

Methodism, Division and the Nature of the Church

By Scott Kisker

Introduction

“[Schism] 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 only when our love grows cold, that we can think of separating from our brethren. ... The pretenses for separation may be innumerable, but want of love is always the real cause; otherwise they would still hold the unity of the Spirit in the bound of peace. ... And as such a separation is evil in itself, being a breach of brotherly love, so it brings forth evil fruit; it is naturally productive of the most mischievous consequences. It opens a door to all unkind tempers, both in ourselves and others. It leads directly to a whole train of evil surmising, to severe and uncharitable judging of each other. It gives occasion to offense, to anger and resentment, perhaps in ourselves as well as in our brethren; which, if not presently stopped, may issue in bitterness, malice, and settled hatred; creating a present hell wherever they are found, as a prelude to hell eternal.”¹

So wrote John Wesley of the nature of division or heresy (which he defined as the fomenting of division within communities of living Christians ²).

With such a direct and strong statement against division, it is perhaps surprising that the Wesleyan Methodist tradition has produced as many bodies of Christians as it has, some living still: African Methodist Episcopal, African Methodist Episcopal, Zion, Christian Methodist Episcopal, Free Methodist, Global Methodist, Nazarene, United Methodist, and Wesleyan Methodist, to name a few, and these only within the confines of the United States. Taking a global perspective, given the independence of the descendants of British Methodism and the influence of Holiness and Pentecostal

¹ John Wesley, Sermon 75, “On Schism,” [II]:11-12, in *Sermons III*, ed. Albert C. Outler, vol. 3 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976-), 64-65. Note that the damage in schism is not to a structure, but to the character of holiness in those who participate in it.

² Wesley, “On Schism,” I:6, *Works*, 3:62.

movements, the divisions are legion. A closer examination of Methodism's history and its founder's ecclesiology.

This paper will argue that Wesleyan Methodism depends on divisions for its existence as a coherent tradition within the larger church catholic. These divisions occurred first in Bristol and then in London. Next, through an examination of John Wesley's sermons "On Schism" (1786), "Of the Church" (1785), and "The Catholic Spirit" (1750), this paper will then examine John Wesley's ecclesiology, which assumed a single catholic church that was necessarily divided institutionally on this side of the eschaton. The true church, per Wesley, is visible but not coincident with any particular historical ecclesial community. This ecclesiological position is rooted in the trans-confessional seventeenth century Pietist movements that shaped both John Wesley and Methodism. Finally, this paper will draw some conclusions for the present state of Wesleyan Methodism based on our history and ecclesiology.

The Historical Background: Wesleyan Methodism and Schism

Wesleyan Methodism was birthed in and through division. Some will assume this refers to the beginnings of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1784, when a Methodist church became officially and organizationally independent from anything known as the Anglican Church. It does not. That separation was not a schism but a development necessitated by abandonment. The Anglican Church had ceased to exist in America, *de facto* when Anglican clergy fled to Canada or England in the 1770s, and *de jure* by the former colonies' independence from the Supreme

Governor of the Church, the King.³ Rather, the divisions that formed Wesleyan Methodism as a distinct tradition had happened 50 years earlier.

In the mid-1730s, “Methodism” was a loose confederation of like-minded proponents of experimental Christianity, who met together institutionally in societies (what we might call house groups) and connected through the preachers and teachers who were invited to speak at these societies. These para-church gatherings incorporated Religious Society members, Oxford Methodists, Moravians, continental Pietists, High-Church Anglicans, even some dissenters. The leader of this “Methodist” movement, if there can be said to have been a “leader,” was neither of the Wesley brothers, but George Whitefield. Whitefield – young, charismatic, affable – was by far the most well-known and popular preacher on the Societies’ preaching circuits.⁴

Whitefield had been part of the Methodists at Oxford in connection with both John and Charles, but had experienced the new birth around Easter, 1735, several years before either of the Wesleys. Following his regeneration, he began to testify in Gloucester where a group formed themselves into a society and began reading Puritan writings. Whitefield thus interpreted his religious experience through this Reformed, moderately Calvinistic, doctrinal lens.⁵

³ In 1784 there was technically no Anglican Church in the United States from which Methodists could split. The Protestant Episcopal Church was not formed until 1789. Ironically, one of Wesley’s former Methodist lay missionaries to America, Joseph Pilmore, became one of its early priests.

⁴ Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 191.

⁵ Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 192.

After a trip to America, he experimented with outdoor, extemporaneous preaching. It was effective, especially among coal miners who labored outside of Bristol. In 1739, Whitefield decided to set out again for the American colonies. He wrote on March 3, 1739 to John Wesley, who had by then also experienced the new birth, to “come water what God [had] enabled [him] to plant” among the colliers.⁶

Wesley was in London, having connected with a gathering of experimental Christians, known as the Fetter Lane Society. The group was made of up Oxford Methodists, Religious Society people, and some of the Moravians who had led Wesley into his experience of justification. Despite uncertainty on the wisdom of the move, Wesley went to Bristol to meet with Whitefield and to see the ministry. In Bristol, this Oxford Methodist-Moravian-Anglican priest took up outdoor extemporaneous preaching.

