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Articles, Homilies, and Liturgies: John Wesley and the English Reformation

Jonathan Dean

THE QUESTION OF JOHN WESLEY'S commitment to his own national Church of England and of the measures he took that made separation from it more and more inevitable, even as he trumpeted his loyalty to it, is a well-trodden path in Wesleyan scholarship.[53] There is not room here to explore these issues in greater depth, but it may be worth a brief consideration, in the five hundredth anniversary season of the Protestant Reformation, of a more basic issue. To *which* Church of England was this loyalty expressed?

Perhaps it seems a strange question to ask. It is certainly worth remembering the varieties of what we might anachronistically call *Anglicanism* in the eighteenth century—a strange collection of

53 Still one of the finest accounts remains Frank Baker's *John Wesley and the Church of England* (London: Epworth Press, 1970).

approaches and ecclesiologies that had become even stranger than the hybrid Settlement under Elizabeth I because of the upheavals, challenges, personalities, and vicissitudes of the English Civil War a century later. John Wesley's own sense of where he located himself on the wide map of English-established Christianity shifted over time, as he himself attested—and that is at the heart of some of the difficulty. But, amid his own struggles and his evolution as regards his own self-understanding and that of the people called Methodists, Wesley increasingly looked to the rock from which all English Christianity was hewn: the Reformation Church under Edward VI and the key statements of its faith and practice. These statements certainly underpinned subsequent iterations of the Church of England, but there may be evidence to suggest that John Wesley came to the view that they needed more faithful recovery. Indeed, he seems to have seen Methodism itself as a renewal of the Reformation's most radical phase in England, an urgent summons to recover the renewing fire and the theological passion that the reign of the boy king had offered.

There is not time here either for an adequate survey of the English Reformation. We ought simply to recall that the death in 1547 of Henry VIII, who separated English Christianity from papal oversight but never intended anything like a Protestant Reformation, inaugurated a six-year period of the most dramatic and remarkable change. Matters in Henry's turbulent and unpredictable court, and among his courtiers, were so set when he died that a Protestant ascendancy was the result. The young king's uncle, Edward Seymour, became Lord Protector. Archbishop Thomas Cranmer was finally liberated from the constraints of Henry's conservatism and his enemies at court to unleash the full version of his newfound radical zeal on the English people.[54] The king himself, with precocious confidence, asserted his Protestant theological convictions with assurance.

54 The publication of the "Great" Bible in 1539–40, for instance, is often seen as a great high point in the Henrician reforming agenda, and Cranmer's preface emphasized the fact. But it was soon undercut, and its progress undermined, by the fall of Cromwell and the publication of the Six Articles, which were of a far more conservative character and bent.

It is now thought unlikely that Cranmer did indeed call Edward the new Josiah at his coronation, but it is abundantly clear that something very similar was in his mind.[55] Hoping for a long reign, he clearly envisaged a root and branch cleansing of the Church, and he dreamed of establishing it as the beacon of Reformed Christianity across Europe, even as in some areas Catholicism reasserted itself again. To that end, some of the finest minds in continental Protestantism were offered refuge in England, including those who came to prestigious chairs at Oxford and Cambridge.[56] Cranmer actually hoped for a great General Council of Protestant Europe to be held in England, rivaling the Council of Trent, which was just beginning, in scope and influence.

This was all more than mere window dressing. But the substance of the publishing output in Edwardian England is the most important testament to the scale and ambition of the project. Just months after Henry's death, in July 1547, Cranmer oversaw the publication of a set of official *Book of Homilies*, for possession by and the use of every parish church in the land. They were designed to help a church without much of an established or flourishing preaching ministry by giving local clergy set pieces, which echoed official and Reformed doctrine, to read aloud. The *Homilies* had a long history—the archbishop had been trying unsuccessfully to gain permission to publish a set for years, but Henry had always resisted. Now, given his head at last, they radically reshaped the landscape of public theology in England. Unashamedly espousing the "full" Lutheran doctrine of salvation by faith alone, they

55 See Diarmaid MacCulloch, *All Things Made New* (London: Allen Lane, 2016), 91, for his latest thinking on this, a correction of his earlier work, for instance, in *Thomas Cranmer* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996). But it is clear also that the *Book of Homilies* saw biblical parallels like Josiah and Nehemiah as helpful ones in the Edwardian project.

