
John Wesley and the Radical Protestant Tradition

by Howard A. Snyder

In the first article of this series we noted the critical events in Wesley's life from 1738 to 1740, and how Wesley's contact with the Moravians (and other circumstances) pushed him in the direction of a Believers' Church or Radical Protestant position. We have also examined, in the second article, the particular understanding of the Church which Wesley came to over the course of several years. Now we are ready to ask whether Wesley, in his theory and practice of the Church, can accurately be described as a Radical Protestant. Does John Wesley stand in continuity or discontinuity with sixteenth-century Anabaptism and later believers' churches?

There are other parallels to Wesley that might profitably and suggestively be drawn, and that might initially seem more significant than the possible relationship to the believers' churches. Some striking similarities between early Methodism and Waldenses of twelfth-century France can be seen in the elements of primitivism, itinerant preaching, and an emphasis on the Gospel for the poor.²⁰⁸ Several writers have noted Wesleyan parallels with Francis of Assisi. Ronald Knox noted,

Wesley's open-air sermons, lay preachers, and institution of a church within the Church have so often been compared to the Mendicant revival of the twelfth century that we might expect to find in Wesley an admirer of St. Francis;

— but in fact, Wesley has nothing to say about Francis.²⁰⁹ More recently, Alan Tippett has written that Wesley "was an innovator, if ever there was one, and no one better demonstrated the motility [ability to itinerate] of the Church, unless perhaps Francis of

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Assisi.”²¹⁰ A profitable study might be undertaken comparing Francis, Waldo, and Wesley and the movements resulting from them as differing models of Christian revitalization within the larger context of the Church. Other possible parallels might include modern Pentecostalism and particularly the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, which, like Wesleyanism, represents an emphasis on the experiential side of the faith and faces similar dynamics to those of Wesleyanism in seeking to be a self-conscious subcommunity or *ecclesiola* working to revitalize and yet remain loyal to the larger church body.²¹¹

The major concern here, however, is with the Believers’ Church type as exemplified especially in sixteenth-century Continental Anabaptism. This link is significant at the historical level simply because of the Moravian contact with Wesleyanism. But it takes on a larger significance today given the contemporary “rediscovery” of Anabaptism and the emergence in much of the present-day church of new concern with community, discipleship, ministry of the laity, and similar themes.

The Believers’ Church Type

For several reasons, the Believers’ Church finds its fundamental paradigms in sixteenth-century Anabaptism and subsequent movements genetically connected with it. But to speak of a “Believers’ Church type” one must extract, somewhat artificially, the most essential or characteristic elements of the Believers’ Church concept from several historical manifestations in differing periods and cultural contexts. If defined too broadly, such a type becomes so inclusive as to be unhelpful; while too narrow a definition makes it difficult or impossible to distinguish between a “pure” type and particular historical-cultural circumstances associated with specific Believers’ Church expressions.

For the purposes of this article, the safest course seems to be to collate and compare the descriptions or “marks” which contemporary scholars have noted in studying the believers’ churches, and from these to construct a synthetic model or type. I have therefore relied primarily on the following sources: Donald F. Durnbaugh, *The Believers’ Church*; Frank H. Littell, “The Concept of the Believers’ Church” and William R. Estep, Jr., “A Believing People: Historical Background,” both in Garrett, ed., *The Concept of the Believers’*

Church; John Howard Yoder, "The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision," and Harold S. Bender, "The Anabaptist Theology of Discipleship," both in *Concern* No. 18; Franklin H. Littell, *The Free Church*; and Ross T. Bender, *The People of God*.²¹²

Some definitions. Four particularly cogent definitions suggest the basic elements which a Believers' Church typology should include. George H. Williams speaks of "the gathered church of committed believers living in the fellowship of mutual correction, support, and abiding hope."²¹³ Donald Durnbaugh says the Believers' Church is "the covenanted and disciplined community of those walking in the way of Jesus Christ."²¹⁴

Speaking more specifically of Anabaptism, Harold S. Bender suggests that "the concept of discipleship [is] the most characteristic, most central, most essential and regulative concept in Anabaptist thought, which largely determines all else."²¹⁵ Similarly, Franklin Littell says that "the essence of Anabaptist concern was the nature of discipleship, conceived in terms of Christian community; in short, the view of the Church."²¹⁶

A sevenfold Believers' Church Typology. As a type of model distinct from its various historical manifestations, the Believers' Church demonstrates most basically the following seven characteristics:

- 1) *Voluntary adult membership based on a covenant-commitment to Jesus Christ, emphasizing obedience to Jesus as necessary evidence of faith in Him. Believers' baptism has usually been the sign of this commitment, but not essentially.*
- 2) *A community or brotherhood of discipline, edification, correction, and mutual aid, in conscious separation from the world, as the primary visible expression of the Church.*
- 3) *A life of good works, service, and witness, as an expression of Christian love and obedience, incumbent on all believers — thus an emphasis on the ministry of the laity, rather than a special ministerial class; the church as "a missionary minority."*
- 4) *The Spirit and the Word as comprising the sole basis of authority, implying a de-emphasis on or rejection of church traditions and creeds.*
- 5) *Primitivism and Restitutionism — Belief in the normative nature of the early church, with an attempt to restore the essential elements of early church life and practice; also im-*

plying some view of the fall of the church.

- 6) *A pragmatic, functional approach to church order and structure.*
- 7) *A belief in the universal Church as the Body of Christ of which the particular visible believing community is but a part.*

Obviously a number of other themes might be mentioned. Suffering, the eschatological vision, pacifism, consensus in decision-making, ecumenism, and separation from the State have been important themes among some believers' churches. But the seven elements mentioned above seem most basic and less dependent on particular historical circumstances; and they are the elements most commonly cited by students of the believers' churches and the Radical Protestant tradition. (See Appendix for representative quotations supporting each of these seven elements of the proposed typology.)

It is against this typology that Wesley's understanding of the Church will now be examined.

