

New Creation in Tradition and Process

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Introduction

Wesley always sought to justify the changes he wrought through reference to tradition, but if Runyon's view of his synergistic leanings are correct¹, it is possible to see a pre-conceptual tendency to process thinking in his ecclesiology. His pragmatism in allowing the growth of Methodism in varied ways in differing situations was argued out of a real belief in tradition while it, logically, allowed for consequent actuality. Methodism's early growth and renewal was set free within this process, it's subsequent downturn is synchronous with the modern church's attempt to institutionalise.

I. The Tradition

1 Looking Back for affirmation

It was to tradition that Wesley appealed when he felt called to ordain presbyters for the America's. There was no new thinking involved, he had held the view for forty-four years, but there was a situation in which he seemed to feel the need to cooperate with God to enable the new creation to continue. Despite his loyalty to the Church of England he acted as though the future required him to act outside that loyalty.

He used as his authority for this new step the treatise by Peter King, *An Inquiry into the Constitution, Discipline, Unity, and Worship of the Primitive Church*. Wesley, in this instance, chose to operate from the stance of presbyter/bishop, i.e. an elder was no less than the bishop and could therefore, logically, do what the bishop did. His view contrasts with the understanding of bishop/presbyter where the bishop has certain authority held by the body of elders, not by individual elders. An extension of Wesley's application of this concept of order can be seen in the understanding implicit in the statement about ministers and the priesthood of all believers in the present Deed of Union of the Methodist church in Great Britain. "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 sole occupation and 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."²

The decision to ordain made the Methodist Church a practical reality, even within Wesley's lifetime, and it is the mould from which Methodism, in particular British Methodism, is cast.

¹ Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation, John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville : Abingdon Press, 1998) p.168.

2 A New Church

Despite his lack of *intent* Wesley moved inexorably on an unswerving journey which could only lead to a separated Church. It cannot be imagined that he did not understand this, even as he denied the intention.

It was the belief that “The great end of religion is to renew our hearts in the image of God.”³ which seems to have driven him on, remaining constant with the Spirit of Creation intent on bringing a new life to the people, he brought renewal to the church also. While he obviously hoped that there would be no separation from the Church of England there was equally no give in him when it came to risking this new activity of the Spirit. He tried, in gardening terms, to graft his new shoot on to the trunk, but it would not take. He could not simply let it die, so he planted it where it would grow.

3 Divisions or “new growth”

Looked at from the perspective of “new growth” the various divisions which sprang into being after Wesley’s death should be seen as a sign of vigour, not collapse. Spirit led creationism breaking down structural traditionism.

This is not simply to claim that division is a clear sign of vigour and growth, more that institutionalisation can become a straitjacket which contains vigour. Wesley recognised the problem of structures becoming an end rather than a means, causing him to believe that: “If anything that was traditional in the Church worked effectively, and made for the salvation of souls, well and good: if it did not, he was prepared to let it go.”⁴

Two things mark the major breaks in early Methodism. There was a concentration on structure in the mother church, what Henry Betts has described as a spirit of ecclesiastical conservatism and clericalism within the conference⁵. Alongside this was an increase in vigour in the daughter churches. A case of new wine bursting out from old wine skins.

³ John Wesley, “Sermon 44, Original Sin”, ed George Lyons (Nampa : Wesley Centre for Applied Theology, 1999).

⁴ Henry Bett, *The Spirit of Methodism*, Epworth Press, London, 1937. p. 79.

II Structural Union

1 Clause Four - Weaving a Fabric

Pope applauded in Methodism “that it threw around all its organization, and every department of it, a doctrinal defense.”⁶ The 1929 Methodist Church Act produced a group of doctrinal clauses by common consent. Kenneth Grayston⁷ categorised these “as inadequate as standards, so vague that they can be interpreted with great freedom” and Rupert Davies⁸, sixteen years later, deconstructed the clauses and opened up their lack of clarity. Where is Pope’s Doctrinal Defense today? Grayston was being critical, questioning the value of doctrinal standards so permeable as to hold nothing in and allow the free entry of any change or opinion without real challenge. Davies on the other hand seems to suggest that the vagueness of the clause, alongside the guardianship of Conference as final arbiter, allows Methodism to blend with contemporary ideas with little difficulty. Wesley’s pragmatism might be thought to offer support to Davies, but I would contend that Grayston more closely represents the Wesleyan viewpoint towards change and reform. Wesley had one measure of the worth of a change: Would it save souls? The test was not “was it an elegant piece of theology?” or would it stand up to academic challenge? The test he applied was “What did it achieve in practice?” Wesley sought to see the work of God in the changes being effected in his time and tried to use the measure from Genesis as his guiding standard, “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.”⁹

