

What Methodists believe: an exploration of normative and lived theologies

Philip Turner
Doctoral candidate, Durham University, UK
Presbyter in the Methodist Church of Great Britain

As someone who was raised in the company of Methodists, and has raised my own children in different Methodist churches, finding out what Methodists believe is an exploration of my own identity. As a presbyter in the Methodist Church of Great Britain it is also part of my continuing journey to understand my vocation. Yet the exploration is also political in nature because it assumes that there is a person, or a group of people, who know what Methodists believe. That someone has this power is not contentious. My experience is that British Methodists willingly confer this power on different people, for example, on Charles Wesley (particularly in his hymns), on the Methodist Conference, on Methodist Ministers or on the leadership of their local church. The issue, then, is not whether someone has power but, perhaps as the Brexit debate has shown, to whom power is given. Who do Methodists give, to quote Helen Cameron and others writing on normative theology, that ‘authority which may even stand to correct, as well as to inform, operant and espoused theologies’?¹

The most persuasive answer is provided by the doctrinal standards as set out in Section 2 of the Deed of Union (and reprinted as an appendix to this paper), composed to bring together in 1932 the Wesleyan Methodist, the Primitive Methodist and the United Methodist Churches. Those who enabled that union asserted these doctrinal standards as normative. Furthermore, the way the Methodist Church Act of 1976 affirmed those standards suggests that a previous generation confirmed them as normative. Moreover, the amendments of 1995 and 2012, primarily to recognise the diaconal order of ministry, suggest that my own generation has upheld the authority of the doctrinal standards. This does not

¹ Cameron, Helen, Deborah Bhatti, Catherine Duce, James Sweeney and Clare Watkins, *Talking about God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2010), p.54.

mean that all Methodists see the doctrinal standards as normative. It is likely that many British Methodists are unaware that they even exist. However, for those seeking a consensus on what is British Methodism's theological authority, I suggest that we would be hard pressed to find a more persuasive expression of what is normative. Yet, highlighting these standards does not enable a definitive answer to what Methodists believe but presents a series of signposts to help contemporary Methodists discover what is normative for their church.

The first signpost that appears in the doctrinal standards is the importance of relationships with other Christians. The doctrinal standards begin (lines 1 and 2), 'The Methodist Church claims and cherishes its place in the Holy Catholic Church which is the Body of Christ.' No geographical limit, such as 'British Christians', is given to this body. No political limit, such as 'inclusive' or 'traditional' ways of doing church, is given to this body. In addition, the way the second sentence asserts that Methodism 'rejoices in the inheritance of the apostolic faith' (line 2) suggests that it is not only our relationship with the contemporary church that is important, but also our relationship with the historical Christian church. In this broad company, British Methodists begin their journey.

The second signpost appears in the second sentence that Methodism 'loyally accepts the fundamental principles of the historic creeds and of the Protestant Reformation.' The way the doctrinal standards describe Methodism in lines 4 and 5 as 'raised up to spread scriptural holiness through the land by the proclamation of the evangelical faith'; in lines 7 and 8 that the 'doctrines of the evangelical faith which Methodism has held [...] are based upon the divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures'; and, in line 9, that this revelation is the 'supreme rule of faith and practice' suggest that British Methodism relates to the reformation through the way it prioritised the theological authority of scripture. This is affirmed by John Wesley — Methodism's key founding father — who described himself as

‘a man of one book’,² a Methodist as ‘one who lives according to the method laid down in the Bible’ and his mission to spread ‘scriptural holiness’ as resulting from a detailed study of the scriptures.³ The doctrinal standards continue to affirm the significance of the Bible in stating, in lines 10 and 11, that Methodism’s ‘evangelical doctrines [...] are contained in Wesley’s Notes on the New Testament and the first four volumes of his sermons.’⁴ Wesley’s Sermons are ‘soaked in scripture’⁵ and I have noticed in Wesley’s Notes how he challenges parts of the church which he perceives as operating in an unscriptural way.⁶

Asserting scripture as authoritative does not make Methodists unique. Across Christian churches, scripture is authoritative.⁷ Neither does asserting scripture as authoritative limit Methodists to only reading the Bible.⁸ What it does mean is that understanding scripture — and in particular ‘scriptural holiness’ — is Methodism’s priority. It requires the greatest effort, shown in the way Wesley refused to trust the King James Version of the Bible, but instead in his Notes provided his own translation, using the best scholarly tools of his time.⁹ It also requires unceasing effort, shown in the way the doctrinal standards refrain from stating which edition of the Notes are authoritative, despite Wesley

² *The Works of John Wesley*, volume 1, ed. by Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), p.105.

