THE THEOLOGICAL STANCE OF METHODISM IN THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT

by William R. Cannon

The ecumenical movement, as it has emerged in our century, has been largely an effort both to discover and implement what the Christian denominations have in common with one another and thereby to emphasize their basic unity and also to try to find ways to transcend if not to eradicate their fundamental disagreements.

The first expressions of the movement were at the level of fellowship together as brothers in Christ and of cooperative action in constructive service to needy mankind. It was only natural that the missionary enterprise should have been the initial occasion for ecumenical endeavors. Consequently the first international and interdenominational Christian conclave was the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910. It was no accident, for example, that a layman rather than a clergyman was chosen as its first president. That gathering of talented and dedicated people of international stature and repute represented a gallant effort to consolidate forces in a single army to win the uncommitted nations and peoples to Jesus Christ. Yet successfully to do this, it conceived of its task in non-theological terms, actually going so far as frankly to say that whereas doctrines divide, service unites. At the Jerusalem Conference almost two decades later, this same attitude found expression in an even more appealing, and to many people, unassailable slogan: "Agreed to differ, yet resolved to love!" Life and Work, in contrast to Faith and Order, has the ring of practical necessity in its tone. People frequently have to live and work together whether they are able to think alike or not. Either through cooperation we will begin to establish a Christian world order, or else godless ideologies employing technological power will leave us no world at all.

This is true. No one will deny its validity. Yet in trying to translate it from an ideal assertion into a practical, working relationship effecting good results in social behavior and accomplishment, it was soon recognized that every action must be defined in terms of purpose, that life is hollow and empty apart from conviction which molds and shapes it, and that all works are trivial apart from faith which inspires them. Therefore, after the world conference at Lausanne in 1927, Faith and Order soon superseded Life and Work as the central concern of the ecumenical movement, or at least each task and enterprise was essayed in the context of its theological meaning and signification. Before one can perform the will of God, one must know what God’s will is. The missionary-evangelist who
preaches the gospel must be tutored in its content. He must have
the mind of Christ.

What was said at Lausanne in 1927 is being said, in almost the
same language, at ecumenical meetings today:

God wills unity. . . . However we may justify the beginnings of disunion,
we lament its continuance and henceforth must labor, in penitence and faith,
to build up our broken walls. . . . More than half the world is waiting for the
Gospel. At home and abroad sad multitudes are turning away in bewilder­
ment from the Church because of its corporate feebleness. Our missions count
that as a necessity which we are inclined to look on as a luxury. . . .

Thus this conference, in contradistinction to the Edinburgh Con­
ference of 1910 and the Stockholm Conference of 1925, addressed
itself to distinctly doctrinal issues such as the gospel itself, the
nature of the church, the meaning of the ministry, and even the
understanding and interpretation of the sacraments. Though the
president of this conference, at the same time its originating spirit,
was an American bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Church, the
deep concern for theological issues was perhaps most clearly mani­
fested by the Lutheran delegates from the continent of Europe, es­
pecially Germany, and they were fearful that statements might be
issued prematurely and matters of faith might be handled super­
ficially. Therefore caution and an attitude of tentativeness pre­
vailed to such a degree that the Roman Catholics poked fun at the
council and labeled it a "do-nothing assembly." One widely-read
journal reported:

From beginning to end the Conference was a sort of international exhibi­
tion of divisions and discordances which were beyond reconciliation. It was
an undertaking by men to substitute a human voice for a divine voice in
determining and deciding what God established the Catholic Church to
determine and decide.

Since the inception of the Faith and Order movement in 1927,
the controlling influence, as I have been able to observe it, has been
in the hands of theologians of the Neo-Orthodox, or continental,
persuasion; and, though Karl Barth and Emil Brunner have not
personally been active in the various conferences, nevertheless
their thought has tended to dominate all ecumenical discussions.
This was clearly apparent in the choice of the theme for the second
assembly of the World Council of Churches at Evanston in 1954,
and the force of it was made oppressively real to those of us who
had to listen to the lugubrious expressions of theological thought
through the papers and speeches made on the floor of the assembly.