Wesley Compared with the Believers' Church Type

To what extent does Wesley "fit" this Believers' Church type — both in his theory and in his practice?

Franklin Littell has written of Wesley,

Throughout his active life he shifted by steady steps from the developmental and sacramental view of the institutions of Christendom to normative use of the New Testament and reference to the Early Church. He justified field preaching and the itinerancy, class meetings and their disciplinary structure, and finally the ordination of ministers for America, on the argument that he was following "apostolic" practice. He became, in his basic orientation, a Free Churchman.²¹⁷

The foregoing analysis of Wesley's understanding of the Church suggests that Littell is basically correct in this assessment. Perhaps the degree of Wesley's free-churchmanship, and its particular emphases, can best be seen by examining the seven elements of the proposed typology in the light of the evidence in these articles.

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1) *Voluntary adult membership based on a covenant-commitment to Jesus Christ, emphasizing obedience to Jesus as a necessary evidence of faith in Him.*

Adult baptism and a rejection of infant baptism have often been considered *the* distinguishing marks of the Free Churches. But the more basic issue is voluntarism: the Church must be a covenant community of freely acting adults. While believers' baptism has usually been the sign of such adult commitment, the more basic question is voluntary commitment.

Wesley, of course, insisted on infant baptism, and he spoke with some disdain of "the seditious sect of Anabaptists" (about whom, however, he does not appear to have known a great deal).²¹⁸ But Wesley saw clearly the need for conscious adult commitment and obedience to the Gospel. He placed strong emphasis on a conscious, rational decision to accept and follow Christ. To be a member of a Methodist society meant that one had submitted to accepted rules and disciplines. Wesley used an annual covenant service as a means for reinforcing and renewing the personal commitment of each believer.

One faces an ambiguity here, however — one that applies to all the components of the proposed typology. Wesley insisted on voluntary adult commitment as a condition for becoming a Methodist. But the peculiar place of Methodism within the Church of England, and Wesley's Anglican ecclesiology, must be borne in mind here. The voluntary adult commitment was necessary to become a Methodist, but not to be a part of the Church of England. Which was more truly the Church? Wesley seems to have believed that the Church of England was a true church, but that it was seriously degenerate, and that Methodism showed what the whole Church *should* be like. But as already noted, a certain ambiguity exists at this point in Wesley. One may say that Wesley held to the Believers' Church tenet of voluntary adult membership since he practiced this in Methodism and wished to see all of Anglicanism more like Methodism. But this assertion must be qualified by reference to Wesley's lingering High Church views. Still, one gets the distinct impression from reading Wesley that he felt his Methodist societies were more genuinely the Church that was the Church of England — though Wesley would never actually say this.

2) *A community or brotherhood of discipline, edification, correction, and mutual aid, in conscious separation from the world,*

as the primary visible expression of the Church.

Wesley is clearly within the Believers' Church sphere on this point. This is seen most clearly in his use of bands, classes, and societies, but is evident in his writings as well. Wesley saw himself as imitating the primitive church in bringing Methodists together in close-knit societies.²¹⁹ The classes and bands provided for discipline, correction, and mutual aid, supervised personally by Wesley.

Wesley does not, however appear to have had, consciously, as deep a sense of the communitary nature of the Church as characterized sixteenth-century Anabaptism and its direct descendents. He indicates that he stumbled upon the class meeting almost by accident, and he adopted this and other innovations (notably the bands) initially more for pragmatic than for theological reasons. He did insist, however, that "Christianity is essentially a social religion" rather than a "solitary religion"; "I mean not only that it cannot subsist so well, but that it cannot subsist at all, without society — without living and conversing with other men."²²⁰

Franklin Littell has compared Wesley with Menno Simons and found several striking similarities at the point of discipline and discipleship. He points out that Menno and Wesley "both dealt with Christian perfection in terms of the New Testament imperatives, in terms of the perfection of the church" and "introduced again the note of radical discontinuity between the 'world' . . . and the disciplines of discipleship."²²¹ Both spoke of the "circumcision of the heart." Littell emphasizes "the extent to which the entire problematic is set in the context of the church, with Christian perfection a matter of community witness and not individual enterprise."²²² "Both Menno and Wesley, as representative Free Churchmen, had strong views on the expression of faith in positive discipline," and "both instituted ordinances and practices of voluntary discipline."²²³

Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection was, of course, considerably different from Menno's views. The point here, however, is to note the similarity at the point of the *ecclesiological meaning* of the emphasis on perfection. When one sees in Wesley how his emphasis on perfection or sanctification actually worked itself out in the system of societies, classes, and bands, he is struck with the degree to which Christian perfection for Wesley actually meant discipleship — not just an interior work of grace in the believer. But in much later Wesleyan interpretation the link between sanctification and discipleship has, unfortunately, been largely severed. Colin Williams

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is right in observing,

Wesley believed that the necessity for mutual encouragement, mutual examination, and mutual service, within the context of the means of grace, required more than the hearing of the Word, the participation in the sacraments, and the joining in the prayers of the 'great congregation.' Wesley's view on holiness was woven into his ecclesiology. He believed that the gathering together of believers into small voluntary societies for mutual discipline and Christian growth was essential to the Church's life.²²⁴

At this point, then, Wesley's ecclesiology falls decidedly within the Believers' Church type, though in perhaps a less self-conscious way than was true of the Anabaptists and their immediate descendents.

