

## THE PEOPLE OF GOD

WHATEVER we may think about the desirability and possibility of natural theology, I take it that we are agreed on the necessity of specifically Christian doctrines. Christian doctrines do not spring fully grown and equipped from the Bible, like Athena from the head of Zeus; but they have no claim to be called Christian unless their foundation is in the Bible. Nor is their development fortuitous, the mere play of historical circumstances; it takes place within the Church, which we believe to be guided by the Spirit, and the experience of the Church confirms the truth of what the Bible teaches and Christian thinkers have elaborated. Now the doctrine of the Church, the People of God, is a specifically Christian doctrine.

What we are going to attempt to do is to consider the doctrine of the Church which is implied by the teaching and practice of the Methodist Church, and I suggest that we begin by employing a historical approach. What, for instance, was John Wesley's doctrine of the Church? Remember that he formulated it, not in the void, but against the background of a certain religious and ecclesiastical situation which he had himself helped to create. He had founded the Society of People called Methodists. And what precisely was that? At the time that he came up to Oxford there were in existence a number—how large, we cannot tell—of religious societies operating within the Church of England. Most of these consisted of clergymen and laymen, and met together for religious exercises according to the *Book of Common Prayer*. It is difficult to say much more about them than this, since the evidence by the nature of the case is scanty. We may, however, add that most of them were strict and exclusive, though some may have welcomed the more amenable sort of Dissenter. The Holy Club at Oxford, we may conjecture, was a student version of such Societies. But these were not the only religious societies in existence during John Wesley's later Oxford days. The Moravians, during the decade preceding Wesley's evangelical conversion, had established religious societies of a more informal and intimate kind, and in these discussions of personal spiritual matters seem to have taken place. There were also religious societies of yet another and very different kind, closely connected with the Church of England, with a definitely evangelistic purpose and a central administration. Such were the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, under whose auspices John Wesley went to Georgia, and the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge.

I do not know that it can be proved that John Wesley had in mind any one of these kinds of society when he formed the Methodist Society. It seems rather that they all contributed to his thought on the matter, and that the combination, plus the original genius of John Wesley himself, produced something which was in fact unique and distinctive, though of course it must still in the language of the time be called a 'religious society'. It had a background of Anglican liturgy and practice, it had the warmth and intimacy of the Moravian gatherings, and it was an organized instrument of evangelism like the S.P.G. But it also had the special practices of the Methodists, their peculiar ethos, and their conception of scriptural holiness. The Methodist Societies were within the Church of England, as we always say; but we mean by that, not that they were authorized

by the Anglican authorities, which they certainly were not, but that they did not regard themselves as separate from the Establishment, and that they were the heirs through the Wesleys, and the other ordained clergymen who belonged to them, of a tradition which valued Anglican Churchmanship very highly and held the Church of England to be the best constituted Church in Christendom.

It is thus against a background composed of the Church of England by law established, celebrating its sacraments and other offices according to the *Book of Common Prayer* through its bishops and clergy, and at the same time of a heterogeneous group of religious societies, with the Methodist Society rapidly taking the lead in size and zeal and influence, that we must look at John Wesley's doctrine of the Church. According to him, every Christian belongs to the Church by virtue of being a Christian, for the catholic, universal Church consists of all Christians. The Christians who live in England belong to the Church of England, and this is a true Church. Wesley accepts, in a general sort of way, Article 19 of the Thirty-nine Articles, which says that the Church exists where the pure Word of God is preached and the Sacraments are duly administered; but he criticizes it as being too exclusive. In the Church of Rome, he points out, the pure Word is not preached and the Sacraments are not duly administered; yet it would be wrong to unchurch the Church of Rome. Christians may have wrong opinions and superstitious modes of worship, but because they have the one hope and the one Lord, they belong to the one Church; and that Church is to be found wherever men have this one hope and this one Lord.

