

# THE METHODIST DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH

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There is no Wesleyan doctrine of the church as such, for John Wesley unlike John Calvin did not undertake a systematic compilation of his theology or his ecclesiology. The student must search for Wesley's understanding of the church in his doctrinal views. Accordingly, this study will be limited to what can be found about the doctrine of the church in Wesley's writings and in the history of American Methodism down to 1820.

Inherent in Wesley's doctrine of the witness of the spirit is his view of the church. He made some affirmations concerning the witness of the spirit which throw light on his understanding of the church. Listed in the order of their importance to Wesley the affirmations are as follows.

First, Wesley insisted that he had a divine call or mission to save souls. He wrote to James Hervey on March 20, 1739:

On scriptural principles I do not think it hard to justify whatever I do. God in scripture commands me, according to my power, to instruct the ignorant, reform the wicked, confirm the virtuous. Man forbids me to do this in another's parish: that is, in effect, to do it at all; seeing I have now no parish of my own, nor probably ever shall. Whom, then, shall I hear, God or man? A dispensation of the gospel is committed to me; and woe is me if I preach not the gospel. . . . I look upon all the world as my parish.<sup>1</sup>

Obviously in citing scripture to justify action contrary to the will of his church, Wesley was indirectly saying that the salvation of souls takes precedence over church authority and practice.

Second, Wesley insisted that persons and procedures must show the fruits of the spirit, and by fruits he meant the salvation of souls. He permitted Thomas Maxfield, a layman, to preach because Maxfield's work won converts. Maxfield's results prompted Wesley as time passed to employ scores and hundreds of lay preachers to work under his direction, and always the basic qualification for a lay preacher was fruits.

In passing, it may be noted that Wesley's principle pertaining to fruits enabled him to avoid the pitfall which traps those who say that anyone who feels a "call" is thereby qualified and is entitled to preach.

Third, Wesley insisted that practical necessity must take precedence over tradition and canon law. He loved the Church of England, but from 1738 to the end of his life, he did not hesitate to break with tradition and transgress canon law if they stood in the way of his mission to save souls. When the pulpits of his church

<sup>1</sup> *The Letters of John Wesley*, John Telford, editor, Standard Edition (London: Epworth Press, 1931), I, 285.

were closed to him, he preached in the open. Unable to persuade the bishops of London to ordain a Methodist preacher for America, Wesley performed ordinations himself in order that the Methodists in the New World might have the sacraments and an organized church.

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Consider now Wesley's view of the denominations of his day, including Anglicanism. He attended, supported, and defended the Church of England, saying it was "the best constituted National Church in the world." Throughout his life he communed at its altars an average of once every five days. He believed that only ordained clergymen should administer the sacraments. Regarding attendance at Anglican church services as important, he forbade his Methodist chapels to hold preaching services during the hours of worship at Anglican churches. Loyal to the Anglican church, Wesley never left it.<sup>2</sup> However, toward the end of his life he realized that the Methodist societies would leave the church after his death and accordingly he arranged for that eventuality.

Though a high churchman, Wesley held some low church views. He dropped fourteen of the Anglican Church's thirty-nine articles of religion when he sent Thomas Coke to set up a Methodist church in America. Among those omitted was the article which said that the wickedness of ministers does not hinder the good effect of preaching and the sacraments. For Wesley, scripture took priority over church traditions and regulations.<sup>3</sup> Toward the end of his life he ordained preachers. All such views and actions were contrary to the high church position.

Wesley accepted the fact of denominationalism in Christianity. Generally speaking a denominationalist believes that the theology and polity of his own church are supported by scripture and that his church is the best for the followers of Christ; but at the same time he admits that others may in all sincerity hold different views of the Bible, theology, and church polity. In effect he admits that other denominations are right and good and that in time the theology and polity of his own denomination may be abandoned as inadequate. While loyal to his own church, the denominationalist never claims that it has a monopoly on the gospel; he is appreciative and tolerant of other denominations. In essence this was Wesley's position. He owed much to the Moravians and he respected their point of view, but he would not join the Moravian Church. Wesley's Sermon on the *Catholic Spirit* accepted denominationalism.

