

# THE OXFORD INSTITUTE OF METHODIST THEOLOGICAL STUDIES

## (A) THE RECORD

AN Institute of Methodist Theological Studies, sponsored by the Oxford Memorial Committee of the World Methodist Council, was held in Lincoln College, Oxford, from 19th to 29th July. The project, as conceived at Lake Junaluska in 1956, was designed not for sectarian ends, but to give an opportunity for representatives of world Methodism to consider how, as a world communion, we might play a worthier part in the thinking and action of the Universal Church.

The membership, upward of a hundred, the majority of whom attended the whole Institute, represented as wide as possible a cross-section of world Methodism. They came from five continents, and though the larger part was from the United States and the British Isles, there were members of the Churches of Europe, Australasia, Africa and Asia. There were men and women, ordained and lay; teachers, pastors, students, members, housewives; in age ranging upward from the twenties. Among those taking part were the President of the World Methodist Council, the President of the British Conference, and the President-Designate of the Methodist Church in Ireland. Among the visitors were Bishop Ivan Lee Holt and Dr Elmer Clark.

On the first evening, the Institute was welcomed by the Chairman of the District and inaugurated by its Warden, the Rev. Reginald Kissack, of Rome. Each Sunday the members attended worship at Wesley Memorial Church. On the second Sunday morning there was an ecumenical service, with participants from the various countries represented, and in the evening members conducted worship in a number of nearby village churches.

Each day began with prayers in Lincoln College Chapel and, after breakfast, with Bible study on Romans 1-8. The main morning address was followed by group discussions, and that of the afternoon by questions and contributions from the whole membership. Each evening, after dinner, the Institute met at Wesley Memorial Church, in the room used by the John Wesley Society, for informal discussions, the nature of which was determined, in part, by the course of the proceedings of the Institute.

On one such evening, there was a discussion on Church union which included evidence from the larger part of the globe. Later on, consideration was given to the form to be taken by this account of the Institute. Here it became abundantly clear that, although the Institute did not wish to commit itself to any elaborate statement of conclusions, it was in no doubt as to the great value of the meetings not least in respect of that to which they pointed for the future of Methodism and its place in the One Church of God.

The papers, read by a carefully chosen panel of experts, covered the main elements of Methodist Doctrine: Justification, Conversion, Prevenient Grace, Assurance, Perfection, Wesley's Doctrine of the Last Things, and an examination of the New Testament Basis of the Distinctive Methodist Emphasis. Other papers, on the wider aspects of Biblical Theology, dealt with Grace and Faith in the Old Testament, the People of God, *Kerygma* and Response in the

New Testament, the Holy Spirit, and the relation between Faith and Order in the New Testament.

In this context two contributions which aroused special interest, as throwing new light on the problem of communication, were that of Dr Stanley Hopper on Faith and Belief, and our Apologetic Task; and Dr Harold DeWolf's Theological Evolution of Natural Theology. The discussion of the latter was so urgent as to demand a special session in which the writer of the paper and Dr Franz Hildebrandt, with others, argued the main issue.

Dr Benson Perkins's survey of World Methodism served to put other issues in perspective. On the one hand, looking backward, we heard an account of the development of American Methodist Theology in the nineteenth century. On the other hand, and very much in the present, were accounts by eye-witnesses of circumstances in Germany, and South Africa, giving poignant examples of a situation that repeats itself all over the world. In another context, but no less relevant, the Institute heard Professor Charles Coulson speak about recent developments in science.

On the final morning, after hearing Dr Gordon Rupp outline his views on the Future of the Methodist Tradition, the Institute shared in the Covenant Service at Wesley Memorial Church.

#### (B) THE FINDINGS

The findings (given in John Wesley's room, Lincoln College, Oxford, on 27th July) were as follows:—

The hearing of the papers and their discussion in groups and in open session, have led us to ask a number of questions, and to express certain concerns:—

(1) *The Doctrinal Position of Methodism.* Is the theological tie which now binds world Methodism, 'Our Doctrine', that is, distinctive theological emphases inherited from the Wesleys?

How far does our theological inheritance from the Wesleys remain a peculiar Methodist possession, in view of theological changes both in our own and in other Churches?

How far are these changes due to the urgent political, cultural, economic, and religious problems and pressures of the last one hundred and fifty years?

Is not the task of Methodists to perform with the Scriptures in the twentieth century a task like that which John Wesley performed in the eighteenth century?

Our sense of indebtedness for the biblical insights of Wesley is profound, and we believe these insights will long continue to be relevant. Does not loyalty to this great contribution of the Wesleys require us now to go further and perform in the twentieth century a like task of bringing the world under the judgement of the Word of God? Is it not the proper work of the Holy Spirit in every generation to make Christ and His commands contemporary?

(2) *Further Theological Issues.* We observe that Wesley's teaching concerning the work of the Holy Spirit in Prevenient Grace, Conversion, Justification, Assurance and Perfect Love, together with the actual work of the Spirit in the Methodist Revival, provide valuable help in interpreting the biblical doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Ought not the implications of this fact to be considered more carefully by Methodist Theologians?

Methodism is not only concerned with traditional doctrines but also must face the philosophical problems of the modern world. Questions are raised about the sources of religious truth, in considering whether there is a valid natural theology. Further questions are being raised about the significance of religious language, as when it is asked how far such language is to be taken literally and how far symbolically.

Cannot Methodism make its contribution here also by reminding men that they are saved not by what they believe and say about God, but by God Himself?

Throughout our discussions we have been aware of the problem of communicating our Gospel. We have seen that the Gospel needs to be expressed not only on the intellectual level, but also in courageous fidelity and practical witness at the point of human division of race, nation, and class.

(3) *The Church*. John Wesley's 'catholic spirit', his exhortation to his followers to walk the 'royal way of universal love', and the temper of original Methodism were alien from a narrow sectarianism. If today we stress the value of our common inheritance as Methodists throughout the world, it is not that we seek to perpetuate our own life as some kind of world sect, but because of a responsibility toward all these who, like ourselves, have a place within the one covenanted People of God.

We are convinced that in our time the People called Methodists should enter afresh into a present and living enjoyment of the great gifts which God gave our fathers, that they may be made ever more widely available in the growing unity of the one Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.

#### (C) THE RECOMMENDATIONS

The members of the Institute, being convinced of the great value of the meetings, strongly urge that further meetings be held at Oxford, at suitable intervals; that the next be held, if possible, in 1962; that all possible ways of theological co-operation be explored, and that the idea of a permanent house in Oxford be kept in mind.

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# Our Contributors

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