

English Methodist Identity

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This essay was originally written in 2009 as an assessment item for my MA in Theology at York St John University. Some material that was originally placed in the footnotes to avoid exceeding the permitted word limit is now included in the main body of the text. I have deleted some matter that now seems extraneous and have done a little minor updating.

Abstract

Methodism sees its distinctiveness not in the ways in which it is different from other Christian traditions but in its intentional lack of difference: it values a catholic spirit and preaches a gospel for all humanity. The essay examines narrow and broad definitions of ‘Methodist’, the range of different styles of Methodism, the key characteristics of Methodist belief, organisation, practice and values, and the ways in which Methodists express their faith in their lives inside and outside the church. It examines some of the ways in which Methodist identity is being weakened in Britain to the detriment of the church and its mission. If the Methodist Church in Great Britain is to survive, its members, individually and collectively, need to rediscover who they are.

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Introduction

Much recent writing on Methodism reflects a sense of crisis in the Methodist Church today as the aging membership diminishes and few places remain where thriving work among children and young people promises a church of the future. Within the Church there is constant debate about what, if anything, can be done to halt the decline, with often superficial remedies being advocated that do little more than express individual preferences for particular styles of worship. Much of the talk is of organisation, presentation and methods of outreach. There is very little debate on the substantial content of Methodist belief.

For Methodist theologians the focus is naturally more on the Methodist understanding of Christianity and what, if anything, about it is distinctive, unique and worth preserving. *Methodism and the Future*¹ is a fine collection of essays by young theologians reflecting on Methodist perspectives, and—with some guarded optimism—on Methodism's future as a movement if not as a church. *Unmasking Methodist Theology*² brings together more than twenty writers exploring the way that Methodist theology has evolved historically, the methods by which it is worked out, and the directions in which it is moving. Shier-Jones' *A Work in Progress: Methodists doing theology*³, the work of a single author, is significant as a rare attempt to present a sort of Methodist systematic theology, taking as its structure the arrangement of themes in Methodism's current⁴ hymnbook, *Hymns and Psalms*. Most of these contributors are concerned in some way to wrestle with the notion of distinctiveness and to show as false the perception that Methodism has no distinctive identity or theology, and no future other than decline or absorption into another church. What emerges from the picture they collectively paint is that Methodism has a distinctive way of doing theology, and a unique combination of elements that may exist separately elsewhere but not with the nuances they have in Methodism. They also highlight the danger that Methodists are losing the sense of what makes them distinctive, even a sense of who they are, which contributes to decline.

Distinctiveness does not necessarily equal uniqueness. In this essay we try to show that Methodism, sharing much in common with other Christian denominations, has a character of its own and a significant contribution to make, whether independently or as part of a wider church, which is the result not only of what it believes but of what it does not believe.

As is well-known, Methodism began as a 'society' or movement within the Church of England and became a separate denomination after the deaths of its founders, John and Charles Wesley. During the 19th century it split into various sects, most of which in Britain became reunited in 1932 to form the Methodist Church. Other Methodist churches throughout the world have their origins either in the missionary work undertaken during the time of the Wesleys⁵ or subsequently. It is beyond the scope of this essay to explore Methodism outside England, but it is worth noting that the Methodist Church

¹ edited by Craske & Marsh (1999)

² edited by Marsh et al (2004)

³ Shier-Jones (2004)

⁴ Since this was written *Singing the Faith* (2011) has largely replaced *Hymns & Psalms*.

⁵ The Wesley's movement was only one form of 18th century Methodism. The Methodist Revival in Wales was contemporary with the Wesley movement but independent of it and Calvinist. John Wesley split from George Whitefield, an original member of the Oxford Holy Club, and the man who introduced him to field preaching, over the issue of Calvinism. 'Throughout his life it was he [Whitefield], rather than the Wesleys, who was the archetypal Methodist in the public mind.' (Grundy in Vickers (2000:392))

— that is, the church of that name that operates in England, Wales and Scotland — is only part of Methodism in those countries⁶, and a very small part of the world Methodist movement.⁷

Methodist Membership

Traditional requirements

The most obvious starting point for a study of Methodist identity might seem to be an examination of what is required—and not required — for membership of the Methodist Church. Membership requires no statement of faith or subscription to creeds beyond a simple statement of trust in God as Father, Son and Spirit⁸. Membership is optional and there is little pressure on anyone to make that formal commitment. The theological basis for what may seem a lax openness is in Methodism's Arminian universalist theology, in what John Wesley called 'catholic spirit', and in the belief that every act and attitude of a Methodist should be motivated and guided by, and expressive of, the love for God and for one's neighbour. What is also important is the sense of the prevenience of divine love, its undeservedness and generosity, challenging those who become aware of receiving it to emulate it. So Methodism practises infant baptism in confidence of prevenient grace; it declares the communion table to be the Lord's Table, to which all are invited⁹; it welcomes people in anticipation that they will come to faith rather than requiring faith as a precondition of fellowship.

On a strict view, a Methodist is a member of the Methodist Church in good standing who fulfils the duties of a member and has a valid current membership ticket.¹⁰ Throughout the 19th century Methodist discipline was enforced with some rigour, and membership tickets were withdrawn from those who failed to 'walk worthily of the gospel', or who 'ceased to meet'. Without a ticket there was no admittance to Holy Communion. The disciplinary machinery still exists and occasionally is invoked where need arises. Few Methodists today, though, would approve of a heavy-handed approach to discipline. The Church has long since had two lists of those whom it acknowledges as Methodists: one of members (who have entered obligations and are eligible for office) and another, the 'community roll', which includes anyone loosely associated with the local church. All are under the local church's pastoral care.

A broader view

The 20th century saw changes that made Methodism increasingly more open and welcoming. Two developments were particularly significant: first, in the 1970s, and as a result of the influence of the Liturgical Movement, the practice of incorporating Holy Communion with the Ministry of the Word

⁶ The Independent Methodists and the Wesleyan Reform Union still exist as separate bodies and have a claim to having a Methodist identity. To them we might also add the most recent secession, that of the Free Methodist Churches, founded in 1971, with a commitment to evangelicalism.

