

## A Broad Church In A Straight Jacket?

### *A Gentle Look At The Seven Models of Biblical Authority in British Methodism*

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In 1932, three Methodist denominations (Primitive, United, Wesleyan) united to become the Methodist Church GB today. Since the new denomination did not forge one body of doctrines from the different emphases (ecclesiological rather than theological) that the uniting denominations had each come with, it inevitably became a broad church. Over ninety years later, it is still unable to forge doctrinal unity. The 1998 Report, *A Lamp To My Feet And A Light To My Path*<sup>1</sup>, not only acknowledged this inability but also produced a roughly delineated theological spectrum, through its Seven Models of Biblical Authority, covering the various shades of theological convictions within the evolving denomination.

To what extent is this spectrum truly inclusive of the diversity of convictions held within the denomination? To what extent do these diverse convictions enjoy equality of recognition, dignity, affirmation and empowerment within the denomination? How do these diversities help Methodism to address crises within itself and in its mission to the wider community? This paper wishes to examine these, and similar, questions through a gentle historical reflection on the practical outworking of these models.

### The Birth of A Broad Church: An Experiment In Pragmatism

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<sup>1</sup> A Lamp To My Feet And A Light To My Path: The Nature of Authority And The Place of The Bible In The Methodist Church. Conference Report 1998, p 662-664. Hereafter A Lamp.

How did we end up with seven models? Arguably Wesley laid the foundations for the broad church that Methodism became in 1932. Some of the steps that he took - largely hinged on pragmatic considerations - clearly made room for an elastic, therefore inclusive, interpretation and practice of doctrine. Whilst the seeming ease with which the movement splintered into at least six different denominations within a few decades of Wesley's death were mainly ecclesiological, nevertheless all inherited this elastic foundation. Wesley didn't leave either a systematic theology or a confessional body of doctrines, had no intention of starting a new church, but a movement within the Anglican Church of which he was a minister and which already had such a standard in the 39 Articles, which he relied upon.<sup>2</sup>

After many fractious decades, there was a progressive consolidation that reunited a number of the various branches Methodism that culminated in the United Methodist Church of 1907. This church then entered into complete reunion with the Wesleyan Methodists and Primitive Methodists in 1932. It is significant that this reunion was achieved without any attempt to harmonise the different theological convictions that had existed across the churches. While it may be assumed that the 'broad church' character of British Methodism has its roots in Wesley's own Catholic faith and disposition, it really came into its own at the reunion in 1932, as the

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<sup>2</sup> He nevertheless left us his theological method which was at the heart of, and defined his entire approach to, orthodoxy and orthopraxis. See Rupert Davies, *The People Called Methodists* – 1. 'Our Doctrines' in Davies, Rupert and Gordon Rupp (eds), *A History of The Methodist Church In Great Britain Vol 1* (London, Epworth Press, 1965), 147-148.

ambiguity that was effectively there in practice was formally adopted as the foundation for the new church.

In its doctrinal statement for the new Union, The Deed of Union embodied ambiguity into the evolving character of the new denomination. It says:

"The Methodist Church claims and cherishes its place in the Holy Catholic Church which is the Body of Christ. It rejoices in the inheritance of the apostolic faith and loyally accepts the fundamental principles of the historic creeds and of the Protestant Reformation. It ever remembers that in the providence of God Methodism was raised up to spread scriptural holiness through the land by the proclamation of the evangelical faith and declares its unfaltering resolve to be true to its divinely appointed mission.

The doctrines of the evangelical faith which Methodism has held from the beginning and still holds are based upon the divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures. The Methodist Church acknowledges this revelation as the supreme rule of faith and practice. These evangelical doctrines to which the preachers of the Methodist Church are pledged are contained in Wesley's Notes on the New Testament and the first four volumes of his sermons.

The Notes on the New Testament and the 44 Sermons are not intended to impose a system of formal or speculative theology on Methodist preachers, but to set up standards of preaching and belief which should secure loyalty to the fundamental truths of the gospel of redemption and ensure the continued witness of the Church to the realities of the Christian experience of salvation."<sup>3</sup>

Although pledging fealty to Wesley and the reformation doctrines, it did not nail down specific doctrines of a Confessional kind.

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<sup>3</sup> *The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church Volume 2* (London, Methodist Church House, 2023), p213

That statement gave the Deed and the Church a built-in latitude that could accommodate the different theological positions within the uniting denominations. Three factors: non-harmonisation of doctrines, ambiguity, and latitude, would also provide fertile ground for flexibility and accommodation to new ideas and doctrines in the following decades.

Many years later, the 1993 human sexuality debates saw Methodists on all sides appeal to the Bible, the fact that their views were often diametrically opposed one to the other, notwithstanding, so that instead of clarity came confusion, instead of coherence, difference and discord, and instead of comfort, anxiety. Two years later Conference began the process of examining how Methodists use the Bible, leading to the 1998 report. It was sent throughout the Connexion for study and feedback and a further report to Conference was made in 2001. However, the differences already highlighted in the report did not go away. Instead, they became recognised fracture lines in the denomination. By 2006, it had become evident that a way had to be found to deal with tensions arising from those fracture lines and minimise conflict. That year, Conference introduced the concept of Living with Contradictory Convictions into the faith and life of the British Methodist Church to address the burgeoning differences in its theological understandings as well as their attendant proneness to rancour.<sup>4</sup> It was a major acknowledgement not only of the immense diversity within the church, but also of the presence of contradictoriness within that diversity.

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<sup>4</sup> Conference Report 2006, Living With Contradictory Convictions In The Church, [Conf06 Faith and Order committee pt2 9nW2iM1.docx \(live.com\)](#) Accessed 4 July 2024

We may well be right to speak of what may appropriately be termed 'our many Methodisms.'

### The Emergence of A Theological Spectrum.

*A Lamp* identified seven models of biblical authority. A review of these seven is important in order to answer the questions asked at the beginning of this paper. First, we will take a brief critical look at each of the seven models to compare and contrast, and to attempt a theological classification of them. Second, we will look at the entire report, focusing especially on the additional report of 2001, to notice what it tells us about the overall character of 'difference' in the Methodist Church.

### The Seven Models<sup>5</sup> Compared, Contrasted, Classified

The introduction to the report states, "The seven following examples represent different perspectives on biblical authority which are held within the Church. They are not precise definitions<sup>6</sup>, and any one of us might feel that our own position is a mixture of two or three of these examples. But they are intended to illustrate briefly the range of views which are held, and the reasons for holding them."

