect complete harmony on all points of general interest, but becoming clear about our differences as of value in itself. So much for our program, our theme, and some of its implications.

Perhaps, finally, it would be useful to say something about Oxford. Why the *Oxford* Institute? What significance does our place of meeting have for the work we do? The original vision was that Methodists should work together in the setting which influenced the beginnings of Methodism so much. It has not been possible to keep to all of that original vision. Lincoln College, the college of which John Wesley was a fellow, is too small for the size to which we have grown. The particular colleges in which we now meet have no special significance for Methodism; indeed in Wesley's day they did not exist. Oxford too has changed. The appearance of the town and the style of university life have dramatically altered. That is to be expected as a result of industrialization, on the one hand, and the growth of scientific disciplines in the university, on the other. And of course, though we meet in Oxford with the University all around us, we are not thoroughly immersed in its life and cannot catch its inner spirit.

It is not surprising, therefore, that it is sometimes suggested that we should meet elsewhere, and various advantages for that can be suggested. It is a complicated issue, but I hope a move will be resisted for the following reason, and I mention it because it is part and parcel of the general theme I have been trying to explore: the streams of our Methodist/Wesleyan traditions are varied in their development and have been fed by various tributaries along the way. But they all have their starting point in John and Charles Wesley and the friends they gathered around them. These are the head waters of our common tradition, the beginning we all have in common. For most of us that is a truth enshrined in books. We learn of it from books. We read of it in Wesley's *Journal* and *Sermons* and *Letters*. And we form an impression of its context as best we can. But, as with the study of the Scripture and the Holy Land, places are the interpreters of writings. The sights and sounds of everyday are part of the context in which things are written. For the Wesleys there were many such places, but few were more formative than Epworth and Oxford, London and Bristol, and of those Oxford is perhaps the most extensively preserved. Here you can sit in Lincoln Chapel and St. Mary's. You can see, if not John's actual room at Lincoln, at least one of the rooms he would have known. If you are lucky you may see in the records of that college the entry of his election and resignation as a fellow. It can of course be dismissed as sentimentality; and an uncritical enthusiasm for sacred sites would be sentimentality. But if a

stay among the places the Wesleys frequented can help to make them real for us, strips them of the romanticism in which we shroud them, and enlivens our imagination to understand better what they were about, not only will we gain an important dimension to our history and theology, but we may enter a little more deeply into the communion of saints.

## NOTES

### Chapter 1: Prospects for Methodist Teaching and Confessing

1. See *Apostolic Faith Today*, Faith and Order Paper No. 124, ed. Hans-Georg Link (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1985).

### Chapter 2: Methodists in Search of Consensus

1. Ozora Davis, "At Length There Dawns the Glorious Day," *The Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: The Methodist Publishing House, 1932), 469; it has been dropped from the new *United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989). Cf. the even more exalted utopianism of J. Addington Symonds "These Things Shall Be: a Loftier Race . . ."; this too, has fallen of its own weight.

2. William Shakespeare, *Sonnets*, 73.

3. Langdon Gilkey, *Society and the Sacred* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), p. 13.

4. Carl Becker spelled out this vision of human self-sufficiency in a once famous little classic that I first read in graduate school, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century Philosophers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965 [1932]).

5. 1920; cf. especially the edition published in 1951 for "The Century of Progress Exposition" in Chicago (1951), with Charles Beard's rousing introduction (New York: Dover Publications).

6. Frank Manuel's comment on his lifetime's study of utopias, in *Daedulus* (Spring 1987), is typical: "Those of us who have in the flesh experienced the sharp discontinuities of the past half-century . . . may feel in our bones the unity and continuities of Western culture. [The notion] still colors our historical apperceptions, but it has long since ceased to determine our thinking" (p. 145). When Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West* (trans. Charles Francis Atkinson [New York: Alfred A. Knopf]) appeared in English, in 1926-28, it was received with disbelief by all true believers and, presently, the author was muzzled by Hitler. More attention was paid to Robert Heilbroner's *Inquiry into the Human Prospect* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1974); see p. 138 especially. Lately, the trickle has become a flood (e.g., Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978); Jean-Francois Revel, *Comment Les Democracies Finissent* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983); Konrad Lorenz, *The Waning of Humaneness* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1987); Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York: Random House, 1988). This is the centenary year of Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward, 2000-1887* (New York: Hendricks House, 1887), a million copies of which were sold in its first decade. It would now be safe to offer prizes to Methodist scholars under sixty who have ever read it front to back.

7. This tradition of the idealization of humanity has had many partisans, and still has; cf. Thomas Sheehan, S.J. [sic], *The First Coming* (New York: Random House, 1986): "At last, Christianity is discovering what it always was about: not God, or Christ, or Jesus of Nazareth, but the endless unresolvable mystery inscribed at the heart of being human," p. 227.

8. Cf. *Epistle to Diognetus*, V-VI; see also I Peter 1:22-25..

9. Cf. "The Fullness of Faith," Albert C. Outler, ed., *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 279.