

Ecclesiology and Sacraments in an Ecumenical Context: (12.) Methodist theology and practice concerning church order (forms of the ordained ministry; questions of succession; doctrinal and pastoral authority, etc.). By David McCreary, Claremont, California.

It is a commonplace that Wesley had a "functional" view of the church, which places him in the mainline of the Reformation. Calvin, too, had a functional ecclesiology. 1) For both Calvin and Wesley a particular church order is not necessary to the order of salvation. They agree that some ordered community is necessary for the faithful to grow in faith, hope, and love, but this community can be ordered in a variety of ways. Wesley himself preferred the Church of England to any other form of church, but this did not for him exclude the presence of the Holy Spirit in dissenting churches and conventicles. One can find people of living faith in all manner of visible structure, even if that body lacks the sacraments (Quakers) or does not recognize the doctrine of apostolic succession (dissenters).

While Wesley recognized diversity in the churches of his day, his ecumenical and catholic definition of "church" did not serve to justify division. His own sense of "church" seemed to be at odds with the popular understanding of the term:

How much do we almost continually hear about the Church! With many it is a matter of daily conversation. And yet how few understand what they talk of! How few know what the term means! A more ambiguous word than this, *the Church*, is scarce to be found in the English language. It is sometimes taken for a building, set apart for public worship; sometimes for a congregation, or body of people, united together in the service of God. It is only in the latter sense that it is taken in the ensuing discourse. 2)

It is in light of the biblical meaning of "church", as he finds it in such passages as Ephesians four, that Wesley affirms both its unity and its holiness. This is decisive for a proper understanding of Wesley's ecclesiology and is the center around which his thought on various ecclesiological subjects revolves. As he would put it a little later in his sermon, "...it is the Church in general, the catholic or universal Church, which the Apostle here considers as one body: Comprehending not only the Christians in the house of Philemon, or any one family; not only the Christians of one congregation, of one city, of one province, or nation; but all the persons upon the face of the earth, who answer the character here given." 3)

If this church is the one true church, based upon one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all, there can be no separation from it without sin. Such a separation reflects only lack of love, which by its very nature unites souls:

It is evil in itself. To separate ourselves from a body of living Christians, with whom we were before united, is a grievous breach of the law of love. It is the nature of love to unite us together; and the greater the love, the stricter the union. And while this continues in its strength, nothing can divide those whom love has united. It is only when our love grows cold, that we can think of separating from our brethren. And this is certainly the case with any who willingly separate from their Christian brethren. The pretences for separation are innumerable, but want of love is always the real cause; otherwise they would still hold the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. 4)

From these, and other, passages throughout Wesley's writings, it is difficult to find any authority in Wesley for our modern view of denominationalism. Present-day denominationalism assumes and defends the rightness of our divisions as, in fact, the will of God for the church. Each denomination can then defend its autonomy against the others, even though there may now be no theological rationale for continuing separation. Wesley

¹Cf. John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion. (John T. McNeill, ed.) (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960). Bk. IV, X, 27. pp. 1205f.

²John Wesley, The Works of John Wesley. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1958). Vol. VI. p. 392.

³Wesley, Works. p. 394.

⁴Wesley, Works. p. 406

does not object to separate national churches, but their separation for functional and geographical reasons does not constitute disunity and division within the body of Christ. His toleration of differences does not lead him to justify divisions and the different branches of Christianity. There is in Wesley a profound sense of the unity of the church that in modern-day denominationalism is simply missing.

Moreover, the lack of love in schism manifests evils that can only impair witness to a non-Christian world:

And what a grievous stumbling-block must these things be to those who are without, to those who are strangers to religion, who have neither the form nor the power of godliness! How will they triumph over these once eminent Christians! How boldly ask, "What are they better than us?" How will they harden their hearts more and more against the truth, and bless themselves in their wickedness? from which, possibly, the example of the Christians might have reclaimed them, had they continued unblamable in their behaviour. Such is the complicated mischief which persons separating from a Christian Church or society do, not only to themselves, but to that whole society, and to the whole world in general. 5)

