JOHN WESLEY'S CHURCHMANSHIP

Frank Baker

THE ORGANIZATION of Methodism can only be understood by realizing that it was not planned, but just happened. It would not be true, however, to continue—'in spite of, rather than because of, its founder John Wesley'. Doubtless Wesley would have preferred that it should be stated thus. Through the perspective of the years, however, it becomes clearer that in spite of Wesley's vehement protestations of loyalty to the Church of England he felt himself compelled to engage in a series of deviations from her practice and law which almost inevitably led to separation, whether he realized or acknowledged it or not.

Wesley had not the slightest intention of founding a new denomination. His avowed purpose was not 'to form the plan of a new church',[1] but to reform the old one. The *Large Minutes* from 1763 onwards spoke of 'God's design in Methodism' as 'to reform the nation, and in particular the Church; to spread Scriptural holiness over the land'. To this was prefixed in Wesley's last revision of 1789: 'Not to form any new sect, but to reform. . . .'[2] He set out with no blue-print of a perfect Church, but with a burning desire that the most perfect Church which he knew, the Church of England, should become still more perfect by a fuller awareness of God's plans for her, and by a more zealous response to His call. Within that Church, therefore, he embarked on a campaign of spiritual reformation, welcoming co-operation wherever it might be offered, meeting each opportunity, each challenge, each problem, as it arose, displaying sufficient courage to experiment with unconventional methods of evangelism and administration, and the even greater courage necessary to drop those experiments if they proved unsuccessful. He is probably the most noteworthy example of the ecclesiastical extemporizer.

Nevertheless, John Wesley did possess a mental picture of the perfect Church against which he measured the Church of his birth. This prototype was the Church of the New Testament and of the first three Christian centuries. In his view Constantine's conversion had ended this golden age by the union between Church and State, and the consequent removal of persecution.[3] He realized, however, that it was quite impracticable to reproduce a modern replica of the Primitive Church on any universal scale, though he did fashion some small-scale models of particular features of the Primitive Church. From the early Christian centuries he gained something much more important than patterns for love feasts, watchnights, or class tickets, namely the conviction that the outward form of an ecclesiastical organization matters far less than its spiritual effectiveness. This was the driving motive in his whole conception of Methodism.

The foundations were laid at the feet of his devout and scholarly father in the rectory at Epworth:

> From a child I was taught to love and reverence the Scripture, the oracles of God; and, next to these, to esteem the primitive Fathers, the writers of the three first centuries. Next after the primitive church I esteemed our own, the Church of England, as the most scriptural national Church in the world.[4]

This reverence for the ante-Nicene Church was re-inforced when in 1725 John Wesley considered ordination, for his father sent him a manuscript copy of a long letter of advice originally prepared for his curate Nathaniel Hoole. This work—published by John Wesley shortly after his father's death—is noteworthy for its high praise of the Fathers, and for its quotations from them. It seems fairly certain that Wesley's lifelong love of Ignatius and Polycarp stemmed from his father's enthusiasm.[5]

It is by no means surprising, therefore, to discover on the first page of his Oxford diary that in 1725 John Wesley was translating the Fathers.[6] At a similar turning-point in 1729, as he returned to Oxford from Epworth to take over the leadership of the Holy Club, we find him 'collecting' William Wake's edition of the Apostolic Fathers.[7] His friendship with John Clayton, begun on 20th April 1732, led to an even more vehement admiration of primitive Christianity. Wesley embarked on the practice of Wednesday and Friday fasts (not eating until 3 p.m.) on the grounds that they were 'commonly observed in the ancient church'.[8] It is noteworthy that his first publication, the *Collection of Forms of Prayer for every Day in the Week* (1733)—also prepared under the influence of Clayton—contained two non-scriptural quotations, one from 'the ancient Liturgy, commonly called St Mark's', and the other a saying of St Ignatius under persecution.[9] Later Wesley summarized the threefold emphasis of the 'Holy Club' as 'taking the Bible, as interpreted by the primitive Church and our own, for their whole and sole rule'.[10] As an S.P.G. missionary in Georgia, Wesley was obsessed with the idea of reviving the practices of the Primitive Church, and this, indeed, was in large part the reason for his comparative failure.[11]

On his way home from Georgia Wesley realized that his adulation of the ancient Church had been both uncritical and overstrained, so that he had fallen into the error of 'making antiquity a co-ordinate rather than a subordinate rule with scripture'.[12] His 'conversion' four months later completed this subordination of erudition to experience. His grounding in the Fathers, however, was by no means forgotten or despised. They continued to exert a formative influence upon his basic theology and churchmanship, and therefore—as will be seen—upon the organization and worship of the Methodist Societies. His scale of values had now been settled for good, however. It may be seen in his preface to the extracts from the Fathers in volume one of his *Christian Library* (1749):

> We are to look on their writings, though not of equal authority with the holy Scriptures . . . yet as worthy of a much greater respect than any composures which have been made since . . . [13]

Towards the end of his life he still maintained this position.