1 Faith and Order Proceedings of the
World Conference, Lausanne, August 3­
12, 1927 (Ed. H. N. Bate, Doran, N. Y.,
1927), 401.
2 Ibid., 374.
3 This is quoted in E. D. Soper,
Lausanne, the Will to Understand
(Doubleday, Doran, and Co., Garden
City, N. Y., 1928), 128.
The theme was that Jesus Christ is the only hope of the church and the world. But the delineation of that theme had the practical effectiveness of robbing people of what little hope they had by deferring it to the end of time. Barthian thought has always tended to emphasize divine grace at the expense of human responsibility, and continental theology has been so preoccupied with eschatology that it has confused oftentimes man’s temporal disorder with God’s eternal design.

Unfortunately American activism, so styled by our European friends, has not had sufficient theological strength among its proponents to exert any great influence on the thought of the ecumenical movement. We Methodists have been viewed as “warm-hearted” but “lightheaded.” Our role in ecumenical affairs has been more supportive than contributive, so that we have been looked upon largely as ecclesiastical storekeepers, the promoters of and fund raisers for the movement of Christian unity rather than architects of its thought and molders of its purpose. The biblical expression would be that we have been “hewers of wood and drawers of water,” or to speak in contemporary language, we are the great proletariat of ecumenicity.

This role now, in my judgment, is out of date. For one thing, the ecumenical movement has reached a state in its development when it must broaden its theological base if it is to continue to be effective. It cannot afford the least common denominator. It must seek enrichment theologically from the doctrinal heritage of all its members. Then, too, a new factor has been introduced into the ecumenical picture. The Roman Catholic Church is actively involved in promoting Christian unity. The Neo-Orthodox movement of the first half of this century was largely a revival of Reformation theology, which accentuates our differences with Rome, not our similarities.

The time is long overdue, it seems to me, for Methodism to talk about its own theological heritage. Therefore, in my judgment, the primary obligation of the World Methodist Council at this time is to sponsor an understanding and appreciation of Methodist theology within the ecumenical movement. The Church Universal must compute again the values, multiple and various, within her long heritage, and from her storehouse bring forth spiritual and theological treasures, old and new. If Martin Luther was inspired in his writings, is it not reasonable to suppose that John Wesley was as well? The Methodist revival of the eighteenth century, judging by its fruits, is as much of God as the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, and it might well become the providential bridge to span the chasm of schism and reunite, at least in the Western Church, what has been for four hundred and fifty years, alienated offspring and disgruntled parent in one household and
family of faith. It was not without significance that John Wesley defined schism as differences within the church, not separation from the church, thus reminding all people that there are divine values worth conserving in all ecclesiastical bodies which bear the Christian name.4

To be sure, we can receive much to our benefit from other Christian denominations, including both the Lutherans and the Calvinists as well as the Roman Catholics and the Orthodox bodies of the East. But we are obligated to give as well as receive. What are the distinctly Methodist treasures of doctrine and spirituality, to be deprived of which the ecumenical movement will be poor indeed?

The first of these, the appreciative use of which is almost essential to the other doctrinal contributions which are to follow, is the personalization of the order of salvation, indeed the recapitulation of the whole of ecclesiology in terms of the religious development of each person. For example, in most other major ecclesiastical bodies salvation is depicted in institutional terms. Man is relieved of original sin by the sacrament of baptism. He accepts confirmation at the hands of the proper ecclesiastical authority, which makes him a member of the church. He is nourished spiritually as he takes the elements of bread and wine representing, according to various interpretations, the body and blood of his Savior. He is instructed and edified by the preached word. Thus by belonging to the church and observing her offices he is made eligible for admission at the end of his earthly life into the everlasting kingdom of God.

