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1

Do Methodists Have a Doctrine of the Church?

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In the way it is posed here this question is a trap for the unwary. The answer "yes" says too much; "no" says too little. "In a manner of speaking," which is more nearly accurate than the other two, seems, nevertheless, equivocal. Like many another formally indeterminable question, however, this one is important and it becomes more poignant at every new turn of current church history. Far from being an academic affair amongst ourselves, the shape and thrust of Methodists' notions about the church and about themselves as churchmen have deep and wide repercussions, not only in the management of our own internal affairs but in our relationships with the rest of the Christian community in our time.

Thus, I was willing to undertake what I recognized as an ambiguous assignment—not because I have an unambiguous answer to offer or the "true doctrine" of the church to propose. The discussion of this question is useful only because it unfailingly bestirs a cluster of cognate questions, the consideration of which might

serve to illuminate what I take to be our real problem: Methodism's place and mission in the current situation of Christianity-in-crisis. The following comments, therefore, are intended to provoke reaction—less to themselves than to the problems they point to. I am far less interested in winning your agreement than I am in the possibility that you may be provoked, even if in a contrary fashion, to join with me in the basic reconsideration of Methodist ecclesiology which our present circumstances clearly require of us.

Nor have I tried to guard each sentence from the embarrassment of specific qualification and possible amendment. Overcautious lectures make for dull discussions. It might be well, however, to make the otherwise impertinent comment that what is here presented is actually less impromptu and impressionistic than its rhetoric may suggest to certain proper academics!

In the beginning the people called Methodists had no distinctive doctrine of the church—for the very simple reason that they did not need one (and it is a clear rule in church history that Christians do not *think*—i.e., construct doctrines—unless they *have* to). The early Methodists were not a church and they had no intention of becoming one. They understood themselves to be one among a number of religious societies and revival movements in the eighteenth century dedicated to the salvation of souls and the cultivation of the Christian life in its utter seriousness. The specific terms of membership in these societies had no *ecclesiological* reference (“to be saved from their sins and to flee from the wrath to come”), and this by design. The overwhelming majority in the United Societies were already nominal members of the Church of England or had at least been baptized therein. John Wesley was a stanch churchman—prepared to be irregular and inconsistent but also to defend his irregularities and inconsistencies on what he took to be *Anglican* principles. Charles Wesley was an actual bigot on the point of conformity. Such ecclesiological notions as the rank-and-file Methodist may have had were strange mixtures of attachment to and alienation from the national church.

This meant that if they had no fully formed or peculiar *doctrine* of the church, they did have a peculiar *problem* in and with the church to which they were related—that is, the Church of England. In its simplest terms, it was the problem of how to be an evangelical order (or society) within a “catholic” (or quasi-catholic) church, which steadfastly refused to sponsor or even to sanction their order and their enterprise. In the last meeting of this institute, Professor Shipley summed up the early Wesleyan conception of a *ministerium extraordinarium* within the *ministerium ordinarium* of the Church of England. It was *this* notion of being divinely commissioned “extraordinary messengers” which provided the frame for the characteristic organization and program of the original societies. Wesley could “look upon all the world as his parish” because, as he explained in a letter to James Hervey, “thus far I mean, that in whatever part of it [the world] I am I judge it meet, right, and my bounden duty to declare, unto all that are willing to hear, the glad tidings of salvation. This is the work which I know God has called me to. . . .” In similar vein he could say to his lay assistants: “You have but one business: that of saving souls.” It was this limited but central objective that justified the Methodist ecclesiological irregularities—field preaching, lay preaching, Wesley’s extra-parochial, supra-diocesan pattern of supervision and control, extemporary prayers in worship, et cetera. Moreover, it justified the Methodists’ continuing existence as a religious society within the Church of England, despite the latter’s massive disapproval of them. It was on this principle that Wesley deliberately designed the pattern of Methodist preaching services so that they would be liturgically insufficient, leaving the Methodist people still dependent on the priests of the national Church for the sacraments and the full round of Christian corporate life. Wesley never tired of insisting: “We are *not* Dissenters; we are *not* Sectarians; we will not separate!”