3) *A life of good works, service and witness, as an expression of Christian love and obedience, incumbent on all believers — thus an emphasis on the ministry of the laity, rather than a special ministerial class; the church as a "missionary minority."*

Here also Wesley is clearly within the Believers' Church type. His emphasis on good works was characteristic of his Arminian theology; he was confident believers could, by God's grace, work effectively toward their own betterment and for the benefit of society. This emphasis did not, however, work itself out in Wesley in a clear or pronounced doctrine of lay ministry or the priesthood of believers. As we have seen, Wesley worked out a rather elaborate view of ministry in order to justify both the Anglican ecclesiastical polity and his use of lay preachers — rather than arguing simply that all believers are called to minister. Here one might suggest, however, that his practice went further than his theory, for in actual fact Methodism was largely a lay movement and involved thousands of unordained people in a wide range of leadership and ministry functions. Littell comments, "... it is well to remember that Anabaptism and Wesleyanism were lay movements from the start."²²⁵

Wesley was especially insistent that faith did not excuse one from a life of good works — just as he insisted there could be no good works without faith. Love is the fulfilling of the law, "not by releasing us from but by constraining us to obey it."²²⁶ Thus, Wesley said,

(1) Whether they will finally be lost or saved, you are

expressly commanded to feed the hungry, and clothe the naked. If you can, and do not, whatever becomes of them, you shall go away into everlasting fire. (2) Though it is God only who changes hearts, yet He generally doeth it by man. It is our part to do all that in us lies, as diligently as if we could change them ourselves, and then to leave the event to Him. (3) God, in answer to their prayers, builds up His children by each other in every good gift; nourishing and strengthening the whole 'body by that which every joint supplieth.'²²⁷

For Wesley, holiness and good works were intimately related. He saw "faith, holiness and good works as the root, the tree, and the fruit, which God had joined and man ought not to put asunder."²²⁸ He especially emphasized prayer, the Eucharist, Bible study, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, helping the stranger, and visiting or relieving the sick or imprisoned.²²⁹ He would have questioned the authenticity of any claim to holiness that did not issue in good works.

4) *The Spirit and the Word as comprising the sole basis of authority, implying a de-emphasis on or rejection of church tradition and creeds.*

On this point Wesley moved decidedly in the direction of a believers' church position. As noted earlier, Wesley was firmly committed to the "Anglican triad" of Scripture, reason, and antiquity as the basis of authority. Reason remained strong in Wesley's system; he constantly appealed to "men of reason and religion." With time, however, three things happened in Wesley's use of this threefold basis of authority: first, "antiquity" came increasingly to mean the precedents of early Christianity, rather than later church tradition. Secondly, reason came to mean that which could be seen as reasonable in the light of experience. Wesley appealed to reason not as an abstract principle, but as a pragmatic test. Thirdly, Wesley came to view Scripture and tradition less in terms of the letter and more in terms of the spirit — and the animating Holy Spirit. As Baker observes,

In seeking solutions to the many problems posed by his unfolding prophetic ministry in a missionary movement, Wesley continued to turn to his old authorities. Uncorrupted antiquity was the coordinate with reason in

interpreting or supplementing Scripture; these also revealed new insights into the nature of a pragmatic church and ministry far different in some respects from the idealized apostolic preconceptions which he had hoped to transplant. . . . The apostolic *spirit* became the important thing, and this was still available through direct spiritual contact with God. The promptings of this spirit he tested rationally, and then applied them by a process of trial and error, thus determining whether and how far what he had heard with his spiritual ear was indeed the voice of God.²³⁰

Wesley began seriously to study the Bible in 1729, convinced that it was “the only standard of truth, and the only model of pure religion.”²³¹ “I allow no other rule,” he wrote in 1739, “whether of faith or practice, than the Holy Scriptures.”²³² Salvation was accomplished as the Spirit applied the Word to the heart: “all true faith, and the whole work of salvation, every good thought, word, and work, is altogether by the operation of the Spirit of God.”²³³

On this point Wesley falls within the Believers’ Church type. Littell notes that Wesley, like Menno Simons, emphasized the work of the Spirit in the sacraments, *and* his active role in the Church today.²³⁴ Characteristically, however, Wesley’s emphasis on the Spirit and the Word did not mean a rejection of the creeds or Church tradition. These were placed in decidedly secondary position, but Wesley insisted on their proper role in that position.

5) *Primitivism and Restitutionism — Belief in the normative nature of the early church, with an attempt to restore the essential elements of early church life and practice.*

Wesley’s primitivism and his desire to reinstitute early church life and practice in his day have already been noted. This was a tendency current in some branches of Anglicanism, especially, and one which animated Wesley’s thinking and practice from 1729 on. The chief change in Wesley’s thinking on this point was the emphasis upon the spirit rather than the letter. Still, he was pleased whenever he could point to a parallel between some specific innovation and early church practice.

At this point Wesley very clearly fits the Believers’ Church type. Even though he shared a certain degree of primitivism with other Anglican divines, with Wesley the desire for restitution was a strong motive force in prompting him toward many of his innovations, and in justifying them.

6) *A pragmatic, functional approach to church order and structure.* Wesley shared this characteristic with other Believers' Church leaders and movements. He was able to satisfy himself that his innovations were justified either as having early church precedent or as being born of necessity, or both. His pragmatism was, he felt, therefore both reasonable and Scriptural. Baker observes,

John Wesley was convinced that strict church order and evangelical efficacy did not always make an ideal couple, and was ready if called upon to officiate at their divorce, and to award custody of the spiritual children to the partner most capable of promoting their welfare. In his approach to both church and ministry he was alike the biblicist, the traditionalist, and the rationalist, but above all he was the religious pragmatist.²³⁵

This pragmatism was, for Wesley, theologically based, as it was for earlier Believers' Church leaders. Church structure was a secondary question, he felt, not essential in any specific form to the Church, and not prescribed in Scripture. This is one point at which Wesley's views changed considerably from 1729 to 1745, as already noted. It was also the point which made him controversial, for relatively few Anglican leaders were ready to follow Wesley in his structural innovations.