A few preliminary deductions from that introduction might be stated thus:

1. The Methodist Church does not hold a particular perspective on Biblical Authority.

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<sup>5</sup> *A Lamp*, 662-664

<sup>6</sup> The first Model is in fact a precise definition. It accords with the historic Conservative/Evangelical understanding of Biblical authority. For instance, the doctrinal statement of the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches states: "God has revealed himself in the Bible, which consists of the Old and New Testaments alone. Every word was inspired by God through human authors, so that the Bible as originally given is in its entirety the Word of God, without error and fully reliable in fact and doctrine. The Bible alone speaks with final authority and is always sufficient for all matters of belief and practice." [Beliefs - FIEC](#) (FIEC) Accessed 30 September 2024

2. The Methodist Church has a range of views on Biblical Authority. It is therefore a 'Broad Church', and has a theological spectrum.
3. The MC allows for the coexistence of different perspectives.
4. The MC allows you to have your 'own position' on the spectrum.
5. These seven models are 'examples.' There may be more.

The full text of each model can be found in the Appendix but each one will be summarised and briefly analysed.

#### The First Model

*"7.9.1 The Bible is the Word of God and is, therefore inerrant (free of all error and entirely trustworthy in everything which it records) and has complete authority in all matters of theology and behaviour."*

As already indicated, this model clearly agrees with what the Bible says about itself, and it is the Model favoured by Conservative Christians.<sup>7</sup>

#### The Second Model

*"7.9.2 The Bible's teaching about God, salvation and Christian living is entirely trustworthy. It cannot be expected, however, to provide entirely accurate scientific or historical information since this is not its purpose."*

Although this Model seems to have a high view of Scriptures, it is in fact a major departure from Model 1. Let's take a few examples. The Bible teaches that God exists, and that He is the Creator of all things. Both are controverted by science – yet science is not considered subordinate in these matters under this Model. That's already a contradiction within this Model.

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<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, 2 Timothy 3:16-17, 2 Peter 1:21, Psalm 19:7-9.

The Bible also teaches the creation and historical existence of Adam and Eve. This is controverted by historians, as some don't accept a historical Adam – they claim he is a myth. Yet, under this Model, history is not subordinate in this matter. That is another contradiction.

The Bible also teaches, with regard to Salvation, the following: that man is born a sinner, cannot save himself from sin and so needs a Saviour, Christ is the only Saviour, He was born of a virgin, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and resurrected. Again, all these are controverted by many scientists and historians. The virgin birth itself is held to be unscientific, and it is claimed that Christ, like Adam, is a myth: so we talk about the Christ of history and the Christ of faith. Yet again, neither science nor history is subordinate in these matters under this Model. That is another contradiction.

The Bible teaches regarding Christian living, that man is male and female, marriage is made between opposite sexes, sex is permitted only within marriage. All of these are now also controverted by science and recent history. Yet again, neither science nor history is subordinate in these matters under this Model. So that is yet another contradiction.

### The Third Model

*"7.9.3 The Bible is the essential foundation on which Christian faith and life are built. However, its teachings were formed in particular historical and cultural contexts, and must therefore be read in that light. The way to apply biblical teaching in today's very different context is not always*

*obvious or straightforward. Reason is an important (God-given) gift which must be used to the full in this process of interpretation."*

This Model elevates reason to the position of final authority. It strengthens the element of flexibility in interpretation because reason will vary from time to time and from one place to another, depending on the dominant themes in the culture. The rejection of the supernatural (and its manifestation through miracles) in the Bible by higher critics finds its home here.

#### The Fourth Model

*"7.9.4 The Bible's teaching, while foundational and authoritative for Christians, needs to be interpreted by the Church. In practice it is the interpretation and guidance offered by Church leaders and preachers which provides authoritative teaching. Church tradition is therefore of high importance as a practical source of authority."*

This Model elevates the Church and its traditions to the place of authority. a concept strongly rebutted by Martin Luther's response at the Diet of Worms in 1521: "Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason—I do not accept the authority of the popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other—my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Martin Luther, Quoted in [Martin Luther's Appeal to 'Scripture and Plain Reason' - The Benefit of the Doubt \(travisdickinson.com\)](https://travisdickinson.com) Accessed 4 July 2024



This Model claims for its justification that the people of God existed before the Bible. If it means the Bible as the printed book that we now hold in our hands, well that may be true. But it is actually a moot point. When God said let there be light, He spoke. What He spoke was the word of God, long before it was written down. And when what He spoke was written down, it became scripture – from *Scriptura*, Latin for writing. The plain Biblical truth is that the people of God were made by the word of God. It was by His own specific calling (words) that He made a people for Himself. And it was by His own specific instructions (words) that He led His own people. Abraham was called out of Ur of the Chaldees as a pagan. The Bible did not exist before Abraham. He was set apart and God gave him commands and statutes and instructions (words) to become the founding father of the people of God.

#### The Fifth Model

*“7.9.5 The Bible is one of the main ways in which God speaks to the believer. However, the movement of God’s Spirit is free and unpredictable, and it is what the Spirit is doing today that is of the greatest importance.”*

This Model elevates experience to the place of authority. And the Bible is made subordinate to human experience. It divorces spiritual experience from the Bible. Mark the words, ‘its own compelling authority.’

This model calls it Christian experience. That seems a contradiction in terms. If Christianity is defined by the Bible (what it is and what it is not), can any experience be termed Christian that does not conform to the Bible?

If a man is barking like a dog and drooling all over himself like a lunatic and it is claimed to be Christian experience because he is said to have encountered the Holy Spirit, it will be a stretch to pass that off as Christian experience. This may perhaps be viewed as a far-fetched illustration, yet this is possible under this Model.

There are other concerns:

It presumes that the Biblical canon is not yet closed, and we should expect to begin to add new revelations to the Bible. It presumes that the Holy Spirit may act, in its 'unpredictability,' contrary to the will and word of God (John 16:12-15). So we have a plurality of authorities in the One holy and united Trinity, the Godhead. See again John 16:12-15

Apart from that, this Model sets up the Bible and the Holy Spirit as parallel authorities, suggesting that they may act in separate, opposite, and even contradictory fashion. Please note how it is put: that 'the Bible is one of the main ways in which God speaks'. Then, of course, the implication is that there are other 'main ways,' and that the Holy Spirit is one of those main ways. Yet the word of God and the Holy Spirit always work together. He is the primary Author of the Bible. 2 Peter 1:21 says "For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." ESV

Please also note the phrase: 'to give too high a status to the Bible'. It suggests that the word of God can be too highly regarded. That is completely contrary to what the Bible says of itself. In fact, the risk is in the opposite direction.

