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CHURCH ORDER WITHIN METHODISM

Rev. Donald P. Ker

‘The Methodist Church claims and cherishes its place in the Holy Catholic Church, which is the body of Christ. It rejoices in the inheritance of the Apostolic faith, and loyally accepts the fundamental principles of the historic creeds and of the Protestant Reformation. It ever remembers that, in the Providence of God, Methodism was raised up to spread scriptural holiness through the land by the proclamation of the evangelical faith, and declares its unfaltering resolve to be true to its divinely appointed mission.’ (Para. 1, Constitution of the Methodist Church in Ireland.)

Within this constitutional statement of belief, which offers us a vantage point from which to view the question of order in the Methodist Church, we may note a desire both to locate Methodism within the main-stream of Christianity from its earliest days and to define the Church with a view to its mission.

Both concerns have their roots in John Wesley. It is important to remember that he remained an Anglican to the end of his life and did not have deliberately schismatic intentions. But from his reading, his study of scripture and his experience of God he came to hold two very different visions of the Church at one and the same time, neither of which, to his mind, contradicted Article 19 of the 39 Articles (which defines the visible Church of Christ as ‘a congregation of faithful men, in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly ministered according to Christ’s ordinance in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same’):

‘On the one hand he recognised the historical institution, organically linked to the apostolic church by a succession of bishops and inherited customs, served by a priestly caste who duly expounded the Bible and administered the sacraments in such a way as to preserve the ancient traditions on behalf of all who were made members by baptism. On the other hand the church was a fellowship of believers who shared both the apostolic experience of God’s living presence and also a desire to bring others into this same personal experience by whatever methods of worship and evangelism seemed most promising to those among them whom the Holy Spirit had

endowed with special gifts of prophecy and leadership.’ (Frank Baker: ‘John Wesley & the Church of England.’ Abingdon Press, 1970)

Wesley recognised the tension involved in holding these two visions. He recognised too that the latter vision could tend towards the Church becoming a ‘sect’, if there was any attempt to insist on unity of opinion or form of worship, and these he resisted. He accepted that within Methodism there would always be those who would claim allegiance without holding a living faith. Nevertheless Wesley attempted to hold the two visions together through his concept of the relationship of the Methodist Societies within Anglicanism as ‘*Ecclesiolae in Ecclesia*’.

However admissible this concept might have been theologically it was, in practice, doomed to failure, in part because many in the established Church were deeply suspicious of the Methodists and in part because those joining the new movement had no sense of belonging to the larger body, or were theologically and sociologically distanced from it. In Wesley’s own lifetime Methodists were beginning to become a distinct body. After his death separation from Anglicanism became inevitable.

The history of the relationship between Irish Methodists and the Church of Ireland at the beginning of the nineteenth century, which is somewhat different from that in England, may serve to illustrate the flexibility of approach to church order which was adopted after Wesley’s death. In England the Plan of Pacification allowed Methodists to receive the Holy Communion from their own preachers, provided the service of the established church was used. This did not apply to Ireland. Here Methodists were still encouraged to attend and receive the sacrament in the Church of Ireland, or from any Methodists who were also in Anglican orders, one of whom was Rev. Adam Averell. However several Circuits, particularly from the North East corner of the country, (reflecting the strong influence of Presbyterian and Free-Church thinking) petitioned the Conference to be allowed to receive the sacraments from Methodist preachers.

The issue was first formally debated by the Conference of 1814, where deep division over the issue emerged, some being in favour of the move and others deeply opposed to any separation from the Anglican Church (on political as well as ecclesiological grounds).

By 1816 the Conference resolved that, within certain strict conditions, the sacraments might be administered by Methodist preachers. Opposition to this move, particularly in Dublin and the North West, was such that by 1818 the Methodist movement had split and the 'Primitive Wesleyan Methodist Conference' was formed, retaining its connection with the Church of Ireland, with Rev. Adam Averell as its president. The two Conferences remained separate until 1878 when they reunited. The 'Methodist' identity had ultimately remained stronger among the Primitives than their adherence to the Church of Ireland or its hold on them. Dis-establishment in 1870 served to hasten the re-unification.

One might add that in the two Centuries since Wesley Anglicans and Methodists have moved forward from some of the misunderstandings which characterised their early relations, although the task of reconciliation is hardly yet complete. It has to be noted that, just as in 1818, there are some among Irish Methodists who are strongly aware of their Anglican heritage, while others continue to lay emphasis on their Free Church identity.