But what were they—these people who were in but not of the eighteenth-century Anglican establishment? They puzzled and offended many an Anglican leader—both the good ones, like Butler and “John Smith” and Edmund Gibson—as well as the bigots, like

Lavington and Warburton and Church, who raised the cry of "enthusiasm" and let it go at that. Moreover, the Methodists were a sore puzzle to the Dissenters, who could not understand why such vigorous advocates of holiness would not "come out from among [the corrupt national church] and be separate." It was, therefore, inevitable that as time went on an increasing number of Methodists—though always in a minority—began to regard their situation in the Church of England as anomalous and intolerable. But Wesley knew what the Methodist societies were intended to be and he set himself to make and keep them so; an evangelical order defined by their unique *mission*: "to spread scriptural holiness over these lands."

Once he was involved in it, the revival dominated the rest of Wesley's life—his preaching, theologizing, writing, publishing, his private and social affairs. He was convinced that the Methodist societies were the chief human agencies of the revival—and that this was their importance and justification. They were also his hope of reforming the Church of England—not by overthrowing the establishment or even capturing it—but by their actual performance of the church's essential mission, where this was going generally by default. Whatever else Methodism ever was or has since become, its first and most decisive identification was as an enterprise of Christian mission, witness, and nurture.

John Wesley's own doctrine of the church, like the rest of his theology, was an interesting amalgam. Its solid, consistent core was hewn from bedrock deposits in the Anglican tradition, laid down by the tradition of anti-Roman English "catholics"—such as John Jewel and Richard Hooker. For example, the decisive motifs of Jewel's ecclesiology, as seen principally in his controversy with Thomas Harding, may be summarized under five heads: (1) The church's subordination to Scripture; (2) The church's unity in Christ and the essentials of doctrine; (3) The notion that paradigmata for ecclesiology should be drawn from the patristic age; (4) The apostolic doctrine; (5) The idea of a *functional* episcopacy (as belonging to the church's well being rather than its essence). Each

of these motifs re-echoes in Wesley whenever and wherever he refers to the *form* of the church and to its *continuity in historical existence*. The grounds on which Hooker justified and approved continental ordinations are precisely those on which Wesley proved to his own satisfaction that an *exclusively* episcopal polity was not original or classical Anglicanism.

Wesley's view of the church as a *community of liturgy and devotion* was framed from such diverse sources as the Catholic Non-jurors (Hickes, Kettlewell, Ken, Nelson) and the Puritan masters of devotion (Scougal and Baxter). His ideas about the form and administration of the church came, not from the Puritans nor the Dissenters, but from the so-called *latitudinarians* (Stillingfleet, Lord King, Tillotson, *et al.*). Wesley's vision of an evangelical society serving the church almost against its will was a creative synthesis of Anthony Hoare's vision of a church reformed by "religious societies," from the Lutheran and Moravian pietists, from the fourth-century seekers after the perfection of the Christian life, and from the Society of Jesus—about which he had curiously mixed feelings. His sacramental theology was borrowed outright from his father's *Pious Communicant*—from which he took his *Treatise on Baptism*—and from Daniel Brevint's *Christian Sacrament and Sacrifice*. The influence of the continental Reformers in this particular area is never more than indirect—and that from the Protestant moderates (Bucer, Peter Martyr, Melancthon) mediated largely through Cranmer (*Homilies*), Jewel, *et al.* This goes with his generally dim view of Luther, his *implicit* rejection of Calvin's concept of the New Testament model of the church, and his *explicit* rejection of the sectarian ecclesiologies of the Protestant left wing.

The three primary texts for what we might call Wesley's *resultant* ecclesiology are Sermon LXXIV, "Of the Church"; LXXV, "On Schism"; and the *Minutes* of 1745. Important auxiliary texts are his sermon "On Numbers 23:23" and the one on "The Ministerial Office." To readers of this volume a detailed exposition of these texts would be impertinent, but there are certain accent points

which I would like to recall in the framing of the basic hypothesis of this chapter.

The catholic or universal church is *coetus credentium*—the entire company of men and women whom God hath called out of the world to give them the power of living faith. The Church of England is that part of this whole company who are inhabitants of England. In this connection Wesley affirms the *positive* meaning of Article XIX but then goes on to reject its negative implication—for, strictly construed, the article excludes members of the Church of Rome from the church catholic, and this Wesley was unwilling to do.