The Bible summons us again and again to accord the word of God the glory and majesty it deserves because to honour the word is to honour God, to adore the word is to adore God. Psalm 138:2 says "I bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness, for you have exalted above all things your name and your word."<sup>9</sup> ESV

There is no risk that one may 'give too high a status to the Bible' because ". . . the gospel . . . is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" Romans 1:16. The power of God is vested in His word. To make that claim is to suggest that we can 'give too high a status to the power of God.'

It promotes the imperfection and insufficiency of Scriptures. Note the phrase: 'hearing what God is saying today.' God has already spoken in His word. Hebrews 1:1-2. "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, <sup>2</sup> but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son."

First, through the prophets. And then through His Son. And then through the Holy Spirit.<sup>10</sup>

The foundation is complete, and the building now carries on using what has been given. According to Ephesians 2:19-22 that "the household of God" is <sup>20</sup> "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, <sup>21</sup> in whom the whole structure, being joined

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<sup>9</sup> See also Psalm 19:7-9, Matthew 4:4, Psalm 119:105, Psalm 119:89, Hebrews 1:3.

<sup>10</sup> See John 16:12-15

together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. <sup>22</sup> In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.”

You may not add to it or remove from it.<sup>11</sup>

To be built up, ever since and today, is to hear what has already been spoken.<sup>12</sup>

Please also note the emphasis on the word ‘today,’ which may suggest that it is divorced from history, and from tradition. That understanding creates some tension among and between the Models. For instance, it seems to contradict Model 2 “The bible’s teaching about God, salvation and Christian living is entirely trustworthy.”

Please note that it states that “We should be guided principally by the convictions which emerge from our own Christian experience as individuals and as a church community, which on occasion will go against the main thrust of the Bible’s teaching.” This seems to contradict Model 4 which claims that “the interpretation of the Bible is essentially a matter for the Church community, and especially its appointed leaders, rather than for private individuals.”

### The Sixth Model

*“7.9.6 The Bible witnesses to God’s revelation of himself through history and supremely through Jesus Christ. However, the Bible is not itself that revelation, but only the witness to it.”*

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<sup>11</sup> See Deuteronomy 4:2. Revelation 22:18-19.

<sup>12</sup> See Romans 10:17. Ephesians 4:11-18.

As we find in Models 3, 4, and 5, this Model also elevates reason, tradition and experience.

Please note the phrase: *'Christians must therefore discern where and to what extent they perceive the true gospel witness in the various voices of the Bible.'* This seems to presume that there may be false gospel witnesses in the Bible and it is down to humanity to sort out the true from the false.

Please note the statement: *Reason, tradition and experience are as important as the biblical witnesses.* This Model seems to promote human wisdom as a parallel authority to the Bible (or Biblical witnesses).

#### The Seventh Model

*"7.9.7 The Bible comprises a diverse and often contradictory collection of documents which represent the experiences of various people in various times and places. The Christian's task is to follow, in some way, the example of Christ. And to the extent that the Bible records evidence of his character and teaching it offers a useful resource."*

This Model is a variation of Models 3, 4, and 5. Like these Models, it also elevates reason and experience, and seems to clearly undermine the Bible's integrity, in which regard note the use of the phrase; "often contradictory documents."

It also seems to reject the Bible's claim to be the word of God. Note the phrases: "collection of documents." And "experiences of various people in various times and places." All of these are placed in competition and opposition to the idea that the Bible is the word of God.

It seems to reject the authority of the word of God. Note the phrase: "*The Christian's task is to follow, in some way, the example of Christ.*" It claims that only Christ's character and teaching make it useful. But even that – character and teaching – is not objectively evident; it must emerge from our subjective determination.

It elevates culture and human wisdom as parallel authorities to the Bible. Note the phrase: "in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century..."

And it directly contradicts the Bible. Note: "not possible to obey all . . ." <sup>13</sup>

It denies and rejects the inspiration of the Bible. Note: "very human authors."

It deconstructs the Bible. Note: "represent the ideology of particular groups and classes... "

It effectively cancels the Bible. Note: "reason and experience provide more important tools. . . "

Under this model, ideology is passed off as theology, and politics as piety. Note: "But, guided by the insights of, for example, feminist and liberation theologies, it further argues that before we can discover in it God's Word for us we must strip away from it those elements which betray the vested interests of particular groups, for instance, the interests of male dominance or of political and economic power-blocks."

Other than model one, the models place the interpretation of the text with the reader rather than the text and author. And both models 6 and 7 do not even regard the Bible as 'divine revelation.'

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<sup>13</sup> See James 2:10

## The Conclusion

*"7.10 If we go back to the Deed of Union and its summary statement that, 'the Methodist Church acknowledges the divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures as the supreme rule of faith and practice' we can see that most, if not all, of these positions are compatible with possible interpretations of this ambiguous phrase!"*

It may be argued that this conclusion is not based on the facts represented in the Models as it seems to gloss over all the evident contradictions between and among the Models.

## A More Faithful Summary

1. The Bible has a specific, precise, particular, position on Biblical Authority.<sup>14</sup>
2. Only one of the 7 models correctly states this Biblical position. That is the first model. The choice therefore is between accepting the Biblical position or rejecting it.
3. Everything else (as evidenced in Nos. 2-7) is an attempt to forge a broad third option, and find a middle path between accepting or rejecting the Biblical position. That makes man the authority. He can pick and choose what accords with his wisdom and experience and tradition. He is not bound by the Scriptures. He is above them. There is no basis in Scripture for such a third option. This is clearly therefore a man-made option.

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<sup>14</sup> Matthew 4:4. Psalm 19:7-9 and 2 Timothy 3:16-17. Deuteronomy 4:2. Revelation 22:18-19.

### Classification Variation in characterisation of the spectrum

Not much work has been done on these seven models and so only a few voices may be noted here. Jonathan Dean describes the range expressed in the spectrum as “on the one end was fundamentalism, and the language of ‘inerrancy’; on the other, a mild liberal view that the Bible contained some wisdom but was not to be regarded as primary or even authoritative.”<sup>15</sup> Other binary terms such as Evangelical and Liberal, Conservatives and Progressives may also be used. The report says there were ‘evangelical, liberal and catholic’ Methodists involved in drafting it.<sup>16</sup> However, if fundamentalism is that form of rabid legalism, uncritical idolisation, and unwarranted bigotry typical of the enthusiasm and extremism of some, then we must needs separate model one from fundamentalism and not to conflate one with the other. To hold inerrancy is not to automatically descend into fundamentalism. It is to see inerrancy as a fundamental actor in interpretation and discernment.

