

METHODISM, CONFESSIONALITY, CONFESSIONALISM AND CATHOLIC VOCATION.

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Twenty one years ago, I wrote an article entitled ‘Has Methodism an Ecumenical Vocation?’¹ I answered unhesitatingly in the affirmative and would not wish now to unsay anything from it. However, I have since then, and especially even since our last Oxford Institute, become disturbed by the reception process or lack of it within British Methodism. I have become disturbed by the ecumenical fickleness of so many of our ministers and layfolk and their lack of appreciation not simply of the ecumenical commitments into which the British Conference has entered over the last two or three generations but even more of the profound spiritual asceticism which is demanded of all those who would respond to our Lord’s prayer for unity.

I hope that the ecumenical weaknesses that I discern within the British connexion are confined to it and that those of you from other conferences will bring me cheering news from elsewhere. In this paper, I confine myself to the one Methodist church of which I have sufficient knowledge to even begin to make the judgements that I advance.

I begin by illustrating the two points I have made about my own church. Since before World War II, British Methodism at the official level has played a big role in the Ecumenical Movement. We have repeatedly shown ourselves willing to acknowledge a role for the historic episcopate within the oikoumene. We said in the thirties that the coming Great Church would incorporate episcopal, Presbyterian and congregational elements. We endorsed the South India plans for unity on this basis. After the War, we voted for the Anglican-Methodist unity scheme of the 1960’s and the abortive Covenant of 1982, both of which would have involved us accepting the historic episcopate. Most recently, we accepted the Anglican-Methodist Covenant of 2003 with its agreement of the principles of episcopal oversight².

Perhaps most significantly of all, we said to the entire oikoumene in 1985 that ‘we await the occasion when it would be appropriate to recover ‘the sign of the episcopal succession’³. Yet, when it came to it and the Faith and Order Committee issued, at the request of the Conference, a series of proposals for various possible forms of a Methodist episcopate, the debate fell flat, so much so that the Methodist Council decided that the Conference of 2007 should not carry out its previously envisaged debate on the matter or make any decision so great had been the mixture of apathy and, in some quarters, downright hostility to any suggestion of an episcopate. At the level of circuits and districts the debate was often characterised by the trotting out of a bowdlerised and misconstrued doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, sometimes accompanied by the denunciation of a form of prelacy that may have characterised some Anglican bishops of yesteryear but is scarcely the model of any episcopate present in Britain today. To my great distress I heard a report of the debate that took place within the circuit in my native city where my father grew up. Fifty years ago, this was a circuit that supported the then Anglican-Methodist unity scheme. Now, if I have been correctly informed, it has rejected the logic of the decision of a previous generation, largely, so I am told, as the result of a presentation by a local preacher who argued that Methodism had got on perfectly well without bishops for two hundred years, so why adopt them now? All

¹ *Epworth Review*, Jan. 1986, pp. 24-9.

² Affirmation no 7 of the *Anglican-Methodist Covenant*.

³ In our Lima response to BEM. Thurian, M. (ed) *Churches Respond to BEM*, vol 2, p. 215.

this said in the context of a circuit that has many problems, which desperately needs to co-operate with local Anglicans in the interests of the common mission and which also was not responsive to the request of a struggling URC church to associate itself with the circuit.

All this raises the question of reception, not just of the commitments entered into on behalf of the Methodist people by the Conference but, even more importantly, of the essentially ecumenical ethos of Methodism and beyond that of the process of spiritual asceticism and conversion which was so particularly commended alike by our own William Shrewsbury and by the great French Catholic pioneer, the Abbe Paul Couturier⁴. Reception is, of course, a problem for every major communion, not just Methodism. Within all the western churches, the reception problem is compounded by sheer rampant internal pluralism, something that may be more immediately evident within the Anglican Communion but which is nevertheless part of the rest of us, Methodism not excluded. British Methodism is certainly considerably more plural in terms of worshipping styles and theological approach than it was in my youth. Tensions, of course, have always existed within it from the very beginning. As Richard Heitzenrater has pointed out, many of the Methodist people from the beginning came to cherish *exclusively* certain forms and style of church life that the Wesleys thought of rather as *complementary* to those of the traditional church rather than *supplanting* them. At the end of the Wesleys' lifetime, there was the tension between the so-called 'church' Methodists and those who were adamant that the achievement of Methodism could only be preserved by actions that necessarily involved separation from the Church of England. A little later came the tensions between the more formal Wesleyan styles and those of the Primitive Methodists and Bible Christians. There were the disputes over the theology and practice of ministerial leadership and church government. Finally, in more modern times, came new tensions resulting from the very variable reception of the liturgical and ecumenical movements and new styles of hymnody and worship songs. As Brian Beck stresses, Methodist pluralism extends even to the most local level⁵.

