

METHODIST DOGMATICS :
A THEOLOGY IMPLICIT IN THE
KERYGMA OF THE METHODIST
CHURCH ?

by

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ABSTRACT

Barth is believed to have considered Methodism devoid of any distinctive theological insight, but, it is possible that Barth lacked a broad enough theological perspective from which to make such a judgement. Methodism has introduced no new doctrines to the Church but the assumption that a lack of a doctrinal distinction corresponds to a lack of theological distinction has never been proven; other theological sources exist, not least the *kerygma* of a community of faith.

The formation of Christian *kerygmata* never ceased. Every Christian community formulates its *kerygma* in response to the imperative to proclaim the gospel. Moreover, *kerygma* has both form and content and hence cannot be fully defined by either doctrine or dogma. As the articulation and expression of the community's proclamation of Christ it is inescapably theological.

The British Methodist Church is a *kerygmatic* church. It both originated out of, and defines itself in terms of, its call to proclaim the gospel. By examining the theology implicit in the Methodist *kerygma*, it can be shown that Barth was mistaken. Methodism does have a distinctive dogmatic theology, one which is as indebted to the 'works' of the Methodist people as it is to the 'Works of John Wesley.'

DEDICATION

For Brian, for believing.

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ABBREVIATIONS

BoO The Book of Offices (Methodist Church 1936)

CAT A Catechism for the use of the people called Methodists (Revised ed.)
(Methodist Church 2000d)

CPD Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church Vol. II
(Methodist Church 2000b)

F&O Statements and Reports of the Methodist Church on Faith and Order.
Volume I (Methodist Church 1984) Volume II (Methodist Church 2000)

JWW The Complete Works of John Wesley 14 Volumes (Wesley 1996)

MCA Methodist Conference Agenda

MMC Minutes of the Methodist Conference and Directory

MSB The Methodist Service Book (Methodist Church 1975)

MWB The Methodist Worship Book (Methodist Church 1999)

SER John Wesley's Forty-Four Sermons (Wesley 1988)S

SSR Statements on Social Responsibility (Methodist Church 1995)

WEN Explanatory Notes on the New Testament (Wesley 2000)

CHAPTER ONE - INTRODUCTION.

General introduction

This thesis, like so many at the close of the twentieth century, was provoked by one of Karl Barth's questions and the belief that a good question deserves a good answer. Barth is reputed to have once asked – "Does the Methodist Church have any theologians?" In asking the question he gave voice to the suspicion held by many and admitted to by some that:

'The theological thinking and creative writing that has been done within Methodism has been the work of individuals, and few of those are to be found in the second half of the period of modern Methodism. We have had competent teachers of theology, but few creative theologians.' (Thompson Brake 1984, 380)

One of those competent teachers concluded his own history of Methodist theology by stating that, as a denomination:

'We have not, in fact, produced many outstanding scholars, and we have to recognise our dependence upon other churches for leadership in theological matters.' (Strawson, 1983, 230)

He does not state whether he included himself in this dismissal of Methodist scholarship and theological leadership.

This thesis is an attempt to formulate an answer worthy of Barth's question, one which draws on the theologian's own definition of a Church dogmatics to prove that there must be hundreds of British Methodist

theologians, each one deserving of the name. The primary aim of this thesis therefore is to prove that implicit in the *kerygma* of the British Methodist Church is a dogmatic, contextual theology, one which is as indebted to the 'works' of the Methodist people as it is to the 'Works of John Wesley.'

Methodology.

The task can be broken down into three distinct stages. The first stage defines the terms and sets the context for the project as a whole by recovering the theological concept of the *kerygma* of a community of faith. By re-evaluating the classical and Scriptural use of the term *kerygma* it will be argued that the *kerygma* of a particular community cannot be reduced to its bare content and still retain its kerygmatic nature. It is not possible therefore to accurately determine the *kerygma* of a community of faith by merely analysing the written record of its sermons or doctrines etc.. *Kerygma*, it will be claimed, always has both form and content. The sole purpose of *kerygma* is to realise whatever is proclaimed. Christian *kerygma* therefore, as a consequence of being Christ's *kerygma*, can be recognised as being that which makes Christ real and present to the hearer. Viewed from this perspective it becomes evident how *kerygma* is not only created by the Church but also creates the Church as necessary in order to ensure that the invitation to faith can be made. I will want to argue that Methodism is a case in point.

The second stage will focus, therefore, on the question of how to describe Methodism theologically. If it can be proven that Methodism is, both by origin and nature, predominantly kerygmatic, then it will be considered reasonably safe to assume that Methodist theology is likewise primarily kerygmatic. There are several competing, traditional hypotheses concerning the origin and nature of British Methodism, each of which will need to be examined in some detail. Only then will it be possible to see the extent to which Methodism has consistently explained and defined itself in terms of the kerygmatic purpose which it believes calls it into being. Based on that information, the decision will be made as to whether or not Methodism can be described as a fundamentally kerygmatic community. If it is believed that it can, then it will be claimed that, accordingly, the theology of the British Methodist Church will be found implicit in its *kerygma* rather than explicit in any so-called Methodist doctrines or emphases.

The final stage of the project will then test the validity of the claim by firstly identifying the *kerygma* of the Methodist church according to the definition of the *kerygma* of a community of faith derived section one and then attempting to demonstrate, by example, how the theology which is implicit within it could be made explicit as a work of Methodist dogmatics.

CHAPTER TWO - *KERYGMA* AND THEOLOGY

Introduction.

When Martin Kähler(1964) challenged the historical relativism prevalent in the late nineteenth-century 'Lives of Jesus' and redirected the attention of the theological world to the Christ of the apostolic preaching, he inaugurated a debate which profoundly affected the way in which Christian *kerygma* was subsequently understood. Through being used either as a tool to prise open the question of whether or not the gospel could, or should, be demythologised, or as a means of collectively identifying the gospel of the so called primitive church, 'the *kerygma*' came to be progressively and unambiguously associated with the content of early Christian proclamation. By the mid-twentieth century Evans(1956) was able to claim that:

'writers on the New Testament have come to speak with increasing confidence of 'the kerygma' meaning by that term either the Gospel message of the New Testament as a whole, or, more particularly, that of the apostolic church at Jerusalem in its first years.' (Evans, 1956, 25)

Once reduced to this historical definition, it was inevitable that the term *kerygma* would become

'more a technical term of modern biblical theology than of the Bible itself.' (Baird, 1957, 184)

And hence, by the start of this century, dictionaries were able to define *kerygma* as:

'The proclamation (Gk. "preaching") of the good news in the NT and later. The word has become a quasitechnical term for the content of early Christian polemic, the "gospel" par excellence.' (Freedman, 2000, 764)

It is my contention that such definitions have repeatedly denied the dynamic dimension of *kerygma*, forcing it instead into static or historical frameworks. In the following sections, therefore, I question whether or not definitions of *kerygma* such as those quoted above, not only fail to do justice to the richness of the meaning of the word as used in classical literature and Scripture, but also, effectively deny the existence, and hence the theological significance, of contemporary *kerygma* as *kerygma*.

The word '*kerygma*', as found in both the Septuagint and the New Testament, owes its linguistic origin to classical Greek, being a derivative of the noun *keryx*, often interpreted as 'herald'. A *keryx* in classical literature was an individual specifically commissioned or set aside by a ruler or the state in order to cry out and make public some item of news, or to pronounce a judgement in a clear and distinctive manner and, by so doing, render it valid. *Kerysso* or *keryssein*, the corresponding verb, describes the activity of the *keryx*¹. Clarke(1997,63-68) has argued that the etymological origin for both words is most likely to have been *κηρυξ*, the voice, as

¹ First attested to in Homer Iliad II:438

'these persons were never employed in any business, but such only as could not be transacted but by the powers of speech, and the energy of ratiocination.' (Clarke 1997,66)

The later addition of 'ma' to the word stem *keryk* engendered the noun *kerygma*, which:

'differs from κηρυξίε as the aorist does from the present or the imperfect: it denotes the action, not in process, but completed or viewed as a whole. It denotes not 'the thing preached' but 'the proclamation' itself' (Robertson and Plumber 1983, 21)

In the classical world, the noun *kerygma* possessed an inherent duality. *Kerygma* could refer to something which was either active or passive, in that it could be used to denote either the event/act of proclamation or the content of that which was being proclaimed.

A further, essential, consideration regarding the *kerygma* is the direct association found in much of classical literature between proclamation and event; that which the *keryx* proclaimed was not simply made known, it was made real, valid and active, through the act of proclamation. This phenomenon found expression in continental kerygmatic theology as the 'Word event' (Ebeling 1966) or the 'eschatological event' (Bultmann 1961), descriptions which suggest an attempt to maintain, at least in part, the complexity of the dual meaning of *kerygma*.¹ It is arguable as to how far these attempts succeeded. Bultmann, for example, whose works on demythologising formed the basis for a large part of the continental debate,

¹ Consider also Gogarten.(1955) in particular p.69 and Friedrich(1965)

stressed that the Christian *kerygma* is a form of 'address' which resists objectification in terms of a mere historical recital (Bultmann 1965,307). He also however insisted that the *kerygma* is

'the word of Christ whose contents may also be formulated in a series of abstract propositions.'
(Bultmann, 1961a, 209)

On the whole, Bultmann is perceived to have attempted to present the Christian *kerygma* primarily as 'eschatological event', as God's action in Christ, a stance which Moltmann (1977,210) describes as complementary to Barth's 'Word of God' concept.

That Bultmann made extensive use of the term *kerygma* in expounding his existentialist theology is undeniable, but there is little consensus with regard to whether his use is consistent with that found in either Scripture or the writings of the early church. The debate engendered by Bultmann's demythologising project effectively turned *kerygma* into a convenient collective noun for whatever could be recognised or identified as the 'message' of Christ. But Christ in scripture is recognised as both the content of the *kerygma*

"we preach Christ crucified"¹,

as well as the power behind the Christian proclamation, as may be seen from Paul's description of his commission to preach:

¹ 1 Corinthians 1:23

“God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles”¹

Thus, whilst Bultmann insisted that the message of Jesus was inseparable from the action of God in Christ, his focus on the mythological, on the stories and words with which the message was proclaimed, led ultimately to a dismissal of his work by Coenen (1992), on the grounds that

‘the qualitative concept of kerygma, as it appears in the mid-twentieth-century theology of R. Bultmann and his school, is the product of theological reflection. It takes up the language of the New Testament, but uses the word in a sense which is at most marginally present in the New Testament.’ (Coenen 1992, 53)

It would be hard to believe that such an accusation could have been levied against C.H. Dodd whose own investigation into the *kerygma* (Dodd 1951) was firmly based on the principles of New Testament scholarship. British and American kerygmatic theology was subsequently dominated by Dodd’s contribution, which was once described as:

‘one of the most important and positive contributions to New Testament Science’ (Hunter 1954,26)

Dodd posited a concept of the *kerygma* as an identifiable six-fold pattern of proclamation which implied that the Christian *kerygma* could be extrapolated from the content of apostolic proclamation as contained in the Scriptures. According to Baird (1957,183), Dodd’s emphasis on content should be viewed in the light of his theory of realised eschatology which is

¹ Galatians 1:15ff

presupposed in his notion of the *kerygma*. This presupposition, however, is not explicit, whereas Dodd's emphasis on content is unavoidable.

Just how influential Dodd's concept of *kerygma* as the content and pattern of gospel proclamation was, may be deduced from the number of British and American Scholars who adopted it in their own work.¹ Hunter (1944), whilst acknowledging that *kerygma*:

'may signify either the act of proclamation or the thing proclaimed'(Hunter 1944,21)

nonetheless also claimed that *kerygma* in scripture is used to signify content far more frequently than action. He was therefore led to conclude that *kerygma*:

'in its usual New Testament signification and in the sense in which we use it, means the proclaimed message of salvation.' (Hunter 1944,21)

On the strength of the influence which Dodd's work wielded, *kerygma* was considered

'practically synonymous with euangelion, "gospel".' (Hunter 1944,21)

Indeed, Dodd himself was to claim as much, stating that

'keryssein by itself can be used as a virtual equivalent for evangelizesthai, "to evangelize" or "to preach the gospel."(Dodd 1951,8)

¹ For example. (Strachan 1951). (Bristol 1949). (Sanders 1950) and (Williams 1953)

Dodd based this equivalence firstly on his observation that

'The verb "to preach" in the New Testament, frequently has for its object "the Gospel"'(Dodd, 1951, 8)

and secondly on his opinion that the connection of ideas between proclamation and preaching is close enough to ensure that the assumption is a valid one. This enabled him to go on to assume that the *kerygma* of a particular group or individual is little more than the content of the gospel which they preach, an assumption which went largely unchallenged.

Although a few scholars (Craig 1952),(Filson 1956) did question whether the early preachers were as formulaic in their proclamation as Dodd's conclusions appeared to imply, the debate which Dodd's work tended to engender was less concerned with whether or not he was correct in his concept of the *kerygma*, than with the content and the pattern which he claimed to have identified. Filson (1956,41ff) and Glasson (1953,129-32), for example, both suggested that the *kerygma* contains five facts or doctrines, whilst Craig (1952,182) and Hunter (1954,29) insisted there were only three - albeit not the same three.

An important alternative debate wrestled with whether or not Dodd's distinction between *kerygma* and *didache* had been too sharply drawn.¹ Stendahl's (1952) contribution to this debate was to distinguish between

¹ e.g. (Strachan 1951,4) and (Filson 1956,34)

kerygma as formal activity, and *kerygma* as content. He pointed out that it was possible for a message to be kerygmatic without referring specifically to the message of Christ, in which case it would be '*kerygmatisches Nicht-Kerygma*' Likewise, it is possible to relate the stories of Jesus or a summary of his life in a less than kerygmatic manner, in which case such a narration would be an example of what he called '*Das unkerygmatische Kerygma*'. (Stendahl 1952, 719) Coincident with Stendahl's distinction is the recognition that *didache* can function in an undeniably kerygmatic manner in certain instances. His differentiation of the phenomenon of *kerygma* and the content of *kerygma* made possible a greater appreciation of the interrelationship between *didache* and *kerygma*. The content of *kerygma* could often be didactic, but conversely, didactic material could be profoundly kerygmatic with a corresponding transformative power.

Consequential to all such debates, whether of demythologising, of pattern recognition or of differentiation, was the idea that the *kerygma*, as

'the proclamation of a few basic facts or doctrines presented in a relatively definite pattern or formula' (Baird 1957, 182)

could, perhaps even should, be subject to the same processes of historical relativism which had initiated the search for it. Analytical approaches to, for example, the relationship between *didache* and *kerygma*, made possible

by the developments in form criticism, once again focused the debate on historical content and language.¹ Käsemann's insistence for example that,

'primitive Christianity allows mere history no vehicle of expression other than the kerygma.' (Käsemann 1960, 21)

effectively invited a return of the debate to its origin as a rejoinder to the search for the historical Jesus for, in his opinion,

'The question of the historical Jesus is, in its legitimate form, the question of the continuity of the Gospel within the discontinuity of the times and within the variation of the kerygma' (Käsemann 1960, 21)

Subsequent attempts to analyse the variations purported to have been identified in the Christian *kerygma* as contained in scripture and in the writings of the early church, presupposed that the Christian *kerygma* was open to such analysis, that it could in some way be contained within a pattern or an historical framework.

Ebeling vehemently disputed this, pointing out that

'It is the nature of the Kerygma that it is an address made here and now... and so it follows that kerygma which is handed down cannot, in so far as it is handed down, be kerygma. It has been kerygma. For just that reason, it is not actual Kerygma.' (Ebeling 1966, 43)

His point was made even more forcibly by Baker (1969) who issued a challenge to study any of the kerygmatic formula extracted from the scriptures and then ask whether or not, on their own, they

¹ For a review of the debate consider the introductory chapter of McDonald, (1980), especially pages 7-10

'would ever convert a fly - even a first century Palestinian fly - let alone one of the twentieth century European variety.' (Baker 1969,20)

Thus developments resulting from Dodd's work, like that of Bultmann's, also came to be accused of being products of theological reflection, rather than accurate readings of the term *kerygma* as defined by its Scriptural context. Attempts were then made to address the imbalance concerning the way in which the word *kerygma* was being interpreted, and hence alter the predominant perception of Christian *kerygma* as being nothing more than historical, doctrinal, statements. Even the contemporary debate in kerygmatic and doctrinal theology concerning the shift from historical to linguistic relativism,¹ has so far proved unable to open up the association between *kerygma* and content in such a way as to allow equal recognition of the phenomenological role of *kerygma*. There has, as yet, been little recognition of the contribution which *kerygma*, as action, made in the formation and development of the early communities of faith. The *kerygma* of a particular community of faith has, subsequent to Dodd's findings, primarily been perceived as no more than the summary of its doctrine and/or ecclesial proclamations. This has led arguably to the discipline of dogmatics, by which is meant the exploration and exposition of the theology implicit in the proclamation of a community of faith, being effectively

1. A shift largely in response to the Yale School and George Lindbeck's highly influential work. (1984) For an effective summary of the debate consider McGrath's response to Lindbeck (McGrath 1990, pp15-34)

reduced to the more accessible discipline of doctrinal or confessional theology.

By the close of the century it would seem, *kerygma* was no longer in theological vogue, having been rendered largely irrelevant to contemporary theology other than as a technical term of biblical scholarship or as a collective noun for pre-creedal or confessional statements. Yet I would argue in support of Baker and Ebeling that Christian *kerygma* cannot be completely encapsulated by either linguistic or historical processes. In order to reclaim its relevance to theology, those definitions of *kerygma* which do refer almost exclusively, or even predominantly, to *kerygma* as the content of proclamation, will need to be proven to be incomplete. Given that most, if not all, such definitions are based on New Testament scholarship, this necessitates demonstrating that the active meaning of *kerygma* was far too important to those communicating the Gospel of the early church for it to be so summarily dismissed. In the following section therefore I will attempt to prove that the writers of the New Testament were both aware of, and were determined to make constructive use of, the active and dynamic dimension of *kerygma* as well as its content in order to communicate the Gospel Truth which they had received.

The use of *kerygma* in classical literature and Scripture.

There is no evidence to suggest that *kerygma* in classical literature was used more to denote the content than the phenomenon of a proclamation or vice-versa. Other historical literature, such as the works of Philo for example, mirror this dual usage. *Kerygma* was used extensively throughout such literature to refer either to the contents of a declaration¹, report or edict, or to describe the event of a proclamation such as that which released slaves.² A restriction of the meaning of *kerygma* to content alone would therefore seem to suggest that either the writers were unfamiliar with the classical usage of the noun or that they were attempting to make some deliberate point.

In the New Testament, *kerygma* appears to be used classically, i.e. to describe either the event or the content of the proclamation being made. It should be noted that *kerygma*, like the noun *keryx*, is not a term found frequently in Scripture, occurring only four times in the Septuagint and only eight times in the New Testament. Moreover, the use of *kerygma* in the New Testament is problematic in that it is not always clear which meaning of *kerygma* is intended in every instance of its use. In the texts which are accepted as Pauline, for example,³ *kerygma* is most probably, but

¹ Philo The life of Moses. I,9

² Philo The Special Laws. IV,4.

³ Romans 16:25. 1 Corinthians 1:21; 2:4; and 15:14

not certainly, being used to describe the act rather than the content of proclamation.

In Romans 16:25, Paul refers to the *kerygma* of 'Jesus Christ' in conjunction with his own gospel.

κατὰ τὸ εὐαγγέλιόν μου καὶ τὸ κήρυγμα Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ

It is most commonly held that the words, 'the *kerygma* of Jesus' are meant to explain the expression 'my gospel', but, as Cranfield (1983,810) acknowledges, there is no other example in the New Testament of *kerygma* with an objective genitive. An alternative interpretation is possible if it is allowed that the conjunction καὶ refers to Paul's belief that both his gospel and the *kerygma* of Jesus Christ are necessary for the believer to be strengthened or confirmed in the revelation which they have received. Accordingly, Paul's gospel is his account of the good news about Christ, but the *kerygma* of Jesus Christ is that which transforms the gospel from mere words into a reality which can and does make the revelation real and able to transform the lives of believers. Another, somewhat similar, interpretation is that the *kerygma* of Jesus Christ is the public pre-creedal formula or narrative which speaks solely of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, whereas Paul's gospel is his own interpretation of that narrative. This reading of the text does little, however, to explain Paul's conviction of the transformative power of the *kerygma*.

There is no consensus as to whether in writing

διὰ τῆς μωρίας τοῦ κηρύγματος.¹

Paul is referring to content or to the means of delivery. Hunter (1944,21) considers this text to be an example of *kerygma* as content whereas Evans (1956,25) suggests that

'The content of the activity corresponds with the activity itself, "Christ crucified" being the apparently foolish content of the foolish activity of preaching.'

Litfin likewise is convinced that

'The term κηρυγμα in 1:21 must be viewed as comprising both form and content. Hence, the Kerygma is not simply *what* is proclaimed, but also what is *merely proclaimed*. The foolishness attaches itself to both elements.' (Litfin 1994, 252)

Later in this epistle to the Corinthians, Paul again dissociates word and *kerygma*, albeit here, his own, rather than Jesus' *kerygma*

καὶ ὁ λόγος μου καὶ τὸ κήρυγμά μου²

This text clearly contradicts the earlier alternative interpretation of the Romans text, as it is unlikely that Paul is referring to a personal testimony or brief narrative of his own life and call to faith.³ Although such a

¹ 1 Corinthians 1:21

² 1 Corinthians 2:4

³ Robertson and Plumber(1983, 32) likewise deny the possibility that 'ὁ λόγος' is meant to refer to Paul's private speech and 'τὸ κηρυγμα' to his public proclamation.

possibility cannot be entirely discounted, I believe that Dunn has convincingly shown that as far as Paul was concerned:

'there was no standardized pattern, no extended outline of Christian proclamation.' (Dunn 1990,24)

It is thus perhaps safer to assume that Paul is once again referring to the act of proclamation rather than the content which he proclaimed. When the verse is once more set in its context this interpretation seems even more credible as Paul clearly considers this kerygmatic event to be a demonstration of the Spirit, and of power.

1 Corinthians 15:14 is much more ambiguous, and could be interpreted as referring equally to either Paul's activity of preaching or to the content of his message. Some texts seem to be much less open to interpretation. One of the most obvious references to *kerygma* as an act of transformative power is in 2 Timothy 4: 17 where there is a similar allusion to that found in the Romans verse, of the *kerygma* as

'the actual act of proclamation, which has need of the particular messenger only in order, as it were, to complete it and give it concrete fulfilment.' (Coenen 1992,53)

An almost identical use of *kerygma* is found in Titus 1 :3.

The *kerygma* is that which actuates, which has the power to transform, which is able to make manifest that which was hidden. *Kerygma* in these texts can only be considered a dynamic concept.

Nonetheless it is evident that a degree of ambiguity does exist in some of the New Testament texts as to which aspect of the *kerygma* – phenomenon or content – is being referred to. This is particularly true if it is held that the writers of the New Testament used the term *kerygma* as nothing more than a convenient term to describe a particular type of declaration, as is in part suggested by those who define *kerygma* to be a template for the early gospels or creeds. It is important therefore, in the light of this ambiguity and the claims subsequent to it, to attempt to ascertain whether or not the New Testament authors were indeed aware of the ‘active’ meaning of the term *kerygma* or whether *kerygma* had already been reduced in concept to that of a pattern, or format of gospel preaching, a type of primitive sermon template. Whilst it is not possible to deduce with absolute certainty at what stage in the etymology of *kerygma* its active meaning may have been rendered subordinate to its meaning as content, it should prove possible, through an analysis of the use made of the corresponding terms *keryx* and *kerysso*, to determine the most likely meaning prevalent when the New Testament texts in question were being written.

Friedrich (1965,683-94) has suggested that the precise meaning of *kerygma* at any time was ultimately dependent upon the understanding of the office or function of the *keryx* in the historical period in question. His argument is based on the fact that *kerygma*, whether as the content or the event of proclamation is, by classical definition, inextricably bound up with the

person of the *keryx*. Not only was the *keryx* the person responsible for making the proclamation, but the content of the proclamation, likewise, tended to be restricted to that which a *keryx* could reasonably be expected to proclaim and so realise on behalf of his master. It would certainly be important to determine whether or not the New Testament authors were aware of the belief that the role of the *keryx* was often to make real, or present, that which was proclaimed. If this were a shared belief then it would undoubtedly have had some impact on the way in which the *kerygma*, as that which describes the act or event of proclamation and hence possibly the process of 'actualisation', was used.

The following sub-section therefore explores whether or not the writers and interpreters of scripture were aware of the classical perception of the person and office of the *keryx*, before going on to consider what impact, if any, that knowledge may have had on their use of the term *kerygma*. If it can be shown that the New Testament authors were indeed familiar with the office and person of the *keryx* as depicted in the classical world, then it can be assumed that the meaning of *kerygma* as that which describes either the event or the content of a proclamation, was also familiar to them.

The exploration begins with a review of the way in which the *keryx* has been depicted in classical literature, leading up to, and including the time when the New Testament texts were being written. The aim is to identify

any characteristics which were so specific to the person and/or office of the *keryx* that they could reliably have been expected to have been well known to those living and writing in the first few centuries after the death of Christ. From such a review, it should then prove possible to determine, through an analysis and comparison of the scriptural use of both *keryx* and *kerysso*, whether or not the 'characteristic', classical understanding of the *keryx* had any impact on the meaning attributed to the noun *kerygma*.

The person and office of the keryx.

The Homeric keryx.

In classical Greek Literature, prior to the establishment of the Polis and the earliest forms of democratic government, the office of the *keryx* was a complex courtly one. The *keryx* attended to the needs of his Prince and performed those duties which were normally associated with senior court officials such as cup-bearing, stewarding etc.¹ The *keryx* commanded a far greater degree of respect than that accorded to most senior officials. The person of the *keryx* was always a free man not a slave, and could even be accredited with a status equivalent to that reserved for friends or brothers.² Yet the *keryx* also undertook more menial tasks such as were reserved for body servants. When Achilles returns from battle, for example, he calls the 'clear-voiced heralds of the host' to prepare his bath.³ Similarly, heralds are elsewhere reported as preparing meals with maids.⁴

The authority of the *keryx*, which was extensive, was derived directly from his prince, and made public by his badge of office, a type of sceptre known as the herald's staff.⁵ His⁶ primary function was to proclaim the edicts and commands of his Prince and, if necessary, to call the soldiers to battle.⁷ In

1 Homer Odyssey 1, 143 ff.

2 Homer Odyssey 19, 247

3 Iliad XXIII:39

4 Iliad XVIII:558

5 Iliad VII:7,277; XVIII:505

6 Female heralds are also referred to in Greek Literature. cf Aristophanes, *Thesmophoriazusa*, 295

7 Iliad II:5

spite of this occasional military function, the *keryx* of this time enjoyed a sacrosanct,¹ inviolate position in society which might explain why they were occasionally called upon to serve as political ambassadors.² A seemingly universally recognised moral and religious law led to the belief that to harm or endanger a *keryx* bearing a message for the enemy in time of war would be to incur the wrath not only of the one who sent him, but of the gods also.³

In summary, the *keryx* was consistently depicted as a highly respected, loyal and trustworthy servant who commanded authority on account of the role which he fulfilled. His status and power were granted by his Prince. He was considered to be protected by the gods by virtue of his function as messenger. Through his proclamation, the will or the decrees of his Prince were actualised.

The keryx of the Polis

Although the office of the *keryx* survived the transition from monarchic to democratic rule and the establishment of the Polis, it did not do so without considerable change. The significance and authority of the role of the *keryx* were considerably diminished through his becoming a part of the Polis bureaucracy. Several different categories and types of *keryx* were created to serve the Polis, leading to the necessity of some form of qualifying noun, or

¹ Homer calls them 'angeloi dios', Iliad E: 334 and 'angeloi theoi', divine messengers, Iliad X: 315

² Demosthenes, XIX: 163

³ Demosthenes, XII: 4; See also the statement of Achilles in Iliad E:334

adjective in the genitive case, in order to be able to distinguish between them. A *keryx* could be classified and described as, for example, a *keryx* of the games, of the council or court, of the city, the market, the mysteries, or of the gods.

An appreciation of the extent of diversification which crept into the office of the *keryx* can be obtained from a cursory appraisal of some of the duties assigned to the various types of *keryx*. Within the assembly, for example, a *keryx* was held responsible for the establishment and maintenance of good order as well as for leading and orchestrating the prayers and ritual sacrifices with which the Assembly was opened. Such duties were in addition to the more traditional role of announcing the end of the Assembly and making public any reports resulting from it.¹

A *keryx* of the Court performed duties which were more generally in keeping with the original function of the *keryx* such as announcing the result (and hence making the result active) of the drawing of lots for the judges. In addition to this, such a *keryx* was also responsible for calling on the judges to cast their votes, and for enquiring beforehand whether or not anyone had any objections to raise. As a result of the change in their duties, the *keryx* became responsible for the fundamental maintenance of the laws. Consequently, as in classical Greek culture, religion and politics could not

¹ cf. Aristophanes, *Thesmophoriazusae* 295 ff.; *Acharnenses* 45, 173

be separated; it was even possible under Athenian law for a *keryx* to become a judge.

Regardless of the diversification and need for classification, certain characteristics of the person and purpose of the *keryx* remained unchanged. Whilst having additional highly specific duties to perform, the primary purpose of the *keryx* remained that of proclamation and of actualising the content of a decree or announcement through such proclamation. As a person, the *keryx* remained a loyal and trustworthy servant and spokesperson of the authorities which he represented,¹ the main difference being that he no longer necessarily represented a specific individual. The authority of the *keryx* likewise continued to be entirely dependent on the authority and power of the body which had commissioned him and on the nature of his commission.

One change which did occur was with regard to the social status of the *keryx*. There is some evidence to suggest that the diversification of the office of the *keryx* led to a depreciation of the status formerly accorded to him. The *keryx*, it would seem, came to be seen as a simple official.² That the *keryx* was no longer universally respected and held in high esteem may have been a factor which influenced subsequent New Testament usage of the noun.

¹ Plato *Politicus*, 290b

² Plato *Politicus*, 290b

The keryx and the Stoic Philosophers

After the relaxation of the somewhat rigid order of the Polis, the opportunity arose for an alternative interpretation of the office of the *keryx* to be formulated. The first difference is found in the Eleusinian mysteries which refer to a special type of *keryx*, one who carried out distinctly liturgical and priestly duties. This *keryx* was also, as would be expected, responsible for making the announcements of the cult, but his influence had developed more in keeping with that of priests. It is likely that this development evolved as a consequence of Hermes being presented as a *keryx* – i.e. as the messenger sent to proclaim and actuate the will of the gods.

Further developments of the concept of the *keryx* as a messenger of the gods, rather than merely being under the protection of the gods, is found in the works of Epictetus.¹ Epictetus taught that the real *keryx* of his age were the ‘Cynic philosophers’. These travelled the country without any visible means of support and were totally dedicated to their calling as (so they believed) messengers of the gods and guardians of the moral order.²

‘The Stoic has a profound sense of having a special God-given task among men. The deity has revealed the secret to him, and he must now bear witness to it.’³

¹ Dissertationes 3, 22, 13 ff.

² *kataskopos*. Dissertationes 3, 22, 69

³ Dissertationes. I. 29, 46f. ως μάρτυς υπό του θεου εκκλημενος.

In the name of the gods, such a *keryx* denounced immorality and called the people to repentance, to reformation of life, and to a concern for their salvation. A *keryx* of this type dissociated himself from all forms of religious observance, insisting instead on the importance of behaving with integrity in all aspects of everyday life. He considered himself to be engaged in the pursuit of an inner, higher peace.¹ The Stoic *keryx* taught that

'To despise his word and refuse to follow his teaching is to do despite to God.'²

Friedrich notes the undeniable similarity between the Stoics' way of life and their teachings and the lives and practices of the preachers of the early Christian Church. He suggests that the Stoic *keryx* was a forerunner and model for some of the early Christian preachers, noting that :

'Both are divine messengers. Both have a higher mission. Both bring to men a new message which offers salvation. There is little distinction as regards the mode of their activity. Their work consists in *Kerysso*, in the loud publication of the message entrusted to them.' (Friedrich 1965,693)

Just how close the message of the Christians could, on occasion, seem to Stoic preaching, both in language and in content, may be deduced from the way in which Paul in his epistles appears to need to make the distinction clear.³ The main difference, according to Friedrich, is embedded in the word

¹ Epictetus, *Dissertationes* 3, 22. 9 ff.

² *Dissertationes*, III. 1. 36f ταυτα μοι... ,Επικτητος ουκ ειρηκεν ποθεν ψαρ εκειτωι, αλλα θεος τις ποτ, ευμενης δι εκειπου... αγε ουν το θεο πισθωμεν, ινα μη θεοχολοιτωμεν.

³ An example of this would be in 1 Thessalonians. 2:3 ff

kataskopos. The Stoic is called to observe humanity, and then declare on the basis of the observations he makes. The Christian is not, however,

'a katakopos of human relations. He is a preacher of the Word of God.' (Friedrich 1965,693)

What is important is the source of the authority of the preacher, i.e.

'What counts is whose herald one is.' (Friedrich 1965,694)

Summary of the person and purpose of a classical keryx.

Even given the considerable development of the person and purpose of the *keryx* from Homeric to Stoic times, it is possible to identify certain aspects and qualities of the *keryx* which went unchanged. The first and most obvious was that the *keryx* had to be in possession of a good voice; in some instances those seeking to be a *keryx* would have to undergo a voice test.¹ Other qualities were also required; a *keryx* must, for example, be trustworthy and able to deliver his message accurately;

'The essential point about the report which they give is that it does not originate with them. Behind it stands a higher power. The herald does not express his own views. He is the spokesman for his master.' (Friedrich 1965,688)

Throughout history the *keryx* always spoke and acted officially on the authority of someone else, and never on his own account. He had no freedom or authority to negotiate. His purpose was to convey the message and intention of whomsoever or whatsoever he represented, exactly as it

¹ Demosthenes.19.338

had been entrusted to him. As long as the *keryx* was believed to be performing his task he was immune from reprisal and could not be held personally responsible for the content of the message he bore. Most importantly, what the *keryx* announced, became so, by virtue of his having proclaimed it.

The *keryx* and the use of *kerysso* in Scripture

Having determined what might be called the identifying characteristics of the *keryx* which should have been familiar to the authors of Scripture, we can begin the process of comparing the classical *keryx* with the *keryx* as depicted in Scripture. Given that both the Old and the New Testaments make extensive use of the concept of the *keryx*, i.e. of someone who is given authority in order to proclaim, make manifest, or actuate a specific decree or prophesy, it would be natural to assume that '*keryx*' would be a frequent noun in both texts. This is not the case. Coenen cites the paucity of use of *keryx* in the Septuagint as evidence that

'a figure comparable to the Greek *keryx* was unknown in Israel, and that it was clearly not appropriate to describe the prophets in this way.' (Coenen 1992,50)

The Septuagint is remarkable in that it does appear to restrict the use of *kerygma* to denote the content of a proclamation or decree. This suggests that there may be alternative reasons for the paucity of the use of *keryx*, than lack of familiarity.

Keryx and kerysso in the Septuagint.

Keryx occurs only four times in the Septuagint, and in three of these instances there is no Hebrew equivalent. In the first of the four, Genesis 41:43, *keryx* is used to describe the servant of Pharaoh required to ride in the chariot ahead of Joseph crying out to the people to “bow the knee” to him. The second time it is used, in Daniel 3:4 it is to refer to Nebuchadnezzar’s herald, responsible for calling the people to worship the golden statue which had been erected. In both of these references the emphasis falls on the verb *kerysso* which appears in addition to the noun. The third use of *keryx* occurs in 4 Maccabees 6:4 and refers specifically to the herald of Antiochus IV. Lastly, in Sirus, 20:15 the *keryx* is used as a metaphor for the voice. In each of these four texts, the *keryx* referred to is the *keryx* of a foreign (i.e. non-Hebrew) institution or person. From this it might be inferred that the writers of the Septuagint were aware of the *keryx* but, in keeping with Jewish particularity, chose to make a deliberate distinction between the messengers of Yahweh and the *keryx* of the time.

That the person and office of the classical *keryx* were familiar to the translators working on the Septuagint is made evident by their use of the verb *kerysso*. *Kerysso* is used 29 times in the Septuagint, usually to interpret the Hebrew verb *Qarah*¹. *Qarah* is used over 650 times in the Old

¹ Variations are Jonah 3:7 where it is used for *za`aq*, to cry; Hosea 5:8, Joel 2:1, Zephaniah 3:14, Zsch. 9:9, where it replaces the high. of *rua`*, which refers to a loud cry. In Exodus 36:6 and 2 Chronicles 36:22 *kerysso* is used for an announcement made throughout the camp by Moses, and throughout the kingdom by Cyrus, the Persian king replacing the Hebrew *qol*, meaning the voice

Testament and is normally denoted by *kaleo*, to call, or by *ekkaleo*, to call forth. When the specific use of *kerysso* is examined, it is found that it is used primarily to refer to one of what Coenen identifies as ‘*the three classic functions of the herald*’ namely:-

1. For the proclamation of a cultic festival¹ including the call to worship or to fast.
2. To proclaim the orders of the military commander in the field, or the decree of a King or prince²
3. For the proclamation of judgement³ or of a day of judgement⁴ or to announce liberty to captives and to proclaim the rehabilitation of the accused⁵

It would seem more likely therefore that the classical office of the *keryx* was known, but was generally held to be distinct from the office of a prophet. Those who speak on God’s behalf, those who, through the power of God can make real that which they speak, are never referred to by the noun *keryx*. Perhaps more importantly, *kerysso*, as the activity of the *keryx*, has never

1 Exodus 32:5; 2 Kings 10:20; 2 Chronicles 30:5; also Daniel 3:4 LXX. 2 Chronicles 20:3; Joel 1 : 14; 2: 15; also Jonah 3: 5, 7, by the citizens or the king of Nineveh

2 Exodus 36:6; 2 Chronicles 24:9

3 Hosea 5:8; Joel 3:9; Jonah 3:2, 4

4 Joel 2:1

5 Isaiah 61:1; Esther 6: 9

been thought of as a verb of central or even significant importance in the Old Testament's proclamation of salvation.

There would thus seem to be a deliberate attempt to dissociate the power of the proclamation of God, as found in the Genesis account of creation, for example, or in the prophetic decrees, from that of the proclamation of the classical *keryx*. This dissociation also provides some insight into why it might be that *kerygma* is only ever referred to as content in the Septuagint. To use *kerygma* as a description of the act of proclaiming the judgements of Yahweh might conceivably detract from the idea of the word of God as being both word and action by focusing attention on the power and purpose of the, inescapably, all too human *keryx*.

Keryx and kerysso in the New Testament.

There are only three occurrences of *keryx* in the New Testament and it is noteworthy that they all occur in the later writings,⁴ and then only with qualification. Wherever the *keryx* is specifically referred to it is qualified by the addition of the noun 'apostolos'. Coenen assumes that this usage is

'probably to be explained by the stronger tendency of the church to think in terms of institutions at a time when the eschatological aspect was diminishing in importance, and the church was adjusting herself to a permanent existence in the world', (Coenen 1992,52)

4. 1 Timothy 2:7; 2 Timothy 1: 11; 2 Peter 2:5

The use of *keryx* may have been illustrative of the way in which apostolic power and authority ultimately came to be associated with the role of Christian proclamation. By the time of the early Church Fathers *kerygma* was directly and perhaps even uniquely associated with apostolic authority. Irenaeus is believed, for example, to have considered *kerygma* to be

'authoritative proclamation, proclamation that derives its authority, not just from the apostles as duly commissioned witnesses and ambassadors (important as they were in the church founded on them by Christ), but from the truth which they proclaimed.' (Torrance 1995,59)

Nonetheless, the two words *apostle* and *keryx*, despite the apparent similarities in the role which they describe, never became synonymous. The nearest that the New Testament comes to presenting an image of the classical figure of the *keryx* without specifically using the noun is in the book of Revelation. An angel is said to proclaim with a mighty voice asking

'Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?' ¹

There is an occasion in Matthew and the corresponding parallel text of Luke when the disciples appear to be being asked to adopt a similar role to that undertaken by the Stoic *keryx*, namely making public that which is initially hidden.

'What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops.'²

¹ Revelation 5:2

² Matthew 10:27; Luke 12:3

Friedrich (1965,705) is adamant that this text does not in fact refer to the disciples but is simply a popular saying of the time used to give added force to the warning of the previous verse to the disciples to avoid the Pharisees. In a similar manner it could conceivably be argued that the author of the Petrine epistles presents Christ as someone who has performed the role of a *keryx*.

'For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison' ¹

Further analysis of this position is not possible as, in these verses, the verb *kerysso* is used on its own without an object, we are not told what the content of the proclamation was.

Aside from these few texts, it would appear that the New Testament writers were reluctant to associate the disciples or apostles with the office of the *keryx*. Coenen insists that,

'no doubt deliberately, the New Testament witnesses, following other streams of Judaism, avoided identifying themselves or the messengers of Jesus with the Greek institution of the *keryx*, open as it was to such a wide variety of interpretation.' (Coenen 1992,52)

He is supported in his conclusion, although for completely contrary reasons, by Friedrich who says that the classical understanding of the *keryx*,

¹ 1 Peter 3: 18-19

'does not really fit the person of the one who proclaims the Word. For the true preacher is God or Christ himself. Hence there is little place for the herald. The Bible is not telling us about human preachers; it is telling us about the preaching.' (Friedrich 1965,696)

Furthermore, Friedrich suggests,

'the prior Greek history gives too specific a meaning to *keryx*. The New Testament knows nothing of sacral personages who are inviolable in the world.' (Friedrich 1965,696)

Whether as a consequence of a lack of specificity, or a surfeit of it, it would seem safe to conclude that although the authors of the New Testament were familiar with the classical understanding of the person and the office of the *keryx*, they too were concerned to avoid making an association between the messengers of God and the messengers of the gods or of others. This did not prevent them from utilising the key concepts embedded in the office of the *keryx* through a considered use of both the noun *kerygma* and the associated verb *kerysso*.

Although *keryx* is seldom used in the New Testament, the verb *kerysso* occurs over 60 times. I do not believe it is right to assume as Dodd, Hunter, and in particular Coenen has, that this means that *kerysso* can be considered to be merely:

'one of a number of formal verbs of telling and communication, which connote a certain means of communication but are not limited as to the content e.g. *didasko*, to teach; *angello*, to report, together with its compounds; *lego*, to say; *homologeō*, to confess; *martyreō*, to bear witness, with its compounds; *euangelizomai*, to preach; *gnorizo*, to make known; and others.' (Coenen 1992,54)

Coenen's argument is based on his observation of the extensive range of words used for 'telling' or 'communicating' the gospel in the New Testament. Such a range, he maintains, suggests that none of the verbs ever became a specialised term. To support his position, he refers to Paul and points out that Paul

'in 1 Thessalonians 2:2, 9, describes his ministry in the same context as laesai . . . to euangelion, "to tell.. the gospel", and as ekeryxamen . . . to euangelion, "we proclaimed . . . the gospel"; while in Philipians 1 : 18 he expresses this same act of proclamation by the verb katangelo.' (Coenen 1992,54)

He likewise draws attention to the way in which Luke replaces the Marcan use of *kerysso* with *euangelizo*.¹ Whilst there is undoubtedly some merit in Coenen's claim, it can also be argued that the extensive use of *kerysso* stems directly from the need to communicate the transformative power of the gospel rather than simply the gospel content. As in the case of the Septuagint, *kerysso* may have been deliberately dissociated from its classical origin as that which describes the specific function of a *keryx*. Unlike in the Septuagint, *kerysso* in the New Testament is clearly associated with the proclamation of God's salvation, thus justifying a more detailed exploration of its use.

Within the New Testament, the verb *kerysso* occurs as follows: in the gospels it is found 9 times each in Matthew and Luke and 14 times in Mark; it is

¹ Luke 4:43 (Mark. 1:38); Luke 9:6 (Mark. 6: 12) In Luke 8: 1 both verbs are used and in Luke 6: 13 (Mark. 3:14) *keryssein* is subsumed into the term *apostle*.

used 8 times in Acts, 19 times in the ‘Pauline’ epistles¹, and once each in the books of 1 Peter and Revelation. It is absent from all the ‘Johannine writings’ as well as from the epistle to the Hebrews and James’ epistle. The object of *kerysso* in these instances highlights the difference between the New Testament usage of *kerysso* and that found in either classical literature or in the Septuagint. Far from decrees or edicts, pronouncements or judgements, the New Testament object of *kerysso* is invariably related to Christ’s ministry of reconciliation and to the advent of God’s kingdom. In Paul’s early writings² as well as in some Marcan and Matthean contexts, for example, the object of *kerysso* is the gospel, the good news that God’s rule is at hand. In Acts and in some of the later epistles of Paul,³ it is Christ,⁴ Jesus,⁵ or Christ Jesus who is proclaimed. Luke generally makes the ‘kingdom’ the object of proclamation,⁶ which Matthew similarly offers as the content of the gospel which is proclaimed.⁷ All of which are very different from the objects of *kerysso* found in classical literature or the Septuagint with one possible exception; there is a degree of similarity in John the Baptist’s proclamation of the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of

¹ This includes the disputed epistles of Colossians, and 1 and 2 Timothy

² 1 Thessalonians 2:9; Galatians 2:2; but cf. also Colossians 1:23; Mark 1:14; 13: 10; 14:9; Matthew 4:23; 9:35; 24:14; 26: 13

³ 1 Corinthians 1:23; 15:12; 2 Corinthians 1:19; 11: 4, Philipians 1:15 and Acts 8:5; 9:20; 19:13

⁴ 4 times

⁵ 3 times

⁶ Luke 8:1 ; 9:2; Acts 20:25; 28:31

⁷ Matthew 4:23; 9:35; 24: 14

sins,¹ to Coenen's third function of the classical *keryx* listed earlier. In all other instances the content of the proclamation is highly distinctive – as is the way in which the proclamation is made.

The key difference is that in classical usage, proclamation was the final act, the culmination of a process or dialogue. It was the conclusion or the summary of a Prince's deliberations or the judgement of the courts. It was therefore a one-off pronouncement, a full stop, rather than an invitation to discussion or debate. In the New Testament, proclamation is presented as the first stage in the process of engendering faith and a relationship with God which will subsequently demand the total commitment and trust of the hearer². The apparent difference stems from the fact that that which is proclaimed is not a decree or an edict, but an event which can only be fully realised in relationship. The *kerygma* of Christ makes Christ real and present at the moment of proclamation, but relationships grow through increasing contact and fellowship, hence repeated proclamation is both necessary and desirable.

Paul clearly does not consider proclamation to be a one time declaration such as would be expected of the classical *keryx*. Paul presents the task of proclamation as one of unceasing cajoling and wooing³ regardless of the

¹ Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3; Acts 10:37

² 1 Corinthians 15: 1 ff

³ 2 Corinthians 5: 18 ff.

demands which it places on the messenger. Paul's suffering and status are regarded by him to be an intrinsic part of his proclamation,¹ a fact which is mocked by the inviolate, somewhat privileged, status of the Homeric *keryx*. Nonetheless there are aspects of proclamation which Paul shares in common with the classical understanding of it as a function of the *keryx*. For example, Paul considers proclamation to be legitimate and possible only where a commission and authority have been given².

The fact that Paul also uses *kerysso* in what might be termed a 'classical' manner lends credence to the idea that Paul was well aware of the comparison which might be made between himself and a Stoic *keryx*. In spite of his obvious familiarity with the classical function of the *keryx* Paul nonetheless chooses not to apply the noun to himself, to Jesus or to the other apostles.

The author of Matthew's gospel also refrains from using the term *keryx* to describe John, Jesus or any of the disciples, whilst nonetheless reserving the use of *kerysso* to describe exclusively their ministries. Matthew's gospel is unique in this respect. This suggests that the author wanted to utilise something of the characteristics of *kerysso* which had been inherited from the association with *keryx*, i.e. the binding, almost judicial and official character of proclamation. This assumption is substantiated by the fact that

¹ 1 Thessalonians. 2:9

² For example, Romans 10:8 ff.; 10: 15 ; Acts 13:3; Isaiah 52: 10

another of the characteristics of the classical *keryx* which Matthew's author makes implicit reference to in his somewhat restricted use of *kerysso*, is that of the *keryx* needing to be sent – to have been given the necessary authority to be able to proclaim. In agreement with Paul's understanding and use of the verb, both Matthew and Luke present proclamation of the kingdom as a specialised task requiring a specific commission from either God or Jesus.

No such acknowledgement of the implicit characteristics of *kerysso* can be found in Mark's Gospel. In Mark it is the necessity of proclamation which is emphasised rather than its official character. In particular the author of Mark's gospel informs his readers that those who have been healed proclaim in spite of them being expressly forbidden to do so. The authority of the individual to proclaim is meaningless when compared to the overriding compulsion to proclaim which an encounter with Jesus engenders.¹ There is little hint of the classical role or office of the *keryx* in Mark's gospel, which perhaps affords some validity to the argument that the use of *kerysso* to connote the qualities and characteristics of the *keryx* without invoking the specific office of the *keryx* was a development of the early church's thinking with regard to power and authority. It is certainly the case that the use of *kerysso* in Mark is far more general than the use of it in either Matthew or Luke.

¹ Mark. 1:45; 5:20; 7:36

From the cursory analysis above, *kerysso* would, on the whole, seem to have been used in a highly specialised manner. As in the Septuagint the verb *kerysso* appears to have been deliberately dissociated from the noun *keryx*. The extensive use of *kerysso* to proclaim the kingdom of God suggests that the dissociation found in the New Testament may be for a very different reason. In the New Testament, the dissociation may serve to ensure that it is not the person, but the message itself which is invested with the characteristic power and authority of the office of the *keryx*. For example, in two out of the three gospels which use the verb, it was reserved for the proclamation of the kingdom by those whom God had specifically commissioned. Yet in these same gospels it is also made evident that it is not through their power that the kingdom is realised. Even in Mark's gospel, it is the compulsion to proclaim which possesses those healed by Christ and leads them to ignore his injunction to be silent; the message must be proclaimed. The disciples and the apostles, those who are healed of their demons, are not classical heralds given the power and authority from their Lord to realise that which they proclaim on his behalf, instead they themselves are empowered by the proclamation which they are compelled to make in Christ's name.

Similarly the object of *kerysso* was restricted to that which had been, or could be, realised as a direct consequence of the life, death and resurrection of Christ –i.e. the good news of the Gospel. The Kingdom was proclaimed

because it was now at hand; Christ Jesus was proclaimed as Lord, because his life death and resurrection made him so. Thus *kerysso* is directly associated with the proclamation of God's salvation because of the belief that the Christian *kerygma* – the content and the event of God's proclamation, had the power to actualise and make present that which it communicated – namely Christ and the Kingdom. *Kerysso* on such an analysis cannot be dismissed as being virtually synonymous with any of the other 'verbs of telling' because unlike other verbs, its action was evidently not believed to be restricted to mere communication.

Summary of the analysis of the use of keryx and kerysso in Scripture

The way in which *keryx* and *kerysso* are used in Scripture suggests that the writers of the New Testament were aware of the office and person of the classical *keryx*. It is the status and authority attributed to the person of the *keryx* according to classical usage which the New Testament authors repudiated, not the office itself. The classical association of the *keryx* with the realisation of that which was proclaimed was both known, and deliberately refuted. Yet the specialised and restricted use of *kerysso* in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke suggest that the identifying characteristics of the office of the *keryx* were known to have been directly relevant to what the authors were trying to communicate. The writers seemingly wanted to emphasise that what Jesus, the disciples and the apostles did was to proclaim – and the nature of proclamation, its association with power, and

authority, and most of all its ability to make real that which was made known were all essential elements of the Gospel message.