To be sure, John Wesley does not deny the validity of, nor does he attempt radically to modify the use of, any one or all of the distinctly ecclesiastical offices. But he gives them a personal interpretation which in the end makes out of them tangible signs which ought to point to a spiritual reality which is different in kind from any merely temporal representation. If the power comes through the sign or physical representation, well and good! If it does not, then the act itself, though properly performed, is invalid for that person.

Consequently the personalization of baptism transforms this sacrament from a merely ecclesiastical rite into the vital experience of a new birth, or regeneration in heart and life, of the person who receives it. What happens inside the man, not what is done to him on the outside, is both the test and proof of the validity of his religion. Therefore, Wesley has very, very little to say on the subject of baptism as such. Indeed, except for his father's treatise on the subject which he slightly revised and reissued under his own name in 1756, all he wrote on the subject in the various volumes of

4 Works (Jackson Edition), VI, 402.
his collected works is to be found in his “Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion,” and in two sermons, and the total content amounts to less than one paragraph, only a few lines. Yet his writings on regeneration are as plentiful as any in the whole range of Christian theological literature.

The personalization of the order of salvation is unmistakably apparent when Wesley attempts to summarize in the briefest manner possible what his major doctrinal concerns are: “Our main doctrines, which include all the rest, are three—that of repentance, of faith, and of holiness. The first of these we account, as it were, the porch of religion; the next, the door; the third, religion itself.”

“There is one word,” writes Bishop Stephen Neill, “which is hardly ever found in ecumenical literature, the word ‘conversion.’” Yet this word is the central word in Methodist theology. It is the primary and indispensable word in the personalization of salvation. If the order of salvation is not personalized, then it is possible for people to belong to the church without having the church belong to them, for a society to label itself nominally Christian without its either producing Christian character or exemplifying in the lives of its citizens Christian conduct and obedience to Christian law, and for persons to perform routine acts of both corporate and private worship without obtaining therefrom the power of godliness which genuine worship exists to engender.

South America, for example, claims the largest membership in the Roman Catholic Church of any other continent in the world. More masses are heard, and more rosaries are told there each day than anywhere else. But what about the moral and spiritual quality of the lives of the people? The number of transformed and regenerated persons is not commensurate with the number of persons who have been baptized and confirmed into church membership.

The ecumenical movement desperately needs the Wesleyan understanding of salvation. Unless the order of salvation is personalized, salvation itself is an impersonal abstraction, for in this instance it cannot be a characterization of an institution until it characterizes each person who composes the institution. Bishop Stephen Neill is honest enough to say outright that “conversion” is the one word which the ecumenical movement cannot afford to be without. He writes:

The Church exists only because in every generation people have been converted—from every kind of non-Christian faith or lack of faith and from service to the devil, the world, and the flesh. Unless they go on being converted, ecumenism will cease to be a matter of very much importance, since there will nowhere be any church to which it can be related.

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7 Ibid.
8 Works, op. cit., VII, 472.
Wesley says:

The Church is called holy because it is holy, because every member thereof is holy, though in different degrees, as He that called them is holy. How clear is this! If the Church, as to the very essence of it, is a body of believers, no man that is not a Christian believer can be a member of it. If the whole body be anointed by one Spirit, and endued with one faith, and one hope of the calling; then he who has not that Spirit, and faith, and hope, is no member of that body.*

The second theological contribution which Methodism can make to the ecumenical movement is its doctrine of synergism, or the cooperation of God and man in the act of salvation. This, as much as any other, can provide the bridge of theological understanding between Reformation Protestantism, on the one hand, and Catholicism, both Roman and Eastern Orthodox, on the other hand.

The great Reformers, following in the tradition of Augustine, were unable to find anything in salvation apart from the gracious and redemptive activity of God. The concept of divine grace held their thought in complete thralldom; so powerful was it that it imprisoned their minds and kept them from considering any modifying or even supporting principle outside itself. To add to the activity of God, they thought, was really to diminish it. Consequently, according to their teaching, man himself was a nonentity in his salvation, no more than a passive saddle horn to be ridden either by God or by the devil. This undue emphasis upon the sovereign will of God led to the conviction that everything that is is an expression of his will and purpose. In other words, as Calvin so ruthlessly expressed it, God actually originates what he appears to hate and causes to be what he seems to despise. Therefore the Reformation repudiated what it called the "work righteousness" of the Roman Catholic Church. Man, said the Reformers, cannot do anything to earn his salvation. It is the free gift of God. This led inevitably to the doctrine of predestination.