In the sermon "On Schism" Wesley distinguishes between *diversity* amongst Christian groups, and *disunity*. The New Testament sense of "schism," he maintains, is neither more nor less than an alienation of Christians from each other in heart and love—even "though they still continued members of the same external society." Such a "division of heart" may, however, lead to or occasion "schism" in its common usage: "*causeless separation from a body of living Christians. . .*" "It is only when our love grows cold that we can think of separating from our brethren. . . The pretences for separation may be innumerable, but want of love is always the real cause; otherwise, they would still hold the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

To those who urged that communion with the Church of England was in itself corrupting—and so concluded, "You ought to separate from the Church of England"—Wesley replied:

I will make the case my own. I am now, and have been from my youth, a member and a Minister of the Church of England; and I have no desire nor design to separate from it, till my soul separates from my body. Yet if I was not permitted to remain therein without omitting what God requires me to do, it would then become meet and right, and my bounden duty, to separate from it without delay. To be more particular: I know God has committed to me a dispensation of the gospel; yea, and my own salvation depends upon preaching it. . . . If then I could not remain in

the Church without omitting this, without desisting from preaching the gospel, I should be under a necessity of separating from it, or losing my own soul. . . . But, setting aside this case, suppose the Church or society to which I am now united does not require me to do anything which the Scripture forbids, or to omit anything which the Scripture enjoins, it is then my indispensable duty to continue therein. (Sermon LXXV, "On Schism.")

In the *Minutes* of 1745, and in connection with the question of his own status as chief pastor and bishop of the Methodist Societies, Wesley thus summed up his concept of church *polity*:

The plain origin of church-government seems to be this. Christ sends forth a preacher of the gospel. Some who hear him repent and believe the gospel. They then desire him to watch over them, to build them up in the faith, and to guide their souls in the paths of righteousness. Here then is an independent congregation, subject to no pastor but their own, neither liable to be controlled in things spiritual by any other man or body of men whatsoever [so far, bare-bones, bed-rock Congregationalism].

But soon after some from other parts, who are occasionally present while he speaks in the name of Him that sent him, beseech him to come over and help them also. Knowing it to be the will of God he consents (complies), yet not till he has conferred with the wisest and holiest of his [original] congregation, and with their advice appointed one who has gifts and grace to watch over the flock till his return [in his absence].

If it please God to raise another flock in the new place, before he leaves them he does the same thing, appointing one whom God has fitted for the work to watch over these souls also. In like manner, in every place where it pleases God to gather a little flock by his word, he appoints one in his absence to take the oversight of the rest, and to assist them of the ability which God giveth. These are Deacons, or servants of the church, and look upon their first pastor as their common father. And all these congregations regard him in the same light, and esteem him still as the shepherd of their souls.

These congregations are not strictly independent. They depend on one pastor, though not on each other.

As these congregations increase, and as the Deacons grow in years and grace, they need other subordinate Deacons or helpers; in respect of whom they may be called Presbyters, or Elders, as their [common] father in the Lord may be called the Bishop or Overseer of them all. (John Bennett's

copy of the Minutes of the Conference of 1744, 1745, 1747, 1748. Publication of the Wesley Historical Society, No. 1. London, 1896. Published for the W. H. S. by Charles H. Kelly.)

This is, of course, a quite fanciful account of the actual history of the first and second centuries of the Christian Church. It is, however, an almost exact account of the rise of Methodist Societies from 1739 to 1745—and of Wesley's understanding of his own role therein.

The story of the long struggle over separation is gnarled and knotted. I do not myself know all of the requisite data for its intelligible rehearsal. As far as I know, these data do not exist in any accessible form. Nobody has ever put together Wesley's testimony with the corresponding testimony of both his opponents and partisans. There are, however, visible salients in the story—the conference of 1755, where John barely averted a determined push toward separation; Edward Perronet's mischievous doggerel in *The Mitre*; Charles Wesley's horror of separation and his subsequent withdrawal from the revival (on *this* score more than any other); the increasing clamor of the lay preachers to be treated as equals to the ordained clergy. These serve partially to account for the fact that "separation" was a perennial issue, renewed at *every* annual conference of which we have a record from 1755 to 1790.

Shortly after the conference of 1755, Wesley wrote to a fellow evangelical clergyman, Samuel Walker (September, 1755), in defense of his evangelical order within the Church of England, "irregularities" and all. His main point with Walker is that these so-called irregularities are, each one, functions of the evangelical mission of Christian witness and discipline—and are not necessarily symptoms of dissent. What he would very much like to negotiate, he says, is "a method . . . which, conducted with prudence and patience, will reduce the constitution of Methodism to due order, and render the Methodists under God more *instrumental to the ends of practical religion.*" (Italics mine.)