³ Hooker, Morna D., ‘Scriptural Holiness: The Wesley’s Use of Scripture’, *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, 50 (2015), pp.7-24 (pp.11 and 24).

⁴ John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* (repr. London: Epworth Press, 1976), hereinafter: ‘Notes’. Sermons 1-10, 12, 16-19, 21-42, 44-50 in *The Works of John Wesley*, vols 1-2 ed. by Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984–1985), hereinafter: ‘Sermons’.

⁵ Hooker, p.7. Though there is an obvious bias towards the New Testament.

⁶ In a number of places, mostly in his comments on Revelation, Wesley takes considerable opportunity to write against the papacy, for example, linking the Pope in Revelation 13.1 to ‘the wild beast’ (*Notes*, p.1000-7). See also Wesley’s comments on 2 Thessalonians 2.3-4 (*Notes*, p.766).

⁷ The World Council of Churches describes itself as ‘a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the scriptures’. World Council of Churches, ‘What is the World Council of Churches?’ <<http://www.oikoumene.org/en/about-us>> [accessed 22 June 2017]

⁸ ‘It is estimated that John Wesley read 600 volumes and authored or edited 400 publications.’ James R. Roy, ‘Wesley: Man of a Thousand Books and a Book’ in *Religion in Life*, 8 (1939) cited by William M. Arnett, ‘John Wesley and the Bible’, *Wesleyan Theological Review*, 3 (1968), 3-9 (p.4). See also Rupert Davies, ‘The People called Methodists - 1. ‘Our Doctrines’ in *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain, Volume One* ed. by Rupert Davies and Gordon Rupp (London: Epworth Press, 1965), pp.145-79 (p.148).

⁹ Professor George Croft Cell found that between half and three quarters of Wesley’s deviations from the King James Version pre-empted the changes made by the Revised Version published in 1881. Thomas C. Oden, *Doctrinal Standards in the Wesleyan Tradition* rev. edn. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), p.93. See also Francis Glasson, ‘Wesley’s New Testament Reconsidered’, *Epworth Review*, 10 (1983), 28-34 (p.28).

producing many editions, with each new edition offering a more careful revision of the text.¹⁰

An encounter with scripture, then, is not a one-off event but a continuing engagement in order to obtain ‘divine revelation’ (line 8) using the best methods that are available for each context and generation.¹¹

Walking with Christians past and present, near us and around the world, Methodists study scripture for its meaning, yet this search for meaning is not merely for accessing knowledge. The third signpost that appears is the desire for transformation. This can be seen in the way that the doctrinal standards talk about Wesley’s Notes and Sermons which are said to be, in lines 13 to 16,

not intended to impose a system of formal or speculative theology [... but to] secure loyalty to the fundamental truths of the gospel of redemption and ensure the continued witness of the Church to the realities of the Christian experience of salvation.

In his Sermons and in his Notes Wesley’s aim is ‘the plain truth for plain people’.¹² This is because Wesley saw the transformation of a person’s character — ‘the springboard of our words and actions’¹³ — as the heart-beat of scripture and viewed any preaching without that focus as ‘useless’.¹⁴

Transformation is personal, but also communal. The doctrinal standards direct Methodists to their common memory: the church ‘ever remembers that in the providence of God Methodism was raised up to spread scriptural holiness’ (lines 4 and 5). This led to the claim that ‘what is really distinctive about Methodism is not particular bits and pieces of

¹⁰ Oden, p.94.

¹¹ Langford argues that, in making scripture primary, Methodism affirms the role of the Holy Spirit and emphasizes the significance of a community ‘which shapes, forms, criticizes and enhances biblical interpretation’. He also argues that this emphasis led to Methodists having made a ‘major contribution to ecumenical Christianity through its biblical scholarship’. See Thomas A. Langford, *Methodist Theology* (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 1998), p.53 and 56-7. See also Rupert Davies, ‘Since 1932’ in *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain, Volume Three* ed. by Rupert Davies, A. Raymond George and Gordon Rupp (London: Epworth Press, 1983), pp.362-90 (p.367).

¹² See *Notes*, p.6 and *Sermons*, p.v.