<sup>2</sup> In support of this view, note John Wesley's actions as late as 1780 in regard to Alexander McNabb, whom Wesley expelled from the societies because McNabb believed in and insisted on an independent Methodist Church with power to provide the sacraments.

<sup>3</sup> John Wesley, *Short History of Methodism*, 1764.

11. I dare not, therefore, presume to impose my mode of worship on any other. . . . I ask not, therefore, of him with whom I would unite in love, "Are you of my church?" . . . Let all these things stand by: we will talk of them, if need be, at a more convenient season; my only question at the present is this, "Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart?"<sup>4</sup>

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Consider next some definite statements Wesley made about the church. He held that the sacraments and the preached word of God were important for believers. "Who, then, are the worst Dissenters . . . ? . . . those who unduly administer the sacraments."<sup>5</sup> But notwithstanding that strong assertion, Wesley said in his sermon *Of the Church*, "I dare not exclude from the church catholic all those congregations in which any unscriptural doctrines, which cannot be affirmed to be 'the pure word of God,' are sometimes, yea, frequently preached; neither all those congregations in which the sacraments are not 'duly administered.'" He said that if they had one spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one God and Father of all, he could "easily bear with their holding wrong opinions" and "superstitious modes of worship." He would not scruple, he said, "to include them within the pale of the catholic church" and would be willing "to receive them as members of the Church of England."<sup>6</sup> Evidently Wesley considered the sacraments and the preaching of the pure word as important, but he did not regard them as of the essence of the church.

In view of Wesley's position on the sacraments and the preaching of the word, it is logical to conclude that he regarded an ordained clergy as important but not absolutely essential for the church. However, he did not say that in so many words. And the fact that he performed ordinations in 1784 so that the American Methodists could have the sacraments and an independent church with ordained ministers would seem to argue that he believed there must be an ordained clergy if there is to be a true church.<sup>7</sup> Obviously there was tension in Wesley's thought and action in this area.

Wesley believed organization was essential for the church, though he did not insist on any particular form of organization. He said that ". . . in the narrowest sense of the word . . . two or three Christian believers united together are a Church."<sup>8</sup> He meant that the smallest unit of the church requires organization, but at the same

<sup>4</sup> John Wesley, *Sermons*. London, 1876, I, 548-561.

<sup>5</sup> Wesley, *Journal*, Nehemiah Curnock, editor. New York, 1909, II, 2/6/1740.

<sup>6</sup> Wesley, *Sermons*, *op. cit.*, II, 452-3.

<sup>7</sup> It is possible to argue that when Wesley was faced with the situation in America in 1784, his action was not proof positive that he believed an ordained ministry absolutely essential to the

church. He was confronted with the fact that the American Methodists demanded ordained ministers, and they looked to him as the leader of Methodism to solve their problem. Always a practical man, he simply did what was necessary to care for souls. See also Wesley, *Letters*, *op. cit.*, Sept. 10, 1784.

<sup>8</sup> Wesley, *Sermons*, *op. cit.*, II, 451.

time he speaks of the one catholic or universal church as though it exists without organization. Apparently he believed that visible organization is a natural necessity for the church as a local congregation or denomination but not necessary for the concept of the universal church.

For Wesley the church was composed of believers, “. . . a congregation, or body of people, united together in the service of God . . . how small or great soever.”<sup>9</sup> He said the catholic or universal church is all the persons in the universe whom God has called out of the world, and the Church of England is those members of the universal church who are inhabitants of England. He added that if the church is a “body of believers, no man that is not a Christian believer can be a member of it.”<sup>10</sup>

Wesley believed that the *function* of the church was the salvation of souls and the edification of believers. He defended his ordination of Thomas Coke and others on the ground that it was necessary for the “feeding and guiding of those poor sheep in the wilderness.”<sup>11</sup>

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Consider now Wesley's view of the Methodist societies in England and America, societies which ultimately became churches. He regarded them as groups within, supplemental, and subordinate to the Church of England. Yet according to his own definition of a church as a group of believers, the Methodist societies were at least spiritual churches within the Anglican Church. Moreover, as early as 1744 Wesley faced the fact that the societies might sooner or later form an independent Methodist church. Though he never admitted it to himself, as time passed his very actions showed that he in fact regarded the societies as churches. His ordinations of ministers for America, Scotland, and other places meant that he knew he had established churches which were going to form a separate denomination.