In all these comments—and everywhere else that I know of—

we find the essential *notae ecclesiae* characterized in a distinctive way. This is what I would call the *classical Methodist* [Wesleyan] *ecclesiology*:

1. The *unity* of the church is based upon the Christian *koinonia* in the Holy Spirit.

2. The *holiness* of the church is grounded in the discipline of grace which guides and matures the Christian life from its threshold in justifying faith to its plerophory in sanctification.

3. The *catholicity* of the church is defined by the universal outreach of redemption, the essential community of all true believers.

4. The *apostolicity* of the church is gauged by the succession of apostolic doctrine in those who have been faithful to the apostolic witness.

Significantly, and at every point, Wesley defined the church as *act*, as mission, as the enterprise of saving and maturing souls in the Christian life. This vision of the church as mission was to be realized and implemented within the Anglican perspective of the church as form and institution. Moreover, Wesley took some pleasure in appealing from Anglicans drunk to Anglicans sober—from Butler to Jewel, from Lavington to Cranmer, from Warburton to Hooker—and from everybody to the *Articles*, the *Homilies*, and the Book of Common Prayer!

The Methodists did become a church, however—after all and on their own—by a complicated process which it is partisan to defend and fruitless to deplore. For what it is worth, I might remark in passing that I feel acutely embarrassed as a Methodist who is also a historian, because of the lack of an adequately critical, adequately comprehensive rehearsal of British or American Christianity in the half century from 1790 to 1840—and of Methodism's role in that history. Such a thing would be a very useful contribution to modern church history and to ecumenical understanding. It might supply yet more evidence for the thesis of C. H. Dodd's now famous letter about the "*non-theological factors*" that have complicated and frustrated the quest for Christian unity.

What we can say, however, is that Methodism's transition from

society to church came in the bright morning of the branch theory of the church, when the analogy of competing business companies made good sense to Christians as a parable for the rivalries of their several sovereign and autonomous "denominations." Moreover, the evolution of Methodism as a denomination proceeded under circumstances which have engendered lasting bitterness between Methodists and Anglicans—exacerbated by the atrabilious tempers of the Tractarian controversy. The effect of this was to push the Methodists into the arms of dissent with something like enthusiasm, so that they came quickly to be almost indistinguishable from the other free churches in most observable respects.

The historical patterns of this transition from society to denomination are tangled and vary widely from country to country and from time to time. It first began in the U.S.A., then in Great Britain and elsewhere. One of the most interesting instances was in Canada, where the evolution of Methodism took yet another course from that in the States or in Britain. This needs to be understood if the later development of the United Church of Canada is to be understood. In every instance, however, the transitional process involved a series of borrowings and symbiotic adaptations. Typically, when Methodists have felt a lack in matters ecclesiological they have looked about for whatever seemed handy and truly useful—and then proceeded to adapt it to their own uses and purposes (often quite different from the original). Examples of this sort of thing in American Methodism are (1) "episcopal polity," (2) the scheme of representation and delegation in the conference system, (3) the written Constitution of 1808, and (4) the patterns of frontier expansion and settlement. In England (or so it seems to an American who is scarcely expected to understand such things—really!) Methodists came to be increasingly so far estranged from the Church of England (for reasons that have varied from pique to righteous indignation) that they found themselves readier to adapt to the patterns of dissent and sectarianism. This tendency in Methodism after Wesley to borrow from left and right gave rise

to a theory of the church as a *coincidentia oppositorum*. As William B. Pope put it,

To [the church] there are certain attributes assigned. . . . These qualities are Unity, Sanctity, Invisibility, Catholicity, Apostolicity, Indefectibility, Glory. But we also find by the side of these . . . qualities in some measure their counterparts or opposites: such as Diversity, Imperfection, Visibility, Localisation, Confessionalism, Mutability, and Militant Weakness. Hence we gather that the true church of Christ is a body in which these opposite attributes unite. (*A Compendium of Christian Theology*, III, 266-67.)