For all his pragmatism, however, Wesley remained fundamentally a conservative. His principles were plain: change nothing which did not need to be changed — but change anything that hindered the free flow of the Gospel. Wesley's use of the *Book of Common Prayer* provides a good example. As a devout Anglican, he loved the prayer book and used it constantly. But with apparently no qualms he issued his own revision of the *Book of Common Prayer* in 1784 for Methodist use in America. John Bowmer observes, "The fact that [Wesley] made and insisted upon the use of a revision reveals him the Churchman; the manner of the revision on the whole, reveals him the evangelical."²³⁶

In the areas of church order one thus sees in Wesley the same mixture of conservatism and pragmatism that characterized all his life and theology.

7) *A belief in the universal Church as the Body of Christ, of which the particular visible believing community is but a part.*

It may be questioned whether this element should be included in a Believers' Church typology, since virtually all Christians share some form of a belief in the universal Church. It needs to be included, however, because historically it has been a strong emphasis in the free church tradition, and because Believers' Church adherents have located the church's visibility less in its hierarchy or structure or in some mystical communion and more in its concrete existence as a believing community.

This was true of Wesley. As already noted, he believed in the universal Church, and saw it as consisting especially in the totality of Christian believers. So at this point also Wesley is found to fit the Believers' Church typology.

In summary, Wesley must be seen as standing within the Believers' Church tradition. One may qualify this assertion in various ways, as noted, but in essential features Wesley was clearly a free churchman.

Representatives of different traditions have, of course, attempted to claim Wesley as "their own" — and this is to some degree possible because of the mixture of the old and the new, the traditionalist and the innovator, in Wesley. Colin Williams suggests,

Do we not see . . . in Wesley a creative attempt to keep all three historic emphases together? . . . The Catholic emphasis is right — Christ does not abandon his Church, even when the priests are unfaithful, but is always present in unbroken continuity in the sacraments he has provided. The Classical Protestant emphasis is right — the pure witness to the faith once delivered to the saints is essential to the ever renewed "event" in which believers are called into being The Free Church emphasis is right — true believers must be gathered together for mutual growth in the life of the Spirit toward the fullness of the stature of Christ.²³⁷

There is truth in this. And yet, precisely for these reasons Wesley is best seen as representing the Believers' Church tradition. For the Believers' Church emphasis is not one which rejects the evangelical and catholic emphases, but one which insists that the Church must be a visible community that takes the demands of discipleship seriously.

At all essential points, then, Wesley stands within the Believers' Church tradition. On a continuum within that tradition Wesley would stand to the right of most Anabaptist groups, but still clearly

within the tradition. This is true of Wesley's theology of the church, and even more of his practice of the church.

Wesley's Understanding of Methodism

How did John Wesley himself see the Methodist movement which was growing rapidly under his leadership? He had strong opinions on this point. To him, Methodism was a "new thing" which God had brought forth — unique in that it centered on Christian experience and action, not a creed, and in that it remained a reforming body *within* the Church, rather than separating from it. In his paper, "Ought We to Separate . . . ?" (1755) he wrote,

We look upon the *Methodists* in general, not as any particular party (this would exceedingly obstruct the Grand Design for which we conceive God has raised them up) but as living witnesses in and to every part of that Christianity which we preach, which is hereby demonstrated to be a real thing, and visibly held out to all the world.²³⁸

In his sermon on "The Ministerial Office" he argued that the Methodists "peculiar glory" is that they do not separate into a distinct sect and erect barriers of creed or practice. Methodists "do not separate from the religious community to which they at first belonged; they are still members of the Church" ²³⁹ He told his followers,

Ye are a new phenomenon in the earth, — a body of people who, being of no sect or party, are friends to all parties, and endeavor to forward all in heart-religion, in the knowledge and love of God and man. Ye yourselves were at first called in the Church of England; . . . be Church-of-England men still. . . .²⁴⁰

Wesley particularly emphasized that joining the Methodists was not a matter of creed or liturgical practice. He observed,

. . . in order to their union with us, we require no unity of opinions, or in modes of worship, but barely that they 'fear God and work righteousness,' as was observed. Now, this is

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utterly a new thing, unheard of in any other Christian community. In what Church or congregation beside, throughout the Christian world, can members be admitted upon these terms, without any other conditions? . . . This is the glory of the Methodists, and of them alone! They are themselves no particular sect or party; but they receive those, of all parties, who 'endeavor to do justly, and love mercy, and walk humbly with their God.'²⁴¹

This stance did not mean, of course, that Wesley or the Methodists were indifferent on matters of doctrine or liturgy. He assumed that the basic creedal and liturgical framework was provided by the Church of England, and that Methodism was a revitalization movement within the larger Church (though one did not have to be an Anglican to be a Methodist). In the same sermon on the Ministerial Office Wesley emphasized,

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.²⁴²

On the ground of necessity he justified open-air preaching, extemporaneous prayer (there being "no forms that will suit all occasions"), organizing bands and societies for pastoral oversight, and appointing preachers.²⁴³

Wesley thus clearly regarded Methodism as a movement of authentic Christianity *within* the larger Church, which was largely decadent. In identifying Wesley with the Believers' Church tradition, one must keep this fact in mind. At the structural level, Wesley has more in common with German Pietism and Moravianism than with sixteenth-century Anabaptism in that Methodism was not intended to become a separate church. Yet the difference between Methodism and Anabaptism at this point may be largely due to the difference in historical circumstances, and particularly to the greater tolerance in eighteenth-century Anglicanism than existed within sixteenth-century Christendom (whether Catholic or Protestant).