It is not surprising that in the maelstrom of influences that have hit Methodism there should be confusion amongst our people, compounded by the peculiar combination of vague goodwill with ignorance. It is not that the Methodist people are, in the main, unwilling to co-operate with others. It is more often that they fail to understand what the implications of real commitment to others may be. This point came out in the *Called To Be One Process* where Methodist responses showed considerable variation in understanding of the term unity in reconciled diversity⁶. The weakest of three interpretations seemed to assume that this meant no more than live and let live with churches being quite prepared to co-operate without receiving any challenge to change in any respect from anyone else! In the light of all this and the known difficulty of the reception process, it is not surprising that the ascetic demands of true ecumenism, so strongly expressed by Shrewsbury and Couturier and reiterated more

⁴ In this short paper, I cannot go into all the necessary detail to defend this thesis but I believe it can be illustrated from my work, most particularly my *Love Bade Me Welcome. A British Methodist Statement on the Church*, Epworth, 2002, but also from several articles, most particularly those relating to Shrewsbury and Couturier (*One in Christ*, 2000, pp. 365-377 and *Ecumenical Trends*, April 2003, pp. 8-13).

⁵ *Epworth Review*, Oct 2000. p.23. 'There are, in fact, many Methodisms. The view of the Conference is not necessarily accepted by the person in the pew or even in the pulpit. The Network and junior church leader may see things differently'.

⁶ The Called To Be One Process was an ecclesiological one, launched in the early 1990's by Churches Together in England. Each church was asked to respond to a series of questions about its understanding of church, in particular of unity, mission and the bonds of unity within its own ecclesial life. I was the Methodist representative on this group which produced the report *Called To be One*, (CTE, 1996) summarising the response and making a series of challenges to the different churches.

recently both by the Groupe des Dombes and the Princeton group, should have been imperfectly received within British Methodism⁷. The question remains, ‘What are we to do about it?’ At root, I continue to believe that the truths concerned should be eminently receivable by our practically minded Methodist people since they are simply the ecclesial and ecumenical application of the basic principles of individual Christian discipleship and living, to wit, humility in receiving, joy in preferring one another in honour and openness to the Holy Spirit who, as John Paul II reminded us, ‘makes surprising discoveries possible’⁸.

We do, however, need an adequate hermeneutic for our teaching on this and I look in particular to three sources that should be explored.

The first is the teaching of our founder, Mr Wesley, on the ecclesial location of Methodism. I recognise the difficulty of distilling consistent teaching from the fidgetty gentleman on horseback but I believe that some relevant teaching of his has been grossly overlooked in pots-Wesley Methodism and needs to be re-received⁹. In particular, I refer you to his sermon on *The laying of the foundation at City Road* which seems to encapsulate the general tenor of his understanding¹⁰.

‘Methodism, so-called, is the old religion. The religion of the Bible, the religion of the primitive Church, the religion of the Church of England. This old religion is none other than love, the love of God and of all mankind... This love is the great medicine of life, the never failing remedy of all evils in a disordered world. Where ever this is, there are virtue and happiness going hand in hand, there us humbleness of mind, gentleness, long-suffering, the whole image of God...

This is the religion of the Bible... This is the religion of the primitive Church, of the whole Church in the purest ages. It is clearly expressed... and even in the fourth century it is found in the works of Chrysostom, Basil and Ephrem Syrus and Macarius... And this is the religion of the Church of England... from the uniform tenor of her liturgy, and from numberless passages in her homilies’.

In this passage, several points stand out. The first is the claim that the faith of Methodism is essentially that of the Church across the ages. It is the old religion, but it is not a religion based upon the sort of biblical restorationism so often seen in elements of the radical reformation and more recent times. It is the religion that *persisted* in the developing early Church to which the fathers mentioned were witnesses as well as teachers. It is the essential perduring faith of the Church of England, however much it may have been forgotten or inadequately practiced therein at the time of the Methodist revival. Implicit in it is the assertion that, in principle, there was no need for a Methodism separate from the Church of England, indeed from the rest of the Universal Church; in the light of this one can specify the coming separation of Methodism as pragmatically and missiologically necessary according to

⁷ See *For The Conversion of the Churches* (ET, 1991) of the former and Braaten, C and Jenson, R (eds), *In One Body Through the Cross. The Princeton Proposal for Christian Unity*, Grand Rapids, 2003

⁸ This, as I show in my work on Shrewsbury, is his particular contribution to ecumenism, none the less real for the fact that, of course, the word did not exist in his time. His thought bears a relationship to that of Couturier that can only be seen as providential.