> I regard no authorities but those of ante-Nicene Fathers; nor any of them in opposition to Scripture.[14]

The new element which firmly ousted reverence for antiquity as such, and which became the *raison d'être* of Methodism, was the conviction that direct knowledge of God was promised in Scripture, and was possible without any mediation of Church or Priest or Sacrament. This emphasis upon the immediate contact of the soul with God owed more than Wesley was always ready to acknowledge to his friendship with William Law, and to his study of the mystics. There is little doubt that his revulsion from the mystics had a root similar to that which prompted his reduced estimate of the early Fathers—the supremacy for him of Holy Scripture.[15] Wesley's advocacy of *The Life of God in the Soul of Man* (to quote the title of one of his favourite works) drew upon Methodism from the beginning the charge of being a new brand of Quakerism, the term 'assurance' being substituted for 'inner light'.[16]

Samuel Wesley on his deathbed had said to John, 'The inward witness, son, the inward witness: that is the proof, the strongest proof, of Christianity.'[17] Although at the time John Wesley did not fully understand what his father meant, in later years he echoed those words in a treatise addressed to that clerical sceptic, Dr Conyers Middleton:

> What Christianity (considered as a doctrine) promised is accomplished in my soul. And Christianity, considered as an inward principle, is the completion of all those promises. It is holiness and happiness, the image of God impressed on a created spirit, a fountain of peace and love springing up into everlasting life. . . . And this I conceive to be the strongest evidence of the truth of Christianity. I do not undervalue traditional evidence. Let it have its place and its due honour. It is highly serviceable in its kind and in its degree. And yet I cannot set it on a level with this.[18]

The truth of the Christian gospel had been proved to John Wesley himself through an inward assurance which he believed to have been impressed directly upon his heart and mind by God. He went on to hint that the purposes of God in history were to be seen in the swing of the pendulum from the politico-religious fury of the seventeenth and the frigid intellectualism of the early eighteenth centuries to this emphasis upon the 'inner light', so that men might 'be constrained to look into themselves also and attend to the light shining in their hearts'.[19] Henceforth his concern was to proclaim this creative idea as his central theme, though with numerous safeguards, intellectual, moral, and ecclesiastical.

The fundamental proof of Christianity thus became for Wesley its fundamental purpose, overriding every other consideration, though it might be confirmed or modified by other factors. The Church was not an end in itself so much as a means for introducing people to God, and keeping them in touch with Him. If it did not fulfil its main purpose it must be either reformed or superseded. An oft-quoted saying of John Wesley's is still untraced to its source, though there is no doubt that it is fundamentally in character—'Church or no Church we must attend to the work of saving souls.'[20] In one of his famous letters to 'John Smith' Wesley defended himself from the charge of 'setting aside order' by asking which kind of church discipline was intended, 'the scriptural, the primitive, or our own?' He then proceeded from the outward form to the inner purpose:

> But methinks I would go deeper. I would inquire, What is the end of all ecclesiastical order? Is it not to bring souls from the power of Satan to God, and to build them up in His fear and love? Order, then, is so far valuable as it answers these ends; and if it answers them not, it is nothing worth.[21]

Wesley went on to give examples of the people untouched by 'orderly preaching' but responding to his unorthodox methods. In a letter to 'John Smith' the following year he maintained

> I did far more good . . . by preaching three days on my father's tomb than I did by preaching three years in his pulpit.[22]

Wesley was the more easily able to take up this pragmatic view of the Church because of his reading of Scripture and the early Fathers—or perhaps we should say 'his reading of the Scriptures in the light of the history of the early Church'. There is little doubt that soon after his 'conversion', if not before, he agreed with the claim of Edward Stillingfleet's *Irenicum*, whether or not he had then read that book, 'that the Form of Church Government is a mere matter of Prudence, regulated by the Word of God'.[23] In other words, any form of Church government is valid which *works* and which is not definitely contrary to Scripture, since the Bible lays down no specific form of Church—episcopacy may be there described, but not prescribed.

Wesley's historical theory of the origin of Church government, as propounded to the 1745 Conference, may be faulty,[24] but it shows quite clearly that his reading had already convinced him of the amorphous state of the early Church. It may, indeed, be a somewhat unhappy attempt to summarize Stillingfleet, whom Wesley accredited with having convinced him upon this point. To a critic he wrote in 1756:

> I still believe 'the Episcopal form of Church government to be both scriptural and apostolical': I mean, well agreeing with the practice and writings of the Apostles. But that it is prescribed in Scripture I do not believe. This opinion (which I once heartily espoused) I have been heartily ashamed of ever since I read Dr Stillingfleet's *Irenicon*. I think he has unanswerably proved that neither Christ nor His Apostles prescribed any particular form of Church government, and that the plea for the divine right of Episcopacy was never heard of in the primitive Church.[25]

Wesley also claimed that the native English Church had maintained a similar flexibility, and that 'the divine right of episcopacy [was] first asserted in England . . . about the middle of Queen Elizabeth's reign'.[26] Lord Peter King's *Account of the Primitive Church*, which he read early in 1746, clarified Wesley's mind on another point, that in the first Christian centuries bishops and presbyters differed only in 'degree' (*gradu*) not in 'order' (*ordine*), and were therefore in effect interchangeable—a conviction upon which he was soon himself prepared to ordain, and eventually did ordain.