The deliberate dissociation of the person and office of the *keryx* from the task of proclamation, enabled the writers to communicate the compelling, transformative, nature of Christian proclamation, without introducing any of the negative connotations of personal status and individual authority. Recognition of the power implicit in the Christian proclamation undoubtedly played a part in the early Church's attempt to restrict proclamation to those given specific authority to proclaim. In the New Testament it is the message itself which has import, not the person who bears it. Likewise, the power of the message is seen to spring both from its content and from the necessity for it to be proclaimed, not from the herald or from any institutional support. The emphasis is always on the existence of a higher power and authority which insists on the message being proclaimed. The import, power and authority of the Christian message sprang directly from its relationship with the living word which it proclaimed.

Conclusion

The above appraisal of the use of *kerygma*, *keryx* and *kerysso* in scripture concurs with Coenen's conclusion that

'The New Testament's completely predominant conception of proclamation as a process and event, whose content can only be determined by closer definition, is confirmed by the considerably greater frequency with which the verb is used in comparison with the nouns.' (Coenen 1992,53)

The New Testament texts support the proposal that the understanding of the *keryx* and hence the description of the phenomenon of *kerysso* as a function of the *keryx* of this time was essentially the same as that found in the classical literature of the same period. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the noun *kerygma* had also retained its classical, dual meaning throughout the time that these scriptures were being written.

Undoubtedly one of the main reasons that the content of *kerygma* has tended to be over-emphasised by New Testament Scholars is that Greek substantives with a *-ma* suffix are generally used to indicate the result of the action but as Litfin points out:

'the "result" of *keryssein* is not simply content, but content in a particular form, namely, proclamation.'
(Litfin 1994, 199)

The ambiguity surrounding whether or not *kerygma* refers to content or act in some instances in the New Testament, is unlikely therefore to be due to some development or change in actual meaning of the noun *kerygma*. It is more likely to be due to the desire of nineteenth and twentieth century theologians to uncover a uniform primitive gospel. As Goldammer points out, the idea that the *kerygma*

'can or must be as it were the 'evangelical' substance of the Christian message, the nuclear revelation after the mythical has been eliminated cannot be established from the New Testament' (1957,96)

Recognition of the fact that the authors of the New Testament were aware of, and made deliberate use of the dynamic meaning of *kerygma* does not in any way negate Dodd's scholarly observations concerning the basic doctrinal content of the *kerygmata* of the early Christian communities. The main objection of this thesis to Dodd's work on the Christian *kerygma* is not what it included, but what it left out. Not enough was made of the 'realised eschatology' which Baird insisted was presupposed in Dodd's work resulting in the re-definition of *kerygma* as a set of historical doctrinal statements. This in turn assisted in the creation of the belief that the theological significance of the *kerygma* of a community of faith could be largely ignored except in terms of its confessional or doctrinal content. The task of identifying the *kerygma* of the early church was left unfinished. Dodd may have succeeded in identifying the doctrinal content of the *kerygmata* of the early Christian communities, but he had not identified their *kerygma per se*. To do so, he would have needed to have taken fully into account the form as well as the content of the early Church's proclamation, i.e. not just *what* was proclaimed, but *that* it was proclaimed and *how*. Preaching is not the only form of proclamation attested to in the New Testament, as the life, death and resurrection of Christ reminds us. Evidently the form of proclamation, no less than the content, has theological significance.

The task of successfully identifying the *kerygma* of a community of faith therefore, such that the theology implicit within it may be examined, requires a more comprehensive definition of Christian *kerygma* than that of 'The preaching of the gospel'. By reviewing the possible forms, as well as the content, of Christian *kerygma*, the following chapter aims to provide such a definition.

CHAPTER THREE - THE *KERYGMA* OF A COMMUNITY OF FAITH

Introduction

The a-priori of any definition of Christian *kerygma* is that Christian *kerygma* is Christian *kerygma* only in as much as it is Christ's *kerygma*. This does not limit the definition of Christian *kerygma* to the public recitation of the message of Jesus by suitably authorised individuals, for, whilst Dunn(1990,13) is undoubtedly correct in his conclusion that the content of Christ's *kerygma* is encapsulated in the verse,

'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel.',¹

Christians nonetheless acknowledge that Christ proclaimed as much, if not more, by his actions as by his speech; both the incarnation and the cross being kerygmatic events. Hence, although Jesus never put himself forward as the content of his *kerygma* (Dunn 1990, 16), Christian *kerygma*, as Christ's *kerygma*, proclaims both Christ and that which Christ himself proclaimed. As Bultmann observed:

'He who had formerly been the bearer of the message was drawn into it and became its essential content. The proclaimer became the proclaimed.' (Bultmann 1965, 33)

¹ Mark 1:15

The earlier analysis of the New Testament use of *keryx*, *kerysso* and *kerygma* suggested a deliberate dissociation between the *keryx* and the gospel in order to ensure that the authority of the proclamation was not seen as deriving from the messenger, but directly from that which was being proclaimed. Christian *kerygma* is accordingly the *kerygma* of Christ, not merely in that it proclaims Christ, but in that its authority is derived directly from Christ, it is Christ's to commission, engender and make real.

'Christ is not merely an object of proclamation but also the subject who has authority over it. He himself is the one who commands the proclamation, who at the same time wills to be present, and allows the hearers to experience him in and through such human proclamation.' (Coenen, 1992, 56)

Kerygma is proclamation whereby God speaks the Living Word into existence and makes it known by the power of the Spirit. As Barth observes:

'Proclamation is human speech in and by which God himself speaks like a king through the mouth of his herald, and which is meant to be heard and accepted as speech in and by which God himself speaks, and therefore heard and accepted in faith as divine decision concerning life and death, as divine judgement and pardon, eternal Law and eternal Gospel both together.' (Barth 1990,52)

All three 'dimensions' of the *kerygma*: The action of God's speech, the Living Word which is spoken, and the power of the Spirit to make it heard; are all essential in order for what Ebeling refers to as the 'Word-event' – the synergism of God and humanity as 'proclamation' - to occur and to have power.

The definitive nature of proclamation, the fact that it is an announcement of something specific which can then be realised, is, I suggest, that which

differentiates between Christian *kerygma* and Christian doctrine or dogma. Although it is not my intention to so distinguish between dogma and *kerygma* that dogma effectively becomes a law on its own, it is my conviction that dogma only becomes *kerygma* if it is proclaimed, and thereby opened to the realising, interpreting and transforming work of the Spirit.

There are obviously important epistemological concerns here, but there is also the very real danger of becoming so embroiled in the debate of hermeneutics and the role played by language in revelation that it is possible to lose sight of what concerns us, namely that revelation does happen and that Christ can be realised as a result of Christian *kerygma*. Although *kerygma* is definitive, it cannot be reduced to statements or doctrines about Christ, rather, in service to the *kerygma*, doctrines and dogmas become interrogative as opposed to propositional. The interrelationship between doctrine and *kerygma* does not in any way render the truth of doctrine relative; it is the mode of address which changes not the content. In service to the proclamation of Christ, doctrine plays an interrogative rather than a definitive role, acting as that which prompts or initiates the question. Doctrine and *kerygma* are inescapably interrelated by virtue of the fact that Christian *kerygma*, to be *kerygma*, must pose the question implied by the truth of doctrine, such that it effects an encounter with the Truth which can be its only answer.

The questions posed by Christian *kerygma* are not therefore the existential ones assumed by Bultmann and his school. Whilst not wishing to share in the complete condemnation of Bultmann's kerygmatic concept as being anthropological as distinct from theological, I agree with Barth (1962, 83-132) that the primary function of *kerygma* is to make Christ known, not make the hearer known to themselves. Undoubtedly, as a consequence of our answer to the questions posed about Christ, something of our own nature is revealed to us, but this I believe must be deemed the secondary rather than primary result of hearing *kerygma*. Christian *kerygma*, as the *kerygma* of Christ, should pose the same questions which were engendered by Christ's own ministry. Christian *kerygma* could therefore be defined as that which publicly and definitively poses the question put by Jesus "who do you say that I am ?"¹ in such a way that the hearer is compelled to respond. Christ in the power of the Spirit not only ensures that this question can be put, but also provides himself as the definitive answer.

This understanding of *kerygma* as question concurs with the example provided by Christ himself as recorded in Scripture. In the gospel narratives, Christ seldom provides direct answers to those who question him; his use of the parable as a teaching tool suggests a distinct preference for what could be termed the interrogative mode of learning. In his parables, Christ posed question after question for those who heard him to

¹ Mark 8:29

grapple with, to reflect upon, and, in the main¹, derive their own answers to. Jesus did not simply proclaim the kingdom, he invited the hearer to ponder on the nature of the kingdom, to question when it would arrive, who might be admitted to it, where it might be found and whose kingdom it is. Christ's ministry can likewise be seen as a constant provocation to those who witnessed his work, who heard his word. His ministry seemed designed to pose the questions 'who are you?' , and, 'why do you do these things?' in the minds and hearts of those who encountered him.² The disciples question his manner of teaching³ whilst the Pharisees and the elders question his identity, their frustration evident from texts such as:

'How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.'⁴

It could be argued that his question to Peter on the road to Caesarea Philippi⁵ indicates that Jesus was aware of how provocative his ministry was. In keeping with that text, it is, I suggest, the opportunity to be confronted directly and personally with this question, rather than with some pre-determined answer to it, which ultimately distinguishes *kerygma* from dogma, doctrine or human proclamation.

¹ The parable of the sower being an obvious difference here.

² Consider such texts as Luke 8:22ff and John 7:10ff for example.

³ Matthew 13:10ff

⁴ John 10:24

⁵ Matthew 16:13ff; Mark 8:27ff

'In the kerygma Jesus encounters us as the Christ - that is, as the eschatological phenomenon par excellence.' (Bultmann 1962,117)

Doctrine, it can be argued, is a community's attempt to articulate, address and answer the question posed by Christ in the *kerygma*. Whilst it is true that doctrine often poses more questions than it answers, it must be accepted that historically at least, doctrine has been considered to be:

'What the church of Jesus Christ believes, teaches, and confesses on the basis of the word of God' (Pelikan 1975, 1)

Doctrine is recognisable as a community's attempt to articulate or express a common consensus on how the question posed by Christ may be *answered* or *responded to* rather than *posed*. As Weber noted:

'The purpose of Christian doctrine is to submit the proclamation of the Church to the criterion of its commission and thus to help it to be relevant to its mandate.' (Weber, 1981, 25)

It would be far too simplistic to define *kerygma* and doctrine as simply question and answer, they are far too interrelated. Those who proclaim Christ do so by proclaiming their knowledge not their ignorance of him.¹ Nevertheless, no human knowledge of Christ can be complete unless it is Christ himself who engenders it by making himself known and real to the individual. Herein lies the necessity of Paul's kerygmatic 'kai' – both the gospel - the accumulated good news of Christ for humanity, *and* the *kerygma*

1 This was of course the main thrust behind Althaus' (1959) attempt to recover the validity of historical investigation into the content of Christian kerygma. The knowledge of Christ he would maintain is rooted in historical fact.

of Christ are required. Together they are able to pose the question 'And you, who do you say that I am?' in the mind and heart of those addressed.

Realised knowledge of Christ cannot be achieved by the simple repetition of pre-formulated doctrinal answers to the question of his importance for the individual, no matter how well thought out or attested to by tradition. The answers of previous generations seldom serve to engender the same question in the present. At best they tend to pose the question as a temporal teaser, 'why did other men think that that was who he was?' Nonetheless, the question does need to be posed in a language, or with signs and symbols which can be recognised by those to whom it is addressed. As Lindbeck and others have demonstrated, the language which is almost universally recognised as that which is specifically designed to fulfil this function is doctrine.¹ I agree with Ebeling that:

'Only in relation to the Word of God, but for that reason in distinction from it, does Church doctrine share in the capacity of the Word of God for necessary presence.' (Ebeling 1968, 166)

Christological doctrines, the creeds and systematic theologies which are based around the notion of religious truths or dogmas do not generally persuade others to ask for themselves the question that they are considered an answer to, to wit Baker's challenge. Yet the creeds and a community's doctrines and dogmas are undeniably related to its *kerygma* – there is little

¹ According to Lindbeck, church doctrines function 'not as expressive symbols or as truth claims, but as communally authoritative rules of discourse, attitude and action' (Lindbeck, 1984, 18).

to say without them, for they contain the continuity and the import that bears witness to 'The Truth' and to the validity of the question being asked. Doctrines and dogmas are therefore essential to the *kerygma* whilst arguably being insufficient of themselves to enable the church to respond to the kerygmatic imperative to proclaim the gospel. As Schniewind wrote :

'It is of the essence of the Word of Christ that it seeks expression in the contemporary world; in fact this is implied by the whole principle of the incarnation.' (Schniewind, 1962, 87)

Christian *kerygma* must contain more than the pre-formulated answer of the past, even the suggested answers of the present, it must pose the question afresh, to both communities and individuals, in such a way that Christ is made present, and a response (even if it is in the negative) is inevitable. Herein lay the seeming necessity of Bultmann's demythologising project and also its fundamental flaw. Bultmann's project arguably assumed too much of those who were called upon to bear the *kerygma*. The role of the herald is not to interpret the message, or even to translate it, but to deliver it, trusting that the one who commissioned it also anticipated the question of its reception.

In this creative, missionary, context it is easier to recognise that Christian proclamation can and does take many forms. It cannot be confined to preaching or speaking about God although these are the most common forms for, as Barth comments:

'Real proclamation of the Word of God cannot be conditioned by our intention to speak the Word of God.' (Barth 1975, 53)

It is Christ, not the preacher or the speaker, who determines the means of any encounter with him. By his will, other forms of proclamation can and do become a means of grace, i.e. a means whereby Christ can be realised. Barth, for example, acknowledges the proclamatory potential of the sacrificial part of public worship, of praise, active love, instruction and of theology. (Barth 1975, 53). These are forms of *kerygma* which, like the kerygmatic content which Dodd and others identified, can be found in the practices of the early Church recorded in Scripture.

Before being able to define the *kerygma* of a community of faith, therefore, it seems necessary first to explore both the content and possible forms of the *kerygma* of Christ.

The content of Christian *kerygma*.

The content of Christian *kerygma* is the message of Christ as remembered, revealed, recorded and received in order that Christ might be proclaimed. It can therefore be assumed to include Scripture, the early Creeds, as well as other explicit doctrines of the Church whose purpose it is to make Christ known. It is the purpose of the text, as much as the text itself, which determines a text's kerygmatic credentials.

On this basis, Scripture has no need to avail itself of the circular argument so often used to support its authoritative status within the Christian community to validate its kerygmatic status. Scripture is meant to be engaged with. Using the analogy of performance, Young has ascribed to Scripture the characteristics which this thesis has argued pertain to all *kerygma*. She writes

'The Biblical Canon, then, is as it were the repertoire, inherited, given, to be performed. Selections are performed day by day and week by week in the liturgy.'(Young 1990, 25)

More importantly, Young does not restrict the kerygmatic role of Scripture to its use in the liturgy; just as *kerygma* can take many forms, so can the engagement with Scripture. The task of biblical criticism, for example, is no less public, authoritative and definitive, i.e. proclamatory, when it is undertaken with the specific aim of communicating the word of God which is a part of it. Young states that Scripture:

'only comes alive if we face the complex challenges involved in seeking authenticity in performance.'(Young 1990, 21)

Thus she likens the exegete to musicians who undertake the background disciplines of rehearsing, researching and preparing the score, without whose work there would be bad performances and false interpretations. Implicit in her work, is the recognition that Scripture is not merely proclaimed when it is preached, but is proclaimed when it is studied, expounded, and explored. Thus Scripture forms the primary content of

Christian *kerygma* not as a consequence of its historical accuracy or its acceptance by the community of faith, but as a result of its ability to make Christ known when it is engaged with. As Rahner has observed:

'a true presence of Christ is already *ipso facto* achieved wherever the word of the gospel is preached in power and heard in faith.' (Rahner 1973:X,78)

The *kerygma* of Christ is, as has been stated, as concerned with Christ himself, as it is with the message which he verbally proclaimed. In addition to Scripture, therefore, *kerygma* will include those statements which have been formulated and accepted by a community of faith to assist them in making the revelation of, and about, Christ contained in Scripture less open to erroneous interpretation, these being the agreed, received dogmas of that community. The traditionally accepted Creeds fall into this category for, as Young(1991) states,

'they are the natural successors to the summary passages of proclamation and acclamation of God and his saving action found in the Jewish scriptures.'(Young 1991,12)

To these are added the doctrines which act to define the necessary boundaries for limiting the questioning invited by the *kerygma* to that which should ultimately lead to the realisation of Christ.

The sole purpose of any refinement or addition to the content of Christian *kerygma* is to enable the hearer to focus more deliberately on Christ as the answer. This process of addition and refinement is ongoing as the Church

strives in every generation to ensure that the content of its *kerygma* is understandable and accessible. In spite of this ongoing process, the content of Christian *kerygma* remains ultimately dependent on the paradosis of the Church, as McDonald has observed:

'kerygma is inseparable from the paradosis which conveys the data necessary to the intelligibility of the proclaimed message.'(McDonald 1980, 129)

Although the New Testament seldom specifies, when it uses the term *paradosis*, exactly what was handed down, historically scholars have assumed it to be 'the *kerygma*'. McDonald, in an acknowledgement of the active nature of *kerygma*, makes the following distinction:

'When *paradosis* is presented as something that must be learned, remembered, explored, it is essentially *didache*... When it is presented as part of the proclamation designed to bring the hearers to the response of faith and the assurance of salvation, it is *kerygma*.'(McDonald 1980, 129)

Reference has already been made to Stendhal's similar observation concerning *didache*.

The content of Christian *kerygma* may thus be seen as a combination of that which has been handed down as being the message of Christ, and that which has been agreed by the community as either necessary or conducive to making the message more effective in realising Christ.¹ The variation in the content of the *kerygma* of different Christian communities is due to the need for the *kerygma* to be posed as a question relevant to the person being

¹ A detailed exploration into how such agreement is reached lies outside of the scope of this work.

addressed. This variation is not limitless as it is bounded by the purpose of *kerygma*, namely the proclamation of Christ. As Dunn has demonstrated, there was no single common element in the *kerygmata* of the early Christian communities except that which could be inferred, namely Christ himself. (Dunn 1990,29-32)

Forms of Christian *kerygma*.

The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary defines the verb 'to proclaim' as follows:

Proclaim – 'To make official announcement of (something) by word of mouth in some public place; also to cause this to be done.'(1959)

Any form of Christian *kerygma* will add to the content of *kerygma* a means whereby the message of Christ can be publicly, authoritatively and effectively known and realised – i.e. proclaimed. It will therefore include, for example, preaching and teaching, worship and sacrament, mission and service. As this list extends the boundaries of what has come to be understood by the term *kerygma*, it is worth examining each of these forms in some detail, beginning with that which is most commonly accepted as kerygmatic, namely preaching and teaching.

Preaching and teaching.

Although preaching and teaching are often equated with Christian proclamation, not all preaching or teaching can be said to realise its

kerygmatic potential. Some preaching, for example, may be said to be more declamatory than proclamatory. Preaching does not become kerygmatic through any rhetorical ability which the preacher might possess, as Paul's dialogue with the Corinthians makes all too evident¹. The preacher plays but a small part in the task of transforming human speech into *kerygma*. Jesus, for example, reassures his disciples that when they are required to speak in defence of their work that they need not worry

'about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.²

Paul appeared to believe that it was the responsibility of the Spirit of Christ to:

'allow this same κηρυγμα to appear as profoundly right and true and worthy of belief.' (Litfin, 1994, 249)

Litfin(1994) maintains that Paul was so convinced that authoritative preaching in the power of the Spirit would be effective that he was not unduly concerned with the methodology of proclamation:

'By limiting himself to the minimal role of a proclaimer Paul felt that he could be confident that the results he achieved were not based upon his own power as a rhetor but upon the πιστις-inducing work of the Spirit' (Litfin 1994,248)

¹ 2 Corinthians 10:8-18

² Matthew 10:19-20; Mark 13:11; Luke 11:12

It has similarly been argued that contemporary preaching is kerygmatic only when it is undertaken as a collaborative act, for only Christ can make preaching effective such that he is known to be present. Nevertheless, although collaborative, preaching:

'is not an action involving two equal partners. It can mean only Lordship on God's side and obedience on ours. Only as preaching is controlled by this relation can it be viewed as kerygma, i.e. as a message that a herald is commissioned to deliver.' (Barth 1991,50)

Such is the relationship between kerygmatic preaching and commission that the authority to preach has long been viewed by most Christian communities as concomitant with the efficacy of the preaching. It is a relationship which is biblically defensible. In Scripture those who speak the Word of God are first commissioned by God to do so, as prophets, messengers, or apostles.

It is for the authority and validity which such commissioning confers on both the message and the messenger, that Paul, for example, insists on his own apostolic status. On the basis of this divine authority, Paul states that whoever accepts him accepts Christ¹, whoever hears him hears Christ², and correspondingly, whoever rejects him, is accursed³. Moreover not only does Paul defend his right to proclaim the gospel he also denies the right of others to do likewise on the grounds that their authority comes from men

1 Galatians 4:14

2 II Corinthians 5:20

3 Galatians 1:8-9

and not from God.¹ The authenticity of the *kerygma* by the time of Irenaeus was confirmed by its effectiveness:

'Kerygma as Irenaeus understood it, is not just what we call 'preaching' but official, apostolic proclamation of the Gospel, and even then it refers not so much to the proclaiming of the Gospel by the apostles as to the evangelical realities proclaimed by them.' (Torrance, 1995, 59)

Preaching without the 'evangelical realities', i.e. without the real presence of Christ being made known, regardless of the status or authority claimed for the preacher, was not *kerygma*. The commission to preach was important, but was not of itself sufficient to ensure that preaching was kerygmatic.

According to Carroll (1984), the two terms *kerygma* and *didache* are synonymous in the New Testament. His justification for this is, in my opinion, less than adequate, based, as it is, on a few selected texts. He refers in the first instance to the fact that although, in Mark 3:14 the disciples are sent out to preach the Good News, Mark 6:30 records that on their return, they inform Jesus of "all that they had done and what they had taught".

(Carroll 1984, 9) Contrary to Carroll, Dodd held that:

'It is evident from the whole New Testament that the message of the Church was conceived as having two main aspects: the Gospel of Christ, the theme of preaching (*kerygma*), and the Law or Commandment of Christ, the theme of teaching (*didache*). (The distinction was partly a matter of method and ministerial organisation.) The two are ultimately united, though distinguishable.' (Dodd 1946, xxxi)

¹ Galatians 1:2 and II Corinthians 2:14-7:16; 10:1-13

I suggest that although not synonymous with *kerygma*, teaching can be a valid form of *kerygma* as evidenced by the way in which Christ taught in order to proclaim the kingdom. Scripture records that when Jesus taught in the synagogues, he did not teach as others, but taught as one having authority.¹ Whilst it is debatable whether or not Jesus' exposition of Isaiah² was intended to be proclamation, there can be little doubt that his teaching with regard to the coming of the kingdom was³. When the gospels are examined it becomes evident that:

'The sermons, the parables, and the sayings are the only kerygma of which the Synoptics know. They are not 'mere' teachings: they are didactic kerygma ' (Vincent 1957,272)

The gospels make it clear that, like Jesus, the disciples taught as part of their proclamation. In Acts, for example, it is recorded that the disciples did not cease to teach and proclaim Jesus as Messiah⁴. Mark's gospel similarly narrates how the disciples are sent out to preach and to cast out demons, and return telling Jesus all that they had done and all that they had taught.⁵ This observation in particular was what led Vincent to the opinion that

"the Synoptics do not differentiate so strictly between κηρυσσω and διδασκω, as regards *the activity of proclaiming*." (Vincent 1957, 266)

¹ Matthew 7:29; Mark 1:27; Luke 4:32

² Luke 4:18

³ Matthew 4:23; 9:35; 11:1

⁴ Acts 5:42

⁵ Mark 6:30

From his comparison of the way in which the synoptic gospels use the two verbs κηρυσσω and διδασκω, Vincent was led to conclude that

'What Jesus said – the didactic kerygma – was decisive. It presented Him in all his offices. The διδαχη was the gracious κηρυγμα of God. The κηρυγμα was that the διδαχη described God.'(Vincent 1957,273)

Vincent's observations concerning the didactic nature of the *kerygma* in the Synoptic gospels provides us with some insight as to what would be required for contemporary teaching to be similarly kerygmatic. Firstly, it must be effective in presenting Christ in all his offices, in making him real and present to those who are taught in such a way that they are persuaded in turn to become His disciples. Secondly, as with all *kerygma*, it must be of Christ, i.e. what is taught must be both a continuation of what Christ himself taught as well as what has been learned about Christ. Under such conditions teaching may become a form of *kerygma*.

The other possibility is suggested by McDonald who, working within the limitations of the traditional understanding of the term *kerygma*, argues that

'kerygma is not a sufficiently wide and flexible term to encompass the entire hermeneutical task.'(McDonald 1980, 126)

In his opinion *didache* can reinforce the *kerygma* so that it becomes

'more truly kerygmatic'(McDonald 1980, 126)

By which he means that *didache* can provide the necessary contemporary linguistic framework which will enable Christian communication (and hence proclamation) to be both relevant and effective. The point he is concerned with is the necessary intelligibility of any *kerygma*. Can Christ be made real and present to those who have no real and present knowledge of their need of Him?

Teaching, McDonald notes, can elicit the pre-understanding of the human predicament which the gospel seeks to address. In so doing, it begins as *didache*, but becomes kerygmatic. In such circumstances teaching can be classified as a form of *kerygma* providing that it is similarly authoritative. The authority to teach is granted by the same Spirit which enables others to preach.¹ The danger lies in the assumption that such teaching constitutes the definitive teaching of Christ. We have already noted Jesus' preference for the parable as a teaching medium, which should suggest to us the foolishness of attempting to teach definitively the mystery of kerygmatic realities. Again Paul provides the example through his insistence that what is taught and proclaimed is a mystery² 'The 'Truth' cannot be taught, but through the teaching, the Truth can make itself 'known'.

Worship and sacrament .

'To Worship is joyfully to proclaim, in the power of the Spirit, the wonderful acts of God and to celebrate his glorious nature.'(CAT 26)

¹ 1Corinthians 12:4-8

² Colossians 2:1; Ephesians 6:19

Christ is most commonly encountered in worship, but the encounter is not confined to the hearing or proclamation of the Word through the reading of Scripture. Praise and adoration also have identifiable kerygmatic potential. We note first their communicative abilities. As Hardy and Ford(1984) have observed, praise is:

'the primary form of the communication of the gospel'(Hardy and Ford 1984,149)

Furthermore, they maintain that a characteristic feature of Christian praise is that, through this communication, God is found to be

'ever more totally present.' (Hardy and Ford 1984,161)

In particular, as a corporate act, Christian worship may be a form of Christian *kerygma* by which the presence of Christ can be realised and the glory of God made known.¹ In fulfilment of the Scriptural promise it is held that where two or three are gathered in Christ's name, he is there among them.²

The very act of coming together for worship can, under certain circumstances, be a form of *kerygma*, as, for example, when the Church resists oppression, defies the authorities and insists on meeting whether in public or in private. That said, it is normally the individual components of

¹ Consider for example the work of Forrester, McDonald and Tellini (1996) on Christian worship – aptly entitled 'Encounter with God'

² Matthew 18:20

worship such as prayer, hymn singing, the celebration of the sacrament, the sharing of the peace etc. which, either together or separately, are identifiable as forms of *kerygma*.

Whilst prayer is most commonly understood as communication addressed to God, rather than as proclamation of God, it can, at times, be a most effective form of *kerygma*. Consider, for example, the type of prayer known as the Collect. This highly distinctive form of prayer comprises an address to God, reference to some characteristic of God's nature, a petition, the reason or purpose of the petition, and a conclusion as well as a final Amen. It is possible to identify in this combination all the characteristics of a form of *kerygma*. Firstly the Collect is a public prayer, owing its origin at least in part from being the gathering together (*collecta*) of the petitions of several members of a congregation. (Stephens-Hodge 1961, 19) Whilst addressed to God, it nonetheless proclaims the Christian conviction that God is both able and willing to hear and respond to our prayers. Its authority stems from the fact that the whole prayer is made through Christ, not through the power or authority of the petitioners. It is definitive in that by its reference to a characteristic of God's nature, it enables the hearer to be open to the awareness of God in some aspect of God's being which is directly related to the petition to be made. It is similar in this respect to those forms of teaching mentioned earlier, in that, through its address to God, the collect begins as teaching but becomes kerygmatic. Above all, the collect is

effective, for if not, there is little point in praying it. By effective is meant, not merely that the petition is granted, (although scripture does say that the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective¹), but that, through the sharing of the prayer in the Spirit in which it is offered, Christ is realised as being one with us, interceding on our behalf.² The final Amen is then said in anticipation and expectation, not as a final petition.

One further distinctive form of prayer worth mentioning as the illustration *par-excellence* of the ability of public prayer to be kerygmatic is the Eucharistic prayer, or as it is commonly known, the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving. This prayer has as its sole purpose the proclamation of Christ, in the power of the Spirit to the glory of God, such that Christ is made real and present to those about to receive him. In most Christian denominations it is a public prayer³ whose authority is derived directly from the commandment of Christ to

'do this in remembrance of me'⁴

Furthermore, it is definitive in that it declares in full the mystery of Christ, without substituting the words of man for the Word of God, and in so doing

1 James 5:16

2 Romans 8:26-31

3 This is true only when the prayer is said in the vernacular as only then is it truly public (i.e. open to all)

4 Luke 22:19

is effective, for Christ is real and present in the words which are spoken as the Word which is proclaimed.

Similar arguments can be put forward for other forms of public prayer, intercessory, confession etc. although not all public prayers in acts of Christian worship can claim to be kerygmatic. Those prayers which simply '*heap up empty phrases*'¹ are not a form of Christian *kerygma* as they neither proclaim Christ nor make him known. Private prayer is also seldom truly kerygmatic in that it is, by definition, intended to be private communication rather than public pronouncement.² This does not mean that it cannot similarly be effective, authoritative, definitive communication of Christ, it is simply that proclamation is, by definition, public.

Congregational hymn singing is certainly public, and has tremendous kerygmatic potential, indeed most hymns of praise, either said or sung, may become kerygmatic as Scripture attests. Luke's gospel, for example, in addition to containing several 'hymns' also provides an account of how the proclamation of the incarnation was accompanied by singing as a glorious act of praise:

'All at once there was with the angel a great company of the heavenly host, singing the praises of God: Glory to God in highest heaven. And on earth his peace for men on whom his favour rests.'³

1 Matthew 6:7

2 Although an obvious counter-example to this would be the example given in the Old Testament of Daniel and the way in which his private devotions acted to effectively proclaim the sovereignty of the God of Israel. Daniel 6:10

3 Luke 2:13ff NEB translation

That which the angels sang, they also proclaimed to the shepherds. Robertson's examination of the hymns of the New Testament (Robertson 1990) led him to conclude that:

'Singing it would seem, is both a proclamation and a witness, an occasion of teaching and instruction, an activity inspired by the Holy Spirit which itself becomes the instrument of further inspiration.'(Robertson 1990, 39)

Old (1992, 50f) similarly classifies the hymns which are sung by the saints according to the book of Revelation¹ as 'kerygmatic doxology'.

Whilst there are fewer references in the New Testament to singing than there are in the Old Testament, it is evident, from the few texts that do refer to the practice, that hymn singing once performed a very specific function. Robertson notes that in almost every instance where it is referred to in the New Testament, singing is directly associated with proclamation.²

Thus he claims:

'The Church of the New Testament sings in the presence of the Word, in response to the Word, and to express the Word.'(Robertson 1990, 41)

Westermann's (1981) more detailed exploration of the Psalms, enabled him to classify Scriptural hymns as being either declarative praise or descriptive praise. A hymn which praises God for some specific, unique, act or event he defined as declarative praise, whereas descriptive praise is how he defined a

¹ Revelation 5:9, 14:3:15:3

² Romans 15:8, 1Corinthians 14:15; Ephesians 5:19;Colossians 3:16,Hebrews 2:12,

hymn of more general praise for God's acts at all times and in all places. Hymns which are predominantly descriptive are unlikely to be a form of *kerygma* in that they lack the specific focus required of a proclamation. The hymns which Westerman styles declarative praise are in my opinion likely to be kerygmatic, in spite of his terminology.

Westermann notes that declarative praise corresponds to a Hebrew verb whose basic meaning is both to confess, and to make known. He queries whether or not it can be translated as 'to proclaim' on the grounds that:

'proclamation always has as its primary object an occurrence, an event; not, however being or attributes, which can be called events only when accurate usage has decayed.'(Westermann 1981,32)

In response we simply note that, from the time of the New Testament, the being and attributes of God are proclaimed as an event, the Christ event. Hence that which Westermann terms declaratory praise, can for most hymns of Christ, justifiably be termed proclamatory praise – i.e. kerygmatic.

The one aspect of worship which has unfailingly been recognised as a form of *kerygma* is the sacramental. In the light of the volume of literature written concerning the celebration of the sacraments and the real presence of Christ, it should be sufficient here to note, as Torrance does, that *kerygma*, baptism, and the Eucharist, must always go together, for:

'In kerygma it is the Word made flesh; in the sacrament it is the Word made flesh.' (Torrance, 1959, 209)

By *kerygma*, Torrance understands both the thing preached and the preaching of it in one, and on this basis, he goes on to write:

'Apart from the Word there is no sacrament, for it is the living Word and nothing else that is made flesh; while apart from the sacrament the kerygma as act of the living Christ does not reach its proper fulfillment.'(Torrance, 1959, 209)

Neither is he alone in this conclusion. Rahner similarly highlights the somewhat composite nature of the Eucharist when he says of it that

'it is that word through which the proclamation 'showing forth' the death and resurrection of the Lord, the work of redemption which was achieved once and for all, is presented by the Church in visible cult and in the Holy Spirit (as a unity) to the Father, while at the same time the Body and Blood of Christ are brought to the believers.'(Rahner 1973:X, 80)

Worship as a form of *kerygma*, in particular sacramental worship, illustrates most effectively how inadequate it is to confine dogmatic theological consideration to agreed doctrines or creeds. The theology implicit in the performance of ritual and sacrament is surely as important as that which is carried by the doctrines defining the boundaries of their meaning.

Mission and service.

Higgins (1970) has suggested that the link between Luke's Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles is the idea that:

'The ministry of Jesus in works and words(Acts 1:1) is continued in the ministry of his witnesses.'(Higgins 1970,90)

In so doing, he makes a direct association between *kerygma* and action which he believes has been missed by those who restrict their search for the *kerygma* to the preaching content of the many sermons in Acts. He concludes by saying:

'The kerygma in Acts then, is not confined to the missionary preaching. Through the power of the Holy Spirit the apostles show the reality of the gospel they proclaim by their miracles performed in the name of Jesus, as Jesus himself demonstrated the reality of his proclamation of the coming kingdom of God through mighty acts already in the present. The author of Acts interprets the kerygma in this extended sense as the bearing of witness to Jesus.'(Higgins 1970,91)

The apostles evidently witnessed to the gospel through their missionary endeavours and the service which they rendered, as much as by the words which they spoke. Whilst Higgins focuses on the miraculous, Paul in his epistles highlights the mundane.¹ It was by living as Christians that he believed that the early Church could make Christ known most effectively to the pagan peoples around them.

Christians have, in this respect, repeatedly proclaimed Christ by their determination to witness to him and by their commitment to serve others in his name. Polycarp, for example, might be said to have proclaimed Christ as much by his martyrdom as by his spoken word. His refusal to swear to the divinity of Caesar, to take the oath and revile Christ, had a profound impact on the persecution of Christians of that time. Bruce(1995) records :

¹ 1Corinthians 4:10-16

'Polycarp's martyrdom seems to have produced a revulsion of feeling for the time being; not only did that outbreak of persecution in Asia cease with his death, but it was probably at this time that the Emperor Antonine sent a rescript to some of his eastern cities, forbidding them, as Hadrian had done, to indulge in riotous attacks on the Christians instead of prosecuting them according to the due processes of law.'(Bruce 1995,174)

Such proclamatory acts undoubtedly influenced the spread of Christianity, but, as Chadwick (1969) was to detail:

'The practical application of charity was probably the most potent single cause of Christian success'(Chadwick 1969,56)

Christian charity expressed itself in real acts of service, in care for the elderly, visits to those in prison or in the mines, and in provision for widows and children. One very specific service which Christians were able to render to poorer community members was to provide for their burial. Neither was it only members of the community who benefited from Christian service; the distribution of alms, for example, was not confined to believers. Given that the majority of Christians by the close of the third century were middle-class, such acts of service and charity as described above were more likely to have derived from missiological and proclamatory motives than from any self-sustaining necessity. As Chadwick noted:

'The assistance provided by the church was impressive in a world where, except for a period during the second century and again during Julian the Apostate's brief attempt to incorporate the church's ideal within paganism, the government did not expect to undertake a general program of social welfare.'(Chadwick 1969,58)

Christians proclaim the *kerygma* of Christ as he did, by word and deed; by the way in which they are prepared to leave all and follow him, or give all that others may know him.

Summary:

Despite possessing many forms, differing emphases, and variable content, Christian *kerygma* is nonetheless recognisable as a consequence of being firstly 'Christian' and secondly proclamation. This brief overview of the basic content and forms of Christian *kerygma* has depended throughout on a definition of Christian *kerygma* as that which is, at one and the same time, the effective, authoritative and definitive, public communication of Christ. Christian *kerygma* is effective in that it makes Christ real and present to the recipient. Its authority is derived from Christ who similarly alone defines what is made known in his name. Above all, *kerygma* is the public communication of Christ in that Christ's message is not a secret which can be whispered, but is an event which can be realised.

'This much at least is true: that *kerygma* alone possesses the intrinsic power of awakening the conviction of its truth in the hearts of men.' (Schniewind, 1962, 101)

I have argued that *kerygma* can be thought of as possessing both content and form, and that various forms of are attested to by Scripture and the Church. In doing so I have, nevertheless, talked in general terms of the *kerygma* of Christ. Even without taking the various forms of *kerygma* identified above into consideration, Dunn and others had acknowledged the

existence of several *kerygmata* in the New Testament. Before being able to define the *kerygma* of a community of faith, therefore, the relationship between *kerygma* and community needs to be examined.

Kerygma and community.

The Living Word lives and fulfils its purpose of testifying to the love of God by being continually spoken into existence. Human proclamation at the command, and under the authority of, the divine Word, regardless of what form it takes, is one of the means whereby the Word is incarnated; enabled to act, not simply to 'speak' into, or to, the world, but realised within it, changing and transforming it. There is thus an imperative implicit in Christian , to proclaim the gospel. In Mark's gospel this imperative is portrayed as being both divine' and an inescapable consequence of a transformative encounter with Christ:

'those who have been healed proclaim, despite being expressly forbidden to do so.' (Coenen, 1992, 56)

What is explicit in Mark's gospel is also implicit throughout the New Testament, hence it has been argued (Hanson 1966, Downing 1968) that the New Testament is a record of the response of the first Christians to this kerygmatic imperative. It bears witness to Christ, not merely by recording

1 Mark 16:15

his life, death and resurrection, but by extensively narrating the effect that that had on those who heard and responded. Hanson argues that:

'what the New Testament really represents is not early authoritative tradition about what Jesus did and said, but early authoritative tradition about what the Church thought Jesus was, about his Church's estimate of his significance.. it not only purports to tell us what Jesus did and said, but also the reaction of the first witnesses to this.' (Hanson , 1966, 68)

The creative, 'missionary' power of the *kerygma* led to the formation of the early Church. The author of 1 Peter, for example, writes emphatically that Christians are made a people specifically in order to proclaim:

'But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.'¹

Flew (1943), in his study of the idea of the Ecclesia in the New Testament, conclusively proved the relationship between the kerygmatic imperative and the formation of the Church. He used the six kerygmatic components defined by Dodd to show that

'at every point of the kerygma we see the idea of the Ecclesia declared or implied' (Flew, 1943, 121)

Although he acknowledged his especial indebtedness to Dodd's work, Flew also insisted that

'There is a dynamic force in the Word. The Christian gospel declared authoritatively in the power of the Spirit is living and active.' (Flew, 1943, 122)

1. 1Peter 2:9

It was this dynamic force which Flew insists brought the early church into being and gave it its life. By virtue of its relationship with the Word of God, Flew held that

'The kerygma contains the idea of the Ecclesia, but it also creates the Ecclesia.' (Flew, 1943, 122)

Hence, he insisted that the growth of the Word of God mentioned in the Acts¹ is a synonym for the growth of the Ecclesia, for:

'The Word of God, the supreme and final revelation of His will for mankind is the constitutive fact for the Church' (Flew, 1943, 122)

Flew's perception of the creative power of the Word of God is, of course, not unique. Ebeling, for example, held that:

'the church is not brought into being as a result of certain commands but through the liberating freedom which authorises man to preach the Word of authority and power.' (Ebeling, 1966, 97)

Similarly Brunner (1962,3ff), to cite just one more example, argued that the Church and its traditions were created by the Word of Christ and the apostles, a position which led him to advocate an understanding of the Church as:

'in the first place merely the instrument, the bearer of the proclamation. Everything that serves this proclamation is Church, and it is this function and nothing else which makes the Church the Church: a "proclaiming existence" as the historical continuum of the revelation.' (Brunner, 1962, 3)

¹ Acts 6:7

Like Flew, he was similarly insistent in the living dynamic of the proclamation which arises from its direct association with the word of God. For Brunner proclamation is

'not a mere matter of uttering words, but of passing on the life in which God has communicated himself' (Brunner, 1962, 3)

The problem with Flew's, Ebeling's, and Brunner's statements is that they all refer to the so-called Universal Church or, in some instances, the primitive Church, neither of which have tangible existence. It can be argued that it is no longer possible to talk of 'The Church' except in abstract or general terms, and hence extreme caution is needed when attempting to identify and substantiate relationships between *kerygma*, doctrine and Ecclesia. As the most recent works on the evolution or genesis of the Christian Church have demonstrated¹, there is unlikely to have ever been one Church, rather it is more likely that there were, almost from Pentecost onwards, several churches united in their proclamation of Christ as Lord perhaps, but varying in practice and even in confession.² The existence of Christian *kerygmata* rather than a Christian *kerygma* suggests that the relationship between *kerygma* and community is more than an abstraction of the ideal described above. *Kerygma* evidently does have a role to play in the formation of Christian community, the question is – in what way?

¹ For example (Dunn 1996b) and (Crossan, 1999).

² Dunn has argued (based on an understanding of *kerygma* as the content of that which is preached) that there is no real unity in the early Christian *kerygma* other than that which can be abstracted from the many different confessions in existence in the early church. (Dunn, 1990).

In both McGrath's (1990) and Lindbeck's stated opinion it is doctrine which differentiates and creates religious communities and enables each to develop a self-awareness, an identity which can be supported, maintained and, if necessary defended. McGrath bases his thesis concerning the genesis of doctrine on the belief that there is an obvious need, linked to the human need for social definition, for religious groups to define themselves in relation to other religious and secular groups. He draws heavily on the work of Niklas Luhmann to support his belief that doctrine creates and defines what he terms *communities of discourse*. His conviction is that doctrine

'serves as a means of creating a sense of social identity, shaping the outlook of a community and justifying its original and continued existence in the face of rival communities with comparable claims. It assists in defining both the limits of, and the conditions for entering, such a community.' (McGrath, 1990, 38)

The sharing of common characteristics of faith which are doctrinal by nature leads inevitably, he would suggest, to the formulation and maintenance of a community of faith. In this, McGrath seems to be in basic agreement with the work of Dodd and Dodd's implicit understanding of the relationship between *kerygma* and Church, i.e. that a Church's *kerygma* is its set of agreed fundamental doctrines. A specific doctrinal gospel, it would appear, can, according to McGrath, be used to identify a particular Christian community and visa-versa. Macquarrie (1972) partially supports this concept, noting that there is some New Testament evidence in the first epistle of John of different doctrines defining different communities. This is

one instance which he suggests might serve as an illustration of how a difference of doctrine can result in a division of the community.¹

There are other well proven causes of ecclesial differentiation – or, if we hold to the ideal of a universal Church – schisms, which may be said to result in the origination or creation of a new community of faith. Greenslade (1953), for example, in his exploration of the schisms of the early Church, lists five specific causes ranging from the charismatic force of an individual through to national, social, economic or puritanical influences acting on the established church. None, unsurprisingly, are referred to explicitly as ‘kerygmatic’. If, however, the *kerygma* of a community of faith is defined as that community’s response to the kerygmatic imperative to proclaim Christ, then it is possible to recognise how the *kerygma* might begin to operate as a creative dynamic of that community. Above all else, the *kerygma* is that which emphatically demands that the question in the gospel can be heard and responded to.

Whilst not entirely disagreeing with McGrath and the way in which doctrine can and does engender different communities of faith, I believe there are many other ways in which Christians can respond to the divine imperative and form communities of faith which he neglects, most notably, the question of religious emphasis. McGrath claims that in many ways:

¹ 1 John 2:22

'the distinction between doctrine and theology is somewhat artificial at points, perhaps reflecting differences in emphasis rather than differences in substance.' (McGrath, 1990, 12)

There are, however, all too many notable instances where differences of emphasis regarding doctrine, practice, and process have been the sole basis of differentiation between Christian communities and their subsequent theology. The passion and vigour, or otherwise, with which particular doctrines are upheld or defended, the way in which the Christian has felt compelled to live life as a Christian, or even the conduct of certain aspects of worship can all be seen historically to have been as divisive in the Church as questions of right wording, or interpretation. Knox (1950), for example, believed that he had identified a 'recurrent situation in Church history.. where an excess of charity threatens unity.' He describes the pattern as follows:

'You have a clique, an elite, of Christian men and (more importantly) women, who are trying to live a less worldly life than their neighbours; to be more attentive to the guidance (directly felt, they would tell you) of the Holy Spirit. More and more, by a kind of fatality, you will see them draw apart from their co-religionists, a hive ready to swarm. There is provocation on both sides; on the one part, cheap jokes at the expense of over-godliness, acts of stupid repression by unsympathetic authorities; on the other, contempt of the half-Christians.... Then, while you hold your breath and turn away your eyes in fear, the break comes; condemnation or secession, what difference does it make? A fresh name has been added to the list of Christianities.' (Knox, 1950, 1)

Knox then proceeds to list over 15 distinct Christian communities from the early church at Corinth through to John Wesley's Methodism, whose formulation he believes can be largely attributed to issues of emphasis and purpose, which Knox defines as religious enthusiasm. Whilst not wishing to

support Knox's caricature of Wesley or Methodism, it has to be agreed that he succeeded in identifying a notable distinction, namely that of a community's 'emphasis' or process – i.e. not just *what* the community says in speaking of and to God, but the emphasis it places on it and the manner in which it finds expression, i.e. *how* a community says what it needs to say to and of God. By this is meant all aspects of liturgy and worship as well as religious practice.

As Knox and others have pointed out, issues of emphasis have always been a contributing factor in the diversification and differentiation of the Christian Church. It has been claimed (Kung 1963, 322) that it is only since the nineteenth century that theologians, in particular university theologians, have called for dogmatic definitions as a way of unfolding and explicating the Faith in place of the old tried means of prayer, preaching, the Sacraments etc. Questions of liturgical practice and Ecclesial order as well as those of charisma, political and social interaction, which do not of themselves engender any deviation from accepted or traditional doctrines have all, at some time in the history of Christianity, served as the origin for new Christian communities. We need look no further than the formation within the Roman Catholic Church of orders such as the Jesuit or the Franciscan Brothers to appreciate how particular emphases can result in the formation of distinct Christian communities which, despite their clearly

unique identities and theologies, remain convinced of their doctrinal orthodoxy.

McGrath's thesis, therefore, even if allowance is made for his perception of doctrine as activity, must be deemed somewhat incomplete. There are other aspects of faith which engender community than doctrine, not least a passionate response to the gospel which can introduce changes of behaviour, liturgy or action, rather than of doctrine or confession. Also, contrary to Lindbeck's 'cultural linguistic' thesis, not all faith communities can be comprehensively linguistically defined. It can be argued that the post-liberal dependence on language-based epistemology inadvertently attempts to restrict the ability of God to intrude where language has yet to have penetrated. That God does intrude is surely evidenced by the kerygmatic origin of Christianity itself, with its 'foolish' gospel. God can and does communicate through the written and the spoken word, but it can also be argued that God communicates far more through action - the cross, through relationships - the trinity, and through ontology - God's very being expressed so that humans are aware of it, yet unable to articulate it. *Kerygma* as a participant in the action of God despite its restriction to the language of humanity, manages somehow to proclaim this 'foolishness' or nonsense such that, where necessary, it is capable of creating its own medium whereby it might be heard and understood. As Gunton (1997) observes:

'The activity of proclamation and the celebration of the Gospel sacraments are temporal ways of orienting the community to the being of God. Proclamation turns the community to the Word whose echo it is called to be;.. Thus there is no timeless church: only a church then and now and to be, as the Spirit ever and again incorporates people into Christ and in the same action brings them into and maintains them in community with one another.' (Gunton 1997, 82)

Conclusion

It is not the intention of this thesis to make any grand claims for *kerygma* such as have been made for doctrine in terms of the genesis of Christian communities. Proclamation can and does, as Flew and Gunton observe, assist in the creation and maintenance of community, although not exclusively so. *Kerygma* participates in the creation of a community of faith through being the way in which that community, by the power of God, responds to the kerygmatic imperative to proclaim the gospel. Accordingly, it is perfectly feasible for a community to have a specifically kerygmatic, as opposed to a charismatic, doctrinal, national, social or even economic origin.

One final observation concerning *kerygma* and *ecclesia* is that the existence of a kerygmatic community is itself a form of Christian *kerygma*. Christ is proclaimed, not only by the preaching and teaching, the worship and the practices of the community, but by the existence of the community *as* community in order that the gospel might be proclaimed. The early Church, it can be argued, proclaimed Christ as much by its undeniable, inexorable existence as by what it said. In spite of repeated persecutions, like the Lord which it proclaimed, the Church would not die. Similarly the structure or

form of a community may be kerygmatic, proclaiming the relational nature of Christ to the outside world. As Bonhoeffer (1966) was to write in defence of the structure of the confessing Church:

'The church government is the bulwark of true proclamation in the community'(Bonhoeffer 1966, 185)

As the *kerygma* of Christ, the *kerygma* of a particular community of faith can be recognised as that which is *of* Christ as well as *about* Christ in the life, work and words of that community. It is that which makes Christ real and present in the midst of that community, and in the world at large. More importantly, it is the way in which, through that community, Christ is enabled to continue his task of proclaiming the kingdom, and realising the salvation of all of creation, for it is by *kerygma* that we are saved.

The above definition of *kerygma* provides the context for the identification and subsequent analysis of the *kerygma* of the Methodist church. In order to justify the attempt of this thesis to make explicit the theology which it maintains is implicit within the Methodist *kerygma*, and to substantiate any claims which may later be made with regard to that theology, it is necessary first to show that Methodism is a predominantly kerygmatic community. As such a community Methodism, it can be argued, will have a theology which is likewise primarily kerygmatic, i.e. implicit in the way in which the Methodist Church, as the Methodist Church, responds to the kerygmatic

imperative to proclaim Christ. The next task, therefore, is to analyse the origin and nature of twentieth century British Methodism.

