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# Heritage of Methodism

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by John Lawson

Last year the American economist, Professor Galbraith, delivered a very interesting illustrated series of lectures telecast on our British television entitled "The Age of Uncertainty." Now the age of uncertainty is no new thing.

In the eighteenth century Joseph Butler, the Bishop of Bristol who was one of the greatest Christian scholars of his age and the sole defender of the orthodox faith against Deism, was invited to become the Archbishop of Canterbury. But he turned the job down. He was not man enough for it. He said, "I have not strength to support a falling church."

An intelligent and devoted man, he was of the opinion that Christianity was gradually ebbing out in England into a polite invention of society. To put it in a modern phrase, people were beginning to think they had come to the post-Christian era. When Bishop Butler made his statement, he did not recognize that a new wave of Christian faith and devotion was being born in England in a way he did not anticipate and certainly would not appreciate.

England was coming to the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, and at the same time there was a great new wave of Christian conviction spreading among the people. This was divine providence. And it is important to remember that this same heritage is fully shared by Americans.

Warfare has always been bad for the Christian religion, and in all sort of warfare none was worse than the Revolution. After the American Revolution there was a time of small church attendance in America and of widespread unbelief in American universities. At the

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same time God was starting His “strange work” in England, quite independently He was starting His “strange work” also in America. As settlers pushed farther and farther West, there gradually came wave after wave of evangelical revival.

*The first part of this our evangelical and Methodist heritage is a heritage of belief.* One very common error about Christian belief is that it consists chiefly in the acceptance of opinions — correct and important opinions about God and Christ and His work; opinions based upon the Bible and witnessed to by the Church. But in the end, faith is a set of opinions.

Now that error sets up by reaction an opposite error. If religion is a matter of theoretical opinions, the practical, zealous, loving man or woman is inclined to think that what matters is not theological theory, but righteous conduct. As Alexander Pope puts it, “The forms and creeds like graceless zealots fight, he can’t be wrong whose life is in the right.” Then there are other people who say that religion consists primarily of moral rules, following the noble example of Jesus in busy, social activity.

But the evangelical witness is faith in the heart going out towards God in Jesus Christ in penitent trust, love and obedience. In his sermon on this subject John Wesley says that evangelical saving faith is *not only* a train of ideas in the head, *but also* a disposition of the heart. I want you to notice that there are two parts to this statement: *not only, but also*. Most important is a basic knowledge about God, Christ, and Christ’s work in His incarnation, cross and resurrection. Religious faith is not just a wave of feeling or sentiment. We have to witness to a historic faith, something that really happened. It is not therefore a matter of opinion, but a definite saving act of God performed in His Son made man, in His wonderful birth, in His life and teachings, in His death and resurrection and glorious ascension.

These important convictions we hold in our mind must also come home to the **heart**. They must fire the imagination, the affections and the moral will. The heart of it all, of course, is that saving faith is a sense of **personal** fellowship with a loving, personal Savior. “Not only a train of ideas in the head, but also a disposition of the heart.”

This much **certainly** is not special to Methodism. Every recognizable part of the church shares this doctrine, at least in principle, and therefore the **Methodist** preaching which we celebrate today was not new in principle. There is no more characteristic phrase in Wesley’s writing than this: “. . . the plain old religion of the Church of

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England, now everywhere spoken against as Methodism . . . ”

The thing that was new in the Methodist teaching was not a new formal doctrine, but a new grasp of the religion of the heart. Just around the corner from the old mother Methodist Church in Exeter, England is a very interesting Norman church full of ancient monuments. When John Wesley, coming to visit his bereaved sister-in-law, first visited Exeter in 1744, the rector of the parish invited him to preach at the church's usual hours of service. After Wesley preached in the morning service, the invitation to preach a second time was withdrawn. When Wesley asked the rector what was wrong, the rector replied, “Well, I acknowledge that your doctrine is orthodox and the doctrine of the Church of England, but it is not guarded. It will drive men to enthusiasm or despair.”

