

Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies

METHODIST INTERACTION WITH OTHER CHURCHES - with special reference to the Grindolwald Conferences and the Lambeth Appeal.

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July 1982



A W Harrison reminds us that it was Vincent Perronet who first used the term the Methodist Church, even in letters to Charles Wesley, who must have winced at the very sight of the words.¹ In the years which followed, three events in particular marked the gradual separation of the Wesleyan Methodists from the Church of England. These were John Wesley's ordinations of three of his preachers for work in England, in 1788 and 1789; the permission given by the Conference to Wesleyan societies to receive the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper from their own travelling preachers, where appropriate, from 1795 onwards; and the Buntingite ordinations, by the laying-on of hands in British Wesleyanism from 1836 onwards. By and large questions of churchmanship did not feature so strongly in the non-Wesleyan Methodist traditions. We need to remember that when these Methodists looked back they saw Wesleyan Methodism over their shoulder, rather than the Church of England.

By 1834, Joseph Beaumont was speaking in the Wesleyan Conference, even for the most conservative of the English Church Methodists, when he uttered his famous dictum:

'Mr Wesley, like a strong and skilful rower looked one way while every stroke of his oar took him in the opposite direction.'²

Beaumont went on to say:

'(Mr Wesley) never resolved that he would go further from the Church. We must have room to breathe and move our arms. I do not like to be tacked on to the Established Church. Let us retain our primitive liberty.'

At the same Conference James Dixon insisted that he was not to be turned into a Dissenter. He would stop at the threshold of that principle and declared:

'Not an inch nearer to the Church. We Methodists stand in the noblest position between the two.'

In the same conversation Jabez Bunting was even more severe about Wesleyan relationships with Dissent:

'We cannot be friendly to Dissent. One of its first principles is - Every man shall choose his own master. Can you be friendly to that?'³

When the Wesleyans of 1842 produced their counterblasts to the Tractarian pamphlets in their own Wesleyan Tracts for the Times, they were taking their firm stand over against both the Church of England and historic English Dissent. John Hannah asserted, in Wesleyan Methodism not a Schism:

'Singular, and even anomalous, as the present position of Wesleyan Methodism may be, it is doubtless, in itself, the fruit of an extraordinary visitation and work of God. To this our thoughts cannot fail to advert, when we have occasion to speak of the validity of its ministerial orders, and of its other claims as a part of the universal church of Christ.'⁴

In 1884 Benjamin Hellier was informing the Methodist people:

'As to what High Churchmen tell us about our departure from Wesley's principles ... our answer is plain. We know that we have departed from them, and should have been very foolish if we had not. We greatly reverence Wesley's memory; but we never held him infallible, and on this matter we know that he was mistaken. Wesley said, "If the Methodists ever leave the Church, God will leave them." We have left the Church, but God has not left us; He is with us, as surely as He ever was with our fathers. And this is to us demonstration that on this point Wesley was in error. As to the idle dream of the re-union of Methodism with the Church of England, there is one short but sufficient objection: "New Wine must not be put into old bottles."⁵

Hellier listed five reasons why the union of Methodism with the Church of England was impracticable: In the first instance, the Church of England was a house divided against itself. The two convocations and the high church party would never reach a common mind. Secondly, the Methodist Conference would likewise never reach a common mind on re-union. Thirdly, the minds of both churches would not arrive at a common policy, even if they could agree among themselves. Fourthly, if the convocations and the Conference did reach a common mind, their suggestions would prove unacceptable to the Methodist people as a whole. Finally, even if the first four points were met, Hellier believed that the sanction of Parliament would be withheld. Hellier prophesied:

'These things considered and without saying what may or may not be possible one hundred years hence, when you and I shall no longer be dwellers upon this earth, we may say that the question of organic union between the Methodists and the Church of England is one which belongs to the region of pure speculation; and as a question on which practical men can take action, it has not yet come within the field of vision.'⁶

James Harrison Rigg, the most informed and prolific critic of Puseyism, wrote in a similar vein, in 1886:

'Cherishing no hostility or animosity against the Church of England - desiring for it nothing worse than that it should be freed from all germs of Popish superstition and spiritual despotism, and should undergo, without violence or spoliation, a salutary and effective reorganisation - Wesleyan Methodists decline, without thanks, though with respect and goodwill, all overtures whatsoever for reunion, or (which is the same thing) for absorption. They must "abide in their lot" till "the end of the days."⁷