CHAPTER FOUR - THE METHODIST COMMUNITY OF FAITH

Introduction

According to Methodism's stated conviction¹, a description of the nature of the Church should take into account the Church's

'origin, fellowship, allegiance, message, mission and ministry : also of its continuity in history, and its present structure.' (F&O 1984, 8)

for it holds that

'Whilst these subjects cannot be kept separate, since each involves the others, none of them can be properly omitted'(F&O1984, 8)

Before Methodism can be described as a predominantly kerygmatic community therefore, each of the areas listed above will need to be examined and the dominant characteristic, if any, of that particular aspect of the nature of the Methodist Church, proved to be kerygmatic. Although space will not normally permit more than a cursory examination of each of the eight areas, competing descriptive claims, where they can be identified,

¹ As expressed in the Conference statement '*The Nature of the Christian Church*' adopted in 1937. Since 1987, a Conference statement is held to be a 'considered statement of' the judgement of the Conference on some major issue or issues of faith and practice.' (See Appendix 4) This ruling was intended to formalise the standing of Conference statements rather than replace any prior understanding of them and hence may be judged applicable to those statements adopted prior to 1987. Likewise, although, "*The Nature of the Christian Church*" was superseded by "*Called to love and Praise*" adopted in 1999, this particular aspect of the report was neither updated nor replaced and hence may still be deemed a valid expression of Methodist conviction concerning how the nature of the Church is best described.

will be evaluated in full. The examination begins therefore by evaluating in some detail the many and varied hypotheses for the origin of Methodism.

The origin of contemporary British Methodism.

'It is quite wrong to think of Methodism as coming into existence in the time of the Wesleys' (Davies, 1990, 11)

Davies(1990) argued that Methodism is a recurrent form of Christianity, the earliest clear example of which is the movement begun by Montanus in Phrygia in A.D. 160. He believed that certain characteristics combine to define Methodism as a particular *form* of Christianity.¹ Firstly, Davies states, Methodism is characterised by a

'complete and wholehearted acceptance of the cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith' (Davies, 1990, 11)

as laid down in the creeds,

'combined with the conviction that doctrine which is not proved in devotion and life and does not issue in practical charity is valueless' (Davies, 1990, 11)

Secondly there is the conviction that the heart of Christianity lies in the *personal commerce* of an individual with their Lord who has saved them, and obtained forgiveness for their sins, and who will live in them to transform their character. Thirdly, Methodism characteristically places a deliberate stress on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. The fourth characteristic

1. Davies used the norm provided by 18th Century Methodism as the basis from which to derive what he saw as the Characteristics of Methodist Christianity.

is an emphasis on personal and social holiness. Next is the desire to make the gospel known as persuasively and as widely as possible. The sixth is the practical, material concern for the spiritual welfare of the underprivileged, with the seventh and final characteristic being the

'development of a Church Order in which the laity stands alongside the ministry, with different but equally essential functions, sharing in the ministry the tasks of preaching the Gospel, caring for Christ's flock, and administering the Church's affairs.' (Davies, 1990, 12)

Given such a defining list it is possible to claim that Methodism is, in many ways, a contemporary reflection of the primitive Christian Church. It could certainly be shown that the Church in the first few centuries strove to possess all seven of the characteristics listed above. As Davies noted:

'All through the history of the Christian Church there have been groups of people, large and small, who have exhibited all or most of these characteristics' (Davies, 1990, 12)

He insisted that they do so, however,

'in such a way as to form a distinctive community within the larger community of the whole Church.' (Davies, 1990, 12)

The most definitive characteristic of all, therefore, is the one which, whilst not explicitly mentioned, is certainly implicit in Davies' list, namely that Christians whose life of faith demonstrates these characteristics appear to be called or compelled to form communities of fellowship and learning on the basis of them.

Continuing therefore with the assumption that

'it is only a knowledge of their origin and development that reveals the real nature of the individual denominations' (Ebeling, 1968, 35)

this subsection will undertake a thorough analysis of previous hypotheses with regard to the origin of present-day British Methodism. It will attempt to show that the origin of Methodism cannot be adequately, or accurately, described using traditional, historical, doctrinal, or sociological methodologies. Methodism's characteristic form of Christian community can, it will be claimed, only be completely accounted for as a direct consequence of Methodism being a corporate response to the kerygmatic imperative.

As a result of developments in sociology, and in particular the sociology of religion, it is now commonly agreed that that there is no single answer to the question of what it is that

'gives to a company of human beings the cohesion and solidarity that constitute them a 'community' or 'people.'" (Macquarrie, 1972, 10)

This is considered to be as true of the Primitive Church as it is of twentieth century communities of faith. Greenslade (1953), for example, suggested that there were several key factors involved in the formulation of new churches, sects or denominations out of the early Church.¹ This thesis will,

¹ As an example Greenslade quotes the history of Donatism as being a 'classic instance of plurality of causes leading to persistent schism.' (Greenslade 1953, 42)

nevertheless, argue in favour of a single, dominant, overarching, identifiable source from which Methodism can be shown to originate: a source which, it will be claimed, can both utilise ecclesial, doctrinal and social cohesive forces or override them as required.

In order to achieve this it will need to draw on Ebeling's understanding of religious history and his observation that

'the Church is a historical entity. Its divisions into various denominational churches is the result of historical events.' (Ebeling, 1968, 34)

Much will depend on the acceptance of a working definition of 'historical origin' as an important, perhaps even crucial, characteristic of Methodism is that it has never originated outside of the established Church of its day. It has always denied any charges of schism levied against it. Methodism's emergence was not instantaneous but was the result of a series of progressive, inescapable movements, initially within and then ultimately out of, its parent body. The 'originating' source which this thesis insists exists, must therefore have first existed in the parent body in such a way that it would inevitably give rise to something new. This new creation would nonetheless be recognisable and inescapably dependent upon its parent for the sensibility of its own existence. Consequently, contemporary Methodism, like all denominations, has its own history but that history also reflects, at least in part, the history of its parent Church, The Church of England.

A progressive evolution such as Methodism's does not hinder the search for a definitive historical origin, provided that what is meant by an 'historical origin' is clearly understood. Almost all Christian denominations, regardless of whether or not they admit to a later date as their contemporary origin, insist that their 'true' origin is the historical phenomenon of the Christ event. Yet most denominations also have a 'secondary' origin, a date from which they trace their contemporary existence or current manifestation. For example, although modern British Baptists trace their origin to 1609 and the action of John Smyth in re-instituting the baptism of believers, they also insist that their Church's true origin lies with Christ; Baptists are merely upholding the original faith and practices of his Church. In this case, the historical origin can be thought of as neither the Christ-event of the first century nor Smyth's action in 1609, but rather the practice of witness and baptism which unites these two chronological events into a single recurrent historical phenomenon.

Such an understanding of historical origin mediates between the two extremes normally associated with early twentieth century kerygmatic theology, namely that of history as being totally relative or existential and of history as being irrevocable and unchangeable. There is no attempt in this thesis to deny the concrete historicity of the origin of Christian faith in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ, or to reduce it to any single kerygmatic or even mythical moment. Pannenberg's critique of

Bultmann's reduction of the history of the gospel to the 'that' which denies further exploration of the 'what' (Pannenberg 1970,87) is almost certainly valid, as, taken to its extreme such a perspective leads to an almost deistic denial of the involvement of God in and through history both before and after the resurrection. There is, nonetheless, a scriptural and theological basis for an associated transcendent perspective of history which respects the actuality of the historical 'now' or 'then' by relating it concretely to the relativity of origination. Whilst seeming somewhat paradoxical, this perspective both respects and articulates the common understanding of historical origin as it currently exists within the Church. For example, Christians acknowledge the relevance of the Old Testament as the precursor to the New, as a testimony of God's continuing action, but nonetheless, they date the origin of Christianity to coincide with the incarnation – time and history was dated from the year of our Lord. This 'historical perspective' is held in spite of the theological perspective that the incarnation was, and is eternal – i.e. that Christ is continually being incarnated into the lives of his believers through the power of the Holy Spirit to give rise to his body the Church.

Correspondingly, in the case of denominations, by 'historical origin' this thesis means the specific action, doctrine, confession, or practice, which, as well as defining the denomination's relationship with the originating Church of Christ from which all Christian denominations are ultimately

derived, also engenders an historically dependent corporate identity. Determining the origin of Methodism is therefore less a question of pinpointing a particular moment in history, than of recognising within the Church, the source of these characteristic means of being *this* Church, i.e. a community of faith which deliberately chooses to identify itself as characteristically 'Methodist'. If this constitutive source can be discovered, then it would be reasonable to assume that the origin of the Twentieth Century British Methodist Church will have also been found, given that this was the norm from which Davies derived his thesis.

In the light of its characteristic emergence out of a pre-existent religious community, it seems reasonable, in spite of its documented protests, to treat Methodism, for the purpose of ascertaining its historical origin, as a schismatic movement. Not least because, of all the possible reasons as to why often seemingly disparate groups of people choose to form completely new religious communities, all five of those highlighted as primary by Greenslade (1953, 8) have, in the appropriate context¹, been proposed as the origin of British Methodism, these being:

- John Wesley himself.
- The national, social and economic condition of the 18th century.

¹ Greenslade's categories referred specifically to the causes of schism in the early church, but his division into secular and ecclesial categories are arguably just as valid whatever period of church history is being analysed.

- Internal divisions within the Church of England.
- Developments or disagreements over liturgy and doctrine.
- Issues of Church discipline and the puritanical idea of the Church.

To demonstrate the inability of such traditional 'secondary' sources as these to adequately account for the phenomena of Methodism as a recurrent form of Christianity, all five will be examined in detail, beginning with the traditionally held view that Methodism owes its origin as a distinct community primarily to the genius of Wesley.

John Wesley : Founder of Methodism ?

The Wordsworth dictionary of beliefs and religions defines Methodism as:

'A Christian denomination founded in 1739 by John Wesley as an evangelical movement within the Church of England, becoming a separate body in 1795' (Goring 1992)

In so doing, it voices a common, albeit mistaken, belief that John Wesley alone, 'founded' Methodism. This sub-section will highlight two key denials of the 'Wesleyan origin' hypothesis. It will, firstly, use evidence from Wesley's own writings to prove that Wesley did not attribute the origin of Methodism to himself. This will lead in part to the conclusion that Methodism, even in its most exclusive mode, would have to acknowledge at least two founding fathers, namely Charles and John. Consequently it will

prove that the 'founding' of modern Methodism required a cast of tens if not hundreds to enable Methodism to emerge out of the Church of England.

Wesley's accounts of the origin of Methodism

Wesley provided several separate accounts of the origin of Methodism, none of which refer directly to his conversion experience at Aldersgate on May 24, 1738. The dating of the origin of Methodism to Wesley's warmed heart experience has to be read as a romantic ideal, used to propagate the understanding of the importance which Methodism later came to place on such experiences rather than as serious historical fact. Study has shown that

'What has seemed to the 'myth-makers' of Methodism the most important thing about Wesley does not seem to have been regarded in that light by himself' (Young, 1988, 39)

Wesley unfailingly associated the origin of Methodism with the commitment to holiness of life which he made initially in 1725 and which began to gain support and bear fruit in Oxford in 1739. In his sermon '*The Wisdom of God's Counsels*',(JWW VI: 368) Wesley attributes the origin of Methodism to the publication, in 1725, of William Law's "*Practical treatise on Christian Perfection*", and to Law's "*Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*", which was published not long after. "*Here*" wrote Wesley concerning the matter,

'the seed was sown, which soon grew up, and spread to Oxford, London, Bristol, Leeds, York and, within a few years, to the greatest part of England, Scotland and Ireland.' (JWW VI: 368)

Wesley considered the emergence of the people called Methodists to be a decisive turning point in the history of the Church because it marked a renewal of the authentic Christian life. He expanded on this association of 'authentic Christianity' and the writings of William Law in '*A Plain Account of Christian Perfection.*' although here, he was more concerned to describe the events of his own personal spiritual awakening than of those surrounding the origin of Methodism. Even so, he still mentioned his (and hence Methodism's) spiritual debt to Taylor and Kempis, a debt which he referred to even more directly in his sermon '*At The Foundation of City-Road Chapel* saying:

'As to the rise of it [Methodism]. In the year 1725, a young student at Oxford was much affected by reading Kempis's "Christian Pattern," and Bishop Taylor's "Rules of Holy Living and Dying." He found an earnest desire to live according to those rules, and to flee from the wrath to come...' (JWW VII: 487)

For these reasons, Jennings (1991) was persuaded that:

'Wesley himself thinks that there is essential continuity between the commitments these authors enable him to make in 1725 and the multinational movement which he was leading more than half a century later.' (Jennings 1991,78)

Generally, Wesley tended to date the origin of Methodism as 1729/30. As Jennings has observed, this was the time which coincided not with Wesley's own private commitment to holiness, but with that of a whole group – namely the Holy Club at Oxford.

'In November, 1729, four young gentlemen of Oxford.... Began to spend some evenings in a week together, in reading, chiefly the greek new Testament... The exact regularity of their lives, as well as

studies, occasioned a young gentleman of Christ Church to say, "here is a new set of Methodists sprung up;" alluding to some ancient Physicians who were so called. The name was new and quaint; so it took immediately, and the Methodists were known all over the university.' (JWW VIII: 109)

Jennings, in agreement with Young, therefore argues strongly against the popular misconception of Wesley's Aldersgate experience as the origin of Methodism. He replaces it with the formation of the Holy Club at Oxford and insists that Methodism could not have originated with Wesley's own pursuit of holiness, for, even in those places where Wesley does refer to 1725 as the origin, Wesley himself

'notes it was an incomplete beginning because of the lack of companions.' (Jennings 1991,79)

Thus Jennings concludes,

'Methodism really begins when it begins to be corporate' (Jennings 1991,79)

Wesley's own appraisal of Methodism's origins, as detailed by Jennings and Young in particular, suggests that he denied the originating role which Methodism has traditionally accorded him, preferring instead to attribute it to the impact of the works of those who inspired him, and to that which he shared with his companions in the Holy Club.

Charles and Whitefield : Methodism's co-founders ?

Locating the origin of Methodism in the 'corporate' or community search for holiness namely the Oxford 'Holy Club', forces recognition of the second refutation of the 'Wesleyan origin' hypothesis. Historically, the first of the

two brothers to whom the term 'Methodist' was applied was Charles, not John. It was Charles who gathered together a group of like minded undergraduates at Oxford to form the 'Holy Club'. Reflecting on this matter later on in his life, Charles was to write:

'Diligence led me into serious thinking. I went to the weekly sacrament and persuaded two or three young scholars to accompany me, and to observe the method of study prescribed by the Statutes of the University. This gained me the harmless nickname of Methodist.' (Baker 1948,14)

This does not permit originating status to be simply switched from John to Charles, though, as it would be difficult to substantiate a claim that the 'Holy Club' was in any real sense the forerunner of early Methodism. Rack (1992, 84ff) has effectively demonstrated that the Holy Club, like so many other similar clubs of that time, was fundamentally an aid to academic study, to scholarly, rather than specifically religious, pursuits. Although the Holy Club appears to mirror the Class and Band structures which Wesley later introduced into Methodism, including the emphases on disciplined living, exhortation, mutual support and encouragement etc., the similarity is undoubtedly more accidental than deliberate.

Nonetheless, the Holy Club remains important to the history of Methodism for three reasons. Firstly, for being responsible for attaching the label 'Methodist' to its members. Secondly, for the fact that Wesley's perception of the role that it played highlights the role of 'community', over and against that of individuality, in the origin of Methodism. Finally, for bringing

together several of those destined to play important roles in the flourishing evangelical revival of that time, particularly the Wesley Brothers and George Whitefield.

The role of George Whitefield has often been neglected by Methodist historians, yet when Methodism first came to public attention, it was generally believed to be headed by Whitefield not Wesley. Lady Hertford, for example, wrote in 1739 of a

'new sect who call themselves Methodists. There is one Whitefield at the head of them.' (Rack 1992,191)

This impression was only moderated when Wesley and Whitefield were in dispute over Calvinism, at which point, reports Rack, they were considered to be equally prominent in the movement. Rack commented that

'Wesley scored over Whitefield in the long run because he organized a connexion which perpetuated his own name and his own voluminous Journal, and accounts of the Revival gave the impression that his brand of Methodism as well as his own career were the source and centre of the whole movement.' (Rack 1992,191)

Rack thus draws attention to the fact that there was more than one 'brand' of Methodism in existence at that time, and more than one individual involved in originating them. Wesley's first attempt at field preaching, and hence his participation in the revival was at the express invitation of Whitefield who wrote to Wesley in 1739 about the opportunities for evangelism amongst the colliers, saying

'You must come and water what God has enabled me to plant.' (Rack 1992, 190)

Whitefield, it seems, recognised his own gifts as those of an 'awakener' and, according to Rack,

'left Wesley to consolidate the results in an organized way.' (Rack 1992, 194)

Even before the rift between the two men over the doctrine of pre-destination, Rack records that the Whitefieldites, as well as the Moravians, with whom Wesley was still associated via the Fetter Lane Society, thought that Wesley was

'an ambitious man who must have all in his own hands.' (Rack 1992,194)

The historical reality is that much of what was to become the 'Methodist' movement already existed prior to Wesley's preaching as diverse religious societies, scattered all over the kingdom. Rack's research led him to conclude that Wesley's movement was

'to a significant degree the product of cannibalizing a number of localized evangelical networks originated by others into a national organization' (Rack 1992,177)

These societies tended to reflect the local social and political situation as well as the evangelical upheaval of that time, making it an almost impossible task to determine a single origin for them all in terms of a single character or issue of doctrine. Even those societies which supposedly united to become a part of Wesley's connexion were in fact open to major

disagreements, as has been highlighted by the work of both Heitzenrater (1995,120-22, 188-190) and Wellings (1999,150). The disagreements testify to the fact that, in spite of popular opinion, there was no one voice of Methodism. Methodism repeatedly attracted strong, charismatic individuals who were more than willing to speak, act, and lead if required, according to their own convictions. Evidence of this exists in Wesley's journals wherein he recorded his attempts to moderate their preaching and their practices by the imposition of his discipline and regulation.

Before being able to totally dismiss the Wesleyan origin hypothesis it is necessary to consider whether or not Methodism originated solely as a consequence of Wesley's organisational and leadership skills. Dobree (1997) has argued that Methodism was forged out of the chaos of the revival through Wesley's organisational genius and total control over those societies which united under him. For example, he says of Wesley at age 68 that:

'all the reins were firmly in his own hand — the preachers, the stewards of the funds, the trustees of the buildings, the class leaders: there was no item he did not know, no thread he did not direct' (Dobree 1997, 2:77)

Such claims tend to be drawn from, or largely substantiated by, Wesley's own evidence, in the form of his letters, sermons and journals. For example, whilst writing prolifically himself¹, Wesley is known to have actively

¹ 'Besides the rest, which we assert as facts,
He wrote in all above Two Hundred Tracts!
And yet, in every year, a Thousand Missives sent
Through this, and various Isles, and every Continent!'

discouraged the publication of books by other Methodists, commenting in a letter to one would be writer that

'It is the glory of Methodists to have *few authors*.' (Wesley 1931,VI:324)

He also insisted on appraising all works written by his preachers intended for publication. The propensity for hymn writing Wesley controlled by insisting that preachers be discouraged from singing hymns of their own composition. Wesley even achieved a degree of censorship over the contents of sermons preached in Methodist preaching houses through the addition of a clause in their trust deeds which forbade the pulpit to anyone who preached anything at variance with 'Our Doctrines'. Methodist preachers, it would seem, if they wanted to be Methodist, had little choice but to comply with the doctrinal stance adopted, preached, sung and taught by the Wesley brothers.

'For good or ill, Wesley stamped his character and beliefs on Methodism in a way comparable with Ignatius Loyola and the Jesuits or William Booth and the Salvation Army.'(Turner 1985,14)

Wesley vehemently denied that his pastoral rule over his preachers and assistants was harsh but his denial must be viewed in the light of Charles' letter to him wherein he wrote:

'You rule the preachers with a rod of iron: they complain about it all over England'(Baker 1970,160)

This short verse written by Thomas Olivers in his pamphlet *Descriptive and Plaintive Elegy on the late Reverend John Wesley* (1791) is evidence of the scale of the writings attributed to John Wesley.

Corroboration of belief in Wesley's iron rule comes from the common perception that Wesley did not simply preside over the Methodist Connexion, he *was* the Connexion. As Baker (1965) reports, the Methodist Conference in Wesley's lifetime was

'far from being the supreme doctrinal, legislative, administrative court which it eventually became... It was simply a matter of Wesley seeking the advice of others in the oversight of the Methodist societies, which both he and they regarded as his personal responsibility' (Baker 1965,243)

Only Wesley's decisions, for example, were recorded in the minutes as the authoritative Methodist statement of belief or 'opinion'. Moreover, following a debate in the conference of 1766 concerning the extent of his power, Wesley had a lengthy statement published in each subsequent edition of the Large Minutes which concluded:

'I Myself sent for these, of my own free choice; and I sent for them to advise, not to govern me. Neither did I at any of those times divest myself of any part of that power above described, which the providence of God had cast upon me, without any design or choice of mine.' (JWW VIII: 363)

The final example of Wesley's control over Methodism is his insistence on personally stationing all the preachers:

'It is I, not the Conference.... that station the preachers: but I do it at the time of the Conference that I may have the advice of my brethren.' (JWW XIII: 30)

It was this 'right' which encouraged Wesley to claim that his control was

'the fundamental rule of Methodism' (JWW XIII:181)

The context of this statement lends credence to the idea that Wesley believed that even if it did not owe its origin to him, Methodism owed its continuing existence as Methodism to him.

The conviction, on such evidence, of the domination of Methodism by the Wesley brothers has meant that it has generally been assumed that there is no reason to suppose that Methodism owed its origin to anything or anyone other than John Wesley. In spite of this, attention should be paid to Greenslade's comment that

'The personal factor is always important, but rarely, if ever, the sole cause of schism.'(Greenslade 1953,55)

Rack also questioned whether or not Wesley's frequent expulsions and 'purges' of his societies may be evidence that the

'passions which John unleashed were 'only imperfectly controlled by his discipline' (Rack 1992,180)

Wesley may have inspired a 'connexion' but the historical evidence seems to suggest it neither originated with him, nor was completely controlled by him alone. Wesley appropriated and wooed what was already there wherever possible, and drew heavily on the skills and abilities of those he could trust like his brother Charles.

It has long been acknowledged that Methodists learned their theology more from Charles' hymns than from John's sermons. Sugden (1951) for example commented that:

'the real embodiment of Methodist theology is the Methodist Hymnbook, and especially Charles Wesley's Hymns.' (Sugden 1951, 342)

Hildebrandt has similarly advocated the primacy of Charles over Wesley theologically, stating that his hymns provide

'a basis for the summa of Charles Wesley's theology'(Hildebrandt and Beckerlegge O.A 1983, xi)

Beck (1999) considers Charles to arguably be a more important theologian for Methodism than John, writing that

'it was Charles' hymns which built into the Methodist psyche that theological character that even now, much diluted though it is by the passing of the generations, remains the most potent force holding us together as a church' (Beck 1999,71)

Charles' hymns were known to have been edited by Wesley which makes it difficult, if not impossible, to separate and identify their individual theologies. Nonetheless Davies is probably correct when he says that even if we had none of John Wesley's sermons

'we would be able to reconstruct a passably accurate version of his theology from Charles Wesley's hymns.' (Davies 1990, 95)

Wesley may have provided the organisational genius which helped to transform the initial disparate societies of the evangelical revival into

something resembling a unified body, but he cannot be said to have created the 'Methodism' which was taught and practised week by week in those societies. This was largely dependent on Charles' hymns and on the preaching of the army of 'assistants' who day by day, week by week, proclaimed the word of God and persuaded the people to '*Flee from the wrath to come.*' As may be deduced from the numerous break-away societies which formed during the early days of Methodism, that which unified and defined Methodists was something other than Wesley himself. Loyalty to Wesley alone, whether to his preaching, or to his Rules and organisational practice, simply could not, and ultimately did not, suffice to keep all the 'united societies' united. It is not realistic, therefore, to claim that Methodism originated with John Wesley; it existed prior to him and subsequent to him. Wesley gave it both focus and form for a while, but it was not something which he alone had created.

Methodism as a response to national, social and economic issues.

A secular answer to the origin of Methodism is that Methodism originated as a response to the national, social, and economic concerns of the eighteenth century. This period of history marks the transition from the so called 'traditional' world to the 'modern' world of Newton and Darwin, of mathematics and science, of reason and enlightenment. Eighteenth century Britain was a time of two major revolutions – the agricultural and the industrial. During this time,

'the population suddenly sprang from 6,000,000 to 9,000,000, outstripping all previous rates of increase and the distribution entirely altered.'(Fitzgerald Date Unknown,6)

These changes contributed to the mass migration from the country to the new townships which were springing up around the mines and factories. The government of the day seemed to care little that the masses lived in unspeakable misery from which the only surcease was to find forgetfulness in drink. This was a time of great unrest as may be judged by the all too frequent riots.

The main theory of how Methodism originated in response to primarily social, national and economic issues was put forward by Elie Halévy at the turn of the twentieth century. Halévy questioned why England should have been exempt from the sort of riots which gave rise to the bloody revolutions which occurred throughout Europe at the same time. He theorised that England in the early eighteenth century was steeped in a puritanical seriousness which the established churches were unable to either release or utilise. Under normal circumstances, he argued, this, combined with the appalling conditions of the time, would have given rise to explosive, emotive riots and revolution. His thesis was that an accidental conjunction of the secular and religious circumstances released this suppressed force and gave birth to Methodism. Methodism was able to convert potentially revolutionary riotous energies into relatively harmless religious ecstasies. The Halévy thesis has, however, been shown (Semmel,1971),(Walsh 1975) to

be riddled with errors and improbabilities. Whilst undoubtedly having some basis in truth, it is too inaccurate to substantiate the claim that Methodism originated as a consequence of national, social or economic concerns of the Wesleys' time.

An alternative argument recognises that much of the work of the Holy Club at Oxford was in response to the appalling living conditions of the poor and the imprisoned. The existence of the Societies for the Reformation of Manners (SRMs) from the 1690s to the 1730s is indicative of the perceived need for concerted action to be taken against the widespread practices of blasphemy, drunkenness, swearing and brothel-keeping. Whilst these societies were engaged in a combination of persuasion and coercion to reform the moral behaviour of the nation, others, like the Holy Club, under the instigation of William Morgan, undertook acts of practical charity and direct involvement to bring about personal, rather than social, change. Morgan persuaded the members of the Holy Club to visit those in prison and to visit the sick, actions which laid the foundation for the 'social program' which later came to be considered an identifying characteristic of the Methodist movement.

Methodism did grow quickest in those areas where the influence of the government and the Church was weakest and where a 'political gospel' of equality in the sight of God was most needed. Thompson (1982) has shown,

however, that political concerns were secondary to gospel concerns for Methodists and thus tended to be challenged only in furtherance of those primary issues. As a consequence Methodism tended to support, and at times defend, the actions and policies of the government of the nation, often adopting a highly conservative, or as Thompson prefers to name it, odiously subservient, view-point. Thompson writes that Wesley

'rarely let pass any opportunity to impress upon his followers the doctrines of submission, expressed less at the level of ideas than of superstition.' (Thompson 1982, 45)

Although he too recognises the claim supported by Wearmouth (1954,1959) that

'Methodism was indirectly responsible for a growth in the self-confidence and capacity for organization of working people.' (Thompson 1982, 45)

his conclusion is in keeping with Southey's (1890) historical analysis of the situation that Methodism

'only facilitated a process to which other causes had given birth.' (Southey 1890,571)

In conclusion, therefore, whilst agreeing that

'it is doubtful if it would have spread so rapidly to the ends of the earth if its rise had not occurred at the same time as the birth of the modern world.' (Dimmond 1932, 21)

it is nonetheless unlikely that the historical origin of Methodism is due solely to national, social or even economic concerns of the early eighteenth century.

Methodism as an answer to the state of the Church of England ?

Greenslade's study highlighted the way in which internal divisions within the church could and did give rise to schismatic groups. Such divisions tended to be amplified by strong charismatic personalities or focused around certain doctrinal issues. They were often primarily due to the inability of the Church to respond to the needs of the people whom it claimed to serve. During the time of the revival, the Church of England unquestionably failed to meet the needs engendered by the growing population. For example, although it was given a grant by the government to build 10 new Churches in London, it succeeded in building only four. In other areas of the country, particularly in the new industrial and manufacturing towns which lay outside the traditional diocesan boundaries, the Church failed to make any provision for the hundreds who migrated there from the countryside in search of work. Research has demonstrated that it was in these areas as well as

'in areas with a long Dissenting tradition - Bristol, the West Riding, Manchester, Newcastle - that Methodism made most rapid headway among the poor.' (Thompson 1982, 42)

Methodist historians have at times characterised the Anglican Church of Wesley's time as being spiritually and theologically impoverished. It was common, for example, to find claims such as the following made by Gorrie:

'The clergy of the established Church were awfully corrupt and profligate. Horse-racing, cock-fighting, card-playing, hunting and drinking were common among the clergy and as no people can ever be expected to be farther advanced in knowledge and morals than their religious teachers, we may infer

that if such was the state of the priesthood, the laity must have been in a still more deplorable condition.' (Gorrie 1997, 9)

In the light of such 'histories', it is not surprising that the corruption of Anglicanism was often suggested as a major factor in the origin of Methodism. However, as Turner(1985) admits, the

'exaggerated picture of the indolence of the Hanoverian Church of England.. was far too convenient a background for the supporters of Methodism' (Turner 1985, 1)

What Davies described as

'prolonged theological controversy'(Davies 1990, 25)

has been cast in a more positive light by Maddox who commented that:

'Anglicanism was perhaps the most diverse theological arena of its time' (Maddox 1995, 8)

Neither Wesley, nor the Church of England, desired or took steps to induce schism. Methodism grew up within the Church of England, but unlike the dissenting movement, deliberately chose not to secede from it. Wesley had no desire for his connexion of societies to be a separate Christian community; he wrote most emphatically that

'from real Christians, of whatsoever denomination they be, we earnestly desire not to be distinguished at all' (JWW VIII: 407)

The societies which Wesley established as well as those which chose to adopt his 'Rules', were never intended by him to be a substitute for the

parish Church. Wesley's express opinion was that society membership was supplemental to Church membership. In addition to attendance at society meetings, members were thus expected to worship regularly at their local (usually Parish) Church as evidence of their desire to grow in a life of faith and spiritual holiness.

The fact that the Church of England did not expel Wesley or Methodism from its midst, stands as testimony to its maturity and toleration. Wesley's actions may have seemed controversial at times, and his movement provocative to the ecclesial order, but his theology fell well within mainstream Anglican thought . Methodism can hardly therefore be said to have originated out of internal divisions within the Church, or of a failure of the Church to respond to the social and economic changes of the time – indeed it could be argued that the Church of England did respond to the needs expressed, through the work of its faithful servants of whom John and Charles were but two of many.

The liturgical and doctrinal origin of Methodism.

Methodism has always insisted that it has never taught anything at variance with the traditional teachings of the church. Agnes Bulmer, for example, was to comment of Methodism that:

For a detailed exploration of this consider the works of both Runyon(1998) and Maddox(1995)

'the doctrines it propounded, were the great and leading principles of evangelical truth, laid down in the scriptures, and contained, not only in the formularies of the universal church but also in those of the Church of England.' (Bulmer as quoted in Church 1948,6)

As Rack points out (1992,278), charges made against Wesley and his societies concerning doctrinal aberration were due largely to the mistaken association of Wesley with Whitefield's doctrine of predestination rather than to any doctrine which Wesley held or preached himself. It could perhaps be argued that the one doctrine which played a pivotal, if not originating role in defining the shape and character of Methodism – was exactly this one, i.e. predestination.

Rack argued that:

'the development of the predestinarian dispute had an important role in the rise of Wesley's movement as a separate organization.' (Rack 1992,282)

Whitefield's 'Methodism', was Calvinistic, something which Wesley could not reconcile himself to, so ultimately the doctrine divided the two men and their two 'brands' of Methodism. Whitefield's connexional association reported that:

'it had separated from Wesley over "election, sinless perfection, perseverance and universal redemption."' (Rack 1992,283)

Nonetheless, Wesley and Whitefield maintained a cordial relationship, even preaching for one another on occasion, long after their most heated debates regarding this doctrine. Likewise, in spite of the Calvinistic doctrines of the

Welsh revivalists, Wesley worked alongside them to further the cause of the gospel, making several trips into Wales to preach and to help in consolidating the societies there. It was not the doctrine which caused the disputes, but the vehemence with which they were held. Wesley's practice was to allow each their own 'opinions' providing that they did not trouble the societies as a result of them. The role of this doctrinal dispute in the evolution of Methodism cannot therefore be ignored but neither can it be held to be the historical origin of contemporary Methodism.

Other charges made against Wesley's doctrinal orthodoxy focused on his presentation of the doctrine of justification by faith. It was feared that Wesley's doctrine would lead to a dangerous neglect of works, but such fears could not be sustained in the light of Methodism's early and continued emphasis on the 'social gospel'. Doctrine and practical charity went together in Methodism. In fact, such was Wesley's own emphasis on doing 'good works' that he was at one time accused of Pelagianism. But Wesley did not subscribe to this heresy either; his insistence on works of Christian charity sprang from his conviction that to do so was to fulfil the will of God.

When required to answer the charges made against him and his societies, therefore, Wesley merely insisted that the characteristics or 'marks' of Methodists were nothing more than adherence to the common fundamental principles of Christianity. He wrote :

'The distinguishing marks of a Methodist are not his opinions of any sort. His assenting to this or that scheme of religion, his embracing any particular set of notions, his espousing the judgment of one man or of another, are all quite wide of the point... Nor, lastly, is he distinguished by laying the whole stress of religion on any single part of it.' (JWW VIII:17)

Although he defended Methodism's doctrinal orthodoxy, doctrine for Wesley was of secondary importance to the business of saving souls. This is evident in the rules which he wrote for the 'United societies'. Membership was open to all those who desired to '*flee from the wrath to come*' and who could provide some evidence of the same by the way in which they lived their lives.⁷ In Methodism's formative years, there was not even the requirement that members should be 'converts' to the faith. Wesley considered the societies themselves to be a means of converting those who attended. There was similarly no requirement placed on those becoming members who were already professing Christians to relinquish any denominational tenets which they held, provided that they did not make them an issue of dispute at society meetings.

There is thus no evidence to support the hypothesis that Methodism's historical origin is due to doctrinal or liturgical differences with its parent Church.

⁷This was of course a point of some controversy given Wesley's insistence that the societies were auxiliary to the Church of England from which they should never separate.

Methodism and Puritanism – a question of discipline ?

The most serious charges levied against Wesley and the early Methodists were not doctrinal, but ecclesial, namely: Wesley's itinerancy, the use of lay preachers, and the ordination of Whatcoat and Vasey by Wesley for the work in America. Each of these charges was justified by Wesley on the grounds of what might be called practical spirituality, and the claim that they were in keeping with the practices of the primitive church. Methodism's historical origin may therefore be located in a difference of ecclesial practice, or as a consequence of what has been termed the 'puritanical urge' – the call to return to the beliefs and practices of the so-called primitive church.

Wesley's spiritual background had an undeniable Puritan component through the influence of his mother. It is also evident from his works that Wesley had encountered writings by, as well as concerning, the Puritans, for example Neal's *History of the Puritans* and Calamy's account of the 1662 ejections of the Puritans. Not all Wesley's 'innovations' which went contrary to the expected or traditional interpretation of canonical law, could be attributed to Puritanical ideals or theology. Of the three main accusations made against him, the first was that of preaching where he was not licensed to preach.¹ When called to task by Bishop Butler for this particular offence,

¹ The second Charge was that of preaching and praying extempore whilst the third, was that of encouraging lay preaching.

Wesley responded with the now famous phrase that *'all the world is my parish'*.¹ He also made a more reasoned and legalistic response, pointing out that as Fellow of Lincoln, he believed that he had not been licensed to any one particular cure but was in fact free to preach anywhere in the Church of England.²

'Like the rebellious priests of the Oxford movement, Wesley thought he knew the priorities of the gospel and the church better than the bishops' (Rack 1992,209)

Wesley was on less safe ground in terms of being able to provide a supporting legal argument or justification in canonical law for the use of lay preachers, or assistants within the Methodist Movement. Susannah Wesley is traditionally credited with having persuaded Wesley that Thomas Maxfield was as much called to preach the Gospel as Wesley himself was. Whether or not Maxfield was Methodism's first Lay Preacher³, the tradition lends some support to the hypothesis that Wesley was influenced by his mother's residual Puritan ideals. It is more likely that Wesley was primarily influenced by necessity. The movement was growing and had already reached a size which made obtaining qualified, ordained support in the numbers required impossible. Wesley is reported to have defended his acceptance of Maxfield to his reluctant brother by saying:

¹ Although made famous by Wesley, it was Whitefield who first used this expression as the basis for his 'irregular' preaching both in England and in Georgia.

² It is unclear however, how legally correct he was in this.

³ In his Journal, Wesley writes of Joseph Humphrys as being 'the first Lay Preacher that assisted me in England' (JWW IV: 541)

'I am not clear that Brother Maxfield should not expound in Greyhound Lane; nor can I as yet do without him.' (Dobree 1997,II:56)

This, Dobree suggests, was the crux; Wesley simply could not do without Maxfield, or the others which followed, although it didn't take long for Wesley to find Scriptural as well as other forms of justification for Lay Preachers. In one letter Wesley comments

I believe several who are not Episcopally ordained are called of God to preach the Gospel.' (JWW XIII:268)

before asking

'Is not a lay Preacher preferable to a drunken Preacher? to a cursing, swearing Preacher?' (JWW XIII:268)

Wesley's use of Lay Preachers was not welcomed by his fellow clergy regardless of his justification for them. Although lay readers existed in the Church of England at that time, they were few, and were licensed to specific dioceses. Wesley not only permitted lay preachers, but encouraged them to be as itinerant as he himself was. The mob riots against the early Methodists often resulted from the challenge that these preachers posed to the authority of the parish priest. Next to the authority of the village squire or landowner, the priest, often doubling as the magistrate, tended to be the main source of authority. Methodist lay preachers were perceived as a distinct threat to the status quo.

Consider his argument based on the Acts of the Apostles.(JWW V:590)

Methodists have often talked of Wesley's inspired 'pragmatism' but this has not been universally accepted. Thompson simply comments that:

'Lay preachers, the break with the established Church, self governing forms within the societies - on all these questions Wesley resisted or temporised or followed after the event.' (Thompson 1982, 46)

Methodism is unlikely therefore to have originated as a consequence of these matters. They undoubtedly contributed to its growth and development, indeed, these were exactly the concerns which led to the early secessions from the Methodist Connexion so soon after Wesley's death, but they were not the historical origin of Methodism in the early eighteenth century.

Methodism as a kerygmatic community ?

Each of the traditional competing hypotheses for the origin of Methodism have been examined and shown to be incapable of independently accounting for Methodism's historical origin. It might be argued that some or all of Greenslade's primary causes contributed jointly to Methodism's origin, and that the concept of a single source origin is flawed. Even if Methodism's origin is due to a combination of any or all of the above reasons for schism however, there must still be something which successfully utilised, motivated, shaped and/or influenced them into a single cohesive force powerful enough to engender the birth of a denomination which could subsequently survive almost a century of secessions and then re-unite. It is this uniting force, the thread which holds each of the strands of

Methodism's early history together, which this thesis contends resulted in Methodism's emergence out of the Church of England and into history as an independent Christian community with its own identity, culture and theology. The task is to identify this thread from the historical and theological data available.

It is far too simplistic to suggest that Methodism's historical origin is a rough combination of all of the factors explored above. There remains an alternative, suggested by the work of Flew and others, namely that Methodism originated as a work of Christ, in response to the kerygmatic imperative. In order to prove that Methodism had a kerygmatic origin, it will be necessary to show that Methodism came into existence primarily as a result of an overwhelming compulsion to proclaim the gospel.

It is certainly the case that contemporary Methodism's historical origin is somehow linked with the evangelical revival of the eighteenth century. This I suggest is due to the fact that Methodism originated out of a desire to proclaim the gospel, which was likewise the primary purpose of the revival. The revival was a missionary movement, its mission fields being the new industrial towns of Britain. Whilst, on the whole, the revival attempted to work with and for the Church, it was, nonetheless, a creative dynamic which could not ultimately be either contained or constrained by the Church. In the light of the earlier conclusions concerning the *kerygma* and

the way in which it both can, and does, engender community in such circumstances, it seems reasonable to assume that Methodism's origin was an inescapable consequence of the power of the *kerygma* to engender a community which is compelled to proclaim.

A kerygmatic origin for Methodism would certainly explain why Methodism cannot accredit its origin solely to Wesley. Just as the *kerygma* cannot be reduced to a historical text, neither can its proclamation be restricted to a particular herald or individual, no matter how enthusiastic or charismatic. Thus, what proved to be a major stumbling block for the Wesleyan origin hypothesis, namely the roles of Whitefield and others, actually substantiates a kerygmatic origin hypothesis. What is important to a community originating in response to the kerygmatic imperative is not who begins the process of proclamation, but that it is begun.

Notice was also drawn to the fact that Methodism had, even in its earliest days, attracted strong individuals and that Wesley's own control over these was nowhere near as total as popular myth suggested. This accords with what would be expected were a kerygmatic origin hypothesis correct, for, as was pointed out in chapter one, a kerygmatic encounter with Christ engenders the compulsion to proclaim which cannot be commanded or contained. Whitefield and Wesley may have begun the process, but the fact that their processes and practices were adopted and adapted by other

existing societies and individuals is testimony to the validity of it being kerygmatic rather than charismatic. It was the force of the gospel and the necessity of responding to it, not the force of their personalities, which created the loyalty of the united societies.

The second hypothesis likewise finds its resolution in a kerygmatic origin hypothesis. The social program of the Methodists developed in response to having heard and studied the gospel, in the same way that it did for the first Christian communities as recorded in the Acts.¹ The early Methodists, as Thompson so dramatically demonstrated, were not rabid campaigners for social justice, their good works sprang out of their response to faith rather than directly out of their awareness of the needs of others. National concerns, social issues and economic conditions, poor though they were, were largely accepted by Methodists as a part of the way of life. Whilst it was important that the Christian should be charitable, it was more important that souls were saved.

The idea of Methodism originating as a consequence of the state of the Church of England has even less credence when it is recognised just how kerygmatic large parts of it were in Wesley's day.² The Church of England evangelicals made their own distinct and unique contribution to the revival which is so often attributed to Whitefield and Wesley. There were many

¹ Consider Acts 6:1 etc.

² For a more detailed exploration of this, consider (Baker, 1970) and (Brown-Lawson, 1994)

Anglican clergymen who not only supported Wesley and Whitefield, but who also travelled and worked with them, sharing in the task of proclaiming the gospel.

There was, in early Methodism, a high degree of toleration with regard to exactly what was preached. The much abused statement of Wesley's that Methodist's 'think and let think', did not mean that Methodists had little or no regard for doctrine, it meant only that doctrine *per se* was inconsequential when compared with the need for the gospel to be preached with effect. Doctrine was an a-priori of early Methodist kerygmatic activity. The interpretation of the gospel always took second place to the need for it to be heard, thus, for example, the dispute with Whitefield could not prevent or discourage Wesley from preaching with and for Whitefield on request.

There can be no denying the zeal of the early Methodists, or the enthusiastic manner in which they expressed it. The charges of religious enthusiasm were undoubtedly correct in nine out of ten cases, but there was never any serious claim made that Methodists were deliberately attempting to recover the practices of the primitive Church, unless it was as a part of its belonging to the Anglican community. The 'Puritanical' streak running through early Methodism did not find expression in terms of mode, manner and dress – in spite of Wesley's desire. It found its expression, as has been noted, through the willingness of Wesley and others to set aside traditional

ecclesiology in order to make sure that the gospel could be heard. This is the most plausible explanation for itinerancy, lay preaching and even the disputed ordinations; not in response to a desire to recreate the faith and conditions of the primitive church, but out of recognition of what needed to be done in order for the gospel to be heard.

A kerygmatic origin answers the problems encountered in the previous hypotheses regarding the origin of Methodism. Each hypothesis appeared to have failed to take into consideration both the need for the gospel to be proclaimed, and the compulsion acting on those who heard it to respond, in turn, to the kerygmatic imperative. It remains to be shown that this compulsion was what engendered the particular community of faith which chose to be known and identified (by its own distinctive characteristics) as 'Methodist'.

The simple or perhaps naive reluctance of Wesley to consider the united societies as a separate and distinct community of faith did not preclude their being so. It merely poses the more contentious question of how to identify the 'secondary' origin of a Christian community when there is confusion over when a community came into existence.

Within Methodism, historians have been divided on exactly what it was that served to differentiate Methodism from the Church of England. Some have considered it to be the ordinations of Whatcoat and Vasey and the

consecration of Thomas Coke as Superintendent for the American church. Some British Methodists have dated Methodism's independent existence from the time of Wesley's death. All such claims though, seem to be more related to the origin of Methodism as a 'Church' than with the origin of Methodism as a Christian community. The origin of Methodism as a distinct Christian community should, I suggest, be dated from the time that its members first recognised it as such.

Members of the early Methodist societies did consider themselves to be a distinct community. They knew themselves to be a people set apart, a people who were even prepared to suffer for their 'Methodism'. Historical evidence abounds, not least from Wesley's own journal, of Methodists, including Charles and John Wesley themselves, being taunted and abused as a result of their commitment to the Methodist cause.¹

The introduction of the membership ticket lends further credence to the idea that members possessed a group identity. The ticket testified to an agreed community identity through its original purpose of ensuring that no 'improper persons' gained entrance to the society meetings.² The conduct of a

¹ One extract from Wesley's works records 'At Wednesbury, Darlaston, and West-Bromwich the mobs were stimulated to abuse the Methodists in the most outrageous manner; even women and children were beaten, stoned, and covered with mud; their houses were broken open, and their goods spoiled and carried away.' (JWW V:30)

² As recorded in the Minutes of the 1744 Conference –

Q. 14. How shall we prevent improper persons from insinuating into the society?

A. (1.) Give tickets to none till they are recommended by a Leader, with whom they have met at least two months on trial.

member, the degree of holiness demonstrated in their life, and their own spirituality, were all badges of Methodist allegiance, and worth defending even at the cost of considerable abuse and suffering.

The reality of a shared group identity suggests that Methodism did have a distinct origin. Yet, as has been demonstrated, this origin cannot be properly accredited to any differences between Methodism and other mainstream Christian communities in terms of either liturgy or doctrine. The difference between the established churches or denominations of the time and the early societies lay not in *what* was taught but in the conviction of the necessity of it *being* taught and the enthusiastic and deliberate way in which such teaching was made accessible to all who needed or desired it.

Wesley recognised and preached that religion should create new life, furthermore, it should be life with a clear purpose. Methodist converts were not simply reformed church goers. Membership required them to undertake a complete change of life, not just of heart. The societies were regularly visited and purged of members who did not meet Wesley's exacting moral and religious standards. Methodism was not a doctrine, it was a way of life, a highly disciplined and rigorous way of life with but one purpose, the

(2.) Give notes to none but those who are recommended by one you know, or till they have met three or four times in a class.

(3.) Give them the Rules the first time they meet. See that this be never neglected. (JWW VIII: 355)

salvation of souls. The importance which was placed on this purposive existence is made clear by the question

'What may we reasonably believe to be God's design in raising up the Preachers called Methodists?' (JWW VIII:346)

which Wesley posed in the early Conference of 1744 and by the subsequent response to it. Most participants of the revival, including Wesley, were convinced that the revival was a mysterious act of God (Rack 1992,171). In a very particular way, namely that of its purposive existence, Methodists believed Methodism to be of 'divine' origin – a part of God's divine plan. Wesley wrote that Methodism was nothing less than a work of God and an

'extraordinary dispensation of his providence.'(JWW XII:408).

So convinced was he of the divine inspiration for, and involvement in, Methodism's existence and achievements that he desired:

'openly to declare to all mankind, what it is that the Methodists (so called) have done, and are doing now' (JWW I:174)

Or, rather, as he goes on to say:-

'what it is that God hath done, and is still doing, in our land. For it is not the work of man which hath lately appeared. All who calmly observe it must say, "This is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes."' (JWW I:174)

Methodism's existence was considered a practical witness to the work of an active, participatory God, one who deigned to 'call' and 'raise up' the

Church and its members into belief and service in order to bear witness to his work of salvation. Wesley was adamant that the purpose of God in Methodism was

'Not to form any new sect; but to reform the nation, particularly the Church; and to spread scriptural holiness throughout the land.' (JWW VIII: 346)

It is the conviction of this 'call', this 'sense of purpose', which I maintain was what united and bound the early Methodists together as a community of faith. Methodist identity sprang from the shared enthusiasm and commitment of the Methodist people to undertake the task which had been identified as God's design i.e. to respond to the kerygmatic imperative to proclaim the gospel.

Methodism's response to the kerygmatic imperative can be recognised as that which defines its relationship with the originating Church of Christ as well as that which engenders its historically dependent corporate identity. Methodism's historical origin is, I maintain, located in its vocation to proclaim the gospel and so reform the nation. Its history thus begins and is dated best from the time that that vocation became known, accepted and communally expressed. As Tillich observed:

'History runs in a horizontal direction, and the groups which give it this direction are determined by an aim toward which they strive and a destiny they try to fulfil. One could call this the "vocalational consciousness" of a history bearing group.' (Tillich 1991, III:310)

Methodism, in the light of the impact that it has had on the world since its formation, is what Tillich refers to above as a 'history bearing group'. Methodism's identity lies in its communal sense of purpose.

Yet we should not fall into the trap of personifying Methodism as a group for, as Tillich points out, it is not the community which wills or acts. In this, we would concur, but only in order to claim that it is through the relationship of the individual to the group vocation that a historical group or corporate identity is formed and expressed. Furthermore, it is the ability of the group to live out that vocation through the interrelated actions of its individual members which renders it historically real – and relevant. In the case of Methodism, its historical origin was undeniably vocational, embodied in the faith and practice of its individual members and made real by virtue of it being enacted. Methodism came into being as a corporate response to the kerygmatic imperative to proclaim the gospel such that Christ could be made real to those who heard. As a consequence, Methodism was a predominantly kerygmatic community, placing its greatest emphasis on the need for the gospel to be proclaimed; what mattered was *that* it was proclaimed, not how it was.

The fellowship of the Methodist Church.