One way and another then, Methodism in the nineteenth century evolved from an evangelical order in a catholic (or quasi-catholic) church into a low-church Protestant denomination or congeries of denominations, but always with subtle differentiations from its congeners—those groups which were more nearly linear descendants of the continental Reformation. As firmly committed as other Protestants to *sola Scriptura*, the Methodists were also "Arminian" and anti-antinomian, and thus never *quite* like the "reformed" traditions in their interpretation of *sola fide*. The theological consequences of this were very considerable—as Dale Dunlap has shown in his Yale dissertation.

In America the Methodists were low church to begin with, differing violently with the Baptists—and later the Campbellites—on such matters as "believer's baptism," immersion, and "the connexional system," but becoming very similar to them in many other respects; e.g., in social typology and ethos. In the present century—for such are the vagaries of ecclesiological ecology—the well buckets have reversed themselves, and now American Methodists have been drifting toward congregational autonomy at a great rate, while the Baptists and the Christians are on their way to becoming almost as "connexional" as the Methodists used to be. Moreover, there are both Baptist and Christian congregations which now "dedicate" infants—and a great many Methodists who "baptize" them with what looks and sounds as if it were the same basic theory of what is going on, or *not* going on! At the same time, however, both

British and American Methodists still preserve selected, mutilated remains of the Book of Common Prayer for various ritual and ceremonial purposes. In the current revival of interest in liturgical reform a good deal of it is patently imitative. My point is that if we are to understand the anomalies of Methodist ecclesiology—or anything else doctrinal in Methodism—we must take this deep-seated symbiotic tendency into account.

Nevertheless, in this history of being a church without having been intended to be one, there are landmarks which remind us that Methodists, when they really face up to the task of self-understanding, usually recover their racial memory of the evangelical order which once upon a time was raised up on an emergency basis to extend and deepen the reach of the gospel witness in uncommissioned service to the church's essential mission. To do the work of the church in default of the church's being the church in its ideal fullness—if we take Richard Watson and William B. Pope as exemplary, as on this point I think we can—we quickly discover that, for each of them, ecclesiology is an auxiliary concern claiming very little of their genius or originality, which is devoted in large measure to what might nowadays be called "the theology of evangelism."

For Watson the first business of theology is to exhibit the derivation of doctrine from revelation—and so to connect the preaching of the gospel with its source. The bulk of the *Institutes* (Part I) is devoted to the authority of the Holy Scriptures and to "Doctrines of the Holy Scriptures" (Part II)—with "Redemption" (II, xix-xxix) the vital core of the entire system. In "The Institutions of Christianity" (Part IV) he expounds a view of the church as a spiritual fellowship of believers which should never be "established" but must have powers of government and discipline—all of them *functional*. Baptism is interpreted—as in Samuel Wesley—in covenantal terms, to be administered to infants, and normally by sprinkling. As for the Lord's Supper, he concludes that Article XXVIII, in its 1662 version—and without certain particular ex-

pressions in the liturgy—"must be taken to be the opinion of the Church of England upon this point, and it substantially agrees with the New Testament" (II, p. 667).

For Pope the heart and center of Christian truth is soteriology, and this as grounded in the atonement and expressed in the Christian life of faith and holiness. Pope's doctrine of the church is frankly eclectic and mediating—taking the Anglican *Articles* in their pre-Laudian interpretation, but interpreting their consequences in a staunchly "non-conformist" temper. His liveliest comments come when he describes the church as the organ of the Holy Spirit and the matrix for the maturation of faith. Here he homes in on the Methodist class meeting (in one of his rather rare positive references in *The Peculiarities of Methodist Doctrine* [1873], pp. 18-19):

Throughout the world, but especially in Great Britain, the Methodist people hold fast the tradition of a Christian communion which confesses the name of Jesus not only before men generally, as in the Eucharist, but in the assemblies of the brethren themselves. Not that we have a monopoly of this kind of fellowship. Meetings for mutual confession, and edification and counsel have always been aimed at in the purest ages and purest forms of the Church; but *we are the only community that has incorporated them in the very fibre of our constitution*. Growing out of our society character, this institution we have aimed to interweave with the organization of the Church also: not yet with perfect success but with results that encourage *the hope of perfect success*. As it is rooted in our ecclesiastical economy, so it is rooted in the affections of our people. No form in which the social element of Christianity has found expression has enlisted more universal enthusiasm in its favour than the old class meeting. Other forms of confederation have been gloried in, lived for, and sometimes died for, in the history of Christendom. But I question if any institution, grafted on Scriptural precepts, has ever commanded such widespread and pervading homage of all orders of the devout, or approved itself by such practical and irresistible evidences of good, as the Methodist class-meeting. . . . Incautious and unskilful hands have been meddling with it of late; but in vain. It may admit of much improvement in detail and in administration, but its foundations are secure and inviolable.