This view of the Apostolic Church was enshrined in his *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (1755). His note on Acts 20_{17}, it is true, is slightly hesitant:

> *Sending to Ephesus, he called the elders of the church*—These are called *Bishops* in 28th verse, (rendered *Overseers* in our Translation.) Perhaps *Elders* and *Bishops* were then the same: Or no otherwise different, than are the Rector of a Parish and his Curates.

On Philippians 1_1 he writes with more assurance:

The word *Bishops* here includes all the Presbyters at Philippi, as well as the *Ruling Presbyter*: The names *Bishop* and *Presbyter*, or *Elder*, being promiscuously used in the First Ages.

His notes on 1 Timothy $3_{2,8}$ strike an almost militant chord:

A bishop—or Pastor of a congregation, *must be blameless. . . . Likewise the deacons must be serious*—Men of a grave, decent, venerable Behaviour—But where are Presbyters? Were this Order essentially distinct from that of Bishops, could the Apostle have past it over in silence?

This was the angle from which he approached his beloved Church of England after his conversion. Wesley's Oxford Methodism has been hailed as a precursor of the Oxford Movement of the nineteenth century, and John Wesley in Georgia might well be compared to a modern Anglo-Catholic. Examples can be adduced to show that throughout his ministry he retained some High Church tendencies. He led a Sacramental Revival within the Church of England by means of his Methodist Societies. He maintained the validity of the 26th Article, 'Of the unworthiness of the Ministers, which hinders not the effect of the Sacraments'.[27] Nevertheless, from 1738 onwards his high regard for the observances and traditions of the Church was always subservient to the will of God made known immediately by the witness of the Holy Spirit within his mind, and checked by Holy Scripture. He remained convinced that Church, Ministry and Sacraments were only means to an end—the forging of personal links between man and God, the creation of 'a company of faithful or believing people'.

John Wesley believed that the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England supported him in this pragmatic view of the Church. Wesley subscribed the Articles 'in simplicity of heart . . . firmly [believing] none but Episcopal ordination valid' on 17th September 1725, prior to his own ordination. Later he confessed that his views of some Articles had altered.[28] Not of the 19th, however. Throughout his life he frequently quoted this—though he sometimes mistakenly referred to it as the 20th!:

XIX. *Of the Church*
The visible Church of Christ is a Congregation of faithful men, in the which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly ministered according to Christ's Ordinance, in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same. . . .[29]

In his *Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion* (1743) he defended himself from any charge of undermining the Church by expounding this definition, maintaining that the *essence* of the Church was the 'company of faithful or believing people—*coetus credentium*'.[30] The preaching of the Word and the due administration of the Sacraments, though immensely important, were yet not of the essence of the Church, but were 'the properties thereof'. This was expressed much more boldly towards the end of his life, in his sermon 'Of the Church', where he made it quite clear that he was unable to regard these specific 'properties' as of supreme importance, and underlined this point by the deliberate omission from his Ephesians quotation of any reference to baptism:

I dare not exclude from the Church catholic all those congregations in which any unscriptural doctrines, which cannot be affirmed to be the 'pure word of God', are sometimes, yea, frequently preached; neither all those congregations, in which the sacraments are not 'duly administered'. . . . Whoever they are that have 'one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one God and Father of all', I can easily bear with their holding wrong opinions, yea, and superstitious modes of worship: Nor would I, on these accounts, scruple still to include them within the pale of the catholic Church; neither would I have any objection to receive them, if they desired it, as members of the Church of England.[31]

