

THE SPIRIT OF METHODISM

By Bishop Odd Hagen

President of the World Methodist Council

It is a great honor to address representatives of World Methodism at the end of this Conference as we are ready to face our future problems and possibilities. Being aware that three of the past presidents of our World Council are listening, I almost hesitate to speak. I assure these outstanding leaders of Methodism however of my high appreciation. I also know that I am included in their prayers and that I can count on their advice and help when I try to carry on the work they have promoted so well. Because I know this, and because you, outstanding leaders of Methodism in different parts of the world, are highly interested in our movement, I dare to speak to you, though I am a single voice from one of the smaller churches in our fellowship. I speak as a Methodist to fellow Methodists.

I also want to say that we think and act in an all-inclusive Christian fellowship. We are members of the Methodist community, but we do not live alone. We also belong to the communion of saints, to the church universal. I heard a Lutheran bishop who came back from the United States of America tell about his experiences and how he had enjoyed the wider fellowship of other churches. He concluded his message by saying that after all he loved his own church and would continue to "play his Lutheran cello." He mentioned also the Salvation Army and thought they should continue to beat their drums.

I have always liked to think of Methodism not as a single instrument, but as an orchestra. This idea was expressed by a friend of mine, Dr. Peder Borgen, in the charge given to the candidates in an ordination service last spring: We should as Methodist ministers be *servants of the whole gospel*, and not representatives of a religious specialty. This concept of Methodism may be selfish thinking. Maybe we cannot be "complete" without the rest of the instruments used by the Lord. But we at least have our part to play, and the other groups cannot be complete without us.

Is there something special or typical about Methodism? If so, is it our theology, liturgy, ecclesiastical thinking or organization? I think I know some of the answers. As to theology some of you will say that we have no special theology, and others will say that there is a Methodist doctrine or at least a Methodist emphasis. Both opinions may be right. The answer to a large degree depends upon whether you look upon Methodism as a movement in church history, beginning with the Wesleys, or whether you try to trace the spirit of Methodism. It is true that "our main lines lie, not in continental Protestantism, but within the English Protestant tradition, that

pattern of life, thought and devotion, which has sprung from within the Church of England and the Historic Free Churches, and from the tension, always fruitful, always tragic, between them." (E. Gordon Rupp). It is also obvious that the Methodist emphasis, or whatever name we give it, was and is an emphasis revealed in a certain situation. Its theological arguments are arguments related to movements, scholars and ideas in the time of John Wesley. I do not say that "Methodist" ideas were unknown to the church of earlier days, but they were weakened and sometimes forgotten. Nor do I say that the doctrines and ideas typical of the first Methodists have become irrelevant in later times and situations. Varieties of the Methodist emphasis have developed and always will develop in other situations. German Methodism surely will not feel the same about the Anglican Church as British Methodism. American Methodism related itself to a society built on the idea of freedom. South American Methodism had to find its way on a continent dominated by a nominal Catholicism. Methodism in the Far East was colored by the stand it had to take toward a colonial society with a totally different religious background. And Scandinavian Methodism cannot be understood if we forget that it came to a part of the world where the Established Church was a real power structure.

What I am trying to say is this: Methodism was historically born in England, but it is not English. It has a stronghold in the United States, but it has not become American. We believe in sanctification, but Methodism has not become a holiness movement. We surely dissent very often from established religion, but we never want to be sectarian.

It is impossible to understand Methodism if one does not catch what has been called the spirit of Methodism, a spirit which did not start with the Wesleys or the Church of England, nor with Luther or John Huss. As a matter of fact Methodism is a movement which identifies itself with basic principles in New Testament Christianity. This may be a weakness, because we do not have any sectarian doctrine for which to fight. It is, however, our strength, because as far and as long as we represent this spirit, Methodism will survive, yes, and it will contribute in a fruitful way to the growth of Christianity.

