

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF METHODIST THOUGHT AND PRACTICE
FOR CONFESSING THE APOSTOLIC FAITH

Group 6: Contemporary Methodist Theology and Doctrinal Consensus

An introductory paper

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When Methodists discuss matters of doctrine, and what is involved in confessing the apostolic faith, increasingly this is done in company with others —nationally and internationally through representatives in various dialogues, but also locally where, for example, ministerial education is done ecumenically and where groups of Christians worship and witness together. More than that, Methodists around the world find themselves working not only with other churches but with other than church groups for the renewal of society. That too is a confessing act, no less (perhaps more) than verbal affirmation using an agreed formula, and so invites theological reflection on how far and in what direction such action should go. Therefore a discussion of 'contemporary Methodist theology and doctrinal consensus' needs to proceed not only by looking at documents of official Methodist and ecumenical origin submitted for our response but also by considering what contemporary Methodist theologians discover as they work in their own wider-than-Methodist cultural and social milieu about what Methodism can contribute and how it may legitimately be challenged.

Given the time constraints of our Oxford meeting, emphasis in Group 6 may well have to be given to the former task, viz. formulating responses to the particular WMC and WCC documents that are being circulated, especially since another group will have as its agenda economic and social issues. Nevertheless it is of fundamental theological importance to

recognize that such a division of topics is no more than an organizational convenience, and we should at least initiate in our group some discussion that takes seriously the inseparability of confessing the faith in word and in action, and the need to reflect with theological rigour upon both in our search for doctrinal consensus. We should therefore take the opportunity to let each other know what we are discovering about Methodism's capacity to contribute to and learn from ecumenical discussion and shared social action in diverse parts of the world.

What follows then is an attempt to show how a distinctively Wesleyan theological motif, viz. prevenient grace, affirms continuity between doctrinal matters and ethical issues, shedding light as it does on both a classical doctrinal debate and an ongoing ethical concern. This is offered in the hope that other participants in Group 6 will provide examples from their theological and social context of the place of Methodist thought and practice in confessing the faith.

To the basic ethical question, how do I decide what I ought to do? or, what criteria are to be used in deciding moral issues? answers have traditionally been given that fall broadly speaking under two headings. First, various forms of Natural Law theory have been advocated (often identified as 'Catholic'). With variations, these have held in common that God has, in creation, ordered the world according to his rational will. What conforms to that will is good, what does not is evil. Human beings, made in the image of God, are rational and therefore have positive insight into God's rational will for the world; they share, as Aquinas put it, in God's own judgement of good and evil.

To this the Reformers said a resounding 'no' because they maintained that such an approach does not take adequate account of the Fall. Such rational ethical judgements are now impossible because in their view the fall has distorted human capacity to discern God's will in the created order. In some versions it has so distorted the whole created order that the very basis of natural law has now been lost. In our own theological era an echoing 'Nein' came from those who denied any analogy of being

between Creator and creature, emphasizing that the gulf that separates the two is ontological, not simply the result of human sinfulness. Consequently the gap which has both ontological and epistemological dimensions can be bridged only from God's side by his gracious initiative in Jesus Christ the god-man. All knowledge of God, therefore, and all true knowledge of the world and its affairs derive from God's unprecedented action in Jesus Christ.

So the second type of answer to the question of moral criteria, sometimes labelled 'ethics of revelation', claims that all our knowledge of what we ought to do derives from this same unique revelation in Jesus Christ. Reason, enlightened though it may be by faith, still has for its data not the way things were ordered in creation but how they are re-created in this once-for-all event, an event of salvation-history within the wider world history (or, in the existentialist version, in our own personal history.)