⁷ 'The Methodist Church is Britain's fourth largest Christian denomination, and part of the worldwide Methodist family representing over 80 million members and adherents in 138 countries. As of 31 October 2019, there were almost 170,000 people who have made and sustained a commitment to Christian discipleship within the Methodist Church of Great Britain as active members of a local Methodist church. While this represents a decrease of about 3,500 since October 2018, the decline has, compared to the previous two years, halved. In addition to this, Methodists are members of Local Ecumenical Partnerships (LEPs) with a total membership of approximately 29,000.' - <https://www.methodist.org.uk/for-churches/statistics-for-mission/overview/> accessed 1/9/20

This means that the Methodist Church in Great Britain has lost 48% of its membership in the last decade since the essay was first written, whilst worldwide Methodism has grown by 14%.

⁸ *Methodist Worship Book*, p99

⁹ Wesley referred to Holy Communion as 'a converting ordinance' (Rack (2002:418))

¹⁰ Tickets are still issued annually and appreciated by the membership. (See Shier-Jones (2005:248))

in a single act of worship.¹¹ Formerly a break after the preaching service allowed non-members to leave before the Lord's Supper. Making the service a unity encouraged non-members to communicate, increasing participation, fellowship and religious commitment, whilst arguably weakening the concept of membership. The second change soon followed. If adult non-members could receive Communion, why not children too? Reports in 1973 and 1975 which suggested children might be allowed were followed in 1987 by one positively commending children's participation, which has since become the norm.¹²

Methodist identity, then, cannot be confined to those who are formally members. It includes children, and must in some measure include others with Methodist links: children in its uniformed organisations and their parents; people who join in the local church's social activities, though not necessarily its worship except perhaps at Christmas; those whose only connection with Methodism—but an important one—is that the local Methodist church is 'their church' for marriages, christenings and funerals. Those who are linked in these ways may know very little of Methodist doctrine, values and practice, and even less of its organisation and activities beyond the local community. If asked their religion, they might nevertheless say 'Methodist'.

Two styles of Methodism

Although the Methodist Church has been one since 1932, the two styles of Methodism that were Wesleyan and Primitive Methodism are still very evident in many ways. It would be too crude altogether to divide Methodists into two distinct identities: the similarities and differences are far too intricate and subtle for that. It is not unreasonable, though, to think of two poles of Methodism, with Methodists tending to be drawn to one rather the other, or to hover between them.

Wesleyanism

The 'Wesleyan' pole inherits the Wesleyan Methodist tradition. It leans toward the Church of England, and its exponents favour the covenant with that church. It is associated with: the valuing of the Wesleyan theological and cultural inheritance; appreciation of Wesley's hymns and other hymns in the conventional mode; liturgical as well as free forms of worship; a preference for dignity, order, ritual, quietness in worship; reasoned, substantial, systematic preaching, often based on lectionary readings and observant of the seasons, feasts and festivals of the Christian calendar; robed clergy; Holy Communion received at the communion rail; a focus on connexionalism¹³, with the observance of standing orders and traditions in the governance of church, circuit, district and connexional life. In theology it leans towards liberalism.

Primitive Methodism

The other pole of Methodism, inheriting the Primitive Methodist tradition, finds Anglicanism rather too ritualistic and dry for its taste, and feels more affinity to the Free Churches, Salvation Army and Pentecostalism. It favours a theologically conservative, Spirit-led, evangelistic style of Christianity, focused on lay leadership of worship, active participation, spontaneity and informality.

¹¹ The Sunday Service in the 1975 *Methodist Service Book* made this the norm.

¹² Methodist Conference (1987). These changes in practice were associated with changes in the understanding of baptism, confirmation and membership, as well as with new thinking about the significance of Holy Communion.

¹³ A commonly-used 18th century term, roughly equivalent to today's 'networking', which Methodism has used from the beginning to refer to the close linking of all the elements of the Methodist organisation. Susan Howdle's entry on 'Connexionalism' in Vickers (2000:77) says: 'The connexional principle continues to be intrinsic to Methodism, as a structural expression at all levels of church life of essential interdependence, through fellowship, consultation, government and oversight.'

Contemporary worship songs, or songs in the Sankey tradition, are enjoyed; preaching is most appreciated when simple, anecdotal and delivered without notes; extempore prayer is preferred; the communion elements are received in the pews (or the chairs that have replaced them) and consumed by all simultaneously; there is a tendency to congregationalist independence. Churches of this 'Primitive' or charismatic style are more likely than 'Wesleyan' ones to run Alpha courses and to bring in new members who have less commitment to, and feeling for, the traditions of Methodism. People of both styles of Methodism identify themselves as Methodist; they may not always and easily recognise the other style as being Methodist too, and this is the source of misunderstanding.

Marsh (2004:124) observes that Methodists want to see themselves, and be known as, 'ordinary people'.¹⁴

'Low church'

Some aspects of Methodist life, practice and outlook show close affinity to dissent or non-conformity. Methodist church buildings, for example, are mainly very similar to those of Baptists, Presbyterians and Congregationalists, especially those whose origin was Primitive Methodist. They are essentially preaching places, with pulpit and organ in central focus, although there is much variety and those built or refurbished in the last half century are more likely to be designed with a modest pulpit and central communion table. 'Small', 'plain', 'homely', 'intimate' are the sort of words Methodists might wish to use. This plainness reflects both lack of finance—since Methodists were generally not well off and lacked endowments—and a contempt for ostentatiousness and for waste. Nevertheless, where wealth was available it was sometimes used for grand displays of carved mahogany. The affinity to dissent expresses itself also in a strong desire for lay leadership and involvement, a valuing of spontaneity in prayer and preaching, a rejection of priestly views of ministry and of episcopacy, and a suspicion of symbolism and mysticism of all sorts. The Primitive Methodist tradition, which was much closer to dissent than Wesleyanism, is still a strong strain in Methodism. Much of the opposition to the attempts in the 1960s to join Methodism to the Church of England came from Methodists who identified themselves as Protestants not Catholics, as dissenters not conformists, and as 'free church' not establishment.

