

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

THE HISTORICAL POSITION OF METHODISM.

BY THE REV. J. M. HARDEN, D.D., CANON OF ST. PATRICK'S
CATHEDRAL, DUBLIN.

[This paper was not written to be published, but to be read before a Clerical Society. In preparing it much was borrowed from different sources—Wesleyan and other. It is indebted especially to Dr. H. B. Workman's pamphlet, "The Place of Methodism in the Catholic Church." This I read to obtain the Methodist point of view and found it so helpful that I borrowed from it more perhaps than I ought. Certainly I could not agree to the publication of the paper without this acknowledgment.—J. M. H.]

THERE had been questions as to the advisability of seceding from the Church of England even during Wesley's lifetime, but it was then judged "inexpedient"—the word he himself used—and it was not till 1795, four years after Wesley's death, that the inevitable secession came. Within two years came a schism from the schism. The Methodist New Connexion broke off in 1797 from a wish to give the lay members an equal share in the secular and spiritual business of the Society. The next split in the ranks was that of the Primitive Methodists or "Ranters." This took place in 1810, and was caused by difference of opinions as to the propriety of holding religious camp-meetings and of allowing women to preach. Five years later the Bible Christians seceded on the practical question of sitting at the reception of Holy Communion. In 1836 and 1849 two other bodies seceded which were later, 1857, amalgamated into the United Free Church Methodists, though at the time of this amalgamation a remnant was left—as in the case of the "Wee Frees"—who are still in existence under the title of the Wesleyan Reform Union. No other change took place during the nineteenth century, unless we reckon the Salvation Army, which was founded in 1878 among the Bible Christians. In 1907 three of the above-mentioned bodies combined to form the United Methodist Church. These were the United Free Church Methodists (1857), the Methodist New Connexion (1797), and the Bible Christians (1815).

There are, then, in England at the present time four Methodist Churches—the Wesleyan Methodist Church, the Primitive Methodist Church, the United Methodist Church, and the Wesleyan Reform Union.

I have named these four in order of size. The Wesleyans have nearly half a million Church members and probationers, the Primitives and the United Methodists have each somewhat less than half this number and the Wesleyan Reform Methodists are a very small body of only 8,000 Church members. In this, no account has been taken of the Independent Methodists—a body that started in 1797 then called Quaker Methodists. These are the "extreme left" of

Methodism without any ordained ministers—only local preachers—though adhering to the doctrines of Wesleyan Methodism. In church government they are absolutely Congregationalist and will therefore have nothing to say to the proposed reunion in Methodism. I have also omitted the two Calvinistic bodies which owe their origin to the same religious revival—the Calvinistic Methodists, chiefly in Wales, and Lady Huntingdon's Connexion, which still has a few chapels in England.

In Ireland Methodism is one. The Primitives, founded here in 1818, joined the Wesleyans in 1878; and the Methodist New Connexion became part of the United Church in 1905. In Canada, Australia and New Zealand also Methodism is united. In the U.S.A. Methodism has followed somewhat different lines. The main body is nominally Episcopal, and the method of government more on Anglican lines.

The total number of *adherents* to Methodist Churches throughout the world is put down (1919) at the large total of 32 millions, including 10 million members. Dr. H. B. Workman puts the total as high as 40 millions.

All these Churches, with the exception only of the Independent Methodists, have a "duly appointed ministry, men who believed themselves moved by the Holy Spirit and who were separated by the Church to that work." In all of them too the two Sacraments of the Gospel are regularly observed.

They have a fixed, though somewhat vague, standard of doctrinal teaching. This is contained in Wesley's Notes on the N.T. and four volumes of his Sermons. This is no doubt vague, but, such as it is, it is insisted on. Methodist ministers have to answer as to their adherence to this standard every year. It may be that this is a better method of securing fixity of doctrine than a more definite standard such as the XXXIX Articles, if the latter have in practice become obsolete.

The Methodist Episcopal Church in North America (U.S.A.) has as its standard a Book of Discipline which embodies 25 Articles, abridged, I believe by Wesley, from the XXXIX.

If we look at the number of those regularly enrolled as Methodists, and even more when we consider the number of the so-called adherents (between 30 and 40 millions), we are faced by a great spiritual fact. Methodists themselves claim to be the largest of the Protestant Churches, and whether this be so or not they are at least a great body. Canon Curteis writes: "Though we cannot exclaim with his (Wesley's) latest exulting biographer (Tyerman) Methodism is the greatest fact in the history of the Church of Christ, we are able to allow that it is at least the greatest fact in the religious history of the eighteenth century."

We can, I think, refer to Wesleyanism also, now after its existence of nearly a century and a half, some words of Canon Rawlinson in "Foundations," used by him with reference to earlier Nonconformist bodies: "They can point to a vigorous spiritual life and Christian experience, and may claim, not without reason, to be regarded as

something more than a temporary anomaly." They stand for something. It is a commonplace, I presume, to say that every secession or split in the Christian Church has been due to the over-emphasis, on one side or the other, of the same truth, an undue exaggeration of some thought which is, at bottom, true. The primary idea of Methodism lies in its emphasis on experience¹ (Workman, p. 16). What was it led to this?

The Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century was, in one of its aspects, a "protest of individualism against the excessive solidarity characteristic of the medieval world." A man is saved not because he belongs to any particular body, but because he himself in his own inner life is in right relation with God. Salvation is subjective, not objective. But not all the Reformers remained in practice true to this idea. The Calvinism which became prevalent tended to make all once more external—an external source of authority the Bible, external conditions of Salvation—immutable decrees, not the individual's faith. The logical result of this was in some places Arianism or Socinianism, in England it was the Deism of the eighteenth century. Methodism was, on one side at least, a reaction against Deism. Did the Deists appeal to logic, Wesley appealed to the heart; did they assert that there was nothing mysterious in Christianity, Wesley brought men face to face with the mystery of the Cross; did they say miracles were impossible, he appealed to experience and gave them the miracle of conversion.

If we wish to see what the religious revival of the eighteenth century did for England, see what Deism led to in France and Germany. Voltaire, Rousseau and others in France drew their inspiration from the English Deists and with them the teaching became an engine of destruction for both Church and State. In Germany Deism led to the so-called illumination, i.e. to "shallow utilitarianism and irrational rationalism," from which Germany was afterwards rescued on one side by Kant and Herder and on the other by Schleiermacher. It is not insignificant that Schleiermacher and Wesley were both indebted to the Moravians. Lecky says with truth that the religious revolution of the eighteenth century was of greater importance than the career of the elder Pitt and the splendid victories by land and sea during his ministry.

Wesley's appeal to experience was seen principally in his emphasis on the doctrine of assurance. The doctrine, that is to say, that a man may know that his sins are forgiven and that he has within himself the witness of his own relation to God. This consciousness was for Wesley a present matter: it "was no assurance of future perseverance." He was no Calvinist.

Ah; Lord, with trembling I confess
A gracious soul may fall from grace.

¹ It is in this and the succeeding paragraphs that I am chiefly indebted to Dr. Workman's pamphlet.

But as regards the present there was no uncertain sound. He and his converts sang

My God, I am thine. What a comfort divine!
What a blessing to know that my Jesus is mine.

This doctrine, in itself, had nothing heretical about it. It is found in the Anglican divines and even in the Homilies, where we read, "The spirit which God hath given us to assure us that we are sons of God." But "it is not the same thing for an article of faith to have a place in the creeds and formularies of a Church and for the same article to be a living factor in its life" (p. 43). We are so familiar with the idea of assurance that we find it hard to realize the antagonism with which it was then received. It was contrary to the ideas of the age. Locke in his Essay writes: "We must not entertain any proposition with greater assurance than the prop it is built upon will warrant. It is plain that all the surplusage of assurance is owing to some other affection and not to the love of truth." Not only Locke's but Butler's influence by his probabilism was against it. It was natural then that the movement was not well received. Of course Wesley and his followers were also, to some extent, to blame for their exaggerations. Wesley said, for example, that Tillotson knew no more about Christianity than Mahomet, and that the "Whole duty of man" had sent thousands to hell.

This, however, does not excuse the nature of the opposition. As Lecky points out, the example set by some of the bishops encouraged the assaults. Warburton and Lavington assailed them with the coarsest and most scurrilous invectives. The first, ridiculing the doctrine of regeneration by the Holy Ghost, was not ashamed to write that the devil was "man-midwife" to the new birth: and the second insinuated an infamous parallel between the Methodist societies and the obscene rites of Paganism. All kinds of mob violence and hooliganism were employed against them. An enterprising curate in Lancashire announced "if any man be mindful to enlist under the command of the Rev. Geo. White for the defence of the Church of England, let him repair to the cross, where he shall have a pint of ale in advance and other proper encouragements." In Dublin, according to Lecky, Whitefield was almost stoned to death. Perhaps the most curious charge brought against them was that of Popery. This was probably due to some of Wesley's antecedents and to his ascetic practices. It was also in part due to political suspicion. Charles Wesley was actually summoned before the magistrates for having prayed that "God would bring home His banished ones." This was taken as a prayer for the restoration of the Pretender.

Before the end of 1738 the Methodist leaders were excluded from most of the Church pulpits. So in the following years they began to build chapels. These were euphemistically described as ancillary to the Church, but such action was bound eventually to lead to a schism, if for no other reason, that the action of Churchmen forced them to get these chapels "licensed" thereby making them technically at least "dissenters."

In 1750 the question of secession was openly broached. In 1755 it was debated for three days at the Annual Conference, the decision being that whether it was lawful or not, it was in no way expedient to separate from the Church. Of this decision Canon Curteis naturally writes "What was *expedient* merely in 1755 might easily become inexpedient under altered circumstances." Wesley died in 1791. Four years later the secession had taken place.