Durward Hofler suggests that while Wesley claimed the Methodist societies were merely Christian subcommunities within the larger

Church, yet he defined “church” in terms that in fact were descriptive of Methodism. Wesley, says Hofler, regarded the Methodist societies

as groups within, supplemental, and subordinate to the Church of England. Yet according to his own definition of a church as a group of believers, the Methodist societies were at least spiritual churches within the Anglican Church. . . . his very actions showed that he in fact regarded the societies as churches.²⁴⁴

All of this would seem to suggest that, to Wesley, the Methodist societies were *ecclesiolae* within the *ecclesia*. Yet Wesley does not seem to have used the term *ecclesiola*. George Williams and Albert Outler both suggest that in Methodism we do have, in fact, an *ecclesiola*, both in theory and practice. Williams says that Wesley till his death thought of the Methodist societies “as primarily the Evangelical *ecclesiolae* within the rationalist, moralistic Established Church of England.”²⁴⁵ Outler comments similarly, “Wesley’s idea of the Methodist societies serving the Established Church even against the good will of her leaders was a distinctive adaptation of the pietistic patterns of the ‘religious societies’ (*ecclesiolae in ecclesiam*) which Anthony Horneck had brought from Germany to England in 1661 and which had served as a refuge for ‘serious Christians,’ discontent with apathetic and nominal Christianity.”²⁴⁶

Wesley’s view seems to have been that Methodism was an evangelical order within a largely decadent church — in effect, an *ecclesiola*. This understanding seems in turn to derive basically from two sources: the system of religious societies already widespread in England by 1738, which owe at least some influence to German pietist concerns, and the more direct influence of the Moravians.

The Moravian Contribution to Wesley

There can be no doubt that the Moravian Brethren exercised a direct and decisive influence on Wesley. At the same time, the limits of that influence are clear.

Moravianism was in its main features a direct outgrowth of German Pietism. Because of this, Donald Durnbaugh suggests in *The Believers’ Church* that Methodism is, in fact, the most influential result of Pietism. He writes,

Although Pietism in the first instance was a reform movement *within* the church, several independent bodies sprang from it. One of them was the Church of the Brethren in Germany. Twenty years later came the Renewed Moravian Church, which took remnants of the Unity of Brethren and vitalized them into a small but dynamic Christian movement. The Moravians provide a direct link to what has become the most influential outgrowth of Pietism, that is Wesleyan Methodism. Although John Wesley was to break with the devotional and theological style of the Moravians, it was to them that he owed decisive aid in several critical junctures of his spiritual pilgrimage.²⁴⁷

Pietism under Spener and Francke sought to awaken German Lutheranism from her “unregenerate slumber.” Its main structural feature, the small cells called *collegia pietatis*, were seen as *ecclesiolae* where the true pattern of Christ’s church could be experienced.²⁴⁸

In 1722, a small group of the Unity of Brethren (*Unitas Fratrum*), tracing back to the “Czech Reformation” and the influence of Peter Chelcicky in the fifteenth century, settled on the estate of Count Nicholas von Zinzendorf in Germany.²⁴⁹ Zinzendorf (1700-1760) was a Lutheran whose family had been closely associated with Spener and other Pietist leaders. He felt uniquely called to extend the message and experience of salvation by faith to the whole world. He organized the *Unitas Fratrum* remnant into the Renewed Church of the United Brethren, which became more commonly known simply as the Moravian Brethren. Zinzendorf instituted a Moravian community at Herrnhut, which became the primary model for later Moravian settlements. By 1733 he had begun two communities in other locations, as well.²⁵⁰

Zinzendorf saw in these new Moravian communities a way to extend dramatically the *ecclesiola* approach to church renewal. The Moravian Brethren were to be, not a new or separate church, but a dynamic missionary movement within all of Christendom. Soon Moravian missionaries were traveling far and wide—including those Wesley encountered in London and on board ship to the New World.

Moravianism was “essentially neither a doctrine nor a discipline, but a spirituality.”²⁵¹ It was a movement for the promotion of the new birth—Luther’s doctrine of salvation by faith alone, as understood by the Pietists. Moravians put the emphasis, notes Stoeffler, “not on

God's sovereign grace, but on man's personal experience of that grace, an experience which carries with it the gift of joyful assurance of one's right relationship with God."²⁵²

It was this doctrine and experience which Böhler and the other Moravians urged upon Wesley. And it seems clear that without this Moravian influence, Wesley very likely would never have become more than a very rigorous High Churchman. As Bowmer comments,

No one should minimize the debt which Wesley owed to the Moravians, for it may well be doubted whether, had it not been for them, his heart would have been 'strangely warmed' and England set ablaze. Without their impact on his life, it is quite conceivable that he would have remained what he was in 1735, a methodical, very earnest, but beyond his own immediate circle of friends, an unknown Church of England clergyman.²⁵³

The first and decisive influence of Moravianism on Wesley was, therefore, at the point of his own spiritual pilgrimage — the personal apprehension of saving faith at Aldersgate in 1738. And this experience was, in turn, to influence Wesley's preaching and practice. Largely as a result of Moravian influence, preaching and the Scriptures came to assume equal importance with the sacraments as means of grace. Moravian contact, likewise, had a reflex influence on Wesley's understanding of the Church. As Stoeffler notes, after Aldersgate Wesley's "ecclesiology was informed by the soteriological interest which was the direct result of his own religious renewal under Pietist [i.e., Moravian] influence."²⁵⁴

There was, however, a second major Moravian influence on Wesley. This had to do especially with his practice and structuring of the Methodist movement and was due in large measure to Wesley's visit to Herrnhut very shortly after his conversion.²⁵⁵

Ernest Stoeffler has emphasized this point, noting the similarity in approach between Wesley and the Continental Pietists. Stoeffler argues that

in his ecclesiology Wesley followed the lead of the church-related Pietists on the Continent. As they accepted the ecclesiology of Lutheranism but chose to interpret it in line with the Pietist approach to the life of faith, so Wesley

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accepted the Anglican understanding of the church, the ministry, and the sacraments, but found himself forced to adapt it to the realities implicit in the corporate religious life of the societies.²⁵⁶

Stoeffler sees the Pietist influence, mediated through the Moravians, as the key factor in Wesley's later ecclesiology, and dismisses the idea that Wesley simply took over the "gathered church" idea from English Puritanism. The evidence of this paper would suggest some caution against over-emphasizing Moravian influence, and yet at the specific point of Wesley's understanding of the role of Methodism within the Church of England, Moravian influence does seem to have been considerable. Baker notes that Wesley in his *Journal* summarized portions of the Moravian constitution and asterisked the following significant passage:

In all things which do not immediately concern the inward, spiritual kingdom of Christ, we simply, and without contradicting, obey the higher powers. But with regard to conscience, the liberty of this we cannot suffer to be any limited or infringed. And to his head we refer whatever directly or in itself tends to hinder the salvation of souls, or whatsoever things Christ and His holy apostles . . . took charge of and performed as necessary for the constitution and well-ordering of His Church. In these things we acknowledge no head but Christ; and are determined, God being our helper, to give up, not only our goods (as we did before), but life itself, rather than this liberty which God hath given us.²⁵⁷

The similarity between this statement and statements which Wesley later made regarding his departures from Church of England practices is striking — although Wesley's strong emphasis on obedient good works modified somewhat the strongly other-worldly thrust of the Moravians. On balance, Stoeffler seems to be essentially correct in outlining the Moravian influence on Wesley's understanding of how the reality of the Methodist societies could be worked into a consistent doctrine of the Church. Stoeffler adds,

What we really have in Wesley's understanding of the

church is the restoration of the older, and by this time well entrenched, movement of church-related Pietism, especially that of the early Moravians. In this view the church as an historical institution is accepted as necessary for God's purposes among men. There is much to be said even for an established church to which all Christians within a given territory normally belong by baptism. Yet, there is also the realization that such a church needs to be constantly informed and reformed from within by a community of earnest believers in whose corporate life the Spirit of God is peculiarly at work, as he is thought to have been in the primitive Christian community. It was in this light that Wesley regarded his societies.²⁵⁸

More specifically, Wesley took over a few particular features of Moravian practice, including the bands and the love feast.²⁵⁹ Stoefler suggests some Moravian/Pietist influence on Wesley also at the point of lay leadership as well, positing that Wesley was impressed by the Moravian lay leaders. He says,

While Philipp Jakob Spener did not recommend lay leadership for his *collegia pietatis* this was a matter of caution rather than theological principle. His real concern was the restoration of biblical Christianity within Lutheranism, a restoration based on a new and vital understanding of Luther's doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. Since the *collegia* were not churches, but fellowships of earnest believers within the established church, his followers quickly came to the conclusion that there could be no valid theological objection against taking seriously the obligations of their common priesthood in spreading their understanding of Christian piety within the church. It is this consideration which prompted the Moravians to put their diaspora societies in charge of laymen, a practice which Wesley gradually came to accept. He used it because he saw that it could be made to work and because he could not see any theological objections to it. There was no reason why, on this model, he could not hold his sacramental views of an ordained ministry along with his understanding of the need for lay witness to the Word and its meaning in the life of the

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church. Problems concerning this understanding of things began to rise only when in the middle forties the question of separation began to come up.²⁶⁰

In actual fact, the process Stoeffler outlines here does not seem to have been as simple or clear-cut as he suggests. Wesley was well aware as early as 1730 of the complicated questions involved in the use of various kinds of unordained leaders in the church. With these qualifications, however, one may accept Stoeffler's point of Moravian influence on Wesley in the matter of lay ministry.

In summary, then, the Moravian Brethren seem to have influenced Wesley at two critical points: in leading him to accept and experience the new birth based on faith alone, and in giving him a visible, working model of a spiritual renewal movement useful to Wesley in the first days of the Methodist Revival.

The striking thing about Wesley is that he was willing to go so far but no farther with the Moravians, and two things need to be said about that.

First, Wesley was not at all ready to abandon the proper place of human action in the plan of salvation. He became convinced that works were worthless in attaining the new birth, but he was equally persuaded of the absolute moral necessity of good works as the evidence of regeneration and the inevitable expression of holy love. Likewise, he could not become convinced (as Charles nearly was!) that total dependence on God's grace required the abandonment of the *means* of grace. Wesley's conviction of the proper place of reason and his years of painstaking study of Christian antiquity (including the perfectionist teachings of fourth-century Eastern Fathers) kept him from becoming totally intellectually converted to Moravian ideas after his spiritual conversion at Aldersgate. As Gerald Cragg states,

The Moravians had shown Wesley the true nature of saving faith; he was astonished that they seemed so blind to its necessary implications. Their Lutheran background made them recoil from anything suggestive of good works. Wesley believed that they were making the religious life a flight from responsibility.²⁶¹

At issue here was the classic question of man's cooperation in the

work of salvation. Wesley objected to a rigid Calvinist position on this point, adopting essentially an Arminian view. L. M. Starkey has called Wesley's view an "evangelical synergism" — a synergism which may be described as evangelical "in order to differentiate it from other types which allow man a natural capacity to cooperate with the divine spirit."²⁶² Wesley was very clear that salvation was totally by grace alone. But he was equally convinced that God graciously enabled man to cooperate with the Holy Spirit in the great work of salvation — of restoring the image of God in man. And therefore, a believer's failure to do his part in cooperating with God's work was sheer disobedience. Fundamentally, it was on this basis that Wesley resisted some Moravian tendencies and finally broke with the Moravians.

The second observation to be made concerning Wesley's resistance to some Moravian tendencies is that precisely at these points, Wesley was moving toward, rather than away from, the Believers' Church tradition. At those points where Wesley resisted the Moravians he was in fact upholding a Believers' Church position in opposition to Moravian/Pietist accommodations to Lutheranism.