Fellowship in the Spirit is undeniably a part of the Methodist Church, giving it its popular character and public face. The jokes about Methodist

tea parties and committees are legion, but in spite of the argued impracticalities of ecclesiology by committee, the fact remains that Methodists do express their commitment to koinonia – to a service or ministry of fellowship – most demonstrably through this direct application of belief in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.⁴ The reason for this is demonstrably kerygmatic. It is the experience of this fellowship which is believed to invoke the desire to respond both individually and corporately to the kerygmatic imperative, for it is an experience which issues in

'common worship,... in prayer, in preaching, and in the social activities of love.' (F&O 1984, 15)

Fellowship begins with the 'call' to belong, at whatever level, in whatever way, to be a part of the body and share in the task of building the kingdom. Such fellowship cannot be reduced to social intercourse or 'holy huddles', although as both Marsh (1999) and Vincent (1965) note, there is always a danger of this if Methodism loses sight of its mission. Belief that Methodism had lost its missionary perspective persuaded Vincent, for example, to pronounce that

'The "Fellowship of Methodism" has become the kind of closed shop where we have our private grumbles to each other but hesitate to be open about them. Hence we appear to those outside to be narrow, mutually congratulatory and indifferent to the wider world, concerned with our own self-perpetuation and rejoicing over every small evidence that we are doing better than the free churches and in places even better than the Anglicans!' (Vincent 1966,3)

⁴ See in particular (Beck 1998, 129-141)

Although he later acknowledged that this was only 'partially true', his rhetoric evidenced the common conviction that fellowship has always been key to Methodist self-understanding, but only when directly associated with its primary mission and divine vocation. When perceived as a consequence of obedience to its calling to respond to the kerygmatic imperative, the fellowship enjoyed by the Methodist Church becomes the ultimate expression of its conviction that God is in the midst of us, calling all to share in communion and proclamation.

As Marsh noted,

'The form of Christianity embodied in Methodism treats fellowship as crucial.' (Marsh 1999,100)

Thus the 'duties' of a member of the Methodist Church includes the requirement that all members

'join in fellowship with other Christians in pursuit of a deeper experience of Christ.'¹

Moreover, Methodism insists that the enjoyment of this fellowship is nothing less than the

'essence of the Church.'(F&O 1984, 15)

¹ As printed on the annual ticket of membership issued to all members of the Methodist Church.

This conviction stemmed from a recognition of no less than four different aspects of fellowship in the Spirit enjoyed by the authors of the New Testament, namely:-

1. That individual experience of fellowship in the Spirit was never separated in thought from membership of the Christian community.
2. Fellowship in the Spirit could, and should, be experienced outside of the Church as well as within it.
3. Christian fellowship finds expression through the sharing of material goods.
4. Christian fellowship is recognised by its universality not particularity.

The Methodist experience of fellowship today evidences the same four characteristics.

The Methodist Connexion, for example, demonstrates the first aspect. It is the embodiment of the principle of fellowship as understood and practised by the Methodist Church. According to one of Methodism's leading writers on the subject

'The Connexion arose out of missionary and pastoral need, not out of a desire to make organization more scriptural.' (Beck, 1998, 133)

At a practical level, the Connexion makes visible the belief in the importance of being interdependent, related and in communion with one another, not as a consequence of geography but as a consequence of Christology¹. The Connexion testifies to the conviction that

'although each local church contains within itself the fullness of the Church, its relationships with other churches are a part of its lifeblood' (F&O 2000, 11)

The Connexion is not divided into Districts, Circuits, Societies, and Classes. On the contrary, the Connexion has always been that which unites these smaller groupings; the distinction is important. This has facilitated good government and built the principle of fellowship and mutual support into the very fabric of the movement without creating an hierarchical 'holiness' structure. It is precisely because of the role that it played in the creation and maintenance of fellowship that the demise of the Class system is so keenly felt.²

The second aspect of fellowship is addressed by what is written on every membership ticket:

'Members are committed to the working out of their faith in daily life, the offering of personal service in the community, the Christian use of their resources, and the support of the church in its total world mission.'

¹ Retaining the rather odd spelling of Connexion is popularly thought of as a way of reminding Methodists that at the heart of their organisation is the cross of Christ.

² It is often argued that the demise of the Class meeting in particular corresponded to the onset of the decline of the Methodist Church in the UK. This is however a gross simplification of the facts. There were and remain many more factors at work in the decline of Methodism.

It is echoed in the words of the annual covenant service which calls all who share in it to :

'accept God's purpose for us, and the call to love and serve God in all our life and work.'(MWB 287)

Fellowship within the Church extends to fellowship in the wider world. Methodism for this reason recognises and supports specific 'lay' and 'ordained' ministries to the world outside of the church. 'Sector' ministry, for example, is ordained ministry which is practised outside of the traditional circuit system, for example through full time chaplaincies, academic posts etc.. Such ministers are believed by the church to be called by God to

'focus and represent the mission and ministry of the Body of Christ, alongside their lay colleagues within their sector.' (Methodist Church undated)¹

A Methodist minister in a sector appointment is not excluded from the fellowship of the Church and Connexion; on the contrary, they are a part of the bridge or link which extends the fellowship two ways. The sector minister has a

'particular responsibility to support the ministry of lay people in their sector and to seek to feed into the life and worship of the church, locally and connexionally, those experiences and insights gained in the sectors.'²

1 Leaflet for those intending to candidate for the Methodist Ministry entitled "*Sharing in Christ's Ministry as an ordained minister in a sector appointment.*"

2 Leaflet for those intending to candidate for the Methodist Ministry entitled "*Sharing in Christ's Ministry as an ordained minister in a sector appointment.*"

The third aspect of fellowship in the Spirit is evidenced by Methodism's insistence that all members, in response to the gospel, are called upon to practise the

'Christian use of their resources'(Methodist Church undated),¹

This is defined as more than charitable giving. Members are expected to be ethical in their financial matters and to develop sound ecological practices as individuals and as part of their communities.² Methodism's commitment to the sharing of material goods can be seen in the existence of such bodies as The Methodist Relief and Development Fund (MRDF)³, N.C.H. Action for Children⁴, Methodist Homes for the Aged (MHA)⁵, etc, all of which, as major charities, collect and distribute several million pounds every year to those in need⁶. As was noted in chapter two, such fellowship can be profoundly kerygmatic.

Finally, Methodism proclaims and practises a belief that:

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- ¹ Leaflet for those intending to candidate for the Methodist Ministry entitled "*Sharing in Christ's Ministry as an ordained minister in a sector appointment.*"
 - ² The conference of 2000 adopted a report which requires all churches to consider the ecological considerations of their spending, particularly when thinking of future building and development work.
 - ³ Formed in response to the need of second world war refugees, it exists to provide humanitarian assistance in disasters and emergencies, to support long term programs encouraging the eradication of poverty and illiteracy and to raise awareness of such issues in the UK.
 - ⁴ A charity founded in 1869 by T.B. Stephenson and two other Methodists to provide child care. The NCH sisterhood of nurses dedicated to the care of children was a forerunner to the Wesley Deaconess order.
 - ⁵ Formed by Conference in 1943 in response to a proposal by Rev Walter Hall to provide good homes and care for the elderly.
 - ⁶ MRDF grants alone exceeded £900,000 annually by 1999.

'No boundaries can be set to the message of a community whose goal is the reconciliation of all things to God, and which dares to take for its pattern the illimitable activity of the love of God himself.' (F&O 1984, 18)

Consequently, the Methodist Church now practises what is referred to as an 'open table'.¹ The communicant is not required to be a member of the Methodist Church, or to have been confirmed in any other Church. All that is expected is that:

'children and adults who receive Holy Communion, if not already baptized be encouraged to be baptized.' (F&O 2000, 187)

The main argument in support of this practice is Wesley's conviction that the celebration of the Sacrament was a converting ordinance.

The only repeating motive for the Methodist emphasis on fellowship is mission, i.e. to share in the knowledge and proclamation of the gospel. This particular aspect of Methodism's nature can accordingly be recognised as predominantly kerygmatic.

The allegiance of the Methodist Church.

Denomination allegiance is not always easy to identify. In the case of a denomination which has as close a link with its founding fathers as Methodism has traditionally had with the Wesleys, there is always a danger of developing a stronger allegiance to human and/or historical matters than

¹ Contrary to popular misconception within Methodism, this has not always been the case. Although Wesley believed that the Sacrament was a 'Converting Ordinance' he nonetheless believed that the communicant should be suitably prepared to receive it.

to Christ. The question which this sub-section needs to answer therefore is whether or not Methodism believes itself to be defined by its vocation to proclaim Christ, or by some agreed corpus of Wesleyan or Methodist doctrines.

French, the Wesleyan Methodist secretary of the Methodist Union Committee, prior to reunification in 1932 believed and argued that:

'The basis of the proposed union is not this scheme, but Jesus Christ. ... Our only mission is to proclaim the Gospel. Add to that and you take away from it.'(Aldom French as quoted by Thompson Brake, 1984, 24)

His perspective was substantiated by the fact that there was no one theological position held by all members of the uniting connexions who were signatories to the act of union. The diversity of theological opinion represented by the uniting parties effectively ensured that the newly united Church could only succeed by adopting Wesley's practice of toleration and acceptance of all that does not strike at the very root of Christianity. For, whilst it had been claimed prior to reunification that the various branches of Methodism comprised:

'a great Church (or set of Churches); one in doctrine, one in aim, one in life, divided only, or mainly by forms of Government and details of discipline.' (Gregory and Gregory 1909, 433)

the reality was otherwise. Tabraham (1995, 85) notes that doctrine prompted the greatest amount of discussion in the unity talks. Compromise was thus an essential component in the formulation of the doctrinal

standard of the Methodist Church. Nonetheless, the fact that no definitive list of doctrines was needed in order to bind the uniting Churches together testifies to the reality of there having been a greater allegiance to the gospel than to either Methodism or Wesley.

Evidence of the basis for re-union being Methodism's allegiance to Christ and its call to proclaim the gospel came as early as 1933 by the Conference statement '*The missionary obligation of the Church*' which claimed :

'We preach universal grace, but not so narrowly that we have our eyes only on Methodism. The obligation to tell the good news is common to the Churches and makes them one: their disunity mars the telling of it.'
(Methodist Church, 1955, 20)

Methodism's continuing allegiance to Christ and the gospel is testified to by its concentrated and committed involvement in national and world ecumenism. Perhaps more than any other denomination, twentieth century Methodism has worked to bring about the Church unity which it believes is the natural expression of the common allegiance to Christ which all Christians share in the power of the Spirit. The fact that conversations with the Anglican Church have so far failed to yield anything positive¹, has not prevented the church from entering exploratory talks once more.² The large

¹ The first attempt at reunion began in 1946 in response to Archbishop Fisher's invitation to the free Churches to take episcopate into their system. Although the Methodist Church voted in favour of a unity scheme in 1968, the Anglican general synod failed twice to obtain the necessary 75% majority.

² The recommendations of the most recent conversations which began in the 1990s are due to be presented to the Methodist Conference and the Anglican General Synod in 2002

number of L.E.P.s¹ which Methodism either instigated or became willing participants in, coupled with its practice of 'recognising and regarding' ministers of other denominations as being ministers within its own connexion with full authority to practise their ministry, all confirm that the primary allegiance of the Methodist Church is to Christ and to his command to proclaim the gospel in order 'that the world might believe.'²

The message of the Methodist Church.

'The message of the Church is the gospel, or Word of God. It is the function of the Church to understand, interpret and proclaim this word.' (F&O, 1984, 19)

As there is only one Word of God there can be no real difference between the message of the Methodist Church and that of any other Christian Church. Such variations as may appear to exist, therefore, must be due to the way in which Methodism understands, interprets or proclaims the gospel.

Rack (1992, 158-180) demonstrated that those who played an active part in the revival were convinced that their work was indisputably the work of God. Wesley and his assistants attributed Methodism's success to the fact that it was God's handiwork, not their own. This did not lead them to believe that Methodism had anything either distinctive or particular to proclaim but merely encouraged them to believe in the necessity of

¹ Local Ecumenical Project – An agreed sharing of either or both Church and minister between two or more denominations.

² John 17:21

proclaiming the gospel well, a task which they undertook with surprising effectiveness. Some sects and groups, the Unitarians, for example, believed that their own creed could be given a more popular appeal through the use of what they called 'Methodist Preaching Techniques'. Early Methodist preaching, including that of Wesley and Whitefield, as with almost all field preaching of the time, often resulted in strange emotional outbursts. Thompson, critical of the Methodist influence on the people of the time wrote about the

'undertones of hysteria and of impaired or frustrated sexuality which - along with the paroxysms which often accompanied conversion - are among the hallmarks of the Methodist revival.' (Thompson 1982, 43)

Wesley was embarrassed by the extreme behaviour which could accompany his preaching and tried to play down the more extraordinary supernatural claims of his followers (although he was as prone as any in the revival to see such 'signs' as convulsions and believers falling down in fits at his feet as being indicative of God's approval of his work.) Convulsions and enthusiastic phenomena occurring in the congregation, whilst discouraged, were also acknowledged by Wesley in his journal as a sign of the reality of the spiritual warfare which he believed the Methodists were engaged in on behalf of the gospel. The success of Methodist preaching cannot be attributed to a difference in doctrine as only the traditional doctrines of the

faith were preached.¹ The difference lay in the Methodist enthusiasm for preaching and hearing the word, an enthusiasm which was often misinterpreted as a new or different doctrine.

The first Methodist conference was called by Wesley to address these misunderstandings and respond to the accusations of doctrinal aberration and schismatic tendencies. Its agenda consisted of just three basic questions:-

1. What to teach;
2. How to teach; and,
3. What to do; that is, how to regulate our doctrine, discipline, and practice.'

The first day of the Conference was spent addressing questions concerning the doctrine of justification. The second dealt similarly with the doctrine of sanctification and the third with what was referred to as 'matters of discipline'. These were mainly concerned with the need to restate and define Methodist allegiance to the Church of England. In response to the question

'How are we to defend the doctrine of the Church?'

the short, but succinct and telling answer is given,

¹ This claim is not intended as a denial of the more popularist preaching of the early Methodist Church. Methodists in Wesley's day, as with most folk of the time, believed in demons, witches, spiritual healings by prayer etc. It remains the case however that Wesley introduced no 'new doctrines' to either pander to or deal with these beliefs. It is safe to assume that the local parish priests were as convinced of the world of the supernatural as their congregations were.

'Both by our preaching and living.'(JWW VIII: 317)

The answer to the question as to whether there existed distinct – as in different – Methodist doctrines was no. Methodists preached and taught the doctrines of the Church of England, and by so doing, defended them. But they did so differently. Even Wesley was forced to acknowledge the difference in worship in a Methodist preaching house and that in the local parish Church. In 1757 he wrote a damning indictment of Anglican worship claiming that the Methodists had

“unspeakable advantages’ in their avoidance of what is either ‘splendid’ or ‘sordid’; prayers are from the heart, and serious, not careless. They are not interrupted by the ‘formal drawl’ of the parish clerk, the screaming of boys or the ‘unmeaning impertinence’ of organ voluntaries.’ (Wesley, 1931, 226)

In spite of his comments, little of Methodist worship was different from that practised by its parent Church. The same is true today. The use of extempore prayer and lay preachers remain the key distinguishing features of Methodist worship, along with its renowned hymnody. Wesley introduced two new forms of service, both of which he considered to have been a part of the worship life of the early church, namely the love feast – or agape, and the annual covenant service. Of these, only the covenant service has continued as a regular practice of the whole Methodist Church. The non-conformity dimension of Methodist worship continues to find expression in the preaching service.

Since 1932 the Methodist liturgy has been revised and published three times, most notably in the 1936 *Book of Offices*, the 1975 *Methodist Service Book* and the 1999 *Methodist Worship Book*. With the introduction of the *Methodist Worship Book*, Methodist worship has the potential to become almost as liturgical, and some would say formulaic, as that which Wesley would have known in the Church of England in his own time. Whilst this has been celebrated by some within the Church, particularly by those of the Methodist Sacramental Fellowship, for example, it has also been bemoaned by many who consider it a betrayal of the non-conformist dimension of the Methodist tradition. The potential for change offered by the *Methodist Worship Book* is constrained by the circuit structure of Methodism and the fact that most ministers have at least two Churches. This ensures that the predominant form of worship remains the preaching service led by a Local Preacher in the manner and style of their own choosing.

The seeming doctrinal ambiguity bequeathed to Methodism by Wesley was not resolved by re-union in 1932. Instead it was agreed that Wesley's Sermons and Notes on the New Testament be recognised as a common heritage of Methodism. These works were adopted as the doctrinal standard of the Methodist Church as recorded in the deed of union of 1932¹. They are not synonymous with the message of Methodism though, for, as the deed states:

1 See Appendix 1a

'The Notes on the New Testament and the 44 Sermons are not intended to impose a system of formal or speculative theology on Methodist preachers, but to set up standards of preaching and belief which should secure loyalty to the fundamental truths of the gospel of redemption and ensure the continued witness of the Church to the realities of the Christian experience of Salvation.' (CPD 213)

Wesley insisted that slavish adherence to tradition and so called 'orthodox' doctrines could engender a Christianity which was devoid of the experience of Christ. He wrote:

'The traditional evidence of Christianity stands, as it were, a great way off; and therefore, although it speaks loud and clear, yet makes a less lively impression. It gives us an account of what was transacted long ago, in far distant times as well as places. Whereas the inward evidence is intimately present to all persons, at all times, and in all places. It is nigh thee, in thy mouth, and in thy heart, if thou believest in the Lord Jesus Christ' (JWW X: 93)

The same has to be said of Methodism's 'traditional evidence' – i.e. Wesley's works. It is therefore in keeping with Wesley for Methodism to

'alter its message to suit the times, and not go on repeating the old doctrine (true though it is) when it has only led to the abuse of God' (Vincent 1966,23)

Vincent is thus convinced that Methodism would be right to continue:

'both Wesley's "listening to the Spirit" and his "experimental pragmatism"(Vincent 1966,23)

There is no shortage of corroborating evidence that Methodism does review and update its message to remain contemporary. The two reports on the nature of the Church adopted in 1937 and 2000 are examples of this practice. The 1937 report was considered to need updating because it was more than half a century since the last report and

'there are new things to be said in a context very different from that of sixty years ago.' (F&O 2000, 3)

That which shapes and defines the Methodist message is therefore Methodism's kerygmatic nature, i.e. Methodism's determination to proclaim the gospel contemporaneously in order that the question which Christ poses can be heard and responded to.

The mission of the Methodist Church

Methodism's mission is based on the understanding that:

'the Church's vocation is to testify to God's reign and to share in his mission in our damaged, hurtful and often despairing society'. (F&O 2000, 11)

Thus, whilst its own mission is inevitably bound up in its calling to '*spread scriptural holiness throughout the land*', it has not allowed itself to be limited in its missionary endeavours by that calling. On the contrary, there is a universality to the Methodist sense of mission which is best expressed in the words of Charles Wesley who wrote:

'For all my Lord was crucified.
For all, for all, my Saviour died' (Methodist Church, 1983, 226).

The Methodist church is aware of having inherited its missionary character.

It notes that

'Our fathers in the eighteenth century were called to save souls wherever they were. The same call comes to us. It is our characteristic task.' (Methodist Church, 1955, 19)

Twentieth century Methodism could only retain that missionary character by engaging in mission for itself. There are several examples which illustrate its determination to do so. One example is the 'Christian Commando' Campaigns, which were initiated by the Rev. Colin A Roberts, a secretary of the Home Missions Department in 1939, as an urgent attempt to address the need for more Christians to create a social order which reflected the Christian ideal. Another is the continuation after reunion of the work of the Forward Movement, a body established in the late nineteenth century in a deliberate attempt to address the increasing failure of the Wesleyan Methodist Church to appeal to members of the working class. The movement had been responsible for the creation of the Methodist Central Mission Halls. These were intended to be realistic alternatives to the workingman's clubs of the day. They succeeded in providing a highly effective social service to the needy in the days prior to the welfare state.

In 1943 the Forward Movement informed the Conference that

'it believed that the time had come for a reconsideration and restatement of the Message and Mission of Methodism in modern society' (Thompson Brake, 1984, 391)

A Committee was duly appointed which presented an interim report the following year. This highlighted the dual concern of its work – firstly the need for worldwide evangelism and secondly the question of whether or not Methodism was retaining its historic witness. With regard to the first, it was concluded that

'there was a need for a new proclamation of the Gospel 'with deep conviction and compelling power by the whole church.'" (Thompson Brake, 1984, 392)

With regard to the second, it insisted that the Mission of Methodism was

'not being fulfilled on a scale commensurate with the divine resources at its disposal and the magnitude of the opportunity that lies within its reach.' (MCA 1944, 12)

To regain its confidence in its mission, Methodism needed to recover its sense of vocation. This, it was felt, could only result from a thorough review of its teaching, worship, fellowship, social witness etc. This review was undertaken, and adopted by the Conference of 1946 who authorized its publication as '*The Message and Mission of Methodism.*' Conference also appointed a continuation committee to prepare booklets which would supplement the report and enable the congregations to make full use of the material contained within it.

There are several factors in the processes which led to the publication of the report and in the content of the report itself which highlight the kerygmatic nature of Methodist Mission. Firstly, the fact that what provoked the report was the recognition that Methodism was no longer adequately addressing its missionary task to the extent that it believed itself called to and empowered to. Secondly, the existence of the continuation committee can be understood as the recognition by the Church that this was to be an on-going process, and that the mission which it was hoped the report would engender would only come about if the local congregations were equipped to

participate fully in its calling. Thirdly, the content of the report echoed the interrogative impulse of Methodism; it was a contemporary answer to the questions 'What to teach, How to teach, What to do.'

It remains the case that all members of the Methodist Church are automatically members of the Methodist Missionary Society although the concept of the 'World Church' has now largely replaced that of overseas missionary work. The World Church both sends and receives missionaries to and from the British Methodist Conference. Through this work Methodists have been helped to recognize that mission is a sharing in the work that God is already doing rather than the creation of something in which God should be invited to share. Methodism today generally works in partnership with other denominations and/or secular institutions in order to fulfil its missionary obligations.

Mission in the Methodist Church is thus to be understood in terms of each generation having the courage to pose and attempt to answer in terms relevant to their own time and situation, the three questions posed at the first Methodist Conference.¹ Methodists ask 'What to teach?' because of

'the pressure of world events and because of recent changes in theology.' (Methodist Church, 1955, 13)

¹ See the introduction to *The Missionary Obligation of the Church*, Report of the commission set up by the Methodist Conference at Birmingham in July 1953 (Methodist Church, 1955).

Its asks 'How to Teach?' because of changes in our understanding of mission and in our relationships with people of other faiths and other lands. In his address to Conference in June 2000 for example, the new president Inderjit Bhogal said he was a Methodist because of

'the significant contribution of Methodists to Interfaith dialogue throughout the world; the steps Methodists have taken to affirm women's and black people's ministries, bearing in mind that more has to be done.' (Bhogal, 2000, 6)

Lastly Methodists ask 'What to do?' because of social and political changes in the world. As Bhogal stressed in his call for greater action with regard to social justice, asylum seekers and refugees are today's strangers, those whom Christians are called upon to welcome. The nation and the Church, he says:

'can be judged by how we treat people who are most vulnerable, whose life is threatened most.' (Boghal, 2000, 6)

The Methodist Church is so convinced that its call is to mission that it has felt able to claim

'Wherever else we may have gone wrong, we have rarely forgotten this call.' (Methodist Church, 1955, 19)

Whenever Methodism has felt that it has lost a part of this calling it is relatively quick to address the situation as has been shown. Methodists have a missionary 'obligation', as the report states, but what it attempts to offer in response to this obligation is

'not an offering of an ecclesial system or dogma, but a proclamation that God is able and willing to take men[sic] and build them up in Christ, so giving them a new life altogether.' (Methodist Church, 1955, 21)

The commitment to new life springs from the belief that mission in Methodism should demonstrate practical as well as spiritual fruit.

'While preaching and living out their message of reconciliation. Christians are called to be active in all the common tasks of love.' (F&O, 1984, 22)

It is this dynamic of Mission – the insistence that mission must change lives as well as hearts and souls - which is so characteristic of Methodism and indicative of its kerygmatic nature.

The ministry of the Methodist Church

'The Methodist Church holds the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers and consequently believes that no priesthood exists which belongs exclusively to a particular order or class of men but in the exercise of its corporate life and worship special qualifications for the discharge of special duties are required and thus the principle of representative selection is recognised'(CPD 213)

Methodist ministry has been a source of great pride but equally of great confusion. This is particularly true of its time as an independent denomination rather than as a reform movement within the Church of England, although there is some evidence that the problem began before the Methodist Church could be deemed to have truly separated from its parent body. The confusion stems from how best to understand the term 'ministry'. On the one hand there is the overriding conviction that all Christians are called to minister:-

'As all Christians are priests in virtue of their access to God, so all Christians are ministers in virtue of their membership in the one body.' (F&O 1984, 22)

All Christians are expected to offer such service as is required of them by Christ and as is indicated by the gifts which they receive through being a part of his body. On the other hand, there is the equally strong conviction that the Methodist ministry is an office equivalent in kind to that of an Anglican priest:

'A Methodist minister is a priest, in company with all Christ's faithful people; but not all priests are ministers [that is, as the context shows, 'not all members of the priesthood of all believers are ordained ministers.' (Anglican-Methodist Unity Commission, 1968, 26)

Ministry is here being defined in terms of ordination. That there has always been a degree of unease with regard to Methodist ordination is evidenced by the initial reluctance of Methodism to ordain its ministers by the imposition of hands. The recognition that such ordinations would imply separation from the Church of England, something which many Methodists had fought so hard to prevent, not only delayed this format of ordination being used within Methodism, but also served to instil the sense of insecurity with regard to ministry which was so painfully manipulated during the Methodist/Anglican reunion talks of the early 1970s. It was not until 1836 that the Wesleyan Conference agreed that

'the imposition of hands was but a circumstance of ordination'

but one which was

'scriptural and ancient and thus it was better not to omit it.' (George, 1978, 154)

Previous to this time, Ministers had been 'Received into full Connexion', with the understanding that they were 'virtually ordained' by the nature of the work which they undertook. After the resolution had been passed, preachers were to be publicly admitted into full Connexion by imposition of hands through a service entitled '*Ordination or Admission to Full Connexion*'. In spite of this the unease persisted and it was not long before the two aspects of entry into Methodist Ministry were once again separate. First a preacher was received into full Connexion and then, usually only a few hours later, was ordained by the imposition of hands. The confusion surrounding the relative importance of each rite was added to by the fact that overseas missionaries were still ordained when they went overseas, which might well occur at the start of their probationary period, and hence well before their reception into full Connexion. Nor was this the only situation which led to a seeming reversal of the normal pattern of events. The same was true of probationers who became chaplains to the Forces and those who were ordained at the Welsh Assembly which tended to precede Conference by some weeks. The most revealing aspect of these anomalies is that whilst

'no one but the Conference had the power to receive into full Connexion, these exceptional ordinations seemed to have not required its authority.' (George, 1978, 155)

Thus even after Methodism replaced its 'virtual' ordination with that which could be recognized as such by other traditions, it was still asserted by some that

'the real Methodist equivalent of the hands laid on in other Churches in ordination is the hand raised to vote the brethren into full Connexion' (George, 1978, 155)¹

The two understandings of the meaning of ministry are therefore represented in the dual rites of entry into the full-time ministry of the Methodist Church. The uniting factor between them being dependent upon an understanding of how it is that God calls and empowers a community of faith. The deed of union states:

'It is the universal conviction of the Methodist people that the office of the Christian ministry depends upon the call of God who bestows the gift of the Spirit the grace and the fruit which indicate those whom he has chosen.'(CPD 213)

All Christians are called to serve Christ in the world – as emphasized by the nature of mission in the Methodist Church – this calling does not differ in degree, but in kind. Thus there can be no 'spiritual or ecclesial' hierarchy in Methodism for such would inevitably destroy the vocation of the Methodist community of faith, rendering it instead the calling or vocation of a select few. The setting apart by ordination of a few of God's ministers is necessary, according to the deed of union

'for the sake of Church Order and not because of any priestly virtue inherent in the office'. (CPD 213)

¹ although reception into full Connexion is by a standing vote.

The confusion stems from the fact that Methodism originated as a kerygmatic movement, not a Church. It has had to evolve an understanding and practice of ministry which holds on to its community vocation whilst at the same time granting it the respectability and equality with other denominations which enable it to be recognized as a Church.

It has largely achieved this by insisting that preaching cannot be made the special province of those who are ordained; to attempt to do so would deny the grace which God had given to thousands through Methodism's historical use of lay preachers. It also recognises that God may call others, although not necessary exclusively so, to a more specific kind of ministry. The deed of union expresses it thus :

'Christ's ministers in the Church are stewards in the household of God and shepherds of God's flock. Some are called and ordained to this sole occupation and have a principle and directing part in these great duties but they hold no priesthood differing in kind from that which is common to all the Lord's people and they have no exclusive title to the preaching of the gospel or the care of souls. These ministries are shared by them with others to whom also the Spirit divides his gifts severally as He wills.'(CPD 213)

The difference in ministry therefore resolves itself to a difference in calling rather than in specific gifts or graces, a factor reflected in the almost non-stop debate within Methodism with regard to the rights of the laity to preside at the sacraments, and by the relative ease with which Methodism was able to expand its concept of ministry. In the last fifty years, Methodist ministry has changed to accept Women's ordination, to develop a form of local part-time non-stipendary ministry, to expand its full-time sector

ministries and to incorporate into the ordained ministry those whom it recognizes as being called to full and part-time Deaconal ministry. The emphasis in Methodism remains firmly on the understanding of ministry as a specific form of calling to service both to and with a community, rather than as distinction on the basis of any gifts or charisms which the minister may possess, in spite of the ecumenical pressure to adopt a more ecclesial and less kerygmatic framework.

Methodist continuity with the church of the past.

Methodism's claim to cherish its place in the 'One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church' is held to be as integral to the Methodist understanding of its own identity as its claim to be 'called into being' by God. Both are written into the deed of union. Methodism's continuity is claimed on the basis of its historical vocation. It believes itself part of the Apostolic succession, not by any ecclesial practice but, as argued by Torrance (1959,34f) and Barth (1975,88f), by virtue of its practice of the Apostolic Faith. For Methodism this means the proclamation of those doctrines which are

'based on the divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures.'(CPD 213)

and the practice of the two sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion which are recognised as being

'of divine appointment and of perpetual obligation.' (CPD 214)

It is this continuity in proclamation, faith and sacrament which Methodism believes ensures its continuity with the Church of the Past.

Methodism, as has been shown treats doctrine as an a-priori of proclamation. Wesley's oft quoted comment that :-

'as to all opinions which do not strike at the root of Christianity, we think and let think. So that whatsoever they are, whether right or wrong, they are no distinguishing marks of a Methodist.' (JWW VIII: 401)

is more comprehensively stated, in terms of Methodism's acceptance and proclamation of the apostolic faith, by his conclusion of the same essay wherein he writes;

'I, and all who follow my judgment, do vehemently refuse to be distinguished from other men, by any but the common principles of Christianity, - the plain, old Christianity that I teach, renouncing and detesting all other marks of distinction.' (JWW VIII: 407)

Wesley's reluctance to define the 'plain old Christianity' more doctrinally does not indicate any lack of respect or consideration for the importance of right doctrine on his part. Hunter (1968,12) has pointed out the impact that the Vincentian Canon had on Wesley. In his journal Wesley wrote

'it was not long before providence brought me to those who showed me a sure rule of interpreting scripture, viz., "Consensus veritum: quod ab omnibus, quod ubique, quod semper creditum."' (Wesley 1909, I: 419)

Wesley's 'Collection of prayers' published in 1733, provides evidence that he had attempted to follow Vincent's rule. In the preface he wrote concerning his interpretation of the Scriptures that he had

'kept close to that sense of them which the Catholic Fathers and ancient Bishops have delivered to succeeding generations.' (Wesley 1733)

Hunter concluded that:

'Wesley followed the Apostolic constitutions perhaps more consistently than he did either the 1718 or 1734 Prayer Book of the Usages' (Hunter, 1968, 43)

This opinion is supported by the more recent work of Campbell (1991), who has demonstrated the extent of Wesley's respect for the authority of the Church Fathers and his use of Christian antiquity as a pattern for individual and communal life.

Methodism's continuing allegiance to the 'Apostolic faith' is evidenced by its use of the creeds and its stated willingness to accept the sign of the historical episcopate if it ever became evident that this is God's will for Methodism. It, nonetheless, remains the case that Methodism does not perceive its continuity with the Church of the past in an ecclesial manner. Its continuity is assured on strictly kerygmatic grounds. Its ministry is apostolic because of what Methodist ministers preach, not because of some historical sign or seal which Methodist ministers have inherited. Similarly the wording and structure of the sacraments celebrated within Methodism reflect the Methodist understanding of the means of grace. They were not specifically written to conform to any 'universal' doctrinal consensus, except in matters which Wesley would say strike at the root of the matter, e.g. that baptism is a once in a lifetime occurrence. In spite of this Methodism firmly

believes that as a result of its emphasis on God's grace, on holiness, commitment and social action, it has a place

'firmly within the tradition of the covenant people' (F&O 2000, 14)

Methodism does not perceive itself as in any way definitive for the wider Church but it does consider itself a valid part of it with gifts to offer and insights to share.

Methodist systems and structures.

Wesley's 'ecclesiastical system' grew out of his conviction of the importance and spiritual value of fellow Christians meeting together for the purpose of supporting one another in the faith. He was, claims Baker

'born with religious societies in his blood' (Baker 1965,215)

and he expounded the necessity of such societary fellowship for the nurture of the Christian soul as earnestly as he argued against any form of schism or sectarian tendencies.

Wesley saw the societies themselves as having a kerygmatic purpose, they existed so that people could hear the Word made flesh; they were open to all so that those who were seeking salvation could be saved by the presence of that same Word. The Bands were undoubtedly imported from the Moravian societies and were initially those members who were most earnest in their search for God's salvation. Band membership eventually became restricted

to those who, whilst they might not yet be in possession of the 'full assurance' of their salvation, were nonetheless converted. It thus became one of the indicators of the state of holiness attained by a member of the society. Bands were the first layer of the Methodist internal structure to disappear.

The division of the society into Classes arose out of the need to collect the money necessary to pay off the loan for building the 'New Rooms'. The reason for their existence changed over time until eventually they met once a week so that leaders could question their class members closely about the current state of their Christianity and provide advice and/or reproof as required. Before their almost total demise by the end of the last century, Classes had, on the whole, become more like 'house-groups' with less emphasis on confession and personal spirituality, and more on fellowship and mutual support. The role of the Class leader likewise changed from that of spiritual director to pastoral visitor, supporting the work of the minister and/or the pastoral committee by ensuring that each member was visited at least once in every quarter.

The formation of the Connexion and the annual Conference, along with the setting up of clearly defined circuits and their quarterly meetings, provided Methodist identity with the force and clarity necessary for it to survive. In spite of the causes for Methodist division following Wesley's death, no

alternative structure or system was developed or proposed to replace either the Connexion or the Conference. The divisions arose from the necessary attempts to reconcile belief and practice. The practical consequence of Methodism's understanding of the 'priesthood of all believers' has been powerfully expressed through its historic and continuing struggle to evolve a church government which does justice to it. As Scott Lidgett reflected -

'The controversies which led to the various secessions turned exclusively upon either general or particular disagreements in regard to church government. The rights and responsibilities of the ministry on the one hand and of the laity on the other, the powers of Conference as representing the whole church and the local liberties of particular churches, were the main subjects of controversy.'(Scott Lidgett, 1909,419)

Although the overall structure of the Methodist Church today might appear much as it did in the early 1740s, there are fundamental differences which support the concept of contemporary Methodism being kerygmatic rather than ecclesial by nature, not least, the now irreversible democratic accountability and lay participation at all levels of Church government which was so hard fought for. Whilst Methodist systems and structures may appear to closely resemble those of other ecclesial bodies¹, a closer examination of them serves to highlight the differences in their nature.

Like other churches, Methodism has a legislative body, responsible for determining its policy and practice; the Methodist Conference. Unlike most

¹ See Appendix 3

other legislatures Conference is primarily an elected body¹ whose constitution changes each year.² Every year each district sends to Conference a number of elected delegates who are supposed to reflect the composition of the district as a whole with regard to age, sex and ethnic origin. Although Conference meets to address an agreed agenda whose items are largely as a consequence of the decisions taken by previous Conferences, the high degree of flexibility provided by the ability of any Church, Circuit or District to bring a memorial to Conference requesting discussion, or action on any matter of concern to it, coupled with the freedom which exists for any member of Conference to propose a notice of motion – again on any issue, means that there is no way to accurately determine in advance exactly what issues Conference will be required to rule on. This effectively prevents the districts from electing representatives with experience or expertise to offer in the areas which Conference may be asked to rule on, something which can, and often is, considered to be a negative feature of Conference's flexibility. Conversely, the Connexion meets at Conference to attempt the task of ascertaining the will of God for Methodism and to learn how best it can respond to it. The inability to elect representatives for any other reason than that they are typical of Methodists in their district is what enables Conference to remain open to

1 There are a few officers of the Methodist Church such as the Coordinating Secretaries, who, by virtue of the service which they perform for the church, are required to attend Conference and do so as voting members.

2 Precisely because of the changing constitution of Conference, Conference elects several people each year, both lay and ministerial, to attend six consecutive Conferences. This provides Conference with a degree of continuity in its decision making.

the working of the Spirit, if not largely dependent on the movement of the Spirit. It prevents Conference decisions being largely the result of the intentional manoeuvrings of a few individuals, whether lay or ordained.¹

This does not mean that within the Methodist Church there is no room or place for deliberately planned or developed expertise. The sub-structure of Methodism, whilst giving the impression of being under continual review², nonetheless exists to serve Conference by preparing, in advance, the largest portion of the work set before it as well as being responsible for determining how best to put into action the policies and practices which Conference votes for. The current division of this labour into four areas - Church life, Church and Society, Inter Church and other relationships, and Central Services - reinstates mission as the determining factor for Methodist Church structures (Munsey Turner 1998,23). The earlier structure of seven divisions was considered intolerably bureaucratic. Restructuring in 1996 reduced the number of non-elected officers in the Church, and acted to encourage greater coordination and team-work whilst still enabling the Church to develop such teams of experienced individuals as necessary to

¹ There have been instances of deliberate attempts to influence the decisions of Conference by ensuring that certain people are elected as representatives. One example occurred in 1993 when Headway (see below) petitioned all of its members to stand for election as representatives to conference so that the voice of the conservative evangelical wing of the church could be heard loudest in the debate on human sexuality. Headway defines itself as being a movement of Methodists committed to prayer for Revival and Witness to the Evangelical faith. It was formed in 1987 as a merger of the two movements Conservative Evangelicals in Methodism and the Methodist Revival Fellowship.

² Major restructuring took place in 1974 and again in 1996

advise Conference or enable the Church to obey a Conference ruling on some specific matter.

Ultimately, it is obedience to Conference which maintains the Methodist principle of Connexionalism and its truly kerygmatic nature. The willingness to be open to the consequence of posing the primary questions of faith as though they have yet had no answer is what enables the Connexion to hold together its theological and social diversity. Recognition of, and respect for, the inherent flexibility of Conference and its dependence on the Spirit for its leadership and guidance is what enables the Methodist church to both retain its diversity and hold to a commonality of purpose.

Conclusion.

In order to arrive at a description for the British Methodist Church this chapter has considered its origin, fellowship, allegiance, message, mission and ministry, continuity with the church of the past, and its present structures. It has been argued that in addition to possessing a distinctly kerygmatic historical origin, the purpose which called Methodism into being tends to dominate every aspect of its nature. This purpose was identified as a deliberate, corporate response to the kerygmatic imperative to proclaim the gospel. Within Methodism, this imperative is interpreted as the call to

'spread scriptural holiness through the land by the proclamation of the evangelical faith.' (CPD 213)

The 'call' is, for example, believed to be the origin of Methodist Fellowship.

Membership of the Methodist Church entails a commitment to fellowship:

As membership of the Methodist Church also involves fellowship it is the duty of all members of the Methodist Church to cultivate this in every possible way.' (CPD 215)

Fellowship and mission were shown to be inescapably bound together in Methodism. The calling to be a Christian is recognised as a calling to share with others. This is what motivates and inspires Methodists to missionary endeavours: Methodists do not proclaim Christ in order to propagate Methodism or even to create new Methodists *per se* but to enable all to participate in the body of Christ. Mission in the Methodist Church was concomitantly found to be deliberately contextual and the shared responsibility of all the Church rather than a select few.

The corporate nature of the call was also shown to have provided the basic framework for the nature of ministry within the Methodist Church.

'It is the universal conviction of the Methodist people that the office of the Christian ministry depends upon the call of God who bestows the gifts of the Spirit the grace and the fruit which indicate those whom He has chosen.' (CPD 214)

Ministry is ever the responsibility of the whole Church yet the church acknowledges that some are called to be set apart. The consequences of this 'calling' have never been resolved to the complete satisfaction of either Methodists themselves, or their ecumenical partners; all that can be said with certainty is that as a consequence of its kerygmatic nature, Methodist

ministry has been able to retain the dynamic of adaptability, or as a recent report phrases it – flexibility.⁴ (MCA 1999, 242-264) Some have seen this increasing flexibility as endangering the acceptability of Methodist ministry by other denominations, others have seen it as the ability of the Church to respond to the changing needs of the world which the church seeks to serve. Both perspectives arise out of a concern for how the Church might better fulfil its calling to the wider world. The claim that this flexibility endangers the ability of Methodism to retain its continuity with the primitive Church is answered by reference to the evolving character of the early Church and the insistence that diversity was ever a characteristic of God's church. Methodism, it is claimed, is but one diverse element in a body which is united not by doctrine or dogma, not even by liturgy or practice, but by the will of Christ and the power of the Spirit. Each church has its specific vocation, its purpose to fulfil to enable the body of Christ to be represented in all its great richness and complexity. Methodism does not challenge the doctrines, beliefs or practices of other denominations but does believe itself called to reform the Church by insisting that the gospel be heard above and within the clamour of dissent and dialogue on such matters. This unity within diversity is expressed in Connexionalism which Methodism believes is one of the gifts which it is called upon to share with the wider church.

⁴ In 1999 a report was brought to Conference entitled "Flexible patterns of ministry". It has not yet been adopted.

Thus both with regard to its origin and nature, Methodism can be described as a kerygmatic community of faith. The various descriptive components of its nature, its fellowship, allegiance etc. have all been shown to be determined or dominated by their kerygmatic function, i.e. the way in which they enable Methodists and Methodism to respond to the kerygmatic imperative to proclaim Christ. Methodism has no new or particular doctrine or practice to defend, no confession to uphold or sacrament to bestow. It appears to recognise no need for its own independence other than the right and the freedom to proclaim the gospel of Christ. Methodism does not teach that it has the only valid interpretation of the gospel, and it certainly does not claim to be the only right manifestation of the Church. It has likewise been demonstrated that Methodism does not even dare to suggest that it is the best church to proclaim Christ, it simply offers as justification for its existence in this particular form, its

'unfaltering resolve to be true to its divinely appointed mission.' (CPD 213)

but this, as the next chapter will seek to show, is the origin of Methodism's distinctive theology.

CHAPTER FIVE – A METHODIST DOGMATICS ?

The theological nature of a community of faith

Langford's description of Methodists as:

' the warm-hearted activists of ecumenism with not very much distinctive theology.' (Langford 1998, 1)

arises, I believe, from a misplaced search for Methodist theology in confessional or doctrinal distinctions. This search for Methodist theology begins, therefore, by challenging what is understood by the theological nature of a community of faith.

Academically, in the latter half of this last century in particular, theology has tended to be treated as a universal, rather than denominational, or community specific subject. It is true that there is a high degree of commonalty concerning some creeds and/or doctrines,¹ within the abstract theological concept of the 'Universal Church of Christ', but it can be argued that there is an even higher degree of dissent with regard to their usage and interpretation. Furthermore, a 'universalist' approach to theology implies that denominational adherence has no measurable impact on the way in which an individual speaks of or to God and hence formulates his or her theology. The reverse of this statement is also concomitant with such an

¹ For example the Nicene Creed, the doctrine of the Trinity etc.

attitude, namely that an individual's theology contributes little or nothing to the theological nature of the denomination in which it will be expressed. A universal approach to theology is contrary to the definition of theology with which Maquarrie (1966) opens his work on the principles of Christian theology. According to Macquarrie,

'Theology may be defined as the study which, through participation in and reflection upon a religious faith, seeks to express the content of this faith in the clearest and most coherent language available.' (Macquarrie, 1966, 1)

Maquarrie recognises that 'participation in' is an essential component of the theology of a religious faith. As he makes clear,

'In theology, faith is bringing itself to a certain kind of expression but even more importantly theology implies participation in a community.' (Macquarrie, 1966, 2)

Accordingly, every church, every denomination, by virtue of its existence as a Christian community of faith, must possess a theological nature which is dependent on one or two factors. The first is the content which it seeks to express and which forms the basis for its teaching and proclamation. The second is whatever it is that enables that community to be a particular community of faith, i.e. to differentiate and recognise itself as being separate or different from other faith communities. These two are often, in all that matters, held to be one and the same.

The meaning of the word "theology" can provide a working definition for the theological nature of a community of faith which unites the two factors

stated above. The theological nature of a community of faith can be described as the way in which that community predominantly defines and/or expresses its communication with, to, for and about God. If, for example, a community defines itself in a predominantly doctrinal or confessional manner, then it will have an agreed set of symbols and statements which can be read or spoken, which will serve to engender and shape how that community communicates with, to, for and about God. Examples of such communities are all the so-called 'confessing' churches of the reformation, including the Church of England. The preponderance of these semiotic communities provide the real substance to Lindbeck's 'cultural-linguistic' theory of doctrine. The assumption on which Lindbeck's theory flounders is that all communities of faith possess a predominantly semiotic theological nature – Methodism is just one example of a community of faith which does not.

Reference has already been made to the Baptist Church, which, like Methodism, has a clearly identifiable historical origin in terms of its vocation and which shares, to some degree, the doctrinal ambiguity of Methodism. It should be evident from Methodism's reluctance to define itself doctrinally that its theological nature is not doctrinal.⁴ Methodists insist that they

⁴ A distinction must be drawn at this point between World-wide Methodism of which the largest percentage, approximately 80%, follows the American Episcopal model of Methodism which does define itself doctrinally, and British Methodism which appears to defy all attempts to do so. This thesis is concerned solely with British Methodism.

'are held together by a common life of worship, fellowship and service, rather than by subscription to a series of articles.' (WCC 1986, 217)

Rupp agrees, insisting that:

'of all the major Christian communions, the Methodists are the least doctrinaire.' (Rupp 1965, xiii)

The preponderance of confessional churches has, I suggest, encouraged the misconception that in order to possess a distinctive or even identifiable theological nature, a Church must possess a distinctive or at least definitive set of doctrines. Distinctive practices, liturgical or otherwise, have, it is true, often provided a means of theologically identifying or even categorizing a community of faith, particularly when such practices are 'doctrinally' justified, but, on the whole, it tends to be a community's doctrines which are examined in order to ascertain its theological nature. In the light of this, it is hardly surprising that Methodism, which takes great pride in announcing that it has no distinctive doctrines or practices, is often thought not to have a distinctive theological nature. Methodism – particularly Wesleyan Methodism, has been said to possess certain theological emphases, but these arise out of Wesley's theology rather than that of the Methodist people today, and are not, therefore, indicative of the theological nature of the community as a whole.

'The Christian community has an active and important part to play in the formation of its beliefs. In this activity the bond in Christ formative of the community now appears as a product of the community of faith.' (Pickard, 1996, 74)

Methodism's bond in Christ is its calling to proclaim Christ through its *kerygma*. Just as Methodism's vocation is inescapably communal rather than personal, so also the theological nature derived from it is dependent on the consensus of the whole rather than on the dictates or definitions of a single individual. As Barth (1975,3) insists:

'theology is a function of the Church.'

The absence of a confession or agreed set of doctrines does not equate to an absence of theology. Methodism clearly does communicate with, to, for, and about, God. Furthermore, it does so in a recognisable manner. Methodism, some would say in spite of its best efforts, is, with Anglicanism, Catholicism etc, identifiable as a distinctive community within the Christian Church and should, therefore, possess a correspondingly distinctive theological nature.

Given the extent to which Methodism is characterised by its kerygmatic vocation, the only possible theological nature which it could possess is kerygmatic. Methodism is thus theologically defined by an agreed *kerygma* which engenders and shapes almost every aspect of how Methodism communicates with, to, for and about God. As *kerygma* is more than preaching, Methodist theology cannot be identified by sifting through or analysing the sermons of past or present Methodist preachers. Methodism's *kerygma* is bound up in Methodism's existence as a community of faith and

in the way in which Methodists, as Methodists, respond to their kerygmatic vocation to proclaim Christ to the world. Methodist theology is therefore more of an implicit than explicit fact of Methodism's existence.

Methodist theology is embedded in the questions which Methodism poses in the formulation of its *kerygma* as well as in any answers which it tentatively offers. Both are recognised as being historical and in constant need of revision. (MCA 1986, 249-252) This does not mean that Methodism considers the truth of its faith to be relative, it is simply an acknowledgement of its theological nature. Methodism knows that the Truth of God made known by its *kerygma* is constant and unchanging; the ability of Methodists to accurately express it is accepted as both flawed and limited and in need of constant questioning and revision. (MCA 1982, 33).

One immediate consequence of Methodism's practice of constantly questioning and revising that which it believes has been revealed to it to proclaim, is that the Methodist theological nature must also be considered dogmatic. This is not because it either formulates or advocates dogma, but because it continually scrutinises that which has been accepted as such in order to find the best way in which to restate or express the truth which it contains, that it might be proclaimed afresh. On the basis of this kerygmatic and dogmatic theological nature, it can be assumed that Methodist theology

not only exists but must also be both unique and highly distinctive, because Methodism itself is unique and distinctive – as are all communities of faith.

The task of a Methodist dogmatics.

Barth defined dogmatics to be:

'the science in which the Church, in accordance with the state of its knowledge at different times, takes account of the content of its proclamation critically, that is, by the standard of Holy Scripture and under the guidance of its Confessions.' (Barth, 1993, 9)

Whilst Methodism is not a confessional church, it did adopt a standard which it uses to guide its corporate statements on religious, social, spiritual, ethical, and theological matters. Thus the task of a Methodist dogmatics may be said to be to take account of its *kerygma* critically, i.e. by the standard of Holy Scripture and under the guidance of those works of Wesley which it acknowledges as being nominated specifically for this purpose.

At its annual Conference, Methodism continually reviews its *kerygma* and updates its understanding of the doctrines implied by it. Whilst it publishes the results of this communal dogmatic process¹ it has never deliberately undertaken what Pannenberg refers to as the task of dogmatics, namely:

'the comprehensive and coherent presentation of the doctrinal content of scripture and the articles of faith (articuli fidei) in the sense of both positive restatement and learned argumentation.' (Pannenberg, 1991, I: 18)

¹ In the Agenda and in The Minutes of Conference. The Minutes are distributed annually to every Methodist minister, including those who are supernumerary and those in training.

Methodist understanding of the doctrinal content of Scripture and what could loosely be called the Methodist articles of faith, are, I maintain, defined by the Methodist *kerygma*. The task of a Methodist Dogmatics therefore, utilising Pannenberg's definition, would be to present a comprehensive and coherent account of the doctrines implicit in the Methodist *kerygma*. Whilst a fully comprehensive account of all of the doctrines implicit in the Methodist *kerygma* cannot be detailed within the scope of this thesis, an illustration of their coherence and an example of their comprehensive nature certainly can be, as the following chapters will demonstrate. In choosing which aspects of Methodist theology to explore in detail, priority was given to those doctrines which would most effectively demonstrate the link between *kerygma* and theology. As these tended to be more related to the nature of God than to that of either the world or humanity, that is the area which is explored in most detail. The aim of these chapters is to demonstrate the possibility of a Methodist dogmatics, not to provide a complete and comprehensive one.