To these alternative approaches of natural law or revelation-ethics Wesley provides another option. On the one hand he clearly shares the Reformers' view of the drastic consequences of the fall and original sin, the rebellion in which we all participate that leads to a state of pride and idolatry:

Man was created looking directly to God, as his last end; but having fallen into sin, he fell off from God, and turned into himself. Now, this infers a total apostasy and universal corruption in man; for where the last end is changed, there can be no real goodness. And this is the case of all men in their natural state: they seek not God but themselves...Here is a "three-fold cord" against Heaven, not easily broken - a blind mind, a perverse will disordered affections. (The Doctrine of Original Sin, according to Scripture, Reason and Experience.)

That is the state of all of us by nature, suffering as it were a double infirmity - bound will and blinded eyes. Dead in our sins, we lack the freedom to opt for the salvation that God offers; blind to God's purpose we lack the capacity to know what he wills even were we free to choose it.

The Reformers saw this as having two corollaries. The first, pre-destination. They argued that since only some are saved, this cannot be because some freely choose God's saving grace while others do not, because no-one has that freedom. The saved must therefore be the elect so pre-

destined by God. The second, revelation-ethics. Since fallen nature retains no signs of God's purpose that can clearly be recognized by human reason, our knowledge of God's will can begin nowhere except with faith's discernment of the Christ-event.

Neither of these conclusions is necessary, however, if one follows Wesley in his insistence that none of us is now in a mere state of nature. God has acted in Jesus Christ who died for all, and the objective aspect of this universal atoning event is 'prevenient grace' for all. Not itself guaranteeing salvation, this grace nevertheless restores what was lost in the fall - both freedom to respond in faith to saving grace, and capacity to discern God's will for his creation.

Now the importance of the first aspect of this, addressing as it does the classical theological dispute about predestination, has been widely recognized.¹ To understand the universal benefit of the atonement as prevenient grace that restores freedom to respond in faith endorses the view of radical sinfulness as 'bound will' without having to deny the universality of God's grace. But what of the second aspect of prevenient grace, the one that addresses the basic ethical question? This has largely been ignored but is clearly significant, providing as it does a way of holding to the other feature of fallenness, 'blinded eyes', without having to reject all aspects of natural law.

Participants in ecumenical discussions of which I have been part² have found this second implication of prevenient grace of considerable value because it provides a way of maintaining continuity between God's will made known in the natural order and his saving act in Jesus Christ without minimizing the consequences of evil. It is therefore worth spelling out in a little more detail Wesley's argument at this point.

Against the contention that our hearts are so hardened and our eyes blinded that we do not know whether our actions conform to the orderly purpose God built into creation, Wesley argued:

Allowing that all the souls of men are dead in sin by nature this excuses none, seeing there is no man, unless he has quenched the

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1. See, for example, Colin Williams, John Wesley's Theology Today (London, Epworth, 1960), where he sets out what was involved in Wesley's dispute with Calvinists, indicating the importance of Wesley's view for ecumenical discussion.
 2. Methodist/Catholic dialogue in Australia, and at international level, and Methodist/Reformed discussions.

Spirit, that is wholly void of the grace of God. No man is entirely destitute of what is vulgarly called natural conscience. But this is not natural: it is more properly termed, preventing grace... every one, unless he be one of the small number whose conscience is seared with a hot iron, feels more or less uneasy when he acts contrary to the light of his own conscience. (Sermon On working out our own Salvation.)

There need therefore be no antithesis between natural law and ethics of revelation, for prevenient grace restores in everyone the capacity, through conscience, to know something of God's purpose for the whole creation, and what is thus known is consistent with what is known in Christ.

But by introducing the role of conscience here, has Wesley merely reverted to the ethics of revelation in a dangerously individualistic and subjective form? Is he encouraging those who claim that God speaks directly to their individual conscience, telling them in a private and detailed way that is not open to challenge what is to be done? Wesley has often been enlisted in that cause, but that is not the way he understood conscience at all. He defined it as 'that faculty whereby we are at once conscious of our own thoughts, words and actions; and of their merit and demerit, of their being both good and bad, and consequently deserving either praise or blame.' (Sermon, On Conscience.) In his view then, conscience does not give detailed instruction about what course to follow in every given circumstance. It provides instead the capacity to know that there is a difference between good and evil, and to grasp broad moral principles, such as that it is right to do to others as we would have them do to us.