But he also says that it is correct to speak of a Church when two or three are gathered together in the name of Christ, and here we come across a different strand in his thinking. This is one of many hints that he thought of true believers as a Church within a Church—*ecclesiola in ecclesia*. At least, this seems to be the inference which we must draw from his two uses of the word 'Church'. It was, in fact, difficult for him not to think in these terms, when he saw the zeal and purity of the Methodist Societies in their startling contrast to the sloth and worldliness of many members of the official Church. But in spite of this notion of the nuclear Church, he certainly never goes an inch in the direction of unchurching the Church of England, and he condemns schism in the strongest possible terms, allowing it only in the extreme case in which it is impossible to remain within the Church without committing a breach of God's commands or omitting something which He enjoins.

So we have in Wesley a *double* doctrine of the Church: of the big Church and the little Church, a fusion of Pietism and Catholicism. It was a natural and perhaps an adequate doctrine in the eighteenth century. It is not clear that it will do for today, especially in the light of the fuller knowledge of the New Testament which is now available. It can hardly be said that there is ground in the New Testament for speaking of two Churches; nor is it easy to see how the doctrine can avoid the implication that there are some élite Christians within the general body; and the spiritual arrogance and strife which may result from such an implication are easy to point out. We shall see that even this rather inadequate conception has something to say to us in our time, but let us now move on from Wesley.

Methodism was never a sect, that is, a group of people claiming a monopoly of Christian truth of life, and hiving off both from the world at large and from

other professing Christians. There have been, and are, many sectarian Methodists, who have failed to read, or at least to digest, Wesley's sermon on the Catholic Spirit. But Methodism itself has never been a sect. In fact, it changed almost overnight from a Society within the Church of England into a substantive Church. This is manifest enough in England; it is even more manifest, if I read events aright, on the American Continent, where it was, I suppose, never really a Society, pure and simple, at all; and after the War of Independence—which is what we in Great Britain call the Revolution—it had to act wholly as a Church with full panoply of ministry, sacraments and organization. In England not all the marks of a full Church were present from the detonation of the starter's pistol in 1795 when final separation from the Church of England took place; for instance, the laying on of hands in ordination was not practised on behalf of the Methodist Conference until 1836. But ministry, sacraments, *episcopate*—pastoral rule and oversight—by the Conference, evangelism, relationship to the civil authority, willingness to co-operate with other Churches, centralized organization, were in full operation from the start. Wesleyan Methodism was known, from 1791, rather oddly, as 'the body', and, as the Interim Report on Anglican-Methodist Conversations (1958) puts it, 'the body lay curiously athwart the Establishment and Dissent'. But, of course, it retained considerable traces—and it retained them consciously and deliberately—of its Society origin: the emphasis on inward religion, the emphasis on the deep, challenging, demanding fellowship of the Society Class, which is the unit of the Church's organization and the implication of membership, and the call to every member of society to pursue personal and social holiness.

What effect had this history on Methodist doctrine? Precious little. There is, also, little sign after Wesley's time of a theology of the Church designed to give due place to the special discoveries of Methodism; the genius of Methodism lay in evangelism not in theology, as we complacently remark. Thus we have no advance on Wesley to record, and in the latter part of the nineteenth century a decline from him is evident. Methodism was at that time impelled into a purely individualistic conception of salvation which would have shocked its founders. It was impelled into it partly by the individualism of the age in its political and economic aspects, and partly by the growth of Tractarianism, which stressed the doctrine of the Church to the neglect of individual salvation, and set the Methodists agog to proclaim the love of Christ for the individual with mounting fervour.