Wesley saw the wisdom of attributing all good to God in the salvific enterprise. If man is not dependent on divine grace, then the coming of Jesus Christ was unnecessary and therefore does not lie at the heart of the Christian religion. Yet at the same time he was unwilling to saddle God with the responsibility for man's damnation. How was he to extricate himself from this dilemma?

He solved this by means of a principle which he called the doctrine of prevenient grace. The noun "grace" which the Reformation had refused to modify by any adjective, fearing thereby to qualify the activity of God and therefore to restrict it, Wesley did modify, believing that the adjective he used did not limit grace but rather stretched its application to the ultimate limit of humanity. He taught that, when a person is born into the world, he is not only endowed

* Works, op. cit., VI, 400.
with the natural qualities of humanity but he is also empowered with a divine attribute not inherent in human nature as such, and that attribute is the capacity to respond to God in the salvinic experience. Thus prevenient grace is given by God to everybody. It is like the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the sunlight by which we see. It is altogether indiscriminate and impartial. “No man living,” writes Mr. Wesley, “is entirely destitute of what is vulgarly called natural conscience. But this is not natural: It is more properly termed, preventing grace. . . . So that no man sins because he has not grace, but because he does not use the grace which he has.” 10

Wesley protects the Reformation principle of salvation by grace alone, but at the same time he relieves that principle of its harsh and inhuman corollary, the doctrine of predestination. God always and invariably is the free and generous giver. Man is the undeserving recipient of God’s generosity. If he responds to the Holy Spirit in salvation, he cannot take credit for this since it is the prevenient grace of God which enables him to make this response in the first place. If he does not respond, it is his own human recalcitrance which holds him back, and he has nobody to blame but himself.

Here it seems to me is a vigorous and vital doctrine, one that is both theologically faithful to ancient Christian tradition and at the same time psychologically sound and full of good common sense. Salvation is neither arbitrarily imposed on some people and withheld from others nor universally and indiscriminately received by everyone. Though it is offered to all and though every person is enabled by God’s grace to take it, only those people are saved who want to be saved, and in the final analysis each one of us decides his own fate. Salvation is a joint enterprise between God and man. It is a cooperative act which is ineffective unless both parties participate. To be sure, man cannot be saved by himself. But then neither can he be saved without himself.

A third contribution which Methodist theology owes to the ecumenical movement is its teaching that there is an inextricable bond between the salvatory experience and the expression of it in the life and behavior of those who have it. Wesley stays within the Reformation tradition in insisting that man brings no merit of his own to the act of his salvation. Indeed, man comes to God with no claims whatever on God. He presents himself for help, and all he has is his own sin and helplessness. Faith for Wesley, as for Calvin, Luther, and Paul, is the gift of God. “No man,” Wesley writes, “is able to work it on himself. It is a work of omnipotence. It requires no less power thus to quicken a dead soul, than to raise a body

10 Ibid., 512.
that lies in the grave. It is a new creation. . . . It is the free gift of God, which he bestows, not on those who are worthy of his favor, not on such as are previously holy, and so felt to be crowned with all the blessings of goodness; but on the ungodly and unholy; on those who till that hour were fit only for everlasting destruction. . . . No merit, no goodness in man precedes the forgiving love of God. His pardoning mercy supposes nothing in us but a sense of sin and misery. . . .”