Rigg's confidence in Wesleyan Methodism had led him to produce a series of essays comparing each of the primitive and protestant church orders with his own.⁸ His condescension plumbed the depths in his remarks on the non-Wesleyans. When he contemplates Methodist union, then almost fifty years away, he reflects:

'And as time advances, while I hardly expect or even desire to see only one form of Methodism for this great and various realm of England, any more than for the wide world, I do hope that there will be a great confederation of Methodist Churches, combining for many great objects, and recognising each other with the most frank and cordial fraternity. To me this seems to be the fitter, and for old England even the greater, ideal. At the same time, if there is to be organic union in any measure or to any extent, it would more naturally be accomplished first between the New Connexion and the Free Churches, and then between the Primitives and the Bible Christians. Three bodies instead of five would be a great step.'⁹

In the same year, 1886, the young A S Peake was an undergraduate at Oxford, and within months of Rigg's complacent utterances about organic union, Peake was writing to his cousin, Annetta:

'I can never be satisfied till we have gained organic unity. This unity will never be gained till we consent to sink differences of belief and make Christ the foundation on which we build... For myself I don't care to be called either Methodist or Church of England, or Protestant, or any name except Christian.'¹⁰

A S Peake took up the torch of the Methodist search for organic union with men like Scott Lidgett. Their great forebears in the movement among Methodists were Wesleyans like Hugh Price Hughes and T B Stephenson; but the pioneer across the Anglican-Methodist divide, on whose work they were all to build, was Henry Lunn.¹¹

Henry Lunn was a latter-day Adam Clarke. Half cleric and half layman, he moved freely and confidently in the corridors of ecclesiastical and political influence. His personal wealth and his audacious charm enabled him to remove padlocks from denominational gates that had been closed for as long as most people could remember. In 1891, with the initial encouragement of Percy Bunting (the grandson of Jabez), Henry Lunn began his periodical and journal Review of the Churches, for which he solicited learned articles from the divines and statesmen of each of the churches, always on an equal footing. Even Cardinal Manning acknowledged the contribution which the publication was making towards the desire and prayers for the reunion of Christendom. In some Anglican circles, including the Church Times, great objection was taken to the use of the word 'churches' in relation to the Methodists and the Baptists.¹²

A year later, the thirty-three year old Lunn invited leading bishops and churchmen of most of the British and European churches to confer in the Alps, at Grindelwald. Lunn was, of course, paying the bill, so many of them accepted. Anglicans of varying parties, Scottish Presbyterians, Swiss and French Reformed, Old Catholics and Free Churchmen, all made their way to these somewhat lavish continental working holidays.

The first Conference, in 1892, met in July and again in September, with nearly five hundred members. Dr Perowne, the Bishop of Worcester, wrote afterwards:

'Never shall I forget the solemn communion last Sunday, when in the Zwinglian Church of Grindelwald, I, assisted by three clergymen of the English and Irish Churches, administered the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, according to a form prescribed in the Prayer Book, to leading ministers and other representatives of the Scottish Presbyterian and English Nonconformist Churches, all of them devoutly kneeling. None can have witnessed that scene unmoved. Such a reunion, I venture to say, stands alone in the history of Christendom...'¹³

The 1892 Conference started with the Lambeth 'quadrilateral' statement of 1888 as a basis for its discussion. T B Stephenson, from the Methodist group, affirmed himself to be a strong believer in the episcopal system of the church, but he urged that frank recognition of the valid ministry of those who were already recognised as ministers in the Nonconformist churches was a necessity in any proposals for reunion. Hugh Price Hughes nailed his colours to the mast on a number of crucial points. Like Stephenson, his Wesleyan colleague, he declared himself strongly in favour of the episcopal system. Hughes went so far as to say that he was willing to be absorbed in the Church of England if it was for the glory of God. Nonetheless, he argued, any real organic union, if there was to be any hope of permanent reconciliation, must contain some liberty of interpretation. He was all for distinguishing between faith and matters of dogma. Hughes believed that the Lambeth 'quadrilateral' of 1888, had it been forthcoming at the time of the Restoration, would have saved English non-conformity the trouble of carving out for itself a separate existence. Hughes had arrived at Grindelwald under great suspicion. The Anglicans in particular despised what they knew of his great oratory and popularity, though he was by no means popular with the Wesleyan establishment in their own conference. However, Hughes left Grindelwald having amazed his Anglican companions with his speeches.¹⁴

At the July and September meetings of the 1893 sessions at Grindelwald high Anglicans and Free Churchmen, in particular, attempted to thrash out a common definition of the church. Both groups soon dismissed the Erastians in their midst and moved on to the key issues. To Hughes was given the task of summarising the papers and the comments of the September conference:

'I wish to say that the distinctive object of this Reunion Conference is not to promote the fellowship of individual Christians, not even to promote the return of individual Christians to particular communities of Christians, but the organised reunion of Christian communities as such ... the essential - the vital point we are met to consider is this - can the great organised sections of the Church as such come together and restore our shattered ecclesiastical unity?'¹⁵

Hughes rounded on those of his Anglican companions who believed that all nonconformists should return, as penitent schismatics, to the church, condemning it as:

'just the sort of scheme likely to be propounded by a good honest soul who lives up in a balloon, far, far away from all the facts of life.'¹⁶

In a somewhat prophetic vein Hughes remarked:

'It has been pointed out to me that if the Church (of England) gave way on the point of re-ordination, they would be abandoning all hope of reunion either with the Roman or Greek Church. But I ask them - is there any hope of any reunion of the kind? ... To the vain hope of reunion with Rome many Anglicans are sacrificing real, inestimable and world-wide blessing.'¹⁷

Hughes concluded:

'The divisions of long centuries are not going to be healed in a day or in a generation but at these conferences a word has been spoken which will never be forgotten.'

When Chancellor Vernon Smith spoke in the Church of England Congress of 1893 he put forward the views of Hughes, more or less, as his own. Either nonconformist ministers would have to be re-ordained by bishops or, by direct inspiration from above, once and once only, the whole body of the Church should readmit such ministers without the laying-on of hands.¹⁸

One of the lasting and closest relationships to come out of the Grindelwald conferences was that between Hugh Price Hughes and the Congregationalist, Charles Berry - both men declaring themselves to be Catholics. Born of their friendship was the Free Church Council Movement, of which Hughes and Berry were the chief architects. They also played a leading part in shaping its policy and, along with A S Peake and others, in providing its celebrated catechism and in creating its constitution. The first session of the Free Church Congress opened in Manchester in November 1892. Of the 370 members who were present at least 53 were Wesleyans, 34 were Free Methodists, 31 were Primitive Methodists, 12 were from the New Connexion and 2 were Bible Christians. A year later, F Luke Wiseman was the prime mover in the Birmingham Free Church Council and fellow Methodists, in other cities, began to follow his example, or at least to give their active support to other Free Church enthusiasts for the movement. The movement was to receive great impetus from the national tours and campaigns of Hughes, Berry and Thomas Law - the latter a full-time officer of the Council, being drawn from the non-Wesleyan tradition. By 1899, there were five hundred Councils or Federations and thirty-six District Federations. There was hardly a prominent Free Church leader who was not on the Council platform.¹⁹

The Free Church Council Movement had three areas of comparative success. It led a sustained, vigorous and semi-intellectual inter-city programme of mission and evangelism under men like Gipsy Smith and Moudy and Sankey; it secured lasting and far-reaching decisions on matters of national education policy and it became thoroughly involved in British politics in the first two decades of the present century.

In the quest for a united Free Church in England there was a different story to tell. The great enthusiast and orator of the campaign was the Baptist statesman, J H Shakespeare. In 1916 each of the Free Churches appointed ten representatives to confer at Mansfield College, Oxford, and that body set up committees to study such topics as ministry, faith, evangelism and the nature of federation. The movement towards federation, such as it was, came in 1919. The Wesleyans, heeding the warning of J A Sharp, instigated delaying tactics in their own conference. At the first meeting of the Federal Council of Evangelical Free Churches in October 1919, the Wesleyans were conspicuous by their absence. In later years, the Methodist Church was to use the Free Church Council for its own occasional purposes, but saw the ecumenical future as developing on a larger canvas. In many ways the work of the Free Church Council Movement was out-paced by the British Council of Churches and its local counterparts from the 1950s onwards.

In 1920 the bishops of the Anglican communion, meeting at Lambeth, issued their famous call An Appeal to All Christian People. Within the context of some form of mutual commissioning, the bishops appealed, in particular to the Free Churches, to make sacrifices for the sake of a common fellowship, a common ministry, and a common service to the world.²⁰

All three branches of British Methodism through their conferences, and parallel with the other Free Churches and the Free Church Council Movement, drew up their responses to the Lambeth appeal. These responses were cordial and cautious. Each reply indicated real problems with the necessity of an episcopate in a united church, or did not mention it. The Wesleyans were slightly less cautious than their Free Church sisters and noted that the suggestion:

'is one that obviously needs careful and prolonged investigation.'²¹

The two outstanding Methodist giants who saw the ultimate necessity of making a positive response to the Lambeth appeal were A S Peake and J Scott Lidgett. Both men, in turn, were to be Presidents of the Free Church Council.