Schism in Bristol

While both Wesley and Whitefield had experienced new birth, they interpreted that experience through different theological lenses: Whitefield (as mentioned) through Puritanism, Wesley through the Arminian High-Church Party Anglicanism in which he was raised. These doctrinal divisions began to manifest soon after Wesley began exercising leadership of the movement in Bristol.⁷

⁶ George Whitefield, Letter to John Wesley ([March 3, 1739](#)), [Letters I](#), in ed. Frank Baker, [vol. 25 of The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley](#) (Nashville: [Abingdon Press, 1976-](#)), 605.

⁷ Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 192. Those two Protestant traditions had been in conflict in England since the time of James I (if not before), and had, in part, had been responsible for the English Civil War. See John Spurr, *English Puritanism: 1603-1689* (London: MacMillan Press, 1998), 79-113.

Wesley had been warned not to raise objections to predestination in his preaching. His conscience, though, would not allow him to remain silent. He found the doctrine of predestination abhorrent, twisting the character of God into someone who didn't love and couldn't be loved. Such a denial of universal charity undercut both the justice and love of God, the process of salvation, and its goal of perfect love.⁸ About a month after beginning to field preach in Bristol, Wesley recorded being "sensibly led" while preaching in Newcastle on April 26, 1739 to preach that "God willeth 'all men' to be 'thus' saved."⁹ Wesley then invoked the Holy Spirit against the doctrine for dramatic effect, asking God "to bear witness to his word." Convulsions began among his hearers and people began to faint.¹⁰

Whitefield, fearing division among Methodists, interpreted events through his own theological lens. He thought Wesley was "tempting God to require such signs" of the Holy Spirit, and warned Wesley against printing "a sermon against predestination."¹¹ In August 1740, Wesley wrote to Whitefield that there were "bigots on both sides," asserting both opinions could co-exist. "For a time you are suffered to be of one opinion and I of another."¹² Opinions hardened. Charles Cennick (who oversaw the Kingswood societies) threatened to separate from Wesley's leadership.

⁸ Wesley, Sermon 110, "Free Grace," *Works*, 3:542-563.

⁹ John Wesley, April 26, 1739, *Journals and Diaries II (1738-1743)*, ed. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, vol. 19 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976-), 51.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, April 26, 1739, 51.

¹¹ Whitefield, Letter to John Wesley (June 25, 1739), in *Works*, 25:662.

¹² Wesley, Letter to Whitefield (August 9, 1740), *Works*, 26:31.

By February 1741, Wesley had published his sermon “Free Grace” with [a](#) poem by Charles. Wesley had cast lots, which had indicated publish. Whitefield complained in a private letter, which others published. In a confrontation with Cennick, Wesley was accused of preaching popery, justification by works. Wesley returned that Cennick was dividing the society. And it did indeed divide.

Fortunately, Wesley had already taken “possession of a piece of ground” in Bristol in May 1739, and on May 12 had laid the foundation stone “to build a room.”¹³ Two religious societies (Baldwin Street and Nicholas Street) had combined there by June 1739 and formed the United Society. With the addition of members from Kingswood who stayed with Wesley, a hub of Methodism in the Bristol area, fully under Wesley’s oversight and institutionally independent from Whitefield’s moderate Calvinistic Methodists, was created.¹⁴

Schism in London

There were also signs of division in London. The joint Anglican-Moravian Fetter Lane Society had seen tensions before, but the catalyst for a break came with arrival of Phillip Molther from Germany in October 1739. He was en route to Pennsylvania. Molther, as Whitefield had, found the mode of charismatic expression in the Fetter Lane meetings unsettling. He wrote:

The good people, not knowing rightly what they wanted, had adopted many most extraordinary ways. The very first time I entered their meeting, I was alarmed and almost terror-stricken at hearing their sighing and groaning, which strange proceedings they called the demonstration of the Spirit and of power.¹⁵

¹³ Wesley, [May 9, 1739, Journals and Diaries II \(1738-1743\)](#) in *Works*, 19:56.

¹⁴ Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 212.

¹⁵ Phillip Molther’s Memoir, *Gemein-Nachrichten* (1873), 1:611-612.

He assumed they were groaning for salvation and began preaching to them about justification. From his more Lutheran perspective, members clearly did not have faith, and he convinced many who, in Wesley's opinion, had indeed had a degree of justifying faith that they had none. Furthermore, Molther also told them to leave off all outward works, refrain from all means (esp. the Eucharist) until they had true saving faith. This offended Wesley's High-Church Anglican sensibilities.

Wesley began arguing for degrees of justifying faith, prior to the experience of justification, and the necessity of the means of grace to strengthen that faith. On July 20, 1740, Wesley confronted the Fetter lane Society with an ultimatum. He "Gave them up to God"¹⁶ and asked those who agreed with him to follow him. He withdrew with around twenty members. Days later Wesley's group met at a former factory, the old King's Foundry, which Wesley had bought and fixed up as a preaching house. The Foundry, like the New Room in Bristol, was owned by Wesley personally. There were now two hubs of Wesleyan Methodism in England, Bristol and London. Both were under his oversight.