You will remember, of course, that in the eighteenth century “enthusiasm” was what we mean by “fanaticism.” The thing which had upset the rector of that church was not what Wesley had said, but rather how he had said it; the people of the congregation were accustomed to the reading and singing of the magnificent Tudor English of the *Book of Common Prayer* liturgy, and then a placid address in which the rector told them that since they were loyal subjects of His Majesty, King George, and respectful to the mayor and corporation, honest in their business and faithful to their wives, doubtless they would all go to heaven. Everyone then went home without a ripple on the pond. But when Wesley preached the same doctrine with fire in his eye and the Holy Spirit at work — well, people felt like John Mendholsohn when he first heard John Wesley preach. He commented, “I felt my heart beating like a pendulum of a clock.”

It was this new grasp of the religion of the heart that was novel and strange. John Wesley had been brought up on salvation by faith in Jesus Christ. He was preaching it before the experience of “the heart strangely warmed” with such passion that people thought he was a fanatic and were deeply repulsed. He later affirmed in his book that he was seeking for and preaching holiness at this period, but after his experience of “the heart strangely warmed” he preached the same doctrine with a different effect. Before he had repulsed people. Now, it still repulsed some, but others were marvelously converted. This was the work of God.

When we think of this heritage I'm sure we are sometimes disturbed at the frequent poverty of spirit in our congregations, both in

the United States and England. In our churches there are very many sincere, good people who are disturbed at the condition of the world and who wish they could do something to inspire other folk with a great sense of purpose. We say to ourselves, "My old grandfather was so certain of the worthwhileness of effort." He was certain of the difference between right and wrong, among a fixed loyalty, and so with a quiet mind.

But now it all seems to have vanished in an age of uncertainty. Today there are some people clinging to the church for the sake of something to cling to. Others are drifting away in disillusionment. It is important to remember that this faith which is our heritage is the gift of God. It is no good trying to put it on as an appearance by suggestion or by autosuggestion.

There is a naughty old story about the preacher who was finding his lesson in the pulpit Bible when he discovered that his senior preacher had left his sermon notes there. As the congregation sang the hymn, he looked down at the manuscript to see that his colleague's method and approach was very interesting. After awhile he came to a little pencil note in the margin which said, "Argument weak at this point, shout like hell." I have heard many addresses by important people in the church, people who knew that they were leaders and ought to be exercising leadership, who in fact were giving themselves away as men desperately uncertain, who were trying to "shout like hell."

This is not the conviction I'm talking about. That strident effort of the hard-sell, to push—, this is not the divine gift of communication. It's no good time to work yourself up into it, and to say to yourself, "I ought to be more certain of God. I ought to be more loving toward other people. I ought to have more power in prayer. I ought to . . . . I ought." This sort of faith is a work of God in the heart. It is given in response to the prayer for faith.

Well, you may say, we all know that in the world of business you can't make money without money. Is it so with religion, that you can't pray for faith unless you've got faith? Where do we start? Are we in a vicious circle? Well, you have a little faith, perhaps only that faith which Jesus compared to a grain of mustard seed, perhaps no more than a sense that it is a good thing in life to have a religious faith, a divine restlessness that you don't have more. This is the preliminary work of the Holy Spirit — what John Wesley called "prevenient

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grace.” And we have to use that small faith to pray for more faith. The prayer of the Christian believer is always, “Lord, I believe, Help thou my unbelief.”

This is where the fellowship of the church comes in. God’s “strange work” in that somewhat sleepy eighteenth century England did not start with a campaign committee, with a bishop as chairman and with a secretary and a filing cabinet and a budget and a handout from Nashville or anything like that. The first mark that God was doing some new thing was this: Charles Wesley, having spent his first year at the university enjoying himself, remembered the destiny that was his — to be a clergyman of the Church of England. He remembered his upbringing and he resolved to take his religious duties seriously. He got together some of his friends and they went each Sunday to their college chapel to Holy Communion. In a day when that was sufficiently unusual — even in Oxford — they became the objects of ridicule, ribbing and leg-pulling. Appropriate nicknames stuck to them, including the one nickname which has remained, the Methodists. They were not seeking organizational success for their program. They were men on their knees seeking for God. That’s where it starts.

*The second part of this heritage is the spirit of discipline.* I want you to note very particularly that I say not organization but discipline. Organization is the skeleton and the skeleton in the body by itself is important but dead. Discipline is the living thing. Discipline is the spirit of “stickability” born of knowing people in the fellowship as friends who care for us and depend on us.