There had been some alteration of circumstances in the interval. In 1761 Wesley allowed preachers not ordained to administer the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. In 1784 he drew up a "Deed of Declaration" which was formally enrolled in Chancery, giving unlimited powers to the Conference and identifying Methodism with the "legal hundred" preachers empowered to settle questions that might arise. This was a big step, but in the same year a more momentous step was taken in the direction of separation.

The United States had recently been separated from England, and the English bishops were afraid, or at any rate delayed, to consecrate bishops for that country. Accordingly Wesley brought himself to consecrate two clergymen as bishops and two laymen as presbyters for his Society in America. In doing this he imagined he was within the exercise of his rights as a presbyter.

This was on September 2, 1784. A few weeks later, if he had only waited, the American Episcopate was guaranteed by the Consecration of Seabury by the Scottish bishops. Wesley's brother Charles summed up the case in the well-known lines :

How easily are bishops made
By man or woman's whim :
Wesley his hands on Coke hath laid,
But who laid hands on him ?

This was not the only occasion on which he presumed to ordain. There are 27 acts of ordination on his part on record, according to a Wesleyan authority, and this not only for America and Scotland but even for England.

"By his action he had taken his stand as a rebel, and his followers had to choose between repudiating the action of their leader, and repudiating the Church of which their leader claimed membership to his dying day." (Somervill, *A History of our Religion*, p. 256.) It seems then futile to quote, as is so often done, Wesley's words on various occasions warning his followers not to separate. What he did could not be undone. We could hardly agree with these words of the great Methodist leader, Hugh Price Hughes, but still they contain a truth : "To say that John Wesley never left the Church of England when he ordained bishops for America and presbyters for Scotland is to talk meaningless nonsense. I know he was very reluctant to do so, but his extreme reluctance only proved that he was the unwilling instrument of the Divine purpose. The great organization which we represent is not a human Society, but a divinely created Church."

I give these words as they embody the views of some Methodists.

And if there were faults on Wesley's side there were also faults on the other. Members of the Church of England have little right to cast stones at the Wesleyans. They were to all intents and purposes forced into secession, and, it should be added, that later developments in the English Church tended to widen the breach. To quote again from a Wesleyan writer: "The Romish sacerdotal teaching and claims of the Church of England in the Oxford Movement further stimulated the Church consciousness of Wesleyan Methodists, and drove them into closer alliance with their Free Church brethren." Most Churchmen would express the thought here enunciated differently, but still I think it has to be confessed that the Oxford Movement, though not without its effect even on the Free Churches, has widened the breach between them and Anglicans.

The Church of England has not had, as Macaulay long ago pointed out, the ability to deal with her enthusiasts. You will remember the passage, "Place Ignatius Loyola at Oxford. He is certain to become the head of a formidable Secession. Place John Wesley at Rome. He is certain to be the first general of a new Society devoted to the interests and honour of the Church." There is no need to expound the thought, and it is futile now to conjecture what might have happened if Wesley and his followers had been received among their own people with sympathy and friendliness rather than with opposition and indifference.

In estimating the Historical Position of Methodism I quote two sentences from Dr. Sanday which I happened by chance to read during the time I was writing this paper.

The first is: "It should be distinctly borne in mind that the more sweeping refusal to recognize the non-episcopal Reformed Churches is not, and can never be made, a doctrine of the Church of England." The second is: "A more guarded and appropriate way of speaking would be, not to 'unchurch' the bodies that do not satisfy all their (High Anglican) requirements, but to speak of them rather as 'Churches with a certain defect of order or organization.' Where there are so many signs of God's presence the impugned bodies must needs have a right to be called 'Churches.'"

We can see such signs of God's presence in the story of Methodism. Methodism has produced saints and scholars and great evangelists and preachers. In speaking of saints, I am thinking not so much of those who, unknown to fame, have been won for Christ by Methodist work, as of great leaders like William and Catherine Booth and Hugh Price Hughes, whose living and dying faith has been said to be expressed in C. Wesley's line, "Thou, O Christ, art all I want." There have been great preachers such as Morley Punshon and the Irishmen William Arthur and Robert Newton; and as to scholars, one has but to think of the two Moultons (now dead) and Dr. Peake (who is still with us). It was once held by many Methodists that learning banished religious fervour. That idea has passed away.

In doctrine they are at one, not perhaps with the majority of

Churchmen, but at any rate with many who are in the Anglican Churches.

They are full of zeal for their Churches, liberal in supporting them and keen about their various missions.

Certainly if Antinomianism has come into Wesleyanism, it was from no following of Wesley. He was even violently *anti*-Antinomian. There are dangers in emotional religions, just as there are other dangers in mere formal faiths.

At the present time there is a great movement amongst English Methodists towards union. This at least should interest us, for, if successful, it *may* be, it is not at all certain that it will be, a foretaste of a wider reunion, by which the breach made in the eighteenth century will be healed.