Yet Another Ecclesiola in Ecclesia

These were no amicable splits. They involved passionate feelings on each side and real separation. Fetter Lane ultimately abandoned Anglican connections and became the beginnings of the Moravian Church in England.¹⁷ Both Moravians and Calvinistic Methodists became separate connections; separate churches ultimately, structurally and missionally.

¹⁶ Wesley, [July 20, 1740, *Journals and Diaries II \(1738-1743\) in Works.*](#) 19:162.

¹⁷ Colin Podmore, *The Moravian Church in England, 1728-1760* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 29-96.

These early “Methodists” divided, institutionally and connectionally, over differences in theology, over diverse readings of Scripture, over community discipline, and over liturgical practice. What we know as the Wesleyan tradition, with its emphasis on universal free grace, on human agency in salvation, on the means of grace, on the sacrament as a converting ordinance, on discipline, holiness, and perfection in love, depends on these splits having occurred. To take an even broader view, were it not for divisions, (Imperial/Donatist, East/West, Protestant/Roman, Arminian/Reformed, Moravian/Anglo-Evangelical) Methodism would not exist as a coherent community to wrestle with its identity and division.¹⁸

The Church?

That, of course, leaves the question hanging. Where is “the Church”? What is “the Church” according to Wesleyan categories? Did these numerous divisions divide the “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church” or (since Wesley found the Nicene Creed politically compromised) the “holy catholic church”?¹⁹ Were all earlier separations heretical? And which? Was Wesley a schismatic by his own definition? A heretic? Was he a promoter of “causeless separation from a body of living Christians”?²⁰

¹⁸ In many aspects, Methodism preserves a strain of holiness and charismatic ecclesiology, which is not easily traced through the standard line of institutional “orthodoxy.”

¹⁹ Wesley [preferred](#) the Apostles Creed. See Wesley, Sermon 74, “Of the Church,” [III]:28, *Works*, 3:55. He also intentionally removed the Nicene Creed from the Articles of Religion and liturgy that he sent to America. Compare Article VIII “Of the Creed” of the Articles of the Church of England, which is omitted from the Articles of Religion sent by Wesley to America. See also John Wesley, *Sunday Service of the Methodists, with other Occasional Services*.

²⁰ Wesley, Sermon 75, “On Schism,” [II]:10, *Works*, 3:64.

Wesley's ecclesiology in his sermon "On Schism," in which he opposed division, shows that Wesley was not hypocritically unaware of his own participation in the disputes that formed his connection. "If I could not continue united to any smaller society, church, or body of Christians," he wrote,

without committing sin, without lying and hypocrisy, without preaching to others doctrines which I did not myself believe, I should be under an absolute necessity of separating from that society. And in all these cases the sin of separation, with all the evils consequent upon it, would not lie upon it, would not lie upon me, but upon those who constrained me to make that separation, by requiring of me such terms of communion as I could not in conscience comply with.²¹

Wesley even admitted that (if forbidden to do what God had called him to do in preaching the Gospel) he would separate from the Church of England,²² a church in which he was reared, which he thought was the best visible instantiation of primitive Christianity, and with whom he agreed (mostly) on matters of doctrine, discipline, polity, and liturgy. Yet he would separate if its discipline threatened to stop to the mission of Methodism to which he was called.

Another clue is that Wesley never assumed that those who disagreed with him, from whom he had separated institutionally, even missionally, were not true Christians, not members of the holy catholic Church. Those who were part of an alternative connection were not excluded from the communion with Jesus Christ that made them part of His body on earth. When Wesley preached George Whitefield's funeral sermon, he was clear that Whitefield, whose doctrine he opposed and from whom he formed a separate connection, was a child of God. "The

²¹ Ibid." [II]:17, 67.

²² [Ibid., \[II\]:17, 67.](#)

foundation of [Whitefield's] integrity, ... sincerity, courage, patience, and every other valuable and amiable quality" wrote Wesley,

was no other than faith in a bleeding Lord; "faith of the operation of God." It was "a lively hope of an inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, and that fadeth not away." It was "the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost which was given unto him," filling his soul with tender, disinterested love to every child of man.²³

Whitefield was a new creature in Christ, part of the Church.

And this assertion of unity in Christ with Whitefield was not due to Whitefield being an Anglican and fellow priest in the established church. It was not due to their connection through the outward sign of unity, the sacrament of communion. Wesley believed that among the Moravians, with whom he disagreed about the sacrament itself, who had once excluded him from the sacrament, there were "dear children of God, through faith which is in Jesus."²⁴ Wesley even accepted that those whose sacramental practice (or lack of it) completely excluded him from their fellowships, contained among them genuine Christians.²⁵

A Wesleyan Ecclesiology

The Oneness of the Church

If unity, given the founding logic [of](#) the Wesleyan movement, does not primarily exist institutionally or even ritually in a shared sacrament of the Eucharist, where does it exist? In his 1785 sermon "Of the Church," Wesley reflected on this question using Ephesians 4:1-6. His translation of St. Paul reads:

I beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with long-suffering, forbearing one another in love;

²³ Wesley, Sermon 53, "On the Death of George Whitefield," II:8, in *Works*, 2: 340.