⁹ One element that remains, as far as I am aware, signally rarely quoted is his teaching that schism almost never answers its aims and almost always results in a loss of love and faith. See my citation of this in *Love bade me Welcome*, op cit, p.8. Worth contemplating also is Wesley’s remark that ‘God could have made us separate...but that would have been a direct contradiction of his plan in raising us up’. (sermon 107 in Abingdon edn)

¹⁰ Sermon CXXXII in the standard Abingdon edition. Text Matt 23:23, date 1777.

the exigencies of the time but as nevertheless un-ideal and not to be persisted in for all time! We note the emphasis upon the Christian virtues, so strongly taken up in the subsequent teaching of Shrewsbury. There is no desire to see Methodism as other than in essential relationship with the rest of the Universal Church and the fullness of its tradition and heritage. This forces us, I think, to see the excessive preference of the early Methodists for the particular means of grace generated within the revival over the tradition received from the Anglican, and indeed 'pre-Anglican' past, as essentially a distortion (appoint that I will revert to later). To the extent that modern Methodism *anywhere* does not relocate itself within the fullest and widest understanding of the total Christian tradition it betrays a key part of the total Wesleyan heritage. One can certainly argue that the full significance of Wesley's teaching could only be recovered within the social and theological context of the twentieth century Ecumenical Movement. However, that Methodism is *still* failing to receive it is cause for concern.

The second source that should be explored is that of the French Groupe des Dombes in their *For the Conversion of the Churches*¹¹. In this, they stress that the primary loyalty of the Christian is to Christ and to the one Universal Church that He established. They point out that all Christian discipleship is characterised by the need for constant repentance and conversion. As a result, Christian identity, both individual and ecclesial is always in the process of being redefined; indeed, they argue that an identity that does not change becomes frozen and dead. In considering the necessary distortions and deformations that have occurred in the life of separated churches, they make a useful distinction between *confessionality* by which they mean 'the positive dimension of an historic church with its specific spiritual and theological heritage' and *confessionalism* by which they mean an attitude of self-justification, of negativity towards other traditions and a failure to enter into real dialogue with them¹². Their appeal is naturally to the separated churches to discern what in their traditions is truly compatible with the Tradition of the whole Church and indeed an enrichment to it, a gift to be exchanged with others and what is negative and needs to be ditched as part of the ongoing conversion to which the Church and the churches are constantly called in order that the Church may be, to use Cardinal Kasper's useful distinction, *ecclesia semper purificanda*¹³.

A rigorous application of the Dombes distinction to British Methodism might prove painful but ultimately salutary. A key candidate for examination might be Methodist concepts and misunderstandings of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers which is sometimes interpreted as meaning that 'anyone can do anything' in the Church and is sometimes popularly supposed to conflict with any practice or establishment of episcopacy. Methodists have to learn to distinguish three things; firstly, the properly corporate nature of the understanding of the priesthood of all the faithful as taught in the New Testament and moreover received by the Universal Church, Anglicans and Roman Catholics included! Secondly, they can distinguish the proper assertion of it upon a more individualistic level as a reasonable defence of Wesley's teaching about the need for the constant use of *all* the means

¹¹ The Groupe des Dombes is an unofficial but highly influential ecumenical dialogue group, consisting of twenty co-opted Roman Catholic and twenty co-opted Protestant members (all francophone) and originating in 1937 as an initiative of Paul Couturier. Their unofficial status has allowed them to be bolder in making proposals for reconciliation than might otherwise have been the case. Catherine E. Clifford, *The Groupe des Dombes-A Dialogue of Conversion*, gives a comprehensive overview of their work.

¹² Clifford, *op cit*, p. 214.