But once faith is offered and received, a glorious transformation is effected by God in the life of the believer. Luther had thought of justification as something God does for us for Christ’s sake. Wesley accepted this wholeheartedly. But, when Luther went on to explain what he meant by this, Wesley at first hesitated and then turned away entirely from Luther’s point of view. Luther taught that in justification God uses the cloak of Christ’s righteousness to cover the leprosy of our sins. Wesley, in contrast, insisted that when God pronounces the sinner justified he at the same time makes him just, that is, actually fit to be acquitted of all his sins. Always and invariably in Methodist theology conversion and regeneration are the concomitants of justification. Thus, when God pronounces a man righteous, he is righteous. What God does for us, he likewise does in us. Grace, according to Wesley, is not fully itself unless in forgiving sin it likewise overcomes and eradicates sin. The God who is good enough to forgive us must also be powerful enough to enable us to triumph over sin and wickedness. There is therefore no place for imputed righteousness in the Wesleyan view of salvation. Mr. Wesley expressed himself unequivocally on the subject: “I firmly believe ‘we are accounted righteous before God, justified only for the merit of Christ.’ But let us have no shifting the terms. ‘Only through Christ’s imputed righteousness’ are not the words of the Article, neither the language of our church.”

“Do not dispute for that particular phrase, ‘the imputed righteousness of Christ.’ It is not scriptural; it is not necessary. . . . It has done immense hurt. I have had abundant proof that the frequent use of this unnecessary phrase, instead of furthering men’s progress in vital holiness has made them satisfied without any holiness at all.”

Activism, therefore, and social concern are not ancillary to Methodist theology but are its natural ethical correlates. To be sure, Wesley believed in the Kingdom of God as God’s own perfect creation over which man can exert no influence at all, but then he was convinced that human institutions and organizations established by Christians and the societies in which Christians live and exert a

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11 Ibid., VIII, 5-6.
12 Letters (Telford Edition), III, 249.
13 Sermons (Sugden Edition), I, 119.
preponderant influence should anticipate on earth that perfect state of affairs which exists already in heaven.

The Kingdom of Heaven and the Kingdom of God are but two phrases for the same thing; they mean not barely a future happy state in heaven, but a state to be enjoyed on earth; the proper disposition for the glory of heaven, rather than the possession of it. . . . It properly signifies here, the gospel of dispensation in which subjects were to be gathered to God by His Son, and a society to be formed, which was to subsist first on earth, and afterwards with God in glory. In some places of Scripture the phrase more particularly denotes the state of it on earth, in others, it signifies only the state of glory; but it generally includes both.14

A fourth characteristic of Methodist theology which the ecumenical movement might well consider is the doctrine of assurance. It is not a fundamental belief, even to Methodism, and perhaps it is not reasonable to expect universal applicability of its salutary concept to the experience of every sincere Christian. Wesley, though he both propounded and proclaimed the doctrine, was noticeably without it at various periods in his life. As late as 1766, for example, twenty-eight years after Aldersgate, he wrote Charles that he did not feel any love for God at all, nor could he be confident that he had faith. The only redeeming feature of the letter was that he felt compelled to preach as he did and that the evidence he had of the eternal world was that which shines from reason's glimmering ray.15 Many people, I presume, must depend entirely upon external evidence such as obedience to the will of God and faithfulness in the performance of the divine precepts as well as honest belief in the goodness of God and trust in the mercy of Christ for their redemption.

But this is not to deny the possibility for some of an inward witness, an inexplicable feeling welling up into joy immeasurable that they are God's and God is theirs, so that they feel the living presence of the Holy Spirit within them. Wesley observed this in the lives of most of his converts. Indeed, in that same despondent letter to Charles he called attention to Billy Evans, who had this conviction, and whom he styled a true Israelite. If Wesley in this instance admitted that he himself did not have the direct witness of the Spirit, he none the less did not infer that no one else had it either but rather indicated that he wanted the witness above all else.