Would to God he had been right on this last point!

In the twentieth century Methodism, in America at least, has undergone a radical metamorphosis which naturally affects any ecclesiological reflection that goes on within our ranks or about us by others. It is an oversimplification in the direction of the truth to say that this was chiefly the effect of German-Enlightenment theology assimilated into a tradition which had lost its vital traditional linkage with classical Methodism. One way of describing the outcome of this development would be to say that we have passed beyond the gravitational field of our historical origin and are now in what might be called a condition of weightlessness as far as our peculiar history is concerned—a detraditioned state of mind and polity. In America at least, Methodism is an “established church” (in the sociological sense) in which the maintenance and expansion of the establishment has become an undecidable prime duty for almost everyone associated with it.

Ecclesiological speaking, however, we are a church after the order of Melchizedek. Estranged from our Anglican heritage—for reasons that range from cogent to paranoid—having no blood ties with any other mode of catholic Christianity (as the Lutherans and Calvinists have even in their *anti-Romanism*), and having become too “worldly” and middle-class a movement ever to make genuine common cause with the “radical Protestants” and the Pentecostals, we are churchmen whose institutional forms are uniquely our own but whose theological apparatus has been assembled from many quarters—whose “place” in the ecumenical movement is painfully equivocal.

For all this derivative and symbiotic behavior there remains a deep, almost instinctive awareness among us that our foremost and final justification for being the church that we are is still precisely the same as the justification for our having first been an evangelical order within *ecclesia Anglicana*—namely, Christianity in dead earnest, distinguished chiefly in our evangelical concern for the Christian mission, witness, nurture—“holiness of heart and life.” I cannot myself point to any contemporary ecclesiological

formulation or formula that I would now acknowledge as *the* “Methodist doctrine of the Church.” But I honestly think I can recognize a constant and comparatively consistent concern amongst Methodists that strikes me as characteristic and “peculiar.” The Church is “a company of faithful men” (i.e., *men with a mission*) “in which the Word rightly preached [evangelism] and the sacraments duly administered” [worship], together with everything else that is relevant and requisite to getting the rightly preached Word truly heard and the duly administered sacraments rightly received (*Christian discipline*, or nurture). Our *notae ecclesiae* are, therefore, evangelism, worship, discipline. It interests me to notice that whenever the motif of *the mission of the evangelical order* is mentioned in an assembly of Methodists, it strikes a responsive chord, even if in contexts that are sometimes faintly bizarre. In the crucial and profound debates over the issues currently paramount in the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, for example, one sometimes gets the impression that the Methodists are not really listening—at least, not with their “third ear.” But when someone speaks incisively about the church in essential action, even the most overinstitutionalized Methodist in “the connexion” snaps to attention—and feels at least a fleeting impulse to report for duty.

The drift of these comments is that Methodism has never lost the *essence* of a *functional* doctrine of the church but that, by the same token, it has never developed—on its own and for itself—the full panoply of bell, book, and candle that goes with being a “proper” church properly self-understood. This makes us *une église manqué*, theoretically and actually. But this raises the question of our relations to other denominations, which is to say our ecclesiastical “foreign relations”—those which we maintain within the pan-denominational pattern of the World Methodist Council or those we share in the interdenominational patterns of the World Council of Churches (and, *mutatis mutandis*, national and regional councils of churches).

It is by now a commonplace that the ecumenical movement is

one of the great facts of current Christian history. It is also common knowledge that Methodists have had interesting difficulties in finding and taking their place in the full round of the operations of the World Council of Churches. In the process some fairly stupid stereotypes have emerged which go on generating or perpetuating what the psychiatrists call a parataxic relationship between Methodists and non-Methodists. I, for one, am rather weary of them, but they continue to haunt us at conference after conference.

I have suggested that there is not now, and there has not been for at least two generations, even a modicum of a *consensus fidelium Methodistica* in ecclesiology. In respect of the ministry, more Methodists would agree on the main issues relating to the minister's *role* than on the theological basis of the ministerial *office*. As for questions about apostolicity, catholicity, episcopal polity, the meaning of ordination, and the power of the keys in discipline and excommunication, et cetera—there is no recognizable consensus anywhere and no conceivable prospect of one.