### *The American Scene*

It may be said that prior to 1784, Methodism in America was a “sect-society” on the way to becoming a separate denomination. At first the tie with the Anglican Church was emphasized; Joseph Pilmoor said, “The Methodist society was never designed to make a separation from the Church of England or be looked upon as a church.”<sup>12</sup> When Thomas Rankin held the first conference of Methodist preachers on American soil in 1773, the Methodist preachers were forbidden to administer the sacraments, and the society mem-

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 447.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 451, 452, 456.

<sup>11</sup> Wesley, *Letters*, *op. cit.*, letter of

9/10/1784.

<sup>12</sup> William Warren Sweet, *Methodism in American History*. New York, 1954, 63.

bers were told to go to the Anglican Church for them.<sup>13</sup> Francis Asbury worked strenuously before and during the Revolutionary War to keep the American Methodist societies related to the Anglican Church.

But though the American Methodist societies were a movement within the Anglican Church, they were also a movement on the way to becoming a separate denomination. American Methodism began spontaneously in the 1760's under the leadership of lay preachers in New York and Maryland, and several years passed before the American societies were related to Wesley's leadership in England. Then the Revolution, coupled with the distance from England, made it impossible for Wesley to keep tight control over the movement on this side of the Atlantic. The action of the preachers in Virginia and Maryland in ordaining themselves during the Revolution and administering the sacraments in the societies showed that the American Methodists were becoming denominationally conscious. When the war was over, Wesley, seeing that he could no longer exercise full control over the American societies, arranged to give them at least a measure of autonomy.

The Christmas Conference of 1784 throws some light on the Methodist doctrine of the church. Methodist historians differ in their interpretation of Wesley's thoughts and deeds which resulted in the organization of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America. Some believe that in ordaining Thomas Coke and telling him to come to America and ordain Francis Asbury in the same capacity, Wesley had no intention of founding a Methodist church here. In support of this view, John A. Faulkner points out that Wesley used no ecclesiastical terms in the letter he addressed to the brethren in America. Faulkner says that Wesley sent three documents to this country and that one of them sketched what was to be done here—his plans for Coke, Asbury, and the American societies. Faulkner infers that the document went counter to what was actually done by Asbury and Coke and that they destroyed it. Faulkner believes that if we had the document we would know exactly what Wesley intended to do when he sent Coke to America.<sup>14</sup>

Faulkner himself believes that Wesley meant only to provide a temporary ministry in America until such time as the Anglican Church could be reestablished and the Methodists could be rejoined to it.<sup>15</sup> He believes that Wesley sent over the liturgy of the Church of England and suggested that the American Methodists have the eucharist every Lord's Day because such would prepare them for

<sup>13</sup> *Minutes of Some Conversations Between the Preachers in Connection with the Rev. Mr. John Wesley*. Philadelphia, June, 1773.

<sup>14</sup> John A. Faulkner, *Burning Questions in Historic Christianity*. New York, 1930, 217.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 224-226.

the day when the Anglican Church would be reestablished. Faulkner is also of the opinion that Asbury desired to set up an independent church and that he proceeded to do so notwithstanding the wishes of Wesley.<sup>16</sup>

But contrary to Faulkner's view, Asbury's *Journal* seems to say that Wesley knew he was setting up a church in America. Asbury wrote, "I was shocked when first informed of the intention of these, my brethren, in coming to this country. . . . The design of organizing the Methodists into an independent Episcopal Church was opened to the preachers present, and it was agreed to call a General Conference to meet at Baltimore the ensuing Christmas."<sup>17</sup> Thus Asbury suggests that the design for a new church was in Wesley's letter and that it was the design which shocked Asbury.