'High church'

In other ways, though, Methodists have an affinity to the Orthodox, Catholic and Anglican traditions that can appear rather 'high church' to other Protestants.¹⁵ The sources of authority to which Methodism appeals—scripture, tradition, reason and experience—are, apart from the distinctive last one, those of Anglicanism and Catholicism. This is not the *sola scriptura* of the Reformation churches. Whilst Methodism does not have bishops, it does have *episkopē*. It is a matter of debate in Methodism whether it lies in the Conference, which ordains and legislates, or in the circuit

¹⁴ 'Even if their faith (or at least their church-going habits) might get entangled with social climbing, there is a deep resistance to making any claims to extraordinariness or 'getting above oneself'. (Op cit: 120)

'The social base out of which many early Methodists emerged remains influential to this day, in Britain at least, in Methodists' "inferiority complex". To this is linked a reluctance to theorize: this would be to complicate unnecessarily (when ordinariness should reign), or to value education too highly (which would be getting above one's station). This in turn is reflected in a pervasive tendency of Methodist presbyters (even) to claim "I'm not a theologian", a tendency which can be documented, and which persists to this day. All three of these factors relate to a fourth: the formal educational levels of most Methodist ministers remained quite low in comparison with their theological teachers right up until the 1950s.' (Ibid: 124)

¹⁵ It should be noted that, technically, Methodists are not dissenters or nonconformists as these terms belong to legal statutes that were largely irrelevant by the time Methodism became independent of the Church of England. In Wales and Scotland different laws apply anyway. Even so, 'non-conformist conscience' was a term first used by the Wesleyan editor of *The Methodist Times*, Hugh Price Hughes, when he called for the resignation of the adulterous Irish leader, Parnell, 'for nothing less will satisfy the Nonconformist conscience'. (Munson (1991:206))

superintendents, whose very name declares their overseeing role. Methodist liturgy has always been close to its origins in the Book of Common Prayer, and in its most recent forms it has grown even closer to Anglican and Roman Catholic liturgies because of the common influence of the Joint Liturgical Movement, which has profoundly affected Methodism. Methodists have become tolerant of ministers wearing vestments, and often encourage it. The use of the Revised Common Lectionary has become so ubiquitous that in some churches there is pressure upon preachers to use it, or at least an element of surprise if other readings are chosen. Although lay celebration of Holy Communion is permitted, it requires a special dispensation from the Methodist Conference in response to demonstration of need and is not taken as normal as in other Free Churches, despite the Methodist claim to believe in the priesthood of all believers.

Most telling, perhaps, is that Methodists do not jibe at the word 'catholic' as applied to the Church, or associate it with Rome, but simply with the universal Church of which they believe themselves to be a part. Although there is a diversity of views about the sacramental nature of Holy Communion, Methodists tend more to a 'real presence' interpretation than to a 'bare memorial' view.

What makes Methodists tick

Catholic evangelicalism

Methodism has never claimed to have a unique Methodist doctrine: to the contrary, it has always been at pains to emphasise that its doctrine is orthodox and unoriginal. The Apostles' and Nicene Creeds are used in its liturgies and quoted in its Catechism¹⁶. The Deed of Union (1932) sets out the doctrinal standards of the Methodist Church in a few hundred words of general statements, whose brevity indicates that there is little that is controversial.

'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... 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.'¹⁷

This statement, which represents the common ground shared by the 'high church' Wesleyans and the 'low church' Primitive Methodists in 1932, hardly does justice to the true catholicity of the Methodist inheritance. Several recent biographers of John and Charles Wesley have noted and explored the influence on their thought of the early Church Fathers, who provided one source of the Wesleys' somewhat mystical¹⁸ focus on inward holiness and their sacramentalism.¹⁹ Dean (2007:15)

¹⁶ Methodist Church (2000:30ff)

¹⁷ Deed of Union, Section 2:4, quoted in Methodist Conference (2005:213)

¹⁸ Charles' daring idea that God's purpose in the incarnation was

'...to bring our vileness near,
and make us all divine'

is hardly consistent with a Protestant understanding of the eternal separation that must exist between the sovereign deity and his creatures, but purely patristic.

¹⁹ Kimbrough (2007:165ff), for example, provides an annotated bibliography of studies by Allchin, Lossky, Wainwright, Carveley and others before himself exploring Charles Wesley's verse under the headings 'The Nature of God' and 'Participation in the Trinity'.

acknowledges that John Wesley was a child of the Reformation but notes also how John abbreviated the 39 Articles, softened the emphasis on Original Sin, and distanced himself in various ways from some of the doctrines and emphases of Luther and especially of Calvin. Arminianism was 'the *sine qua non* of the Methodist movement.'²⁰

Connexionalism

When Methodists seek to reflect on what is distinctive about Methodism, they tend to identify the core message and some particular aspects of organisation. For example, the *Methodist Catechism* summarises the distinctive features of the Methodist Church by quoting the Four Alls (see below) and listing five 'traditional features':

- 'the importance of lay leadership in preaching, pastoral care, and the administration of the local congregation;
- the importance of hymn-singing in worship and in the teaching of doctrine;
- the subdivision of congregations into small groups for instruction, pastoral care and fellowship;
- the Circuit system, linking local congregations in an area, and the District, grouping a number of Circuits;
- the Connexional system, linking all congregations through the annual Conference.'²¹

A universal gospel

The 'Four Alls' are widely quoted with variations in detailed wording:

- All need to be saved
- All can be saved
- All can know they are saved
- All can be saved to the uttermost²²

These are signposts to the doctrines of universal sin, universal grace, assurance and Christian perfection. They form the core of John Wesley's preaching and are prominent themes in Charles Wesley's hymns.²³ That all can be saved was the doctrine that caused the deepest rift among the early Methodists, dividing the Arminian Wesleys from the Calvinistic George Whitefield. The conviction that Christ died for all and that no-one is beyond the reach of God's saving grace underpins Methodists' optimistic view of the world and inspires commitment to mission and evangelism.

