

OXFORDnotes

NEWSLETTER OF THE OXFORD INSTITUTE OF METHODIST THEOLOGICAL STUDIES

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Number 4

We are pleased to announce the CALL of the Eighth Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies. Further information will follow later in the year.

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Co-chairpersons

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CALL

The Eighth Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies, July 27 - August 6, 1987, Somerville College, Oxford

Theme:

The Significance of Methodist Teaching and Practice for Confessing the Apostolic Faith

The Church must be clear about the content of its teaching and the ways in which it understands the truth of its teaching. The communication of the gospel in every generation must be twofold: "handing on" the tradition to the next generation of Christians and proclaiming it to the world. One of the most urgent practical problems for the Methodist/Wesleyan churches is what and how they will teach in the world today. These problems are compounded by confusions in matters doctrinal which have developed since the eighteenth century.

The very first Methodist Conference in 1744 proposed the questions:

What to teach?
How to teach?
What to do?

To what extent is there a theological consensus today in world Methodism about what Methodist/Wesleyan churches should teach and do? What would it require for these churches to work toward a consensus on sound teaching and praxis? Are there valid limits of diversity, dissent and conflict both among and in the Methodist churches?

These questions are especially appropriate at the present time. The documents prepared for the World Methodist Council in 1986, the attempt to re-read

the Wesleyan tradition in the light of Latin American experience, and the production of a new doctrinal statement in the United Methodist Church are some of the signs of a fresh interest in what to teach. Ecumenically, similar questions about consensus and diversity are being raised in the World Council of Churches, through the Faith and Order study, "Towards the Common Expression of the Apostolic Faith Today." Our theme is concerned both with Methodism and with the Methodist contribution to the *ecumene* in the crucial decades just ahead. The questions of 1744 will help to shape the theme as it is taken up by the Working Groups of the Institute.

Structure:

The 1987 Institute will be structured around six Working Groups and plenary sessions for lectures and open discussion. The lectures will not be as closely tied to the particular topics of the Working Groups as in 1982. We will introduce one major disputation in the plenary to take place during the second week, the substance of which will arise out of the Institute's dynamics during the first week. There will also be opportunity for interdisciplinary exchange between groups.

Working Groups

1. Current Biblical Criticism and Methodist Teaching

This group will be charged with the task of saying something about how biblical studies can contribute to the development of Methodist/Wesleyan teaching. What in contemporary critical reading of the scriptures can ground the renewal and revitalizing of our teaching?

Does a critical reading of the scriptures support traditional Methodist understanding? To what extent do the traditional Methodist teachings help us to interpret the scriptures today? In what way do they need to be corrected by a critical reading of the scriptures

today? What should the Methodist/Wesleyan churches teach as the essentials of biblical faith? What interest and relevance might be found in more recent developments in hermeneutics and in canonical criticism?

This group will take a critical look at the grounding in the scriptures of some of the major distinctive teachings of Methodism; for example, Justification, Sanctification, Perfection, New Birth, Creation/New Creation, ethos/ethics questions (discipline, household codes, etc.), and the relationship of the gospel to the poor.

2. Wesley Studies: What and How Did John Wesley Teach?

Wesley studies have recently concentrated on the urgent need for historiographical correction and this will continue. But this group will also be asked to examine Wesley's doctrine in the light of what he did. Thus the question What to do? will be a focus of the group.

Of what significance for our teaching is the fact that Wesley opted for a ministry outside academic institutions? Are there lessons to be learned from Wesley's way in controversy and disputation? Why did Wesley choose not to write a creed or a confession or a typical systematic theology? Why did he elect sermons and "Explanatory Notes" as the parameters of sound teaching? What contemporary relevance is there in Wesley's recourse to the Christian tradition in its diverse forms?

By 1987 the publication of the four-volume collection of Sermons should be completed. This could be the occasion for a serious rereading of the sermon corpus as a means of addressing our three questions.

3. Methodist Teaching and Social and Economic Issues of the Nineteenth Century

The object of this group's work will be to trace the strands of consensus and dissensus in Methodist teaching and the reasons for each. Guiding questions: Is the nineteenth century fragmentation of Methodism, often treated mainly in social or theological categories, rooted in dimensions of a class struggle within Methodism over the relationships of Methodism to the poor? May we correlate the various theological traditions of Methodism in any degree with their social locations? Does this

perspective illuminate the successive development and contemporary character of the Methodist traditions, their interrelationships, and their contributions to the broader ecumenical world? What theological import may be seen in Methodist embourgeoisment in the nineteenth century, especially in America, and the perdurance of racism?

The implications here could be three-fold. First, the contrast between the interpretation given to Wesley's doctrinal standards by the established Methodist churches on both sides of the Atlantic, and that of the separatist churches, focused primarily on the question What to do? Second, the changing ecclesial identity of Methodism, as "society" became church (a conscious decision in the U.S., but not fully assimilated). Because the issue was not faced squarely in the nineteenth century, the question, What to teach? was superceded by a personalized religion, focused on What to feel? Third, the intellectual reaction to this "folk religion," which distracted theologians from their proper task, and conceded the question How to teach? to experiential liberalism at the turn of the century.

4. Methodist Economic and Social Teachings and the Challenge of Liberation Theology

In this group the three diagnostic questions are most clearly inseparable, although the question What to do? might give shape to the other two. If the cutting edge of Methodist doctrine is perforce economic for the world of the next century, we should accept that the question What to do? is doctrinal per se.

If the poor have a special place in the biblical witness (Scripture) and the Methodist experience (Tradition and Experience), ought Methodist teaching today give more attention to this theme as normative doctrine for Methodist churches? May this theme be correlated with certain theological emphases of the Methodist traditions? Does it provide clues for the reconstruction of Methodist theology today? Here the deliberations of Nairobi 1986 could be a starting point.

5. Methodist Evangelism and Doctrine

What to teach? and How to teach? are clearly the priorities of the evangelist in determining the essentials of the Christian gospel. The further Wesleyan question What to do? brings this sharply

into focus by raising the all-important factor of context.

The agenda of world evangelism is now being stimulated by non-Western theology and pedagogy. Evangelistic outreach is no longer predominantly personal, with social and political dimensions of the gospel viewed as necessary, or optional corollaries. The question now being asked is how to integrate the personal, social and political dimensions of the gospel into an authentic evangelistic message.

The Group will therefore continue work from the last Institute: First, with a preliminary review of the evangelistic traditions of Methodism, with regard to content, method, and context; and second, with a detailed consideration of how Methodist teaching and practice can help to keep the evangelism of today faithful to the gospel in global contexts of personal uncertainty, social change, and political conflict.

6. Contemporary Methodist Theology and Doctrinal Consensus

This group will be focused on the substantive discussion of doctrine and confessions of faith in contemporary Methodism. Could there be a consensus among Methodists about teaching the faith? What are the terms in which we could speak of a common faith that both links us with the ecumene and yet expresses our distinctiveness? Is it necessary for us to call into question, for example, the rationality which Western theology has long imposed as a theological given but which in fact is a particular contextual factor?

This group will consider such documents and processes as: (a) The WMC Jerusalem statement for Nairobi; (b) The WCC study, "Toward the Common Expression of the Apostolic Faith" (What is the distinctive Methodist contribution to ecumenical theology?); (c) The United Methodist General Conference commission report on doctrines and guidelines of faith.

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