

SEVENTH OXFORD INSTITUTE OF METHODIST THEOLOGICAL STUDIES

ECCLESIOLOGY AND SACRAMENTS IN AN ECUMENICAL CONTEXT

PREPARATORY PAPER: THE SEPARATION FROM THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

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A HOW DID THE PEOPLE CALLED METHODISTS COME TO SEE THEMSELVES AS A CHURCH?

1 The factors that led "the people called Methodists" to see themselves as a church are as follows:

(i) The development of an organisation which, although nominally and theologically within the ambit of the Church of England, in fact owed loyalty only to John Wesley. (i.e. Societies (1739) Classes (1742) Conference (1744) Circuits (1748)) This organisation developed its own ethos (see (iii) below) and ultimately was underpinned by legal acts that secured its independent existence and continuity (The Model Deed (1763) The Deed of Declaration (1784))

(ii) The construction (New Room 1739) and registration (1748) of buildings for the people called Methodists. Though services initially were not held at the times of Parish Church worship and Methodists were encouraged to attend their Parish Churches, by providing buildings Methodists were given a religious space separate from the Parish Church with which to identify. Registration was as a Dissenting Meeting House (again for legal protection). Wesley was anxious however that they should not be identified (except in legal documents) as Dissenting Meeting Houses and required them to be called "Methodist Chapels".

(iii) The development of distinctive liturgical activities, watchnights, lovefeasts, open air preaching services, the singing of hymns. This was coupled with distinctive theological emphases particularly in relation to Christian Perfection. All this tended to distance Methodists from the norm of Hanoverian Church of England churchmanship. Additionally, most Methodist converts had previously had only nominal contact (if any) with

the Church of England. The Parish Church could easily seem superfluous, the Methodist Society was their church.

(iv) The development of a full time ministry responsible to John Wesley and not to the local parochial clergy or the bishops. It was lay as well! (Thomas Maxwell 1740). At a number of points (particularly in 1746, between 1755-60 and in 1775). the issue as to whether to ordain the lay itinerant clergy was mooted and in each case resisted by John Wesley. Of course Wesley was not in favour of lay administration of the Holy Communion.

BUT

(v) 1784 The ordinations of Whatcoat and Vesey and Coke and the subsequent ordinations for Scotland and England and Wales in the years that followed, introduced to Methodism non-episcopally ordained clergy.

AND

(vi) 1795 Plan of Pacification: allowed for the setting up of a sacramental machinery. Chapels could be used for Holy Communion if a majority of Trustees and Leaders meeting separately agreed to it. Holy Communion was only to be administered by persons authorized by Conference. (i.e. Travelling Preachers in full connexion) Methodism was now a Church.

B WHEN THEN DID THE PEOPLE CALLED METHODISTS SEPARATE FROM THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND?

2 No precise date can of course be given for the separation. John Wesley died a communicant priest of the Church of England. Everything he had done from the 1740's had really however ensured the ultimate separate development of the Methodists. Many Methodists even before Wesley's death would have considered themselves 'Methodists' before they were members of the Church of England. The renewal movement in the end gave up on what it set out to renew and started up in parallel if not in competition.

C COULD THE SEPARATION HAVE BEEN AVOIDED?

3 Clearly yes, but only with large concessions either on John Wesley's part, or on the part of the Bishops and Clergy of the Church of England. Either Wesley could have given up his nationwide organisation and worked within the parochial system (which would have had much less influence but lessened the likelihood of the establishment of a separate denomination) or the Bishops could have recognized Wesley's special mission and enveloped the Methodist renewal movement within its own structures with its order of preachers etc.. Of course neither was to be, the people called Methodists did grow to an institutional self-consciousness independent of the Church of England.

D CAN THE CONFERENCE ORDINATIONS EMBODIED IN THE PLAN OF PACIFICATION (1795) BE JUSTIFIED TODAY?

4 Although traditionally Methodists have sought to justify John Wesley's 1784 Ordinations, clearly more significant for relations between Methodists in the UK and the Church of England were the Conference ordinations after Wesley's death from 1795 onwards. Given the existence of the Connexion and the need for the sacraments among Methodists there seemed no real option but to ordain and administer Holy Communion in Methodist chapels, The separation had been made. Do we still today see the need to maintain that form of ordination, or do we seek a return to an episcopal system of ordination? Is Conference ordination part of the distinctive Methodist contribution? In that case what is it that guarantees the validity of Methodist sacraments?

E TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING THE ECCLESIAL CHARACTER OF METHODISM

5 When considering the place of Methodism in the family of the various ecclesial bodies it is important to remember that there was no united

Christian witness in Eighteenth Century England, even before the Methodist movement. Others than those in the Church of England claimed to manifest the fruits and gifts of the Holy Spirit, so for sensitive Christians there arose experientially the problem of the conflict between the basic New Testament theological datum (that the church is one) the institutional reality (different ecclesial bodies) and the charismatic reality (the Holy Spirit moving in each of these ecclesial bodies).

6 Closely related to this is the important point that in seeking to define the ecclesial reality of Methodism in relation to the Church (as the Body of Christ, the Fellowship in Faith, the People of God, the New Creation, the Messianic Community) it is disastrous to seek to discover it solely in relation to the Church of England, (though Wesley's concern week by week was to maintain his status within the Church of England.) The political ascendancy of the Church of England in the Eighteenth Century should never be mistaken for theological wholeness.

7 In discussions of ecclesiology, pneumatology can never be far behind and this is especially so in relation to an ecclesial body like Methodism which claims a special apostolic status.

F WHAT MODELS OF THE CHURCH DO WE SEE AS DOMINANT IN THE SELF-UNDERSTANDING OF THE PEOPLE CALLED METHODISTS IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY?

8 Using Avery Dulles' typology of ecclesiological models, the dominant models that the people called Methodists seem to have used for their self understanding are the Herald model and the Community model. The task of the people called Methodists was to proclaim the gospel and gather those who responded for sanctification in a community of sinners. The sacramental machinery was to be provided elsewhere and was not primarily their function, (although of course John Wesley did see the Holy Communion as a converting

ordinance, but then that is the Holy Communion of the Church of England!)

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