56 Martin Bucer, the Strasbourg reformer, came to Cambridge as Regius Professor of Divinity; Peter Fagius came to the same university as professor of Hebrew but died unexpectedly before achieving much; Peter Martyr Vermigli went to Oxford as Regius Professor of Divinity. Bucer in particular was a source of advice for Cranmer and the leading English clergy on issues of doctrine and polity, and he was valued for his own "middle way" approach to issues of *adiaphora* in the English Reformation.

represented the English Reformation in full cry and good heart at last. Cranmer himself almost certainly wrote the three central homilies, on salvation, faith, and good works. They are the heart and soul of the set and of the revolution in English church life he was steering.[57]

The other main plank of all this, of course, was a new liturgy. Not one new liturgy, in fact, but two: the rather conservative Book of Common Prayer of 1549 was very swiftly replaced by the much more radical version of 1552. It abolished the Mass and thoroughly refashioned the theology of public worship in a profoundly reformed direction. Altars were destroyed, icons whitewashed, rood screens removed, simple tables set lengthwise down the aisles, all undergirded with language that very clearly echoed the emphases of the *Homilies*, asserting the believer's dependence on the grace of God alone, and the place of worship as a response to and encounter with that grace but by no means a way to increase it.

Then, finally, just as the boy king lay dying, early in 1553, a very Tudor way of doing theology was introduced: a set of forty-two "Articles of Religion." Unreservedly Reformed in their tone and content, assertive and confident in their expression of an undiluted Protestant church, and avowedly Lutheran on the key doctrines as reflected in the *Homilies*, they were meant to herald the end of the beginning of the great Edwardian project of national renewal. In the end, of course, they were its death rattle. Edward died on July 6, 1553, to be succeeded by a Catholic half-sister, Mary, who swept away his reforms, his liturgies, and his official public theology.

The English Reformation never recovered this moment, this zeal, or this poise. What emerged under Elizabeth in 1558 was an intentional compromise, a step back from what Cranmer and his circle had achieved by 1553, and from which they no doubt intended to go on to

57 See, e.g., Alec Ryrie, *The Age of Reformation* (London: Routledge, 2013), 155–57, and MacCulloch, *Tudor Church Militant* (London: Penguin, 1999), 147–49. It is also worth noting Cranmer's own long and losing battle with Henry VIII on the question of justificatio, and the late king's refusal to embrace anything that felt Lutheran in its tenor; cf. Jonathan Dean, *God Truly Worshipped* (Norwich, UK: Canterbury Press, 2012), 10–11, 27–31.

better things. For Elizabeth, the compromise seems to have matched her instincts and her preferences.[58] But, while there was no room in the English religious landscape for unrepentant Catholics, nor was there the possibility of the kind of continued reform that many, some of whom had spent the Marian years in exile in the Reformed cities and states of Europe, yearned for. Some compromised with the compromise: Bishop John Jewel of Salisbury set to, writing his magnificent *Apology of the Church of England*, which sought to show how Elizabeth's church was in fact genuinely Protestant.[59] But the divisions the Settlement engendered, hardened by poor leadership into schism and violence, produced a civil war, a disastrous experiment with non-episcopal forms of governance, and a Restoration of Religion in 1660 that established the Elizabethan compromise again as the Church of England's final form. For many, however, the heady days of the Edwardian reforms, and the radical direction of their ecclesiology, were never forgotten, even as they passed into distant memory.

If there is little time to properly chart the course of the English Reformation, there is even less adequate time to track the evolution of John Wesley's own ecclesiology and evolving relationship to the Church of England. His curious and multifaceted inheritance from his parents, reflecting the divisions and disagreements of the seventeenth

58 The subject of the Elizabethan Settlement and its theological and ecclesiological character is complex and sometimes fraught. Good, if older, accounts remain those of MacCaffrey and Haugaard; more recently Alec Ryrie's *The Age of Reformation* (London: Routledge, 2013) has offered a nuanced view. Chapter 7 of my own *To Gain at Harvest* (London: SCM Press, 2018) is an effort to penetrate a little into the mind and heart of Elizabeth herself, who was responsible for much of the strangeness and hybridity of the Settlement.