It is clear that Wesley understands the unity of the church to be visible unity and not simply spiritual unity or the unity of an invisible church. One can separate from the church for reasons of conscience involving teachings, morals, or idolatry, and in fact one must do so. But, as the Reformers pointed out, it is questionable whether that is a "true church" at all. Even if it is, the violation of conscience is intolerable. That no such conditions obtained in Wesley's continuing adherence to the Church of England made separation from that Church impossible for him. Wesley regarded the Church of England as the church universal in the country of England, as he points out in his sermon, "Of the Church":

That part of this great body, of the universal Church, which inhabits any one kingdom or nation, we may properly term a National Church; as, the Church of France, the Church of Scotland. A smaller part of the universal Church are the Christians that inhabit one city or town; as the Church of Ephesus, and the rest of the seven Churches mentioned in the Revelation. Two or three Christian believers united together are a Church in the narrowest sense of the word. Such was the Church in the house of Philemon, and that in the house of Nymphas, mentioned Col. iv. 15. A particular Church may, therefore, consist of any number of members, whether two or three, or two or three millions. But still, whether they be larger or smaller, the same idea is to be preserved. They are one body, and have one Spirit, one Lord, one hope, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all. 6)

Several things follow from this view of unity that should be brought out in ecumenical discussion. First, if there are no reasons of conscience separating communions, then there are no reasons for separation at all. Too often, denominations stabilize their vested interests in their own institutions by affirming "spiritual oneness" while denying the need for structural merger (cf. The United Methodist Reporter, April 2, 1982, p. 2). Open communion, if practiced at all, should pressure the parties involved toward visible unity rather than stabilizing separation.

Second, Wesley sees the Church of England as the visible expression of the Church universal in the nation of England and not simply as a denomination in the modern American sense. He does not continue to belong to that communion out of a sentimental longing for tradition or to maintain a base of operation for his own pet projects. He sees it as the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church of which the Constantinopolitan creed speaks. As such, it has given to the people of England the gift of salvation. The question for Wesley is how do these people appropriate this gift in discipleship. Hence, the rationale for the Methodist societies. He was not trying to duplicate what the church does but to supply that which is wanting in the church; namely, disciplined holiness.

⁵Wesley, Works. Vol. VI. p. 408.

⁶Wesley, Works. Vol. VI. p. 396.

Because Methodism was born out of a need to do something within the larger church it only tangentially touched upon the doctrine of the church. It had a job to get on with and was free to explore the functional-missional side of the church as a social process. It was the mission of the the Methodist movement within the Church of England to bring in all the people who were outside its universality, its love, its faith, its hope, and its discipline. It was this mission which guided its appropriation and adaptation of techniques and structures to its overriding purpose.

In light of this self-understanding, Methodists did not see themselves as separatists, sectarians, or dissenters. It was not their purpose, as they understood it, to found a new church, establish a sect, or save England from a revolution. To the extent that any of these consequences of their activities occurred, it is rather beside the point of their main purpose: mission. In pursuing their mission to reform the church and nation and to spread scriptural holiness across the land, they were quite experimental about the practices and organizational structures they adopted. Wesley followed Whitefield in the practice of field preaching because it allowed for the mass communication of the gospel. Lay preaching was instituted because able lay speakers were in a position to multiply the work of the few ordained members of Methodism. And the class leader, who eventually did most of the actual pastoral work of Methodism, was the invention of a finance campaign to pay off the chapels. If this appears very ad hoc and irregular, as it certainly did to the hierarchy of the Church of England (and even Wesley himself!), it was not because of expediency in any opportunistic sense. This is not thoughtless "pragmatism." The missional purpose itself provided the controlling norm and the early Methodists were always quite certain of what they were about. They stood under authority.

As a society within the Church of England, Methodism relied upon that Church for its sacramental life and did not have to concern itself with the questions of ordination and sacraments until later on. The Methodist chapel was not in competition with the local parish church but served its wider purposes. Nor did exclusion from a Methodist class meeting in any way constitute excommunication from the Church of England. Wesley simply did not believe in separation from the Anglican communion, though it has been speculated that he saw it coming.