Those who believe Wesley intended to found a church in America ask what else he could have had in mind in ordaining Thomas Coke a general superintendent, providing articles of religion and a liturgy, and sending Coke to America with instructions to ordain Francis Asbury as a general superintendent. Regardless of Wesley's intent, it cannot be denied that what he did brought about the organization of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America.

Whatever Wesley intended in sending Coke to America in 1784, possibly he was not fully aware of all that was involved in his action. What did Wesley mean in ordaining Coke if he did not intend to make him a bishop? Yet Wesley was furious when he learned that Coke and Asbury were allowing people to address them as bishops. Perhaps Wesley did not realize that he had laid the foundations for a separate church in America. Perhaps W. W. Sweet analyzes the situation correctly when he says that Wesley did not intend to form a church in America independent of his own control and did not intend for Coke and Asbury to be joint superintendents over a church; they were rather to be superintendents "over our brethren in America . . . who desire to remain under my [Wesley's] care, and still adhere to the doctrines and disciplines of the Church of England."<sup>18</sup> In stressing the maintenance of some sort of relationship to and control over the American Methodists, rather than emphasizing the organization of a new church, Wesley's letter, according to Sweet, really left hanging in the air the question of the status of the Methodist organization in America.

Possibly Nathan Bangs and Halford E. Luccock are right in saying that Wesley saw dimly that something was happening to Methodism in America. Bangs cites Wesley's words, "They are now at full liberty simply to follow the scriptures and the primitive church."<sup>19</sup> Also, Wesley spoke of "that liberty wherewith God

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 226-230.

<sup>17</sup> Francis Asbury, *Journal*. Eaton and Mains, I, 484.

<sup>18</sup> Sweet, *op. cit.*, 102, 106.

<sup>19</sup> Wesley, *Letters*, *op. cit.*, letter of 9/10/1784.

has so strangely made them free.”<sup>20</sup> Luccock mentions what Wesley saw happening in British Methodism, but he could have used the same words in describing Wesley’s reaction to what was happening in American Methodism:

In the closing years of his life, Wesley clearly saw a new, distinct church coming into being. Sometimes he seemed in a mood to close his eyes to what was happening. Once in a while he would feel afresh the perils that would confront an infant church and would point out how much better it would be if all remained in the fellowship of the Anglican body.<sup>21</sup>

But whatever Wesley intended when he sent Coke to America in 1784, Coke, Asbury and the preachers who comprised the Christmas Conference knew that they were organizing a new church. When the conference convened and Wesley’s letter was read to the body, “the first thing agreed upon was to form themselves an Episcopal Church.”<sup>22</sup> In certifying the ordination of Asbury, Coke said that he as “superintendent of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America” had “set apart the said Francis Asbury for the office of a superintendent in the said Methodist Episcopal Church.”<sup>23</sup> Richard Whatcoat wrote, “We agreed to form a Methodist Episcopal Church.”<sup>24</sup>

Abel Stevens says that at the Christmas Conference everything for American Methodism was the same as before except the sacraments,<sup>25</sup> and Frederick A. Norwood writes that at the Christmas Conference there was one need (the sacraments) and one central act (the creation of an ordained ministry to supply that need).<sup>26</sup> Both statements are true, but at the same time certain implications concerning the Methodist concept of the church were involved in the actions of the Christmas Conference. The implications are as follows.

First, an ordained clergy. As indicated above, Wesley considered valid ordination within the mainstream of traditional Christianity as important for preachers who would administer the sacraments. Wesley does not mention it, but it may be noted in passing that Article XX of the Church of England implies that when ordination takes place, the existence or the creation of a church is presupposed. Bishop Nolan B. Harmon, Jr. says:

It was not altogether a new church which in 1784 came into being. It was a church which in its method of ordaining its ministry and consecrating its superintendents was careful to stay within the Christian tradition and to

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Luccock and Hutchison, *The Story of Methodism*, New York, 1949, 178.

<sup>22</sup> Sweet, *op. cit.*, 110.