This point can be clarified by a brief review of the Believers' Church typology. Wesley and the Moravians agreed basically on all of the seven elements of the typology — with the exception of the emphasis on good works and obedience to Gospel commands. Precisely at these points Wesley more faithfully represents the Believers' Church tradition than does Moravianism.²⁶³

A very interesting and potentially significant aspect of this whole question is the relationship between Wesley and Count Zinzendorf, and their similarity in ecclesiology. Zinzendorf in fact worked out a rather elaborate theory of the Church and church renewal based on an adaptation of the *ecclesiola in ecclesia* idea. Zinzendorf developed his "Tropus" theory which saw the church in each country as having something unique to contribute to the Universal Church, and which focused on the utility of movements such as Moravianism as missionary and renewal structures within the Church.²⁶⁴

Conclusions

John Wesley is best understood today as representative of the Believers' Church tradition — precisely because that tradition is not primarily a system of doctrine in contradistinction from the various

historical theological options, but is rather a way of understanding the concrete expression of the Church as a community of discipleship. From the standpoint of the Believers' Church tradition, the significant thing about Wesley is not that he was an Anglican or had particular views on points of theology, but rather it is his theory and practice of the Church — the fact that Wesley believed a community of faithful disciples could, in fact, exist in Gospel obedience in the present world and the fact that he established such a community in the form of the Methodist societies. One might add that Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection is not fully understood unless it is seen in this context.

The main reasons for Wesley's particular ecclesiology are three: (1) Wesley was never expelled from, or disciplined by, the Church of England, despite his rather extraordinary innovations. Hence he could develop his views and practice in a way basically consistent with Anglican ecclesiology. (2) Wesley personally never left the Church of England. Hence his Believers' Church position was worked out in a particularly Anglican way. (3) The Methodist societies were never given official ecclesiastical recognition or status within the Church of England. Hence Methodism developed largely in its own way, under the strong influence of Wesley himself during his lifetime, rather than becoming an ecclesiastically-controlled order within Anglicanism. This fact was, of course, to lead to Methodist separation from the Church of England after Wesley's death — and, to some degree, to leave British and American Methodists as ecclesiological orphans.

Finally, six general conclusions concerning Wesley's ecclesiology and his relationship to the Believers' Church tradition may be drawn from the evidence presented in this paper:

1) Wesley considered himself to have a consistent, rational, and Biblically-based ecclesiology — however it may appear to others.

2) The sources of Wesley's ecclesiology were mainly the Catholic tradition mediated through Anglicanism, and the Free Church tradition mediated through the Moravians. The influence of the "mainline" Protestant Reformation reached Wesley both through Anglicanism and through the Moravians.

3) Wesley's ecclesiology shows gradual development from an Anglican High Church type toward the Believers' Church type.

4) Wesley conceived of Methodism essentially as an evangelical order within the larger "Catholic" Church.

5) Wesley's views show marked similarity to the Believers' Church type; the similarity is more marked in practice than in theory. But at both levels Wesley may be seen as standing in the Believers' Church tradition.

6) The peculiarities of Wesley's concept of the Church are due largely to the peculiar position of Methodism within Anglicanism. One may hypothesize that in Roman Catholicism, Methodism might well have become a recognized order, while in sixteenth-century continental Protestantism it would have been forced to become a separated Believers' Church.

What is the significance of all this for our experience of the Church today? This whole study is really intended as a prologue to asking this question. It is a question which those in the Wesleyan tradition, especially, should be asking. And the answers provided, if faithful to the spirit of Wesley, will be relevant to the whole Christian Church in the late twentieth century.

In a very suggestive way, I would like to point to three aspects of the contemporary significance of Wesley's ecclesiology.

1) This study has demonstrated the marked affinities between Wesley and the Radical Protestant tradition. I have argued, in fact, that Wesley stands within this tradition. Yet clearly there are differences and tensions between Wesley and classical sixteenth-century Anabaptism. Particularly, Wesley was more affirming of the institutional church and of church tradition than were the Anabaptists, even though he recognized the fallen condition of the church; and Wesley was willing to include, and hold in tension, diverse elements in his ecclesiology which came from differing traditions and which some would consider incompatible.

Does this mean Wesley was logically inconsistent in his ecclesiology, and therefore must be "corrected" by the Anabaptist tradition? Or does it mean rather that in Wesley we find a finer synthesis which in some way "corrects" Anabaptism?

I would not argue that Wesley was entirely consistent in his views of the Church, nor would I want to affirm every detail of his ecclesiology (especially in the way he worked out his views of ministry). But I do affirm the *spirit* Wesley demonstrates in these efforts, and the general *perspective* which allowed him to include rather diverse elements in his ecclesiology. I would argue that the peculiarities of Wesley's views are not due to a fundamental inconsistency in his thought, but rather to (1) the fundamentally

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paradoxical nature of the Church in the world which makes a totally consistent, systematic theory of the Church virtually impossible from a human standpoint, and (2) the fact that Wesley's primary interest was not to work out a systematic ecclesiology but rather to understand and explain the evolution of the Methodist movement as it grew in response to the renewing work of the Holy Spirit.

From this perspective, one can affirm Wesley's basic ecclesiology, be instructed by many of its specific features, and see in it elements which may actually serve as correctives today on the Anabaptist view of the Church as it is being rediscovered and reintroduced. It seems to me that a careful restudy of Wesley's ecclesiology first of all in the light of Scripture, and secondly in the light of the present world, is called for and would be most productive.

2) Wesley clearly demonstrates the crucial need for the *doctrines* of the Gospel and the *experience* of the Gospel to be tied to specific *structures* which provide for ongoing spiritual growth and discipleship. Entire sanctification and the demands of discipleship require commitment — not only to God but also to Christian brothers and sisters in the Church. And such commitment requires structures of common life which enable the Church to be a community in conscious distinction from (but not in isolation from) surrounding culture. In other words, functional equivalents of the classes, bands, and societies of early Methodism are as needed in the Church today as are Wesley's specific teachings on the Christian life.

3) Those of us in the holiness tradition need the corrective of Wesley's understanding of the Church in order to gain a fuller understanding of Wesley's own views of Christian perfection. Wesley himself does not seem to have consciously dealt with the relevance of the doctrine of entire sanctification for the communitary life of the Church, although he says a number of things which relate to this. This is really what he means by "social holiness." The point for today is that we need to emphasize the sanctification of the body of Christ; the fact that holiness is not merely an individual matter, but concerns one's *relationships* — first, to God; and secondly to one's brothers and sisters in Christ. Holiness has often been individualized and privatized in a way that is un-Wesleyan. Wesley can help us to see the need for a proper emphasis on, and experience of, not only holy individual persons but also a holy community sustained by love.