[1] *Reasons Against a Separation* (1758), *The Works of John Wesley* (Standard edn), XIII.225.
[2] *Minutes* (1862 edn), I.446-7.
[3] *Works*, 7.164. But cf. for abuses earlier, pp.164-5.
[4] ibid., 13.272.
[5] Tyerman, *Samuel Wesley*, pp.391-2, 394. *Advice to a Young Clergyman* (1735), reprinted in Jackson, *Charles Wesley*, pp.500-34, especially pp.503-4, 506, 510, 514, 528.
[6] *The Journal of John Wesley* (Standard edn), I.37.
[7] ibid., p.89n.
[8] ibid., p.468. Cf. pp.67, 101, and Tyerman, *Oxford Methodists*, pp.31-40, espec. p.33.
[9] *Collection* (7th edn), pp.27, 44.
[10] *Short History of Methodism* (1765); see *Works*, 8.348.
[11] For a discussion of his reading on the voyage and in Georgia see A. W. Harrison's articles in *W.H.S. Proc.* XIII.35-9; XV.113-17; and also F. Hunter's article on the influence of the non-Jurors on both Wesley brothers—*L.Q.R.* (January 1947), pp.56-61.
[12] *Journal*, I.419.
[13] *Works*, 14.225; cf. p.224.
[14] *Letters*, VII.106.
[15] See E. W. Baker, *Herald of the Evangelical Revival*, espec. pp.103-9.
[16] See Frank Baker: *Relations between the Society of Friends and Early Methodism*, pp.3-4; cf. Moore's *Wesley*, II.521.
[17] *Letters*, II.135.
[18] ibid., p.383.
[19] ibid., p.385.
[20] See *W.H.S. Proc.*, XXII.105-6, XXVII.168, where the Rev. E. W. Thompson traces it back as far as Watson's *Life of Wesley* (1831), where it is given as from 'one of his letters to Charles'—Dr Henry Bett, in his *Spirit of Methodism* (1937, reprint of 1943), p.57, quotes it as 'said to the Bishop of London'.
[21] *Letters*, II.77-8.
[22] ibid., p.96.
[23] Quoted by E. W. Thompson, *Wesley, Apostolic Man* (1957), p.18.
[24] See ibid., pp.77-80.
[25] *Letters*, III.182; cf. II.55-6, III.135-6, 201; *Minutes* (1745), p.25; 1747, pp.47-8. At Kingswood School is a copy of Stillingfleet's *Irenicum* on whose title page Wesley has written: 'I think he fully proves his point. J.W. 1760. Kingswood.' This, of course, was written long after Wesley's first reading, about which there is only indirect and inconclusive evidence.
[26] *Minutes* (1747), p.48.
[27] He even argued that upon this point could be decided the question of whether the Methodists should separate from the Church of England, claiming that it was the influx of Dissenters into the Methodist Societies who had somewhat shaken the orthodoxy of his early followers (*Works*, 7.175-85).
[28] Cf. *Letters*, IV.150.
[29] *Book of Common Prayer* (1772). For '20th' see *Journal*, II.335; *Minutes* (1744), p.12; *Letters*, VII.285.
[30] *Works*, VIII.30. Wesley used the Latin phrase in order to show that the article implied 'living faith'. Cf. *Works*, VI.396.
[31] *Works*, VI.397. The sermon is dated 'Bristol, Sept. 28, 1785' and was first published in the *Arminian Magazine* for 1786. Cf. his important sermon, 'Catholic Spirit', first preached in 1749 (*Works*, V.492-504).

no freedom of the will!). Thus encouraged our Arminian may even feel disposed to mount a double counter attack. 'You have argued,' he says in this case to his opponent, 'from the premiss of causality, which is the premiss of all science, and is no doubt valid; but there is an equally valid premiss derived from ethics, and according to the premiss man is in some sense free; no one has any right to say that the premiss of science is valid and the premiss of ethics is not. What we have to do is to reconcile these two premisses—not explain one away in the interest of the total victory of the other. This means that we must allow some place for human freedom without doubting the validity of science. And when I claim that I freely chose to have faith in Christ, perhaps what I mean is this: when I am in the situation of being confronted with the claims of Christ, there is enough in the situation itself, in my previous history and in my character, to cause me to say "Yes" to Him, *and* to say "No" to Him; in this sense, whichever I say can afterwards be regarded as caused. But there is another element in the situation—*I*—which is not the product of causes alone; and *I* decide which response to make.'

The psychological attack on the Arminian assertion of human freedom is, of course, more powerful than ever before. In fact, in many quarters, including some Christian ones, it is assumed that this attack has been finally successful. Now that we know so much about human motivation, rationalization, and the hidden springs of so many actions that we used to call noble or base, how can we possibly, it is asked, maintain the beliefs that we are free to act in a variety of different ways? This applies, it is urged, whichever school of psychology we join, and whether we believe or not that the causes of action are in the last analysis physical. Freedom, in fact, is just a useful illusion. This is, indeed, a formidable attack, for if we attempt to defend our freedom we shall be told that our defence has a psychological origin, and it does not help our defence to say that the attack has a psychological origin also. But perhaps we may venture to point out that the psychological account of human action, while it may provide a perfectly valid description of causal relations within the psyche, cannot discover either the absence or the presence of free choice, which is by its very nature not susceptible to discovery by psychological method. This does not prove the existence of freedom, which depends on other arguments, but it tends to show that psychology cannot disprove it.

Enough has been said to show that the Arminian issue is still a live one; and perhaps that Arminius's doctrine of the nature and grace of God, of faith and all human goodness as gifts of God, and of that small measure of freedom which man, even in his sinful state, must claim to have if he is to respond to God's infinite but not irresistible grace, is still worthy of consideration.