Such a general approach to church order might be considered as rather pragmatic, and it remains a cause of considerable surprise to some that within Methodism worldwide there are Conferences which practice a threefold order of ministry (most notably in the United States) while others (whose practice has followed that of British Methodism) retain simply a presbyteral structure. This divergence arises not least because the major Methodist concern has been more to recover the spirit of what it understands to be the faith of the New Testament rather than necessarily to reproduce a 'New Testament Pattern' church along tightly defined lines.

At the same time Methodists have worked to develop their theological understanding of the Church. This may most simply be expressed as we note how Methodists understand the words 'One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic'.

'One'

The unity of the Church, which belongs to its very calling, is based upon the Christian 'Koinonia' in the Holy Spirit. That this unity was problematic even from the earliest days is clear from the

New Testament. We have already noted that questions of 'correct' church order were not historically a motivating factor in Methodism's development. Likewise Methodism, though deeply committed to the Ecumenical movement, would contend that any concept of unity must take into account the markedly pluralist character of the Church. Since the Holy Spirit is both dynamic and greater than all our understanding of him we should not expect him to produce monotonously identical structures. On the other hand unity should result in that sense of mutual dependence and solidarity with one-another which is suggested by the image of the 'Body of Christ'.

'Holy'

The Holiness of the church is grounded in the discipline of grace which guides and matures the Christian life from its threshold in justifying faith to its fullness in sanctification. Once again here is a tension, since holiness is a gift of God already given, and yet its realisation still has to be striven for, because the Christian is 'simul justus et peccator'. Methodism's concern for 'Scriptural Holiness' is thus a refusal to become resigned to the inevitability of sin, and an openness to God's effective grace leading to personal and social transformation.

'Catholic'

The Catholicity of the Church is defined by the universal outreach of redemption, and thus the essential community of all true believers. If Christ is Saviour of all (Jn.12:32) and Lord of all (Phil 2: 10f) then the ultimate scope of the Church cannot properly be less than universal. The converse is also true. The intended Catholicity of the Church is grounded in the universal Saviour and Lord.

'Apostolic'

The apostolicity of the Church is ultimately grounded in God's mission to the world, and gauged by the succession of apostolic doctrine in those who have been faithful to the apostolic witness. All the people of God are charged with this message, within their own circumstances. At the same time some members of

the community articulate the message with particular authority. This authority is grounded in the call of God, and involves the recognition by the lay community of those so called. It is highly desirable that there be an orderly continuity of the faith through the generations, but this line of continuity does not, of itself, guarantee the apostolic credentials of the Church, nor is it essential to it.

How is the authoritative voice of God to be heard in the Church? Wesley's starting point as an Anglican was the triad of Scripture, reason and tradition. To this he added the work of the Holy Spirit, testifying to and confirming the Word in present 'experience'. Not that the four elements in the 'Wesleyan Quadrilateral' thus formed should be regarded as bearing equal weight, for Methodists would wish to affirm that Scripture is always to be placed above all other authority.

It is the responsibility of the whole people of God to order the life of the Church and discern the will of God under this authority. Yet Methodism also recognises the need for 'Episcope'. Thus within the structure of courts of the Church, while the local (Quarterly) and district (Synod) meetings have some authority within their own areas it is their duty always to act in accord with the mind of the Conference, the national body which is the final authority within the Church with regard to all questions concerning the interpretation of its doctrines. Methodism in Ireland holds the balance between the authoritative role of the whole people of God and the teaching function of the ordained by ensuring that the Conference is made up of equal numbers of lay and ministerial representatives.

The W.C.C. report on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry poses an important question which reflects a concern lying at the heart of Methodism: 'How, according to the will of God and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, is the life of the Church to be understood and ordered, so that the Gospel may be spread and the community built up in love?'

Within the answer to this question, which must finally be offered by the wider Church, Methodism will look to the variety of structures for Church life which are to be found in the New Testament.

It may well have to learn a new appreciation of the traditional order of much of the Church from the second century A.D., but will also point to the need to be responsive to what God is doing, even if it seems to involve moving beyond accepted structures.

Finally it will point to an understanding of the whole people of God which entrusts to 'laity' as much as to those ordained the responsibility for the spiritual life and growth of people both within and beyond the Christian community.

D. P. Ker

THE MURATORLAN FRAGMENT AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CANON. by Geoffrey Mark Wahneman. Clarendon Press. 0-19-826341-4. 1994. £30:00 Hardback

Since the eighteenth century the Muratorian Fragment has been regarded as representing a list of the New Testament books recognised as authoritative in the Roman Church in the late second century. The name derives from its discovery in 1740 by the archivist Lovovico Antonio Muratori at the monastery in Bobbio, Lombardy. The Fragment itself consists of eighty-five lines and is mutilated at the beginning and the end, (commencing in mid-sentence and ending abruptly.)