¹³ Randy L. Maddox, ‘The rule of Christian faith, practice and hope: John Wesley and the Bible’, *Epworth Review*, 38 (2011), 6-37. p.32.

¹⁴ Richard P. Heitzenrater, ‘John Wesley’s Principles and Practice of Preaching’, *Methodist History*, 27 (1999), 89-106, p.101.

doctrine and practice [...] but rather a particular history.’¹⁵ Yet the desire for transformation expressed in the doctrinal standards is not only for the individual Christian, nor only for the church community, but for the whole of Great Britain, because ‘Methodism was raised up to spread scriptural holiness *through the land*’ (line 5, my italics). This national transformation results from Methodists witnessing to ‘the realities of the Christian experience of salvation’ (lines 16 to 17), therefore national transformation results from personal and ecclesial transformation.

Here then we see the precise nature of transformation. Normative theology begins by calling British Methodists into a relationship with other Christians; to engage continually and rigorously with scripture; and to work for personal, ecclesial and national transformation. Yet these are precursors to the fourth signpost presented in the doctrinal standards: the vocation of holiness. This vocation is not primarily about a particular history: the focus is not that Methodism was raised up in the past, but the belief that in every generation Methodism is ‘raised up to spread scriptural holiness’ evidenced in the way the doctrinal standards in line 6 speaks of an ‘unfaltering resolve to be true to its divinely appointed mission’.¹⁶ In this way British Methodism asserts theological purpose as much as theological content. It sees the church in its contemporary setting faithfully interpreting and living out the scriptures as part of the message of God’s holiness and the ‘gospel of redemption’ (lines 15-16). This may not be a distinctively Christian approach, but it is a deeply Christian approach.

¹⁵ Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* 2nd edn. (London: Epworth, 1992), p.553. In contrast to how he directed Methodists in America, for Methodists in Britain Wesley did not prepare Articles of Religion. As a consequence, nowhere in the constitutional documents of the British Methodist Church are doctrines ‘ever closely defined in terms of formulae, lists, definitions or any other kind of statement of faith to which Methodists have to give assent.’ Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes, *A Lamp to my Feet And a Light to my Path: The Nature of Authority and the Place of the Bible in the Methodist Church* (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 1998), p.27.

¹⁶ Perhaps the reason why Wesley’s Notes and Sermons are normative while his journals are not is in order to prevent Methodism being stuck in a particular moment in time, leading Abraham to argue, ‘Important though the life of Wesley is [...] it does not count as doctrinal standards in any shape or form.’ William J. Abraham, *Waking from Doctrinal Amnesia: The Healing of Doctrine in The United Methodist Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), p.36.

This vocation shapes the way Methodists perceive ‘the office of Christian ministry’ which ‘depends upon the call of God who bestows the gifts of the Spirit’ (lines 25 and 26). Here the doctrinal standards suggest that Methodists know who holds office, according to lines 26 and 27, by the ‘grace and the fruit which indicate those who [...God] has chosen.’ For a church ‘raised up to spread scriptural holiness throughout the land’ (lines 4 and 5), this must mean that its ministers are, at the very least, noted for pursuing holiness. In addition, the mention in lines 36 and 37 of ‘All Methodist preachers’ (rather than ministers generally, or presbyters specifically) ‘are authorised to minister in holy things’, suggests that, of all activities, ‘the proclamation of the evangelical faith’ (line 5) is an activity particularly radiant with holiness.

While the vocation of holiness may be highlighted in the ‘office of Christian ministry’ (lines 25 and 26), the doctrinal standards assert the call to holiness as not the responsibility of ‘a particular order or class of persons’ (lines 32 and 33). Presbyters ‘hold no priesthood differing in kind from that which is common to all the Lord’s people’ (line 20). Rather, as a whole Methodism shares in the vocation of holiness. This is what enables the ‘continued witness of the church to the realities of the Christian experience of salvation.’ (lines 16 and 17).