²⁴ Wesley, Letter to Count Zinzendorf [August 1740], *Works*, 26:24.

²⁵ This included both Quakers and Roman Catholics.

endeavouring to keep the *unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*. There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.²⁶

In this sermon, Wesley interpreted each of Paul's statements of unity: One body, One Spirit, One Calling, One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism, One God and Father of All, in such a way as to turn aside any understanding of the unity of the universal Church as primarily institutionally visible, or necessitating connection to one organization.

The universal Church, Wesley argued, is "not only the Christians of one congregation, of one city, of one province, or nation."²⁷ Rather, the universal Church is "all the persons upon the face of the earth, who answer the character here given. The several particulars contained therein, we may now more distinctly consider."²⁸ He then dealt with those "particulars" that mark the universal church, which point to its unity.

Those who are part of the universal church share in the One Spirit "who animates all . . . the *living* members of the Church of God."²⁹ They share "a hope full of immortality. They know, to die is not to be lost: Their prospect extends beyond the grave."³⁰ They have one Lord who "reigns over all those that are partakers of this hope. To obey him, to run the way of his commandments, is their glory and joy."³¹ They have one faith, "the free gift of God . . . teaching them to say with holy

²⁶ Eph 4:1-6, in Wesley, Sermon 74, "Of the Church," *Works*, 3:46, emphasis mine.

²⁷ Wesley could have included one connection or one mode of celebrating the sacrament; such is the logic of his argument.

²⁸ Wesley, Sermon 74, "Of the Church," [I]:7, *Works*, 3:48.

²⁹ Ibid., [I]:8, 48-49.

³⁰ Ibid., [I]:9, 49

³¹ Ibid., [I]:10, 49.

boldness 'My Lord and My God.'"³² They share "one baptism; which is the outward sign our one Lord has been pleased to appoint, of all that inward and spiritual grace which he is continually bestowing upon his Church."³³ Finally, ""There is "one God and Father of all" who have the Spirit of adoption, which "crieth in their hearts, Abba, Father;" which "witnesseth" continually "with their spirits," that they are the children of God."³⁴ And "the catholic or universal Church is, all the persons in the universe whom God hath so called out of the world as to entitle them to the preceding character."³⁵

The same perspective unity can be found in Wesley's much misused and misinterpreted 1750 sermon "The Catholic Spirit." Here, the unity of the Church is evident in mutual love and cooperation in mission among those whose hearts are right with God. This right heart implies, namely, "a divine evidence, a supernatural conviction, of the things of God."³⁶ It is shared among those who "know Jesus Christ and him crucified,"³⁷ who are "filled with the energy of love,"³⁸ who "in whatsoever [they] doest in all [their] labour, [their] business, [their] conversation" aim "only at the glory of God."³⁹ Those with such a heart "serve [God] with fear . . . [and] 'hate all evil ways,' every transgression of his holy and perfect law."⁴⁰ They "love . . . all

³² [Ibid., \[I\]:11, 49.](#)

³³ [Ibid., \[I\]:12, 49.](#)

³⁴ [Ibid., \[I\]:13, 50.](#)

³⁵ [Ibid., \[I\]:14, 50.](#)

³⁶ Wesley, Sermon 39, "Catholic Spirit," Intro:12, *Works*, 2:87.

[Ibid., Intro:13, 87.](#)

³⁸ [Ibid., Intro:14, 88.](#)

³⁹ [Ibid., Intro:15, 88.](#)

⁴⁰ [Ibid., Intro:16, 88.](#)

mankind, without exception,"⁴¹ and show "love by . . . works while [they] have time . . . [and] opportunity."⁴²

This definition of the one Church, Wesley argued, *can* be read as consistent with the Anglican Article of Religion 19: "The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men." "Faithful congregation," Wesley argued (using the Latin version of the Article, *coetus credentium*) means "'a congregation of believers;'" plainly showing that by faithful men, the compilers meant, men endued with living faith."⁴³

However, while not opposed to the doctrinal standard of his own communion, Wesley clearly thought the article, where it reads "in which the pure word of God is preached, and the sacraments be duly administered,"⁴⁴ overreached. "The Article" Wesley says, "includes a little more than the Apostle has expressed,"⁴⁵ and he would "not undertake to defend" *that* statement.⁴⁶

He demurred precisely because he believed membership in Christ's Church, his body, is about whether one is being saved from sin and death. Is one grafted into the vine and producing the fruit of holiness? Salvation is not determined by opinions about particular doctrines or modes of worship. "I dare not exclude from the Church catholic," he wrote,

all those congregations in which any unscriptural doctrines, which cannot be affirmed to be "the pure word of God," are sometimes, yea, frequently preached; neither all those congregations, in which the sacraments are not "duly administered."⁴⁷

⁴¹ [Ibid., Intro:17, 89.](#)

⁴² [Ibid., Intro:18, 89.](#)

⁴³ Wesley, Sermon 74, "Of the Church," [I]:16, *Works*, 3:51.