¹³ It is interesting to note in this connection the teaching of the most recent British Methodist ecclesiological statement, *Called To Love and Praise* (1999), which talks of great discernment being needed in this connection. CLP, para 4.2.14. Note also in this context para 4.2.10 with its Dombes like warning that 'the past can, however, trap a church within denominationalism and make it a prisoner of its own cultural identity'.

of grace against an unwarrantedly narrowly exclusively sacramental understanding of the means and against the New Testament's emphasis upon the access of each believer to the father through the ministry of the Son and in the guidance of the Spirit. Finally, they need to accept that the proper understanding of the doctrine under the two heads already adduced in no way means that the emergence of episcopal government and succession within the early Church was some sort of fall from an originally egalitarian grace. There was always apostolic and teaching authority in the Church and these existed without prejudice to the relationship of the individual believer with the Lord but as instruments of communion in faith binding the whole Church together. That they came to be accepted as normative almost universally for about fourteen centuries and then still held as such by most Christians since the Reformation is not necessarily an unfortunate accident of history but may rather be in the guidance of Providence a vital sign and means of unity, though, in the words of BEM and Porvoo, not always a guarantee. Prejudices inherited from past eras of Methodist conflict with other traditions now need to be set aside in favour of a more objective consideration of the work of the Spirit across the entire and complex history of the whole Church¹⁴.

Finally, there is the useful distinction that Yves Congar makes in discussing catholicity, between essential loyalty to the Tradition as already received in the past and openness to that which comes to us from the future and the leading of the Spirit into fuller and, ultimately, into all truth¹⁵. This seems to me to cohere both with a theologoumenon of George Tavard that the Church progressively in the totality of its life 'images the Kingdom'¹⁶. It also coheres with our Methodist understanding of catholicity, with the ethos of a tradition in which our founder encouraged us to 'press onto full salvation' and with Rex Kissack's valuable emphasis upon the search for unity as the ecclesiological consequence of the doctrine of Christian perfection¹⁷. It also, of course, coheres with the understanding of the Groupe des Dombes that a static identity is ultimately doomed. In the process of recovering such an holistic vision of its role within the Church Universal, Methodism will recover elements of the wider vision that is present in the thinking and hymnody of the Wesleys but which, as elsewhere in the later protestant world, have tended to be obscured by later individualism, whether of the conservative evangelical or liberal varieties.

The key question of reception remains. If the points I have made are valid, how can we attempt to ensure their reception in a church that has apparently gone cool on ecumenism? The recent international Roman Catholic-Methodist dialogue report *The Grace Given You in Christ* majored on ideas for reception more thoroughly perhaps than has been the case in any other bilateral dialogue to date. Its specific proposals for the developing Catholic-Methodist relationship arguably need to be backed up by a more general reception of the ecumenical ethos and mindset among the Methodist people.

We need, I would suggest, a World Methodist Council declaration which would hopefully be endorsed by all the partner conferences to the effect that ecumenism is a task for every

¹⁴ A matter I addressed in my paper for the Bose conference on the Holy Spirit and Ecumenism in 2002 and in which I argued that what may have been necessary for Methodism in the 1790's in England was no longer necessary now; indeed, the very reverse, receiving the sign of the episcopal succession in very altered circumstances might now be the 'providential way' for contemporary Methodism

¹⁵ Congar, Y. *Dialogue between Christians*, 1964, p.349

¹⁶ One in Christ, 1988, p.110 in his article 'Tradition as koinonia'.

¹⁷ Kissack, R. *Church or No Church*, London, 1964, p. 146 (a key work in our ecclesiological heritage)

Christian¹⁸. We would need this to be backed up at the most local levels and so basic ecumenical education needs to form part of our membership preparation, lay training and local preacher training courses. I have to say that the prospects for this are not as bright as I would like them to be. When I suggested to those responsible for lay training and local/preacher/lay reader training within the Bristol district and diocese that there should be some ecumenical material within their schemes, I was greeted with less than enthusiasm. I intend to take the matter now to the local intermediate church leaders' meeting which I attend in my capacity as County Ecumenical Officer for Bristol.

Geoffrey asked us all to prepare a few questions arising out of our papers. Mine would be these.

1. How far is the situation I have described as obtaining in British Methodism paralleled elsewhere?
2. What can be done within Methodism to encourage the healing of memories in respect of our less than perfect relations with other particular churches in the past (particularly perhaps Anglicans in England and Roman Catholics in some countries where Methodism is a tiny minority church)?
3. How can we encourage our people in true ecumenical humility so that they always look to the faults and needs of Methodism rather than to the faults and defects of others? How do we, in our time, encourage them to look, as Shrewsbury did, always for the good in other traditions, acknowledging our need of them?
4. How far are our ecumenical problems as Methodists due to a failure to realise the sacramental side of our catholic and Wesleyan vocation as well as the evangelical one?

¹⁸ This would, of course, parallel the declaration at the beginning of *Unitatis Redintegratio* section 5, of Vatican II, to the effect that 'concern for unity restoring pertains to the whole Church, clergy and faithful alike; It extends to everyone according to the potential of each...'