A Church dogmatics can only provide a snapshot of the theology of the Church at a particular time. In order to prove my thesis that a Methodist dogmatics is possible, therefore, attention will be focused on the theology implicit in the *kerygma* of the Methodist Church at the close of the twentieth century. It is also important to note that no apology for the presuppositions of Methodist theology will be made. The acceptance of the

fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith by Methodism has been considered throughout this thesis to be not only a characteristic of Methodist theology, but one of the primary means by which it is enabled to grow and to change in response to the context into which it speaks.

At the start of his own Systematic theology, Pannenberg noted that

'Christian Dogmatics has formally made the truth of Christian Doctrine a presupposition rather than declaring it to be a theme of inquiry' (Pannenberg, 1991, 48)

In spite of Pannenberg's arguments against this practice, this partial dogmatics will likewise not question the truth of the Methodist *kerygma*, only whether or not the Methodist *kerygma* has accurately conveyed the understanding of 'The Truth' as has been revealed, received, accepted and proclaimed by the Methodist Church. In so doing, it remains true to the dogmatic as opposed to systematic nature of Methodist theology.¹

In order that what follows can be recognised as a coherent account of the theology implicit in the Methodist *kerygma*, it is necessary to impose a structure on the presentation of our findings. Only one framework has been approved by Conference for such a burden within Methodism, and that is the one used by *Hymns and Psalms*. (Methodist Church 1983) The structure of this hymnal, according to its editors, was not only carefully designed from

¹ There have been several attempts to produce a Wesleyan systematic theology, the latest, and perhaps most successful, being that of Runyon (1998). It remains the case, however, that Methodism, following Wesley's example, has never developed a systematic theology worthy of the name.

the onset, but was also modified during the committee's deliberations in the light of debate and criticism. As a result, the compilers felt able to echo the words of Wesley's preface to the 1780 collection of *Hymns for the use of the People called Methodists* wherein he wrote.

'It is large enough to contain all the important truths of our most holy religion, whether speculative or practical; yea to illustrate them all and to prove them both by Scripture and by reason: and this is done in a regular order. The hymns are not carelessly jumbled together, but carefully ranged under proper heads, according to the experience of real Christians. So that this book is, in effect, a little body of experimental and practical divinity.' (Methodist Church, 1983, x)

Given Methodism's boast that its hymnody has been the main vehicle for the theological education of its people, it seems fitting to use the last approved structure for a Methodist hymnal as a framework for the theology which, it is suggested, it at least in part represents. Although a framework is required for practical purposes, it is nonetheless important to note that there is no unifying or systematising basis for this framework other than that of Methodism's relationship with, and understanding of, God, something which is in a state of constant flux. Methodist theology changes as the Methodist people change and as the Church strives to fulfil its calling. Although Methodism accepts as foundational the traditional creeds of the Christian faith, these are not what has shaped its communication with, to and about God. Furthermore, Wesley's 44 sermons and his notes on the New Testament, whilst important in establishing a common reference point within the Methodist Church, may be seen, on examination, to have contributed little, particularly in the latter half of the twentieth century, to

the development of a specifically *Methodist* theology. As Langford noted with regard to the British Methodist response to *Baptism Eucharist and Ministry*, the World Council of Churches document of 1982

'In an extended reply, the emphases which Methodism has maintained are indicated with clarity and deep appreciation. Typically, there is little mention of John Wesley and no explicit reference to the Methodist tradition. But what is affirmed is in clear continuity with what has characterised Methodism through its existence and in its recent statements.' (Langford 1998, 82)

It is the Methodist people themselves, their questions and their concerns which ultimately define Methodist theology, for Methodist dogmatics is what results from Methodists having the courage to ask, of each new generation and of each new situation 'What to Teach?, How to Teach? and What to do? with a specific purpose in mind, namely to proclaim the gospel.

These questions form a trinity of inquiry in which the nature of God, Christ and the Spirit can be interrogated along with the nature of humanity, the Church and the world, from a distinctly kerygmatic perspective. The doctrinal content of the Methodist *kerygma* as determined by this work of Methodist dogmatics should therefore be thought of as being nothing more than the current set of Methodist presuppositions which form the basis for the next set of questions necessary to continue the unending process of discovering and proclaiming the mystery which is God.

The Methodist *kerygma*

According to the definition of the *kerygma* of a community of faith derived in chapter two, the Methodist *kerygma* is the way in which the Methodist Church *as* the Methodist Church responds to its calling to live out and proclaim the Gospel of Christ. It is therefore manifestly bound up with Methodism's vocational identity.

Whilst Methodism may appear to lack the doctrinal boundaries¹ which serve to delimit and differentiate many other denominational theologies, it nonetheless possesses equivalent kerygmatic boundaries. These boundaries are set by the acting consensus with regard to what does and what does not constitute 'Methodist' proclamation, practice, teaching or doctrine with regard to a specific subject or issue. Attempting to accurately determine any consensus is a notoriously perilous task, that said, the deed of union details the consensual foundation on which contemporary Methodism was built and, as has been noted by many scholars of Methodism², is a very carefully worded document. As a statement of the consensus of the uniting Methodist Connexions on policy, practice and doctrine, it is arguably as important for what it does not say, as for what it does. It is certainly a valid starting point for determining if any other, in some instances more contemporary,

¹ The way in which doctrine and dogma may be considered to set necessary theological boundaries for the Church is explored by Gunton (1999).

² In Particular by Thompson Brake (1984).

consensual boundaries of Methodist teaching, being and proclamation exist which form a part of the twentieth century Methodist *kerygma*.

The content of the Methodist kerygma

The *content* of the Methodist *kerygma* will include, along with Scripture, those doctrines and creeds which Methodism has always accepted as the a-priori of its proclamation as well as those statements and reports which it has formulated and adopted through its communal practice of Church dogmatics. More illustratively, it can be defined as including, firstly, the Holy Scriptures and then what Stacey (1987, 270) refers to as Methodism's 'Foundation Documents', namely:

1. The Apostles' and Nicene Creeds.¹
2. John Wesley's explanatory notes upon the New Testament.
3. The first four volumes of John Wesley's sermons.

To these 'Foundational documents' must be added all reports and statements which Conference has adopted since 1932.² Once Conference has adopted a statement it is accepted as being

'a considered statement of the judgement of the Conference on some major issue of faith and practice'
(CPD 366)

¹ These being the accepted historic creeds referred to in the Methodist Deed of Union

² Statements adopted prior to 1932 were binding on the specific Connexion which adopted them rather than on what we now know as The Methodist Church in Britain.

Such statements are not only authoritative, they are held to be indicative of the received doctrine of the Methodist Church by virtue of the clause within the deed of union which states that:

'The Conference shall be the final authority within the Methodist Church with regard to all questions concerning the interpretation of its doctrines.' (CPD 214)

Also included in the content of the Methodist *kerygma*, but rather more problematic to identify, are those doctrines which are referred to in the deed of union as:-

'the doctrines of the evangelical faith.' (CPD 213)

These doctrines are not detailed or categorised in any way other than through the claim that they are firstly

'based on the divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures'(CPD 213)

and, secondly,

'contained in Wesley's notes on the New Testament and in the first four volumes of his sermons.'(CPD 213)

Given the enormous scope of theological issues covered by Wesley in these foundational documents, it would seem that the task of identifying with any certainty exactly which doctrines are meant is an impossible one. Wesley's own words may be used as a means of delimiting the search to make the task more viable. He wrote that:

'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.' (JWW VII: 550)

These three doctrines are also referred to in this, and in other works by Wesley, as the doctrines of original sin, justification and sanctification. It should perhaps be pointed out that the essay from which this quotation has been taken is not one of those within the works of Wesley specified as authoritative by the deed of union. The validity of this qualification can be inferred from the fact that it is made by Wesley as a part of his statement entitled *The Principles of a Methodist Farther Explained*. Wesley was talking specifically about Methodist doctrine, and hence, it is assumed, those doctrines which he also accepted as his own. To these three can be added at least one other doctrine which is known to have been considered by Wesley to be important – namely that of assurance. These four, undoubtedly evangelical doctrines, have historically been presented as the main theological or doctrinal emphases of Methodism expressed as:

1. All need to be saved – The doctrine of original sin
2. All may be saved – The doctrine of universal salvation
3. All may know themselves saved – The doctrine of assurance
4. All may be saved to the Uttermost – The doctrine of Christian perfection.

On the basis of their acceptance by Methodism¹, these four will therefore, in agreement with Wesley, be considered to contain within themselves all other remaining doctrines of the evangelical faith to which this specific part of the deed of union refers.

This does not mean that these doctrines can only be considered in terms of their traditional or historical formulation. The Methodist *kerygma*, like all *kerygma*, is highly contextual. It is deliberately and continually being re-appraised in order to ensure that it may be understood by those for whom it is intended. The doctrine of universal salvation, for example, is today more concerned with the question of religious plurality and of what God intends for people of other faiths, than it is with the question of predestination (although the question of predestination can of course contribute to the debates arising out of the fact of religious pluralism and inter-faith

¹ The Methodist Catechism approved by the Methodist Conference in 1986, and hence authoritative, lists these four 'Alls' as one of the distinctive features of the Methodist Church and as a summary of its message. (CAT 40)

dialogue). The contemporary context ensures that the doctrines remain evangelical, i.e. that they are concerned with the proclamation of the good news of Christ today.

But the *kerygma*, as proclamation, is as concerned with *how* Christ is proclaimed as *that* Christ is proclaimed. The Methodist hymn books are therefore an essential component of the Methodist *kerygma*. The Faith and Order report to Conference on *The Methodist Hymn* book concluded:

'The influence of this book can hardly be over-rated. It is arguably the greatest single factor in preserving the unity of Methodism; it has been the primary means whereby the Methodist people have expressed their worship, nourished their faith, and affirmed their doctrines.; its use in British Methodism is almost universal and it has been widely used overseas.' (MCA 1979, 52)

A note of caution is, nonetheless, required with regard to evaluating the kerygmatic content of both hymnals. Not only has *The Methodist Hymn Book* been replaced by *Hymns and Psalms*, *Hymns and Psalms* is also arguably less of a standard in Methodist worship than its predecessor once was. Many Methodist churches now regularly supplement its use with other, more contemporary volumes such as '*Songs of Fellowship*'¹ which contain a mixture of new and traditional hymns and choruses. In addition, in order to participate more fully in local ecumenical projects, some Methodist Churches deliberately use an alternative hymnal, such as the Anglican *Hymns Ancient and Modern*. The modern chorus books and

¹ *Songs of Fellowship* (Eastbourne: Kingsway Music, 1998)

ecumenical hymnals tend to be a feature of all-age worship or united services which are becoming a regular part of the overall pattern of worship offered in the majority of Methodist circuits.

Nonetheless it can still be argued that *Hymns and Psalms* is a part of the content of the Methodist *kerygma* given that it remains the most commonly used of all the hymn books within Methodism. It is also the hymnal which Conference has most recently approved for use. Although *Hymns and Psalms* was considered by many Methodists to be a controversial creation¹, it was also a highly informative one. Its existence affords a rare insight into the way in which the Methodist perception of many theological issues has changed over the course of the century. The hymns which it contains, their popularity, and even the way in which the hymn book is structured, are all indicative of how the majority of Methodist people elected to proclaim, in their worship, the Gospel of Christ which they have received.

An even more important component of the content of the Methodist *kerygma* is *The Methodist Worship Book* along with its predecessors, *The Book of Offices* and *The Methodist Service Book*. These books contain the words which have been and are used by Methodists to bind them together as a worshipping community. Although the majority of Methodist Sunday services are still 'free-form' preaching services, the importance of these

1 According to Thompson Brake's research, 'far more letters were written to the editor of the Methodist recorder over this subject than about proposals for Covenanting and the matter of episcopacy' (Thompson Brake 1984, 377)

service books in unifying Methodist proclamation should not be underestimated. There was, and to some extent remains, a tremendous diversity in Methodist worship and in attitudes to the Sacrament. If the uniting Connexions were to truly become one church, there needed to be some proof of this in its worship. Methodism needed a common liturgy which could be accepted by the members of all of the newly created church. Thus the preface to *The Book of Offices* is concerned to address any possible concerns over the use of liturgical material in a 'non-conformist' setting. It does so by pointing out that there is no real conflict between free prayer and liturgical prayer as most 'free prayers', if they are examined, will be found to owe much to

'the language of the great liturgies, and of the hymns of Methodism' (BoO 8)

The fact that Methodism did not begin life as a liturgical Church does not negate the fact that it became one. In the course of this century Methodism has managed a seemingly impossible task of holding on to its free-form preaching service whilst partially recovering its Wesleyan 'High Churchmanship' inheritance¹ without, as was originally suspected, dividing the tradition into 'low' and 'high' church.² The celebration of the Word and the Sacraments are the means by which every Church proclaims Christ,

¹ For this Methodism as a whole is greatly indebted to the work of the Methodist Sacramental Fellowship whose members have contributed extensively to the development of the Methodist liturgical corpus.

² The potential for such division was tremendous given the historical differences in emphasis and practice in 1932 of the uniting connexions.

including the Methodist Church. Methodism does recognise that, over the years, it has developed its own liturgy to replace that which it inherited from the Church of England. *The Methodist Service Book* talks of the services it contains retaining a:

'distinctively Methodist flavour' (MSB viii)

in spite of the extensive consultations it undertook in its preparations with churches of other communions. This is probably due to the fact that Methodist public liturgy, i.e. that published for general Connexional use, has to be approved by Conference. When considering the suitability of including *The Methodist Worship Book* as a part of the content of the Methodist *kerygma*, it should be taken into account that it is the most recent service book to have been approved by Conference. The faith and order committee claim that it is:

'a significant document, illustrative and representative of the faith and order of the Methodist Church' (F&O 2000, preface)

but there has not, as yet, been sufficient time to determine whether or not this book will gain the degree of acceptance which its predecessor enjoyed. For this reason, both *The Methodist Service Book* and *The Methodist Worship Book* will be considered to be part of the content of the Methodist *kerygma* at the close of the century. Precedence will be given, where

necessary, to the theology expressed in *The Methodist Worship Book*, as it was the most recently approved.

The continually changing context of Methodism means that the content of the Methodist *kerygma* will always include the most up-to-date versions of Conference approved and accepted teaching, worship and liturgical material such as *The Catechism*, *The Methodist Service Book* and *The Methodist Worship Book*¹. It will also include those publications issued by the Methodist Church for the Methodist people to enable them to participate more effectively in their calling as Methodists, e.g. Training materials for Local Preachers, Worship Leaders, Stewards, Pastoral Visitors etc². Likewise, it will include any guidelines and discussion materials produced by the Connexion which are designed to assist the Methodist people as the Methodist people in groups or as individuals to develop their vocation to respond to the kerygmatic imperative and proclaim Christ to the world. The content of the *kerygma* is the Gospel of Christ, hence, the content of the Methodist *kerygma* is the Gospel of Christ as it is revealed, received, accepted, shared, taught and above all proclaimed by the Methodist people. The above list, therefore, whilst extensive and hopefully illustrative, cannot

1 Both *The Methodist Service Book* and the *Methodist Worship Book* are included as part of the content of the Methodist *kerygma* at the close of the twentieth century. This is due to the late publication date of the *Methodist Worship Book*. Insufficient time has elapsed to determine whether or not the new service book will gain the acceptance necessary for it to replace the former service book and hence be deemed indicative of the content of the Methodist *kerygma*.

2 Such material is approved by Conference before use (MMC 1987,23)

be considered exhaustive of what is included in the content of the Methodist *kerygma*.

The forms of Methodist kerygma

The forms of Methodist *kerygma* add to the content all those processes and practices whereby Methodism seeks and is enabled to discover and fulfil its commission to 'spread scriptural holiness throughout the land' and to proclaim the Gospel. They are the means by which the content of the *kerygma* is made known and realised and hence can be found in the way in which the structures of the Methodist Church allow it to fulfil its calling. They can be more specifically defined in terms of:

Methodism's existence as a work of God

Methodism's worship and devotional practices

The Methodist Connexional structure, including the work of Conference

Methodism's ecumenical and inter-faith activities.

The evangelical and missionary endeavours of the Methodist Church.

The social, economic and educational projects of the Methodist Church.

These parts of the Methodist *kerygma* are also under constant review by the governing bodies of the Church, i.e. the Conference and the Methodist

Council, and are open to revision, as may be seen from the annual publication of *The Constitutional Discipline and Practice of the Methodist Church*. As with the content, the contextual nature of these forms of Methodist *kerygma* means that the most recent and accepted means of proclamation are to be considered indicative. Hence, for example, although comparisons may be drawn between earlier and contemporary ecumenical encounters in order to make explicit the theology implicit in the ecumenical process as undertaken by the Methodist Church, it is the most contemporary situation which must be deemed indicative of the Methodist *kerygma*. The various forms of Methodist *kerygma* can be summarised as the use which the Methodist community makes of the power of the Holy Spirit given to it to enable it to realise the gospel of Christ.

The resultant of the Methodist kerygma

Although it is possible to identify some of the specific content and some of the forms of the Methodist *kerygma* at a given time, there is a third factor at play which cannot be underestimated in terms of the contribution which it makes to the overall *kerygma*, namely the resultant – i.e. that which results from putting a specific content with a specific form of proclamation. The *content* of the Methodist *kerygma* is the Gospel of Christ as it is remembered, revealed, recorded, and received by the Methodist people, and the various *forms* are the way in which the power of the Holy Spirit enables that gospel to be proclaimed. When these are concomitantly appraised, the

Methodist *kerygma* becomes recognisable as that which is *of* Christ (rather than specifically *about* Christ) which is revealed, received, and accepted as proclamation, translated into action by the Methodist Church, through the power of the Spirit for the glory God in the service of his kingdom in this world. It is, as Wesley declared in amazement, that which:

'God hath done, and is still doing, in our land. For it is not the work of man which hath lately appeared. All who calmly observe it must say, "This is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes." (JWW I: 173)

The results of the previous chapters have suggested that at least part of the resultant of the Methodist *kerygma* is Methodism itself - as a work of God. This does not, however, refer to the institutional body of Methodism, but to the community of faith and each individual within it, joined by the vocational calling which identifies them as Methodists. The full resultant of the Methodist *kerygma* is, of course, the presence of Christ in the world, as Christ is that which is realised by all *kerygma*. The Methodist church, as a part of the body of Christ, is but a small part of that resultant.

Whatever else this work of dogmatics will uncover therefore, it can be expected to show that Methodist kerygmatic theology is theocentric as a consequence of the conviction at the heart of Methodism that God continually calls Methodism into existence. It will likewise be identifiably Christocentric because of Methodism's kerygmatic nature and its purposeful existence to proclaim Christ, as well as being equally Pneumacentric as a

consequence of Methodism's total dependence on the power of the Spirit to enable it to fulfil its calling. Methodist theology should therefore be exposed as being essentially Trinitarian. What will be largely self-evident is the fact that Methodism's understanding of God and the world was and remains inextricably linked to its perception and understanding of its own existence and calling.

CHAPTER SIX · THE TRIUNE GOD.

God's nature

Wesley taught that the nature of God is a mystery, writing that:-

'Touching the Almighty Himself, they cannot search Him out to perfection.' (SER 458)

This does not mean that Methodism believes the nature of God to be completely incomprehensible. On the contrary, Methodist theology has a distinctly Thomistic bias regarding the nature of God. Aquinas, for example, held that:

'Because therefore God is not known to us in His nature but is made known to us from His operations or effects, we name Him from these.' (Aquinas 1920: Part I, QQI-XXVI, 169)

Not the least of these so-called 'operations or effects' is human existence and humanity's relationship with God. These are operations and effects which are known to us through Scripture, reason and tradition, but, more directly, through our own experience of being a part of God's creation. Wesley assumed

'that humans have no innate idea of God. We form our understanding of God indirectly based on our experience of the world and human life'(Maddox 1994, 49)

Methodism similarly assumes, on the basis of Genesis 1:27 that

'our human nature should give us some clue as to the divine nature in whose image we are made' (F&O 2000, 472)

In spite of Feuerbach's gibe that Christians make God in their own image.(Feuerbach 1957, 13ff) Methodism has made, and is continuing to make, a deliberate attempt to revise its language and imagery about God in the light of late twentieth century gender sensitivity.¹ Still, as the report *Inclusive language and imagery about God*² pointed out, the question as to whether or not our understanding of God has been distorted and impoverished by the almost exclusive use of male imagery is important. Methodism evidently retains Wesley's concern with regard to:

'the formative (and *deformative*) influence of our understanding these attributes.'(Maddox 1994,51)

The aim of the report was to ensure that the image of God which Methodists proclaim through their worship is as accurate as it can be.

Whilst acknowledging that our image of God has undoubtedly been affected by the very real consequences of humanity's sinful nature, Methodism nonetheless remains convinced that the image of God in humanity:

'has not been completely obliterated and so we may believe that what manifest themselves as the worthier human experiences and capacities may give us some insight into the nature of God.'(F&O 2000, 473)

¹ No less than four reports have been adopted by Conference with regard to this issue since 1984

² adopted in 1992

The worthier attributes of human nature, those of love and mercy, compassion and forgiveness, for example, are deemed to be suggestive or indicative of the nature of God. God is not only the source of these things as the creator of humanity, but is himself, by nature, believed to be all loving and compassionate, all merciful and forgiving. As the prayer of humble access reminds us, God is the one

'whose nature it is always to have mercy'¹

Probably as a consequence of this anthropological perspective, Methodism, in keeping with other Reformation traditions, tends to speak of and to God in predominantly personal, as opposed to metaphysical language. God is referred to, addressed and worshiped as King, Father, Lord of Lords, the Almighty etc. rather than as the immutable, impassible, omniscient, necessary God. The metaphysical attributes of God, so beloved by Aquinas, are not neglected, though. The Methodist *kerygma* proclaims that God is the source of all being, the one who is both immanent and transcendent. God is prayed to as the unseen God, the invisible God, the eternal God. God is praised as the immortal, the unchanging, the all-knowing God; God is adored as the loving, creating and redeeming God.

'All human words are inadequate to speak of the unfathomable richness of God. They are but images that point to, whilst never capturing completely, the full truth of God.'(F&O 2000, 470)

¹ MWB 59

The personal God can be known, addressed and accessed(Stacey 1987,86); but this does not mean that the personal God has made comprehensible that which was beyond comprehension for God is also the impersonal God:

'Whose nature is made known to us in the mystery of the cross.'¹

The above statement is both an affirmation and a denial of the ability of humanity to understand the nature of God. Thus Methodism preserves the doctrine of the unknowability of God and avoids what Gunton refers to as

'the weakness of so much modern theology in reducing the knowledge of God to a speaking about ourselves or our supposed experience rather than from the God made known in Christ.'(Gunton 1997, 193)

The nature of God is known, above all else, to be a mystery, to be that which is totally other – to be Holy.

God's being and majesty

As Young (2000) and Maddox(1994) have shown, Wesley's own theology of the trinity was largely borrowed from the teachings of the Eastern Orthodox Church. Wesley distinguished between Father, Son and Spirit according to their works but, as Maddox has noted, he was aware of the dangers inherent in this approach. He was concerned about practical Unitarianism in his followers.(Maddox 1994, 140) A concern which seems to have been justified.

¹ MWB 533

Until the late 1980s, the twentieth century Methodist *kerygma* was formulated according to a strict economic and mediatorial model of the trinity. Each person of the trinity was recognised as having a specific role in the process of salvation and accredited with whatever attributes were necessary to fulfil those roles. God was seen as the architect of the salvation achieved at great cost by Jesus Christ, who in turn bequeathed to us the gift of the Holy Spirit to enable us to participate in his mission until he returns again. The practical “unitarianism of the son” (Maddox 1994, 140) which crept into Methodist theology during this time arose from the fact that, as the mediator between the Father and all of fallen creation, Jesus formed the focus of almost all Methodist proclamation. Methodist *kerygma* from this time had a distinctly christological as opposed to trinitarian bias.

By the close of the century, this had changed significantly. Major modifications to the Methodist *kerygma* suggest that there had been a concerted and deliberate attempt to promote a more definitively trinitarian understanding of God which incorporated elements of the essential model of the trinity. Jesus Christ is now seldom portrayed as having acted almost independently in order to achieve salvation for humanity. The Spirit is likewise, recognised as having the same timeless and eternally present nature as the Father and the Son. The role of Jesus Christ as mediator is largely denied except from within the context of the essential trinity. Methodism proclaims that salvation is possible as a result of the dynamic

interaction of Father, Son, and Spirit who are defined, not by their functions, individual natures or attributes, but by their relationship to the Whole.

The first major indication of this important theological shift came in the structure chosen for *Hymns and Psalms*. This, in stark contrast to its predecessor, is a theocentric volume divided into three main categories, namely God's Nature, God's World and God's People. *The Methodist Hymn Book* had no identifiable controlling format in spite of having 14 subdivisions for hymns with a further 5 subdivisions for Psalms and scripture passages etc. The structure of *Hymns and Psalms* was reported to have been the result of careful design, consideration and deliberations. Hence the fact that the category entitled God's Nature is further subdivided according to the divine persons, i.e. 'The Eternal Father, The Eternal Word and The Eternal Spirit', may be deemed evidence of an attempt to promote an unashamedly trinitarian understanding of God. In the previous hymnal there had been no corresponding sections devoted to each person of the trinity, the trinity was treated as a sub-category of those hymns pertaining to God. The person of the Father was also entirely neglected except within the unity of God, although both the Son and the Holy Spirit were treated separately. The largest number of hymns came under the category 'The Lord Jesus Christ', substantiating the accusation that Methodism's proclamation was predominantly Christological.

A comparison of the wording of the Covenant services from 1936 and 1999 provides another example of the shift in Methodist trinitarian theology. In 1936, *The Book of Offices*, stated that as Christians, Methodists were called

'to live no more unto ourselves, but to Him who loved us and gave Himself for us and has called us so to serve Him that the purposes of His coming might be fulfilled.'¹

By 1999 the theology of the Covenant relationship had changed significantly. *The Methodist Worship Book* states that

'By the help of the Holy Spirit, we accept God's purpose for us, and the call to love and serve God in all our life and work.'²

This is not a simple substitution of God the Father for God the Son, as evidenced by the way in which the service continues to remind members that:

'Christ has many services to be done'³

The service reclaims a Christological emphasis, but from within a trinitarian perspective of its purpose. The Covenant service has always insisted that the covenant which a Christian makes is with God; what has clearly changed with time is the understanding of the roles of the individual persons of the trinity in enabling the covenant to be made and/or renewed and kept. Neither is this change confined to the Covenant service; it is

1 BoO 123

2 MWB 287

3 MWB 288

reflected throughout the Methodist liturgical corpus. The Baptismal service for those who can answer for themselves, for example, contains several declarations which those who are to be baptised are required to make. In 1936 the candidate for baptism was required:

'to make answer concerning your faith and obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ and to us.'¹

By 1999 this had been changed so that the candidate was asked:

'to respond to God's love and grace by making these promises.'²

Again, the form of address, 'God' is used, not as an alternative for 'Father' but to refer to the unity of Father, Son and Spirit. This is even more evident when the promises to be made by those who can speak for themselves at Baptism are compared.. The wording is laid out below in parallel format for ease of comparison.

¹ BoO 93

² MWB 74

1936

Do you truly repent of your sins, and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as your Saviour?

Are you fully resolved by the Help of the Holy Spirit to keep the commandments of the Lord and to be ready in the service of His kingdom?

Thus having pledged yourselves to Christ, will you seek to fulfil the ministry He appoints you in His Church as members of His Body?

1975

You have heard Jesus saying to you as he said to his first disciples, Follow me. You have already responded to his call, and you sincerely desire to be saved from your sins through faith in him. I ask you therefore: Do you repent of all your sins and renounce all evil?

Do you trust in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour?

Will you obey Christ and serve him in the Church and in the world?

1999

Do you turn away from evil and all that denies God?

Do you turn to God, trusting in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, and in the Holy Spirit as Helper and Guide?

Such modifications as detailed above cannot be attributed solely to changes in language and culture, they speak of a theological change. They indicate the change in Methodism from the worship and proclamation of an almost tri-theistic God, with Jesus at the forefront of all divine-human interaction, to the celebration and proclamation of God as being truly, indivisibly, three in one, in action, and in essence.

Within the economic/essential trinity, personhood is relational as well as functional, hence God the Father, for example, can be recognised as the Father by virtue of his relationship with the Son (Stacey 1987, 94). This has enabled Methodism to develop alternative means of addressing God, which reflect the nature of relationship rather than the nature of the persons concerned. One clear example is the Methodist belief that God can be correctly known and proclaimed as the divine parent. *The Methodist Worship Book* thus includes in one of its services for Holy Communion a prayer to

'God our Father and our Mother'

to whom thanks and praise can be given

'for all that you have made, for the stars in their splendour and the world in its wonder and for the glorious gift of human life.'¹

1 MWB 204

The fact that the person of God the Father can be described as 'our mother' is not meant to suggest that God is also a goddess. On the contrary, it is meant to indicate the all inclusive nature and unity of the Godhead which, in the person of the divine parent, contains both that which we have defined as male as well as that which we have labelled female.(F&O 2000, 477) In relational terms, God is our parent, the source of all our life. God not only fathers, but also mothers, creation, bringing it to life, nurturing, protecting, educating and guiding, continually fashioning it according to the divine will.(F&O 2000, 477)

These changes are not universally welcomed however. There are those within the Methodist Church who object to the description of God as Mother and Father, as may be deduced from the notice of motion brought to Conference asking for a revision to be made to *The Methodist Worship Book*.(MCA 2000,674) It could also be argued that the formation of 'Headway' was, at least in part, a reaction to the movement away from a predominantly Christological *kerygma*.

Methodist *kerygma*, nevertheless, is now overwhelmingly trinitarian. God is God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit; three in person, but one in nature, divinity, in purpose, action and intent. As is said on trinity Sunday,

And now we give you thanks
because you have revealed your glory
as the glory of your Son and of the Holy Spirit:
three persons equal in majesty,

undivided in splendour,
yet one Lord, one God,
ever to be worshipped. ¹

God's majesty, as referred to above, is more than a metaphor for the supremacy of God, it is a fundamental and unquestionable characteristic of God's being. The majesty of creation, such as the majesty of the heavens or of the earth, is only as a consequence of its inheritance from God.² God alone is truly majestic. God is, furthermore, proclaimed as having the right to question, to judge and to save, according to the divine will, as a consequence of that same majesty.³ As Lord of Heaven and earth, God reigns, and his will is that which governs the universe.⁴ Although by nature God is recognised first and foremost as being Holy, as being totally other than that which he has created, God is nonetheless not defined in contradiction to his creation but in terms of his relationship with it or Lordship over it. Hence God is worshipped and proclaimed as 'The Eternal' and 'The Lord of History', as 'The Almighty' as well as as 'The Lord of all life and Power.'⁵ From these examples it can be seen that God's holiness is not what makes God sovereign, rather it is the majesty of God which makes God holy. Humanity is incapable of reigning in heaven, of commanding the angels, of

¹ MWB 192

² e.g. MWB 154,231

³ See *Hymns & Psalms* Nos 51,59,247

⁴ *Hymns and Psalms* No 413

⁵ The predicates are all drawn from the Methodist Worship Book.

ordering the universe, all that humanity can do is to respond to the majesty of God with thanks and praise. Hence the words of Charles Wesley:

'Rejoice, the Lord is King!
Your Lord and King adore,
Mortals, give thanks and sing,
And triumph evermore;
Lift up your heart, lift up your voice,
Rejoice, again I say, rejoice.¹

The Eternal Father

God the Father has been almost a missing person in twentieth century Methodism.² This was not the case in Wesley's time. Wesley regularly preached of the love of God as Father and considered the knowledge of the Fatherhood of God to be one of the signs of new birth.

'God hath willed and commanded that all our works should be done in charity (*εν αγαπη*) in love, in that love to God which produces love to all mankind. But none of our works can be done in this love, while the love of the Father (of God as our Father) is not in us; and this love can not be in us till we receive the "Spirit of Adoption, crying in our hearts, Abba, Father."' (SER 56)

The model of the trinity which Wesley assumed was an hierarchical one, with the Father as the primary focus of worship and adoration. The purpose of salvation was to be able to know God as Father; this is what Christ achieved and what the Spirit testifies to. Nevertheless, by the twentieth century the person of the Father was almost completely lost in the worship and proclamation of God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit.

¹ Charles Wesley *Hymns & Psalms* No. 243

² Lidget (1913, 270) acknowledged the lack of an explicit theology of the Fatherhood of God in Methodism writing that the doctrine was 'for the most part, a deduction waiting to be made'.

Although the structure of *Hymns and Psalms* suggests that the change to a trinitarian proclamation had already commenced by 1980, it was still deemed correct, following on from Wesley's own ambiguity regarding this matter,(Maddox 1994,48) to sub-divide those hymns in praise of 'The Eternal Father' into categories describing:-

God's Creating and Sustaining Power

God's Revealing and Transforming Love

God's Justice and Perfection

God's Patience and Guidance.

The descriptive language used to describe these sub-categories is important, stressing, as it does, the continual dynamic of the Father's being. God the Father is the eternal Father. As a consequence God not only created, but is creating, he not only sustained creation, but still sustains it. The power of God is his continuing action in the world. Similarly, God's love is not static, it is revealing and transforming. The Methodist God is inseparable from his action, but that action is not bounded by, or confined to, history. This proclamation and understanding of the dynamic of the fatherhood of God has developed progressively over the course of the twentieth century until it is no longer found only in the contents page of *Hymns and Psalms*, but in almost every aspect and dimension of the Methodist *kerygma* .

To substantiate the claim that Methodism has developed a more comprehensive understanding of God the Father as a result of the change in its understanding of the trinity, it is appropriate to compare once again the wording used in each of the three service books approved by Conference since 1932. We begin with a comparison of the way in which God is addressed in each of the primary services of Holy Communion in the 'Great prayer of thanksgiving'.

The Book of Offices addresses this prayer to God as

'Lord, Holy Father, Almighty, Everlasting God'¹

By 1975 this had been changed to:

'Father, all powerful and ever-living God'²

which was further developed to become by 1999

'Gracious Father, our Maker and Sustainer.'³

Even allowing for the changes in language over the period in question, there is a noticeable movement towards a personable, approachable understanding of God as Father. The Father is increasingly proclaimed as being defined by process *and* relationship rather than by attribute. Perhaps

¹ BoO 72

² MSB 56

³ MWB 193. In order to compare these services, the primary service is used from each book. Hence the prayer of thanksgiving is taken from the first service for Ordinary Seasons.

more revealing of the change in the understanding of the Father is the fact that throughout the entire communion service of 1936 there is no mention of the love of the Father except in the final blessing. Mention is made, though, of

'the exceeding great love of our Master and only Saviour, Jesus Christ.'¹

This situation had changed only slightly by the time the 1975 service book was produced. God the Father was now referred to more frequently as 'Our Father'. More personable means of addressing God did not replace more formal means, but were presented as being complementary as evidenced by the address:

'Almighty God our heavenly Father'²

carried over from the 1936 service book. As late as 1975 there was still no direct mention of the love of the Father in Methodist liturgy, this had to wait until 1999.

The Methodist Worship Book includes a variety of services of Holy Communion rather than one primary service making direct comparison slightly problematic. Nonetheless it is apparent that, throughout the book, including the services of Holy Communion, God is frequently referred to as

¹ BoO 69

² MSB 19

'Our Father' as well as as 'The Father of our Lord Jesus Christ'. Many of the contained in it refer explicitly to the love of God as Father, as well as to the love of God in Christ, for example, in the benediction:

'The love of the Father enfold us,
the wisdom of the Son enlighten us,
the fire of the Spirit enflame us;
and the blessing of God, the Three in One,
be upon us and abide with us now and for ever.
Amen.'¹

And, in the litany

'Loving God, Father of all
have mercy on us.'²

As with the 1975 service book, the proclamation of the love of the Father is not made at the expense of the proclamation of more familiar attributes of God. God continues to be addressed as 'Almighty', 'Heavenly King', 'Holy' and 'Merciful', in all the liturgies contained in *The Methodist Worship Book*, the difference being that these predicates are now set in the context of the creative and redemptive love of God.

The distant architect, the almost deistic God the Father of the earliest forms of Methodist twentieth century liturgy, has been supplemented by the recognition of the immanent, approachable, Father of creation. God the Eternal Father is no longer solely 'The' Father but is more definitively and

¹ MWB 38

² MWB 42

inclusively 'our' Father, the God of Love. From the Covenant service from 1975 wherein Methodists pray

'Let us adore the Father, the God of love.
He created us;
He continually preserves and sustains us;
He has loved us with an everlasting love, and given us
The light of the knowledge of his glory in the face of Jesus Christ.'¹

Methodists are now invited to give thanks to God

'For the love of our Father, the Maker of all,
the giver of all good things'²

It would appear that the theology of the fatherhood of God, so essential to Wesley, is in the process of being reclaimed for contemporary Methodist worship and proclamation.

God's creating and sustaining power

Given the times in which he lived, Wesley wrote comparatively little about the creating and sustaining power of God. Despite the challenges being presented from scientists and philosophers alike with regard to the origin of the universe, the nature of creation and the very means by which these things can be known, Wesley, and Methodism with him, chose to remain largely silent. Maddox attributes this to Wesley being in general agreement with the assumptions of his time, that creation had occurred 6000 years

¹ MSB 173

² MWB 32

earlier and that since then there had been no origination or loss of matter in creation. (Maddox 1994,58) As such,

'God's work as Creator (in the most proper sense) was completed at the origination of the universe with its laws for subsequent natural processes. Since then God has been sustaining this created order. Apart from such sustaining work, the universe would immediately cease to exist.'(Maddox 1994, 58)

Deism was roundly refuted but natural theology was partially tolerated on the basis that it is possible for creation to mirror something of the attributes of its creator:

'But from what we see of heaven and earth, we may infer the eternal power and godhead of the great Creator.' (Wesley, 1996b, 13)

Natural theology was not thought to be sufficient for salvation, any more than the philosophical claims of the day were, according to Wesley who wrote:

'the first verse of the Bible gives us a surer and better, a more satisfying and useful knowledge of the origin of the universe, than all the volumes of the philosophers.' (Wesley, 1996b, 13)

It is evident that Wesley's biblical understanding informed his theology of creation, hence he taught and preached:

'That this world was, in the beginning of time, created by a Being of infinite wisdom and power, who was himself before all time, and all worlds.' (Wesley, 1996b, 13)

This teaching and proclamation has, on the whole, been retained through Methodism's hymnody and the Creeds. Methodism has continued to advocate a biblical cosmology :

'Blessèd are you, Lord our God:
in your love you create all things out of nothing
through your eternal Word'.¹

in keeping with Wesley belief concerning creation:

'God created, that is, made it out of nothing. There was not any pre-existent matter out of which the world was produced. The fish and fowl were indeed produced out of the waters, and the beasts and man out of the earth, but that earth and those waters were made out of nothing.' (Wesley, 1996b, 14)

God alone is capable of creating *ex-nihilo*. (Stacey 1987, 85) Human creativity is dependent on the will and love of God to provide the necessary means. The distinction is an important one as Methodism proclaims that humans are:

'co-partners in the ongoing creating and renewing activity of God.' (Methodist Church 2000c, 9)

This particular theological perspective has, in part, developed naturally as an extension of Methodism's recognition of having been created by God for a specific purpose and vocation. It is not meant to imply that humanity can create or renew other than as God directs. Throughout its history Methodism has repeatedly warned of the damaging and destructive results of humanity's frequent attempts to create or renew without due reference to

1 MWB 40

God,¹ by which is meant taking into account that God creates out of love, not out of greed, or necessity, and only in order to serve his purposes.

'By his will, "for his pleasure" alone, they all "are and were created." (SER 389)

God does not need to create, but does so in order to ensure, out of love, the redemption of all of creation as suggested by the hymn

Thy providence is kind and large,
Both man and beast thy bounty share;
The whole creation is thy charge,
But saints are thy peculiar care.²

Methodism has latterly come to acknowledge that it has failed to have sufficient regard for the degree of interconnectivity of creation which is implied by such scriptures as Romans 8:21 and Colossians 1:20. These texts, it is held, suggest an as yet unanswered question as to whether or not

'God may be beckoning on the whole inter-related complex of life.'(SSR 118)

What is certain is that Methodism has at least confessed to the way in which a theology of co-creation and renewal based primarily on Genesis 9:2-3 has led to what it calls a

'deplorable arrogance towards nature.' (SSR 117)

¹ As just one recent example consider the Methodist Statement on the Non-Medical Use of Drugs which was adopted by Conference in 1974. (SSR, 5-13)

² Isaac Watts *Hymns & Psalms* No 26

In particular Methodism now recognizes that

'Christian theology, uncritically accepted by orthodox science, must carry a large measure of responsibility for the ravaging of the environment and for dangerous disturbance to the harmonious balance of the natural creation.' (SSR 117)

The closing decades of the twentieth century saw Methodism more directly concerned with ecological and environmental issues.(MMC 1996,6) At the Conference of 2000 it adopted a Connexion-wide environmental policy which, whilst perhaps not as dramatic in its impact as it might be, is nonetheless evidence of a willingness to take its responsibilities as co-partner more seriously.

Accepting a role as a co-partner in God's creating and redeeming activity does not necessitate a change in the Methodist understanding of divine providence. Creation and providence are linked, not by anything which humanity does for and with God, but by the power of God.

'as this all-wise, all-gracious Being created all things, so he sustains all things. He is the Preserver as well as the Creator of everything that exists. "He upholdeth all things by the word of his power," that is, by his powerful word.' (JWW VI: 352)

In spite of advances in science and technology, there is little evidence in the Methodist *kerygma* of any corresponding movement in the Methodist doctrine of divine providence. Methodism continues to proclaim that God sustains all that he has created, not in some general way but in a highly specific and particular way. The refusal to acquiesce to the pressure to

change and to proclaim a more general doctrine of providence is seemingly a Methodist characteristic; consider, for example, Wesley's own comments concerning such a proposal:

'for as to a general providence, (vulgarly so called,) contradistinguished from a particular, it is only a decent, well-sounding word, which means just nothing.' (SER 485)

The doctrine of the particular providence of God is given as a reason for Methodism's prohibition on gambling. This ruling dates from the 1936 Conference declaration which insisted that

'The Christian attitude to God and life is essentially one of reverent trust in the Fatherly care and providence of God for all his children... Gambling is contrary to an acceptance of the Divine will and providence.' (SSR 47)¹

God's creating and sustaining power is proclaimed throughout the Methodist liturgical corpus; in the creeds, in the hymns and in the prayers:

'Glory to the Father, the God of love, who created us; who continually preserves and sustains us; who has loved us with an everlasting love, and given us the light of the knowledge of his glory in the face of Jesus Christ.'²

Almost every act of Methodist worship includes some form of intercessory prayer which has, as its basis, the belief that God not only listens, but acts to sustain creation. God is believed to have the power to intervene and to heal and restore that which has been distorted and disturbed by sin.

¹ The revised statement in 1992 relaxed the church's regulations concerning the trivial recreational or fund-raising forms of gambling such as raffles, but retained the primary ruling prohibiting all forms of serious gambling on Church premises. Gambling continues to be seen as contrary to a belief in divine providence.

² MWB 282

Whilst some today might baulk at Wesley's defence of God's use of 'natural' disasters as a means of achieving his purpose¹, no alternative doctrine has either been proposed or proclaimed. It could be argued that the Methodist Relief and Development Fund which works with other charities to bring relief to disaster areas, is proof of Methodism's refusal to consider such acts as the will of God today. The theological basis for the MRDF, however, undoubtedly owes more to the belief that faith should result in action and in the responsibility of humanity to work with God as co-partners in the ongoing renewal of creation as required.

There can be no denying the theological problems concerning such a strictly biblical view of providence as that which continues to be proclaimed by Methodism. There appears to be more than sufficient cause to doubt the sustaining power of God in the face of the Holocaust or the famines of Africa. Wesley acknowledged the difficulties and, in a sermon devoted to the issue, suggested that :

'There is scarce any doctrine in the whole compass of revelation, which is of deeper importance than this. And, at the same time, there is scarce any that is so little regarded, and perhaps so little understood.' (JWW 352)

Contemporary Methodists confronting their lack of understanding in a difficult and demanding world do not abandon their doctrine, but instead pray:

¹ See in particular Wesley's comments regarding the Earthquake at Lisbon in "Serious Thoughts occasioned by the Late Earthquake at Lisbon" first printed in 1755. (JWW XI: 12ff)

'All-embracing God, Your care for us surpasses even a mother's tender love. Through your word and sacrament renew our trust in your providence, that we may abandon all anxiety and seek first your kingdom.'¹

God's revealing and transforming love

Methodism has historically been preoccupied with soteriology, not least as a result of Wesley's insistence that his helpers had:

'nothing to do but to save souls' (JWW VIII: 360)

What is often forgotten in the analyses of Methodist theology,² however, is the motivation for this soteriological emphasis, namely a conviction of the revealing and transforming love of God. In preaching salvation, Methodism's concern is to determine whether or not people know God. Wesley, for example, repeatedly asked:

'And is the love of God shed abroad in your heart?' (SER 18)

For only then, he believed, would the soul be transformed from its sinful state to its saved state. One of Wesley's theological insights was that the love of God is the dynamic of salvation, and that furthermore, the only possible measure of salvation is the love which is engendered in response to the love which God gives. His oft repeated enquiry was, therefore, almost invariably followed with :

¹ MWB 559

² Consider for example, Williams (1969) or Bett, (1937, 130) who wrote that the 'practical concern with the salvation of men is really the factor governing all that can be said about the relation of Methodism to theology'

'And is this commandment written in your heart, "That he who loveth God love his brother also?" Do you then love your neighbour as yourself? Do you love every man, even your enemies, even the enemies of God, as your own soul?' (SER 19)

Methodists believe and teach that the love of God is always pro-active, not reactive. God does not love us because of anything we have done, we can only love God, because God has first loved us. Likewise, we can only know God because God has chosen to make himself known to us. There is an order to salvation, and it begins with the love of God in what is referred to as 'preventing grace'. God

'prevents us indeed with the blessings of his goodness. He first loves us, and manifests himself unto us. While we are yet afar off, he calls us to himself, and shines upon our hearts.' (SER 184)

Once God has manifested himself to us, he then creates in us the desire for salvation and transformation which only he can achieve for us. His love for us in salvation thus includes :

'all that is brought in the soul by what is frequently termed natural conscience, but more properly, preventing grace; - all the drawings of the Father; the desires after God, which, if we yield to them, increase more and more; - all that light wherewith the Son of God "enlighteneth everyone that cometh into the world;" showing every man "to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with his God;" - all the convictions which his Spirit, from time to time, works in every child of man; although, it is true, the generality of men stifle them as soon as possible, and after a while forget, or at least deny, that they ever had them at all.' (JWW VI: 60)

Only if God's preventing grace is responded to, may the individual be given the gift of faith by which they might know God's gift of justification. The Methodist theology of revelation is thus founded on a conviction that revelation is first and foremost an encounter with the love of God.

Knowledge of God, even knowledge of the real need of God, is a gracious gift which humanity cannot win, but can only receive and then respond to – or not.

This understanding led Wesley to distinguish sharply between knowledge *about* God, and knowledge *of* God. From his own life experiences, Wesley knew just how much it was possible to know about God without ever having known God. Likewise Wesley admitted to a difference between the means by which an individual can be open to revelation, and the event of revelation itself. (SER 136ff) Concerning how God reveals himself Wesley confessed that he was totally unable to explain:

'The manner how the divine testimony is manifested to the heart, I do not take upon me to explain. Such knowledge is too wonderful and excellent for me: I cannot attain unto it. The wind bloweth, and I hear the sound thereof; but I cannot tell how it cometh, or whither it goeth. As no one knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of a man that is in him; so the manner of the things of God knoweth no one, save the Spirit of God.' (SER 117)

In consequence, Methodism has tended to stress that what God reveals is not particular knowledge or facts, truths or doctrines about God, but God himself, in his glory, wisdom, love, power, compassion and truth. Revelation is nothing less than a life-changing encounter with the love of God. Knowledge can be confirmed by the Spirit, truths can be taught, learned and applied, wisdom can and should be sought after, and doctrines can be tested and proved against Scripture, reason, tradition and experience, but only God can make God known and can give the gift of faith.

This distinction between revelation as the gift of God's knowledge of himself and other forms of religious knowledge was fundamental to early Methodist theology but appears to be in the process of revision. Revelation was not referred to at all in *The Book of Offices*, in either the collects or the communion services. *The Methodist Service Book*, conversely, made repeated use of the concept of revelation and in such a way as might be deemed to weaken the distinction between revelation and other forms of religious knowledge. The prayer of intercession in the communion service, for example, seems to suggest that humans are capable of being a means of revelation, as Methodists give thanks

'especially for those who have revealed to us your grace in Christ.'¹

In another place in the service book, Christians are referred to as those who have known the revelation of Christ² who is himself elsewhere referred to as the object of revelation.³ God is once referred to as both the source and the object of revelation⁴. Such varied use of the concept of revelation, whilst possibly due to changes in popular religious language, might also be indicative of a weakening of the theology of revelation as encounter with God. The role assigned to God in revelation continues to be primary, but would no longer appear to be exclusive. Certainly this development is

¹ MSB 175

² MSB 114

³ MSB 122

⁴ MSB 144

continued in *The Methodist Worship Book*, which, like its predecessor, also makes frequent use of the language of revelation without restricting either the source or the object of revelation to God. The distinction between what Wesley called the means of grace and revelation as an event of grace appears to have become muddled.

Wesley had differed from many of his contemporaries in his insistence that the fact that revelation is a gift of grace places individuals under a responsibility to avail themselves of the 'means of grace' rather than simply wait passively until the gift has been given.¹ These 'means of grace' he described as :

'outward signs, words, or actions, ordained of God, and appointed for this end, to be the ordinary channels whereby he might convey to men, preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace.' (SER 136)

The above were not to be confused with the gift of grace itself in revelation. According to Wesley, the means are merely the channels which God might use². The distinction Wesley was drawing is all the more evident when the list of the means of grace which he provided is examined.

'The chief of these means are prayer, whether in secret or with the great congregation; searching the Scriptures; (which implies reading, hearing, and meditating thereon;) and receiving the Lord's supper, eating bread and drinking wine in remembrance of Him: And these we believe to be ordained of God, as the ordinary channels of conveying his grace to the souls of men' (SER 136)

1 Disagreement over this issue was the primary cause of the Wesley brothers leaving the Fetter Lane society with its Moravian emphasis on stillness.

2 Wesley points out in his sermon on the means of grace and in other places, that even though God may have ordained these specific means of grace, he is not bound to use them for 'God is above all means'. (SER 150)

There are two points to be made about the above quotation with regard to early Methodist understanding of revelation. The first is that there was an openness to reason as a means of grace although not as a source of revelation. In keeping with Aquinas, Wesley made a clear distinction between reason and revelation. Reason as a human faculty required the gift of God in revelation to enlighten the mind and make the truth of himself known:

'He shall enlighten the eyes of thy understanding with the knowledge of the glory of God. His Spirit shall reveal unto thee the deep things of God.' (SER 306)

'Searching the Scriptures' entailed the application of reason as well as tradition in appropriating the truths which they contain. Methodism continues to assume that God can and does, in love, break through and, through the gift of revelation, act as his own interpreter.

'Still we believe, almighty Lord,
Whose presence fills both earth and heaven,
The meaning of the written word
Is by thy inspiration given;
Thou only dost thyself explain
The secret mind of God to man.