These four signposts feel fresh to me. I do not mean that they are new. Relationships with other Christians, scripture, transformation and the vocation of holiness resonate with Outler’s quadrilateral of tradition, scripture, experience and reason.¹⁷ Yet as signposts they are, by implication, directional and, in their flow, suggest a crescendo towards holiness as the ultimate purpose. This crescendo is magnified further in Wesley’s Sermons and Notes which

¹⁷ Outler, Albert C., ‘The Wesleyan Quadrilateral in John Wesley’, *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, 20 (1985), 7-18.

presents humanity as created to be holy,¹⁸ God's desire for humanity to be holy again¹⁹ and holiness as the means to human happiness,²⁰ which is particularly striking given the contemporary decline of mental health in Britain.²¹ Yet, as someone who was raised in British Methodism, who has raised their children within local Methodist churches and who is a presbyter ordained to uphold the normative theology of the Methodist Church, why do these signposts feel fresh? It is not that the language of holiness is new: it is present in hymns, liturgy and in the recent addresses of Presidents of Conference.²² Neither are Methodists

¹⁸ For example, see Wesley's sermon on Romans 4.5, 'Justification by Faith' in *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 1 - Sermons 1:1-33* ed. by Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), p.184. 'In the image of God was man made; holy as He that created him is holy; merciful as the Author of all is merciful; perfect as his Father in heaven is perfect. As God is love, so man, dwelling in love, dwelt in God, and God in him. God made him to be an 'image of His own eternity,' an incorruptible picture of the God of glory. He was accordingly pure, as God is pure, from every spot of sin. He knew not evil in any kind or degree, but was inwardly and outwardly sinless and undefiled. He 'loved the Lord his God with all his heart, and with all his mind, and soul, and strength.' See also the way the Levitical command 'Be holy' is important for Wesley. For example, For Wesley's Sermons see 'Justification by faith', in *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 1 - Sermons 1:1-33* ed. by Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), p.184; 'The Righteousness of Faith' in *Works, Volume 1*, p.205; 'The Marks of the New Birth' in *Works, Volume 1*, p.422; 'Upon the Lord's Sermon on the Mount: Discourse the First' in *Works, Volume 1*, p.530; 'Upon the Lord's Sermon on the Mount: Discourse the Fifth' in *Works, Volume 1*, p.555; 'Upon the Lord's Sermon on the Mount: Discourse the Seventh' in *Works, Volume 1*, p.610; 'Upon the Sermon on the Mount: Discourse the Ninth' in *Works, Volume 1*, p.648; 'Upon the Lord's Sermon on the Mount: Discourse the Thirteenth' in *Works, Volume 1*, p.690; Sermon upon the 'Christian Perfection' in *Works, Volume 2*, p.111; 'Satan's Devices' in *Works, Volume 2*, p.151; and 'Heaviness through Manifold Temptations' in *Works, Volume 2*, p.224. For Wesley's Notes see comment on Romans 11.16 in *Notes*, p.566; I Corinthians 12.34 in *Notes*, p.607; I Thessalonians 4.8 in *Notes*, p.759; Revelation 3.12 in *Notes*, p.952..

¹⁹ For example, see Wesley's sermon on Romans 10.5-8, 'The Righteousness of Faith' in *Works, Volume 1*, p.205. 'That he should be pure in heart, even as God is pure; perfect as his Father in heaven was perfect; that he should love the Lord his God with all his heart, with all his soul, with all his mind, and with all his strength; that he should love every soul which God had made, even as God had loved him: that by this universal benevolence, he should dwell in God (who is love), and God in him: that he should serve the Lord his God with all his strength, and in all things singly aim at His glory.'

²⁰ I have traced 25 different occasions in his Notes and 10 occasions in his Sermons where Wesley connects the word 'holy' or 'holiness' with 'happy' or 'happiness'. For example, there is a 'happiness that naturally and directly results from holiness' (Comment on Matthew 5.3. *Notes*, p.30) and 'without inward and as well as outward holiness you cannot be happy even in this world' ('The New Birth' in *Works, Volume 2*, p.200. See also comment on Galatians 4.9 and Ephesians 2.12 in *Notes*, pp.691 and 708). Of course, happiness is not equated with sensual pleasure but includes struggle, as many of Wesley's sermon titles indicate. For example, 'Wandering Thoughts', 'Satan's Devices', 'The Wilderness State', 'Heaviness through Manifold Temptations' and 'Self-Denial'.