59 The other great scholarly apologist for Elizabethan Anglicanism is Richard Hooker, whose work represents in some ways a more moderate view than that of Jewel; there is not space here to analyze his distinctive contribution, from which much of the subsequent character of the Church of England drew its wisdom, and he seems not to have been especially important to Wesley. But my colleague Andrea Russell has recently produced her own perspicacious volume on his work: *Richard Hooker, Beyond Certainty* (London: Routledge, 2017).

century, is one obvious factor.[60] He emerged from these conflicting influences, and from his education, something of what we might call a "high churchman," especially in his attitude toward the Church's governance. In all things, as he said himself, he was in his youth "as regular a clergyman as any in the three kingdoms."[61] It is interesting to note, however, the debt he owed to his father, who had written to his son in 1725, repeating advice he had previously given to a curate about the books one ought to read early in public ministry. Foremost on the list were the Edwardian *Homilies*, which "should be often and carefully read," along with Jewel's *Apology*, described as "neat and strong."

Assuming that John Wesley read these works at the time or soon afterward, there is every reason to suppose that they were increasingly important to him later. By his own description of events, the searing failure of his years in Georgia led to a soul-searching and a reevaluation of much of the basis of his former confidence in the Church in which he was ordained. When we survey the writings and utterances of his middle and later years, once the Methodist revival was well underway and its existence more secure, it is fascinating to note the shift in emphasis. Wesley certainly echoed the concerns of Bishop Jewel, whose *Apology* had been largely an appeal to the first centuries of the Church and to their doctrine and practice, in order to demonstrate the vitality and fidelity of Queen Elizabeth's odd creation. Wesley's own works were liberally scattered with patristic sources, and the *Christian Library* included versions of many ancient authors.

By the 1740s, Wesley had become more and more intent on proving the rectitude of the Methodists' adherence to Anglican doctrine and law. The *Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion* of 1744 cited several canons in their defense. The much longer *Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion* of the following year strove to assert Methodist credentials by quoting extensively from the *Homilies*, the Articles (under Elizabeth reduced to a mere thirty-nine), and the Book

60 See, e.g., Henry Rack's *Reasonable Enthusiast* (London: Epworth Press, 1992), 43–61.

61 From the *Arminian Magazine* of 1790, quoted by Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England*, 138.

of Common Prayer itself. In all of this, it became his fervent concern simply to prove the inevitability of Methodism's rise, once members of the Church of England took their own doctrines seriously. As he put it to Lord Dartmouth in 1761, "The doctrine of the Established Church, which is far the most essential part of her constitution, [we] manifestly confirm."[62]

Such quotations as these identify the nature of his evolution: toward a deeper love for the Church's doctrines, as established in those radical Edwardian years, and further away from some of the matters of order that his younger self, along with the successors of the Elizabethan and Carolinian establishments, had so cherished. He believed less in the authority of priests and more in the necessary ministry of gifted laypeople; he became more dismissive of any canon that prevented the proper preaching of the gospel by anyone with the ability to do so; he even came to see episcopal authority as a convenient framework but by no means a guarantor of ecclesial integrity and authenticity. In all this, he identified himself increasingly with the more radical end of the English Reformation and even with those of a puritan bent who had wished for better things.

In 1755, addressing the Conference on the question "Ought we to separate from the Church of England?," Wesley nailed his colors to the mast with a keen sense of this history. In the address, he very clearly identified adherence to the *Homilies*, Articles, and liturgies of the Prayer Book as essential marks of belonging to the Church of England, and he affirmed again that Methodists "keep closer thereto than any other body of people in England." As I reflect on Professor Pak's work earlier in this chapter, I'm actually more convinced that in large measure he saw in Cranmer's homilies on salvation, faith, and good works exactly the kind of Protestant theology, espoused by the infant Reformed Church of England, which he believed also to lie at the heart of Methodism's own success and appeal. It embraced Luther's insistence on the absolute sovereignty and priority of God's action but resisted his caution, shared with other leading reformers, about insisting on works