We all know that Methodism finally did become a "church" in the denominational sense of the term, though not for unecumenical and separatist reasons. In America, political independence and the lack of an established church, the separation of church and state, and the refusal of the Bishop of London to ordain any of his preachers combined to force Wesley to ordain his own "superintendents" and preachers. Wesley's hand was forced and he has been reproached ever since for contravening his own principles of unity and his strict adherence to Anglican authority. He probably felt that God was a higher authority at this point, given the uncooperative attitude of the hierarchy. One's authority is not always derived from continuity with a tradition, as prophetic religion in all times shows. But Wesley did have a precedent in the ante-Nicene Church at Alexandria. As he had learned in the 1740's from reading works by Lord King and Bishop Stillingfleet, presbyters had not only ordained other presbyters for a period of two hundred years, but they actually ordained bishops! Wesley was convinced forty years before he ever did it, that he had the right to ordain and that the apostolic succession was a fiction. 7)

Episcopos, for Wesley, came to mean a general overseer which he saw as the function of a bishop in the early church. Bishops were not of the esse (nature) of the church, but for the bene esse (well-being) of it. Wesley was thus quite willing to recognize a functional necessity for bishops without accepting prelatical claims to teaching authority and proprietary rights over the ordination of ministers. But because these bishops were not a superior third order of ministry, the Methodists in America left off "ordaining" them and now use the term "consecrate" for these elders who are primus inter pares. Our system of two-fold ordination is presbyterian in polity with a moderate episcopacy added on.

The ordination of persons to the representative ministry is itself a functional position essential to a well-ordered church. The church can only live as an historical body

⁷Cf. Wesley, Works. Vol. XIII. pp. 235f.

through the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments. In this, Methodists are one with Calvin in recognizing the universal significance of these offices, even though ministry is not a defining mark of the church. Ministry serves the church's mission. 8)

At this point, we should note an important ecclesiological issue in the transition of Methodism from a society to a church which is only rarely discussed. Too often this transition is seen only as an outward event marking a movement from semi-dependence on the Church of England to institutional autonomy. But there is a theological issue involved which, as we have asserted, Wesley was only too conscious of. The Reformers and Wesley agreed that a church mediates salvation by the promise of Christ in Word and Sacrament and that this salvation is completely of the character of gift. It is not earned and cannot be possessed by any meritorious actions on our part. Faith is the only appropriate attitude toward this indwelling Spirit of Christ and is our complete self-surrender to God's Spirit. Wesley assumed that this was basic in the teaching of the Church of England. 9)

The appropriation of this gift was the main point of the Methodist societies as they operated within the large congregation, the Church of England. One was not excluded from the church by being excluded from the society. The Methodist disciplines were not confessional tests by which it was decided whether one was a Christian or not. Even in its emphasis on sanctification and perfection the gift character of salvation was preserved. They are the work of Christ in us. They are his "alien righteousness" at work.

How then shall we understand the minute on slavery in the Discipline of the American Methodist Episcopal Church?:

...We are deeply conscious of the Impropriety of making new Terms of communion for a religious Society already established, excepting on the most pressing Occasion: and such we esteem the Practice of holding our Fellow-Creatures in Slavery. We view it as contrary to the Golden Law of God on which hang all the law and the Prophets, and the unalienable Rights of Mankind, as well as every Principle of the Revolution, to hold in the deepest Debasement, in a more abject Slavery than is perhaps to be found in any Part of the World except America, so many Souls that are all capable of the Image of God. 10)

I have no doubts that slavery was all these things and that it should be a matter of grave concern to every Christian conscience, no matter what form it takes. I also believe that the church should take stands on moral and social issues and seek to build a missional consensus within its own ranks on these issues. But it is one thing for people to select themselves out because they cannot agree with that missional consensus; quite another for the church to excommunicate people for their disagreement. In spite of its own compromises with this minute, Methodists had established in principle a matter of church discipline as a "term of communion" which could separate Christians from the means of grace. This raises all kinds of thorny issues about the freedom of the Christian conscience in relation to moral, social, and political issues; the extent to which these issues become confessional issues; and how to prevent the church from descending into mere perfectionism and moralism. Moralism has been a plague upon Methodism which has obscured the gift character of salvation and confused many a Christian about what it means to stand under grace. While church discipline is an important aspect of the Christian life, it is not a mark of the true church alongside living faith, Word, and sacrament. 11) Discipline is the appropriation of salvation in discipleship rather than itself the basis of assurance. American Methodists seemed to be unaware of this important distinction between gift and appropriation and thus tended toward a pelagian moralism.