Come then, divine Interpreter,
The Scriptures to our hearts apply;
And, taught by thee, we God revere,
Him in three Persons magnify,
In each the triune God adore,
Who was, and is, for evermore.' *1*

1 Charles Wesley *Hymns and Psalms* No. 480

Reason, as a necessary adjunct to study of Scripture, was certainly not perceived of as contrary to faith. In agreement with Locke, Wesley preached the 'reasonableness' of faith. Methodist hymns confidently referred to the 'proof' of faith, by which was meant the 'testing' of faith by reason. The continuing Methodist appreciation of the relationship between revealing and transforming love and reason is succinctly expressed in the following verse taken from one of the Wesleyan communion hymns which is still in use today:

'Our needy souls sustain
With fresh supplies of love,
Till all thy life we gain,
And all thy fullness prove,
And, strengthened by thy perfect grace,
Behold without a veil thy face.'¹

As a necessary part of 'searching the scriptures' Wesley expected individuals to give due consideration to the traditional teachings of the Church. Tradition, in the form of the received and recorded revelation of the Church could and should, according to Wesley, inform our understanding of Scriptural truths. Wesley, for example, used the voices of tradition as an interpretative community, treating the Apostolic Fathers and others as partners in theological and Spiritual discourse. His use of tradition in this way agrees with Gunton's general definition.:

1 Charles Wesley *Hymns and Psalms* No. 596

'Tradition is a form of relation between people, in which those in the present receive from those in their past something that is either necessary or valuable – or intended to be – for their life.'(Gunton 1998, 88)

Wesley refused to be bound by tradition, but he also refused the arrogance and ignorance which denies the value of past revelation. What is important is the conversation with tradition and a willingness to be truly open to receive that which it has to offer, for,

'When it is a true giving and reception, it realises the Father's giving of his Son, the Son's self-giving to death and indeed the very life of God of which they are the economic expression.'(Gunton 1998, 103)

That this 'conversation' and openness has continued to be a part of the Methodist *kerygma* is evidenced by the report on the Filioque Clause in the Nicene Creed, brought to the Conference of 1990. Consideration of this matter was made with reference to tradition and Scripture as well as to ecumenical dialogue. The adopted resolution is characteristic of the Methodist openness to the gift of future revelation, (in this case to be found in the evidence of greater ecumenical agreement), as well as its willingness to change the content of its *kerygma* should this be deemed appropriate. (MCA 1990, 118).

The second point follows on from the above observations, namely that, contrary to popular misconception, the 'Wesleyan' doctrine of revelation did not teach that Scripture was the sole, or even the primary, means of God's

revelation.¹ Prayer and the Sacrament have always been considered to be equally important as means of grace. This conviction makes the communal aspect of revelation more explicit. Methodism has always taught that the sacrament is an expression of the fellowship which is a gift of God. In this regard, it might also be said that the Methodist understanding of revelation pre-empted much that would later be said on this matter by those of the so-called radical-orthodox school of theology. The liturgy as a means of God's self-expression, and self-realisation, is that which creates the community which responds to the love made manifest by it. God can and does speak his own word into existence and knowledge through the sacrament and the fellowship which it creates. In this respect, there is some support for the idea of human beings as being 'revelatory', although not as the source of revelation as the prayers and collects of contemporary Methodist worship suggests, but as a means of grace.

Whether solitary or communal, revelation occurs, by the grace of God, through a kerygmatic encounter with the living Word. In this insistence on the role of God in revelation, Wesley was more Lutheran than Calvinist. An analysis of his works suggests that, like Luther, Wesley was convinced that revelation could not be contained in the words of scripture but required an encounter with the love of God in Christ. The words or means alone achieve nothing.

¹ For a detailed exploration of Wesley's use of Scripture see Jones (1995)

'We know that there is no inherent power in the words that are spoken in prayer, in the letter of Scripture read, the sound thereof heard, or the bread and wine received in the Lord's supper; but that it is God alone who is the Giver of every good gift, the Author of all grace; that the whole power is of Him, whereby, through any of these, there is any blessing conveyed to our souls.' (SER 137)

The emphasis is not on the written or the symbolic word, but on the realised living Word. Methodism retains this particular emphasis as the recent report concerning the authority of the Bible in Methodism points out. The report¹ contains the following summary of the Methodist position with regard to the authority of the bible:

'The Methodist Church acknowledges the divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures as the supreme rule of faith and practice.' (F&O 2000, 652)

It then goes on to insist that it is the divine revelation, not the record of it, i.e. the Bible itself, which is the supreme rule of faith and practice. The report does not tell us either the source or the object of that 'divine revelation'.

There is thus a degree of contradiction in the current Methodist theology with regard to revelation. Despite the confusion over language, according to the Methodist *kerygma*, the love of God is made known when it is spoken by the Word and realised by the Spirit. Revelation on this basis is nothing less than an encounter with God, by the grace of God, and what is gained as a consequence of the gift of revelation is not simply 'truths about God' but the reality or 'realisation' of the love of God, which demands a response which

¹ The report was adopted in 2001

will engender a transformation. It is not possible to encounter God and remain unchanged. Given such an understanding of revelation, the Methodist historical emphasis on conversion becomes completely understandable. When individuals encounter God they are transformed; converted, from their former state, to a new state of grace. To be 'saved' is to be changed – to 'have the love of God shed abroad in your heart'.

Methodism insists that those who already know themselves to be saved have as great a responsibility to avail themselves of the means of grace as sinners do. God is not only encountered once. The order of salvation does not end with justification, but with sanctification and the utter transformation of the believer. In his great love for us, God sanctifies us by transforming us, revelation alone is insufficient. Methodists are called upon:

'to allow the living Christ to transform the system of basic selfishness, materialism and acquisitiveness which flourish even within Christendom.' (SSR 120)

It is ultimately through a relationship with Christ that the transforming love of God is revealed and Christ is recognised in Methodism as:

'a Lord who is always contemporary' (SSR 118)

Thus it is safe to assume that Methodism expects revelation likewise to be always contemporary. The question as to whether or not there can ever be a 'new' revelation in the light of the supreme revelation of Christ is somewhat

moot for a theology which is founded on the belief that God's promise is – Behold I make all things new¹.

God's justice and perfection

If the motive for salvation is love, and its means, grace, then its necessity according to Methodism is due to God's justice and perfection. The justice and perfection of God demand that all of creation is as perfect as it was intended to be. Everything is judged impartially according to its faithfulness and obedience to the divine will and purpose. Humans in particular are charged to 'Be perfect as your father in heaven is perfect.' What is recognised is that, as a result of its fallen, sinful state, this is not something which humanity is capable of achieving on its own.

'Yea, the present and future obedience of all the men upon earth, and all the angels in heaven, would never make satisfaction to the justice of God for one single sin.' (SER 81)

Methodism has traditionally taught that, as with the other attributes of God, justice and perfection are dynamic rather than static attributes, having a direct and often visible effect on creation. Wesley, for example, was convinced that it was appropriate to see the somewhat turbulent state of Great Britain during his lifetime as evidence of God's divine justice at work:

'It is certain, therefore, that all the quiet in a nation is ordered by divine wisdom; as all the confusions and convulsions are permitted by divine justice. Let us view the present state of Great Britain in this

¹ Revelation 21:5

light; resting assured, that all which befalls us is intended to promote our good in this world, and that which is to come.' (JWW 395)

There is little evidence in support of such an interventionist theology in contemporary Methodist teaching, which is seemingly more comfortable proclaiming God's justice as being an eschatological rather than an immediate or imminent event. God's justice is a feature of the coming kingdom, rather than of this earthy domain as evidenced by the prayer:

'In union with him, we offer ourselves to you
that, strengthened by the Spirit,
we may be signs of your life and love,
as we await the coming of his kingdom of justice and peace.'¹

Wesley and the early Methodists believed and taught that divine justice could be seen at work in the lives of the people². Whilst Methodists today are more reluctant to attribute what can be interpreted as accidents of fate to God's justice, Methodism has not, on the whole, lost the conviction which Wesley had in God's ability to use his servants to mete out his justice and the responsibility which this places on all Christians to act justly.

Human justice, it is believed, when guided by God, is more than a mirror of divine justice, it can work synergistically to achieve God's purpose. As the gospel cannot be separated from the question of justice and mercy, so Christians have a responsibility to work for justice to help to realise the

¹ MWB 416

² See in particular a fascinating account by Wesley in his journal of an act of Divine Justice and mercy meted out to one Abraham Jones (JWW II: 193)

gospel truths which they proclaim. (MMC 1993,3) In recognition of their responsibility, Methodists pray:

'Give us grace to learn your ways
and to do your will,
that we may bring justice and peace to all people,
in the name of Jesus Christ.'¹

More indicative of the Methodist proclamation of the justice of God, is the history of Methodist involvement in the struggle against injustice. Even allowing for Thompson's disparaging attacks on early Methodism, the historical evidence of Methodism's involvement in the trade-union movement, for example, stands, as Wearmouth(1959) has claimed, as testimony to Methodism's participation in the fight for social justice on the grounds of religious conviction.

This century has, as a consequence of two world wars and the discovery of the extent of the holocaust, presented an unprecedented challenge to any doctrine of divine justice, especially to one as synergistic as Methodism's has been. Of the many questions posed by the war, two in particular challenge Methodism's claim to be concerned with issues of justice: 'To what extent is humanity really involved in administering divine justice, and how can humanity determine what is, and what is not, 'just'?. Methodism has not flinched from addressing these questions (SSR 83-88). It is probably

¹ MWB 557

true to say that Methodism's reluctance to proclaim as its predecessors did, the possibility of the immediate or imminent application of divine justice, owes much to its reflection on this matter - and its inability to reach any consensus. Methodism was firstly led to acknowledge that

'What his duty is in time of war has always been an embarrassment to the conscience of the Christian, and Christians are not at one on this issue.'(Methodist Church 1971, 22)

and ultimately to question the proclamation of the absolute nature of justice as interpreted and enacted by humanity. Thus the updated statement adopted in 1995 says:

'themes like 'justice', 'peace' and 'freedom', which impregnate the scriptures and the church's worship, are not singular in meaning... Is justice, for example, the appropriate reward for individual effort, enterprise and behaviour; or it is a description of a social order where access to opportunities, basic resources for living and human rights are roughly the same for everyone?' (SSR 105)

There is thus a note of caution in Methodism regarding its ability to work with God for justice, although not, it must be stressed, its responsibility to seek to do so. (MMC 1992,1; 1995,4) Methodism proclaims its uncertainty in correctly interpreting God's justice but not in its desire for it to be accomplished. Methodism continues to believe that it is called:

'to love justice' (SSR 120)

And to zealously and compassionately participate in

'all constructive programs for racial justice and the building of a just and peaceful society.' (SSR 113)

This continued belief owes much to the Methodist commitment to Christian perfection in response to the commands to:

"Be ye merciful, as God is merciful." "Be ye holy as I the Lord am holy." "Be ye perfect, as your Father which is in heaven is perfect." (SER 171)

The 'perfections' of God are not, according to Methodism, matters of opinion.

Wesley, for example, in his sermon on the Catholic Spirit asked:

'Is thy heart right with God? Dost thou believe his being, and his perfections? his eternity, immensity, wisdom, power; his justice, mercy, and truth?' (SER 448)

God's justice and perfection cannot be separated, which means that for humanity to obey the command to be 'likewise perfect', requires it to recognise and apply the teaching that:

'Whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are amiable, or honorable; if there be any virtue, if there be any praise, they are all comprised in this one word, - love. In this is perfection, and glory, and happiness.' (SER 157)

God's justice and perfection are, above all else, manifested in his revealing and transforming love.

God's patience and guidance

There is a paradox in Methodist theology concerning the patience of God. The sense of urgency, particularly in the early *kerygma*, is undeniable, yet there has also always been a sense of wonder at the great patience of God who seemingly never ceases to work for the salvation of creation. In spite of

the urgency, regardless of a conviction in the reality of the day of judgment, the belief is that

'A love which took self-giving to the point of suffering crucifixion is likely to be deep enough to persist while ever there is a chance of response.' (Wainwright, 1982, 459)

Methodist teaching concerning God's patience evolved as a response, not only to the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination¹, but also to Methodist's experience of both the gradual and instantaneous nature of conversion. God is patient, not only with our initial reluctance to turn to him, but also with our faltering steps to subsequently follow him. The good news is always good news, the backslider can be reclaimed for God. Methodism, in spite of Wesley's purges of the early societies, has never had a service or theology of 'excommunication' for this would be a denial of its understanding of God's patience with humanity.

The idea that someone could be eternally denied the opportunity to respond to the gospel is an anathema to Methodism.(F&O 2000,589) There remains to this day, an annual responsibility for every Methodist Church to review its membership, and members can be expelled for various reasons² but provision also exists, on theological grounds, for members who were previously expelled to be re-instated:

¹ There is no need for God to be patient with us if he has already determined who will be saved and who will be damned.

² See standing orders section 02 in (CPD 287-332)

'The Conference, mindful of the purpose for which the Methodist Church was raised up and believing in the possibility of repentance and forgiveness, declares that any person expelled from membership.... may at any time be admitted again after application to a Church Council' (CPD 341)

In a similar way, the annual covenant service can be recognized as a symbol of the Methodist conviction of God's patience and of God's willingness to renew his relationship with his people regardless of their past failings, providing that they are open to receive God's grace. The covenant prayer of thanksgiving includes the lines:

'You bear patiently with our folly and sin,
granting us your law to guide us
and your prophets to renew our faith.'¹

Such patience does not negate the imperative to respond to the gospel, and to do so with haste. Methodism continues to teach that those who refuse to repent and turn to God remain

'under the judgement of God and to be separated from him' (CAT, 10)

The Methodist proclamation invites the penitent sinner to flee from the wrath to come by waiting patiently for the Lord! God's gifts of grace and knowledge have been promised to us, but they are not available on demand.

'Be of good cheer! "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God, with all thy heart, and mind, and soul, and strength." "Faithful is he that hath promised, who also will do it." It is thy part, patiently to continue in the work of faith, and in the labor of love; and in cheerful peace, in humble confidence, with calm and resigned, and yet earnest expectation, to wait till the zeal of the Lord of Hosts shall perform this.' (SER 95)

¹ MWB 292

The repentant sinner must have faith and trust in God's promise that the gift of salvation will be given, there is no automatic right to God's grace.¹ There is a tension here which, in its evangelical zeal, Methodism has not always completely respected, it has, nonetheless, always insisted that it is faith, not a confession, which is the necessary prerequisite to salvation. In the words of Wesley,

'Faith, therefore, is the necessary condition of justification; yea, and the only necessary condition thereof (SER 58)

It is faith which enables the sinner to wait patiently upon the Lord and faith which ultimately grants them the knowledge that God is indeed patient and has redeemed them so that they too are able to pray:

'Generous God,
from whom comes every good and perfect gift,
we thank you for your mercies:
for your goodness that has created us,
your grace that has sustained us,
your patience that has borne with us,
and your love that has redeemed us.'²

Bearing with us in our sins is not the limit of God's patience. According to Methodism, God's patience is also found in his eternal willingness to guide all of creation through to its intended perfection.

¹ This was highlighted by the report on universalism which pointed out the priority of grace in, for example the prayer of committal intended for use with those who are not obviously within the Christian community. (F&O 2000. 587)

² MWB 342

Methodism is not unique in proclaiming God's guidance, but, it is refreshingly expansive in how it believes God achieves this. In answer to the question 'How does God guide us?' the current Methodist Catechism begins with a sentence which could be considered true of all reformation traditions:

'God guides us from within, through the Holy Spirit's prompting and our conscience. He guides us through the Bible, as we study its teaching.' (CAT, 12)

The rest of the answer is less orthodox, referring not to tradition, but to the life of the believer and the way in which God interacts with humanity on a day-to-day basis:

'He guides us through Christian fellowship, the advice of friends, and as we respond to daily events and circumstances. He guides us particularly as we seek to be imitators of Jesus Christ.' (CAT, 12)

God interacts with his people in all areas of their life. The Christian is called to be open to his guidance and to actively seek it at all times. This universality is a return to Wesley's theology and a major improvement on that taught in the first half of the twentieth century. The 1952 Senior Catechism, for example, was content, in answer to the question 'How does God make known His Will for our lives?' to teach that:

'God's law for our lives is written in our hearts, set forth in the ten commandments, perfectly fulfilled in the life and teaching of Jesus, and brought home to our consciences by the activity of the Holy Spirit.' (MMC 1952, 222)

With a sufficiently liberal interpretation it could be claimed that there is nothing in the contemporary statement which is not implicit in the 1952 answer. It is unlikely that the Faith and Order Committee, charged with updating the catechism, deemed the answer either particularly 'Methodist' or sufficiently inclusive when they came to revise this particular group of questions. The current question and answer is much more in keeping with the characteristic Methodist emphasis on Christian fellowship as a means of grace. It re-affirms the belief that God's guidance is available through the study of the Scriptures¹ as well as emphasizing the importance of personal spiritual growth. God's guidance does not exist solely to enable us to live this life well, but to enable us to grow in holiness as we seek the perfection of Christ in our lives. God's guidance is thus a gift of grace for the sake of our sanctification:

'Go before us, Lord, in all that we do,
with your most gracious favour,
and guide us with your continual help,
that in all our works,
begun, continued and ended in you,
we may glorify your holy name,
and finally by your mercy obtain everlasting life;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.'²

Perhaps more importantly, the contemporary answer restores to the theology implicit in the Methodist *kerygma*, an understanding of the love of

¹ In this respect it may also have been framed as an answer to the biblicism which had crept into much of Methodism during the nineteenth century.

² MWB 554

God as being the origin of all that we can know or perceive of God. The impression is given of God, not as a law-maker and law-enforcer, but as a constant companion, someone who is actively prompting and engaging with us as a means of guiding us; he can even speak through the mouths of our friends. (CAT 12) The law of God which guides us is no longer emphasized in terms of commandments, a list of 'shalt-nots', but in terms of our relationships, with ourselves, with fellow Christians, and most of all, with God in Christ made known to us in the Spirit.

The Eternal Word

Some of the clearest statements on Methodist Christology are to be found in Wesley's Notes on the New Testament, in particular, in Wesley's comments on the prologue to John's Gospel:

'the Word existed, without any beginning. He was when all things began to be, whatsoever had a beginning.'¹

The nature of the Word is further elaborated on as Wesley explores and expands the text under consideration:

'And the Word was with God - Therefore distinct from God the Father....And the Word was God - Supreme, eternal, independent.'²

Except for in its hymnody, Methodism has tended to refrain from making definitive statements regarding the nature of the Word. In its reports, statements, and even in its liturgy, Methodism has been far more cautious, seemingly reluctant to make such statements without qualification. There is, for example, no direct reference to the eternal nature of the Word in either of the two earlier service books, despite frequent use of Logos language in *The Methodist Worship Book*. Whilst there is an undeniable danger in placing too great an emphasis on the use, or otherwise, of particular theological terms in liturgy and worship, Logos language – by which is meant reference to the second person of the trinity as the Word or

¹ WEN John 1:1

² WEN John 1:2

Logos · has been too fundamental a component of the vocabulary of the Christian community to be considered totally subject to the whims of theological/cultural linguistic fashions. The presence of Logos language throughout Methodist hymnody and in Wesley's works, makes the absence of it, for most of the twentieth century, from other components of the Methodist *kerygma* particularly noteworthy. Its reappearance in the closing decades of the century hints, I suggest, at the attempt to work through an unresolved dilemma rather than a reticence to use particular terms of reference.

The dilemma, simply stated is, how can the Methodist Church reconcile the kerygmatic, evangelical, phenomenological, emphasis which it has traditionally given to Christ, with the traditional teachings of the church concerning his nature and ontology? Methodism's particular emphasis was inherited from Wesley who according to Deschner (1960, 12), had a

'Protestant distrust of abstract Christology.'

There can be little doubt that Wesley, and most early Methodists, would have agreed wholeheartedly with Melanchthon's earlier statement:

'The mysteries of the Godhead are not so much to be investigated as adored. It is useless to labour long on the high doctrines of God, his unity and trinity, the mystery of creation, the mode of incarnation... To know Christ is to know his benefits, not to contemplate his natures and the modes of his incarnation.' (Melanchthon 1890, 60)

Although Melancthon later withdrew this remark, Methodism seemingly remained convinced of the truth of it, despite the fact that, as Barth has pointed out

The beneficia Christi cannot be properly investigated if some consideration of the mysteria divinitatis as such has not been undertaken in its proper place.' (Barth 1997, II.1: 259)

Clearly some consideration had been undertaken by Wesley and subsequent Methodist theologians. Deschner at least was convinced that Wesley had what he terms an elaborated Christology, one which he claims

'accompanies his soteriology in such a way that the Christology faithfully reflects the soteriology , and vice-versa' (Deschner, 1960, 14)

Almost all scholars who have investigated Wesley's Christology, however, have found it to be deficient', hence the dilemma facing contemporary Methodism. Wesley's Christology, like that of Methodism's up to the latter part of the twentieth century was decidedly unbalanced in its under-emphasis of the human nature of Christ. In terms of Schleiermacher's classification of Christological heresies (Schleiermacher 1976, 97), there can be little doubt that Methodism has traditionally erred towards the Docetic. The reintroduction of logos language into Methodist liturgical statements is, I suggest, part of a much broader recovery of traditional Christology within Methodism. Moreover, it is indicative of a deliberate attempt to redress the

1 Deschner for example lists no less than five of his contemporaries who consider Wesley's Christology problematic including J.E. Rattenbury. (1935, 156) wherein Rattenbury comments not on John's, but on Charles's Christology, and what he thought of the Lord's humanity.

imbalance of its inherited teachings, regardless of their Wesleyan pedigree. Contemporary Methodist Christology thus stands in opposition to much of Wesley's Christology. There is little to distinguish between them with regard to the divine nature of Christ, it is the lack of emphasis given to the human nature and the hypostatic union which differentiates them and which will therefore provide the focus for the following presentation of Methodist Christology.

In spite of his insistence that the “flesh” which Jesus took signifies “whole man”¹ and his claims that Jesus is a “real man like other men,” and “a common man, without any peculiar excellence or comeliness”,² Wesley was still able to suggest that Christ’s human nature was a body prepared for Christ to sacrifice.³ In fact, Wesley’s description of the humanity of Christ suggests a doctrine of anhypostasia. As Maddox observes, Wesley

'did not deny that Christ had a human nature, but apparently considered it a direct creation of God'(Maddox 1994, 116)

Jesus was the name given to a totally new species of humanity whose nature was so alien to our own that he could render himself invisible at will.⁴ Wesley was convinced that Christ could think no evil thoughts (SER 473)

¹ WEN John 1:14

² WEN Phil. 2:7&8

³ WEN Heb. 9:5

⁴ WEN John 8:59; Luke 4:30

and experience no involuntary emotions¹. Perhaps most indicative of Wesley's anhypostasia is his comment that Christ's authority to preach the sermon on the mount is as

'something more than human; more than can agree to any created being. It speaks the Creator of all! A God, a God appears! Yea, O ΩN, the Being of beings, JEHOVAH, the self-existent, the Supreme, the God who is over all, blessed for ever! '(SER 189)

I agree with Deschner that there is no hint in Wesley that he believed the personal union to be a bringing together of two natures to create a new person, the person was always the second person of the Trinity. (Deschner, 1960, 28) But whilst Deschner attributes Wesley's failure to acknowledge the full humanity of Christ to an underlying negative attitude to human nature, Maddox wonders whether or not it could be indicative of what he considers to be Wesley's Eastern Orthodox Christology. Wesley, he suggests, may have over emphasised the divine nature of Christ rather than downplayed the human as

'an expression of his conviction that God is the one who takes the initiative in our salvation.'(Maddox 1994, 117)

Regardless of the reason, this bias continued within Methodism until quite recently as can be seen by, firstly, the inclusion of Wesley's Notes on the New Testament (from which the majority of the above Christology was extracted) as part of the doctrinal standard for Methodist preaching, and,

¹ WEN John 11:33-35

secondly, the noticeable absence of references to the human nature of Christ in the Methodist Catechism of 1952. By contrast, the most recent catechism approved in 1987¹ makes frequent mention, where appropriate, of the humanity of Jesus Christ. For example, it poses the question ‘What has Jesus done?’ and then provides an answer which mentions that Jesus Christ shared our human life and death. (CAT 8) There is no corresponding question in the earlier catechism. In fact, with the exception of the historical creeds, the humanity of Jesus Christ is only mentioned in the 1952 senior catechism in response to the question:

‘What do we mean by “conceived of the Holy Ghost, Born of the Virgin Mary”?’ (MMC 1952, 216)

In its attempt to address the imbalance which it inherited, there is evidence of a desire to remain true to the Spirit of Methodism, if not to Wesley’s teachings. The increasing emphasis on the humanity of Christ is, for example, presented as being in keeping with its stated historical adherence to a key reformation principle; namely that it is not enough to accept as a doctrine the humanity of Jesus Christ, it is essential that the incarnation is made a factor of Christian discipleship as it was in the time of the reformation when:

‘The humanity of Jesus in His earthly life, which had always been a dogma of the Church, became an article of practical piety.’ (F&O 1984, 35)

¹ Revised in 2000 to enable references to be made to the Methodist Worship Book.

The historical fact of the humanity of Christ has thus been presented as both a pattern and a revelation for Methodists. (Stacey 1987,110;124ff) In the catechism, for example, it is taught that:

'Jesus Christ is God the Son who was born among us as a human being; in him alone we can see God the Father.' (CAT, 34)

Moreover, Christians pray that they may be enabled to walk in the way of Christ¹, to be the servant of others as He was the servant of all², and to follow the example of his humility and his passion.³

Whilst continuing to insist on the reality of both the human and the divine nature of Christ as taught by the historic creeds, Methodism also feels able to admit that there is a serious credibility problem with the creeds which affects Christology:

'They state what is the case or what is not the case; they are concerned with propositions. Unlike the New Testament, they say very little about what has happened and what will happen. They are short on action, they are not dynamic. Our own orientation to life is just that; for us everything is on the move. The words of our time are change, flexibility, decision, ongoing, existential, situational - ugly enough, but descriptive of what life is for us. The incredible becomes credible for us when we see Christology in these, our own terms.'(Stacey, 1987, 132)

Seeing Christology in a more dynamic, Methodist manner, appears to entail addressing equally both the human and the divine natures of Christ.

¹ MWB 123

² MWB 133

³ MWB 132

Wesley had found it difficult to define the nature of Christ other than by reference to both his humanity *and* his divinity, as may be seen from the following quotation:

‘What is the righteousness of Christ?

It is twofold, either his divine or his human righteousness.

1. His divine righteousness belongs to his divine nature, as he is Ο ων, He that existeth; “over all, God blessed for ever;” the Supreme; the Eternal; “equal with the Father, as touching his Godhead, though inferior to the Father as touching his manhood.” Now this is his eternal, essential, immutable holiness; his infinite justice, mercy, and truth; in all which, He and the Father are One...

2. The human righteousness of Christ belongs to him in his human nature;’ (JWW V: 319)

Similarly, when he was questioned with regard to whether or not Jesus existed before he was made flesh Wesley responded:

“He did, - as God. But the man Christ Jesus did not. (JWW IX: 390)

Preferring the dialectic and refusing to resolve the paradox arguably enabled Wesley to avoid the worst excesses of his reluctance to fully accept the human nature of Christ. He was able to maintain the integrity of his faith both in the Christ whom he could know, and in the Christ whose nature was an eternal mystery. Nevertheless, it does suggest that not only was Wesley’s Christology dangerously close to being Docetic, it was also perilously Nestorian at times. There are, for example, several statements made by Wesley where the two natures of Christ seem to be separable from one another, or when a given act is attributed to only one of the natures.

In spite of this, Methodism is not Nestorian. It has made use of the insight of Wesley that when the Word was in the beginning :

'He was not yet named Jesus, or Christ.'¹

which suggests that it is context which determines how the nature of Christ is best named and known and how it should be proclaimed. In agreement with Bonhoeffer it has seemingly recognised that the question is not 'what is Christ?', but 'who is Jesus Christ for us today?' (Bonhoeffer, 1967, 139) For example, in the liturgy in *The Methodist Worship Book*, the second person of the trinity is addressed and worshipped as the divine Word or the human Jesus as appropriate. In adoration and worship, reference is made of Christ's divine nature. In intercession and ministry, Methodists are pointed to the example he sets by virtue of his human nature. With regard to the act of salvation, both the human and the divine nature of Christ are acknowledged as indispensable and inextricable.

Utilising a 'both and' rather than an 'either or' approach to proclaiming Christ according to the appropriate context prevents the distinction being drawn between the human and the divine. It also introduces quite a high degree of ambiguity as, for example, in the following collect for Christmas where both the Word and Jesus Christ are referred to, but not explicitly as the same being.

¹ WEN John 1:1

'Ever-living God,
whose glory was revealed
in the Word made flesh,
may we, who have seen such splendour
in the coming of your Son,
be true witnesses to your self-giving love in the world;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen. '1

This degree of ambiguity exists elsewhere in the contemporary liturgical corpus. For example, in the following collect, it is not clear whether the word which is referred to is the eternal Word, and hence whether or not a distinction is being made between the pre-existent Word and Jesus the begotten Son:

'Creator God,
in the beginning
your word subdued the chaos
and in the fullness of time
you sent Jesus, your Son,
to rebuke the forces of evil
and to make all things new.'2

There is little evidence to suggest that Methodism has completely divested itself of a doctrine of anhypostasia. It could be argued that the language of the catechism and its reference to the new beginning for the human race implies a movement away from a doctrine of anhypostasia in favour of enhypostasia. In my opinion, there is insufficient additional kerygmatic

1 MWB 527

2 MWB 518

material to substantiate such a claim. As yet, all that can be stated categorically, is that there is firm evidence of an increased emphasis on the human nature and achievement of Christ. Unlike Wesley, Methodism is not ashamed to proclaim that Jesus wept at the grave of Lazarus¹ and that he not only lived our life, but bore our grief².

Having recovered the human nature of Christ, Methodism has attempted to ensure that neither the divine nor the human nature is allowed to dominate the proclamation of the Christ, rather each is proclaimed as appropriate to the context. Whether intentionally or not, by refusing to define the Word in Jesus with human words through the medium of doctrine or dogma, whilst nonetheless continuing to proclaim Christ in context to the world, Methodism has begun the process of liberating itself from the Christology which it inherited. It manages on the whole to maintain the sort of integrity with regard to its proclamation which Williams (2000) insists is essential to the Church. I would argue that this is due to the fact that Methodism's kerygmatic nature is dependent on Methodism continually exploring how its:

'commitment to the question Jesus poses may make itself audible and intelligible beyond the bounds of the Christian institution.' (Williams, 2000, 94)

1 MWB 484

2 MWB 454

Methodist Christology poses, rather than attempts to answer, the kerygmatic interrogative. Further defining the unity of the human and the divine in Christ is not an issue for Methodism because Methodism remains convinced that Christ can be individually known and experienced. Jesus can be related to precisely because he is both human and divine. He is his own answer and his own definition. The foundation of all Methodist Christology is thus a belief that the Word is continually speaking to humanity in a way in which humanity is capable of hearing and responding to through the word and sacrament.

The eternal glory of the Word

The emphasis on the internal order of salvation, from prevenient grace through to Christian perfection, has undoubtedly been the main reason why Methodism has been slow to develop a corresponding doctrine of the history of redemption in terms of Christ's pre-existent glory, humiliation and ultimate exaltation. The sub-division of the category of *Hymns and Psalms* relating to the life of Christ shows that, whilst Wesley may not have systematised his theology with regard to this¹, Methodism, latterly, has been prepared to attempt to do so. It does so by making full use of Wesley's key word for explaining the exaltations and humiliations of Christ, namely "glory". The glory of the Word which is

¹ That Wesley knew of the doctrine is evidenced by, for example, his comment on Revelation 5:7. He actually produced a number of lists of the various states of Christ but nothing which could be deemed definitive of his thinking.

‘the nature of God revealed in its brightness’¹

is what Christ lays aside for a season². Likewise, Christ’s reward for His having suffered death is that he is glorified and honoured.³

In addressing the Wesleyan over-emphasis on the divinity of Christ, Methodism also corrected Wesley’s over-enthusiastic attribution of glory to Christ and his under-assigning of the glory of God to anything related to humanity. Methodist liturgy now proclaims that God can reveal his glory in the lives of his witnesses.⁴ Christians are furthermore called upon to reflect the light of Christ’s glory whilst here on earth, as well as look forward to their complete glorification in heaven⁵.

Both Methodism and Wesley are in agreement that prior to the incarnation the Word was with God and, as God, was glorified. Likewise, it is believed that the glory of the Word is from everlasting to everlasting⁶. The problem is in reconciling the claim that Christ emptied himself of “the glory which he had before the world began”⁷ with Wesley’s teaching that the glory of Jesus in his earthly life was:

1 WEN Heb 1:3

2 MWB 534

3 WEN Phil 2:9, Heb 2:9, Eph 1:20-23.

4 MWB 558

5 MWB 473

6 WEN Heb 1:2

7 WEN Phil 2:7

'in every respect such a glory as became the only begotten of the Father. For it shone forth not only in his transfiguration, and in his continual miracles, but in all his tempers, ministrations, and conduct through the whole series of his life.'¹

This teaching has been countered by one of the Collects in *The Methodist Worship Book* which expresses the more traditional doctrine that Christ's earthly life was a part of his humiliation.

'Almighty God,
whose most dear Son went not up to joy
but first he suffered pain,
and entered not into glory before he was crucified.'²

Only by his resurrection is Christ restored to glory,³ and then ultimately exalted by his ascension into heaven.⁴ The progress from glory, through humiliation into glory is now used by Methodism to tell the human story whereby humans are born in the image of God,⁵ humiliated by sin and human frailty,⁶ but can, by virtue of the humility which Christ endured, be granted, by grace, a share of His glory.⁷

The promise of the Messiah

Jesus Christ is proclaimed as the Jewish Messiah, the fulfilment of God's promises to his people, as noted by the Collect:

¹ WEN John 1:14

² MWB 264

³ MWB 537

⁴ MWB 544

⁵ MWB 557

⁶ MWB 535

⁷ MWB 533

'God and Father of all who believe in you,
you promised Abraham that he would become the father of many nations,
and through the death and resurrection of Christ you fulfil that promise.'¹

Accordingly, Christianity did not originate with Jesus and the incarnation,
or the resurrection, but with the purposes of God.

'Jesus is called the Christ because he is the one chosen by God to fulfil his purposes, recorded in the
Old Testament, the holy book of the Jewish nation.' (CAT, 5)

This fact is reflected in Methodist worship through hymns such as the
Wesleyan hymn *Come, thou long-expected Jesus*, which refers to Jesus as

'Israel's strength and consolation'²

and the more recent hymn which declares:

'Long ago, prophets knew
Christ would come, born a Jew.'³

Through its recognition, proclamation, and affirmation of Jesus as the
Messiah of Jewish hopes and expectations,(CAT 5) Methodism has been
able to locate its own purposeful existence firmly in the history of the
covenant people. It has latterly⁴ refused to be drawn into the debate as to

¹ MWB 269

² Charles Wesley, *Hymns & Psalms* No.81

³ F. Pratt Green, *Hymns & Psalms* No.83

⁴ Previously, Methodists were seemingly content to pray for God's mercy on all 'Jews, Turks and Infidels' in the hope that 'they may be saved under the remnant of the true Israelites, and be made one fold under one shepherd, Jesus Christ' BoO 42

whether or not the Church has replaced Israel as the chosen people, insisting that:

'any attempt to define the relationship of the Jewish people to the Church is a difficult, sensitive matter. Perhaps the very attempt is presumptuous.' (F&O 2000, 14)

Instead, it now avers that :

'Jews and Christians, both sharing a common heritage of the Hebrew prophets, have a common responsibility to work together to combat all forms of oppression, discrimination and exploitation, and to establish justice and peace.' (F&O 2000, 14)

This entails attempting to proclaim the gospel with an awareness of the anti-semitism which has not only marred much of the Church's relationship with the Jewish people in the past, but which has also distorted its presentation of the truth which it seeks to convey.¹

Although a recent Methodist statement² insisted that the Jewish Scriptures were essential for the Early Church's life, worship, and theology, there has been a noticeable lack of interest in the Old Testament and Jewish Theology in general, throughout the Methodist church. For example, although Methodism has produced many outstanding biblical scholars, almost all have been primarily New Testament scholars. Recruiting Old Testament lecturers for the Church's colleges has become increasingly difficult over the

¹ It is believed, for example, that Christian preaching has often incorrectly caricatured the Pharisees as legalistic and hidebound reactionaries when they were not, thus removing some of the challenge and 'offence' of the gospel. (F&O 2000 ,1-4)

² *Called to Love and Praise* , adopted by the Conference of 1999

last two decades and Hebrew has all but ceased to be taught as a standard option. Whilst accepting that this is probably true for most Christian denominations, it nonetheless serves to put the comments in the accepted statement into perspective. Jesus is the promised Messiah, but, on the whole, it would appear that Methodism knows and proclaims him more often as an idealised Western promised Messiah than as a Jewish one.

Christ's birth

Christ's humiliation was, in Wesley's stated opinion, threefold,¹

To appear in the form of a creature

To be made in the likeness of fallen creatures

To share in the disgrace of fallen creatures.

This opinion was perpetuated by Methodist theologians such as Pope. (1880, II: 154—155) Wesley questioned whether or not the incarnation was a form of existence worthy of the Son of God.² He was nonetheless quite ambiguous as to whether or not the birth of Christ marked the start of Christ's humiliation. Today Methodism is similarly ambiguous proclaiming both that the Glory of God was the Word made flesh³ and that Christ emptied

¹ WEN Phil 2:7

² WEN Rev 1:7

³ MWB 130

himself of all but love.¹ It is also content to follow Wesley's lead with regard to the factual status of the birth narratives.

Wesley seemed to have no doubts at all over the virgin birth.² Methodism likewise continues to proclaim the virgin conception in a predominantly factual manner, through the creeds, through its favourite carols and through its prayers such as :

'God our Redeemer,
you chose the Virgin Mary,
to be the mother of our Lord and Saviour.'³

If anything, Methodism has grown increasingly more explicit in its statements about the virgin birth. The revised catechism, for example, leaves no room for ambiguity or interpretation with regard to the paternity of Jesus:

'Jesus Christ was not born of a human father, but by the direct intervention of the Holy Spirit.' (CAT, 34)

The catechism continues by interpreting this unique birth as a sign that Jesus was from the Father and that his birth was indicative of a new beginning for all of humanity. It is doubtful whether or not Methodism continues to believe, as Wesley did, that the eternal virginity of Mary is one

¹ MWB 137

² Lawson (1987, 57) suggests that the reason that Wesley once withdrew a verse of a hymn which described Jesus as the 'son of the carpenter' was presumably to allay any suspicion that he did not believe in the virgin birth.

³ MWB 525

of the few doctrines which Protestants and Catholics hold in common. Recent ecumenical discussions with the Roman Catholic Church have shown that contemporary Methodism has as much difficulty accepting the doctrines of the Immaculate Conception and the Virgin Birth proper as Wesley himself did, in spite of his belief in Mary's perpetual virginity. With regard to the Virgin Conception, Methodist Local Preachers have been taught that:

'the doctrine is primarily Christology (a statement about the significance of Jesus) rather than a history (a statement about how Jesus was conceived and born)' (Stacey, 1972, 115)

The Epiphany

The full liturgical celebration of Epiphany is relatively new to Methodism. Although the two earlier service books did contain collects for Epiphany, the first real acknowledgement of it by Methodism, as a major Christian sacramental festival, occurs in 1986 with the inclusion of a relevant subsection in *Hymns and Psalms*. Despite there being no direct mention of the Epiphany in Wesley's works, it is safe to assume that he would have celebrated it as a high Church Anglican priest. Furthermore, as the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles, it supported Wesley's own, somewhat unorthodox, views concerning divination and the role of prevenient grace for those outside of the Church. For example, in his notes on Matthew's account of the visit of the wise men he writes:

'Wise men — The first fruits of the Gentiles. Probably they were Gentile philosophers, who, through the Divine assistance, had improved their knowledge of nature, as a means of leading to the knowledge of the one true God.'¹

A position which he then goes on to defend, writing:

'Nor is it unreasonable to suppose, that God had favoured them with some extraordinary revelations of himself, as he did Melchisedec, Job, and several others, who were not of the family of Abraham; to which he never intended absolutely to confine his favours.'²

In an age of increasing religious plurality, these comments regarding God's willingness and ability to use alternative means of grace to communicate his will have provided a solid foundation from which many Methodists have been able to engage fruitfully in inter-faith dialogue.

The acceptance of Epiphany as a major Christian festival is being encouraged through the inclusion in *The Methodist Worship Book* of a specially written service of Holy Communion for Christmas and Epiphany. Although it is too early to say whether or not the attempt will succeed, I suspect that it is highly unlikely to do so in the short term. Most Methodists celebrate their covenant service at the start of the new year and, as long as the majority of Methodist churches continue to celebrate holy communion no more than once a month, the January communion service will undoubtedly continue to be that which celebrates the renewal of the Covenant rather than that which celebrates the Epiphany.

¹ WEN Matthew 2:1

² WEN Matthew 2:1

Christ's baptism and temptation

The principal significance of Christ's baptism was his anointing by the Holy Spirit, and the inauguration of his public ministry. As Christ, who had no sin to wash away, submitted to baptism, so his behaviour and his actions should dictate what is to be expected of his followers. Wesley's notes on the subject make the Methodist position clear:

'Let our Lord's submitting to baptism teach us a holy exactness in the observance of those institutions which owe their obligation merely to a Divine command. Surely thus it becometh all his followers to fulfil all righteousness.'¹

Similarly, the temptation of Christ is accepted as indicating something of what could be expected to befall all those whom God favoured:

'And immediately the Spirit thrusteth him out into the wilderness — So in all the children of God, extraordinary manifestations of his favour are wont to be followed by extraordinary temptations.'²

Methodism has wrestled with both of these teachings latterly. The Church has grown increasingly uncertain as to what the institutions are which might be said to owe their obligation merely to a divine command, and what an 'extraordinary manifestation' of God's favour might look like today. The extent of the Church's unease over these issues is mirrored by the plethora of reports and memorials to Conference concerning, for example, infant baptism, as well as in the Church's hesitation to proclaim definitively on the phenomenon of Toronto blessing. What is not at issue is either the reality of

¹ WEN Matthew 3:16

² WEN Matthew 4:1; Luke 4:1.

these two Christ events or their overall significance for the individual and the Church.

Methodism teaches that Christ was not baptised because of any lack in his own nature or being, he was baptised for our benefit. This is so that at our baptism we might gain the same grace which was bestowed on him, as suggested by the hymn

'Christ, when for us you were baptized.'¹

Both Christ's baptism and his temptation are held up as Christ events which show Jesus' commonality with our humanity. They are repeatedly used by Methodism to emphasise the necessity of growth and development in faith:

'Almighty God,
whose Son Jesus Christ fasted forty days in the wilderness,
and was tempted as we are, yet without sin:
give us grace to discipline ourselves in obedience to your Spirit'²

Or similarly:

'And now we give you thanks because Christ,
though tempted in every way as we are, did not sin;
through him therefore we may triumph over evil and grow in grace.'³

¹ F. Bland Tucker, *Hymns & Psalms* No. 129

² MWB 534

³ MWB 55

The greatest impact of the teaching derived from the temptation and baptism of Christ is experienced by the whole Church rather than the individual. Methodism teaches that the Church has the responsibility of seeking the true reign of God on earth (F&O 2000,10) but that, in order to do this, it has to face the temptations which Jesus himself endured and triumphed over, namely:

'the temptation to live for bread and not for the word of God; the temptation to test God, and require that God perform according to our wishes; to acquire power instead of true worship.' (F&O 2000, 10)

Christ's teaching

'The style and methods of our Lord's teaching were such as to mark him out from every other teacher.' (Pope II: 209)

Christ's use of the parable was, according to Pope both original and unrivalled (Pope II:209) although Wesley says it was common in Eastern countries. Wesley believed that the parable not only impressed the humble and serious but also

'by an awful mixture of justice and mercy hid the truth from the proud and careless'¹

Christ's teaching is summarised as

'the true way to life everlasting; the royal way which leads to the kingdom; and the only true way.' (SER 186)

1 WEN Matthew 13:3

For Wesley, the paradigmatic expression of Christ's teaching was, according to Maddox, Jesus' sermon on the mount.(Maddox 1994,111) Here we learn that Christ's teaching is for all of humankind, not only for his disciples.(SER 187) His teaching sets the standard we are all required to follow.

Jesus, reveals and defines the potential for all humanity:

'Jesus Christ fulfilled, in perfect love, his Father's will. He gives us the power to do the same by his example and by his inward presence through the Holy Spirit.' (CAT, 16)

Christians are encouraged therefore to pray that they might be able to live their lives in accordance with the teachings of Christ. Local Preachers, in particular, are publicly asked:

'Will you seek to fashion your life according to the way of Christ and in all things seek to promote, not your own glory, but the glory of the Lord?'¹

with a similar commitment being required of those wishing to serve as Worship Leaders.²

Christ's teaching is not contained solely in the words which he spoke which are recorded in the Scriptures. The example which Christ set by his life, death and resurrection is also deemed an essential component of his teaching. The Methodist Catechism, therefore, whilst stating that God

¹ MWB 333

² MWB 351

teaches humanity how to respond to his grace through the Ten Commandments also records that, in Christ, we learn the true nature of these commandments. Jesus taught humanity that

'faith in God means more than obeying commandments; it is giving our whole selves in trust to him.' (CAT, 14)

The importance of Christ's teaching is further emphasised by the comment which accompanies the listing of the commandments:

'Note that the Ten Commandments are a response to what God has done, not a formula for winning his favour.

Each Commandment should be studied alongside the teaching of Christ and the apostles.. which interprets it. (CAT, 15)

The heart of Jesus message, and hence his teaching, is the Kingdom of God (F&O 2000,8) but the law makes little explicit reference to this kingdom. This does not mean that the law can be dispensed with. On the contrary, as Maddox points out, Methodism inherited from Wesley a belief that the law is an expression of God's grace which Christ came to

'establish, illustrate and explain'¹.

not to destroy.(Maddox 1994, 112)

Methodism concludes, therefore, that the teaching of Jesus must have:

'presupposed and completed the teaching of the Old Testament about the Kingdom of God.' (Methodist Church, 1946, 5)

¹ WEN Matthew 5:17

There are two immediate consequences of the Kingdom being at the centre of Christ's teaching. The first is that it makes it almost impossible to separate out the moral or ethical teachings of Christ from his teachings concerning salvation and discipleship.

'What Jesus taught about conduct is related throughout to what he taught about God. His 'ethics' are the ethics of the Kingdom of God.' (Methodist Church, 1946, 4)

This effectively prevents Christ's teaching being reduced to a code of behaviour or a new 'law' to replace the old:

'By no device can the content of the teaching of Jesus be described as a moral code. He refused to legislate either for his own generation or for posterity.' (Methodist Church, 1946, 4)

The second is that it forces recognition of the corporate nature of Christ's teaching. Christ offered no personal instruction, rather he taught the people how to be the people of God. Methodism believes that

'the corporate nature of the Christian life is plainly set forth by what Jesus taught by speech and action.' (Methodist Church, 1946, 12)

These two consequences can be recognised as having provided the theological rationale for the bulk of Methodism's statements, reports and declarations on social, moral and ethical matters.

Christ's ministry

Christ's ministry was once defined by Wesley to be

'the actions and words by which Jesus proved he was the Christ' ¹

Today, Methodism places less emphasis on the concept of proof and more on the value of Christ's ministry as an example of how the kingdom should be proclaimed. It has progressively developed a more comprehensive definition, one which is not ashamed to acknowledge the value of the humanity of Christ. Christ's ministry is thus currently proclaimed by Methodism as including:

'both demonstration and proclamation that the forces of evil are overcome, the Kingdom of God let loose among men.' (SSR 53)

It therefore entails acts of service, healing, preaching, teaching, sacrifice and commitment as well as prayer and worship, prophecy and proclamation. Christ can only be preached effectively, and hence his ministry shared by those whom he has called to serve as his disciples, if he is preached in the light of all that he achieved and all that he means to humanity. This, Wesley referred to as preaching Christ in all his offices (JWW VIII: 371) by which he meant as Prophet, Priest and King. Methodism has continued to do this in the conviction that these offices enable the ministry of Christ to be better understood, defined, and, where possible, emulated.

¹ WEN Preface to Matthew

The mission of Jesus Christ is described firstly in the catechism in prophetic terms as being :

'to proclaim the coming of God's kingdom, to call people to repent and to receive the kingdom of God, to turn from their sins and believe the Good News.' (CAT, 4)

which is in keeping with Wesley's declaration of Christ as:

'The Prophet of the Lord, "who of God is made unto us wisdom;" who, by his word and his Spirit, is with us always, "guiding us into all truth;"' (SER 410)

Christ's humanity is what enables Christ to function as our great high priest.¹ This ministry is not confined to the sacramental, Christ's priestly ministry includes his pastoral roles as servant, healer and teacher :

'Christ offered himself as a servant or minister and opened the way to God for us (his priestly ministry)' (CAT, 24)

This he does not only through his death and resurrection, but also, after his ascension, through his intercession for us. The Priestly ministry of Christ continues in heaven

'Where he lives forever to pray for us'²

Or, as Wesley expressed it, where he lives as:

'Our great High Priest, "taken from among men, and ordained for men, in things pertaining to God;" as such "reconciling us to God by his blood," and "ever living to make intercession for us;"' (SER 410)

¹ WEN Hebrews 2:17

² MSB 57

The last office of Christ is also an everlasting one. Christ is:

'A King forever... reigning in all believing hearts until he has "subdued all things to himself," - until he hath utterly cast out all sin, and brought in everlasting righteousness.' (SER 410)

In keeping with the Trinitarian theological shift noted earlier, however, there has been a growing trend towards accrediting this particular office to God rather than specifically to Christ.

'In the death and resurrection of Jesus, Christians saw both the completion of God's mission and the decisive evidence that God reigns.' (F&O 2000, 9)

In spite of this, Methodists continue to name and proclaim Christ in song and prayer, as the king of kings, and king of Glory¹ although there are noticeably fewer references to Christ as King in *The Methodist Worship Book*, than in previous service books. There is, nonetheless, insufficient evidence as yet to suggest that there has been any real change to the understanding and teaching of Christ's ministry as being three-fold and everlasting. The proclamation of God's, as opposed to Christ's, reign, may be indicative of the general trend away from using patriarchal models of ministry, as well as a deliberate attempt to render the ministry of Christ more inclusive, given the injunction to all Christians to share in that ministry.