It is the position of this writer that a helpful classification or schema would be to see Model one as a class and Models 2-7 as another class. The reason is that Model one accepts what the Bible says about itself, while models 2-7 do not. Although models 2-7 differ from one another, it is only in degree and nuance.

### The Inevitable Conclusion

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<sup>15</sup> Dean, Jonathan, A Biblical Faith, in Curran, Luke and Shier-Jones Angela (ed), *Methodist Present Potential* (London, Epworth, 2009), 28

<sup>16</sup> A Lamp, 666.



There are major tensions and irreconcilable contradictions within and between the models. From these seven models has emerged inevitably the Methodist doctrine of 'Contradictory Convictions' approved by Conference. We are agreed to learn to live with contradictory convictions and now need to find a way to put that theory or doctrine into practice, finding separate spaces for the different convictions. As an example, The Anglican Communion already practices this reasoned separation of convenience.

#### The Report Observed: Character of 'Difference' In The Methodist Church

The depth and breadth of difference echoed by the sheer range of voices in the report and the degree of discord among them makes a sense of authority quite a worryingly difficult thing to find. They run from the sharp contrast between the two opposing ends of the spectrum to a variety of often irreconcilable notes. Here I offer just a few observations of a variety of notes sounded by the report and amplified in The Responses (summary) of 2001.

However, in order to help us place the observations in context, it would seem appropriate at this juncture to make a note on the theological method of the report before proceeding. It does not begin from an overarching confessional position or standard. It simply states *what is*, not *what ought to be*. Therefore, it makes no claim to being a watchdog or gatekeeper. Indeed, it cannot, since it is merely reporting a situation already in existence. It may in this regard have ab initio incapacitated itself in deciding the orthodoxy or otherwise of the models. It cannot applaud one, and decry

the other because it does not seem to have set out to do that. Had it settled on a full-orbed, clear-cut 'what we believe' body of divinity (Westminster Confession, 39 Articles, Belgic Confession, etc), which the doctrinal standard in the Deed of Union is not, then it might have had a standard for measuring orthodoxy, and a basis for judgement.

Firstly. We have a note of contrasts and contradictions.

While one respondent enthused, "This is one of the best study books that we have used for several years,"<sup>17</sup> another was disappointed: "We view with grave concern the possibility that this document could be considered to portray the character of the Methodist people, who will be seen by Christians and non-Christians alike as not being grounded on Biblical foundations. . . We reject this document of being worthy of consideration by the Methodist people – it should be rejected totally and the authors requested to consider seriously their position as members of the Christian Church."<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, while one respondent says "Model 1 is felt to be the only perspective which should fall outside the limits of what should be acceptable to Methodism," another said "Models 5 to 7 seem to contradict the natural meaning of the Doctrinal Clauses in the Deed of Union."<sup>19</sup> It is significant that these contrasting and contradictory views "were often firmly held," it said.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Conference Report, The Nature of Authority: Responses To A Lamp To My Feet And A Light To My Path 2001, Item 2.2, p 321

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, Item 2.3, pp 321-322

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, Item 2.5, p 322

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, Item 2.1, p 321.

Secondly, we have a note of anxiety. The note of contrasts and contradictions already mentioned is amplified here in a way that a sense of tension and frustration is felt both by respondents and the authors of the report. While a respondent confesses, "We would look to the leadership of our Church structures to provide certainty as well as a widening of our understanding,"<sup>21</sup> another echoes that with a 'strong assertion' of "the need for an unambiguous statement of a 'defined role for the Scriptures.'" <sup>22</sup> That yearning for certainty is met with an uncertainty that could be frustrating for those crying for help. "As it is not clear that all Models are to be viewed as equally compatible with the Deed of Union,<sup>23</sup> there is an argument for reducing the range of possible Models which Methodists should be encouraged to support." It continues: ". . . some of the Models can be deemed to be mutually exclusive, thus recognising that some Methodists are in fundamental disagreement with each other . . . To fail to opt for a normative Model, or a narrower range of Models, would merely acknowledge that all Models are held to by some Methodists." And then concludes, "To opt for a narrower range would seem to be more in keeping with the Deed of Union ."<sup>24</sup>

Yet, in its recommendation, *The Responses* sounds a note of tacit approval for all the Models. "We . . . recommend that these seven simply be acknowledged as different ways in which Methodists *do in fact* use the

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, Item 2.8, p 323.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, Item 3.6, p 325

<sup>23</sup> It is worthy of note that the implication of this seems to be that the Deed of Union is the standard of authority in the Methodist Church, and that the Bible is subordinate to it.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, Item 3.5, p 325.

Bible today" (*italics mine*),<sup>25</sup> a nod to the suggestion of one of the respondents: "If the Conference decides to act upon the report, our group would recommend that the Models as a whole should be used to demonstrate, and accommodate, the wide range of thinking within the Methodist Church."<sup>26</sup>

Thirdly, there is a strong note in praise of eclecticism and, therefore, of fluidity. It seems to suggest that a faith that is bred on an eclectic offering is best.<sup>27</sup>

Fourthly, there is a note of impossible expectations

In one of its recommendations, the report argues, ". . . it is important that preachers should use the different models of interpretation as a resource alongside insights from current scholarship, while continuing to emphasize that God continues to encounter and challenge his people through the pages of Scripture."<sup>28</sup>

The expectation that the preacher would somehow try to integrate the models is a difficult one because of the degree of contradictoriness and mutual exclusivity embedded within the plurality of convictions. The preacher, who functions more like an advocate, is not a lecturer, and sermons are not lectures. To expect a preacher to do this is almost like expecting the prosecutor in a case to somehow find a way to argue for the defence. This would be even more difficult for preachers on opposite,

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, Item4.1, p 327

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, Item, 2.5, p 322

<sup>27</sup> A Lamp, Item 8.4, p 666

<sup>28</sup> A Lamp, Item 8.4, p 666.

mutually exclusive, ends of the spectrum. Equally difficult is the expectation that congregations should be exposed to such a wide variety of theological. It would merely promote the contrasts and contradictions within the Models and lead to anxiety, confusion, and frustration, rather than comfort. The *Responses* does acknowledge the great potential for discomfort in grappling with the wide range of theological difference among Methodists. It also notes its inevitability in the life of the church. "However difficult the process of living with diversity may be, Methodist understanding of the Church supports that discomfort as part of what it means to live within the Body of Christ, in the service of the Kingdom of God in the world."<sup>29</sup>

We may also note here that the range of discord in these tunes is noticeably quite wide and almost overwhelming. Take for instance the tensive clash between the first and fourth notes and set that against the expectation of some degree of harmony among the seven models on the theological spectrum. While it may be admitted that this is well-nigh impossible to achieve, there is no feasible way provided to resolve this clash.