The spirit of Methodism then represents no specialty but that of the whole gospel. "Our main doctrines, which include all the rest, are three—that of Repentance, of Faith, and of Holiness," said John Wesley. Though most people know what was considered to be the Methodist emphasis, maybe a few words should be said about what it meant to be the first followers in the Wesleyan tradition. Usually the doctrine of sanctification is mentioned as typical of Methodism. It was considered so by John Wesley himself. But we

should not forget that it was a part of a message which, in the light of experience and reason, represented the whole gospel. When Wesley spoke of the necessity of repentance he did so because he believed in universal sin and the total depravity of man. Conversion was necessary. By reason and by experience it could be proved as scriptural. Likewise, when Wesley spoke about faith, it was something more than intellectual acceptance of certain dogmas; it was personal, and it involved decision. It was to put one's trust in God's mercy revealed in Jesus Christ, and therefore it could also lead to assurance. "Religion itself" was holiness, a new way of life. It may be that Methodists as well as other believers have interpreted this holiness in a legalistic way, but it is basically love to God and love to man, a love which destroys evil temper and is the spring of every good thought, word and work. Holiness was in one way inward religion, but it was also social and it was to be revealed in good neighborliness and good citizenship. True religion should not be an inward life only; it should also be an outward activity.

The practical approach of John Wesley to the Christian life brought forth the General Rules, in which the Methodist people were taught, not only to do all the good they could and to abstain from all kinds of evil, but also to attend to the means of grace. The outlook is biblical and practical when Wesley speaks about the church and the ministry. When he tries to clarify his views he has much to say about the church and its nature. He does not differ greatly from the Anglican or Protestant tradition. But Wesley's practical approach is different. Methodists are people who sincerely try to "flee from the wrath to come and to be saved from their sin." A Methodist society is a company of men having the form and seeking the power of godliness. It is obvious that the societies, class meetings and "bands" were organized for the sake of spiritual and moral counseling and care. There is a New Testament background to Wesley's concept of the church, the sacraments and the ministry. But he had to learn by experience. By experience he started to use lay preachers. But at the same time he was convinced that with regard to the ministry of the whole church ministers should be "set aside" for special service.

The spirit of Methodism also means mission. "You have nothing to do but to save souls" was not a slogan with John Wesley. That spirit brought the message to the cities and the countryside, to coal mines and cotton mills. Also, it brought the Word of God to other countries and continents. The famous words of Wesley, "The World is my Parish," were rooted in the commandment of Jesus, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature." Methodism has been a movement. Will it be today "forever beginning"?

To summarize: The cornerstones in Methodism are Scripture, experience and common sense spiritual reason, with a single aim, "To

serve the present age." But as Methodism has been central in theology and practical in purpose, it has been able to appeal to people in different countries, of different races, and in different social settings. We have been liberal in things not essential and conservative in things vital to the Christian faith. This has given Methodism a flexibility necessary to meet new situations, and steadfastness so that we can always tell what we stand for. Our movement became a religion of personal decision, social involvement, and missionary action, always ready to serve in new situations, according to the will of God.

This spirit of Methodism has brought us to the place we have in the world today. We still think we represent this spirit, and with the essential insight and power of this spirit we are called to face the future. The future confronts us with several problems and difficulties, but it is my sincere conviction that if the spirit of Methodism is still alive among us, we can turn these difficulties into great possibilities. The true spirit of Methodism also is creative and it can go into new situations and make them opportunities for the kingdom of God.

One of the great concerns of John Wesley was the future of Methodism. Would it be able to renew itself in such a way that it could fulfill its mission in the days to come? This ought to be our special concern today, not only because our situation is new, but also because it is in accordance with the flexibility and the central and missionary spirit of Methodism. In a time of secularization our first task should be to revitalize religion. Where religion has become more or less formal because it has become official or because it is proof of good citizenship, we should stress personal religion and decision, as in early Methodism. This great message should not be left to the movements we call the sects. Faith and assurance should be preached in a world of disbelief and uncertainty. We ought to regain the strength Methodism had in its personal care of souls, and at the same time enrich Methodism with the wider experience we have learned from modern psychology. The doctrine of sanctification has often been misunderstood, but worse yet it has been forgotten. The situation in which we live urges us to reclaim it, not as a sort of pious inward feeling, but as the spring of love which forces us to practice love and seek righteousness in all human relationships. Holiness should be revealed in social concern in all fields. This will be a new variety of an old Methodist emphasis. Do we hear the call from God to true discipleship? We should tell our people that conversion, faith and sanctification are what we need, and enable them—by the power of the Holy Spirit—to make true religion, as John Wesley called it, known to all men.