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*Continued from p.*215 (*July* 1960)

PART TWO

AT THE 1744 Conference Wesley described being 'zealous for the Church' in terms not of polity, liturgy, priesthood, or dogma, but of pastoralia —'to be earnestly desirous of its welfare, by the confirmation of its present members in faith, hearing, and communicating; or its increase, by the addition of new members'.[32] He maintained that 'orthodoxy . . . or right opinion, is but a slender part of religion at best, and sometimes no part at all'.[33] To the true High Churchman the Church is a 'given' institution, and to him tradition and orthodoxy are all-important. To Wesley, however, the Church was functional, and where its essential purpose of bringing people into touch with God was either neglected or mismanaged he felt himself at perfect liberty—indeed under a divine compulsion—to suggest or to carry out any practicable reforms.

At the outset of his ministry as leader of the People called Methodists John Wesley was thus running true to his staunch Nonconformist ancestry, and indeed to the courageous independence of thought which had compelled both his father and his mother to forsake Nonconformity for the Established Church. The right of holding and following a private judgement contrary to ecclesiastical tradition and established authority he regarded as axiomatic. He rightly saw this as a cardinal principle of the Protestant Reformation, and maintained that even against an otherwise unanimous vote a Christian could only submit as far as judgement and conscience allowed, 'either to Pope, Council, Bishop, or Convocation':

> This is that grand principle of every man's right to private judgement, in opposition to implicit faith in man, on which Calvin, Luther, Melanchthon, and all the ancient Reformers, both at home and abroad, proceed, 'Every man must think for himself, since every man must give an account for himself to God.'[34]

This is also the thesis of the opening paragraphs of his sermon on a 'Catholic Spirit': I.9 quotes this 1747 phrase almost word for word; I.10 shows that to attempt to enforce Anglican discipline, as he had once done, was in effect to deny the Protestant Reformation, which was founded on 'the right of private judgement'.[35] His *Explanatory Notes* on 1 Corinthians 11[18] emphasize the same point:

> Both *Heresy* and *Schism*, in their modern sense of the words, are Sins that the Scripture knows nothing of; but were invented merely to deprive Mankind of the benefit of private Judgements, and a liberty of Conscience.[36]

With John Wesley, however, there could be no question of spiritual intuition or private judgement running amok. He was neither iconoclast nor anarchist nor megalomaniac. Some of his followers, indeed, thought him far too cautious in his insistence on testing every step before venturing along an untrod way. Every innovation must first be examined in the cold clear light of reason—Wesley's emphasis upon logic and argument in the approach to conduct as well

as to doctrine was the cold douche that prevented Methodism's emphasis upon personal spiritual experience from degenerating into an hysterical emotionalism.[37] It must be measured against the standard of the Sacred Scriptures, for Wesley was one with the Reformers in the tendency to substitute an infallible Book for an infallible Church. In the case of Church institutions or practices which were neither prescribed nor forbidden by the Bible, any seeming orthodoxy must also be compared with the practice of the Primitive Church. (For instance, James Hutton's suggestion that each 'band' should have its own 'monitor' did not even reach the point of experiment because it was blocked by Wesley's appeal to reason and to Church order.[38] Finally, it must face the pragmatic test of experience—if it did not produce lasting spiritual fruits in credible witnesses it must be discarded.)

In spite of these safeguards—which in any case were not adequately known to many of his contemporaries—it is not surprising that from the outset of his evangelical ministry scores of Anglican pulpits were closed against John Wesley, and sterner discipline was threatened. In a letter to his brother Charles on 23rd June 1739 he states that if a bishop stood between him and what he believed to be the call of God—such as an urge or an invitation to preach in someone else's parish—he must obey God and be ready to 'suffer for it'.[39] He was therefore prepared for his famous interview with Joseph Butler, Bishop of Bristol, two months later. When the bishop 'advised' him to leave Bristol, Wesley flung down the gauntlet in a memorable speech, comparable to Luther's '*Hier stehe ich: ich kann nicht anders*':

My Lord, my business on earth is, to do what good I can. Wherever, therefore, I think I can do most good, there must I stay, so long as I think so. At present I think I can do most good here; therefore, here I stay.