²¹ For example, see Mental Health Foundation, *Fundamental Facts about Mental Health 2016* (London: Mental Health Foundation, 2016) <<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/file/2518/download?token=RU6lzcSK>> [accessed 24 July 2018]

²² For example, Kenneth Howcroft in 2014. Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes, 'Back to the Bible, forward to the world: Inaugural address of the Methodist President' <<http://www.methodist.org.uk/news-and-events/news-releases/back-to-the-bible-forward-to-the-world-inaugural-address-of-the-methodist-president>> [accessed 8 June 2016] and Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes, 'New Methodist President Calls for Holiness' <<http://www.methodist.org.uk/news-and-events/news-releases/new-methodist-president-calls-for-holiness>> [accessed 16 June 2017].

distant to the holiness of God. Rather, my research shows that, despite holiness being Methodism's purpose, British Methodists do not easily use the language of holiness to describe God's saving ministry for and within the world.

Between 2014 and 2016 I engaged in multi-mode research within Village Road Methodist Church where I had pastoral charge.²³ Over 100 people explored holiness in youth and house groups. Moreover, I explored holiness in depth with 22 people who were in a team that prepared material for the house groups, in a Fellowship Band and in hour long semi-structured interviews. My findings illuminate the way Methodists struggle with a vocation of holiness.

First, while the language of holiness is not new, most participants could not recall an occasion when holiness was highlighted in church life. Bernie acknowledged, 'I suppose it is a word that I've grown up with in the church and never really stopped to think, "What does this mean?"' Trevor commented, 'It is a word that I've always been aware of and it is a word that I vaguely think I knew where it was pointing, but I've never really delved into it before and really thought about what it actually means.' Robert said, 'I think [our exploration...] was probably the first time I'd done anything which was concentrated around the question.' In addition, though 58 per cent of interviewees had received formal theological training, only one could recall an opportunity in their training to explore holiness. My research supports the assertion of one President of the Methodist Conference who confided that holiness is 'the great un-talked about for a long time [...] not a serious topic of conversation'.²⁴

Second, participants at Village Road resisted holiness terminology. This was not because the terminology was unfamiliar, but rather because it was all too familiar in ways that ran against British Methodist normative theologies. Edie summarised,

I don't think it is used an awful lot by the general public [...] by the general people it is almost like, 'Oh Holy Joes', almost got a bit of a negative connotation, either that or holy is something that is set

²³ To preserve anonymity, I do not use the real name of the church or the real names of those within the church.

²⁴ A personal telephone conversation in spring 2014.

apart over there and it's a holy book or a holy place and it is detached [...] disconnected [...] The word holiness, it is a bit archaic I think [...] If we are talking about sharing our faith with other people and start using the word holy it isn't really that helpful.

The difficulty lies in people's experiences. For example, Cathy realised that she instinctively selected the word 'holiness' to describe behaviour that was not 'normal'.

When [my daughters] left sixth form and went to uni they both went to Christian Union and that was the point where they both stopped going to church. It is funny I should say this because I've never given this a lot of thought, but the people weren't normal [...] I'm saying that because the word holiness reminded me of that. Have you ever heard it said that somebody can be so heavenly focused that they are no earthly good?

Cathy is able to articulate a normative theology of holiness but notices the dissonance between this and her operant theology.²⁵ Yet it is her 'tacit knowing', which links being holy to being 'no earthly good', that overshadows a normative theology of holiness.²⁶

Third, participants at village road saw holiness as being out of reach for ordinary people. This was illustrated in a house group of mainly older women where one person boldly asserted that there are not many saints, and that she was not a saint, because no one is 'good enough'. In a different group, an older lady recalled when she had been called a 'saint' for doing something kind, but she had taken offence because she did not see how doing one good deed made her a saint. These instinctive responses illuminate the perceived chasm between daily life and holiness. Moreover, it implies a disbelief in God's power to bridge that chasm, despite all that may have been said in churches, for example, about the incarnation; Christ's death and resurrection; and the giving of the Holy Spirit.

Fourth, participants at village road were significantly influenced by relationships. Some relationships had a positive effect on their Christian faith. Other relationships did not. Denise told me,

²⁵ For the original seminal work on cognitive dissonance, see Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1957).

²⁶ Gourlay offers a helpful review of the literature on 'tacit knowing'. See Stephen Gourlay, 'Knowing as semiosis: steps towards a reconceptualization of "tacit knowledge"' in *Organizations as Knowledge Systems: Knowledge, Learning and Dynamic Capabilities* ed. by Haridimos Tsoukas and Nikolaos Mylonopoulos (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) pp.86-105.

I feel I ought to use the word 'holy' in relation to the church, but I don't feel I can [...] I do know some people I'd describe as holy. Very holy people. But having worked for the church and being part of the church, I think I've just seen too many flaws and too many difficult times, to see the church holy.