If this renewal is to come surely we must have a revival in our biblical and theological thinking. Many people ask what Methodism

stands for, and the reason may be that the emphasis we had has disappeared. In a time of ecumenical ideas and work we need to understand our own traditions. If we want to contribute to a greater unity, we ought to come as Methodists and not as "what-is-its." But also for our own sake we need a biblical and theological renewal. I think the Oxford Institute made a good contribution in that direction, and so did the Conference of Seminary Professors held this year and in 1961 prior to the World Methodist Conference. New movements in theology and biblical research should be studied, evaluated and related to our Methodist traditions, with our liberal attitude in things nonessential and with steadfastness in things vital to our faith.

Then we should observe the rapidly changing world and society of today. There is no need to go into details. The time of colonialism and the white man's supremacy is gone. New states and nations make their voices heard. Society is changing. Economy and education are different in our day. This may be obvious especially in the western world, but the same changes are also coming rapidly in the younger nations. Mission some years ago was to send missionaries to certain countries which we referred to as the mission field. With modern materialism and secularization we find the mission field just outside our own doors. How shall we fulfil our calling in this new situation? The question is asked not only by Methodism but by all the churches. The whole church, local and universal, is under the divine imperative and should bring its witness. This is the background to the discussions about new structures within our church. Methodism with its flexibility, missionary spirit and centrality in message ought to take the lead here, and we are trying. Two tendencies are evident. The first is found mainly in the British branch of Methodism. It is a tendency to autonomy and to stress local responsibility. The other tendency is toward an International Methodist Church, and there is no doubt that here the idea of the Church Universal is to some degree dominating. I am not trying to give an evaluation of these two tendencies, but it is obvious that both are parallels to similar movements in other fields of life. It should also be said that on both sides we know there should be no real contradiction between these two ideas, especially since both of them are supported by biblical thinking. There is no doubt that the church "which is his body," according to the second chapter of Ephesians, as well as the church triumphant in the Book of Revelation, is the Church Universal. On the other hand, we hear about the Church in Rome, Corinth and other places. In practical life we also find that the idea that all believers in one place or one country should belong to one church, wants to cross the borders and have fellowship with believers in other countries. Also, the man who almost always likes to think of the church on a universal scale, has to

come down to some place and some country where fellowship can be manifested and experienced. In any event, Methodism will continue to exist and we will be one people.

I have mentioned several times that in this day of ecumenism we have come to a new era in the history of the church. If we are to save ecumenism from being a problem and make it a possibility, we must take a realistic view of it. Let it be said first that according to biblical teaching we are already one in Christ (John 17 and I Cor. 12:12-26). This means that ecumenism in itself does not include organized union, but organic unity, mutual recognition, cooperation and witnessing. But it should also be said that ecumenism can lead to organized union. When and where organized union is to come should be decided by the situation and the circumstances. The spirit of Methodism with its centrality and flexibility will guide us. But one thing more should be said, and I think it is vital: We should be guided by the plain biblical ideas which from the very beginning belonged to the Methodist tradition. We shall be willing to compromise or yield regarding details and "opinions," as Wesley said. But I am sure that the spirit of Methodism will not allow us to give up central New Testament teaching. My personal conviction is that some of these ideas, about the *church*, its *ministry*, *ordained* and *lay*, as an expression of the total ministry of the church, are well expressed, both in the Articles of Religion of the American Church and in the Deed of Union in the British Church. If I am to change my mind in regard to these matters, I can do so only after having been strongly convinced by the Word of God, which The Methodist Church acknowledges, "as the supreme rule of faith and practice."

I would also like to say that any kind of union which means new divisions in the already divided church of Christ should be avoided. Let us think and take the time needed to come to real ecumenical understanding and then possibly union can be effected. On the other hand, let it be said that no kind of stubborn dogmatism in regard to details should prevent our active and creative participation in a wider fellowship.

Finally, my brethren, I think that we should continue to tell our people that conversion, faith and sanctification are what we need. We should enable them—by leading them back to a fresh religious experience—to make true religion, as John Wesley called it, known to all men. This means that we should proclaim and prove again what Christian faith means both to individuals and to society. John Wesley wrote once to an American these words, "Lose no opportunity to tell all men that the Methodists are one people in all the world, and that it is their full determination so to continue." Henry Carter, commenting on that statement, said, "This far visioned saying leads fittingly to our task, to recognize anew and with sureness the essential message of Methodism, in face of the renewal call for

spiritual unity and the desperate need of our world for spiritual deliverance.”

It is my sincere hope that Methodism will make its greatest contribution to the world by working with all its powers and by all means for that spiritual deliverance.