There is a sense in which union can be said to have taken all the most dearly held opinions of three ossified structures and woven them into a garment made of untearable fog. Perhaps the greatest irony, which this doctrinal elasticity brought about, is that it has permitted the modern liberalism to grow comfortably alongside the more evangelical conservatism of the pre-union denominations. Although there was a more liberal position on ecclesiology in the Primitive and United Methodist Churches all three churches were fairly conservative in their theological positions.

2 Structures at a distance

One of the consequences of shrinking numbers and aging congregations has been a growing isolationist tendency. This is not a deliberate strategy of congregations or circuits, but the outcome of the demographic changes within these congregations. Ageing congregations tend towards a greater traditionalism and resistance to change which includes an unwillingness to become involved in the engines of change. Ministers with a greater number of churches in their charge can become wearied of the multiplication of meetings this involves and so shorter of time and energy to commit to district and connexional involvement. Circuits begin losing connection with the Connexion and to develop a growing congregationalism. Allied to this there has been a steady drift towards dependence on ordained leadership. As the average age has moved upwards, so has the tendency to dependence grown. Management theory¹⁰ tells us that you can only gain the time necessary to manage well if you delegate, it

⁶ William Burt Pope, “Developing Distinctiveness” in Thomas A. Langford ed. *Wesleyan Theology a Sourcebook* (Durham, North Carolina : The Labyrinth Press, 1984), p. 107.

⁷ Kenneth Grayston, “What is Methodist Doctrine”, *Epworth Review*, 3/3 (London : Methodist Publishing House, 1976). p. 46.

⁸ Rupert E. Davies, “A Methodist View” in Rupert E. Davies, ed. *The Truth in Tradition*, (London : Epwrth Press, 1992), pp. 43-45.

⁹ Genesis 1:31.

also indicates the tendency to push problems as far up the ladder as they will go. Modern Methodist ministers come out of college with a view of themselves as being responsible for everything which happens in their churches. Despite the changes in legislation, it is still rare for any church meeting to be chaired by anyone other than a minister. Christina Le Moignan,¹¹ in her recent Pastoral Address to the Ministerial Session of Conference¹² suggests that there is a distinctive presbyteral contribution to be made in terms of the theological and spiritual resources they bring and asks: “In a church meeting for example, might we be more genuinely presbyteral in offering a contribution in terms of what the Bible had to say about the various agenda items than being in the chair?”

A consequence of this focus on ordained leadership has been a tendency for lay participation to be concentrated in the local church. Ministers too become more localised in their focus turning their backs on the process. Such situations lead to traditionalism while losing touch with the real traditions. If the traditions of Methodism have been; continuing creation, development through renewal, actuality through connexion, then surely the creative process requires the connection to be maintained?

It could be argued that Jesus stated the basic connexional principle in Matthew 10:40 when he tells the disciples “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.” Although this principle is maintained in most Church structures, Brian Beck¹³ points out how easy it is for this to slip into congregationalism with a group of individuals covenanting together to form a church. Beck illustrates that the Church is God’s creation and that we connect with and covenant into the creation. “A congregation *belongs* to the wider church, and only by virtue of this can it claim to be a church.”

¹¹ President of the British Methodist Conference, 2001-2002.

¹² Christina Le Moignan, *Methodist Recorder* June 27, 2002

III A New Creation?

1 An Appointed Mission

Wesley's vision for the Methodist people, which has been perpetuated in the Deed of Union, was "To spread scriptural holiness through the land".¹⁴

The task should be to *spread* holiness and it is only possible to spread what exists. Many fellowships function as structural maintenance groups rather than as centres of holiness. There are certainly persons within all these fellowships with a vision of the centrality of this doctrine, but it would be difficult to recognise this as the purpose or aim of many such groups.