This was ecclesiastical insubordination with a vengeance, even though Wesley went on to justify his intransigence by the extremely shaky argument that he was 'ordained as Fellow of a College' and was therefore 'not limited to any particular cure'. If his claim proved untenable, however, he was perfectly prepared to face the consequences:

I do not therefore conceive that in preaching here by this commission I break any human law. When I am convinced I do, then it will be time to ask, 'Shall I obey God or man?'[40]

Controversy on this and related issues dogged Wesley throughout his life, though particularly during the following decade. Sometimes the encounter was private, as in the important 'John Smith' correspondence.[41] At other times it took the form of a pamphlet warfare, like that with the Rev. Thomas Church.[42] The subject was also frequently debated by the Methodist Conferences. At the first Conference, in 1744, Wesley was ready to question some of the Thirty-nine Articles as being unscriptural, and quite firmly maintained that obedience to bishops could only be in 'things indifferent'.[43] At the 1745 Conference he stressed the congregational principle of mutual consent between pastor and flock, whereby either may leave the other if 'convinced it is for the glory of God and the superior good of their souls'.[44] This principle was reaffirmed against all comers at the 1747 Conference, after Wesley had read Lord Peter King's volume:

Q[uestion] 4. You profess to obey both the governors and rules of the Church, yet in many instances you do not obey them: how is this consistent? Upon what principles do you act, while you sometimes obey and sometimes not?

A[nswer]. It is entirely consistent. We act at all times on one plain, uniform principle,—'We will obey the rules and governors of the Church, whenever we can consistently with our duty to God: whenever we cannot, we will quietly obey God rather than men'.[45]

This pragmatic, individualist churchmanship, linked with such a burning desire to proclaim an almost unknown and certainly unconventional gospel, was bound sooner or later to bring about either a reformation in or a separation from the Established Church. Wesley so longed for and believed in the possibility of the first, however, that he would never admit that the second had actually taken place. Out of many witnesses we quote a few sentences only from his sermon on 'The Ministerial Office', dated 'Cork, May 4, 1789':

I hold all the doctrines of the Church of England. I love her liturgy. I approve her plan of discipline, and only wish it could be put in execution. I do not knowingly vary from any rule of the Church, unless in those few instances, where I judge, and as far as I judge, there is an absolute necessity.

Later in the sermon he analyses this constant tension throughout his ministry from 1738 between two principles, namely:

The one, that I dare not separate from the Church, that I believe it would be a sin so to do; the other, that I believe it would be a sin not to vary from it in the points above mentioned. I say, put these two principles together, First, I will not separate from the Church; yet, Secondly, in cases of necessity, I will vary from it, (both of which I have constantly and openly avowed for upwards of fifty years,) and inconsistency vanishes away.[46]

Nevertheless he was prepared to be driven into the wilderness if necessary, and it is noteworthy that all his twelve *Reasons against a Separation from the Church of England* (1758) are prudential reasons, showing that separation—'whether it be lawful or no'—was not expedient; it was only Charles Wesley's endorsement which went farther and claimed that it was 'neither expedient nor lawful'.[47]

There is no doubt that Wesley preserved a deep affection for the Church of England, and was not speaking with his tongue in his cheek when he protested his loyalty. He was able the more easily to do this because he made a careful distinction between the essential Church and its temporary accretions. Writing to his brother-in-law, Westley Hall, on 30th December 1745, he claimed that 'many of the laws, customs, and practices of the Ecclesiastical Courts' were 'indefensible'. He added a significant illustration as 'a key to our whole behaviour':

We no more look upon these filthy abuses which adhere to our Church as part of the building than we look upon any filth which may adhere to the walls of Westminster Abbey as a part of that structure.[48]

He therefore felt fully justified in scouring the structure, even though some might object to the presence of scaffolding and unordained workers about the premises. He would do it cautiously, however, bit by bit as he felt compelled, rather than according to a carefully planned and timed schedule. He is perhaps

the best example of the ecclesiastical extemporizer, not erecting a new denomination around some particular concern, conviction, or revelation, but doing his best to fit the old building for its proper task, cleansing here, repairing or buttressing there, and even adding a new chapel or transept. He was ready to adopt or adapt any idea which might help the Church to proclaim the Gospel more effectively.

In this process Wesley deliberately aimed at caution, as may be seen from the *Minutes* of his first Conferences, whose members were called together to consolidate Methodist doctrine and discipline. The burden was learning the way of God step by step. In 1744:

> It is desired that all things may be considered as in the immediate presence of God: That we may meet with a single eye, and as little children who have everything to learn.[49]

In 1745:

> Q. 1. Should we still consider ourselves as little children, who have everything to learn?
>
> A. Yes, so far as to have our minds always open to any farther light which God may give us.[50]

In 1746:

> We desire barely to follow Providence, as it gradually opens.[51]

In 1747:

> Q. 4. In our first Conference it was agreed to examine every point from the foundation. Have we not been someway fearful of doing this? What were we afraid of? Of overturning our first principles?
>
> A. Whoever was afraid of this, it was a vain fear. For if they are true, they will bear the strictest examination. If they are false, the sooner they are overturned the better. Let us all pray for a willingness to receive light; and invariably desire to know of every doctrine whether it be of God.[52]