It is also arguable that *A Lamp* predisposes people to a lower view of the scriptures, and that it therefore influenced to that degree, the subsequent study of the report as well as the responses that were fed back to the Faith and Order Committee.

See for instance its definition of the Bible<sup>30</sup> as well as what seems to be a tensive affirmation-subversion tone in its characterisation of the Bible.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> The Responses, Item 3.8, p 327

<sup>30</sup> *A Lamp*, Item 4.10.4

<sup>31</sup> See *A Lamp*, Items 5.5 and 5.7. See also items 2.5, 2.6, 2.8-2.10, 4.4, 4.5, and 4.6-4.8

However, it is important to note that it is essentially a report of *what is*, not *what ought to be*. Yet its voice as the narrator too often serves as a partial advocate of certain ideas, beliefs, and convictions.<sup>32</sup>

#### A Critical Question: Are All Seven Models Biblical?

Despite its many cautions to the contrary, the report nevertheless seems to rest on the fundamental presupposition that all seven models are okay and welcome. Its promotion of eclecticism further strengthens this impression that all seven models are valid biblical ways of seeing the Bible. Yet in the end no biblical grounding is provided for the seven models. It is not part of its task. It is simply presumed that the seven models are all okay because Christians have discerned them by conferring together and have been led by the Holy Spirit in the process and the result has to be acceptable to God and to orthodoxy.

#### A Challenge: Views of The Bible

##### (a) What does the Bible say about itself?

What does the Bible say about itself? How does the Bible view itself? It is important to separate what the Bible says about itself and what we say about it. The report does not do this. Its silence may again suggest that all seven models are Biblical. It is therefore important as a point of contrast and comparison to see what the Bible says for itself. As already noted, it is the belief of this writer that Model one 7.9.1 states the Biblical position very clearly, and that Model stands in complete contradiction to the other six Models.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, Items 7.1-7.4

(b) A second question is, to what degree would the 7 models be said to be compatible with Wesley's own position?

Wesley's position is portrayed by the report as fully in sync with the Bible. "Wesley held that the Scripture is the Word of the living God," it says, "and that Scripture's authority rests upon this fact . . . For Wesley Scripture was authoritative because its human authors were inspired by God and thus for the Christian the Bible is the final authority in faith and practice."<sup>33</sup> The report quotes three portions from Wesley's works and it is important to reproduce them in full here as follows:

"The Scripture, therefore, of the Old and New Testament is a most solid and precious system of divine truth. Every part thereof is worthy of God; and all together are one entire body, wherein is no defect, no excess. It is the foundation of heavenly wisdom, which they who are able to taste prefer to all the writings of men, however, wise or learned or holy." (Preface to Notes, paragraph 10)

"God speaks, not as man but as God. His thoughts are very deep, and thence His words are of inexhaustible virtue. And the language of His messengers, also, is exact in the highest degree; for the words which were given them accurately answered the impressions made upon their minds." (Preface to Notes, paragraph 12) 4.5

"This is a lantern unto a Christian's feet, and a light in all his paths. This alone he receives as his rule of right and wrong, of whatever is really good or evil. He esteems nothing good, but what is here enjoined, either directly or by plain consequence; he accounts nothing evil but what is here forbidden, either in terms or by undeniable inference. (Sermon 'The Witness of our own Spirit'", paragraph 6)<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> A Lamp, p 653

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p 653

There are clearly no arguments to be had about the fact that the entire thrust of the report is a parting of ways with Wesley. To take just one example of such divergence, the report quotes the text, 'God has spoken . . . in many and various ways' (Heb. 1:1), and then follows with the question, "Are we sufficiently willing to recognize the multi-faceted nature of God's revelation, and the diversity of our own interpretations of that revelation?"<sup>35</sup> The context seems to suggest an expectation of new revelation of a canonical nature. Wesley, on the other hand, would disagree. God is "intimating that no other revelation is to be expected," he says, adding that God has already spoken "all things, and in the most perfect manner."<sup>36</sup>

### Some Implications of Having Seven Models of Biblical Authority

We must now turn our attention to an examination of some of the implications of these seven models for the life and faith of the Church with a view to seeing especially whether and how they actually promote harmony or disharmony, and their ability therefore to resource crisis minimalization and conflict resolution in the body.

First, each model has its own lens for looking at the text and the world. Therefore, interpretations of the Bible and consequent convictions will be determined by the model one adopts. Yet the interpretation of each Model would not be universal enough to be acceptable by the lenses that

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 667

<sup>36</sup> Wesley, John, *Explanatory Notes Upon The New Testament* (Peterborough, Epworth Press, 1976), 810.



govern the other models. There is therefore a risk here of 'unconscious bias', where people will tend to universalise their conviction(s) and apply them across the spectrum. Since each model has its own framework of interpretation, inequality would be to allow Model A to be interpreted through the lens of Model B and vice versa. It will also be dismissive of diversity and undermine inclusiveness. Yet, in the day-to-day life and work of the church, the model with the majority is guaranteed to win. Just like political parties. Should the church operate in this way? In addition, the use of different lenses means that each model is also a different standard of measurement, arising from the fact that models 2-7 all operate on the basis of limited inerrancy, while model one does not. Crucially, because of this, we see the difference narrowing and becoming more nuanced among models 2-7 and widely diverging between models 1 and the rest.

A second implication of living under such a spectrum therefore is that broadness ought to mean more than securing a majority. It ought to provide protection for minority models. It is evident, for instance, that the God In Love Unites Us (GILUU) Report<sup>37</sup> does not satisfy people in Model one. It does not, for example, even seem to be aware of the concept of partaking in other peoples' sins which is a problem for model one. From its own perspective, universalised shared across models two to seven, partaking isn't an issue. It is not even factored into the decisions, other than a presupposition that the conscience clauses would take care of

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<sup>37</sup> The report is available on the Methodist Church website [10 Amended Marriage and Relationships report 2019 \(methodist.org.uk\)](https://www.methodist.org.uk/10-Amended-Marriage-and-Relationships-report-2019) Accessed 30 September 2024

everyone else. Yet the conscience clause does not take care of the partaking dilemma. To take another example Anthony Reddie's radical reconstruction of the doctrine of original sin, a core Wesleyan doctrine, is part of the corpus of 21<sup>st</sup> century British Methodism.<sup>38</sup> Yet, this radical reconstruction and the partaker principle do not get equal treatment. The former is included, while the latter is not, though both are rooted within the same broad-church theological spectrum of British Methodism.