When A S Peake gave his Presidential Address to the Council, in 1928, he declared the Lambeth appeal to be:

'A noble document, comprehensive in its scope, lofty in its spirit, generous in its temper.'²²

Peake knew and told the Council that for the Anglicans to abandon episcopacy would be to snap one of the chief links which it had with the Eastern and Roman communions. But he reminded his fellow Free Churchmen that the envisaged episcopate in a united church would not only be constitutional, but would be combined with elements in the congregational and presbyterial (sic) order. He confessed:

'To an episcopate so limited, provided no theory that Episcopacy is of the essence of the Church is demanded, I should personally have no objections. Church order is for me a matter of expediency and not of principle. I could live and work happily under any form of Church order except despotism. The existing Anglican system needs strengthening and reform; but recent non-episcopal developments suggest that Episcopacy has its own value.'

Even so, Peake hoped, in the long run, that Anglicans would accept the validity of those Free Church ministries which had been authorised by their own ordaining bodies, as ministries of the universal church.

Scott Lidgett viewed the Lambeth appeal as:

'an epoch-making act; the greatest ecclesiastical event, in my judgement, since the Reformation.'²³

He saw difficulties over the acceptance of the Episcopate, especially for the Presbyterians. He knew, however, that it was, for him, the one means of providing a universally acknowledged ministry. Episcopacy for Lidgett had to be treated as:

'a living development that has not yet reached its final goal.'

The greatness of the end should not render any difficulties insurmountable:

'Doctrine apart, it is clear that a united church is only possible on the basis of the historic and primitive episcopate.'²⁴

Federation, Lidgett claimed, pointed to the possibility of fellowship, whereas reunion would establish the fact of fellowship:

'Under such circumstances the Catholic Truth will live as a vital faith and all true apprehension and useful service will live in it and for it.'²⁵

NOTES

- 1 Archibald W Harrison, The Evangelical Revival and Christian Reunion London (1942) p 119
- 2 Benjamin Gregory, Sidelights on the Conflicts of Methodism 1827-1852 London (1898) p 161
- 3 *ibid* p 162
- 4 *op cit* p 10
- 5 Benjamin Hellier, His Life and Teaching (A Biographical Sketch, with extracts from his Letters, Sermons, and Addresses) Edited by his Children London (1889) p 133
- 6 *ibid* p 134
- 7 James H Rigg, The Churchmanship of John Wesley and the Relations of Wesleyan Methodism to the Church of England (1878, 1886) p 123
- 8 James H Rigg, A Comparative View of Church Organizations - Primitive and Protestant with a Supplementary Chapter on Methodist Secessions and Methodist Union (1887)
- 9 *ibid* p 301
- 10 Leslie S Peake, Arthur Samuel Peake - A Memoir London (1930) p 159
- 11 James Harrison Rigg (1821-1909); Hugh Price Hughes (1847-1902); Thomas Bowman Stephenson (1839-1912); Henry Lunn (1859-1939); John Scott Lidgett (1854-1953); Arthur Samuel Peake (1865-1929)
N.B. Henry Lunn was a medical missionary, a candidate for the Wesleyan ministry and for three years an ordained minister of the Episcopal Methodist Church (Swiss Conference). Later, while remaining a Wesleyan layman and member of the Conference, he was confirmed as an Anglican. He was knighted in 1910.
- 12 Henry Lunn, Chapters from My Life with Special Reference to Reunion London (1918) p 149
- 13 *op cit* p 172
- 14 *ibid* p 367
- 15 *ibid* p 380
- 16 *ibid* p 383
- 17 *ibid* p 384

- 18 ~~ibid~~ p 397
- 19 For the background and development of the Free Church Council Movement:
The Life of Hugh Price Hughes by his Daughter London (1904)
E K H Jordan, Free Church Unity: History of the Free Church Council Movement (1896-1941) London (1956)
- 20 see G K A Bell, Documents on Christian Unity 1920-4 Oxford (1924)
- 21 op cit p 113
- 22 John T Wilkinson (ed), Arthur Samuel Peako (1865-1929) Essays in Commemoration and Selections from His Writings London (1958) p 143 ff
- 23 J Scott Lidgett, God, Christ and the Church London (1927) p 241
- 24 ~~ibid~~ p 244 and p 235
- 25 ~~ibid~~ p 250