⁴⁴ [Ibid., \[I\]:16, 51.](#)

⁴⁵ [Ibid., \[I\]:16, 51.](#)

⁴⁶ Wesley, Sermon 74, "Of the Church," [I]:19, *Works*, 3:52.

⁴⁷ [Ibid., \[I\]:19, 52.](#)

To Wesley, the actual Church of England is not a single communion, circumscribed within the institution so-called and “duly established.” Rather, the Church of England “is that part, those members, of the Universal Church who are inhabitants of England.”⁴⁸ Therefore, there are many confirmed regular communicants of the established church who are not members of the Church of England and many dissenters from that communion who are.

Likewise, the “oneness” of “the Church” is not institutional. Unity is not encompassed in any organization or connection, or even through the sacramental sign of its communion with Christ. Unity is through actual communion with Christ through believer’s shared experience and character of Christ. In his sermon “Predestination Calmly Considered” (which is not very calm and hardly a text promoting external unity) Wesley referred to the true church as “those who are grafted into the good olive tree,”⁴⁹ “not barely the outward, visible church but the invisible, consisting of holy believers.”⁵⁰ Christians are united to each other, because they are invisibly united to Christ, which produces visible fruit in their lives.

Plurality in Unity

According to Wesley, the catholic or universal Church can not be one outward connection, at least on this side of the eschaton. First, this is because the outward visible church includes non-Christians, people who are not part of the unity of the body of Christ. In the outward visible church “reprobates are ... mingled with the

⁴⁸ [Ibid.](#), [I]:17, 52.

⁴⁹ [John Wesley](#), “Predestination Calmly Considered,” in [John Wesley, ed. Albert C. Outler \(New York: Oxford University Press, 1964\)](#), 461.

⁵⁰ [Ibid.](#)

elect,” as St. Augustine put it.⁵¹ There are “weeds and wheat” to quote another learned theologian.⁵² “How clear is this!” wrote Wesley,

If the Church, as to the very essence of it, is a body of believers, no man that is not a Christian believer can be a member of it. If this whole body be animated by one spirit, and endued with one faith, and one hope of their calling; then he who has not that spirit, and faith, and hope, is no member of this body. It follows, that not only no common swearer, no Sabbath-breaker, no drunkard, no whoremonger, no thief, no liar, none that lives in any outward sin, but none that is under the power of anger or pride, no lover of the world, in a word, none that is dead to God, can be a member of his Church.⁵³

Indeed, sometimes, those who “cry out, ‘The Church! The Church!’ and to pretend to be very zealous for it, and violent defenders of it,” wrote Wesley, actually “have neither part nor lot therein, nor indeed know what the Church is.”⁵⁴ There are always “sheep ... without, ... wolves within,” to reference again St. Augustine.⁵⁵

Second, this is because each “outward visible church” is constituted by people who share “opinions” – on doctrine, discipline, and modes of worship. Such shared opinions are necessary, constituent aspects of community cohesion, and yet they separate even true Christians from one another. These opinions obscure the sacred unity in Christ of the invisible church because

Every man necessarily believes that every particular opinion which he holds is true (for to believe any opinion is not true, is the same thing as not to hold it). . . . “And yet, no man [can] be assured that all his own opinions, taken together, are true.”⁵⁶

⁵¹ Augustine of Hippo, *City of God* 18.49.

⁵² Matt 13:24-30.

⁵³ Wesley, Sermon 74, “Of the Church,” [III]:28, *Works*, 3:56.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, [III]:19, 56.

⁵⁵ Augustine, “Homily XLV on John 10:1- 10.”

⁵⁶ Wesley, Sermon 39, “Catholic Spirit,” I:4, *Works*, 2:83-84.

Every “outward and visible church” must make choices with regard to faith and practice. Not to do so would be, as Wesley put it, “speculative latitudinarianism, . . . an indifference to all opinions”⁵⁷ or “practical latitudinarianism, . . . indifference as to public worship, or as to the outward manner of performing it”⁵⁸ The former,” Wesley said, “is the spawn of hell, not the offspring of heaven.” “It is an irreconcilable enemy, not a friend, to true Catholicism, . . . nearer the spirit of Antichrist.”⁵⁹ The latter,” is “an unspeakable hindrance to the worshipping of God in spirit and in truth.”⁶⁰

Furthermore, “a catholic spirit is not indifference to all congregations,” or even connections. That is equally “absurd and unscriptural.”⁶¹ All who claim to be Christian *must* be “steadily fixed” in the “religious principles” they think “to be the truth as it is in Jesus.” They must “firmly [adhere] to that worship of God . . . [they judge] most acceptable in [God’s] sight.” And they must unite “by the tenderest and closest ties to one particular congregation.”⁶²

There will be multiple separate groups containing real Christians, because “every wise man will allow others the same liberty of thinking which he desires [others] should allow him.”⁶³ Unity, according to Wesley, does “not mean ‘be of my opinion.’ You need not.”⁶⁴ That cannot be desired or expected, even though differing

⁵⁷ [Ibid., III:1, 92.](#)

⁵⁸ [Ibid., III:2, 93.](#)

⁵⁹ [Ibid., III:1, 92-93.](#)

⁶⁰ [Ibid., III:2, 93.](#)

