

The catholicity of Methodism. Some challenges to and from Methodism.

Methodism believes profoundly in the catholicity of the Church. This belief has been constantly reiterated throughout its history, from Wesley's original sermon 'On the Catholic Spirit', through the declaration in the 'Liverpool Minutes' of 1820, through the teaching of William James Shrewsbury, Hugh Price Hughes and John Scott Lidgett, down to the affirmation in *Called To Love and Praise* that the Church is catholic because 'there is one Universal God, who has declared His love for all creation in Jesus Christ'¹.

British Methodism asserted its claim to catholicity in the Deed of Union. 'Methodism claims and cherishes its place within the one Holy Catholic Church which is the Body of Christ'². Since then, the Roman Catholic ecumenist, Cardinal Willebrands has developed the notion of distinct types or styles of Christian life, each with its own characteristic style of liturgy, spirituality, theology and discipline. Methodism clearly is such a type.³

What is not always so clearly realised, either within Methodism or within other Christian communions is that such a claim imposes the strictest possible ecumenical obligations. Churches cannot claim to be 'catholic', unless, as the late Jean-Marie Tillard put it in his 'L'Eglise Locale', they are porous to each others' concerns.⁴ They must be responsible and mutually accountable to each other, a point that, in any case, lies at the heart of our connexional ecclesiology. They must be ever ready both to give and to receive from others in search of deeper koinonia and what George Tavard calls the '*progressive imaging of the Kingdom*'⁵. They must display the characteristic that William James Shrewsbury denominated '*disinterestedness*', that is to say a concern that gives priority to the total mission of the Church and its integrity over any denominational '*amour propre*'⁶. They must be able to acknowledge the limitations imposed upon their grasp upon catholicity by the reactive nature of their development in situations of past conflict and rivalry.

With all of this in mind, I propose for discussion challenges both to and from Methodism within the contemporary Ecumenical Movement. I begin with the former as I believe it is incumbent upon every tradition, without exception, to begin by asking what it is that they should be prepared, humbly and penitently, to learn and receive from others.

I begin then, by looking at those challenges that come to us from what are sometimes termed the 'catholic' churches, using that term more narrowly, and understanding by it in this particular context those churches possessed of the historic episcopal succession and a strong sacramental emphasis. From these churches come three strong challenges, firstly, concerning the centrality of the eucharist, secondly concerning the episcopal succession and, finally, from the largest of them, the challenge to a discussion and reception of the Petrine ministry. In all three cases, we are challenged not just to receive things that we may currently lack, but also to recognise that, in each case, there is that in the fullest understanding of our own Tradition that points us towards them as a fulfilment of everything that Methodism stands for in the most positive sense.

In the case of the centrality of the eucharist, denominated by Wesley, 'the grand channel of God's grace', there was a very wide variation in the nature of the Methodist responses to the 'Lima' document. The US response did indeed display much of the sense of ecumenical repentance and humility that I would argue is central to our Tradition. It asserted that the American Church had departed both from the tradition of the Universal Church and the authentically Wesleyan tradition in

its downgrading of the place of the eucharist in its life in the course of its nineteenth century development. By contrast, some of the from our European sister churches were much more negative⁷. The quality of the responses is, however, not the beginning and end of the question. It then has to be asked, what has been done since to enable the reception of the Lima insights, what has been done to restore the centrality of the eucharist in our life? The answer, at least as far as British Methodism is concerned, is not enough. Recently, there has been a British Methodist Faith and Order working party on the eucharist in which I have participated. A good feature of its work has been the painstaking attempt to give an account of the very wide variety of eucharistic practice and emphases within our churches. What has disappointed me, and I do not say this lightly, is the reluctance of my colleagues to engage in more **critical** evaluation of our practice in the light of the witness of the rest of the Church. We also need to address issues of presbyteral availability for eucharistic presidency, a problem that, ironically, the Roman Catholic Church is also failing to address over huge areas of Africa and Latin America. Can either church be said to be treating the eucharist as central if it fails to provide sufficient eucharistic presidents for every congregation?

There can be no doubt that Wesley wished the eucharist to be seen and used as the central means of grace. Many Methodists since, often in reaction to pre-Vatican II 'catholic' teaching (anglo - as well as Roman) have failed to preserve the balance between his equal emphases upon this, the *greatest* means of all, and the need to use *all* the means of grace, both sacramental and non-sacramental, both '*covenanted*' and '*prudential*', twin emphases that should count as a Methodist enriching insight for the whole Church.