Similarly, although Model one and models 2-7 are largely mutually exclusive, yet decisions have been reached at various courts in the church that presumed universal application across the spectrum of the seven models. Such decisions are invariably based on a presupposition that potentially marginalises others.

A third implication is that Conference is the final authority, not necessarily a body of doctrines. There is a presupposition here that Conference is always right, and that Conference will get it right. Yet it could not say, and has not said, which of the seven models may or may not be correct. That leaves decisions in the hands of the majority who of course may be wrong, but will be presumed right by its might of majority vote, at least in the eyes of others who do not subscribe to the view upheld. With the removal in 1976 of the proviso that it cannot legislate against the doctrinal standard, it removed any authority over it and became the

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<sup>38</sup> Reddie, Anthony, Original Sin, in Shier-Jones, Angela and Kimberley D. Reisman, *44 Sermons To Serve The Present Age* (Peterborough, Epworth, 2007) p232-241. Reddie categorically states, "I reject Good Mr Wesley's notion of original sin" p 237.

magisterium.<sup>39</sup> Conference alone can check itself, placing the church above scripture and violating the Deed of Union regarding principles of the Reformation. To what standard then does it appeal? It is its own standard and final authority.

A fourth implication is the challenge presented by the fault-lines in our doctrinal foundations. Not forging a comprehensive body of doctrine or Confession seems a primary fault-line in the foundation, from which the different theological Models (and schools) emerge as further cracks and fault-lines.

A further, and fifth, implication has to do with the fact that the report is a statement of *what is*, not *what ought to be*. The expression of *what is* passes the report off as an acknowledgment and tacit approval of the status quo. It is a description and an explanation of what is already in practice. It would also seem to be a tacit approval because the report does not censure any of the models. Therefore, having acknowledged and approved what is, conference needs to ensure that the status quo is protected and each model that constitutes that status quo given its space to flourish. As the report observes, churches may and do actually choose their own way. “. . . some Methodist churches are congregational in their outlook,” it says, “hardly looking outwards even as far as the Circuit let alone the Connexion. So parts of Methodism have no strong sense of connection with the Conference, no interest in its debates and do not regulate their life by its decisions to any great extent. To such chapels, circuits, members or

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<sup>39</sup> Morris-Chapman, Daniel Pratt

ministers it can be a matter of complete and utter indifference what Conference decides or thinks.”<sup>40</sup>But is it a tacit approval? It should be, but history and current practice rebut that.

### Broad, Yet Straightened?

Now, as we address our primary question, let us restate our initial secondary questions: To what extent is this spectrum truly inclusive of the diversity of convictions held within the denomination? To what extent do these diverse convictions enjoy equality of recognition, dignity, affirmation and empowerment within the denomination? How do these diversities help Methodism to address crises within its denomination and in its mission to the wider community?

All of the foregoing seem to suggest that although we have a broad theological spectrum that should ideally sufficiently provide leg room for everyone to come harmoniously to the table, that does not seem to be the case. In fact, judging by the very unhappy controversies that have attended some of our major decisions (Human Sexuality Resolutions 1993 and GILUU 2019, 2021) and the consequent loss of churches, members, preachers and ministers, the opposite appears to be the case. And the fact that Living with Contradictory Convictions not only became a necessary rallying cry, but that it has also morphed into one of the ruling principles of our faith and life, is testimony to the thought that our broadness may in fact constitute

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<sup>40</sup> A Lamp, 658

more of an hinderance than a help. It might well be said that we have become a broad church that is in a straight jacket.

### A Puzzle for Pragmatism: Finding harmony in fractious times

It may be said that this has always been a chief challenge of humanity but especially of 'broad church' denominations. Methodism has had this challenge for most of its history resulting in its fracturing into multiple denominations with theological variation within them and then coming together institutionally as one but with plural theological convictions all still struggling to find harmony. The authors of *The Responses* ask the difficult question: "What practical steps will need to be taken to enable Methodists to 'live with this diversity' in the use of the Bible . . . "<sup>41</sup> The question is crucial because it highlights the challenge of how the seven Models might become an instrument of harmony in the Methodist Church.

We may have no doubt therefore that our history sufficiently shows that we have been elastic - perhaps pragmatic is a better word - in our doctrines and practice. What we do not seem to have had in equal measure is perhaps a sense of harmony and wellbeing in our pragmatism.

Our history, especially post-Wesley, does in fact reflect a narrative of existential anxieties and tensions which have sometimes - some may say too many times - threatened our very existence as well as reproached the very integrity of our claim to being a broad church. What we may need to address is whether our current broadness makes enough 'dialectical' room

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<sup>41</sup> The Responses, p326.

for all in our theology. In other words, is our broad church truly pragmatic for *all* the people called Methodists?

These questions are especially critical in our times when the postmodern, post Christian, and post truth postures of secular humanism – and of our tempers and identities arising from them – have bred a vast and still burgeoning stronghold of pluralism across the landscapes of what it means to be human in the 21st century. Having acknowledged our reality by taking the pragmatic step of suing for the doctrine of ‘Living With Contradictory Contradictions’ which as an oxymoron further highlights and intensifies the sense of dis-ease in the body, the case for such an examination is pressed even more compellingly upon us.

The ideal situation will be to find a fine poise between our two theological tempers: conservative and liberal, both of which may overflow into doctrinal sectarianism on the one hand, and doctrinal minimalism on the other.<sup>42</sup> This poise is much celebrated as the golden secret of Anglicanism in the Book of Common Prayer. The preface to the 1661 edition notes: “It hath been the wisdom of the Church of England, ever since the first compiling of her Publick Liturgy, to keep the mean between the two extremes, of too much stiffness in refusing, and of too much easiness in admitting any variation from it.”<sup>43</sup> G.K.A. Bell adds: “It is the combination

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<sup>42</sup> Ortlund, Gavin, *Finding The Right Hills To Die On: The Case For Theological Triage* (Wheaton, Illinois, Crossway, 2020) 27-59.

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in *The Book of Common Prayer*, (London, The Folio Society, 2004) ix.

of the Protestant and Catholic factors in the same body which gives the Church of England its peculiar quality."<sup>44</sup>

It is important in a broad church that things are so positioned that they help to minimise conflict, encourage unity, avoid schism. At the heart of the broad church is *difference*. A working formula will therefore need to avoid both suppressing difference on the one hand, and privileging it on the other. It is safe to observe that the Methodist spectrum is *reflective* of diversity, but whether it is inclusive and equal is debatable although it is this writer's view that it is not, and that work needs to be done to move from merely *reflecting* to being *inclusive*, and from *acknowledgement* to *actualisation*.