¹ See for example, *Hymns & Psalms* No.74.192

Kingly language has of late come to be considered as both exclusive and patriarchal and there has been a deliberate attempt to address this issue.¹ It remains to be seen whether this will ever provoke a complete revision of the current understanding and proclamation of the ministry of Christ. Such a change is possible, for as a kerygmatic community Methodism is engaged in an ongoing process of determining how best to proclaim Christ, as Vincent has commented:

'Wesley taught us how to preach Christ in all His offices, as much His Law as His Gospel. The argument is not that Christ has ceased to be saviour. Rather it is that in the multitude of his offices as Healer, Friend, Saviour, Leader, Example, Lord, Prophet, Priest and King, we must consciously seek that office which will present Him most relevantly today.' (Vincent, 1966, 13)

The transfiguration

Methodist teaching with regard to the transfiguration is worth noting for the rather surprising Christological statements which Wesley makes in commenting on it. It also serves as a good example of how Methodist theology can default to an outdated and largely unsupported Wesleyan perspective when there has been no reason to directly address and/or review the issue in question. Wesley's comments on the relevant New Testament passages and the hymns of *Hymns and Psalms* must be considered to provide the dominant theological perspective in the absence of any other significant kerygmatic resources. Wesley taught a rather literal understanding of the transfiguration as follows:

1. Consider the report *"Inclusive Language and Imagery About God"* (F&O 2000 pp 465-490)

'And was transfigured — Or transformed. The indwelling Deity darted out its rays through the veil of the flesh; and that with such transcendent splendour, that he no longer bore the form of a servant. His face shone with Divine majesty, like the sun in its strength; and all his body was so irradiated by it, that his clothes could not conceal its glory, but became white and glittering as the very light, with which he covered himself as with a garment. '1

The Christological implications of this particular Wesleyan perspective are nowhere detailed in the Methodist *kerygma*. The language of 'indwelling deity' hints, not only at the disjunction in the nature of Christ already referred to, with the flesh being presented as a mere vessel housing the divinity of Christ, but also at a peculiarity noted by Deschner (1960,17) of Wesley's presentation of the divine nature of Christ as an almost tangible substance. The problems of Wesley's Christology are further exacerbated by his use of the expression '*bore the form of a servant*' which sounds a distinctly docetic note. The language was perhaps necessary for Wesley to make the point that the transfiguration originates within Christ. It is not something that is done to him. This is not the Father glorifying the Son, it is more a case of the glory of the Son momentarily escaping its human confines !

The Methodist belief in the ongoing processes of human salvation, and in the ability of humanity to truly walk where Christ has trod and to be perfected in love, is probably the theological root for this rather literal interpretation. What Christ achieved can be achieved by all Christians; they

1 WEN Matthew 17:2

too can be transformed, the divine love that is within them can and will transfigure them into the likeness of Christ. The transfiguration is thus a foretaste of our own transformation into glory.

'How glorious the body of Christ is, we may guess from his transfiguration... When our Saviour discovered but a little of that glory which he now possesses, and which in due time he will impart to his followers,...This excellency of our heavenly bodies will probably arise, in great measure, from the happiness of our souls.' (JWW VII: 532)

Although Wesley struggles with the Christological language in order to express this axiom of his faith, his meaning is nonetheless certain; by virtue of the transfiguration, humanity was able to perceive the glory which is reserved for it by Christ, as the hymn states:

'Fulfiller of the past,
Promise of things to be:
We hail your body glorified,
And our redemption see.'¹

More in keeping with the rest of the Methodist *kerygma* is the belief that this transfiguration is not reserved for the life to come, but can, to some degree at least, be witnessed in this life:

'The unspeakable joy that we then shall feel will break through our bodies and shine forth in our countenances; as the joy of the soul, even in this life, has some influence upon the countenance, by rendering it more open and cheerful.' (JWW VII: 532)

¹ Joseph Armitage Robinson. *Hymns & Psalms* No.156

Christ's passion and cross

Given Wesley's reserve about Christ's humanity, it is unsurprising that he should have bequeathed to Methodism a correspondingly tentative theology of Christ's passion and the cross.

Deschner notes that Wesley had a clear tendency to reinterpret any references to human weakness in the biblical account of Christ's passion. So much so, it would seem, that, rather than refer to the passion as Christ's suffering, Wesley comments that

'Christ's passion was a grappling with the powers of darkness.'¹

This is one aspect of Wesley's theology which has almost been completely overturned in the contemporary *kerygma* which proclaims the suffering of Christ as an undeniable aspect of his humanity.

The funeral service for example, teaches that:

'In the presence of death,
Christ offers us sure ground
for hope and confidence and even for joy,
because he shared our human life and death,'²

And the service for healing asks the Christ who

'hung in agony on the cross'³,

¹ WEN Luke 22:44

² MWB 449

³ MWB 412

to bring strength to those who suffer.

Deschner attributed Wesley's inadequate acknowledgement of Christ's humanity to a determination to present Christ as an idealised second Adam, in support of a penal substitution view of the atonement. Whether or not this was the case, there is little support for it today. Outler, for example, commented that one of the '*salient theological motifs*' of the Methodist heritage is

'A complex doctrine of the Atonement, which emphasises the Total Event of Jesus Christ as the atoning "act" by which the power of evil is broken and men are reconciled to God. Methodism has embraced both the patristic notions of *lutron* (What Aulen calls "the dramatic theory of the atonement") and the Abelardian notion of Jesus Christ as the exemplar of God's sacrificial love.'(Outler A. in an unpublished paper, quoted in Williams 1969, 74)

Neither Conference, nor any body acting on behalf of Conference, has ever made a comprehensive statement with regard to the atonement. There has likewise been no indication given as to which of the so called traditional 'theories of atonement' Methodism as a whole subscribes to. On the contrary, the only document this century which has had the approval of Conference to speak of the 'Message of Methodism' states that,

'Methodism has never been eager to formulate a rigid doctrine of the Cross. The mystery of divine love defies analysis and is sometimes debased by speculation.' (Methodist Church, 1946, 19)

The most detailed comment made is that of the senior catechism approved by the Conference of 1951 which states in response to the question 'What did Jesus do for us on the cross?',

'He atoned for our sins, that is, He reconciled us to God and obtained for us all the benefits of salvation.'
(MMC 1952, 217)

Just how that atonement is achieved is not detailed, except in terms of the relationship of Jesus to God. The later revision of the catechism acknowledges the many possible biblical interpretations of the atonement by listing them:

- he gave his life to redeem all people;
- he is compared to the Passover Lamb, sacrificed as a sign of God's freeing of his people;
- he is also compared with the lamb sacrificed on the Day of Atonement' (CAT, 8)

Whilst Methodism seemingly unashamedly avoids the 'how' of the atonement, it nonetheless insists that the atonement is only possible as a consequence of the totality of Jesus, i.e. his life and his works as well as his relationship both with God and ourselves. After listing the 'expressions' the catechism goes on to state

'None of these is complete by itself: together they point to the fact that through the cross God acted decisively on behalf of the world he had created.' (CAT, 8)

Hymns and Psalms contains hymns which support every recognised theory of atonement, from satisfaction to substitution, and hence cannot realistically be used as a reliable indicator of a consensual 'Methodist' opinion. The current Methodist service book is a more contemporary document, but it too contains insufficient material to do more than state that Methodism believes that atonement took place at the instigation of God

through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

It is possible to build a case in support of a Methodist penal substitutionary theory of atonement by exaggerating the importance of such texts as those in the Baptismal service

'For you he suffered death on the cross.' ¹

Or those from the 1952 senior catechism

'We are forgiven by the grace of God, through faith in Jesus Christ who died for our sins.' (MMC 1952, 217)

But there is little else in the worship book to directly support the theory as it is normally propounded. Williams (1969,83) in his exposition of Wesley's theology, claims that the central point of this theory was of great importance to Wesley, suggesting that it is possible to hear Anselm in Wesley's statement of the problem which man faces:

'But what shall he give in exchange for his soul which is forfeited to the just vengeance of God? "Wherewithal shall he come before the Lord?" How shall he pay Him that he oweth? Were he from this moment to perform the most perfect obedience to every command of God, this would make no amends for a single sin, for any one act of past obedience; seeing he owes God all the service he is able to perform, from this moment to all eternity; could he pay this, it would make no manner of amends for what he ought to have done before. He sees himself therefore utterly helpless with regard to atoning for his past sins; utterly unable to make any amends to God, to pay any ransom for his own soul.' (SER 193)

¹ MWB 108

There is some support for this in the Easter Vigil service wherein Jesus is recognised as

'our Lord Jesus Christ who has ransomed us with his blood, and reconciled us to the Father'¹

Wesley's works and Methodist hymnody can, however, just as easily be used to provide support for the 'Moral Influence Theory' of atonement. The Methodist emphasis on holiness and growth in discipleship make this theory as prominent as that of penal substitution. All of the works of Christ contribute to the work of salvation. Christ did not merely die our death, he lived the life to which we are called. Thus the words of the liturgy

'In the fullness of time you sent your son to be our Saviour and Deliverer. Made of flesh and blood he lived our life and died our death upon the cross.'²

Despite the underlying emphasis in Methodism of Christ as leader and teacher, as the example which all Christians are required to follow, there is as little substantial support for the moral influence theory as there is for that of penal substitution.

The last of the major theories of atonement also has support in Contemporary Methodist liturgy which thanks God for the fact that:

'When we had fallen into sin you gave your only son Jesus Christ to suffer death upon the cross for our redemption making there the one perfect sacrifice for the sins of the whole world.'³

¹ MWB 275

² MWB 169

³ MWB 226

Sacrificial language is also used in many of the hymns used at Easter and at Holy Communion as, for example, in the Wesleyan hymns which speak of Christ as the bleeding sacrifice¹

In spite of the apparent ambiguity with regard to which, if any, of the above atonement theories Methodism subscribes to, it would be wrong to assume that Methodism does not have a doctrine of the atonement. The Methodist doctrine of the atonement is that it is a mystery.

'Sing, my tongue the saviour's glory
Of his cross the mystery sing;²

This is not 'cop-out' or a refusal to investigate. On the contrary, it is an invitation to explore and question further the complex relationship between God and all of creation as it has been revealed in the totality of Christ. By refusing to predicate the atonement, Methodism suggests that what God undertook and achieved is not knowable in any algorithmic or systematic sense. The responsibility of atonement theology is not to explicate the processes by which God achieves what he does, but to open up the mystery to the dynamic of the so that it can be experienced rather than explained, known rather than articulated, lived rather than discussed.(Stacey 1987,145f)

¹ Charles Wesley, *Hymns & Psalms* Nos. 217,160

² MWB 250

Perhaps one of the main reasons that Methodism has refused to align itself more emphatically with one or other of the atonement theologies has been its unease with the post-reformation individualistic bias which they seem to imply. Methodism understands itself best as community, society, as a 'people'. The suspicion has been that insufficient attention has been paid to the atonement of all of creation, hence the prayer:

Almighty and everlasting God,
whose Son Jesus Christ is the resurrection and the life:
set his passion, cross and death
between your judgement and our souls,
now and in the hour of our death,
and bring us, with the whole creation,
to the light and glory of your kingdom;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**¹

Theories of atonement provide opportunities for exploration into the nature of God and his love of his creation but, within Methodism, they are not held to be either descriptions or definitions of God's great achievements. God is mystery.

The final dimension of Christ's passion and the Cross is Christ's death and descent into hell. That Christ died on the cross has never been questioned by Methodism. What happened during the time that his body lay in the tomb is less certain. Wesley did not hold to the doctrine of Christ's descent into hell and famously omitted it from his 25 articles². Although the

¹ MWB 263

² Written for use in the American Church only.

American Methodist Conference of 1786 followed his lead and deleted the Article from the Apostles Creed as used in their Sunday services, British Methodism has been more cautious.

Until the introduction of *The Methodist Service Book*, Methodists proclaimed that Christ descended into hell, at every service concerned with entry into the Church when use was made of the Apostles Creed. The proclamation was footnoted to the effect that by hell was meant 'Hades or the world of Spirits'.¹ The wording of the Apostles Creed was subsequently altered to read

'He descended to the dead'²

The caution is indicative of a return in Methodism to a reluctance to speak of either hell or the devil. Wesley believed in the devil but preached the love of God, only one of his forty-four sermons being directly concerned with 'Satan'. In the senior catechism, hell is defined as the place of separation from God (Methodist Church 1952, 219). The revised catechism makes no mention of hell at all. Furthermore, although there are forty-eight hymns which refer to hell in *Hymns and Psalms*, there is not a single reference to hell in *The Methodist Worship Book*. Similarly, although the devil is mentioned both directly and as 'the evil one' in Methodism's prayers and

¹ BoO 90.113

² MSB 10

hymns, up to 1983, there is no mention of him in the new catechism and only one mention in the Methodist Worship Book.¹ Although there remain over fifteen references to the devil or Satan in Methodist Hymnody, there would appear to be little in the contemporary Methodist *kerygma* to support a belief in either a place of damnation, or its ruler. This is not really surprising as the purpose of the *kerygma* is to proclaim Christ and hence his kingdom, not the devil.

The resurrection and the ascension

Methodism proclaims the bodily resurrection with a degree of reservation. The catechism talks only of God bringing Christ back from death with great power; it makes no mention of the resurrected body, except to note that those who trust in Christ will not only share in Christ's triumph over death but will

'rise, transformed like him, to perfect life in the presence of God.' (CAT, 36)

From this it could be argued that there is as great a reluctance to speak of the resurrected body in Methodism today, as there was in Wesley's time. This does not detract from the importance of the resurrection.

The Methodist belief in both the resurrection of Jesus and in the accessibility of the risen Christ is total. The certainty which lies behind the

¹ MWB 535

confidence to pose the question 'Who do you say that I am?' stems from the conviction that the person who asks the question can be known. Jesus Christ is Lord, not simply because others proclaim him as Lord, but because he reveals himself as such; he can be experienced directly, as Vincent wrote:

'The glorious achievement of Methodism's assessment of Christ was to insist that He was personally available to religious experience.' (Vincent, 1966, 59)

Methodists believe and teach that Jesus Christ can be known, his resurrection can be 'realised' or experienced, by the individual but also, through the proper practice of religion, by the whole community.

'Jesus Christ suffered death and was raised again for us so that we might live for him...being joined to Christ is described as a new creation.' (CAT, 8)

It is believed that between the resurrection of Jesus and the day of resurrection, regardless of whether that is the day when an individual Christian dies or the 'last day', the present resurrection exists to be experienced. (Jones 1972,101f) Christians have been raised with Christ by virtue of their baptism – the tense of the verb is important. The resurrection which humanity shares with Christ is a current reality not a future event.

Christ's work of salvation

Methodism's tendency towards a unitarianism of the Son is hinted at in the title of this subsection of the hymn book but finds little support in most other components or forms of the Methodist *kerygma* today.

The Methodist catechism thus first defines salvation as

'the forgiveness of our sin, deliverance from guilt, and the gift of new life in Christ.' (CAT, 6)

before attempting to explain how God saves us. That there has been a **shift** in Methodist thinking here can be seen by comparing the answers which the two catechisms give in response to the question 'How does God save us?'

In 1952 the answer was:

'By his grace he freely converts, justifies, regenerates and sanctifies every repentant sinner who has faith in Jesus Christ crucified for us.'(Methodist Church 1952, 218)

By 1986 this had changed to:

'God as a free gift, converts us by his grace, turning us from rebels into friends. He puts us right with himself, gives us new life in Christ, and makes us his own holy people through the Holy Spirit. We receive his gifts when we turn to him in repentance and put our faith in Jesus Christ who was crucified and raised again for us.'(CAT 6)

which is identifiably trinitarian. More tellingly, in 1952, faith in Jesus Christ was defined as follows:

Faith in Jesus Christ is trusting in Him alone for our salvation.'(Methodist Church 1952, 219)

which, by 1986 had been changed to read :

'Faith in Jesus Christ is trusting that through him alone God gives us his salvation. We demonstrate our faith by desiring to do God's will and by the practical love we show to others.' (CAT 8)

The changes cannot be attributed solely to the expressed desire to address the fact that many of those for whom the catechism is intended are not familiar with traditional Christian language.(CAT 2) The change in 'ownership' of salvation and the addition of the proof of faith in the latter definition provide further evidence of the theological differences mentioned earlier. They also demonstrate an increasing awareness of the relationship between salvation and community and salvation and creation.

Whilst Bett (1937,147) undoubtedly claimed too much for Methodism's Arminian theological achievement in suggesting that it had made an end of Calvinism, it is true that Methodism has been loud in its denunciation of the Calvinistic doctrine of pre-destination, and its insistence that:

'For all, For all my saviour died'¹

With regard to humanity, salvation is believed to be a process which

'begins now... and is completed with God in heaven.' (CAT, 6)

Salvation for humans is not an achievement, or a status, but the means whereby God's people may be perfected in love. That this is, for some, an instantaneous possibility is not denied by Methodism, but it is held to be somewhat unusual.(CAT 18) It is more common to progress in stages, from prevenient grace, through faith to justification and new life, until

¹ Charles Wesley , *Hymns & Psalms* No. 226

ultimately achieving sanctification or, as is it better known, Christian perfection, which is the full extent of the work of Christ in humanity.

Whilst this might appear to invite a highly personal view of Christ's work of salvation, it should be set in the context of the growing belief in Methodism that the main work of salvation is the creation of the Church, a new community which experiences a foretaste of the life which God intends for all humankind:

'the effects of God's salvation transcended the lives of individual people. Barriers which separated groups and communities from one another were broken down.' (F&O 2000, 9)

The work of Salvation is thus recognised as being corporate, not private. The forgiveness and deliverance which the catechism refers to must be both individual and corporate. That this has been a growing awareness is evidenced by the change in the profession of the Nicene Creed. In *The Book of Offices*, the creed commenced

'I believe in One God' ¹

which was changed to

'We believe in One God'²

¹ BoO 64

² MSB 54

in *The Methodist Service Book* and all later texts. There is also evidence of an increased acknowledgement of the need for the Church as a body to repent and receive the forgiveness of God if it is to be able to demonstrate the new life in Christ which it proclaims.

Christ's coming in glory

Nagler (1918, 84) makes a common mistake in assuming that because Wesley fails to develop a full scheme of eschatology he had no interest in the subject at all. Likewise, Lawson (1955) commented that

'Wesley was not one of those to whom a vivid sense of the end of the world is at hand was an important part of his religion.' (Lawson, 1955, 26)

And Mercer (1967) is probably indicative of the position adopted by most scholars when he writes:

'Wesley does not develop a unique approach to eschatology but rather draws the particulars of the general eschatological process from the concepts of eighteenth and pre-eighteenth century orthodoxy.' (Mercer, 1967, 57)

The same cannot be said of Methodism and the theology it has developed from its Wesleyan foundation. Methodism's interest in Christ's coming in glory is not constrained to the practical considerations of how to flee from the wrath to come, and, although it too has never developed a full scheme of eschatology, its interest in the subject is reflected in the content of its *kerygma*.

Although only one of the hymns in this section of *Hymns and Psalms* was written in the twentieth century, the evolution of Methodist thinking on this issue is evidenced in other kerygmatic components such as Methodism's liturgy, church statements etc. These testify to a belief in a realised eschatology, consistent with Methodism's soteriology and anthropology.

'Time, and history are not absolutes' (F&O 2000, 59)

The eschaton is both an eternal reality and a future event and hence can be experienced and realised whilst it is yet to be. The Church proclaims the reality of the day of the Lord, when the Lord will come again to reign, through its celebration of Advent¹ and in the words which proclaim the mystery of Christ:

'Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again.'²

It also does so through its adherence to the creeds. At the same time it stresses the reality of the

'foretaste of the heavenly banquet'³

in its hymnody, liturgy and prayers. For example:

¹ Consider for example the wording of the great prayer of thanksgiving as well as the concluding prayer and final blessings. Holy Communion for Advent in MWB pp117-128

² MWB 194

³ MWB 197

'In the darkness of this age that is passing away
may the glory of your kingdom,
which the saints enjoy,
surround our steps as we journey on.
May we reflect the light of your glory this day
and so be made ready to come into your presence,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.'¹

An important distinction is made between the experience of the eschatological hope as evidenced in the above prayer, and the eschatological events themselves which belong firmly in the future. The church, whilst attempting to anticipate the kingdom through its vocation to testify to God's reign and share in his mission, does not attempt to claim that mission for itself, but rather recognises that

'it must hold to Christ, seeking renewal, remaining with and for the world, and join its praises with the Church in heaven as it awaits the coming Kingdom.' (F&O 2000, 59)

Belief in the reality of that future is unlikely to be what drives the evangelistic enterprise of the Methodist Church. Wesley's injunction to flee is seldom heard today and there would appear to be less certainty in his belief that death seals the soul's relation to God.²

¹ MWB 473

² The report on Methodist Doctrine and the Preaching of Universalism, adopted in 1992 for example, acknowledged that Universalist tendencies have always existed in the Church at large, for, it suggests, no Christian can be content with the thought that some might be forever separated from God. (F&O 2000, 580ff)

The Eternal Spirit

In spite of Davies' claim (Davies 1990, 11f) that a stress on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is a dominant characteristic of Methodist Christianity, Methodist pneumatology would appear to be no more advanced or developed than that of most other denominations. On the contrary, it could be argued that Methodist pneumatology is decidedly lacking as a result of its former loyalty to the monarchical concept of the trinity and a consistent over-emphasis on the operations, as opposed to the nature, of the Holy Spirit. Moltmann (1999,289), for example, observed that it is one thing to work backwards from the operations of the Holy Spirit in order to arrive at an understanding of the essential nature of the Spirit, it is not so easy to perceive that same nature from an appreciation of the Spirit's constitutive relationships. If, therefore, Gunton (1997) is correct in his claim that:

'Father, Son and Spirit are what they are by virtue of their otherness-in-relation' (Gunton 1997, 13)

then it would be reasonable to assume that any pneumatology which does not take adequate account of the constitutive relationship of the Holy Spirit, as a consequence of being based largely on the evidence of its operations, is in some way incomplete. Thus, although the doctrine of the Holy Spirit has played a pivotal role in Methodism, it would be erroneous to assume that Methodism has a balanced and coherent pneumatology; this needs to be demonstrated, and is the primary task of this section.

According to the evidence of its *kerygma*, Methodist pneumatology has changed over the course of the century, albeit slowly and, in some areas, almost imperceptibly. Questions concerning the nature and ontology of the Holy Spirit, brought to the fore largely as a consequence of ecumenical dialogue¹, have not only been addressed, but in some instances answered, by changes to Methodist liturgy and teaching. For example, Wesley's retention of the Anglican article² concerning the Holy Spirit, coupled with his comments concerning the procession, namely:

'that He proceeds from the Son, as well as from the Father, may be fairly argued from His being called "the Spirit of Christ"(1Peter 1:11), and from His being here said to be sent by Christ from the Father, as well as sent by the Father in His name.' John 15:26

make it clear that early Methodism supported the Western Church against the East in the filioque controversy. The position adopted by Methodism today is far more ambiguous. Notwithstanding that Wesley's notes, as quoted above, form part of its doctrinal standard, Methodism has attempted to take seriously the depth of feeling within the Orthodox community and have the courage to question whether or not the West was right to insert the filioque clause, unilaterally, into the ecumenical creed. Methodism's reluctance to make a unilateral declaration of its own regarding the procession is largely due to its belief that the doctrinal issue is of secondary

1 For example, through having to formulate a response to the World Council of Churches report on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry.

2 Wesley wrote his own version of the Articles for the newly founded Church in America. Wesleyan Scholars have tended to consider the changes which he made indicative of his own personal theological position.

importance when compared to the need for reconciliation in the universal Church of Christ.(F&O 2000 576-579)

It is nonetheless true that the lack of theological import given to the ontology and procession of the Holy Spirit could also be indicative of the paucity of academic theological reflection within Methodism concerning the constitutive relationships of the Holy Spirit. The filioque clause has not been seen as something which directly affects the Church's proclamation of the Holy Spirit as the presence of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is also not deemed contrary to the teaching that the Spirit of God is also known by Christians to be the Spirit of Christ.(F&O 2000, 622) The experience of the Holy Spirit by Methodism as the gift which is given by God to confirm the work of Christ, and as the giver of the gifts necessary to enable Christians to follow Christ, actively encourages this ambiguity. For example, the hymn *Father of Everlasting Grace*¹ includes the lines

'Thou hast, in honour of thy Son,
The gift unspeakable sent down,
The Spir't of life, and power, and love.'

which Spirit is then redefined in the next verse as being the Spirit of God's Son, before then being referred to as the one who can sanctify.

'Send him the sprinkled blood to apply,
Send him our souls to sanctify'

¹ Charles Wesley. *Hymns & Psalms* No.300

Wesley defined justification to be what God does for us through his Son, and sanctification to be that which he works in us by his Spirit.(SER 52) On the basis of such operational distinctions, Wesley's theology was said to be closer to tri-theism than modalism.(Staples, 1986,92) The same cannot be said of Methodist theology today. The essential role of the person of the Holy Spirit is acknowledged in every aspect of God's action, from creation through to Salvation and the coming of the kingdom. For example, Methodism proclaims that:

'Jesus comes to us in the power of the Spirit, as the Man of the Spirit, as God the Son. His ministry, teaching and work were in the truth and grace of the Spirit. He was raised from death and is present to all space and time in the Spirit's power.' (F&O 2000, 622)

It likewise defines the Holy Spirit to be God's saving and perfecting power (F&O 2000, 623). More emphatically, the Holy Spirit is spoken of as being

'God communicating to all that is, sharing the Being of the Trinity with all life.' (F&O 2000, 622)

Such affirmations of the inclusive, trinitarian activities of the Holy Spirit not only serve to negate the perception engendered by the Western insistence on the Spirit's subordination to the Son, they also help to recover what Moltmann refers to as the

'synoptic Spirit Christology which, in the course of history, was driven out by the pneumatology of Paul and John' (Moltmann 1999, 293)

It is unlikely that such developments could have been derived from the Church's experience of the operations of the Holy Spirit alone. As such, they testify to Methodism's evolving pneumatology resulting from Methodism's participation in debate and discernment with the rest of the Christian church.

The latest Methodist statement with regard to the nature and personhood of the Holy Spirit is a further case in point. This statement arose out of the need to respond to a phenomenon which crossed ecumenical boundaries, namely the 'Toronto Blessing.' The reluctance of Methodism to re-define the Holy Spirit in phenomenological terms alone is evidenced by its refusal to either affirm or deny the testimonies of those who had experienced this phenomenon. Methodism's response was to focus rather on the trinitarian nature of the works of the Holy Spirit, and on defining the person of the Holy Spirit as:

'the presence of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ to and in all that is' (F&O 2000, 622)

The argument that the personhood of the Holy Spirit has been largely neglected by Methodism (Spivey, 1953,127) can be denied on the grounds that, although there may be little mention of it in Methodism's liturgy and hymnody, it is nonetheless well attested to in other components of its *kerygma* as, for example, in the following passage from Wesley's notes:

'The Spirit's coming, and being sent by our Lord from the Father to testify of Him, are personal characters, and plainly distinguish Him from the Father and the Son; and His title as the Spirit of Truth, together with His proceeding from the Father, can agree to none but a divine person.'¹

Consequently, the Holy Spirit is no impersonal influence. As the catechism states, in support of the Creeds:

'From eternity he is God. He has been present and active in the world from the beginning - in creation, in the inspiring of the prophets, in the equipping of God's servants' (CAT, 36)

It is probably true to say that whilst the Methodist understanding of the ontology of the person of the Holy Spirit may be undergoing change, the Methodist understanding of the nature of the personhood remains much as it always has been. Undoubtedly this is because the person of the Holy Spirit has been known rather than defined by Methodism as

'the Spirit of wisdom and understanding;
the Spirit of discernment and inner strength;
the Spirit of knowledge, holiness, and awe.'²

Methodism's charismatic origin has meant that the experience of the Holy Spirit has been considered the norm rather than the exception for Christians. Hymns invoking the Holy Spirit do so primarily as a request for the experience of the Holy Spirit in terms of assurance, confirmation, new life in Christ and sanctification, a request which it is expected will be met.

¹ WEN .John 15:26

² MWB 112

There is undeniably much of value in the Methodist appreciation of the personhood of the Holy Spirit as it has evolved from its reflection on the operations of the Holy Spirit. In particular, the understanding of salvation as being a process rather than an event, initiated and completed in the individual by God through the Holy Spirit's mediation of firstly prevenient grace and lastly Christian perfection. It is therefore neither possible, or desirable, to totally dispense with Methodism's pneumatological inheritance. The initial concerns regarding the possibility of a lack in Methodist pneumatology, may, I suggest, be considered largely unwarranted, as there is sufficient evidence to show that Methodism has, where necessary, been able to develop its existing teachings rather than formulate radically new ones. The academic doctrine of the Holy Spirit may well exist only in embryonic form in Methodism, but so comprehensive has its appreciation of the operations of the Holy Spirit been that it would appear that Methodism has all the theological resources necessary to allow its pneumatology to mature to meet a need rather than be replaced. This is, I suspect, due in no small part to Methodism's willingness to be led in its understanding and proclamation of the Holy Spirit, by the Holy Spirit.

The giver of life

'God creates all things in the power of the Spirit, sustains the universe, and will bring all things to fulfillment in the Spirit.' (F&O 2000, 622)

The Spirit is the creative life-giving power of God whose arena is all of space and time(F&O 2000,622), but whose work is not restricted to the physical or material realms. As the source of the resurrection power which was made known in Christ, the Spirit is able to free humanity from its enslavement to sin and death by enabling the individual to be re-born. It is this gift of new-life, of eternal life, which persuades Christians to worship and adore the Spirit as 'The Lord, The Giver of Life.'

'by whom we are born into the family of God,
and made members of the body of Christ;
whose witness confirms us;
whose wisdom teaches us;
whose power enables us;
who will do for us more than we can ask or think.'¹

It is the Holy Spirit who enables people to face the truth about their mortal existence and to find the resources necessary to make their life a creative and trusting relationship with God (SSR 54). A part of this truth is the knowledge that humans can be born again in the Spirit, to a life of everlasting fellowship with God. Being born again in the Spirit is not the same as being justified. In justification, God does something *for* us, whereas in rebirth the Spirit does something *in* us, our very nature changes(SER 174). Rebirth is:

'the change wrought in the whole soul by the almighty Spirit of God then it is created anew in Christ Jesus.' (SER 520)

¹ MWB 283

Without this rebirth, Wesley believed it was not possible to be happy, even in this world (SER 521). Only in the new-life, given and sustained by the Spirit, does the individual have the power to grow in grace and holiness, to be without sin and to live only to Christ, i.e. to be sanctified or made perfect in love.

Methodism proclaims the doctrine of Christian perfection or sanctification, which Wesley insisted was a work of the Holy Spirit, but which is now more commonly presented as trinitarian.¹ The doctrine has always aroused a certain amount of controversy, not least because it teaches that the gift can be given either gradually or at one moment.²

A further area of controversy is Wesley's insistence that

'A Christian is so far perfect as not to commit sin.' (SER 472)

He also insisted that Christian perfection does not imply an exemption from ignorance or mistakes or infirmities or temptations, it is, he says, only another term for holiness (SER 461). Without denying Wesley's claim, Methodism seems more at ease today teaching that even after being born in the Spirit, Christians are:

'always wrestling with evil and dying to sin, always being forgiven and strengthened... being directed in the new way of love.' (F&O 2000, 623)

1 Consider for example the wording in the current Methodist Catechism which explains the doctrine in terms of the love of God, the gift of the Holy Spirit and the necessity of the Christian's dependence on Jesus Christ

2 Although Wesley never claimed this for himself.

Being born in the power of the Holy Spirit can thus be seen in some cases to be precursor to ultimate holiness. It is certainly believed to be the precursor to true happiness and, more importantly, to eternal salvation. The knowledge of this re-birth is therefore important, and it is this which provides the basis for the Methodist doctrine of assurance. Methodism continues to teach that Christians can be assured of their salvation through the testimony of the Holy Spirit (CAT 10) which is:

'an inward impression on the soul, whereby the Spirit of God directly witnesses to my spirit, that I am a child of God' (SER 115)

As with sanctification, not all Christians experience this gift of the Spirit in an instant.

Most of Methodism's teaching with regard to the Holy Spirit is summarised in Wesley's declaration:

'I believe the infinite and eternal Spirit of God, equal with the Father and the Son, to be not only perfectly holy in himself, but the immediate cause of all holiness in us; enlightening our understandings, rectifying our wills and affections, renewing our natures, uniting our persons to Christ, assuring us of the adoption of sons, leading us in our actions; purifying and sanctifying our souls and bodies, to a full and eternal enjoyment of God.' (JWW X: 100)

The one area where Methodism and Wesley do seem to be at variance is with regard to the link between Baptism and being born in the Spirit. Wesley's teaching concerning this is inconsistent. In one sermon, for example, he states that infants who are baptized are also born again at the

same time, but that the same cannot be said of adults(SER 523). Methodism currently prays the same prayer for both infants and adults, namely that

'those baptized in this water
may die to sin,
be raised with Christ
and be born to new life in the family of your church.'¹

It is unclear as to whether or not the new life referred to corresponds to being born in the Spirit. The use of the adjective 'new' suggests that this is the case. If so, it is a change to the understanding professed earlier and reflected in the baptismal prayers of *The Methodist Service Book*. Previously, the prayer used in the baptizing of infants could be distinguished from that offered for those who could answer for themselves by the exclusion of the single line

'having professed their faith and being born again of the Spirit'²

which text seems to suggest, on the grounds that infants cannot profess their faith, that infants are not born again of the Spirit by their baptism.

Currently, therefore, Methodism would appear to be saying that the gift of life which the Spirit offers is available to all, whether or not they are able to profess the faith. New life is conferred by the Spirit in the sacrament of baptism by which all are made a part of the body of Christ. The question of

¹ MWB 66

² MSB 34.8

whether or not those who are baptised today will need to be 'reborn' again – as Wesley would have claimed, remains largely unanswered. It would be easy to assume from Methodism's insistence on the 'once and for all' nature of Baptism, that not only would a second 'rebirth' be unlikely to happen, it would also be unnecessary.

In the Church

The life which the Holy Spirit gives is nurtured and realized in the Church which is called into being through the same Spirit (F&O 2000,623) and which must likewise be sanctified and perfected in love. The Church is governed by the Holy Spirit¹ whose presence alone:

'makes possible the credibility of the Church as a witness and sign in the world of new life in Christ' (F&O 2000,10)

The presence of the Holy Spirit within the Church is experienced in many ways, not least through the sacraments, the reading and hearing of the Gospel, the Church's prayer and pastoral care. Without the Holy Spirit, for example, the Church's attempts at prayer would be mere gabble and pretension (F&O 2000,623). There has been a noticeable change in the way in which the Holy Spirit is referred to in Methodist worship and liturgy over the course of the century. These changes reflect not only the changes in Methodist pneumatology discussed earlier, but also the way in which the

¹ MWB 539

culture and context of worship in Britain in the twentieth century has changed.

Methodist services of Holy Communion, for example, once made no reference to the Holy Spirit in connection with the bread and wine.¹ In particular, the earlier services contained nothing which could be interpreted as a prayer of invocation. By the close of the century every version of the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving included in *The Methodist Worship Book* included a prayer of invocation and a direct reference to the role of the Spirit in enabling the bread and wine to 'be for us the body and blood of Christ'. This development is important as it could possibly be interpreted as being a reversal of the declaration made by the Wesleyan Conference in 1908 that

'the presence of Christ by His Spirit in the sacraments is realized by the faith of his people.' (Watkin-Jones, 1937,93)

The bread and the wine, as symbols of Christ's person, were then seemingly secondary to the faith of the people in enabling the sacrament to be both a converting and a sanctifying ordinance. The wording used in *The Methodist Worship Book* hints at an attempt to bring about a return in Methodism to Wesley's stated belief that:

¹ See for example, both *The Book of Offices* and the later *Methodist Service Book*. *The Methodist Service Book* contains the prayer that 'by the power of the Holy Spirit, we who receive your gifts of bread and wine may share in the body and blood of Christ.' (MSB 58)

'the elements are not mere signs, but "the sign transmits the signified"' (Bowmer 1961, 52)

It was this transmission which convinced Wesley that Holy Communion could be a converting ordinance, a means by which the Holy Spirit could induce the faith which is the necessary precursor to salvation.

The change permits the assumption that the Holy Spirit is concerned with making the bread and the wine something other than they formerly were, i.e. with making the elements effectual rather than enabling the communicants to 'experience' or 'know' themselves to be other than they were prior to the sacrament. This interpretation means that the elements can be more easily recognised as pertaining to the whole of the trinity; the Father to whom the offering is made, Christ whose body and blood is shared in bread and wine, and the Spirit by whose power the elements are 'realised'. This eucharistic presentation of the trinity is important as it is a reversal of the order of the monarchical model; the Spirit is acknowledged to be the means by which the Son is made real and hence the Father known. It is probable that this particular modification to Methodist liturgy owed more to ecumenical than theological consideration. There can be no denying that the changes make the eucharistic offering closer to that of the Catholic community. Unease over the extent to which this change alters Methodist understanding may be one of the motives behind the intent of the Faith and Order Committee to review and present to the Conference of 2002 or 2003 a

statement on the Methodist understanding of eucharistic theology and practice.

Ecumenical dialogue has also played a part in shaping recent developments in the Methodist understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit in Baptism, confirmation and ordination. Whilst Methodism retains its conviction that there are only two sacraments, it acknowledges that the Holy Spirit can make any occasion 'sacramental'. It has striven to find a balance between its own practices and convictions and those of other churches with whom it regularly shares in worship. Thus the Methodist service of Reception into Full Membership has over a period of time come to double as a confirmation service in spite of the fact that there are recognized and stated differences between the two¹.

Cultural rather than ecumenical changes lie behind the recent acknowledgement by the Methodist Church of a change in its understanding of the way in which the Holy Spirit is active in the inspiration and interpretation of Scripture. Methodism continues to teach that all Scripture is inspired by the Holy Spirit but it now believes that there is no longer a consensus as to what that means in practice. Religious and denominational pluralism have provoked the twin questions of inspiration and interpretation to the extent that there is now no agreement

¹ For a full exploration of the differences see "*The Use of the Term 'Confirmation'*" adopted in 1962 (F&O 1984, 89)

within the Church as to how, or indeed if, the Holy Spirit can render Scripture authoritative for the Church's policy and practice.

In reviewing this matter, Methodism recently came to the conclusion that

'the Holy Spirit speaks through the Scriptures to awaken and nurture faith and provide ethical direction for the Christian community... True biblical interpretation depends on the Holy Spirit, recognizes the literary character and the historical and cultural background of each book, takes account of the teaching of the rest of Scripture and acknowledges a rich diversity of theology and contexts.' (F&O 2000, 661)

It then suggests that no less than seven different models of biblical authority can be found to exist within the Church, each seemingly consistent with Wesley's and Methodism's former teaching with regard to Scripture and the role of the Holy Spirit in its formation and interpretation.

That the Holy Spirit might inspire the Church to a policy or belief which seems to some to be contrary to Scripture or tradition is not only confirmed by contemporary Methodist practice, such as permitting the re-marriage of divorced persons, but also has to be accepted as a fact of Methodism's own independent existence as a church. Whilst the context should not be allowed to dictate the gospel, Methodism nonetheless insists that the gospel can and must be preached and understood in context. The reality of this causes both caution and uncertainty, as well as excitement and anticipation, summed up firstly by the comment that

'it is the task of every generation to try to determine, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, how the Word of God in scripture informs our decision-making in the present.' (F&O 2000, 666)

but more tellingly in the remark that

'the presence of the living God is inexhaustible, life-renewing, life-transforming; so the Church may live in expectation and hope that God will continue to lead it into truth'. (F&O 2000, 666)

The insecurity with regard to biblical authority is, therefore, perhaps not as damaging to Methodist theology as might at first appear.

Methodism has emphatically insisted that the experience of the Spirit in the Church cannot be confined to the traditional means of grace which includes Scripture and the Creeds, for:

'It has been the Church's experience that the Spirit works through both tradition and spontaneity.' (F&O 2000, 137)

This teaching is the rationale for the use of extempore prayer and testimony within Methodist worship, a practice which Wesley initially found quite repellent, yet was persuaded of as a result of his own experience of it. Probably as a consequence of its societal origins, Methodist worship has traditionally been open to experimentation and to the movement of the Spirit. This may no longer be the case. In spite of the wealth of new resources available to the preacher and worship leader resulting from developments in new technology, for example, most Methodist services follow the so-called 'hymn-prayer' sandwich format¹. The use of new technology and music bands in worship tends to be thought of as the

¹ The format of the service being 5 hymns into which are 'sandwiched' in predictable format, prayers, Scripture readings and the sermon.

hallmark of the more 'charismatic' or 'evangelical' Methodist Churches. Methodist worship has become noticeably more liturgical and less free-form than it once was. The lack of spontaneity in Methodist Worship may explain why there are seemingly fewer manifestations of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit within the Church, such as were evoked by Wesley's charismatic preaching.

Gifts of the Spirit are no less real or important to Methodism today but, as in Wesley's time, caution and discernment are needed. Perhaps as a consequence of the accusations of enthusiasm and impropriety levied against Methodists in Wesley's time, Methodism has tended to stress the importance of testing the spirit to see whether or not it is of God. Testing is not limited to the more charismatic phenomena such as being slain in the Spirit but is applied to all areas of the Holy Spirit's work in the Church and in the individual, including the work of ministry and preaching. The Holy Spirit is believed to speak through the Church's preachers today in the same way as it once spoke through the prophets. It remains as important to be able to identify those preachers who are truly moved by the Holy Spirit to preach, as it once was to identify the true from the false prophet. Any individual who believes themselves to be called to the work of a preacher within the Methodist Church must therefore be prepared to undergo a period of testing and training still referred to as being 'on trial'. Social and economic pressures on the church have at times altered the processes

whereby the church undertakes this testing, but the general principle and motive have remained the same.

As God is being in communion (Gunton, 1997, 9) so the Church is being in fellowship for

'by grace,
through the sign and seal of Baptism,
and in the power of the Holy Spirit,
we become God's people, the Church.'¹

Methodism has taught (Stacey 1987, 162) that it is not possible to distinguish in experience between 'the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit'² The fellowship which Christians enjoy is a participation in the being of the trinity. The Holy Spirit is continually at work in the Church refashioning it as the body of Christ and enabling it to share in God's mission (F&O 2000, 10). It achieves this by calling all people to share in fellowship through the exercise of some form of ministry.

Fellowship in the Spirit underpins the entire structure of the Methodist Church, from local to Connexional level. As a result the entire Church is continually being tried and tested. Whilst this is most often a positive dimension to Methodist Church life and decision making, it can also be a

1 MWB 110

2 2 Corinthians 13:14

painful and divisive process, as exemplified by the difficulties experienced in reaching a decision with regard to what form of ministry in the church is open to either practicing homosexuals or to those who have been at any time in the past convicted or cautioned for an offence against a minor.¹ Nonetheless it is this combination of calling and testing which ultimately gives the church the confidence it exhibits to examine willingly its understanding and proclamation of God on a continual basis, and to be open to the possibility that it too may experience new life in Christ. As the recent report so emphatically states:

'The Spirit is God's freedom to initiate the radically new, to turn the Church inside out, to let loose a new Spiritual dynamic, to inaugurate reformation, renewal and revival in an unprecedented manner.' (F&O 2000, 623)

For the world

The work of the Holy Spirit in the world is to complete the mission of God. This mission is not addressed to the Church but to the whole of creation. Thus the Spirit must be at work in the wider world as well as within the Church, motivating, transforming and creating, in order that God's kingdom may come. The chief means by which it is believed that the Spirit can work to transform the world is through the power of inspiration:

'the Holy Spirit inspires in our imaginations new visions of how human beings may live well together which are not constricted by current political interests and social structures.' (SSR 106)

¹ The debate regarding both these issues has not yet been concluded. The final decision taken at the Derby Conference with regard to human sexuality called upon the church to undertake a pilgrimage of discovery – similarly the report 'The Church and Sex-Offenders' recommends that further work be undertaken.

Just as it is believed that all confession of Jesus as Lord and Saviour is the work of the Spirit, so too it is believed that all true knowledge of God's world is given by the Spirit. The Spirit is therefore believed to be the source of the inspiration for all works of science and technology, art and politics, etc. where vision and knowledge have been used to bring about the healing and reconciliation of the world and its peoples. Christians have a particular role to play in facilitating this work of the Spirit as:

'Through the gift of the Holy Spirit Christians are empowered to share in the divine love which is operative everywhere. They seek the transformation of groups and communities, and of national and international relationships, in favour of human dignity, freedom, justice and peace.' (SSR 90)

Runyon (1998, 185ff) would maintain that in holding to this belief, Methodism was being true to Wesley who was convinced that the full power and presence of the Spirit would bring with it a new social and economic order. It is certainly the case that Methodism inherited from Wesley a synergistic faith, one which believed that the only way that a work could be a 'good work', was if it was motivated, blessed and empowered by the Spirit.

The Holy Spirit calls individuals and equips them for their task in the world by bestowing on them the necessary gifts and graces. Methodism teaches that gifts of the Spirit are meant for all the world to enjoy and benefit from for, although they are individually possessed, the New Testament makes it clear that they are meant to be corporately exercised. They are given to empower the people to work for the common good and only when they are

used in this way can they bring forth the promised fruits of the Spirit. The world is not to be spurned or denied by Christians therefore, but seen as a place where they can practise their calling as disciples and use the gifts which the Spirit has given them to work with God in completing the work of redemption and transformation.

That the Spirit is already at work in the world cannot be denied, neither then can the world's claim on Christians. Through its insistence that

'Whenever we are aware of God we are 'blessed' by the Spirit' (F&O 2000, 623)

the Church acknowledges that the Spirit can bless anyone at anytime, inside or outside of the Church. Its practice of testing the spirit and its openness to the working of the Holy Spirit mean that its inability to command charismata, or to dictate who receives the various gifts and how they are to be used, is not a source of concern for Methodism. Methodism chooses rather to rejoice in the fact that

'The Spirit is as free as the wind' (F&O 2000, 623)

CHAPTER SEVEN – GOD’S WORLD AND GOD’S PEOPLE

God’s world

Over the course of the century Methodism has tried to develop and sustain a theology which marries its understanding of the creation with the advances which have been made in biology, sociology, technology and ecology. This has not proved an easy task as the volume of reports, declarations and statements brought to Conference testifies. At the core of its belief is the conviction that

‘this is God’s world, brought into being by his Word, and sustained by his Spirit.’ (SSR 52)

Moreover, God created the world in love (Methodist Church 1971, 133) and made nothing in vain¹ but he also:

‘in His Wisdom, placed animals under man’s dominion’ (Methodist Church 1971, 133)

Hence humanity cannot abdicate responsibility; it has a calling to serve in the world as a steward under God. (SSR 119) Humanity is meant to care for God’s creation according to God’s will, but determining what God’s will is, is believed to be an ongoing process. The Methodist Church has therefore committed itself to endeavour to develop both the theology and the practical

¹ MWB 467

implications of caring for God's earth on a continuing basis.(Methodist Church, 2000c, 9)

Like most Churches, Methodism has had to acknowledge, in the light of such discoveries as global warming, that its theology has not only been inadequate, it may even have contributed to the ravaging of the environment and to what it believes to be the current

'dangerous disturbance to the harmonious balance of the natural creation.' (SSR 117)

This it considers to be the result of an overemphasis on the Lordship of humanity over creation and a failure to recognise that it is God, not humanity, who provides for the beasts of the forest and the fish of the sea. The doctrine of providence, it acknowledges, should be recognised as applying to all of creation, not just to humanity, as Wesley noted:

'although God dwelleth in heaven, yet he still "ruleth over all;" that his providence extends to every individual in the whole system of beings which he hath made; that all natural causes of every kind depend wholly upon his will; and he increases, lessens, suspends, or destroys their efficacy, according to his own good pleasure' (JWW VIII: 183)

Recognition of the interrelated dimension of creation has led to an understanding of the Christian mission as including:

'sharing in putting right the relationships with God's creation that have gone wrong, and growing towards the balance and good stewardship envisaged in the Biblical vision of the world as it is meant to be.' (Methodist Church 2000c, 9)

This is not meant to imply that humanity is to blame for all of the relationships within God's creation which have gone wrong, but to express the belief that humanity is called to share with God in the task of reconciliation. Mutuality and interdependence rather than Lordship and dominion are the key words which forms the basis for the model of stewardship being advocated, which is in turn based on the incarnation of Christ:

'In Jesus Christ God brought to fullest expression the divine purpose in creation: to create free and mature persons living in harmony with one another, with a redeemed universe and with God.' (SSR 89)

The natural world

The natural world is the world of all created beings, it does not therefore preclude the unseen world. The world of rational spiritual beings, of angels and archangels, along with a conviction of the reality of the communion of saints, is an integral part of Methodism's testimony to the reality of God's creation and his eternal relationship with it. Hence in Worship, Methodists join in praise with

'angels and archangels and all the choirs of heaven.'¹

Although in *The Methodist Service Book* all reference to angels or archangels was removed from the service for Holy Communion, every

¹ MWB 193

service of Holy Communion in The Methodist Worship Book makes some mention of angels participating in the act of worship. Methodists, it would seem, have regained their belief in angels, if indeed they ever lost it.

The Church appears to have grown a little more cautious about the existence of demons. In the report adopted in 1976 regarding the practice of Exorcism, for example, the Faith and Order committee stated that the theological issues surrounding the whole question of exorcism

'would repay further detailed study' (F&O 1984, 269)

due to the fact that it had identified three conflicting opinions within Methodism regarding the efficacy of exorcism and belief in the ontological reality of evil spirits. In spite of this, it reported to the Conference a year later that

'the time is not opportune for a more extensive theological statement', (F&O 1984, 272)

and the subject has not been broached since. Thus, in the absence of further guidelines, Methodism continues to sing of the reality of fiends as well as of angels.

'Power is all to Jesus given,
Lord of hell, and earth, and heaven,
Every knee to him shall bow;
Satan, hear, and tremble now!

Angels and archangels join,
All triumphantly combine,

All in Jesu's praise agree,
Carrying on his victory.

Though the sons of night blaspheme,
More there are with us than them;
God with us, we cannot fear;
Fear, ye fiends, for Christ is here!¹

The social order

In 1988, Conference confirmed its

'resolute belief in the fundamental equality of all human beings in the eyes of God, and our abhorrence of all systems of government which treat any individuals or groups as second-class citizens.'(MMC 1988,11)

This statement is rooted in the Methodist conviction that humanity was created for fellowship with God, hence

'the family and the social groups which have grown out of the clan, the tribe, the nation - are part of the God-created natural order.' (Methodist Church 1971, 8)

Nonetheless, as a consequence of its sinful nature, humanity is incapable of truly social living (Methodist Church 1971, 9) for

'The foundation of a true social order is spiritual and our social economic and political relations must be an expression of our spiritual nature. Only as we enter into our Divine Heritage as the redeemed children of God are we fully equipped to build with him a new social order.' (SSR 75)

This does not mean that the creation of the new social order should be reserved for the eschaton. On the contrary, Christians are called upon to

¹ Charles Wesley, *Hymns and Psalms* No. 811

'actively desire a transformation of the present social order to bring its structure and intention into harmony with the Christian principle.' (SSR 63)

The task of reforming the nation entails more than preaching the gospel; it demands the proclamation of Christ in the power of the Spirit, which alone can bring about the necessary transformation,

'for an order designed to serve the spiritual and material welfare of mankind cannot be established or preserved unless there is a renewal of the heart and redirection of the mind by the Holy Spirit.' (SSR 63)

This understanding of the social gospel arguably provided the impetus for much of Methodism's involvement in, for example, Trade Unionism, the campaign for nuclear disarmament, Jubilee 2000, and many other bodies which have actively campaigned for social and political reform. It is true that, at the start of the 20th century, Methodism could have been accused of being a little preoccupied with Temperance; the department formed in 1933 to deal with social issues, for example, was named '*The Temperance and Social Welfare Department*'. The range of issues which it brought to Conference in the form of reports and resolutions suggest that, whilst temperance might have dominated the agenda, the theological relationship between the gospel and the necessity for social action was never in any danger of being lost or even marginalized.¹ The department was renamed *The Christian Citizenship Department* in 1950 and *The Division of Social*

¹ In 1933, Conference approved reports and resolutions with regard to Lotteries and Betting, Sunday and the use of Leisure, Youth and citizenship, International and industrial relations, Unemployment, Armaments and Slum clearance.