Part of the problem of cutting the connection with the Connexion is that what is left is a local society with a view of church bounded by its own experience and vision. In a world where our horizons are constantly expanding many churches have a vision "that they will paint the church hall next year". Reducing numbers and crumbling buildings work together to crush the spirit from the mission of the church.

The burden of the buildings has become unbearable because the building has become the church. For so many people the church will no longer exist if the building they have struggled with ceases to be.

There is a need to engage with the mission, which inspired Wesley and his followers, if we are to connect with the creative power of God. A renewed understanding of connexion with people not buildings will free energy which can be put into cooperation in the creative process.

Jeffrey Harris¹⁵, commenting on what he saw as a pastoral deficit, suggests that a minister can only relate effectively to between 175 and 300 people. This figure would fit with the normal relationship between membership and provision of ministers but this ratio was predicated on the basis of full time pastoral charge. Often the burden of maintaining the buildings falls on the minister. The circuits themselves are presenting a changed profile of smaller congregations and more churches under the care of one minister. Many ministers see it as their task to spend a considerable portion of their time on work in the community. The resultant shortage of time for pastoral care of the fellowship by the minister creates the situation of pastoral deficit on which Harris comments.¹⁶

A survey which I undertook in 1997¹⁷ of the churches to which I related produced a description of the work they expected of their minister which was headed by "preaching, teaching and pastoral care." Donald Eadie reports a conversation with a community activist which culminated in the statement: "What I need you to be is a priest for me, not another ruddy social worker, psychotherapist or community politician."¹⁸ There would seem to be an real desire that the Methodist ecclesiastic should create a representation of holiness for those to whom they relate. It may be that the congregations are not looking for help to be good, but are looking for guidance as to how to be holy.

2 A New Society for A New Society

¹⁴ The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church, Volume 2 Clause 4, p 213.

¹⁵ Jeffrey Harris, *Our Calling to Fulfil*, (London : The Methodist Church Home Mission Division, 1986)

¹⁶ Harris p33

¹⁷ This survey was part of the project component of my M.Min, Urban Theology unit, Sheffield.

That there was ever a single historical form of Christianity has been disproved by historical analysis nor can it be found in the biblical record but this does not stop denominations claiming primacy. This is how we treat tradition. We behave as though it was something set in stone. Albert Outler¹⁹ reminds us that the root meaning of 'tradition' is active and transitive. That tradition is in fact is about handing something over from the past to the future, that it is not static but in motion. He argues that the worst form of tradition is 'traditionalism' in which there is no movement, but a turning back to hold on to the past rather than growing on from the root which provides constant renewal and new growth. Tradition, he contests, has to constantly interact with the changing context. This, at its best, is a continual synergism of old and new.

Experience tells us that to understand God's model of creation as a single act in and of a moment in time cannot be the whole truth. Moltmann's concept of continuous creation²⁰ fits better with the model of creation provided by God in that the evidence of our senses demonstrates that all things have a lifespan and creation is an ongoing process.

This creative process is God's work, and we are a part of it as far as we co-operate with him in it. The Old Testament is a recurring paradigm with a remnant turning back to the tradition and through bringing it into their context finding renewal. John Wesley struggled to create a new Wesley year after year without success. He did so from within an understanding of the Church of England as the finest flowering of God's church on earth. It was not until he reentered the paradigm with which God has been seen to work, and looked back to the tradition and allowed it to come into his context that the new creation he had been seeking began to occur. Wesley did not set out to amend the structure of the church to which he owed allegiance, nor to build a better structure. He set out to spread scriptural holiness.

If the above view of creation is accepted, it must have consequences for our response to the need for renewal of the church which we face today. Primarily, it would suggest that the normal process of examining our structures with the intention of bringing about the best conditions for renewal is unlikely to be successful. This is not to suggest that there may not be value in occasional restructuring, but it needs to be recognised as an administrative rather than a missiological strategy.

The process would suggest that new creation is people-centred rather than structure-centred. The apostle Paul clearly understood "new creation"²¹ as God's activity in a person and the church as the collected charism of the body of believers²². Wesley too spoke of the church in terms of persons²³, in particular, "all the persons in the universe whom God hath called out of the world". The British Methodist Church has continued to make similar statements on the church. The 1937 Conference stated "The age-long task of the Church will be to build up all its *members, thus redeemed*, in holiness and perfect love".²⁴ Unfortunately, this facet of "church" was missing from the recent Report *Our Calling*²⁵, which describes what the church is for but tends to use corporate language to describe what the church is.