We have previously noted the fault-lines in our doctrinal and theological foundations. Can such a foundation hold together? Our experience seems to suggest that it cannot. Yet the foundation question needs to be resolved. How? One of two ways may be suggested. Either go back to the drawing board and try to forge a unified body of doctrines, and come away from being a broad church, or recognise and empower the various schools to exist side by side.

#### A critical dilemma: A Ruling Standard

What we need may best be presented in the form of a dilemma. The dilemma is how to obtain a ruling standard, one of a confessional kind that will be objective, propositional and Biblically-rooted. How do we determine

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<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Barker, E. Francis, *Through The Ages: The Story of The Christian Church From The Beginning To The Present Day* (London, Church House, Westminster, 1966) 2.

which of the models is/are biblical, and which is/are not? The conference has not made that determination. Nor has it provided a yardstick to do the measurements from time to time. As we have already noted, that leaves the determination with conference to sort from season to season depending on the issue(s) at hand. That raises the question: with what standard will the conference – even as a magisterium – make its determination, and how can the conference itself be held accountable? Will it simply follow the majority vote? If the majority votes became the standard, would the conference be directed and governed by the popular vote? Would the popular vote become the standard which will be inviolable and to which the conference itself is to be bound? If so, that is the more reason the 7 approaches need protection so that the dominant narrative does not suffocate the others and even snuff them out of the fold. A universal application of one Model's interpretation across the spectrum enabled by majority vote will amount to cancelling the others. And where then would equality, diversity and inclusiveness be?

### The Case For Differentiation

Having acknowledged *what is*, significant questions arise: How do we honour freedom of belief and practice and yet avoid discrimination and its inherent breach of diversity, equality, and inclusiveness? In acknowledging *what is* the report notes both the *possibility* and *reality* that people would have, and *do have*, a diversity of convictions even to the point of being contradictory, which is the basis for the doctrine of living with contradictory



convictions. If they are to live together there must be found a way either to resolve those contradictions and take away the contradictions or respect them and provide for their independent coexistence. It means that difference will be validated, with each school given its own space.

It may be argued that this will destroy our unity. But it may be countered that since we do not have doctrinal unity, we are already disunited and the institutional, legal and bureaucratic unity we do have has not held us together and may not be sustainable in the long run. It may also be countered by the evolution of the same in the Anglican Communion which has for hundreds of years helped to contain the carnage occasioned by the Roman Catholic and Protestant hostilities, and also managed, if not averted, a full-scale war of attrition within.

### Defining Differentiation

What do we mean by differentiation?

### *Unity In Diversity*

Differentiation is about purchasing true unity in the midst of diversity. Can a diversity of theological schools truly flourish within a unitary system of Church governance (ecclesiology) which is what Connexionalism is in practice? Is the principle of subsidiarity strong enough to accommodate the side-by-side co-existence of such diversity and individuality, and still allow for flourishing? This would necessarily have to be the case if the different schools are to co-exist equally yet distinctively in a unitary system. This would look more like a semi-Federal structure, albeit a unitary structure

that cedes reasonable functional autonomy to the local churches to follow the schools of conviction they wish to subscribe to.

### *Equality of equality*

This is about the *quality* of equality in each case. Is the quality of my equality the same as the other person's? Equality of equality would mean Equality in diversity. Or different but equal. That means we not only recognise the range of diversity available, but also acknowledge it by providing equal opportunity for each school to have and enjoy practical existence. And it also means equality in inclusion, which is already recognised in principle: It now needs to go further and empower each school to have the same opportunity for existence. This is the challenge.

### Presenting The Arguments

There are very important theological-dogmatical, pastoral, soteriological, ecclesiological, historical, missiological (united congregations better than divided denominations), and doxological reasons for differentiation.

First, the denomination's understanding of unity is not uniform. The current Connexional arrangement mirrors the unity achieved at Reunion. It was a unity that made room for theological distinctions, but not differentiation. According to this perspective all shades of theological belief can be brought together in a congregation. But that is obviously not a view that would sit well with Model 1. It therefore deprives Model 1 of its equality in diversity as well as the inclusion of its diversity.

Second, the seven Models do not provide a solution to the tensions arising from difference. It is debatable whether the seven models have helped in

times of crises. To start with the report not only shows that we do not all have the same theological beliefs, but also that we *cannot*. The convictions are contradictory. They are also apparently irreconcilable. And perhaps irreversible too. At this stage in our history, it seems that the key thing common in a denomination Living with contradictory convictions is the name Methodist. The existence of the 7 Models is both a reflection of crises in biblical authority as well as perhaps a reinforcement of those crises.

The spectrum shows the problems rather eloquently but is, so far, incapable of solving them. The existence of seven models has neither solved our key challenges nor brought peace to everyone, as demonstrated by the problem of biblical authority since 1932, and well-illustrated by the human sexuality resolutions and GILUU. It hasn't solved either.

Third, biblical authority is already undermined in practice as shown in the wide variety of contradictory convictions and practice in the report.

Both the report, and Conference, further strengthen this undermining by not giving clear and specific direction as to the validity of these Models, thus creating the impression that *what is* is okay and may continue, and invariably – it may be argued – giving liberty for further undermining.

A fourth argument is the importance of reconnecting the pulpit and pastoral welfare. The exposure of the Methodist pulpit to all the voices on the 7-Model spectrum means the provision of consistency in pulpit ministry may become impoverished. This means the role of the pulpit in moulding the pastoral life of congregation may also become weakened. And there are serious pastoral implications for such divorcing of pulpit and pastoral

welfare. The minister in pastoral charge may be burdened with more pastoral problems as a result of the congregation's exposure to such a wide array of theological beliefs.

#### Fifth, the consequence of Mapping

If we map some of our historic decisions onto the spectrum, we will clearly notice the significant fact that many of them fit into the models 2-7 part of the spectrum. To take two examples, the endorsement of same-sex marriage and cohabitation by GILUU fits into the limited inerrancy paradigm of interpretation common to models 2-7. So too does the policy of living with contradictory convictions, which presupposes an impossibility. It is important to note here that for much of its history, the Church has traditionally solved contradictions by ironing out difference, either by declaring it a heresy and disfellowshipping its adherents, or securing martyrdom for its recalcitrant promoters. Even the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, it may be argued, went its own way in part because 'wild pig' Martin Luther was ironed out.

#### Sixth, the necessity of Fairness

Differentiation is unquestionably a much fairer way of achieving EDI. Giving room for each model to flourish satisfies the principles of equality, diversity and inclusiveness in a functional manner, which is what is important.