Thus, in America at least, Methodists still practice infant baptism by effusion—but the vast majority would balk at both the premises and consequences of Wesley's *Treatise on Baptism* if they were confronted by it. As for the Eucharist, there is a wide area of confusion in respect of the nature of sacramental grace and on God's presence and action at the Table of the Lord.

As Methodism goes on being—and having to be—a church it will be increasingly harassed and embarrassed by the consequences entailed in the tension between *ecclesia per se*—institutional maintenance and management—and *ecclesia in actu*—proclamation, nurture, and service. If this continues for the next half century as it has for the last, we shall be in a sorry shape for sure. If we go on borrowing and patching and playing with pious gimmicks, we shall not only become ridiculous in the eyes of yet older *poseurs* in our divided Christian family, but our proud claim to a valid heritage may very well become suspect.

One of our difficulties, I suggest, is that Methodism's unique ecclesiological pattern was really designed to function best *within*

an encompassing environment of *catholicity* (by which I mean what the word meant originally: the effectual and universal Christian *community*). We don't do as well by our lonesome as some other denominations appear to do—and for a good reason. Preoccupation with self-maintenance distracts us from what is actually our peculiar *raison d'être*. This is why a self-conscious and denomination-centered Methodist is such a crashing bore to all but his own particular kith, kin, and kind.

Methodism arose as a divinely instituted project—*ad interim!* There can be no doubt that the Wesleys, and most of the early Methodists, understood their enterprise as the effort to meet an emergency situation with needful, extraordinary measures. As with the eschatological views of the New Testament Christians, the "emergency" has lengthened and the "emergency crew" has acquired the character of an establishment. But we lose perspective whenever we forget that we are still more deeply rooted than we realize in the motifs and spirit of the eighteenth-century origins. We need a catholic church within which to function as a proper evangelical order of witness and worship, discipline and nurture. Yet, it is plain to most of us that none of the existing unilateral options are suitable alternatives to our existing situation. The way to catholicism—i.e., Christian unity—is *forward*—toward the *renewal* of catholicity rather than in *return* to something that has lost its true status as truly catholic. Meanwhile, since we *are* a church, it is more than a practical convenience that requires of us that we try to act responsibly in the exercise of our churchly character. This means, among many other things, the reconsideration of our own traditions and their role in that *traditional process* by which Christianity lives and maintains its authentic continuity with the Christian past and its openness to the ecumenical future. It also means a major reconsideration of the obligations we have as a church in respect of *catechetical instruction*, in more adequate provision for group discipline and therapy, in the ministries of the general priesthood and of the meaning of our own representative priesthood. Almost above all else, it means the acceptance of the

liturgical and sacramental obligations of being a church for so long as God requires it of us, pending a really valid alternative of authentic Christian unity.

Every denomination in a divided and broken Christendom is an *ecclesiola in via*, but Methodists have a peculiar heritage that might make the transitive character of our ecclesiastical existence not only tolerable but positively proleptic. On our pilgrimage toward the actualization of the unity in Christ that God has given us and still wills for us to have, we can take both courage and zest from the fact that what we really have to contribute to any emergent Christian community is not our apparatus but our mission. Meanwhile, however, we must ourselves beware lest, in this business of having to be a church while "waiting" for the Church that is to be, we should deceive ourselves by falling further into the fatuity that this business of "being a church" is really our *chief* business!

2

The Biblical Doctrine of the People of God

C. H. DODD

The writings comprised in the Canon of Scripture, extremely various as they are, differing in standpoint and outlook, and spread over a period of several centuries, are bound in unity by their consistent reference to the history of a community, self-identical through many changes. Hebrew clans, Israelite kingdoms, Jewish dispersion, catholic church—all these are successive embodiments of the one People of God. This interest in the experience of an actual concrete community, rather than in abstract philosophical doctrines, is a part of the character of Christianity as a historical revelation. Its theology is essentially an interpretation of what happened in history, with corollaries drawn from it.

The community came into existence at a definite point of history through an act of God. So its members always believed. Traditionally, a body of serfs of the Egyptian crown won their freedom and migrated by way of Sinai to Palestine, and these, with perhaps other kindred clans, formed a religious bond through which in