For Vince, it is not so much the experience of a positive or negative relationship, but the absence of a meaningful relationship. He told me

What it takes is [...] make myself vulnerable [...] and to deliberately say what are we going to do about it and how are we going to help each other [...] There are a couple of people that I tried that with since we've been here and it's just not taken. It's just not taken. If I'm honest, over the last few years I've given up really.

Alex noted that while she saw young people responding positively — even enthusiastically — to the theme of holiness, she felt that young people needed more.

I wonder if really young people need more handholding than we were giving them [...] I wonder really if they are able at that age to join up the dots and think [...] 'how am I called to be holy in my daily life.'

Fifth, participants at village road both desire and resist transformation. Suzie's earliest memory include the phrase 'Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty' painted on the wall around the organ in her local village Baptist church. This provided an understanding of holiness that was the 'Awe of God. It's beyond personal, it's awesome.' Her second memory is as a teenager when a new minister arrived at her Baptist Church who connected holiness with a particular ethic. Suzie said,

The overriding feeling of sermons was 'thou shalt not commit adultery' or fornication [...] It was that kind of 'thou shalt not' [...] to] be pure in thought, word and deed [...] They may have been trying to teach us to be holy but certainly for me it backfired.

Certainly, there is an ethical dimension to holiness, both as part of God's holiness and of the grace-enabled human response which reflects God's holiness. However, Suzie rebelled at the particular presentation offered of Christian ethics which meant that, when she heard that Village Road would be studying holiness, she panicked. It may have been this that led her to caricature the focus on relationship I emphasised, saying 'When we were growing up we didn't talk about being 'in love' with Jesus. And this sort of thing'.

Suzie is enthralled by the vision of the holiness of God being distant and other but reacts negatively to the idea of holiness as being intimately involved in her daily life. Very honestly, she offers feedback on how our exploration of holiness did not change her.

And so have I changed my perspective of holiness? I understand there is a different definition, there is different understanding. As far as what I feel about holiness, it is still the soaring choir boys going up to the rafters or the awesomeness of being on top of a mountain by yourself in winter.

In this paper I have laid out what I understand Methodists believe as a journey alongside others searching the scriptures, desiring transformation as part of a vocation of holiness. I see this normative theology as inspiring, but I have discovered that not everyone is able to receive this normative theology. There appears to be a number of reasons. At Village Road few could recall this normative theology being highlighted to them, suggesting that the diagnosis of ‘doctrinal amnesia’²⁷ may not be the right term, because you cannot forget what you have not previously known. Furthermore, it does seem that people at Village Road have come to see holiness as having arrived at extraordinarily performed moral behaviour, which is at odds with the way the doctrinal standards present holiness as an ongoing vocation in ordinary every-day life. Yet, after learning for myself what I contend is British Methodism’s normative theology, I did detect ways whereby the vocation of holiness could gain a foothold.

Rather than buying house group notes, a group from Village Road gathered to write their own. The act of not merely hearing about holiness but proactively learning about holiness in a team in order to serve others seemed to enable a deeper engagement with holiness that overflowed into their ongoing life. One team member began exploring becoming a Methodist presbyter, one became a commissioned worship leader, one a deacon in a Methodist circuit, another an elder in in the Society of Friends and others deepened their commitment to pastoral care and writing. This exercise in trusting a small group with

²⁷ Abraham. See also Kenneth Cracknell, *Our Doctrines: Methodist Theology as Classical Christianity* (Calver, Sheffield: Cliff College Publishing, 1998), p.13

freedom to cultivate a new imagination for themselves of what holiness might mean, while undoubtedly the most risk-filled part of my research, enabled some of the deepest engagement. It moved holiness from cerebral to an embodied engagement of their hopes and passions, which James Smith argues has the greatest formative potential.²⁸ These people had embarked on a vocation of holiness and therefore, I would argue, were living out the doctrinal standards. Of all people at Village Road, they were also the most enthusiastic advocates of holiness. They had a natural desire and an ability for spreading scriptural holiness.

With the youth group we enacted the grace integral to holiness through giving away sweets that advertised a *Twitter* account which promoted random acts of kindness. We also cleaned a neighbouring church and worked in its garden. That church was low on money but, more crucially, low on hope, which is the most significant capital held within any church.²⁹ Following this enactment, two of the youth group asked to be confirmed and gave their testimony of God's transforming work in their lives.