The doctrinal foundations for Methodism were laid during those early Conferences—laid without any clear plans for the ecclesiastical superstructure that was to be raised thereon, but laid with the confident certainty that God would Himself supervise operations, making known His designs both through the Scriptures and by immediate contact upon the awareness of Wesley and his followers, who were also charged to confirm or reject those intuitive findings by reason and by the acid test of experience. It was in this spirit that Wesley approached not only the formative ecclesiastical experiments of the 1740's, the debates on separation of the 1750's, and the consolidation of the 1760's and 1770's, but also the crucial 1780's, when by the Deed of Declaration Methodism was in fact if not in name declared a sect, and when by his ordinations John Wesley proclaimed himself in deeds if not in words a schismatic, though with the best of intentions and the clearest of consciences. All sprang from his initial conception of the nature and function of the Church. His later collaborators recognized that this had been the spirit of his approach to Methodism throughout his life. When in the year of Wesley's death the provision of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper for the Methodist Societies was being warmly debated, John Pawson wrote to Charles Atmore:

> Our Old Plan has been to follow the openings of Providence, and to alter and amend the plan, as we saw needful, in order to be more useful in the hand of God.[53]

Step by step, therefore, urged by the inner promptings of the Holy Spirit, and always testing the genuineness of those promptings with the reagents of reason, experience, Scripture, and the example of the Primitive Church, John Wesley marched with the leaders of the Anglican Church, yet had his eyes so firmly fixed on his spiritual goal that he never realized how far he had strayed from the remainder of the column. Had he been quite clear that he was marching straight into a separate denomination, however, he would not have flinched, for it was his task to do all the good he could, in all the ways he could, wherever and however God might call him, and to leave the unknown future in God's hand. His prudential approach to religion at times seems, in fact, quite improvident. At the 1744 Conference he faced the possibility that the Methodists might leave the Church of England after his death, but added,

> We cannot with good conscience neglect the present opportunity of saving souls while we live, for fear of consequences which may possibly or probably happen after we are dead.[54]

To 'John Smith' he wrote:

> I am not careful for what may be an hundred years hence. He who governed the world before I was born shall take care of it likewise when I am dead. My part is to improve the present moment.[55]

Every moment, then, with its challenge or its opportunity, was faced in the certainty that God would direct him to his decisions, and support him in his actions, whether they were praised or scorned, whether they were orthodox or unconventional in the extreme. He must 'follow the openings of Providence'.

The dualism of Wesley's approach to the organization of the Methodist Societies has been well described by Dr H. B. Workman:

> The conjunction of belief in the authority of an organic church with insistence upon the value and reality of individual experience as the final test, gives to Methodism its special position in the catholic Church. We have the root idea of the Independent joined to the root idea of the Anglican, a primary insistence upon the value of the subjective joined to the constant maintenance of the objective authority of the Church. To plead that Wesley himself held contradictory views as to wherein lay the objective authority of the Church is futile. Whatever may be said about the logic of his churchmanship, it cannot be gainsaid that he insisted throughout his life upon external authority as well as upon inner illumination. If his enemies claimed, not without some grounds for their statement, that that external authority was but himself, they would really do him an injustice. . . . In this double allegiance to the inner illumination as the final court of appeal and to an ill-defined outer authority we see one secret of the struggles which rent Methodism after Wesley's death.[56]

There was no attempt at a long-term policy and little at consistency in John Wesley's direction of the evolution of Methodist organization at the behest of an adventurous Providence. As a matter of fact, however, the basic polity of British Methodism has remained throughout two centuries very similar to the pattern which was gradually formed during the opening decade, the principal components of which were the Societies, the Circuits, and the Conference, to which

were added immediately after Wesley's death the Districts. The transformation from a Society to a Church is again the result of this same controlling factor of Wesley's distinctive brand (some might term it 'peculiar brand') of churchmanship, especially as exercised in the crucial year of 1784, when he both took it upon himself to ordain his preachers, and made provision for the continuance of Methodism after his death by securing legal recognition for the authority of the Methodist Conference. He continued to protest his loyalty to the Church as established by the laws of England, but in fact his loyalty was only to the Head of the Church legislating in the heart of man.