<sup>23</sup> Asbury, *Journal*, *op. cit.*, 486-487.

<sup>24</sup> Whatcoat, Notes on the 1784 Conference, as found in Amherst W. Kellogg, *A Concise History of Methodism*, Mil-

waukee, 1897, 181.

<sup>25</sup> Abel Stevens, *The History of the Religious Movement of the Eighteenth Century Called Methodism*. New York, 1859, 219.

<sup>26</sup> Frederick A. Norwood in *The History of American Methodism*, Abingdon, 1964, I, 419-487.

conform to the English Rite. . . . Conference action approved, adopted, and used the forms and methods of a historic ministry . . . but it did not originate them.<sup>27</sup>

Second, the sacraments. Wesley provided for an ordained ministry so the American Methodists could have the sacraments. Bangs says that authority to administer the sacraments is essential to the nature of the Christian church.

Hence a necessity originating from the state of things in this country, compelled the Methodists either to remain without the ordinances [an obviously bad choice], to administer them by unconsecrated hands [also incompatible with the nature of the church], or to provide them in the manner they did [an unusual but a necessary and thus valid action] . . .

'Because they were his spiritual children . . . they justly looked to him for a supply of the ordinances of Jesus Christ.' (Coke, 12-27-84).

John Wesley had a "right," as the spiritual father of this numerous family, to provide them with all the means of grace. . . .<sup>28</sup>

Third, a community gathered around an ordained ministry. Prior to 1784 the American Methodist societies had no ordained clergy. After the Christmas Conference they were an organized church with such a clergy.

Fourth, organization. Under the leadership first of Thomas Rankin and then of Francis Asbury, American Methodism had considerable organization before 1784. The Christmas Conference made the organization official, and the publication of the *Discipline* made the societies cognizant of it.

Fifth, independence. Operating under Wesley's direction from England and required to go to Anglican churches for the sacraments, the American Methodist societies were certainly not independent prior to 1784. But after the Christmas Conference the organized Methodist Episcopal Church was decidedly independent.<sup>29</sup> An organized church, as distinguished from societies within an ecclesiastical body, is characterized by independence.

Sixth, the care of souls. By means of societies, classes, and bands, American Methodism was of course caring for souls prior to 1784. But as time passed both the preachers and the laymen became poignantly aware that one important factor in the care of souls was lacking and was forbidden, viz., the sacraments. It was the

<sup>27</sup> Nolan B. Harmon, *The Organization of the Methodist Church*. Nashville, 1962, 17.

<sup>28</sup> Nathan Bangs, *A History of the Methodist Episcopal Church*. New York, 1835. I, 159, 160, 163.

<sup>29</sup> While it is true that the Christmas Conference adopted a resolution that the American Methodists would be subject to John Wesley in matters of church government as long as he lived, the preachers either did not take the resolution seriously or they were not fully aware of its implications. Two and one-half years later when confronted with an order from Wesley which they did not want to obey, the conference flatly refused, rescinded the resolution adopted at the Christmas Conference, and dropped Wesley's name from the minutes. They thus made explicit the independence which was already implicit in the organization of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1784.

demand for the sacraments in America which compelled Wesley to make arrangements for an ordained clergy which would be duly authorized to administer the ordinances. As religious societies within a church, American Methodism was only partially prepared to care for souls. When the societies became an organized church they were fully qualified for ministry to the people.

Now though the American Methodist societies were in reality a sect prior to 1784 and an organized church after that date, at first they were not fully aware of all that was involved in being an organized church. It takes time for a sect to become a church in thought and action. Down to 1820 and even beyond that date, American Methodism functioned more like a sect than a church. In "Notes" on the 1798 *Discipline* Coke and Asbury said, "It is manifestly our duty to fence in our society and to preserve it from intruders; otherwise we should become a desolate waste. . . . We will have a holy people or none."<sup>30</sup> In his report to the 1812 General Conference, Asbury "came down rather firmly on the side of the society rather than the church."<sup>31</sup> It was not until 1816 that the *Discipline* even began to use the word "church" as distinguished from "society."<sup>32</sup>