Responsibility in 1974, changes which reflect the increasing importance which was placed on this aspect of the Church's life and mission. The scope of the division's responsibilities was defined by the belief that

'The mark of a truly Christian social order is that it is designed effectively to serve both the material and the spiritual needs of man.' (SSR 63)

Hence its brief covered political, social and economic affairs as well as family life, health and healing, etc.

The underlying theology of this activity is derived from the belief that change could, and would, come:

'Believing that it is the will of God that the manifold of human relationships in the social order should be directed by the life-giving wisdom of His Holy Spirit, we anticipate and welcome a changed and better order.' (SSR 63)

and that Christians are called to participate in bringing about this change through their proclamation of the Gospel and their Christian conduct in the world.

The question of what constitutes right Christian conduct in the world with regard to the reform of the existing social order has not been an easy one for Methodism to address. It has wrestled with the dilemma of divided loyalty, acknowledging that:

'Government at times looked upon the Methodist movement with suspicion as a possible source of sedition and treason. Yet Methodism encouraged its adherents to be loyal and law abiding citizens,

while exhibiting at the same time a deep concern for the prisoner, the poverty stricken and ill-fed, for children, and slaves.' (Methodist Church 1971, 12)

Herein lies the basis for Thompson's disparagement of Methodism and his accusations with regard to the extent to which Methodism's determination to prove itself no threat to the state hindered rather than helped the cause of the working man. It is certainly true that, at the start of the century, there was a distinct tendency to consider politics an unsuitable activity for Christians. Whilst Methodism now takes pride in those of its number who were Tolpuddle Martyrs, for example, the acceptance of the legitimacy of political involvement has been slow, as evidenced by the fact that in 1995 Conference needed to approve a recommendation stating that:

'The commitment of individual Christians to work for social and political change should also be recognised as a fully legitimate form of Christian discipleship.' (SSR 102)

The dilemma of divided loyalty is ultimately reconciled by a belief that

'all Christian reflection on creation, salvation and the coming of the kingdom of God implies and demands participation in politics, by individual Christians and Christian communities.' (SSR 90)

This does not mean that there will be no conflict; on the contrary, conflict is guaranteed:

'no discussion of political hopes and no commitment to social change can happen without conflict.' (SSR 102)

Whilst the church has traditionally shied away from conflict, preferring to advocate ideals like reconciliation, its calling to support those in need

demands that it must not flinch from its responsibility to engage in unpopular forms of action where necessary. Not least, because it now recognises that

'Much of the criticism of the way society has been run may be directed against the church's historical social and political stances.' (SSR 102)

Methodism has attempted over the course of the century to address many of the issues which it has come to recognise as having been either created, or exacerbated, by inadequate theologies of the social order. In particular, it has provided much needed statements to update its theology with regard to family life, the single person, marriage, industry and leisure, healing, and racial justice. (MMC 1997,1)

The Christian belief that the family is an essential feature of the created order is now, for example, proclaimed in such a manner that does not denigrate or discriminate against, other, less traditional familial forms such as the 'household-family', which may be bonded through its shared need and mutual caring. (SSR 24) Moreover, in recognition of the fact that the church held false or unjustified expectations of, and attitudes towards, single people, often presenting the very idea of being single as equivalent to failure, or second best, (SSR 31) the Church now teaches that:

'Individuals can be and obviously are, completely fulfilled as single people. Marriage is not the best way for everyone.' (SSR 33)

Similarly, some of the most damaging teachings with regard to women are corrected through the affirmation of the equality in Christ of a married couple and the statement that

'Though men and women are recognised as being physically and psychologically different, before God and within marriage neither sex is superior.' (SSR 35)

All the correctives to Methodist social theology produced over the course of the century are in keeping with the motivating conviction that the social order which the Christian seeks can, in the end, only be

'created and sustained by the grace of God and by the effectual working of His Spirit in and through regenerated and consecrated Christians...We are not called to be the architects of the new society. We build, but according to His plan.' (SSR 59)

The human condition

Methodist theology concerning human nature has always, in spite of appearances to the contrary, been optimistic. Whilst convinced of the fallen nature of humanity and the need for its redemption, Methodism nonetheless proclaims that Christian perfection is not only desirable but also achievable, and that it is the duty of every human to strive for it. Furthermore, there is, implicit in the fact that Methodism believes itself called to a divine vocation, evidence of a firm belief that humans really are 'little less than the angels' and capable of working synergistically with God to proclaim the gospel to the world.

The reputation for being a serious – or rather ‘miserable’ - group of sinners was undoubtedly well deserved in Methodism’s earlier days. Consider, for example, the prayer of confession from the 1936 ‘Book of Offices’ wherein **the communicants**

‘acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness, which we, from time to time, most grievously have Committed, By thought, word and deed, Against Thy Divine Majesty.’¹

And compare with the corresponding prayer in the 1975 service which simply states,

‘ We have sinned against you and against our fellow men, in thought and word and deed.’²

The loss of ‘wickedness’ is unlikely to mean that Methodists became a more holy people who somehow sinned less than their predecessors, rather, it reflects the quiet dignity, honesty and humility, with which Methodists now acknowledge their ability to sin. There is no attempt to deny the fallen nature of humanity as evidenced by the fact that sin is still defined by the Methodist catechism to be:

‘the condition of estrangement from God which affects the whole human race. Sins are specific actions, words or thoughts which arise from our sinful condition and deny the presence power and purpose of God.’ (CAT 4)

Furthermore, it teaches that

¹ BoO 70

² MSB 49

'Sin hinders the effect of God's grace. It corrupts our relationships with him and with one another, with the world in which we live and with ourselves. The effect of sin is discord where God intended harmony' (CAT 6)

The conviction of the destructive power of sin is what drives Methodism to proclaim the gospel with its Good News that

'God has acted decisively in Jesus Christ to deal with our sinful condition; that is, he has acted to save us. God offers us his love, forgiveness, acceptance and new life in Christ.' (CAT 6)

What has changed is the confidence with which Methodists once proclaimed a particular sin to be a sin in the light of the changes in its understanding of human nature. Methodism has, I suggest, grown wiser about its own ignorance with the passing of time, and has learned to be more cautious in its proclamations concerning the nature of humanity. The debates and reports produced within Methodism during the twentieth century on the issues of abortion, euthanasia, homosexuality and the place of sex-offenders within the church are indicative of Methodism's ongoing struggle to contextualise its understanding of humanity as being made in the image of God. In each instance, the debates centred around the seeming contradiction between what might be, or indeed has been, interpreted as a sin according to either scripture or tradition and what might be understood as the love of God and of humanity being made in the image of God. On the whole, Methodism has refused to limit the potential of human nature to that disclosed by its own interpretation of the written word, but, instead, has required human nature and potential to be interpreted by that which is

disclosed by the Living Word. The willingness to be open to discover what God has created in humanity has arguably been a hallmark of twentieth century Methodist anthropology.

Changes in the understanding of human nature are found reflected in the revisions to the traditional hymns included in Hymns and Psalms. The most important change was that the worshipping people were no longer spoken of in strictly masculine terms. It had been possible to revise some of the more popular traditional hymns to make them more inclusive. Thus, for example, Good Christian Men Rejoice, became Good Christians all rejoice.

That there is such a thing as human nature, and that our understanding of human nature reflects on our understanding of our relationship with God, has been highlighted most recently by the Church's attempt to address the very real problem of how the Church can protect its young people from abuse by sex-offenders, whilst at the same time, providing both spiritual and practical care for those members of the Church who have committed offences against children. The theological section of the report, used to emphasise the necessity of implementing certain pastoral practices, was criticised at Conference for seeming to suggest that certain 'sins' were incapable of being 'cured', and should never be 'forgiven' if by forgiven is also meant forgotten.

The theology implicit in almost all the reports and statements made regarding these controversial issues is neither predominantly scriptural nor anthropological. Neither can it be claimed that it is primarily ethical, although in some instances, for example in the report on Euthanasia, ethics have been a key consideration. The theology must be deemed theocentric in that it begins and ends with the conviction that whatever human beings are, they are made in the image of God, and God loves them, completely and without qualification. Herein, I suspect, is the basis for the growing reluctance of Methodists to refer to themselves as 'miserable sinners' or as being 'unworthy' in the same way that once engendered the image of Methodists as a dour folk. The potential of humanity is left for God to reveal rather than for humanity to define any tighter than to say that 'the best of all is, God is with us.'

God's people

Methodists believe themselves to be God's people, not exclusively, but joyously inclusively. Drawing on their societary origins, Methodists revel in the fellowship which evolved out of people knowing themselves to be one in Christ, regardless of which Church they attended. Whilst it has long since ceased to be the practice of Methodists to attend both their Methodist Society meeting and their own Church, the belief that what matters is allegiance to Christ rather than to a denomination has persisted. The

consistent ecumenical spirit evident throughout Methodist history, springs from this unshakable belief in the fundamental unity of God's People in Christ. (MMC 1997,3) The Methodist four-fold summary of faith¹ is similarly as much a statement of unity and inclusivity as it is of Arminian theology; 'all' being the operative word.

Unity and inclusivity do not preclude diversity; Methodism therefore insists that ecumenical dialogue which allows traditions to discover what God has revealed to other traditions is important:

'since no denomination can do justice in its faith, life and practice, to the diversity of the New Testament.' (F&O 2000, 19)

The importance of dialogue is not confined to the ecumenical scene. First and foremost, Methodism celebrates its own 'unity in diversity' through the Circuit and Connexional Structure of the Church. Union in 1932 did not change the theological, liturgical and spiritual divides between the Methodist people. It is still possible in many churches to identify from, for example, the style of the building or the conduct of worship, whether or not the church was formerly Wesleyan or Primitive. The circuit system, with its combination of itinerant ministers and Local Preachers, has enabled individual churches to retain their distinctive qualities whilst at the same time rejoicing in their commonality with the rest of Methodism. The

1. All need to be saved, all can be saved, all can know themselves saved and all can be saved to the uttermost.

individual character of a church is allowed to flourish as it is seen, not as a threat to commonality, but as an expression of the contextual nature of faith. The only time that this is challenged is when it is seen to reflect prejudice and bigotry rather than genuine contextual fellowship. Thus a predominantly white church in an ethnically diverse locality would be challenged to explore whether or not its fellowship was exclusive rather than inclusive. (MMC 1994,1)

A pilgrim people

Methodists are a pilgrim people – never quite believing that they are at their journey's end, an attribute which is reflected in every aspect of their proclamation; the understanding of salvation as a process rather than an event, for example; or the constant search for Church unity and reconciliation, and the conviction of the necessity and reality of God's calling of his people. These may all be taken as indicative of the Methodist preoccupation with the pilgrimage of faith. The pilgrimage begins with the fall of creation and ends with its redemption on judgement day; it is thus a pilgrimage of both humanity and creation through history as well as soteriology. Methodists undertake this pilgrimage both personally, through the progress of their own faith, and corporately as the people of God, divinely appointed to call others to share in the journey and, where appropriately, to journey with others. (MMC 1988,4;1993,2)

Although the ecumenical dimension of contemporary Methodist theology has already been demonstrated it is still worth quoting in full the Methodist response to the last round of Methodist/Anglican unity conversations as an illustration of the way in which Methodism relates its existence to the privilege of sharing in the unity of the Body of Christ.

'We Methodists, believing that within the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church our communion was brought into being by the Holy Spirit to be a witness

To the universal grace of God,

To the gift of assurance by the Holy Spirit, and

To the power of the Holy Spirit to make us perfect in love,

Desire to share with our brethren of the Church of England this our calling; and to enter into the spiritual heritage and continuity of commission which they treasure.'¹

It is the calling which is to be shared, the understanding that community can be brought into existence as a dynamic act of the spirit today as well as through the work of the Spirit in the past.

Wesley might not have chosen the pilgrim path for his people, but his action essentially ensured that they were left with little alternative. Methodism's calling continues to provoke questions concerning the nature of the Church as an unfinished, incomplete, yet nonetheless divine body. Unity, and the corresponding stability which Methodism seeks, eludes it, even as, with declining numbers, it questions its existence.(F&O 2000,59)

¹ Report of the Conversations between the Church of England and the Methodist Church.(1963),38

A worshipping people

Methodists claim (Methodist Church 1988,2; CAT 40) that its worship has certain traditional and distinctive emphases, namely that Methodists:

Sing their faith

Prefer a simple style of service

Value fellowship beyond ordinary friendship

Place importance on lay leadership of preaching.

There is also the fact that Methodist structures result in the creation of what are held to be distinctive practical features of Methodist Worship such as circuit ministry and the preaching plan. The plan in particular is believed to express

'the dynamic relationship between a group of churches and the shared ministry of lay and ordained'.
(Methodist Church, 1988, 2)

Each of these distinctive emphases arguably underlines the kerygmatic nature of Methodist theology.

As Brian Hoare's hymn 'Born in Song' so aptly expresses it,

'God's people have always been singing.'¹

¹ Brian Hoare, *Hymns & Psalms* No. 486.

This is certainly true of the Methodist people who trace their enthusiasm for hymns to Wesley's adoption of the Moravian practice. So much of Methodist theology was originally taught through the hymns of Charles Wesley that it established the pattern for future Methodist practice. Methodist doctrine was held to be contained in Methodist hymns, as selected and approved firstly by Wesley, and subsequently by the Conference. That Methodists believe hymn singing to be kerygmatic – i.e. proclamatory in such a way as to evoke change or transformation, is testified to in the preface to *Hymns and Psalms* which states

'They unite the intellect, the emotions, the will and the voice, in the human response to God's grace; and they also point beyond our human faculties, for God addresses us in them, and through them applies the good news of Jesus Christ to our lives.' (Methodist Church, 1983, vii)

It is also testified to by the volume of correspondence and the extent of participation which the revision of *The Methodist Hymn Book* generated. It is not simply that Methodists enjoy their hymns, they consider them to be a fundamental dynamic of their faith.

The simpler style of service which takes place within the Methodist Church is likewise kerygmatic in that it is generally that of a free-form preaching or testimony service. The preaching service, which is the most common form of Methodist worship, exists to enable the Word of God to be heard and received by the Methodist people. Methodism believes that the sermon is far

more than an opportunity to teach the Word of God, insisting that each sermon:

'should be judged on its effectiveness as a means of grace rather than on its educational value. Preaching... is a proclamatory event in which people are invited to respond to the good news.' (Methodist Church, 1988, 15)

Preaching is thus, like hymn singing, expected to bring about change in the worshiper, to contribute to the transformation being worked in the individual by God, through the power of the Holy Spirit. It is

'the church confessing its faith; so that the word becomes again the living Word of God.' (Methodist Church, 1988, 15)

Similarly the fellowship referred to, of which much has already been said, is inescapably kerygmatic in that it is proclaimed in prayer and in praise, but expressed through its ability to transform the congregation into the living body of Christ, bound together by his will and word. This transformation is not reserved for a special group of people, or for those presiding or leading in the worship. Methodism has always maintained that

'In worship, there is no distinction between participants and non-participants. All are taking part simply by being there.' (Methodist Church, 1988, 21)

Neither is this inclusive relationship deemed to be limited to the act of worship itself, but is expected to be expressed and experienced in every dimension of the Christian's shared life in Christ. The deed of union

therefore offers the following interpretation of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers and that of representative selection:

'no priesthood exists which belongs exclusively to a particular order or class of persons but in the exercise of its corporate life and worship special qualifications for the discharge of special duties are required and thus the principle of representative selection is recognised.' (CPD 213)

Given such an understanding, it is not difficult to recognise why lay leadership of worship is so well regarded within Methodism. Regardless of whether or not lay workers were originally forced on Wesley by the growing demands of Methodism's growth, as Rack (1992,211) claims, the fact remains that Methodism embraced the concept of lay leadership so totally that it has remained a characteristic of the Church ever since. As the service for the admission of Local Preachers states:

'From the early days of Methodism, God has called lay people to lead worship and prayer, and to preach the gospel. In every generation since, women and men have responded to this call and have been admitted as Local Preachers.'¹

The conviction that this will continue to be the case once again underlines the kerygmatic nature of Methodist Worship as being both proclamation and action – call and response. The service continues with the claim that as Local Preachers lead worship and offer the gospel to others, they themselves will be transformed.

¹ MWB 332

That worship is a planned activity is acknowledged by almost all traditions. For some, this planning is only made evident through the liturgical nature of the worship offered; for Methodism, the planning is far more obvious and begins much earlier with the making of the Circuit Plan. This document, produced quarterly by the Superintendent minister of every circuit, details the worship to be offered by all of the churches in the circuit. It can be read as a proclamation of the conviction that that which binds the circuit and the connexion together is the proclamation of the Word and the worship of God. This conviction is further supported by the fact that all preachers, including those in the ordained ministry, are called to be circuit preachers. The proclamation of God's word is the source of the fellowship which unites Methodists into one worshipping people, regardless of how diverse Methodist worship may be in terms of theological perspectives.

Diversity acts to encourage Methodist worship in its attempt to hold together the twin realities of human life and the anguish of the world, with the reality of God's love and goodness. These are seldom if ever seen as conflicting realities, for Methodists believe that:

'The God to whom we respond in worship is the God who is present and active in both the inadequacies and the joy of our daily living.' (Methodist Church, 1988, 25)

Methodism believes that the daily experiences of the Methodist people must be acknowledged and proclaimed in worship as they constitute the life which is being offered to God in worship. Worship which does not take

account of humanity's sexual and sensual nature as well as its spiritual nature is considered incomplete:

'Only a full acknowledgement of our bodies and our emotions as well as our minds and spirit will enable us to journey in our worship to that point where we can offer ourselves to God and seek spiritual renewal in him.' (Methodist Church, 1988, 26)

Methodists are a worshipping people because

'At heart, worship is a statement of faith.' (Methodist Church, 1988, 5)

It is how Methodists are able to proclaim that God is the source of everything which is held to be worthwhile; it is truly kerygmatic in that it is also claimed to be that activity by which Methodists express their thanks and praise, and by which they can be transformed. Transformation is the proper consequence of worship, and reveals the quality of the worship which is offered. (Methodist Church 1988, 28) All worship is therefore sacramental, being an outward, visible sign of an inward, invisible act of God in transforming and renewing his people.

The Christian life

The name 'Methodist' was given to the members of the Holy Club in Oxford on account of their distinctively methodical approach to the practice of their faith. The fact that the name was willingly adopted, despite it having been initially a term of ridicule, hints at the importance which was once given by Methodists to the practice of a distinctly different and disciplined Christian

lifestyle. This lifestyle was governed by the rules which Wesley established for members, rules which, if broken, could result in expulsion from the society. Whilst Wesley taught that the only qualification for membership of a Methodist society was a desire to flee from the wrath to come, he also insisted that wherever this desire was fixed in the soul, it would be evidenced in the life of the individual. All those who wanted to continue to belong to the Methodist societies were therefore expected to continually demonstrate their desire of salvation, firstly, by doing no harm, secondly, by doing good, and thirdly by attending on all the ordinances of God. This three-fold pattern for the Christian life has formerly been referred to (Carter, 1937, 34ff) as the Christian negative, the Christian positive, and the Christian dynamic.

The Christian negative is a willing recognition of the fact that certain behaviour, even that which is 'most generally practised' is not right for Christians. Carter points out that Wesley was keen to address those 'sins' of his day which were generally condemned by professors of religion and considered evil, as well as those which he believed to be

'breaches of the Golden Rule of Christian love.' (Carter 1937, 37)

Methodism has repeatedly demonstrated its continuing commitment to this principle through its reports and statements on subjects such as gambling (MCA 1949,342;1951,417-419;1984,122), the Christian use of

leisure (MCA 1981,113;1982,75), smoking (MCA 1961,60), and the Christian use of Sunday(MCA 1945,233;1951,419-20;1973,390;1982,76) Perhaps even more indicative is its determination to challenge itself on matters such as racism(MMC1990,5; 1999, 4) or sexism, stating in 1997 that:

'Every person has the right to share in the life of the Church without fear of harassment or abuse, whether on the grounds of sex, cultural or ethnic origin, disability, sexual orientation, or indeed any ground. Each one of us has the responsibility to protect that right.' (MMC 1997,1)

The Christian positive, on the other hand, is the deliberate choice to do good. Whilst has been a noticeable decline in 'social action' programs initiated by the Methodist Church, this is probably more indicative of the success of the Welfare State and of practical ecumenism than of a Methodist reluctance to continue to do all the good it can. Steady improvements throughout the century in health care, education, housing and employment has encouraged the Methodist Church to focus on areas of greatest need. Methodism has also chosen to work ecumenically wherever possible. Methodism has been an active partner in such projects as The Pilgrimage against poverty (MMC 1999, 9) and Jubilee 2000 (MMC 1993, 10) as well as continuing its work with NCH, MHA etc.

The Christian dynamic has been expressed as 'contact with Christ' (Carter 1937, 84) by which is meant :

'Attending upon all the ordinances of God; such are,

The public worship of God;
The ministry of the word, either read or expounded;
The supper of the Lord;
Family and private prayer;
Searching the scriptures; and
Fasting or abstinence.' (JWW VIII:303)

The decline in Methodist membership declares Methodism's failure to hold to the Christian dynamic; once a characteristic of its calling. Methodists are no longer identifiable by their 'methodical' approach to their Christian life. Methodism continues to teach that all of the above are important, but it no longer expects its members to demonstrate their desire for salvation through the practice of them. Of the list above, it is only if a member persistently absents himself from the Lord's Supper and from the meetings for Christian fellowship without sufficient reason that he runs the risk of being removed as a member of the Methodist Church.(CPD 215)

The calling of the Church

Wesley interpreted Methodism's success and existence as evidence of God's unceasing concern with the salvation of all people and God's willingness and ability to act and interact with creation. God the creator created not just the heavens and the earth, but the means by which those on earth could know the will of God in heaven. The conviction that Methodism was a work of God not only spoke of a proactive God, but of a caring and compassionate God who determinedly, and continually sought and created the means by which that caring could be made known and real. Wesley, in

discussing the phenomenon of Methodism, for example, wrote that it was plain to him:

'that the whole work of God termed Methodism is an extraordinary dispensation of his providence.' (JWW XII: 408)

The earliest Methodist historians may have exaggerated the state of the Church of England of Wesley's day, but the conviction remains that Methodism was, and is, a response to the need of the world for the love of God and, more importantly, God's desire for it to be made known. God is thus, in a very real way, the Father of Methodism.

In the last century Methodists have, in the face of increasing religious pluralism and ecumenism, grown noticeably reticent in proclaiming their Church's 'divine' origin and existence. The current catechism, for example speaks only of Wesley's calling in response to the question

'How did the Methodist Church arise' (CAT, 38)

This is in stark contrast to the 1952 catechism which taught that:

'Within the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, the Methodist Church is the communion which was brought into being by the Holy Spirit.' (MMC 1952, 220)

The conviction that God continues to act in creating and sustaining Methodism, that the Church still has a divine calling, is perhaps no longer as sure as it once was. Throughout the twentieth century, Methodists have

repeatedly questioned the purpose of its own existence. In 1947 Sangster, speaking of his recognition of the uncertainty of the Methodist people, commented that

'The very fact that it was necessary to appoint a committee to restate The Message and Mission of Methodism makes it plain that others have sensed this uncertainty too.' (Sangster, 1947, 5)

When Methodism has been uncertain of its way ahead, its worship has tended to mirror this uncertainty, focusing on the need for God's guidance, rather than on the confident expectation of it. The three service books capture some of the oscillation in Methodism from confidence to uncertainty, and back again. Thus immediately after reunion when confidence was high that Methodism had recovered its purpose before God, the service for the reception of new members contained the words:

'Within the Christian Church – One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic – the Methodist Church holds and cherishes a true place, having been raised up by God to spread scriptural holiness throughout the world.'¹

By 1975, after the failed talks with the Church of England, there is no corresponding statement of Methodism's place within the Christian Church. This can of course, be taken two ways, either that Methodism was so confident that it no longer felt the need to claim its place, or that Methodism lacked the certainty that had once enabled it to be so bold in its public proclamation. The latter seems most likely given that the words

¹ BoO 109

normally used¹ to welcome a newly confirmed member according to *The Methodist Service Book* are:

'We welcome you into full membership of the Christian Church and the Society in this place.'²

The welcome is two-fold, a welcome into the universal Church and into Methodism. By using the term 'Society' a distinction is made, regardless of how inadvertently. It may be the case that the authors intended no more than to emphasize the importance which Methodism has always placed on membership to a local worshipping community, but the difference between church and society makes that seem unlikely. *The Methodist Worship Book* likewise makes a distinction, but only one of local versus global, as follows:

'We receive and welcome you as members of the Methodist Church, and of the Church in this place.'³

This development supports the idea that, far from being a negative thing, Methodism's periodic lack of confidence can provide an important, alternative insight into the Methodist understanding of the love of God. It would appear to substantiate the hesitant conclusion that God, as revealed by the Methodist *kerygma*, has more in common with God as described by process theology than God as described by Aquinas.

¹ An alternative wording is given in the relevant Appendix which refer to those who are to be received into membership by transfer from another denomination. In such circumstances they are to be welcomed into full membership of the Methodist Church.

² MSB A39

³ MWB 100

According to Methodism, God sets tasks, missions, for people to undertake on behalf of the Gospel. Sangster summarised the Methodist belief saying

'These then were the main tasks for which the Methodists were raised up. To spread holiness throughout the land. To evangelise. To Christianize the social order.' (Sangster, 1947, 15)

God is in all the processes which bring people to faith, which transform and remake the world. God is a constant in those processes, but not such that the processes themselves cannot be changed or replaced by God if God so desires. Methodism's insecurity reflects its knowledge that what is important to God is the imparting of the truth and reality of the gospel, far more so than the means by which that is accomplished. Furthermore, Methodism is aware of the fact that as it exists solely by virtue of its calling, it must be proclaiming a God who is continuing to speak, a God who initiates and desires communication, with a people who are willing to listen. This translates in practice to the proclamation of God's love being such that God believes in humanity's willingness to listen and respond positively to requests for service made in the name of salvation.

God does not make Methodism undertake its tasks, he calls and invites it so to do. The Methodist insecurity arguably stems from its process of continual introspection wherein it asks – are we still listening for the call of God – or are we attempting to determine for ourselves what our message and mission should or could be?.

CHAPTER EIGHT - CONCLUSION

Doing Methodist theology

In his first year as secretary of the Faith and Order Committee of the British Methodist Church, Marsh (2001, 36-39) raised the same question which provoked this thesis and asked how Methodist theology is and is to be done. He outlined seven approaches as to how Methodists might do Methodist theology:-

1. Via Methodism's official statements
2. As a reworking of the theology of the Wesley brothers.
3. Through ecumenism
4. By entering into the interpretative circle or spiral of experience-reflection-action.
5. By 'doing' i.e. by what Methodists do as Methodists.
6. Via Bible study
7. By responding to the present and reinterpreting Christian faith from within the practice of concrete Methodist communities, whilst also digging into a living tradition of Methodist thinkers since Wesley.

He stressed that whilst Methodist theology can be done in a variety of ways:

'It must be done and it must strive to be theology, and it may even want to be a bit more confident than it often has been about being 'British' and 'Methodist' ... otherwise Karl Barth's question really will begin

to haunt Methodist tendencies towards hyperactivism: "Does the Methodist Church have any theologians?"(Marsh 2001,43)

Whilst having every sympathy with Marsh's sense of urgency, I nonetheless concur with Jones (2001, 45) who believes that not only has Marsh understated the totality of Methodism's strengths in the theological field, but that his analysis lacks a clear perspective on theology as communication. This thesis has similarly argued, and I believe shown quite conclusively, that Methodist theology simply cannot be described accurately without reference to its communication, i.e. to its proclamation. Moreover, in the process of describing Methodism theologically, each of the seven 'methodologies' identified by Marsh were proven to already contribute to the formulation of the Methodist *kerygma*.

The answer to Marsh's question must therefore be that, at the moment at least, Methodists do their theology kerygmatically.

Marsh also insists that such theology needs to be done

'more explicitly and unashamedly, and by Methodists.'(Marsh 2001, 43)

This, I believe, can only be achieved through the process of dogmatics and not, as has been suggested (Clutterbuck, 1997), through the firming of Methodism's doctrinal standard into an agreed set of doctrines or confession. The following subsection outlines my main reasons for believing this. It is followed by a short survey of some of the other issues raised by

this thesis which regrettably lay outside the scope of this thesis, which, I believe, warrant further attention. The chapter will then conclude with my answer to Barth's question.

Methodist dogmatics versus 'Our Doctrines'.

'Any religion needs some statement about its beliefs (faith) and practice, for its own self-understanding as well as to explain itself to others.'(Dunn 1996,118)

The absence of an authorised book of Methodist doctrine or a confessional document such as the Westminster confession, does not mean that Methodism has no doctrine. It is indicative of the fact that doctrine within Methodism is defended by, but is also subordinated to, the kerygmatic task. Thus we arrive at the seemingly paradoxical situation whereby, according to Methodist Church discipline, 'Our Doctrines', as they are affectionately referred to, are important enough to insist that

'No person shall be appointed to office in the Church who teaches doctrines contrary to those of the Church, or who holds doctrines likely to injure the peace and welfare of the Church' (CPD 272)

whilst at the same time 'Our Doctrines' are so subordinated to the kerygmatic task that they are continually open to re-statement, reinterpretation, creation and refutation in order to ensure that the gospel can be preached and witnessed to by each generation.

As Townsend (1980,15) has pointed out, Methodism has a great respect for doctrine. Until the Church Act of 1976, for example, it was illegal for

anyone to preach in Methodist trust premises who could be shown to 'hold doctrines' which were considered contrary to Methodism's own – whether they preached on them or not! Similarly all Methodist preachers, whether lay or ordained are required to avow annually that they '*preach nothing at variance with our doctrines.*' Respect, it would seem, does not necessitate attention to detail. In the oral examination for a Local Preacher, for example, the preacher has to satisfy the meeting

'that he or she is faithful to the fundamental doctrines of the Christian Faith and to Methodist Doctrinal standards.'(CPD 525)

This, despite the fact that no formal definition exists to assist the meeting in making a judgement with regard to the candidate's suitability; Methodism, as we have seen, chooses not to provide a definitive answer to questions such as 'What are the fundamental doctrines of the Christian Faith according to the teaching of the Methodist Church?' The deed of union simply states that the doctrines which preachers of the Methodist Church are pledged to are to be found in the first four volumes of Wesley's sermons and in his notes on the New Testament. This has led Beck (1990) to point out that,

'these standards are hardly specific enough to serve as a test of authentic Methodism'(Beck 1990,16)

a view which others share. Rack (1975), for example, has commented that:

'the Methodist standards, whether those shared generally with other Christians (Scripture, Creeds, 'Protestant Reformation'), or those peculiar to themselves (Wesley's writings) are, as norms by which to judge doctrinal deviations, so full of holes and uncertainties that it seems impossible to say what limitations they impose'.(Rack 1975,17)

Hence in spite of Townsend's(1980) insistence that

'No minister or Local Preacher in the Methodist Church is free to believe just what he or she likes, without any check, let or hindrance'(Townsend 1980,15)

it would seem that the ability to discern accurately whether or not a Methodist preacher is preaching Methodist doctrines is extremely limited.

This lack of doctrinal definition has been referred to as a source of some embarrassment to Methodism. The understanding of the *kerygma* outlined by this thesis provides for an alternative perspective which recognises this ambiguity not as an inherited linguistic or contractual compromise, but as an essential theological asset of the Methodist Church. The lack of detail and precision concerning Methodist doctrine is, according to this perspective, what enables Methodism to respond so effectively to the kerygmatic imperative and hence be true to the purpose which calls it into being.

The apparent ambiguity surrounding 'our doctrines' did not originate with the deed of union and the necessity of formulating a statement broad enough to encompass the theological perspectives of all signatories. Wesley was also less than clear regarding certain doctrines, such as that of

assurance, which were later held to be central to Methodist theology. He is known to have changed his mind on several major doctrinal issues. It is true that neither in the deed of union

'nor anywhere else in our constitutional documents are 'our doctrines' ever closely defined in terms of formulae, lists, definitions or any other kind of statement of faith to which Methodists have to give assent.' (F&O 2000, 658)

Paradoxically, Methodist doctrinal ambiguity is as much a Methodist characteristic as doctrinal orthodoxy is held to be. The question to ask is 'Why?'

Cracknell(1998) states that Methodists

'believe that the ability to construct infallible doctrinal formulations does not belong to the human condition.' (Cracknell 1998, 48)

Yet Methodists do hold to the Creeds; something which seems to have escaped his attention. Whilst not completely disagreeing with Cracknell, I believe that a more comprehensive answer is hinted at in the deed of union which states that Wesley's notes on the New Testament and the first four volumes of his sermons documents –

'are not intended to impose a system of formal or speculative theology on Methodist preachers, but to set up standards of preaching and belief which should secure loyalty to the fundamental truths of the gospel of Redemption and ensure the continued witness of the Church to the realities of the Christian experience of salvation' (CPD 213)

This statement suggests that the lack of definition of a system of doctrines may be due to the importance which Methodism places on the kerygmatic

task and the necessity of allowing each generation the freedom to interpret and proclaim the gospel in a manner pertinent to the day.

Even Beck, in spite of his stated embarrassment, maintains that it is the responsibility of today's church (rather than the Church of the past) to judge what is and is not true to its tradition, and that the Church can only do this in accord with the divine will. The discernment of authenticity is, according to Beck,

'a gift of the Holy Spirit, the interpreter of the past, who illuminates the present with the truth of God.'
(Beck 1990,17)

Clutterbuck has argued¹ that Methodism

'cannot escape the challenge to present its own claims to identity and relevance in doctrinal terms, for its claim to be part of the church catholic rests, in part, on an implied claim to be in doctrinal continuity with the catholic Tradition'. (Clutterbuck 1997,22)

Methodism has never denied this; it has always insisted that the doctrines of the catholic tradition are the a-priori of all Methodist proclamation; they have thus never needed to be defined for they have never been questioned.

The concern, therefore, that

'As Methodism makes its own doctrinal exploration and its own response to the demands of the present [ecumenical] context, it will need to accept some constraints on its language and practice if it is not (to

¹ In his lecture, Clutterbuck provides a definition of doctrine which has many of the attributes which I have maintained are integral to the kerygma. My argument against Clutterbuck is therefore that he is 'one step removed' – i.e. that he would like to bring under human control and authority that which I maintain originates with the life and being of Christ and which, if it is to remain true to its purpose, must be a dynamic response to the Spirit and unfettered by the chains (or gravitational forces) of the very real human need for security and 'orthodoxy'. Doctrine must remain a consequence of the kerygma, not that which attempts to dictate it.

use a metaphor of Albert Outler's) to move beyond the gravitational field of the catholic Tradition, into the weightlessness of ecclesial space'.(Clutterbuck 1997,31)

can only be answered by trusting in God's ownership of all space – including ecclesial space, and to hold confidently to the belief that as long as Methodism places Christ, and the need to proclaim him, at the centre of its existence its message will always have weight.

The constraints which Clutterbuck deems necessary do exist, and have always existed within Methodism, but only as a consequence of Methodism's desire to remain true to its kerygmatic vocation. That which motivates Methodist Theology and kerygmatic development is most often the question arising out of an apparent absence of doctrine, or the uncertainty of the credibility of an existing doctrinal perspective.¹ The Methodist doctrinal standard ensures that there is sufficient freedom for the Methodist *kerygma* to change without endangering Methodist orthodoxy or orthopraxis.

A direct consequence of this is that the theology implicit in the resultant *kerygma* cannot be described as strictly Wesleyan – i.e. a contemporary reading of Wesley's own theological position. As Cobb (1995) observed

'It would be totally out of keeping with Wesley to repeat particular formulations when these do not correspond either to lived experience or to the best current biblical scholarship.'(Cobb 1995,141)

¹ Consider for example, the changes in Methodist theology detailed earlier regarding the nature of God due to questions of inclusive language and our imagery of God.

The resultant theology can only be described accurately as 'Methodist' as it is more indebted to the 'works', i.e. the questions, sermons, and theological reflections, of the Methodist people on their contemporary situation, than it is to the 'Works of Wesley'. It is for this reason alone that Methodists can justify talk of 'Our Doctrines'. They are 'ours' because they testify to the faith and proclamation of Methodist people of every age who, as a consequence of their own calling and interaction with the world, provide the questions which compel the church to its dogmatic task.

Assumptions, issues and future tasks.

Although this thesis is concerned primarily with Methodism and Methodist theology, it naturally raises issues which are pertinent to theology in general. These are, I believe, worth exploring in more detail although they lie outside the scope of this thesis. Dodd's initial claims, for example, are worth re-examining. This would touch on the whole question of community, denominationalism and religious affiliation and identity. Are *kerygmata* evidence of God's blessing on diversity? My research certainly left me unconvinced of the desirability of achieving the aims of the current ecumenical movement as a consequence of its insistence on doctrinal agreement as the basis for unity. Methodism encourages doctrinal orthodoxy by not being afraid to question and restate doctrines where necessary. The lack of fear comes from Methodism's recognition that it does

not own 'The Truth', neither can it define it, it is merely called upon to proclaim it such that it can be realised. Furthermore, there is the whole question of Christian calling and its relationship to denominational existence, I, as with many Methodists, have, in an act of worship, proclaimed that I believe myself called to serve the Methodist Church. I recognise that the calling which unites Methodists is common to all Christians, but not all Christians experience it in the same way as the God given dominant characteristic of their faith and tradition. Should they be encouraged or compelled to, or should Methodists be asked to give up their sense of vocation, or is either question a denial of God's freedom to call and ours to respond? Ecumenism will need to take greater account of God's call to community than it currently does before I would feel at ease with the current vision of 'One visible church'.

Similarly, the thesis touched lightly on the idea of doctrine being used interrogatively rather than propositionally; as that which questions rather than states truth so that 'The Truth' can make itself known. As was mentioned at the time, this raises real epistemological issues which are deserving of a much more in-depth study. Research into the relationship between *kerygma*, doctrine and dogma would, I suspect, allow the study of doctrinal development to move past its current dependence on language and engage more effectively with hermeneutics and the ability of humans to respond to the means of grace.

The questions ‘What is theology?’ and ‘What makes a theology either credible or acceptable to others?’ provoked this work and determined its structure. In the course of this thesis I deliberately utilised many different traditional theological methodologies, including biblical theology, historical theology, systematic and dogmatic theology, all in order to be able to state the obvious, namely that Methodism speaks of, to, for and about God. The assumption which needs to be more comprehensively challenged is that theology can or should be separated from our history, our liturgy, our doctrines, our experiences, our practices, traditions, scriptures, reflections, ideas or questions. Time and again, my research led to the conclusion that theology is not some by-product which can be analysed in isolation from any of these things, but is implicit in the way in which we talk about these things with, to, and sometimes, for God. Theology should, I believe, be evaluated according to the contribution it makes to enabling participation in human- divine-human communication.

Finally, as the question-mark in the title of this work suggested, it has not been possible to do more than demonstrate the possibility of a Methodist dogmatics. To do full justice to the theology which this thesis has argued is implicit in the Methodist *kerygma* would, I suspect require a work of dogmatics almost as expansive as Barth’s own. A smaller task would be to expand on the work of the final section of this thesis to cover in more detail the areas of God in Creation and God’s people.

An answer to Barth's question.

The assumption on which this entire thesis depends is that British Methodism can be considered a distinct community of faith bound together by a common identity borne of its shared sense of purpose. The strength of that unity and purpose has lately been questioned. Methodism's response has been to launch a new initiative, appropriately entitled 'Our Calling'. This set out a vision of what the Methodist church is believed to be for and invited the local churches to explore how that applies to their specific context. The language of the report implied that the initiative was fully in keeping with Methodism's traditionally kerygmatic nature; this assumption was queried when the report was brought to Conference. It is true that the report makes no mention of Methodism's historical understanding of its 'calling'. Nothing is said of Methodism's vocation to 'spread scriptural holiness throughout the land'. This led one speaker¹ to suggest that no respect was being paid by the report to the story of the people called Methodist. Is the report indicative of a growing willingness within Methodism to forget, rather than ever remember, the purpose which called it into being.?

I would suggest that, on the contrary, the report is very much in keeping with the kerygmatic nature of Methodism and its determination to question everything, even its own calling, in order to make sure that the gospel is

¹ Rev Dr. T Alexander-Macqibban.

proclaimed. An unwillingness to restate its vocation in contemporary language to reflect the change in context from eighteenth century Methodism to that of the twenty-first century would suggest that Methodism was more concerned about itself, and its traditions, than about proclaiming Christ.

Methodism, I believe, continues to be aware of the fact that

'The church is always broken and sinful. As an institution it is always turning in on itself and seeing its own existence as an end in itself rather than as a means of worship and mission.'(MCA 1993, 804)

The accusations concerning the way in which Methodism has changed over the course of the twentieth century are, thankfully, fully justified. Methodism is not the same as it used to be; it was, and is, a movement. It is this fact which creates the almost humorous contradiction of confidence and insecurity within Methodism, and, I suspect, the reported lack of credibility in the eyes of some theologians.

On the one hand, Methodism can and does boast of its vocation to the world, on the other hand, it can seem to lack the courage to believe in itself enough to define that vocation doctrinally. The *kerygma* of a community is that community's challenge and invitation to confess faith. But to continually question takes courage, for it inevitably engenders a degree of insecurity concerning the ability of the Church to provide the answers. There is always the temptation, as has been seen, to define and predetermine what the

response should be, in order that, at very least, there some consistency of faith and practice is maintained. To pose the question in order to reflect on its ability to proclaim 'The Truth' today is nonetheless the task of dogmatics. That this task has been, and continues to be, successfully undertaken must surely prove the existence of not one, but hundreds, if not thousands, of Methodist theologians.

APPENDIX 1

The doctrinal clauses of the deed of union (1932)

Section 2. Purposes and Doctrine

Purposes. The purposes of the Methodist Church are and have been since the date of union those set out in Section 4 of the 1976 Act.¹

4 Doctrine. The doctrinal standards of the Methodist Church are as follows: 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.

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. These evangelical doctrines to which the preachers of the Methodist Church are pledged are contained in Wesley's Notes on the New Testament and the first four volumes of his sermons.

The Notes on the New Testament and the 44 Sermons are not intended to impose a system of formal or speculative theology on Methodist preachers, but to set up standards of preaching and belief which should secure loyalty to the fundamental truths of the gospel of redemption and ensure the continued witness of the Church to the realities of the Christian experience of salvation.

Christ's ministers in the church are stewards in the household of God and shepherds of his flock. Some are called and ordained to this sole occupation and have a principal and directing part in these great duties but they hold no priesthood differing in kind from that which is common to all the Lord's people and they have no exclusive title to the preaching of the gospel or the care of souls. These ministries are shared with them by others to whom also the Spirit divides his gifts severally as he wills.

It is the universal conviction of the Methodist people that the office of the Christian ministry depends upon the call of God who bestows the gifts of the Spirit the grace and the fruit which indicate those whom He has chosen. Those whom the Methodist Church recognises as called of God and therefore receives into its ministry shall be ordained by the imposition of hands as expressive of the Church's recognition of the minister's personal call.

¹ See Appendix 2

The Methodist Church holds the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers and consequently believes that no priesthood exists which belongs exclusively to a particular order or class of persons but in the exercise of its corporate life and worship special qualifications for the discharge of special duties are required and thus the principle of representative selection is recognised.

All Methodist preachers are examined tested and approved before they are authorised to minister in holy things. For the sake of church order and not because of any priestly virtue inherent in the office the ministers of the Methodist Church are set apart by ordination to the ministry of the word and sacraments.

The Methodist Church recognises two sacraments namely baptism and the Lord's Supper as of divine appointment and of perpetual obligation of which it is the privilege and duty of members of the Methodist Church to avail themselves.

5 Interpretation of Doctrine. The Conference shall be the final authority within the Methodist Church with regard to all questions concerning the interpretation of its doctrines.

APPENDIX 2

The purposes of the Methodist Church as defined by the Methodist Church Act 1976

4 Purposes. The Purposes of the Methodist Church are and shall be deemed to have been since the date of union the advancement of –

- a) the Christian faith in accordance with the doctrinal standards and the discipline of the Methodist Church;
- b) any charitably purpose for the time being of any Connexional, district, circuit, local or other organization of the Methodist Church;
- c) any charitable purpose for the time being of any society or institution being a society or institution subsidiary or ancillary to the Methodist Church;
- d) any purpose for the time being of any charity being a charity subsidiary or ancillary to the Methodist Church.

APPENDIX 3

The constitution of the Methodist Church 1932-1974

Connexional Structure

- a) At National Level
 - i. The Conference - Meeting in two sessions
 - 1. The ministerial session
 - 2. The Representative session
 - ii. General Purposes Committee
- b) At District Level
 - i. The Synod – Meeting in two sessions:
 - 1. The Ministerial
 - 2. The Representative
- c) At Circuit Level
 - i. The Quarterly Circuit meeting.
- d) At Local Level
 - i. The Trustees Meeting
 - ii. The Leaders meeting
 - iii. The Society meeting (all members)

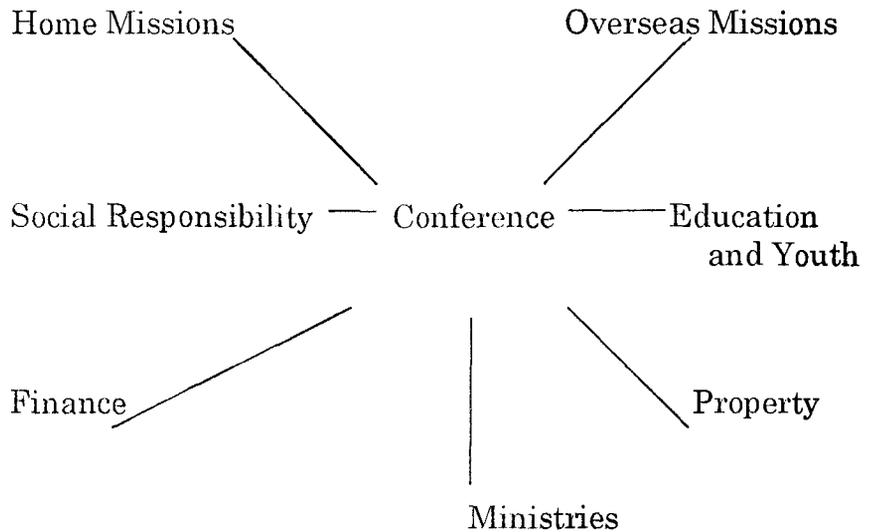
Connexional administration

- a) Methodist Missionary Society
- b) Home Missions Department (London Mission)
- c) Department of Connexional Funds
- d) Department of Chapel Affairs
- e) Sunday School and Education Department
- f) Temperance and Social Welfare Department
- g) Christian Citizenship Department
- h) Ministerial Training Department
- i) Local Preachers Department
- j) Methodist Publishing House and Epworth Press

The constitution of the Methodist Church 1974-1996

Connexional Structure

The seven Divisions



At District Level

'The Synod – Meeting in two sessions':

1. The Ministerial
2. The Representative

At Circuit Level

- i. The twice yearly Circuit meeting.

At Local Level

- i. The Church Council
- ii. The General Church Meeting (all members)

The constitution of the Methodist Church 1996-current

Connexional Structure

The Methodist Conference

|
Methodist Council Executive

|
The Methodist Council

1. Church Life

3 Church and Society

2. Inter-Church and
Other relationships

4. Administration
Services

At District Level

The Synod – Meeting in two sessions:

1. The Ministerial
2. The Representative

At Circuit Level

i. The twice yearly Circuit meeting.

At Local Level

- i. The Church Council
- ii. The General Church Meeting (all members)

APPENDIX 4

Standing Order 129

129 Conference Statements.

(1) It shall be open to the Methodist Council or any committee which reports to the Conference to present a document intended, if adopted by the Conference under this Standing Order, to be a considered Statement of the judgment of the Conference on some major issue or issues of faith and practice, and framed with a view to standing as such for some years.

(2) The body producing such a document shall on first presenting it to the Conference move that it be dealt with as a draft Conference Statement and commended to the Connexion for study, discussion and response.

(3) If that motion is adopted the Conference shall give directions as to the distribution of the draft, the form and duration of such study and discussion, the timing and consideration of any such response and the year in which the matter shall next be brought before Conference, being at earliest the next year but one. The Conference may at any time vary those directions.

(4) (a) After such study and discussion and in the light of any such response the responsible body may present the document to the Conference for adoption in its original form or as revised. The Conference of 1999 adopted a Motion directing that those responsible for bringing revised editions of reports to the Conference, including those falling under this clause, should indicate in their report the amendments made since the previous edition.

(b) When such a document is presented for adoption notice of any proposed amendments to the text must be given in the Agenda or an order paper before the business is reached, and the Conference shall then decide whether to dispose of any such amendments in the ordinary course or to refer them to a revision committee and adjourn the debate.

(c) If the Conference decides to refer it shall appoint a revision committee consisting of a chairman nominated by the President, one representative of each District and three Conference-elected representatives. The committee, meeting if possible when the Conference is not in session, shall consider all the amendments and report with recommendations as to how each amendment shall be dealt with and as to any further changes consequential upon those recommendations. The proposer of each amendment and two representatives of the body presenting the document may speak to the amendment in the committee by such procedure as the committee may direct. The Conference shall deal with the proposed amendments by reference to the report of the committee, adopting or departing from its recommendations, which it may deal with as a whole or by sections. For the purposes of the rules of debate in Standing Order 131 the recommendations of the committee, as moved on its behalf, are at that stage substantive resolutions and any proposal to depart from them is an amendment.

(d) All decisions of the Conference on amendments to the text of the documents, however dealt with, shall be taken by simple majority. After all such amendments have been disposed of any member of the Conference may move that the document be adopted as a Conference Statement. Such a resolution shall be carried only by a majority of not less than two thirds of the members of the Conference present and voting.

(5) No document adopted or approved or otherwise dealt with by the Conference in or after 1987 may be described as a Conference Statement or Declaration unless adopted under this Standing Order or provisions amending or replacing it.

(6) A Conference Statement shall cease to have that status if the Conference by a simple majority so resolves or if a further Statement covering substantially the same issue or issues is duly adopted.

129A Revision Committee.

(1) If the Conference considers that any text presented for adoption or approval is likely to be the subject of a number of proposals for detailed amendments it may, if it thinks fit, without prior notice of motion resolve to follow the procedure set out in Standing Orders 129(4), sub-clauses (b) and (c), notwithstanding that the text is not being dealt with as a Conference Statement within Standing Order 129, and that procedure shall then apply so far as may be. Once the Conference has adopted that procedure any motion to refer any or all of the amendments to the body originally presenting the text shall not be put to the vote until the revision committee has reported.

(2) If in any year the Conference considers that proposals are likely to come before the next following Conference which would require the appointment of a revision committee under Standing Order 129(4) or clause (1) above, but that the number or nature of the amendments to be expected is such as to make it desirable that they be submitted and the committee appointed before that next Conference assembles, the Conference may so direct and may make any ancillary provisions and any consequential modifications of the procedure under Standing Order 129(4), sub-clauses (c) and (d), or clause (1) above, as it thinks fit, and in that event Standing Order 129(4) and clause (1) above shall have effect subject to those directions and provisions and with those modifications.

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