Another feature of Wesley's functional ecclesiology is its underlying dynamism both in its view of the Holy Spirit at work and its view of history. Wesley is not a "restorationist" or "restitutionist" like the early Anabaptists or early Disciples of Christ. Although he has a profound respect for the apostolic church of the first century, he does not strive to recreate it in detail. Nor does he see some intervening period of church history as an ideal worth imitating, as his sermon, "The Former Times", shows:

But let us endeavour, without prejudice or prepossession, to take a view of the whole affair. And, upon cool and impartial consideration, it will appear that the former days were not better than these; yea, on the contrary, that these are, in many respects, beyond comparison better than them. It will clearly appear, that as the stature of men

⁸Colin Williams, John Wesley's Theology Today. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1960).pp. 141f.

was nearly the same from the beginning of the world, so the understanding of men, in similar circumstances, has been much the same, from the time of God's bringing a flood upon the earth unto the present hour... Nay, have we not reason to believe, that, by means of better instruments, we have attained that knowledge of nature which few, if any, of the ancients ever attained? So that, in this respect, the advantage (and not a little one) is clearly on our side: And we ought to acknowledge, with deep thankfulness to the Giver of every good gift, that the former days were not to be compared to these wherein we live. 12)

Wesley's point is the work of the Holy Spirit goes on in every age and there is no reason given in church history to glorify the past at the expense of the present. History is dynamic because the Holy Spirit is dynamic, always calling the church to a new vision of its missional purpose and to avail itself of whatever means are suitable for its mission today. Wesley may respect the church of the first-century, but he does not slavishly imitate it in the eighteenth-century. Nor does faithfulness to past tradition demand imitation. What is called for is the creative transformation of past models for present purposes.

To sum up, Methodist ecclesiology is both explicitly stated in the writings of Wesley and his followers and implicit in the concrete practice of Methodists. Wesley bequeathed to Methodists an ecclesiological self-consciousness which gave to Methodism an experimentalism and openness in its mission. The three foci or variables of this ecclesiological self-consciousness are mission, authority, and structure. In spite of changes within the foci over time, there is a continuity which is only grossly described by the term "pragmatism." I prefer a term the bishops once used: we are a "creative" church in our on-going concern for theory and practice.

The question of Christian unity falls within this ecclesiological self-consciousness and cannot be separated from the question of Christian mission. Mission is the dominant chord of Methodism and Christian unity is its subdominant chord. Nevertheless, there seems to be only a wavering and ambivalent commitment on the part of the United Methodists to enter into church unions to the detriment of denominational autonomy. The Episcopal Address of 1948, for instance, called for union now:

Let us unite! Our laity and our clergy desire union. Our Lord is calling upon us to unite. Let the Methodists take the lead in a great affirmative decision, stating that we desire union. 13)

By 1964, however, either the Lord or the bishops had waived:

...We are not sure that God wills the churches of the Reformation to become one organic union. We believe that our pluralism has produced much good fruit, not the least of which has been freedom. We doubt seriously that eliminating our denominations would solve all our problems. We have no intention of apologizing for our own heritage or slowing down our evangelistic efforts until some proposed merger has been accomplished. The final goal for any Church is not necessarily merger but how to use its resources to serve Christ better. 14)

The bishops seem to be unclear about their ecclesiological basis for ecumenism and what form of unity it dictates in the visible church. This allows them to swing from church unity to denominational "pluralism." What seems to underlie this inconsistency is the "branch theory" of the true church, in which each denomination is part of the one true church. 15) We are not certain that Wesley would accept such an ecclesiology; but more importantly, we do not agree that we have to "slow down our evangelistic efforts" to achieve church union. Historically, Methodists have sought unity for the sake of mission, and both ecumenism and mission have lost steam in recent years. Is there a causal connection?

⁹Cf. "A Letter to the Rev. Mr. Horne (1762)", The Works of John Wesley. Vol. 11, (Gerald Cragg, ed.)(Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 449.

¹⁰...Form of Discipline...(Philadelphia: Charles Cist, 1785). p. 14.

¹¹Wesley, Works. Vol. VI. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1958). p. 397.

¹²Wesley, Works. Vol. VII. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958). p. 162.

¹³1948 Episcopal Address. General Conference Minutes. p. 179.

¹⁴1964 Episcopal Address. General Conference Minutes. p. 207.

¹⁵Cf. 1964 Methodist Discipline. p. 10.