Two years later he was able himself to say:

I believe a consciousness of being in the favor of God is the common privilege of Christians fearing God and working righteousness. Yet I do not affirm there are no exemptions to the general rule. Possibly some may be in the favor of God and yet go mourning all the day long. But I believe this is usually owing either to disorder of body or ignorance of the gospel promises.16

All that assurance means is that inwardly it is possible to feel and to enjoy what actually by the grace of God we have been made to be. Our consciousness registers the quality and depth of the religious experience which is ours through the power and indwelling of the Holy Spirit. "You have already great reason to praise God that he has called you to his honorable service. Fear not. Continue crying unto him 'and you shall see greater things than these.'" 17

The fifth contribution of Methodism to ecumenism, and the one John Wesley would no doubt say is the most important, is the emphasis on sanctity. Among the major theologians of Protestantism Wesley stands alone in the importance he attached to this doctrine. In fact, his concern with goodness almost lifts him out of the Reformation tradition entirely and puts him in the middle of the stream of Catholic piety. In his zeal in proclaiming holiness, he is surpassed by no other person in the entire range of Christian history, not even by Francis of Assisi and Thomas à Kempis. Indeed, his attitude is more comprehensive than that of most Catholic divines. Whereas they make sanctity the extraordinary gift of the few who by renouncing the world and living entirely for God are able to obtain a form of goodness not found by the common lot of Christians, Wesley insists that sanctity is expected by God of every Christian. He therefore introduces sanctity into the ranks of the people of God and revives the claim of the Apostle Paul that all men are called to be saints.

At the close of the year 1763, Wesley made this entry in his Journal:

The peculiar work of this season has been what Saint Paul calls 'the perfecting of the saints.' Many persons in London, in Bristol, in York, and in various parts, both of England and Ireland, have experienced so deep and universal a change as it had not before entered into their hearts to conceive. After a deep conviction of inbred sin, of their total fall from God, they have been so filled with faith and love... that sin vanished, and they found from that time no pride, anger, desire, or unbelief. They could rejoice evermore, pray without ceasing and in everything give thanks... it is a glorious work of God—such a work as, considering both the depth and extent of it, we never saw in these kingdoms before.18

Wesley was convinced, as he wrote in 1781, in his Concise Ecclesiastical History that "wherever the work of sanctification increased the whole work of God increased in all its branches." 19 Indeed, it was for this very purpose that Methodism was conceived.

In 1729, two young men, reading the Bible, saw they could not be saved without holiness, followed after it, and incited others so to do. In 1737 they saw holiness come by faith. They saw likewise that men are justified before they are sanctified; but still holiness was their point. God then thrust them out, utterly against their will, to raise a holy people.20

If the past is any indication of the future, there can never be a

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17 Works, VI, 199.
18 Journal (Curnock Edition), V, 41.
20 Works, VIII, 300.
renewal in the church and a reformation in people and society without sanctity. General Douglas McArthur and before him President Woodrow Wilson have, in my humble judgment, been more clear headed at this point than many of our contemporary church leaders: Society cannot really be improved materially unless it is redeemed spiritually.

To summarize the Methodist message in its ecumenical setting is to say that its burden is soteriological, that is, its chief concern is the problem of salvation. Yet its focus is not on the objective side of the issue, what God has done and continues to do for us in Jesus Christ. Wesley presupposes this. Rather its concern is with the subjective aspects of salvation, how it comes to man, the manner in which he receives it, and the demonstrative evidences of it here and now in the practical affairs of everyday living. The Methodist approach is anthropological throughout. God’s gifts of faith, hope, and love are readily available for all. Yet so few people take and use them. The mission of the church is invariably missionary and evangelistic. It is to inspire men to appropriate the grace of God, to love Him who already loves them and has given his life for their redemption.

Wesley wrote:

Too many who are called Christians live as if under the gospel there were no sacrifice but that of Christ on the cross. And indeed there is no other that can atone for sins or satisfy the justice of God. ... But what is not necessary to this sacrifice is absolutely necessary to our having a share in that redemption. So that though the sacrifice of ourselves cannot procure salvation, yet it is altogether needful to our receiving it. ...

(Dean Cannon read this paper before the meeting of the American Section of the World Methodist Council at Lake Junaluska, N. C., June 26, 1967.)

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