62 Letter to the Earl of Dartmouth, *The Letters of John Wesley*, ed. John Telford (London: Epworth Press, 1960), 4:152.

as the fruit of that salvation.[63] Indeed, it is interesting to note that Wesley himself in the early years of the revival spoke only of "salvation by faith," as Cranmer did; only later did he feel it increasingly important to distinguish justification from sanctification as phases or stages of the *via salutis*, the more he sought (I would argue) to espouse this distinctively English soteriology, as expounded in the *Homilies*.[64]

Where some in 1755 would have added to this list of the marks of allegiance to the Church of England "submission to its laws," Wesley demurred. He could not allow such submission, when contrary to Scripture, and thus when limits were placed on universality of preaching, extempore prayer, the commitment to social holiness, or the preaching ministry of the laity.[65] Echoing Thomas Cranmer, Wesley clearly identified what he had come to view as the radical driving force for English Christianity, a period that ought still to inform and inspire and energize the national Church over two centuries later:

> King Edward the Sixth required several priests in the then Church of England to "search into the law of God and teach it to the people"; . . . afterwards he restored the scriptural worship of God to the utmost of his knowledge and power, and (like Josiah and Nehemiah) gave several rules for the more decent and orderly performance of it—if you mean this only by saying "the church is a creature of the state"—we allow it is, and praise God for it![66]

63 See the extracts from the *Homilies* in Dean, *God Truly Worshipped*, 57–74.

64 See also Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 83–84 and 220–22, and Wesley's great 1765 Sermon 43, "The Scripture Way of Salvation," in *Works* 2:153–69.

65 Wesley also spelled out the areas of his necessary disobedience in his 1789 sermon "The Ministerial Office" or Sermon 121, "Prophets and Priests," in *Works* 4:72–84; they were: (1) open-air preaching, (2) extempore prayer, (3) the societies and associated class and band systems, (4) regular meetings of the preachers, and thus (5) the Conference and its task of assigning the stations.

66 Address to the Conference of 1755, reproduced in Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England*, 330–31.

This gets to the crux of the mature view to which Wesley came, his frustration, as again expressed to Lord Dartmouth, about those around him who had "deliberately engaged to defend [the Church's] orders to the destruction of her doctrine."[67] His own historical investigations led him further in these directions, toward his own decision to ordain ministers for America and to an increasingly self-confident assertion of the calling of his "extraordinary messengers," in a tone and spirit that matched the debates of the English Reformation, in which the *Homilies* had been produced by Cranmer to foster and encourage preaching in a time of want and not, as Elizabeth I fiercely and erroneously insisted, to subdue it altogether. In his *A Concise Ecclesiastical History* of 1781, drawing from the work of Mosheim, Wesley sided with those moderate puritans such as Bishop Jewel and Archbishop Grindal, who bridled at the Queen's conservatism. It is worth noting Jewel's somewhat subversive language too: frequently in his published polemic he chose to refer to England's bishops as "superintendents" in a nod to continental purity.

So much more could and needs to be said—about the precise nature of Wesley's construction of a "new" form of Anglicanism for the nascent United States of America, about his confrontations with episcopal authority and his own reevaluation of his debt to and unfinished business with his beloved Church of England, and about his ongoing spats with his brother about their ecclesial identity. But he does seem to have valued increasingly the radical simplicity and gospel zeal of the early period of the Reformation in England, the brief years under Edward, the boy king, in which the life blood of English Protestantism was infused with a vitality, a clarity, and a theological acuity that marked for him a high point toward which Methodism sought to restore the national Church, in very different times. Professor Schuler wrote earlier in this chapter of the dynamics of the Reformation as leading to a process of renewal that is continual; Wesley, drawing on the wellsprings of the English Reformation, would surely have agreed.

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67 Letter to the Earl of Dartmouth, *The Letters of John Wesley*, vol. 4, *January 16, 1758 to February 28, 1766*, ed. John Telford (London: Epworth Press, 1960), 148.

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