The doctrine of assurance is founded on scriptural promises and on the experience of the warmed heart, which the Wesleys took to be evidence of the Holy Spirit 'bearing witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God' (Romans 8:16). The authority of personal experience, something that Wesley learnt from Moravian pietism²⁴, was added to the authorities of classical Anglicanism (scripture, tradition and reason), to produce a style of Christianity that was both classical and

²⁰ Methodist doctrine as shaped by Wesley was an 'extraordinary combination of elements and emphases,' a weaving together of elements from the wider Christian tradition'. 'In the way it straddles the divide between Protestant and Catholic, in the ways it seeks to integrate the whole of tradition, and in its attention to Christian integrity, Methodism has much to say, and much still to argue for.' (Op cit: 19)

²¹ Methodist Church (2000: 40)

²² Attributed to William Fitzgerald, *The Roots of Methodism* (Epworth, 1903)

²³ That all human beings are sinners in need of redemption is a foundation doctrine of all branches of Christianity, though the language may be regarded as old-fashioned today. Methodism, though, is not wholly committed to the Augustinian view of original sin, and is more inclined to understand sin as a human trait than to attribute it to the consequences of a primeval Fall.

²⁴ —though he might have found it in English Quakerism too.

dynamic, theological and experiential. From Methodism it later spread into Salvationism and Pentecostalism.

The last of the Four Alls, known variously as 'Christian perfection', 'Christian holiness, 'entire sanctification' or 'perfect love', is the most distinctively Methodist. It was also the one that most got John Wesley into trouble, not only with his critics within the Church of England but even among fellow Methodists. There were at least four aspects of this doctrine which were disputable: whether it is possible at all for human beings ever to be perfect; whether perfection is possible within a human lifetime; whether holiness is gained instantly or over time; whether it is given or earned. John's own position was refined in many ways from 1725 to the 1760s (Rack (2002: 395ff)) and debate has never been wholly resolved within Methodism, though the emphasis on love is strong. The Methodist concept of holiness has much in common with the goals of the religious life in Catholicism. The key difference is that Methodism does not consider such goals attainable only through a contemplative life in a community of celibates: it expects them of every Christian. The holy life is to be lived in the secular world, in marriage and family life and in one's secular occupation. There are affinities here with Islam, which has been characterised as 'a democracy of married monks'.

The organisational features to which the Catechism refers are designed to assist the fulfilment of the aspirations which the doctrines express. Lay leadership is important not only because it expresses the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers — which is dear to the heart of all Protestants— but because it gives practical expression to the belief that all are called to salvation and to holiness of life.²⁵

Hymn singing

Hymn-singing is valued because it enables the expression of many emotions that are part of the developing Christian experience: guilt, fear, hopelessness and self-deprecation; the dawning of faith and the joy of forgiveness; the sense of assurance; the flowing and ebbing of faith through the vicissitudes of life's pilgrim experiences; the aspiration to the holy life in this world and the next. Methodist hymn books, from Wesley's day to the present, have always been arranged thematically according to both experiential and theological themes so that they aim to be, as John described them²⁶, 'a little body of experimental and practical divinity'.²⁷ Through them Methodists have learnt the doctrines. Hymns allow the active participation of all, and they strengthen the sense of community. The growing use of non-Methodist hymns and songs, and diminishing use of Wesley's hymns, constitutes some risk to one of the chief sources of nurture of Methodist identity. Providentially, though, many of the best of the Wesley hymns are popular in other churches too. There is no danger that hymns like 'Love divine, all loves excelling' will be lost.

²⁵ 'He bids us build each other up
And gathered into one,
To our high calling's glorious hope
We hand in hand go on.
The gift which he on one bestows we all delight to prove...'
(Charles Wesley, *Hymns & Psalms* 753)

²⁶ in the Preface to the 1780 *Collection of Hymns for the use of the People called Methodists*

²⁷ 'The hymns are not carelessly jumbled together, but carefully ranged under proper heads, according to the experience of real Christians.' (Preface)

Mutualism

What the *Catechism*²⁸ calls 'the subdivision of congregations into small groups', originally 'bands' and 'classes' which met for prayer and mutual examination in spiritual growth, have become in time house-groups for Bible-study, discussion and fellowship. Only a minority of Methodists engages in them today, and the intense pietism that they once encouraged is rare now. Their value continues to be that they assist the process of growing in holiness, which is seen in Methodism as a social and communal process, not a purely individual one. Methodists, in other words, see themselves as having a communal identity, not just an individual one. Christian holiness or perfect love cannot exist in isolation: it requires relationships for its expression and growth. The Circuit system and Connexional system likewise give contexts in which love can be expressed practically on a wider basis by allowing redistribution of resources, the stronger churches and circuits supporting the weaker ones, and by the exercise of efficient stewardship of what God has given. Marsh (1999) sees this 'key aspect' of Methodism as something of great importance, needing urgent re-examination. The challenge is

'how to recover a lost effectiveness: to participate with God in the renewed fostering of this divine community, which the use of the term 'fellowship' has sought to identify and maintain, in such a way that Methodism is but a means to an end and not the end itself.'²⁹

Distinctiveness

Much of what is distinctively and maybe uniquely Methodist is not readily visible to those outside Methodism, and perhaps too familiar to Methodists themselves to be noticeable. The vocabulary of Methodists, for example, includes words which carry particular connotations for Methodists that outsiders may not wholly grasp.³⁰ Some terms are merely Methodist dialect for what others may call by a different name. Misunderstanding can arise when people of different religious traditions use common theological words not quite grasping how differently they are understood by others. For example, Methodist definitions would be significantly different from Roman Catholic definitions of words like 'confession', 'religious', 'saint' and 'catholic'. The word 'faith' in particular is slippery. To Roman Catholics, and to some other Protestants, 'faith' has reference to 'articles of faith' or credal statements: 'the faith' is what one believes; faith is the opposite of doubt. For Methodists credal propositions are relatively unimportant: one may believe yet lack the 'warmed heart', like John Wesley before his Aldersgate Street experience. 'Faith' is therefore better defined as a personal commitment made in trust. It is not the opposite of doubt; it is not certainty; it has little or nothing to do with theological assertions. It is, in Wesley's words, 'a sure confidence that a man has in God'. This is a Reformation understanding of faith with the addition of a distinctive Methodist emphasis: that faith 'working by love' produces holiness.³¹ This seems to have escaped the compilers of the most recent Methodist hymnbook and the Methodist Conference that approved it, for *Singing the Faith* is a curious title. *Singing Faith* would have been more Methodist.