This comes out clearly, I think, in the thought of William Burt Pope (Tutor of Didsbury College, 1867-85), whose theology was so much better than that of his Methodist contemporaries, but who yet, of course, was not wholly emancipated from the presuppositions of his age and milieu. In his *Compendium of Theology* he deals with the doctrines of 'the Nature of God' and 'the Trinity', and proceeds to 'the Redemption of Mankind through Jesus Christ'. Then he turns to 'the Administration of Redemption', under the headings of 'the Holy Spirit', 'the Gospel Vocation', the Preliminaries of Grace', 'the State of Salvation', 'the Tenure of Covenant Blessings', 'the Ethics of Redemption'; and then, and only then, he deals with 'the Christian Church'—which, apart from eschatology, is the last thing to be treated in the whole work. The treatment of the doctrine of the Church is, as we should expect, scriptural and comprehensive, standing squarely in the Protestant tradition, but it still appears somewhat as an extra to

the doctrines of personal salvation, rather than as a doctrine in its own right, integral to the total structure of Christian truth.

Methodism, then—and this is even more true of Primitive and United Methodism than of Wesleyan Methodism—entered the twentieth century, and survived for a considerable part of it, without a doctrine of the Church which was properly formulated within the totality of Christian doctrine, and which did justice to the special deposit of truth which the Holy Spirit has committed to us. This was so until 1937, when Conference approved a statement on the Nature of the Christian Church which was largely the work, we understand, of Dr Newton Flew, and certainly brought to bear on the subject for the first time the Biblical Theology which was emerging from the intensive study of the New Testament by the use of modern apparatus. So now, virtually for the first time, British Methodism has an official doctrine of the Church, even though it is not entirely aware of the fact and traces of the old individualism still linger on in many quarters. Twenty-one years have passed since that very important statement appeared, but it still stands in its affirmations, though of course new material has come to hand in the intervening period. We can fitly ask: what is the position in Methodism today in respect of an ecclesiology? We turn from a historical approach to a contemporary appraisal.

I have said that we retained traces both of our Society origin and of our Church origin into the nineteenth century. I now point out that we still do this today. I suspect, though I am here very much open to correction, that the 'Society' elements have always been much less prominent in the U.S.A. than in England, and on the Continent much *more* prominent; but they are to be found, in strong or weak form, wherever Methodism itself is found. In Great Britain today the Society element is probably dwindling. The emphasis on individual conversion is still there, though some would say that it is attenuated; holiness is not a word often used except in certain circles and in historical reconstructions; and the class meeting, over large areas, has virtually ceased to function. But I would claim that the idea behind the class meeting is resurgent in other forms—especially in the very rapidly growing, and, as far as I know, unique, 'groups' of the University Methodist Societies, and in all kinds of week-end conferences and summer schools for young people. Thus we still have a living tradition of Christian fellowship for which our doctrine of the Church must certainly allow. And we are now again searching for the right way to pursue scriptural holiness in our own time.

Bearing this in mind, I want to try to lay down the basic requirements for Methodist thinking about the Church as they appear to me. I shall do so by adding Methodist elements to what is already widely received as New Testament doctrine, in the belief that the Methodist additions are good New Testament doctrine too.

So far as general New Testament doctrine of the Church is concerned we in Methodism are in an especially favourable situation. We did not take up any entrenched positions respecting Church, Ministry and Sacraments before the development of modern New Testament study, and so we are not committed in advance, like the Roman Catholics, the Anglo-Catholics, and to a lesser extent the Presbyterians, Congregationalists and Baptists, to a number of propositions which are now found to be dubious. We are open, wide open, to what the New Testament has to say to us. Therefore all I need do at this particular

point is to remind you that it is now established that in the New Testament the Church is an integral part of the Gospel—not a laudable addendum—that the whole of New Testament theology, is propounded in the context of Christ's foundation of the *ecclesia*, and His presence within it, and the Church is thought of in the New Testament as 'the New Israel', 'the People of God', with all the implications of these words for those who are versed in Old Testament thought, that it is also called 'the Body of Christ', 'the Bride of Christ', 'the Temple of the Living God', and in addition 'a royal priesthood and a holy nation' (the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers is *primarily* a corporate doctrine, and only secondarily an individual one), and that this Church is one Church—one Church over all the earth, extended in time as well as space, the congregation of all Christ's faithful people in heaven and on earth.