#### Seventh, Safeguard for Plurality, Connexionalism, and Subsidiarity

The report reflects both a rebuff of absolute truth as well as a ratification of a plurality of convictions. Differentiation will prevent privileging one over others. Efforts of Christians trying to avoid partaking in other men's sins (2

John) have in recent years yielded case law in their favour both in Europe and the United States of America.<sup>45</sup> They have been controversial but the boundaries are being teased out, tested and drawn. With the Conference resolution in 1976 that removed the requirement for it to be bound by the doctrinal statement of the Deed, differentiation will also safeguard against the potential tyranny of the Connexion, while enabling the wholesome development of the principle of subsidiarity<sup>46</sup>, already existing within Methodism, as a salutary complement to Connexionalism. Subsidiarity will serve as a helpful counterbalance to Connexional capture and dominance through one or more Models. Differentiation promotes this best.

Eighth, Moving the spectrum from De facto To De Jure

Differentiation enables this move best by levelling the playing field for all. As a reflection of what is, not ought to be, the report is already the *de facto* position. And in the face of Conference indecision<sup>47</sup> about the validity or not of the Models, it has increasingly wormed its way into the *de jure* position by default. It is perhaps noteworthy to recall that Methodist ministers are already practicing plurality.<sup>48</sup> As an operational strategy differentiation will

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<sup>45</sup> The six-year court battle in the Ashers of Belfast case that went all the way to the European Court of Human Rights is an example.

<sup>46</sup> Methodist Church, *Conference Report 2008*, Cited 18 May 2009. Online: <http://www.methodist.org.uk/index.cfm?fuseaction=openogod.content&cmid=2366>.

To ensure that the leadership at the centre is not domineering, there is a principle which in practice allows the local churches to wield more legislative and executive powers in matters that lie closer to them. This is called the principle of subsidiarity, and it is based on the idea that “the more local the issue, problem or opportunity, the more local the jurisdiction which applies to it.”<sup>46</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Hull, David, *The Runaway Train: A Message To Methodists, An Urgent Call To Think Again About ‘God In Love Unites Us’* (2021) p 17.

<sup>48</sup> Haley, John M and Leslie J. Francis, *British Methodism: What Circuit Ministers Really Think* (Peterborough, Epworth, 2006) See especially 99-165

enable the move from acknowledgement of diversity and difference to actualisation of equitable equality.

#### Ninth, Presupposition of Fluidity

There is an overarching presupposition in the report that the church may achieve and enjoy organic unity in spite of difference, and live interrelatedly with such difference. In one breath it says difference cannot be limitless. Yet, in another it seems to suggest that it may not necessarily be defined. All difference may intersect and interact. That means, the spectrum is fluid and everyone can live happily on one point as on any other on the spectrum. But is this presupposition truly inclusive of our diversity?

#### Tenth, the Elijah gauntlet: A Recovery of Certitude

The prophet Elijah is renowned for his boldness in asking the Israelites to stop prevaricating (halting between two opinions) and calling them instead to certitude: either serve God or leave alone. The report's endorsement of uncertainty makes it difficult to think and speak with certitude, and even discourages it. The fact that there are voices yearning for certitude requires that they are not ignored, but rather empowered in line with our EDI principles, to find and live in and with the certitude afforded by their convictions.

#### Going Forward

It is this writer's submission that in order to build harmony through differentiation, and to prevent broadness being a straight jacket, the people called Methodists need to consider a few strategic and urgent measures.

First, it needs the confidence to go forward and take the next logical step: apply the principle and practice of EDI to them and provide space for each model.

1. Acknowledge diversity: recognise the two schools and the difference they engender – the report does this by presenting us with *what is*.

2. Affirm equality: recognise the equality of the two schools.

3. Authorise inclusion: respect and resource the existence of both schools, each rooted in its own theological grid on the broad spectrum of the denomination, by providing institutional support for them. The Principle of Subsidiarity needs to be empowered for the practical reason that the Connexion is too far from the local congregations. Many of the decisions affecting the local churches are either not addressed or not sufficiently inclusive of local content when addressed. Conference may do so formally, allowing for a stronger form of subsidiarity as convictions and the local congregations that hold them become a little bit more independent in the federal family of the pluralities engendered within the seven models.

### Conclusions

We must now pose the question again: is Methodism a broad church in a straight jacket? When one model predominates without enough room at the local level for difference, that would seem to be in breach of the inclusive, equality, diversity (EDI) nature of the spectrum. That's straight jacket. To be in a straight-jacket is to have no room for some or all in our broad church, and consequently compelling them to leave the denomination. We have many ministers, local preachers, and whole or part of churches who

have left because they felt they had no option. A straight-jacket means the broad spectrum is in fact not broad enough for some. They will have to leave else, in a manner of speaking, the denomination will simply not zip up. A straight-jacket happens when we are not all validated in our positions - contradictory convictions - on the broad theological spectrum. Then there will be privileging and marginalisation and therefore discrimination and discomfort. It's like putting on a jacket that's too tight - you cannot zip it up. You either get a bigger jacket, or lose weight. A straight-jacket happens when we try to shrink the spectrum from seven models to one. This obviously means at least one conviction is being privileged and universalised over others, and at least one conviction is being marginalised and discriminated against. Yet everyone is expected to line up under that model, to the neglect of their own point on the spectrum. Again, you can't zip that up. They simply will not gel because they are odd bedfellows (owing to their innate contradictoriness); they don't hang together.

The report and the indecisiveness around the seven-Model spectrum, as well as its subsequent birth of living with contradictory convictions seem to hinder the flourishing of the diverse convictions that inhabit our broad church. The controversial and divisive nature of GILUU is a powerful illustration of this severe limitation of the development and emergence of a truly functional broad church in which all the constituent parts feel equal and included in spite of their diversity. Therefore it still leaves the question of how every Methodist can feel equal and included in his contradictory conviction (diversity), and except there is a way to achieve such EDI, the



whole Connexion will leave itself open to the narrative that commands the majority votes. And that narrative can swing from one end of theological spectrum to the other from one season to another depending on what issues are in season. That is certainly far from ideal, against the EDI ethos, while also not the intention of either the revered founder of historic Methodism nor the framers of the articles of contemporary Methodism. Finally, since our convictions are contradictory and *ipso facto* irreconcilable, surely, we should be heading towards a polity of many Methodisms. The question should be 'what kind of Methodist are you or do you want to be? Surely, the way forward would be to encourage individual Methodists and their local churches to reflect and make a decision. We may not have doctrinal harmony, but may we not achieve equality in harmony?

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