The Methodist Church in Great Britain has two structural problems which legislate against a focus on persons and on spreading of holiness. The first of these is our buildings, the sheer number of them and the weight of maintenance with which they burden not only the people,

¹⁹ Traditions in Transit

²⁰ Jesus Christ for Today's World, Jurgen Moltmann, London : SCM, 1995. p98.

²¹ 2 Cor 5:17

²² 1 Cor 12:27

²³ Sermon 74 "Of the Church".

²⁴ The Nature of the Church, ed R. Newton Flew, SCM, London, 1952, p212.

but those who are called to minister to the people. The second is the administrative load laid upon the ministry by the structure of the church today. A part of this second problem is that much of the maintenance responsibilities settle firmly on the shoulders of the minister in charge of the buildings in question. There is little doubt that a group of people faced with a crumbling building and mounting costs will tend to become focussed on the maintenance problem and will find it difficult to envision themselves as the embodiment of scriptural holiness. Since their minister may spend much of her or his time chairing finance and building meetings, meeting with architects, or encouraging their fund-raising, one can also imagine the difficulty they may have in seeing the minister's role as building them up in holiness.

If there is to be a return to a process based missiology, there needs to be a pruning away of the dead wood in the structure to allow the fresh air into the societies. More importantly the ministers must be freed and encouraged to focus on spiritual growth, on offering people opportunities to encounter God. Changes such as these would require a radical realignment of people's thinking.

Congregations have become wedded to the buildings. They have often come to think of church in terms of the building rather than the people. Ministers have become accustomed to offering projects and to attempt to find ways to make use of the physical resources of the church rather than the human resources.

One of the great ideas of Wesleyan Methodism, the itinerant minister may have become a disadvantage in a time when movement of people has become so common. The purpose of itineracy for the ministry was twofold. It was intended that ministers should not become too settled and comfortable, thus stimulating a new approach to their ministry with each change of appointment and situation. For congregations the purpose was to offer a continual flow of new insights and differing perspectives. This interchange of theological and ecclesiological perspectives could invigorate congregations and motivate ministers to reassess their own understanding on a regular basis. Itineracy was developed with a stable congregation in mind, often with strong local lay leadership. Today the congregations are frequently mobile, with the younger members moving from place to place and the settled sector often consisting of elderly faithful who may feel that they have contributed fully in the past but are now ready to be led. Many of the middle-aged members of a congregation will have come to the particular church from a different denomination or have had such a long gap in their church life that they do not have the sense of tradition which once came with growing in the local church. Ministers can often find that they are seen as impermanent and the projects they create may fade away when they have moved on and the person following brings different gifts. Today society is itinerant and it may be time for a rooted ministry to give a congregation an anchor point, someone who can offer continuity as a source of stability for a society in flux. Such a settled source could act as a spring from which the itinerant believer could come for sustenance and renewal.

3. Towards koinonia

If the view of the church can be moved from institution to koinonia it will be less difficult to prune the structural dead wood without harming the essential fellowship. To offer a prescription at this point would be to negate the principle of "process", but there seem to be some ways in which it would be more likely that the church could allow the process to enter the equation again. Most important is giving ministers freedom from administrative encumbrance and allowing them the space to engage with the spirit. For many this will not be a simple matter as they have become accustomed to looking for ways to engage with the

community in social ministry rather than looking inward to the body of the church to offer ways to encounter God.

If societies/fellowships, decide to reduce the number of buildings they maintain there would be a need for a central place of worship which could offer a gathering place for a number of fellowships. Such a worship centre would offer a different experience of communal worship than that of many congregations at present, and need not offer only one style of service. The local fellowships might develop as groups with common needs and situations, such situation might include the employed or the retired, the young, the middle-aged or the elderly, all with different time requirements and perhaps finding different styles.

Moltmann argues that God's creation is continuous ²⁶, a constant renewal. For this to be a part of our awareness we must involve ourselves with the creator. Continuous renewal can only be effected if doors are not closed, people are not struggling to bring about change and the church looks to the source of renewal.

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