I had thought that the interviews would be an important source of information about holiness, but they became the way through which people journeyed in holiness. Nadine shared,

Something that maybe was quite narrow and separate and now has opened out and much broader and it has grown into a size that is beyond human comprehension [...] and] I'd never thought of holiness as being love [...] And I do think of it as being love now. And that's where the broadness and the richness comes from. (Nadine)

The process of interviewing — like other relational processes within the youth group and house groups — enabled a theological engagement that would not have occurred had the focus been singularly on conveying information from normative theology. The response to

²⁸ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), p.18.

²⁹ Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: equipping your church to reach a changing world* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), p.16.

the interviews illuminated that, in pastoral ministry, interviews are not only a tool for research but a means whereby God's grace and ministry can be expressed.³⁰

I set out to write a paper on what Methodists believe. I have come to see that Methodist normative theology is more than doctrinal content but an engaged vocation of holiness. Therefore, Methodist normative theology cannot be communicated to others from behind a desk, pulpit or even a nationally produced course, but through a journey, aided by signposts, whereby people cultivate their own theological imagination. Although preachers 'minister in holy things', more crucial for British Methodism today are those who will proactively offer the space and support whereby people can explore practicing holiness in their daily lives. This need not mean resuscitating past methods such as class or band meetings. I discovered that empowering local people to write theological resources, engaging young people in practical kindness and in-depth interviewing can enable the space needed for the vocation of holiness to develop. However, each local church must find its own path. This is how Methodists discover what they believe, embody that belief and witness to that belief 'throughout the land'. The theological academy must therefore balance its theological content with this theological purpose, and church leaders must proactively empower local people to discover this purpose within their daily lives.

³⁰ Cameron and others, *Talking about God in Practice*, p.58. This builds on Margaret Ann Craine and Jack L. Seymour, 'The Ethnographer as Minister: Ethnographic Research in Ministry', *Religious Education*, 91 (1996), 299-315.

3 Purposes. The purposes of the Methodist Church are and have been since the date of union those set out in Section 4 of the 1976 Act.

4 Doctrine. The doctrinal standards of the Methodist Church are as follows:

The Methodist Church claims and cherishes its place in the Holy Catholic Church 1
which is the Body of Christ. It rejoices in the inheritance of the apostolic faith and loyally
accepts the fundamental principles of the historic creeds and of the Protestant Reformation. It
ever remembers that in the providence of God Methodism was raised up to spread scriptural
holiness through the land by the proclamation of the evangelical faith and declares its 5
unfaltering resolve to be true to its divinely appointed mission.

The doctrines of the evangelical faith which Methodism has held from the beginning
and still holds are based upon the divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures. The
Methodist Church acknowledges this revelation as the supreme rule of faith and practice.
These evangelical doctrines to which the preachers of the Methodist Church are pledged are 10
contained in Wesley's Notes on the New Testament and the first four volumes of his
sermons.

The Notes on the New Testament and the 44 Sermons are not intended to impose a
system of formal or speculative theology on Methodist preachers, but to set up standards of
preaching and belief which should secure loyalty to the fundamental truths of the gospel of 15
redemption and ensure the continued witness of the Church to the realities of the Christian
experience of salvation.

Christ's ministers in the church are stewards in the household of God and shepherds
of his flock. Some are called and ordained to this occupation as presbyters or deacons.

³¹ Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes, *The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church, Volume 2* (London: Methodist Publishing, 2017), p. 213-4.

Presbyters have a principal and directing part in these great duties but they hold no priesthood differing in kind from that which is common to all the Lord's people and they have no exclusive title to the preaching of the gospel or the care of souls. These ministries are shared with them by others to whom also the Spirit divides his gifts severally as he wills.

It is the universal conviction of the Methodist people that the office of the Christian ministry depends upon the call of God who bestows the gifts of the Spirit the grace and the fruit which indicate those whom He has chosen.

Those whom the Methodist Church recognises as called of God and therefore receives into its ministry as presbyters or deacons shall be ordained by the imposition of hands as expressive of the Church's recognition of the minister's personal call.

The Methodist Church holds the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers and consequently believes that no priesthood exists which belongs exclusively to a particular order or class of persons but in the exercise of its corporate life and worship special qualifications for the discharge of special duties are required and thus the principle of representative selection is recognised.