²⁸ Methodist Church (2000: 40)

²⁹ Op cit: 114

³⁰ Many are related to the peculiarities of Methodist organisation: churches were until recently called 'societies', whose officers were 'society stewards', 'poor stewards' and 'property stewards'; members met in 'bands' or 'classes'; worship 'services' are conducted by 'local preachers' (who travel about and do more than preach) or 'itinerant ministers' (who travel less), whose 'appointments' are on 'the plan', drawn up by 'the Super'—the superintendent or senior minister in 'the circuit'. The circuits are grouped into 'districts', led by 'the Chair of District'. Ministers are 'stationed' by 'the Conference' until they 'sit down' and become 'supernumerary'. Those who read the plan will recognise common abbreviations like S (sacrament, i.e. Holy Communion), AAW (All-Age Worship), P (Parade Service), OA (own Arrangement), and a range of others that represent such events as Easter Offering Dedication and Covenant Service.

³¹ See 'Faith' in Vickers (2000:116)

A Methodist understanding of Methodist identity, then, is likely to contain a sense of being part of community of people who have experienced (or hope to experience) the forgiving love of God, and who seek in response to live in a manner that expresses a growing and maturing love for God and other people, to be expressed in practical ways. They do not consider themselves to be the exclusive recipients of this grace, or deserving of it: it is a gift God for intends all humankind, and therefore to be shared as widely as possible.

Methodist outreach

Spreading scriptural holiness

John Wesley saw the mission and task of Methodism as being to spread 'scriptural holiness throughout the land.'³² The encouragement of piety was certainly part of that goal, but by no means all of it. Holiness was for the Wesleys associated with love for God and neighbour, finding its expression both in worship and in practical help for those in need. John Wesley's school at Kingswood, orphanage in Newcastle and dispensary in London were institutional ways of providing help. His championing of the anti-slavery movement expressed a concern for social justice. These and other examples have always been an encouragement to Methodists to have a strong social conscience and to see their religion as something that absolutely must affect their everyday life. Holiness is conceived as the practical expression of faith and love in life and relationships. It affects choice of career, the use of one's earnings, the way one spends one's leisure, time and talents. Methodists are reminded in the Covenant Service that 'Christ has many services to be done'³³, (and the membership ticket includes as one of the four callings of a member (along with worship, learning and caring, and evangelism) 'service, by being a good neighbour in the community, challenging injustice and using my resources to support the Church in its mission in the world'.

The social gospel

Clough (2004) explores in detail some of the significant changes of emphasis in Methodist moral attitudes since 1932. On alcohol, gambling and Sunday observance—issues that have both a personal and a social dimension—the once strict attitudes have 'weakened'. On matters of social justice, though, particularly in relation to poverty and race relationships, Methodist commitment has been continuous.³⁴ He suggests that two factors have contributed to these changes: in part the Church has moved with the fashionable thought of the times; in part, though, the changes show a church 'deciding to engage with the world...and change it.' He sees this as evidence that Methodists continue to take an optimistic Arminian view about what may be achieved by human efforts in association with divine grace. 'Methodists are committed to the idea of a public church, its social mission, and a corporate vision of the Christian life characterized by action.'³⁵

A considerable weight of evidence could be brought to bear out this view. A glance at the Methodist Church website, for example, provides a glimpse of some of the wide range of public issues in which Methodists are currently engaged in relation to peacemaking, environment and climate change, politics and elections, social justice, social issues, ethical investment and national life.

³² A phrase used by Wesley in the 1763 Minutes of Conference, according to McGonigle in Vickers (2000:161).

³³ *Methodist Worship Book*: 288

³⁴ 'Methodists are now likely to be less interested in whether they drink alcohol or buy lottery tickets, and more interested in social justice issues such as racial discrimination, relief of the debt of countries of the two-thirds world, or fair trade.' (Op cit: 44)

³⁵ *Ibid*: 47

Mission and service

It is impossible to say to what extent individual Methodists are practically involved in social outreach. Undoubtedly a significant proportion of Methodists choose careers in education, social work, medicine and health care as fields in which they can give practical expression to the values in which they believe. Undoubtedly, too, there is an enormous Methodist involvement in a wide range of voluntary organisations, on magistrates' benches, in trade unionism and in local and national politics. A 2002 survey of some 6000 Methodist Local Preachers found that three quarters claimed to be involved with other voluntary, national or community activities.³⁶

There are still puritanical elements in modern Methodism, but Methodists are in general much more relaxed than Catholics, Anglicans and Pentecostals about gay relationships, divorce, pre-marital sex, abortion and euthanasia. In general they tend to be liberal or socialist in politics, and it is the left-wing issues that exercise them more, such as anti-racism and support for women's rights and gender equality, evidenced in the ordination of women and a concern for the use of inclusive language in hymns, liturgy and all church-produced documents.

The practical expressions of Methodist social and humanitarian concern are easy to find. Even the smallest and financially poorest Methodist churches raise funds and give generously to such causes as Christian Aid, Methodist Homes and Action for Children.

Methodism and other paths of faith

Catholic spirit

Andrew (1999) writes compellingly of the way in which Methodism's catholic and universalistic outlook is fundamental to its understanding both of the gospel and of its mission as a part of the universal Church. 'The distinctiveness of Methodist theology is based on the conviction that all churches' identities, our own and others', are linked to the destiny of all humanity.'³⁷ The catholic vision of Methodism 'looks to the ultimate unity of humanity as the object of our common hope.' This even finds expression in the 'ingenious and novel' way in which Methodist structures reflect this vision by linking the local church with the wider church through 'connexionalism'.

Methodism's catholic spirit does not extend only to other Christians: increasingly over the last half-century there has been an involvement in interfaith dialogue and recognition of the genuineness of the spirituality that exists outside Christianity.³⁸ Wesley had little to say about other faiths, having had little encounter with them except during his brief time in North America. What he did say was, as we should expect, consistent with the Arminianism and catholic spirit that informed so much of his thinking.³⁹

³⁶ Sawkings & Batty (2002:51)

³⁷ Op cit: 22

³⁸ Methodist scholars like Kenneth Cracknell, Wesley Ariarajah, Geoffrey Parrinder and Martin Forward have contributed significantly to the study of faiths and of interfaith relationships.