We also accept the ministry of those called by God thereto, as part of and within the Church; in fact, we see in our own ministry today the replica, or the nearest to a replica that we can manage, of those who are called both presbyters and bishops in the New Testament—though we do not urge that everyone else should accept our precise form of the ministry. We acknowledge further the principle of *episcopate*, to be very clearly distinguished from episcopacy, which is only one possible form of it; we see that in New Testament times this positive rule and oversight were necessary in the Church, and we see in our own Conference, and in Chairmen of Districts and Superintendents of Circuits, an embodiment of this sound New Testament principle. So much we can take for granted. What can we add?

(a) The first addition is not in the strict sense peculiar to us, for we received it from the Puritan tradition; but we have developed it in our own way. The Church is not just the People of God, but is the *Covenanted* People of God. This does not mean simply that each believer has a personal Covenant with God, though that is how the Covenant Service is sometimes exclusively taken, but that the whole people of God is bound to Him by a Covenant as real as, and yet deeper and wider than, the covenant made by God with Israel in Mount Sinai. The new Covenant is God's gift, sealed by the blood of Christ; it is irrevocable, for God does not withdraw His gifts; and it binds us to Him by faith, gratitude and love, and by our pledge to serve Him with all our lives. 'On one side the Covenant is God's promise that He will fulfil in and through us all that He has declared in Jesus Christ, who is the Author and Perfecter of our faith. . . . On the other side we stand pledged to live no more unto ourselves, but to Him who loved us and gave Himself for us.' The contractual idea of the bargain between God and man, which adheres even to the most exalted Old Testament conception, is here transcended. God and His people are bound together by the most intimate of bonds, and the prophecy of Jeremiah 31<sub>31</sub> is fulfilled.

So the relationship of Christ to His Church is personal, sealed by the act of Christ for our salvation, confirmed by the personal promise of Christ and our personal response to it. We are truly the People of God—He is our God and we are His people.

*Zion's God is all our own,  
Who on His love rely;  
We His pardoning love have known,  
And live to Christ, and die.*

*To the new Jerusalem*

*He our faithful Guide shall be:*

*Him we claim, and rest in Him,*

*Through all eternity.*

(MHB 699, v. i.)

It is in the light of this conception that we view the other New Testament descriptions of the Church, in particular that which calls it the Body of Christ. We do not view the notion of the People of God in the light of the description of the Church as the Body of Christ, but vice versa. That is, perhaps, another way of saying that the Body of Christ is a metaphor—a helpful, constructive, and for the Christian who is conscious of his membership, with others of different gifts, of the Catholic Church of Christ, an *indispensable* metaphor, but a metaphor. To say that the Church is literally and actually the Body of Christ, an extension of the Incarnation, as some prefer to say, imperils the covenant relationship, as well as being in danger, in some hands, of elevating the Church to a position in the Trinity.

(b) Almost entirely peculiar to us is the emphasis on fellowship—and this is the point at which John Wesley's thinking is particularly relevant. In fact, we have claimed this fellowship for ourselves for so long that we do not recognize it when it takes a slightly different form in other communions; and meanwhile we have used the word ourselves so freely and loosely that we fail to notice when the real thing disappears, or is dissolved into general matiness and reciprocal back-slapping. I know of no more revolting description of Methodism than 'the religion of the warm handshake'. Fellowship, truly understood, is a *sharing* in the Holy Spirit. When the Holy Spirit is absent, and it is only the spirit of good brotherhood that is present, there is no *Christian* fellowship. We share in the Holy Spirit; we have our portion and lot in Him; He is the source of our life and our salvation. Therefore the thing that constitutes our fellowship in the Church is not our relationship to each other—horizontally—but our relationship to the Holy Spirit—vertically. And because He imparts Himself to all of us, because it is the same Spirit who gives His gifts to each of us, we belong to each other. The Church is the company of those who belong to each other solely because the same Spirit gives Himself and His gifts to every member. And as He gives Himself to each, His power flows from one to the other, binding all together. The 'fellowship', in our usual sense of the word, that thus results shows itself most especially and intimately in small groups, for obvious reasons, but it is available to the whole company of Christ's followers; and this is surely immediately apparent when Methodists, and I hope any Christians, meet each other from many different parts of the world. When a great ecumenical conference of nearly all the great communions comes together, it is able at once to worship together, to speak together on the same basic presuppositions, and to seek a truth together which has eluded each group of Christians in its separation; this is surely the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, which in Methodism we may perhaps claim to have experienced in greater measure than has been granted to other Communions.