All Methodist preachers are examined tested and approved before they are authorised to minister in holy things. For the sake of church order and not because of any priestly virtue inherent in the office the presbyters of the Methodist Church are set apart by ordination to the ministry of the word and sacraments.

The Methodist Church recognises two sacraments namely baptism and the Lord's Supper as of divine appointment and of perpetual obligation of which it is the privilege and duty of members of the Methodist Church to avail themselves.

This clause was amended, in minor respects, by the Conference in 1995, and further amended in 2012 to reflect the change of usage from 'minister' to 'presbyter' and to give explicit recognition to the diaconal order of ministry.

5 Interpretation of Doctrine. The Conference shall be the final authority within the Methodist Church with regard to all questions concerning the interpretation of its doctrines.

Bibliography

- Abraham, William J., *Waking from Doctrinal Amnesia: The Healing of Doctrine in The United Methodist Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995)
- Arnett, William M., 'John Wesley and the Bible', *Wesleyan Theological Review*, 3 (1968), 3-9
- Cameron, Helen, Deborah Bhatti, Catherine Duce, James Sweeney and Clare Watkins, *Talking about God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2010)
- Cracknell, Kenneth, *Our Doctrines: Methodist Theology as Classical Christianity* (Calver, Sheffield: Cliff College Publishing, 1998)
- Craine, Margaret Ann and Jack L. Seymour, 'The Ethnographer as Minister: Ethnographic Research in Ministry', *Religious Education*, 91 (1996), 299-315
- Davies, Rupert, 'The People called Methodists - 1. 'Our Doctrines'' in *A History of the Methodist church in Great Britain, Volume One* ed. by Rupert Davies and Gordon Rupp (London: Epworth Press, 1965), pp.145-79
- , 'Since 1932' in *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain, Volume Three* ed. by Rupert Davies, A. Raymond George and Gordon Rupp (London: Epworth Press, 1983), pp.362-90
- Festinger, Leon, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1957)
- Glasson, Francis, 'Wesley's New Testament Reconsidered', *Epworth Review*, 10 (1983), 28-34
- Gourlay, Stephen, 'Knowing as semiosis: steps towards a reconceptualization of "tacit knowledge"' in *Organizations as Knowledge Systems: Knowledge, Learning and Dynamic Capabilities* ed. by Haridimos Tsoukas and Nikolaos Mylonopoulos (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp.86-105
- Heitzenrater, Richard P. 'John Wesley's Principles and Practice of Preaching', *Methodist History*, 27 (1999), 89-106
- Hooker, Morna D., 'Scriptural Holiness: The Wesley's Use of Scripture', *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, 50 (2015), pp.7-24
- Langford, Thomas A., *Methodist Theology* (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 1998)
- Maddox, Randy L., 'The rule of Christian faith, practice and hope: John Wesley and the Bible.' *Epworth Review*, 38 (2011), 6-37
- Mental Health Foundation, *Fundamental Facts about Mental Health 2016* (London: Mental Health Foundation, 2016) < <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/file/2518/download?token=RU6lzcSK> > [accessed 24 July 2018]
- Oden, Thomas C., *Doctrinal Standards in the Wesleyan Tradition* rev. edn. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008)
- Outler, Albert C., 'The Wesleyan Quadrilateral in John Wesley', *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, 20 (1985), 7-18
- Rack, Henry D., *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* 2nd edn. (London: Epworth, 1992)
- Roxburgh, Alan J. and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: equipping your church to reach a changing world* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006)
- Smith, James K. A., *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009)
- The Works of John Wesley*, 32 vols ed. by Albert C. Outler and others (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984—)

Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes, *A Lamp to my Feet and a Light to my Path: The Nature of Authority and the Place of the Bible in the Methodist Church* (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 1998)

—, ‘Back to the Bible, forward to the world: Inaugural address of the Methodist President’ <<http://www.methodist.org.uk/news-and-events/news-releases/back-to-the-bible-forward-to-the-world-inaugural-address-of-the-methodist-president>> [accessed 26 June 2017]

—, ‘New Methodist President Calls for Holiness’ <<http://www.methodist.org.uk/news-and-events/news-releases/new-methodist-president-calls-for-holiness>> [accessed 16 June 2017]

Wesley, John, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* (repr. London: Epworth Press, 1976)

World Council of Churches, ‘What is the World Council of Churches?’ <<http://www.oikoumene.org/en/about-us>> [accessed 22 June 2017]