Lawrence of Arabia went out to raise the Arabs in rebellion against their Turkish masters. In that strange book of adventures in the desert, *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, Lawrence of Arabia says in one place that many an army has been recruited by the stirring exhortations of a Garibaldi, but no army ever got to the end of a long hard campaign without that more prosaic gift of discipline. Everybody knows his job and keeps on doing it to the end depending on everybody else.

When the revival took place, John Wesley was not the greatest pulpit preacher of the movement. This position was probably occupied by George Whitefield. He was a poor boy, the son of a publican in Gloucester. He was working his way through Oxford University, and admired the Holy Club from a distance. He felt they were above him, but in the end he made the acquaintance of the

Wesleys and joined them.

It was George Whitefield who first came to an evangelical conversion. It was George Whitefield who first had evangelical conversions to his preaching. It was George Whitefield who first ventured into the open air. If you read the works of those who were looking at the infant Methodist movement from the outside, you will see they assumed that George Whitefield was the leader of the movement because he was the great man in the pulpit who could hold a vast congregation in the hollow of his hand. But he lacked the gift of discipline. As John Wesley put it, he left his converts a rope of sand. After the revival meeting he went on his way and they relaxed.

Wesley's greatness was this: he joined the converts to fellowship and this was not the spirit of coffee and doughnuts in the church parlor. This fellowship was what you would call pastoral counseling, mutually exercised one upon another in a close group, watching over one another in love, praying for one another. He organized circuits which were not just financial partnerships to support a preacher, they were fellowships of fellowship.

And do we not sometimes face a poverty here? Particularly in America where many have become accustomed to large congregations, and in principle, a large congregation is a good thing. But a big congregation is sometimes kept together by the business methods of a professional preacher. Services in the church are provided by a staff of professional assistants of one sort and another. And it sometimes seems that all the laity can do in the church is to organize the budget.

All this organization is not discipline. It is deeply unsatisfying. If we are to be true to our evangelical heritage, we must see that our churches are not overrun by the spirit of professionalism. Our qualifications as preachers are not the sort of qualifications that are enjoyed by a doctor, lawyer or teacher.

We must remember that God's Word is equally true whether it is declared by a Ph.D. or an ordinary minister; a lay preacher or a mother who never opens her mouth in a meeting but teaches her children at home; or by the faltering words of invitation from one teenager to another. God's Word is true not on account of the professional qualification of the preacher, but because it is God's Word.

It is possible to gather together a congregation, build up a budget, and set up a building by organizational skills and human powers of

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persuasion; but this by itself, though it may be a useful thing, will not bring anybody to God. The real work of the church — bringing people to God — can only take place if we are the sort of people who can be used by God according to His plan and with His power. Therefore the secret of renewal of the church is not professional expertise, but devotion — the praying church. Here is a great mark of authentic, original Methodism — the ministry of the laity.

There is the old story about two fine ladies who were having tea together and they were complaining to one another about the character of domestic servants. One said to the other, “I discovered one of my kitchen maids downstairs with a Methodist, so I dismissed her.”

“Oh,” said the other who thought herself more open-minded, “That was hard on the poor girl. Why did you do that?”

“Well,” she replied, “I have discovered from experience that if I have one maid in my kitchen who is a Methodist, soon all the other girls will be Methodists, too.”

Now that was a magnificent tribute to the essential principle of the evangelical revival, that the duty of caring for people, praying for people, and winning people rests on all. The lay leaders and lay preachers are not stopgaps for a real minister. This is an ideal that we must remember, cherish and pray for.

I once surprised my students at Candler by saying that the truly successful minister is the man who can create a church which can do its work without him. It is in that sort of church that the ordained minister can do his or her best work. Let us pray then with regular and disciplined prayer not only for the deepening of our personal faith, but for the deepening of the faith of the church. Let us pray that we may always be lifted from being a mere organization concerned to perpetuate itself and to outbid our competitors. Let us pray that we may always be a living spiritual fellowship, an instrument to be used by God in His time and in His way and with His power, for this is our sole sufficiency and our Methodist heritage. ■