⁶¹ [Ibid., III:3, 93.](#)

⁶² [Ibid., III:4, 94.](#)

⁶³ [Ibid., I:6, 84.](#)

⁶⁴ [Ibid., II:1, 89.](#)

opinions about Christian teaching divide Christians. It does not “mean, ‘Embrace my modes of worship,’ or, ‘I will embrace yours.’ This also is a thing which does not depend ... on ... choice.” All must “Hold ... fast that which you believe is most acceptable to God,” wrote Wesley, “and I will do the same,”⁶⁵

Instead, believers (those genuinely united to Christ and producing the fruit of holiness), even if they are in separate connections, bear “with those who differ.”⁶⁶ A believer “only asks [another believer in a different connection] ... to unite in a that single question, “Is thy heart right, as my heart is with thy heart.”⁶⁷ That said, because of differences of opinion, the Church has always been and will always be an institutionally divided unity of faith, even among true believers, until Christ returns. “So it has been from the beginning of the world,” wrote Wesley, “and so it will be ‘till the restitution of all things.’”⁶⁸

A Witness to the Presence of the One Church

While such differences “in opinions or modes of worship may prevent an entire external union,”⁶⁹ the true Church is visible. There are always signs of the presence of the invisible church. Despite outward division, there must be a physical gathering, a connection. There is no holiness that is not “social holiness,” that does not involve uniting with other human beings. Believers unite. There are no solo Christians.

Every follower of Christ is obliged, by the very nature of the Christian institution, to be a member of some particular congregation or other, some church, as it is

⁶⁵ [Ibid., II:2, 89-90.](#)

⁶⁶ [Ibid., I:6, 84.](#)

⁶⁷ [Ibid., I:, 84-85.](#)

⁶⁸ [Ibid., I:3, 83.](#)

⁶⁹ [Ibid., Intro:4, 82.](#)

usually termed (which implies a particular manner of worshipping God; for ‘two cannot walk together unless they be agreed’).⁷⁰

Such a gathering, according to Wesley, may be “any number of people, how small or great soever.”⁷¹ It may be as small as two or three, who share “one body” and “one calling ... out of the world, (so the original word properly signifies,) uniting together in one congregation.”⁷²

However, the most important visible evidence of the presence of the true church is holiness. “Religion . . . properly and directly consists in the knowledge and love of God, as manifested in the Son of his love, through the eternal Spirit. And this naturally leads to every heavenly temper, and to every good word and work.”⁷³ “The Church” (and here Wesley meant the invisible unity of believers) “is called holy, because it is holy, because every member thereof is holy, though in different degrees, as He that called them is holy.”⁷⁴ This “olive tree,” wrote Wesley, “is the invisible Church, for it ‘consists of holy believers’ which none but the invisible Church does.”⁷⁵

The Roots of Wesleyan Ecclesiology

This understanding of “catholic unity” was carried down through the centuries by a number of religious communities. Most proximately to Wesley, however, this ecclesiology was developed by and passed on through Pietism. Wesley’s ideas about “Church” were certainly influenced by his 18th century Anglican context (though

⁷⁰ [Ibid., I:10, 86.](#)

⁷¹ Wesley, Sermon 74, “Of the Church,” Intro: 2, *Works*, 3: 46.

⁷² [Ibid., Intro:3, 47.](#)

⁷³ Wesley, Sermon 77, “Spiritual Worship,” III:4, *Works*, 3:99.

⁷⁴ Wesley, Sermon 74, “Of the Church,” [III]:[28](#), *Works*, 3:55-[56](#).

⁷⁵ Wesley, “Predestination Calmly Considered,” in Outler, *John Wesley*, 461.

mostly in the aspects of church community he relegated to “opinions”). However, his overarching ecclesiology (and that of the connections which followed, whether acknowledged or not) was more influenced by a less institutionally defined movement, whose descendants had formed the collection of house groups from which Wesleyan Methodism emerged, and to whom he connected.⁷⁶

Pietistic movements developed on the continent and England in the years following the 30 Years War and the English Civil War. Following these conflicts, opinions about doctrine, discipline, liturgy, and polity were no longer catholic in the West, and defiantly not Roman. The end of these wars brought about various forms of ecclesial purity within princedoms and kingdoms. Subjects in a given territory adhered to particular confessional statements, established liturgical practices, and structures of church governance and discipline.

It became evident quite quickly however that, within these islands of ecclesial purity, not everyone was faithful. People could subscribe to right doctrine, organize themselves biblically according to various readings, and celebrate the sacraments “according to Christ’s holy ordinance” and still live unregenerate lives. This was certainly true with Protestantism’s doctrinal emphasis on justification by faith alone and Luther’s *simul justis et peccator*, teachings that could easily be twisted to antinomian ends. Churches of “right opinions” did not produce the kind of Christian societies pointed to in the New Testament. They did not produce holiness.

⁷⁶ For a description of the ways Methodism (both Wesleyan and Whitefieldian) cannibalized the earlier religious societies movement to create a national network, see Scott Kisker, *Foundation for Revival*, (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2008). 160-164.