Methodists should also now be seeking to 'receive the sign of the episcopal succession', particularly since recent developments, in the wake of Lima's teaching on apostolicity, would allow us to receive it precisely as 'sign and not guarantee'⁸. We would not have to deny that, in the conditions of the Wesleyan revival, a separation from the Anglican church was, sadly, necessary for missionary reasons on both sides of the Atlantic. We can continue to assert Wesley's teaching that our ministry takes its origins from a band of itinerant preachers, 'extraordinary messengers, raised up to provoke the ordinary ones to jealousy'. We can, I think now receive the Anglican emphasis that, though non-episcopal ministries are real and authentic ministries of the word and sacrament, the sign of the episcopal succession is still central to overall universal unity in the sense that it reinforces the sense of continuity across the whole of Christian time from the apostolic age onwards and is a particularly valuable, quasi-sacramental sign of that continuity. As our own British Methodist working party on episcopacy said in 1982, 'when we say why bishops?, the considerable majority of the Church responds why not bishops?'⁹ It is my personal observation that, in general, churches with the episcopal succession generally have a much broader appreciation of the riches of the Christian tradition as stemming from every age. The time has come to take urgent action to recover this sign¹⁰. The British Connexion has already issued a valuable series of guidelines relevant to this issue.

Finally, we have to respond to the daring and prophetic invitation of the Pope to 'engage in a fraternal and patient dialogue concerning the Petrine ministry, welcoming the chance to show how it might be compatible with connexionalism and particularly with that global connexionalism practised by the United Methodist Church.'¹¹ We have the resources for this especially in the work of Benjamin Gregory

who emphasises the importance of Peter's ministry in Acts, in travelling throughout all the churches of Palestine, encouraging them (Acts 9. V. 32), in recognising and bringing into connexion churches established independently of apostolic initiative and in leading the Church into bold recognition of new and unexpected initiatives of the Spirit¹². We recognise many of these Scriptural Petrine characteristics in the globally itinerant ministry of the present Pontiff, in his emphasis upon dialogue as 'making surprising discoveries possible' and his desire to see all the charisms of all the people flourish¹³. With their love of mission, the Methodist people should be only too glad to affirm the role played so often by the see of Rome in mission, including especially that mission of St Augustine that brought Christianity first to the Anglo-Saxon world. We will, however, reserve the right to say to him where we think the balance between the papal ministry and the universal communion of the Church has been distorted and needs to be corrected.

There are, however challenges that come from Methodism to the other churches. To churches of 'catholic' order there is the challenge to complete the work partly begun in the Lima reappraisal of 'apostolicity', and the subsequent Anglican affirmation of the authenticity of certain non-episcopal European churches¹⁴. These churches are challenged to return, with the greatest ecclesiologist in the British Methodist tradition, Benjamin Gregory, to a contemplation of the apostolic function of *recognition* of churches, as recounted in the early chapters of Acts, that may have been founded without apostolic activity, or that of their 'successors', but which are provenly apostolic in their teaching and style of life. 'Whosoever, wheresoever, by whomsoever the Spirit prompted Church action, and gave it the imprimatur of spiritual success, they (ie the apostles) at once recognised, revered and rejoiced in His work... They lost no time in recognising and connecting it'¹⁵.

If the concept of 'apostolic succession' of ministry is to be saved from legalism and narrowness, it must be complemented by the concept of apostolic recognition. As Gregory comments, 'No Christian community can, without the most egregious violation of the sanctity of language, call itself 'catholic' which shuts out...any company, bearing those Divinely impressed marks of the Church'¹⁶. Bishop Kallistos Ware has drawn the attention of Orthodox to the fact that true trinitarian koinonia may be confessed and lived in communities that lack the episcopal succession as such.¹⁷ A pneumatological question is at stake. Are we to regard the ecclesiological creative activity of the Spirit as *confined* to the 'apostolic age' or do we develop the insight referred to in the Roman Catholic-Methodist dialogue and accept that the instinct amongst the faithful that they are living through a new Pentecost (as at the time of the Wesleyan Revival) can, indeed, be true and received within the Universal Church?¹⁸

A second key challenge comes from our ecclesiology of connexionalism. The understanding of this amongst the nineteenth century Wesleyans was carefully nuanced. They regarded connexionalism as the ecclesiology closest in spirit to the lived experience of New Testament church life.¹⁹ They resisted, in the spirit of the quotation just given from Gregory, any temptation to 'unchurch' others who lacked such a system. Connexionalism, however, challenges both churches of 'independent' ecclesiology and those which emphasise an hierarchical ministry. To the former, it poses the challenge of whether the distinction between 'local' and 'universal' is the only valid one ecclesologically. Rather, perhaps, the Church should be seen as an interlocking web at every level and across every generation since church life, even at the most 'local' level always involves a degree of indebtedness to

and reliance upon others in resources both personal and spiritual. As Shrewsbury said, looking at the rich resources that fed the Methodist revival and enumerating all the influences upon it, Anglican and Puritan, English and continental, 'The Methodists are the debtors of all'.²⁰ Over-emphasis upon the rigid autonomy of the local church obscures the *mutual accountability* fundamental to the Christian experience of *koinonia*. It also ignores the point made by Miroslav Volf, himself in an independent tradition, that no one 'local' church is complete in itself because all are involved in a convergent pilgrimage towards their common eschatological destiny²¹. Churches must modify any concept of absolute local autonomy because they are '*theonomous*', under God's law and gracious plan of universal communion and not disobedient to the (ecclesiological) heavenly vision.²²