From his sermon On Conscience four additional features emerge:

- (1) That conscience is universal but not 'natural', ie. it is part of God's supernatural gift of grace to all.
- (2) That conscience is not itself sufficient to conform us to God's will, but reinforces the fact of our sinfulness since we can no longer claim ignorance.
- (3) That conscience is recognized by Christians as a gift of the Holy Spirit, keeping us sensitive to the will of God:

If you desire to have your conscience always quick to discern, and faithful to accuse you or excuse you, be sure to obey it at all events...Whatever it directs you to do according to the word of God do, however grievous to flesh and blood. Whatever it forbids,

if the prohibition be grounded on the word of God, see that you do it not; however pleasing it may be to flesh and blood.

This phrase 'according to the word of God' emphasizes

(4) That conscience does not stand alone. It is moral sensibility informed, for Christians, by Scripture, reason, tradition and experience.

For non-Christians conscience is informed by reason which can give reliable albeit incomplete guidance.

The above rather sketchy outline indicates the theological basis in Methodist theology, insofar as it follows Wesley, for maintaining some continuity between the conclusions any conscientious exercise of reason may draw and those of a conscience conformed to Christ. It may be helpful to conclude by seeing how this works out in a specific social issue, of just as much concern now as then, viz. the attitude toward armed conflict.

It was in the same treatise on Original Sin referred to above that Wesley spelled this out in some detail. After discussing some of the evidence for the existence of original sin, he goes on:

There is a still greater and more undeniable proof that the very foundations of all things, civil and religious, are utterly out of course in the Christian as well as the heathen world. There is a still more horrid reproach to the Christian name, yea, to the name of man, to all reason and humanity. There is war in the world...War between men. War between Christians. I mean between those who bear the name of Christ and profess to walk as he also walked. Now who can reconcile war, I will not say [only] to religion, but to any degree of reason or common sense.

Note the appeal here to both what Christians should conclude from their knowledge of Christ and what any exercise of reason should infer. Wesley then goes on to list the causes and so-called justifications of war, rejecting them with increasing irony:

A crew, driven by a storm they know not whither, at length make land and go ashore; they are entertained with kindness. They give the country a new name; set up a stone or a rotten plank for a memorial; murder a dozen natives and bring away a couple by force. Here commences a new right of dominion; ships are sent and the natives driven out or destroyed. And this is done to civilize and convert a barbarous and idolatrous people.

But whatever the cause, let us calmly and impartially consider the thing itself. What must mankind be before such a thing as was could ever be known or thought of upon the earth! How shocking, how inconceivable a want must there have been of common understanding as well as common humanity...which runs through the whole race of mankind.

But although Wesley clearly deplores war as arising from human depravity, contrary both to God's will revealed in Christ and to rational conclusions about justice and the welfare of humanity, Wesley does not here face the ongoing question - given that humans do have recourse to war, sinful and irrational though the situation may be, what should Christians do who find themselves caught up in it?

Wesley did, of course, have to face that question, not least in relation to the struggle between Britain and her American colonies. I am not at all clear about the extent to which his changing attitude toward the American cause was actually controlled by conscience informed by Scripture, reason, tradition and experience!³ But uncertainty on that historical point makes no less urgent our own need to consider how the faith is to be confessed today where the threat of war is all-pervasive, and where armed conflict may be universally deplored but is nevertheless seen by some as deplorable necessity. Can there be any consensus stimulated by Methodist teaching and practice on that issue of life and death? Is there any common ground on which to stand and confess the faith we live by?

3. For an interesting discussion of this issue by a Baptist scholar see Morris West, "Methodists and Baptists in Eighteenth Century Bristol" in Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society, vol XLIV, Dec. 1984