*Head of Thy Church, whose Spirit fills  
And flows through every faithful soul,  
Unites in mystic love, and seals  
Them one, and sanctifies the whole.*

(MHB 814, v. 1.)

(c) The third Methodist addition is a concern for the individual man-in-Christ. We have learned in our time to speak and think corporately, and to realize as a matter not of doctrine only but of experience that there is no salvation outside the Church. I think it is possible that modern trends of thought are in danger of guarding this truth so zealously that we forget its complementary truth, that we are all loved by God and saved by Jesus Christ as individual persons. This may be partly due to the dominance of the eschatological dimension in a great deal of modern theology. We speak of cosmic salvation and the cosmic Christ, of the movements of history and of the end of history, and of the consummation of all things; we say that nations and cultures and Churches are under God's judgement; and this is all true. But we are in danger of being like blood-red nature in Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, 'so careful of the type, so careless of the single life'; of forgetting that the human race and each separate nation is made up of people, individuals breathing and suffering, being tempted and falling. There is not only a sinful race; there are also sinful men and women. There is not only a solidarity of sin; there is also a terrifying individuality, a scalding solitude of sin. Similarly, the Church is made up of people, individuals at various stages of spiritual development, but still sinners who have been justified and are now being sanctified. There is not only a holy Church; there are also holy men and women, or rather men and women who are being made holy. We dare not therefore jettison our concern that people should be brought one by one to Christ, our concern for personal salvation and personal holiness, but rather hold it together with and in the context of our new emphasis in the covenanted *People* of God. The reconciliation is not easy, as is abundantly clear from the persistent swing of the pendulum from excessive individualism to an excessive sense of corporateness and back again. It is the function of the class meeting, and its modern successors, not only to cultivate a deep fellowship, but also to care for every single member of the class, whatever his spiritual state may be. In this respect also we have a contribution to make to the doctrine of the Church. Charles Wesley expresses the idea with monumental and monosyllabic simplicity:

*Help us to help each other, Lord,  
Each other's cross to bear,  
Let each his friendly aid afford,  
And feel his brother's care.*

*Help us to build each other up,  
Our little stock improve;  
Increase our faith, confirm our hope,  
And perfect us in love.*

(MHB 717, vv. 1, 2.)

These are my 'prolegomena to any future Methodist doctrine of the Church', as Immanuel Kant would have said if he had come under the influence of John Wesley. But I am equally sure that anything that we might formulate on the subject would need to be enriched by what other communions have to teach us. I do not know, for instance, that we have yet fully understood the Anglican emphasis on historical continuity, or the need for its expression through outward forms of the ministry; I suspect that the relation between the Church and the sacraments is still somewhat obscure to us. I look forward to the time when the whole doctrine of the Church will be revealed to a united Church. Meanwhile, let us be very sure that we preserve what has been revealed to us, neither assimilating ourselves too readily or too completely to other forms of Christian thought, nor boasting too much about our own; but always willing both to learn and teach with equal humility, acknowledging that we have often scorned the heritage of other Churches and abused our own. And 'if we be otherwise minded may God grant that this also may be revealed to us'.

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