For the hierarchical churches, there come also the challenge to ensure that the teaching office has regard not just to the previous Tradition but to the present 'sensus fidelium' within the Church, and that the structures developed permit the formal participation of lay people and of 'lower' clergy. The concepts of *koinonia* and of connexionalism transcend both hierarchicalism and independency without denying the need of special ministries of leadership, always, however, focused upon the enabling of fuller *koinonia* and a more perfect circulation of all the charisms, a point recently emphasised by the Pope²³. The very concepts of 'catholicity' and '*koinonia*' involve a degree of mutual giving and receiving at every level of the Church's life if the Church really is, however imperfectly, to mirror that trinitarian life from which its *koinonia* derives²⁴.

This last point brings us the heart of the matter, that all ecumenical activity relates to the fuller reception of the gift of that precious life that is daily renewed in and amongst us by God's Spirit.

¹ For the sermon on the **Catholic Spirit**, see J. Wesley, *Works*, (Abingdon edition) vol 2, sermon 39, pp. 81-95. For the Liverpool Minutes, see J.S. Simon, *A Summary of Methodist Law and Discipline*, London, 1923, pp 267-271 (p. 269 for express elucidation of 'catholicity'). W.J. Shrewsbury, *An Essay on the Scriptural Character of the Wesleyan Methodist Economy*, London, 1840, D. Hughes, *Life of Hugh Price Hughes*, London, 1904, ch. 17. 'The Catholic Idea of the Church', pp. 435-480. J.S. Lidgett, *God, Christ and the Church*, London, 1927. *Called To Love and Praise*, Peterborough, 1999, para 2.4.4.

² cited in *Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church*, Peterborough, 1999, vol 2, p. 212.

³ For Willebrands' sermon, see *Tablet*, 24 Jan. 1970.

⁴ J-M Tillard, *L'Eglise Locale*, Paris, 1995, p. 380.

⁵ G. Tavard, *The Church, Community of Salvation*, Colledgeville, 1992.

⁶ Shrewsbury, p. 54, 296-304.

⁷ For these responses, see M. Thurian (ed), *Churches respond to BEM*, Geneva, 1986, vol 2, pp. 177-254. The United Methodist (US) response is pp. 177-200.

⁸, para 51.

⁹ *Porvoo Common Declaration para M 34*, *Statements of the Methodist Church on Faith and Order*, vol 1, London, 1984, p. 209.

¹⁰ I recognise that there will be particular problems for those Methodist churches already in an episcopal tradition, though I think they would be enriched by the merging of the grand Wesleyan succession, so like that of the *apostoloi* of the sub-apostolic era, with that of the churches claiming the 'historic' succession. For the guidelines of the British connexion, see the report on episcopate and episcopacy, as adopted by the Conference of 2000 and reprinted in *Statements of the Methodist Church on Faith and Order*, vol 2, Part 2, Peterborough, 2000, pp. 407-9

¹¹ For the first possible modern Methodist 'reception' of the Petrine ministry, see *Towards a Statement on the Church*, report of the fourth quinquennium of the Roman Catholic-Methodist

dialogue, para 58. See also my article, *A Methodist response to Ut Unum Sint*, in *One in Christ*, 1997, pp. 125-37.

¹² Gregory, pp. 41, 43, 49-50 for his analysis of 'Petrine' ministry.

¹³ *Ut Unum Sint*, para 38.

¹⁴ *Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry*, 1982, para M34. The agreements referred to are the Meissen Agreement between the Church of England and the Evangelical Church of Germany (1988) and the 'Reuilly' Agreement between the Church of England and the French reformed and Lutheran churches (2000)

¹⁵ Gregory, pp. 49-50.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 7.

¹⁷ K. Ware in *Returning Pilgrims*, CTBI, 1994 (accounts of British representatives at the Santiago Faith and Order Conference, 1993), pp. 29-33.

¹⁸ *Apostolic Tradition*, 1991 (report of fifth quinquennium of Roman Catholic-Methodist dialogue), para. 31.

¹⁹ J. H. Rigg, *The Connexional Economy of Wesleyan Methodism*, London, 1879, ch 1, 'Apostolic Christianity connexional in Principle', pp 1-23, esp. pp. 2, 6.

²⁰ Shrewsbury, p. 90.

²¹ M. Volf, *After Our Image. The Church as the Image of the Trinity*, Grand Rapids, 1998, pp 264-269.

²² Expression used by Bishop Rudiger Minor and cited by Bruce Robbins and myself in our joint article, *Connexionalism and Koinonia*, *One in Christ*, 1998, no 4, p. 331.

²³ John Paul II. *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, Rome, 1994, 36.

²⁴ *Called To Love and Praise*, para 2.1.9.