The reformed churches, including reformed Tridentine Catholicism, made obvious what had been obscured by the rhetoric of uniformity in the Latin West since North Africa had been overwhelmed by Islam and the Bishop of Rome made central to Latin-based Christianity. Right opinions about doctrine, polity, or liturgical practice (whatever they were) could not ensure serious discipleship, or lives conformed to the *logos* of God. Thus, emerged calls for “further reform” within these various churches, though not of doctrine, polity, or liturgy. Instead, small communities of lay people, meeting to encourage one another “in love and good works,” appeared to manifest the pious opinions in the lives of their adherents.

What spurred these calls was a vision of the Church, which shared some of the concerns of Waldensians, Anabaptists, and a host of earlier monastic movements. Pietists expected Christians to behave differently in this world because they had encountered another. Believers were expected to have a quasi-mystical experience of faith that would result in holy living. Christians were not simply declared righteous, but actually made righteous by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit’s work in individuals also meant one could expect the work of the Spirit in the world, through works of mercy, mission, and social reform.⁷⁷

Pietists had theological emphases yet were not doctrinal in the way magisterial churches understood it. They distinguished between theological “fundamentals” and “opinions,”⁷⁸ and moved and multiplied across confessional borders. Nearly all

⁷⁷ Dale Brown, *Understanding Pietism*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 27-28.

⁷⁸ This distinction is the origin of the contemporary language of “fundamentalism.” The nineteenth century publishers of “The Fundamentals” were arguing that the supernatural essence of Christianity was threatened by liberalism and that was not a matter of “opinion” but “fundamental” to the gospel.

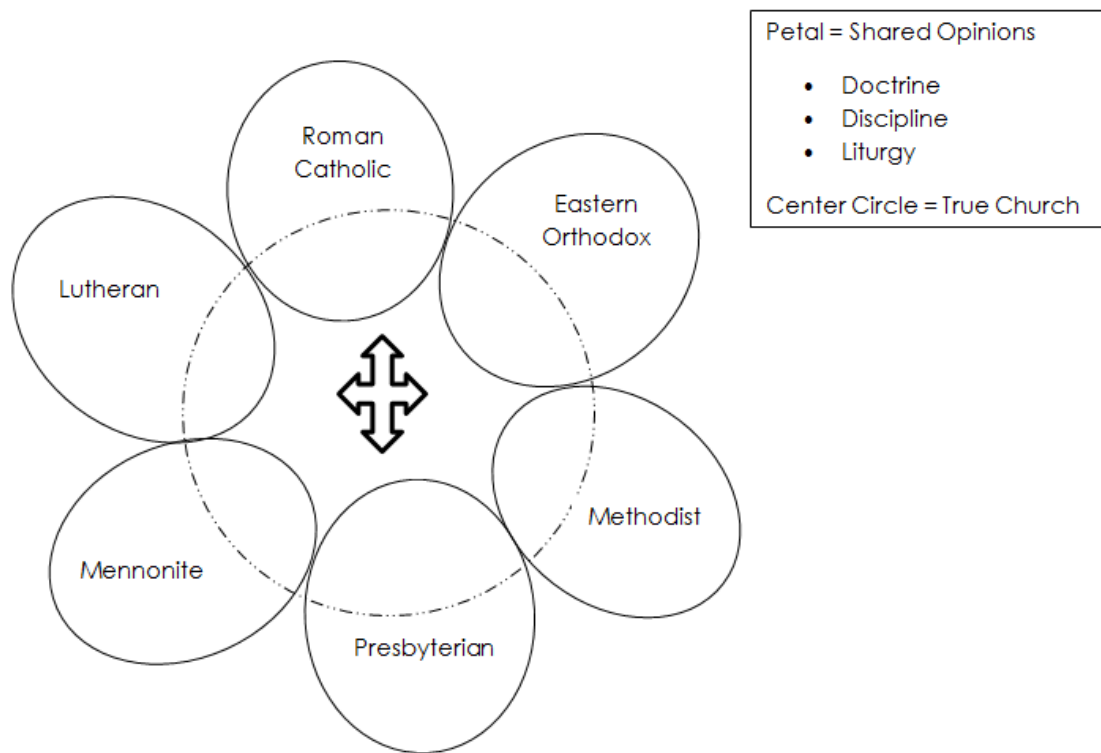
confessions were impacted. Wrong opinions (within a certain range, anyway) did not make transforming faith impossible. Lutheran Pietists recognized genuine faith among non-Lutherans (Calvinists, Anabaptists, and even some Roman Catholics⁷⁹). And although individual Pietists were committed to theological positions (generally to those of their territorial churches) these commitments were the lenses through which they viewed a lived piety.

Pietism had institutional form, namely, the use of small groups for cultivating piety. But unity was not defined institutionally. Pietists did not limit fellowship or missional cooperation across confessional lines.⁸⁰ Rather, unity in Christ was manifested in shared fellowship and missional cooperation across ecclesial divisions. Pietist's originated para-church organizations, like the original Methodist connection. Their ecclesiology acknowledged common cause and care across divisions of doctrine, and practice, yet did not seek to eradicate the divisions. Furthermore, Pietist ecclesiology acknowledged that not every participant in institutional churches, who participated in its services and partook of its sacraments, were real Christians.