Only gradually did Methodism in America become more a church and less a sect. The early Methodists were a "tightly knit fellowship of committed Christians who watched over one another in love."<sup>33</sup> After 1784, Methodism was "a church in name, society in spirit."<sup>34</sup> It was potentially a church, but actually still a society. A sect is by nature exclusive. As it continues it tends to become inclusive. This creates tension, and American Methodism experienced that tension. As Frederick A. Norwood says, "Through it all surged those two opposing forces, the fundamental concept of the universal church of all ages which Wesley cherished in the Church of England, and the equally basic concept of the community of saints . . . the holy people, gathered together in societies for mutual witness."<sup>35</sup>

### Conclusions

As stated above, there is no carefully worked out Methodist doctrine of the church. But if the material set forth in this article regarding the Methodist concept of the church is valid, then we may conclude that a Methodist doctrine of the church when and if formulated would include the following principles.

First, a Methodist doctrine of the church will be that of an ecclesiastical body made up of believers. Wesley held that the universal church is made up of believers and he would have only the committed in the Methodist societies.

<sup>30</sup> Norwood, *op. cit.*, 7.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>32</sup> *Discipline*, 1816.

<sup>33</sup> Norwood, *op. cit.*, 11.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

Second, a Methodist doctrine of the church will be that of an ecclesiastical body which is in the mainstream of Christianity. In England and America, Methodism "was careful to stay within the Christian tradition and to conform to the English Rite."<sup>36</sup> By his ordinations in 1784 and by the letter he wrote to the American Methodists at that time, John Wesley "transmitted into the life of the [American] church the ethos and influence of the age-old church."<sup>37</sup> Wesley challenged anyone to point out a more rational and more scriptural way of feeding and guiding the Methodist flock in America than the one he took.<sup>38</sup> He held that his ordinations did not violate scripture and that they were in accordance with early Christian practice. In his *An Original Church of Christ*, Nathan Bangs attempted to show that Methodism was a scriptural church. An ordained clergy is a feature of churches in the mainstream of Christianity, and Wesley moved to provide just such a clergy for the American Methodist church.

Third, a Methodist doctrine of the church will not claim that Methodism is the only true church, because the concept of denominationalism is inherent in Methodism. Methodists may believe that theirs is the best church, but they are not justified in holding that theirs is the one and only true church.

Fourth, a Methodist doctrine of the church will include the witness of the spirit. Methodism is more than form or tradition; it is a spirit. Beginning with Wesley's Aldersgate experience, a vital factor in Methodism has been the experience of the warm heart.

Fifth, a Methodist doctrine of the church will include the factor of practical necessity. Acting from practical necessity, Wesley put flexibility and relevance into tradition and organization. The Methodist Church has continually followed Wesley's example in this respect. This principle is not to be confused, however, with the idea that the end justifies the means, or that a policy is right because it proves "successful." Freedom must be tempered by tradition, while tradition is being made flexible by the freedom of "practical necessity."

Sixth, a Methodist doctrine of the church will have a tension between loose inclusivism and rigid exclusivism—the inclusivism of a church and the exclusivism of a sect. From the beginning in England the Methodist societies were of the nature of a sect. In 1784 the American Methodist societies were organized as a church but they continued, as already indicated, to act in some respects as a sect made up only of fully committed Christians.

The seventh factor in a Methodist doctrine of the church, the one which in a very real sense gathers up and includes the other six, is

<sup>36</sup> Harmon, *op. cit.*, 17.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>38</sup> Wesley, *Letters*, *op. cit.*, letter of 9/10/1784.

the salvation of souls. The Lord Christ said, "Feed my sheep." (John 21:16). For Wesley the church's reason for being is the conversion of sinners and the edification of believers. He believed that even if a church is made up of only two or three believers, its function is to provide spiritual nourishment thereby enabling the members to witness to the truth of the gospel and to bring others into the fold. The principle of the salvation of souls was basic in Wesley's ministry, and it has been fundamental in historic Methodism.