[32] *Minutes*, 1744, p.12.
[33] *Letters*, III.183; cf. p.203.
[34] *Minutes*, 1747, pp. 39-40.
[35] *Works*, V.496.
[36] Cf. *Minutes*, 1747, pp.46-7. See the sermon 'On Schism' (Vol. VI, 1788), *Works* VI.401-10. Cf. *Farther Appeal*, Part III (1745), *Works*, VIII.235-7, 251-2, and *Letters*, III.182, 201-2.
[37] Cf. his scathing remarks on 'enthusiasm, imaginary inspiration', etc., in his sermon on 'God's Vineyard', *Works*, VII.211.
[38] *Letters*, I.272-6.
[39] *Letters*, I.323.
[40] Whitehead's *Wesley*, II.119-21; Moore's *Wesley*, I.464-5. For a valuable study of Wesley's supposed *ius ubique praedicandi* see W.H.S. *Proceedings*, XX.63-7.
[41] Moore's *Wesley*, II.475-8.
[42] Green, *Anti-Methodist Literature*, Nos. 185, 205, and Green, *Wesley Bibliography*, Nos. 65, 87; see *Works*, VIII.375-481.
[43] *Minutes*, 1744, pp.12-13; cf. *Minutes*, 1745, p.24.
[44] *Minutes*, 1745, p.26.
[45] *Minutes*, 1747, p.47.
[46] *Works*, VII.278-9; cf. *Letters*, II.240-1, etc.
[47] *Works*, XIII.225-32; cf. *Works*, VII.208. The author of *John Wesley in Company with High Churchmen* (3rd Edn, 1870, p.157) endeavours to prove that to John Wesley also separation from the Church was unlawful, and not merely inexpedient. He cites for his purpose, however, a passage from the *Journal* (VII.217) in which Wesley states that it would be 'not only inexpedient, but totally unlawful' for him to put Methodists in the dilemma of separating 'either from the Church or from us'—a different matter altogether. To be on the safe side, however, this passage was quietly dropped from the 1794 reprint of Part XXI of the *Journal*.
[48] *Letters*, II.56; cf. *Journal*, III.230.
[49] *Minutes*, p.7.
[50] Ibid., p.19. [51] Ibid., p.35. [52] Ibid., p.39.
[53] Smith's *History*, II.15.
[54] *Minutes*, 1744, p.13.
[55] *Letters*, II.94.
[56] *New History of Methodism*, 1909, I.16.

SANCTIFIED IMPERIALISM

The Ramsden Sermon preached before the University of Cambridge, 5th June 1960

John Foster

IT WAS on the 4th of June 1805—155 years ago yesterday—that a son of this University, the Reverend Claudius Buchanan, wrote to the Vice-Chancellor with the offer of a £500 prize for an essay. Buchanan was a graduate of Glasgow before he came to Queens' College, Cambridge, and was brought up in the Church of Scotland before coming to London to seek his fortune and being converted by that ex-slave-trader, now Church of England parson, John Newton.

So when he was called to the ministry it was to the Church of England, and Charles Simeon of Holy Trinity placed his hand upon him and sent him off (as he did with so many missionary-hearted young Cambridge men) to an East India Company chaplaincy. And here was the result. £500, vast sum for a prize in those days, was a sign that in John Company's service even a parson might grow rich. But the essay subject, *that* is the point: £500 for writing on 'the probable designs of the divine Providence in subjecting so large a portion of Asia to the British Dominion'.

If the Ramsden Sermon carries no similar reward, neither is it stamped with so blatant an imperialism. My sermon is to be on: 'Church Extension over the Colonies and Dependencies of the British Empire', a subject somewhat dated, if not to the extent of having gone bad on us. It is a left-over from the period before colonies had become dominions, and dependencies had begun to be hustled along the road to *in*dependence. Yet I venture to suggest that if there be any mistake with either of them—Buchanan Prize or Ramsden Sermon—it is made within the apostolic succession. For St Paul, a Hebrew of the Hebrews, was swift to use his Roman citizenship for the preaching of the gospel, and the great Origen (*c.* 250) says straight out that the unification of the Mediterranean lands in the Roman Empire was 'for the spread of the doctrine of Jesus through the whole earth'. Let us be neither fearful nor finicky. God's purpose runs through all that is.

In Scotland this year we are celebrating the fourth centenary of the Reformation. There are some things not to be celebrated, but to be mourned, and chief among them this: when the voyages of Columbus, Vasco da Gama, and Magellan had opened routes across the world as never before, and monk and friar and Jesuit were soon speeding out along them, Protestants stood aside. Doomed in most lands of the Reformation to a long struggle in self-defence, they settled into an attitude of self-regard, arguing with each other as to how the gospel should be expressed instead of boldly preaching it across the world. But that was not all. Routes across the world, world trade, and Empire—these belonged to the two Great Powers, Portugal and Spain, countries untouched by the Reformation. Protestants were to be found chiefly in the small weak countries of Northern Europe, and how were they to hear the cry of the world's need if their windows did not open on the world? There was room in God's purpose for imperialism.

We British were the exception—we were in at the explorations from the beginning, our John Cabot of Bristol discovering Newfoundland in the same year that Vasco rounded the African continent and sailed to Calicut. Elizabethan seamen challenged Spain's American monopoly, and in 1600 merchant adventurers founded (with her royal charter) the East India Company, reaching out to spheres which Portugal once guarded as her own. And so *we* came to eastern trade and western colonies. It is in the latter that our missions, among the earliest of all Protestant missions, begin.

The colonies were, of course, in the New World. That is a good name for it, because, whether Roman Catholics from Spain or Protestants from these islands, men venturing there seem to have felt that a new age was beginning. When our Lord gave His commission to the Apostles, 'Go ye into all the world', the Devil had spirited away one section of mankind to this *terra incognita*, hoping thus to