⁷⁹ Count von Zinzendorf's contacts with the Jansenist Archbishop Cardinal Noilles of Paris, convinced him that there needed to be a trans-confessional fellowship.

⁸⁰ The first corresponding member of the Society for Propagating Christian Knowledge, an organization with roots in the Anglican Pietist movement known as the Religious Societies Movement, was the leader of the German Lutheran Pietist Halle Foundation, August Herman Francke. In his letter of introduction to the society, he wrote, "I look upon these things as comfortable signs that the Spirit of God is now about a great work to put a new face on the whole Christian Church."

Visually we might conceive of this ecclesiology as a sort of daisy⁸¹ with each petal being various congregations, connections, or denominations in which Christians gather. Each petal shares peculiar opinions, modes of worship, practices of leadership and discipline, which distinguish it from other “petals”. The center circle, intersecting all petals is the true Church. There are faithful people in each petal. But not every participant in a given set of opinions, modes of worship, and discipline is within the true Church. Not all have saving faith. The true Church is a circumscribed “body” of some within each “petal,” who are vitally connected to Christ by faith.



⁸¹ The Reformed have their T.U.L.I.P., why shouldn't we, Wesleyans, have a flower?

The true church is visible within various institutional churches (and is what enables them to be called “churches”). It is visible to the outside world through holiness, through its departure from the patterns of the world and submission to the patterns of Christ’s reign. Unity of the Church, however, exists at the center, in Christ. It is a unity of fellowship, missional cooperation, and mutual recognition across divisions of opinion. Therefore, a division within a particular petal cannot touch this unity. Institutional or connectional divisions have no effect on the unity of the true Church. It does not effect those who remain “engrafted into the good olive tree.”⁸²

Conclusions

So, what do we make of this heritage, this ecclesiology, and its instantiation within the Wesleyan movement from its inception? Let me draw a few observations that may help us in our present predicament as a denomination:

1. Wesleyan Methodism should embrace our ecclesiology that is not defined by Imperial or Protestant Magisterial categories, but by more radical categories (with assumptions about holiness and discipline) by way of Pietism. The existence of the United Methodist Church with reformation roots in various magisterial traditions, including Anglican (the Methodist Church), Lutheran (The Evangelical Alliance), Reformed, and Anabaptist (the United Brethren in Christ), makes this obvious. The union of Mennonite and Reformed traditions in the United Brethren is another instance. Despite concerted academic and ecclesial

⁸² Wesley, “Predestination Calmly Considered,” in Outler, *John Wesley*, 461.

efforts to portray Methodism as a version of “Anglicanism light,” only a pietistic ecclesiology makes sense of Wesley’s writings on schism and the church, and the reality of Wesleyan Methodism’s origins and continued history.

2. Methodists should abandon any argument that the integrity of a particular connection or denomination impacts the unity of “the Church”. Any pretense of organizational unity among Christians ended with the Novatian controversy in the third century, if not before then. Furthermore, external institutional unity ought not be held as paramount over other creedal marks of the Church, especially those shared by the Nicene and Apostles (which Wesley greatly preferred): namely, sanctity and catholicity.
3. Methodism, in line with its ecclesiological heritage, should embrace a robust defense of denominationalism. The Church is the communion of saints, militant and triumphant. It includes all those, in all congregations, connections, traditions, and denominations, who persevere in true saving faith. Institutional expressions of church (which necessitate holding “opinions” on doctrine, discipline, polity, and liturgy) are churches only insofar as they contain a portion of said saints gathered to worship, serve God, and hold one other accountable. Wherever and whenever believers gather, they participate in the true church. No gathering or connection encompasses the catholic body of Christ, nor is the body of Christ fully resident in any gathering or connection. Correct opinions about Jesus do not ensure participation in Jesus, in the “true Church.”
4. Wesleyan Methodists should, by the logic of our history and ecclesiology, acknowledge that there are legitimate reasons to go separate ways in separate

connections. Without separations, we would not have a Wesleyan Methodist tradition worth preserving or dividing over. Furthermore, if we cannot hold one another accountable to any coherent expression of Christian ethics, we are no longer one church, in the Wesleyan sense. We hold irreconcilable opinions about what it means to hold each other accountable in love. We can no longer “walk together.”

5. Finally, Methodists should realize that when divisions occur, by the logic of our ecclesiology, there is no “pure church” on the other side of it. No division produces a church that is “the Church”, prior to the separation of the sheep from the goats at the final judgement. There are always faithless people within any body called “church,” sharing the opinions necessary to hold together corporately. There are also always people, genuinely grafted into the true vine, which is Christ, who do not agree with the opinions of my congregation, my connection, my denomination. Their opinions may indeed be wrong. My opinions may indeed be wrong. But in Pietist/Wesleyan/Methodist soteriology, one can be wrong and be [“being saved.”](#)⁸³ Thank God.

⁸³ [Acts 2:47; Acts 27:20; 1 Corinthians 1:18; 1 Corinthians 15:2; 2 Corinthians 2:15.](#)