³⁹ 'Let it be observed, I purposely add, "to those that are under the Christian dispensation", because I have no authority from the word of God "to judge those that are without...Nor do I conceive any man living has a right to sentence all the heathen and Mahometan world to damnation...It is far better to leave them to Him that made them, and who is "the Father of the spirits of all flesh": who is the God of the heathens as well as Christians, and who hateth nothing that He has made. (John Wesley in Sermon 125, *On living without God*. <http://www.godrules.net/library/wsermons/wsermons125.htm>)

The 1983 the Methodist Conference recommended Methodist engagement in interfaith dialogue.⁴⁰ A further report in 1994 went further, displaying a 'reasonable enthusiasm' for such dialogue.⁴¹

Of course, not all Methodists would share exactly the same views about other faiths and what they would hope for as the outcome of dialogue. There remain among Methodists those, particularly of conservative evangelical views, who hold that there is no salvation except through a conscious faith in Christ, who are committed to evangelical mission, and whose purpose in dialogue is to seek ways of persuading others to become Christians. That is no longer the position of the Methodist Church as a body. One of the notable principles that was evident in the editing of the 1984 hymnbook, *Hymns and Psalms*, was the removal of hymns or alteration of lines that patronised 'the heathen'.

The attenuation of Methodism

Wellings & Wood (2004:75) have observed a 'strong, if changing, sense of Methodist identity' in their study of training materials used in Methodist Sunday schools, membership classes and local preacher training, and reading lists for ministerial candidates and probationers, since the 1930s. In the membership materials 'the overwhelming sense is of a Trinitarian, practical, inclusive and exploratory theology.'⁴² The local preacher courses in each generation sought to address what were perceived as the current intellectual challenges to Christianity. 'Attuned to the general theological climate of the day (or sometimes the day before yesterday), with a faint and fading tinge derived from the Wesleys'⁴³ they became progressively less Methodist. Their summary conclusion is:

'At its best, this theology has been practical, attuned to contemporary concerns and ready to learn. At its worst, it has been an anaemic partner of the spirit of the age, marked by a progressive attenuation of anything distinctively Methodist.'⁴⁴

An exploration by Richter (2004) of some of the means by which Methodist identity can be transmitted and preserved finds ambiguity and lack of distinctiveness common across a range of them. In its use of hymnody, for example, Methodism uses less of Wesley nowadays, and *The Methodist Worship Book* seems to 'privilege more 'high church' traditions within Methodism'⁴⁵. The Methodist newspapers and magazines have a very limited circulation; Methodist Conference reports

⁴⁰ 'Conversation or dialogue is an integral part of loving another person. It is not a technique to break down the other's defences and win his allegiance to Christ more easily. In dialogue both partners have much to learn: the Christian must want to know what the God of the universe has been doing in the life and heritage of his partner as well as to share his own experience of God-in-Christ. There must be respect for the integrity and contribution of the other partner as well as freedom to witness what rings true for oneself.'
(A response to the British Council of Churches guidelines on inter faith dialogue adopted by the Methodist Conference in 1983.)

⁴¹ 'We commend a theology of providence which believes that God has created the whole diverse human race and wants all human beings to live together in justice and peace whatever their religious belief or ethnic origin...
Like other Christians, Methodists believe that it is only by the grace of God that people of different faiths and ethnic origins can do that..
'If we believe that a multi-faith society is within the gracious purposes of God, then Methodists must display the attitude commended in John Wesley's sermon on *The Catholic Spirit*, and extend the hand of friendship.
This can happen at the workplace, over a garden fence at home, or by joining an inter faith group.'
(From *Principles for Dialogue and Evangelism among people of other faiths*, adopted by the Methodist Conference of 1994)

⁴² Op cit:75

⁴³ Ibid:78

⁴⁴ Ibid:81

⁴⁵ Op cit:42

'can be dry and inaccessible to the average reader';⁴⁶ the Methodist Church website is less effective in expressing denominational identity than that of the Church of England; Methodism has few schools, 'no one set pattern for preparing individuals for reception into full membership'⁴⁷ and lifelong learning opportunities are not Methodist-focused. Even the ordained ministers cannot be relied upon to be 'key agents in promoting denominational identity'⁴⁸ because some have switched from other denominations and initial ministerial training is often ecumenical. Richter's analysis does not make encouraging reading, but it will be easily recognised by Methodists as a fair summary of many of the practical ways in which opportunities to recognise, reflect on, develop and strengthen a sense of Methodist identity and purpose are being lost.⁴⁹

Jonathan Dean's reminder of the importance of the tradition is valuable here. In the 2007 Fernley Hartley Lecture Dean argues that Methodism is in danger of losing its institutional memory, rejecting its own story, and thereby losing the knowledge of its own identity, as tragic as the loss of memory and of identity in those afflicted with dementia in old age. He writes of Methodism's 'discomfort with the past', a 'collective amnesia.'⁵⁰ He wishes Methodism to rediscover its Methodist identity as a contribution to the renewal of ecumenical effort. He sees the need for a historical hermeneutic in Methodism to rediscover, reevaluate and carry forward Methodist tradition creatively in the same way as Methodism interprets scriptures in new ways appropriate to the age. This is what Wesley did himself. He was a reinterpreter of the traditions he inherited. It is highly significant, in Dean's view, that Methodism

'is not, at root, an import from the purer Protestant air of Geneva or Zurich and Strasbourg; neither does it grow from impulses within the Church of England to greater doctrinal exactitude or rigour. It arose, rather, happily imbibing the unusual catholicity of the Church of England.'⁵¹

There were aspects of Wesley's teaching that carried the Reformation even further, but he also drew on older sources, patristic and eastern, that enriched and enlarged his understanding and contributed particularly to his distinctive emphases on catholic spirit, on inward holiness and on frequent Communion. Most important of all was his utter rejection of Calvinism and embracing of Arminianism.⁵²

Dean concludes that what Methodism can also contribute to an ecumenical church is a focus on what is important, not the relatively unimportant issues about church structures, episcopacy or beliefs about the eucharist.⁵³

⁴⁶ Ibid :44

⁴⁷ Ibid: 46

⁴⁸ Ibid: 47

⁴⁹ Richter sees some hope in the consultative method by which Methodism's 'Our Calling' vision statement was produced . 'It is always important that a sense of Methodist identity is owned by ordinary Methodists, as something they themselves identify with (ibid:47).' The problem, though, with defining Methodism in terms of the current consensus among Methodists, is that uninformed Methodism easily drifts from its moorings.

⁵⁰ 'What has been termed the gradual 'attenuation' of distinctive Methodist emphases has been observed in confirmation class, class meeting, theological college and Conference proceedings alike.' (Dean (2007:9)

⁵¹ Op cit: 15

⁵² 'The salvation optimism of the Methodists was...a missiological imperative...the supreme hermeneutical key to the reading of Scripture and tradition..the lens through which engagement with those of other denominations and even occasionally other faiths should be viewed.' (Ibid: 18)

⁵³ 'In the way it straddles the divide between Protestant and Catholic, in the ways it seeks to integrate the whole of tradition, and in its attention to Christian integrity, Methodism has much to say, and much still to argue for.' (Ibid: 19)

Methodism as the Middle Way

Dean is not alone in wanting Methodists to revisit their origins to discover the key to their future. The 2007 tercentenary of Charles' Wesley's birth gave opportunity for a reassessment of Charles' contribution to Methodism, not just as hymnwriter (the junior role that John assigned him) but as the first Methodist and every bit as much a shaper of Methodism as John. Chapman (2006:334-337), in his study of the history of Methodist worship, examines the contributions of both brothers to the shaping of Methodist worship in their own day and subsequently, and observes what he calls 'a dialectical tension' between extempore and prescribed forms of worship, emotional and intellectual components, the sacramental and the subjective, which together 'give Methodist worship its distinctive shape'.⁵⁴ In this he is drawing on a seminal idea of John Wesley's definitive biographer, Henry Rack.

Rack's inspired title for his acclaimed biography of John Wesley, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, captures brilliantly the paradox of the scholarly evangelist and points to the source of so much that is paradoxical in Methodism. In Wesley's day 'enthusiasm' was a term of abuse, often levelled against Wesley and the Methodists in reference to the excesses of irrational religious excitement manifested at Methodist meetings, and the outbreak of charismatic phenomena, like instant conversion, which the Established Church taught belonged only in the apostolic age. 'Enthusiasm' carried overtones of what Rack calls 'social subversion', and recalled the breakdown of authority and order of the Interregnum.⁵⁵

John Wesley did cause trouble, and so did Methodism. Yet the man himself was no wild ranter. His sermons are systematically ordered, reasoned, scholarly, as one would expect of an Oxford don. In all aspects of his life, from his balanced stewardship of his own time and money, to his disciplined and systematic organisation of activities, resources and people (what today we would call managerial and administrative flair), everything he did was underpinned by a scriptural, orthodox, reasoned theology, which changed in 1738 only because there was added to it the personal experience of the 'warmed heart'.

'Reasonable enthusiasts' could be an appropriate way of describing the Methodist ideal today—a key to their identity—though we would need to understand 'enthusiast' more in its modern meaning than in that of the 18th century. The older sense should not be wholly forgotten. Wesley did not despise the gifts of the Spirit (healing, glossolalia, prophecy, etc), though he was not enthusiastic about them. His focus was more on the 'more excellent way'⁵⁶ of love, and on the cultivation of the 'fruit of the Spirit'⁵⁷. Wholehearted response to divine love, and total commitment to the service of God, are the enthusiasm that 18th and 21st century Methodists should have in common.

Methodists today are somewhat divided over the extent to which 'enthusiasm' is to be encouraged. No-one doubts that the Christian gospel calls people to a life dedicated to God in service given not reluctantly but wholeheartedly. Three quarters of a century ago much of the preaching would have been deliberately targeted at 'seeking a verdict'—a conversion experience involving a personal encounter with Christ—and Methodists then supported Billy Graham's evangelical crusades and

⁵⁴ Op cit: 337

⁵⁵ The perception that Methodism was a threat explains why Methodist preachers, including the Wesleys, often suffered physical as well as verbal abuse.

⁵⁶ I Corinthians 13

⁵⁷ Galatians 5:22f

others of a similar kind. Some contemporary Methodists still do.⁵⁸ Much of Methodism, though, has grown wary of such approaches, and for the most part Methodist congregations wish to be warned rather than over-excited: they are embarrassed rather than uplifted by what they call 'happy clappy' worship. It would be easy to dismiss this as the lukewarmness of the church of Laodicea⁵⁹. It may be that, or it may be the result of the tension that exists between reason and enthusiasm. The 'enthusiastic' tradition of Methodism remembers Pentecost and I Corinthians 12 and looks for a new Pentecost in individuals and church communities. The rational tradition of Methodism remembers I Corinthians 13, and is wary of mistaking wishful thinking for faith, high spirits for the Holy Spirit, and entertainment for worship. It expects the Holy Spirit to work in quiet, inconspicuous ways. The middle ground between a dry, emotionless rationality, and an empty-headed and ultimately godless frothiness, is not easy ground to occupy, but it is where 'reasonable enthusiasts' can find themselves, and it is of the essence of Methodism: its genius and its Achilles' heel.

It is difficult for Methodists today to shout the gospel from the rooftops because Methodism is a moderate church, occupying the middle ground. With reason as one of its declared sources of theological authority, Methodism is committed always to looking at different points of view on controversial issues and recognising that truth is often difficult to find.⁶⁰ Before Methodists can say 'it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us'⁶¹ they feel the need to study, think, pray and confer.⁶² Reasonableness makes for modesty and a willingness to allow that different points of view may both be Christian. That leads to an inclination to dialogue rather than to debate, to educate rather than evangelise, to choose service rather than mission, and to despise propaganda and the use of emotional and psychological blackmail. Modern Methodist preaching does not seek an instant verdict as much Georgian and Victorian Methodist preaching sought to do, though it does hope to educate, inspire, challenge, nurture and comfort. This attention to reason also makes for a church critical of some of its theological inheritance and sceptical about what cannot be reconciled with science.

To be both reasonable and enthusiastic often means following what Anglicans and Buddhists call 'the middle way'. It is, of course, Anglicanism, from which Methodism split, that has been called the *via media*.⁶³ Methodism can equally claim to be a *via media* between Anglicanism and Dissent. That, at least, has been its historical location. Nowadays, though, the traditional labels do not always fit. Evangelical Anglicanism is often more Protestant than Methodism, and since Vatican II Methodist

⁵⁸ Cliff College is still the home of an evangelical, missioning Methodism that has much in common with Pentecostalism in its focus on the Holy Spirit as the source of empowerment in Christian faith and life.

⁵⁹ Revelation 3:14ff

⁶⁰ The characteristic way by which Methodism does theology is collectively. An issue, a problem, a dispute will arise, within the church or outside it, and this may give rise to tensions. A memorial may be sent to Conference inviting some declaration or new standing order that would forestall any dispute in the future. Conference will refer it to the Faith & Order Committee or some other appropriate group, who twelve months later will present a carefully reasoned and comprehensive report, in which scripture, tradition, reason and experience will all be considered. The report may be adopted by Conference and commended to the church at large, or it may be sent out for further discussion and amendment before Conference is satisfied with it. It is not a quick process but it is a thorough one.

⁶¹ Acts 15:28

⁶² As Shier-Jones (2004) says, 'Within Methodism, revelation is held to be communal, mediated and, most importantly, dynamic and contemporary as well as historical.'

⁶³ The Tractarians used the term to locate Anglicanism as being both Catholic and Reformed. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglicanism>).

and Roman Catholic dialogue has brought more commonality than was previously appreciated on either side.⁶⁴

Longley (2004:198ff) in his critique of other articles in *Unmasking Methodist Theology* fails to find much that is distinctive in Methodism because so much of what Methodists believe and say is easily paralleled in Roman Catholicism.⁶⁵ By his own admission, Longley looked in the draft contributions to *Unmasking Methodist Theology* for what he could disagree with.⁶⁶ He evidently expected Methodists to define their identity by showing how they were different from other Christians. That is exactly what Methodists do not do: they look to their foundational principles especially in scripture and tradition, to define what is Christian, and to what they have in common with others, playing down the points of difference as less important.

The desire of Methodists to be 'the friends of all and the enemies of none' also leads to the middle ground. Methodists are reluctant to engage in controversy, and prefer where possible to allow different views to co-exist. For example, even on what is for most Christian churches a key question—the authority of scripture—Methodists are tolerant of a diversity of views, as is strikingly shown by the Conference-approved statement, *A Lamp to My Feet and a Light to My Path* (1998). This illustrates seven models of biblical authority which can all claim to be Methodist, ranging from the Bible as the inerrant word of God at one end of the spectrum, to the Bible as just a useful resource, secondary to reason and experience, at the other end. Where conflict is unavoidable, there are procedures and traditions that endeavour to minimise its impact.⁶⁷ The memory of the harm done by the schisms of the 19th century is, no doubt, one factor in promoting a concern for harmony. 18th century Methodists knew from personal experience what it was like to suffer intolerance, and the Wesleys taught them to 'turn the other cheek'.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ If Methodism today is less distinguishable from Anglicanism than it was in the 18th century, that is because Anglicanism too has changed. It is less Calvinist than it was, more open to innovation and spontaneity in its worship, less class-ridden, more accessible to working class people. Evangelical Anglicanism has an outlook and a commitment that would be more comfortable to many 18th and 19th century Methodists than it is to many contemporary Methodists.

⁶⁵ What Clifford misses is what *Unmasking Methodist Theology* does not say: that Methodism has no Pope or Vatican because it does not want them or need them; it does not allow its district Chairs or superintendents the autonomy granted to bishops, because it is more democratic, yet it has a form of *episkope* and is not congregational. One will not find in Methodism oral confession, priestly absolution, a doctrine of transubstantiation, and veneration of the sacrament, yet Methodism is sacramental in its own way. Methodists seek holiness and value experience, but they are sceptical of miracle and mysticism, of the efficacy of rituals, of the supernaturalism that inspires much popular Catholic piety. Catholicism shares with Methodism some of what Methodism considers to be important, the stripped-down essentials of Christianity. What hinders union with other denominations, though, is that Methodism will not take on board elements that it considers unnecessary or inauthentic Christianity, which happen to be some of the features that are both distinctive of and important to Catholics and Anglicans.

⁶⁶ Op cit: 202

⁶⁷ It is well-known secret in Methodism, for example, that no-one is ordained unless they have first given an undertaking that if ever they leave the ministry or the Church, they will do so 'quietly'.

⁶⁸ The 44 Sermons of John Wesley that contain the doctrinal standards include 'A caution against bigotry', 'Catholic Spirit' and 'The Cure of Evil-speaking'.

Conclusion

Methodist identity is not easy to pin down because Methodists do not all think alike or express their spirituality in the same way. Richter (2002:41) likens the difficulty of recognising and articulating the Methodist identity to that of trying to pin down national, regional or ethnic identity. 'Such identities are elusive and there are often competing versions'. Methodism, for all that it likes order and regulation, is a movement that tolerates diversity and aspires to be open-hearted, open-handed and open-minded to all of humanity, and perceptive of the work of God that goes on outside Methodism as well as within. Methodists have what they think of as a common-sense approach to religious belief, practice and lifestyle, stemming from their recognition of reason and experience as important authorities to be considered along with scripture and tradition. It puzzles them that this middle-of-the-road, broad-minded Christianity, which seems to be consistent with Jesus' way, is not as popular or attractive as more extreme forms of Christianity, and saddens them that much anti-Christian polemic today seems unaware that an amicable, rational, liberal, contemporary, inclusive, socially responsible form of Christianity exists. They hope to see Methodism renewed and growing again, but do not know how to effect it. Some see Methodist tradition, especially its style of worship and use of Wesley's hymns, as part of what holds Methodism back and desire a completely contemporary Methodism to appeal to contemporary people. Methodism's thinkers, though, as we have seen, hold that what is most distinctive and valuable about Methodism is its unique blend of traditional and modern, its comprehensiveness, its ability to be all things to all people. For Methodism to grow it needs not to forget its past but to rediscover it and to find new ways of strengthening Methodist identity. The 'Catch-22' for Methodism is that the catholicity that is so fundamental to its identity tends to challenge any distinctiveness in its identity. To live, it may first need to die. But that is what its gospel is all about.

The Church of God, in every age
Beset by change but Spirit-led,
Must claim and test its heritage
And keep on rising from the dead. (*F. Pratt Green*)

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