In all these ways, Wesley's understanding of the Church has much to say to us today. Wesley's "radicalism" sprang from his deter-

mination to put God first and to measure all things by Scripture. He was willing to go back to the roots. In this, certainly, he is worthy of imitation.

Footnotes

²⁰⁸Cf. Durnbaugh, pp. 40-51.

²⁰⁹Knox, *Enthusiasm*, p. 426.

²¹⁰Tippett, p. 151.

²¹¹On a historical and to some degree theological level, Vinson Synan has dealt with the connection between Wesley and modern Pentecostalism in his *The Holiness-Pentecostal Movement in the United States* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971).

²¹²Durnbaugh, pp. 3-33; James Leo Garrett, Jr., ed., *The Concept of the Believers' Church* (Scottsdale, Pa: Herald Press, 1969), pp. 15-32, 35-38; Franklin H. Littell, *The Free Church* (Boston: Starr King Press, 1957), pp. xi-xiii; Ross Thomas Bender, *The People of God: A Mennonite Interpretation of the Free Church Tradition* (Scottsdale, Pa: Herald Press, 1971, *passim*).

²¹³Quoted in Durnbaugh, p. 33.

²¹⁴*Ibid.*

²¹⁵Harold S. Bender, "The Anabaptist Theology of Discipleship," *Concern* No. 18, p. 39.

²¹⁶Littell, *The Free Church*, p. xii.

²¹⁷Franklin H. Littell, "The Discipline of Discipleship in the Free Church Tradition," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 35 (April, 1961), p. 113.

²¹⁸The reference is in Wesley's *Concise Ecclesiastical History*, III, p. 269, and IV, p. 110, quoted in Bernard Semmel, *The Methodist Revolution*, p. 216. On other occasions when Wesley mentioned "Anabaptists" he is referring to contemporary English Baptists.

²¹⁹CF. "A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists," *Works* (Zondervan ed.), VIII, pp. 250-51.

²²⁰"Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount," Discourse IV, *Sermons on Several Occasions*, First Series (London: Epworth Press, 1944), p. 237.

²²¹Littell, "The Discipline of Discipleship," p. 112.

²²²*Ibid.*, p. 114.

²²³*Ibid.*, p. 117.

²²⁴Williams, p. 151.

²²⁵Littell, "The Discipline of Discipleship," p. 118. This, of course, was true of many of the broad-based renewal movements within the Church — not to mention the New Testament church itself!

²²⁶"Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount," Discourse IV, p. 245.

²²⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 248-49.

²²⁸*Journal*, August 30, 1739. Quoted in Introduction, *Works* (Oxford ed.), XI, p. 20.

²²⁹*Ibid.*, (*Journal*, June 29, 1740).

²³⁰Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England*, p. 139.

²³¹John Wesley, "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection," *Works* (Zondervan ed.), XI, p. 367.

²³²Letter of March 20, 1739. Quoted in *Works* (Oxford ed.), XI, p. 36.

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²³³"A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion," *Works* (Oxford ed.), XI, p. 108.

²³⁴Littell, "The Discipline of Discipleship," p. 115.

²³⁵Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England*, p. 3.

²³⁶Bowmer, p. 215.

²³⁷Williams, pp. 152-53.

²³⁸"Ought We to Separate . . . ?" in Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England*, p. 337.

²³⁹*Works* (Zondervan ed.), VII, p. 278.

²⁴⁰*Ibid.*, p. 280.

²⁴¹*Ibid.*, 281.

²⁴²*Ibid.*, p. 278. But Wesley is here reserving to himself the right to determine what constitutes "an absolute necessity."

²⁴³*Ibid.*, pp. 278-79.

²⁴⁴Durward Hofler, "The Methodist Doctrine of the Church," *Methodist History*, 6:1 (October, 1967), p. 28.

²⁴⁵George H. Williams, "A People in Community: Historical Background," in Garrett, p. 137.

²⁴⁶Outler, *John Wesley*, p. 307. Outler notes that Horneck (1641-1697) was a German Lutheran preacher. He suggests also that "The Methodist notions of corporate Christian discipline were derived, at least in part, from Wesley's interest in the Roman Catholic religious orders — the Society of Jesus in particular" (*Ibid.*).

²⁴⁷Durnbaugh, p. 120. Likewise William Estep comments, "The Methodist denomination through Moravian influence upon Charles and John Wesley became the most famous outgrowth of eighteenth-century Pietism" ("A Believing People: Historical Background," in Garrett, p. 56).

²⁴⁸Lewis, p. 25.

²⁴⁹Durnbaugh, pp. 51-63.

²⁵⁰Addison, p. 51.

²⁵¹Knox, p. 408.

²⁵²Stoeffler, p. 304.

²⁵³Bowmer, p. 61.

²⁵⁴Stoeffler, p. 305.

²⁵⁵Cf. Stoeffler, pp. 303-04.

²⁵⁶*Ibid.*, p. 316.

²⁵⁷Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England*, p. 55.

²⁵⁸Stoeffler, p. 306. For whatever reasons, Stoeffler throughout his essay chooses to emphasize the Pietist roots of Moravianism and therefore to underscore Methodist dependence on Pietism.

²⁵⁹Cf. George Williams, "A People in Community: Historical Background," in Garrett, p. 140.

²⁶⁰Stoeffler, p. 310.

²⁶¹Gerald R. Cragg, "Introduction," in Wesley's *Works* (Oxford ed.), XI, p. 11.

²⁶²Lycurgus M. Starkey, Jr., *The Works of the Holy Spirit: A Study in Wesleyan Theology* (New York: Abingdon, 1962), p. 116. Cf. Cho, p. 67.

²⁶³On the other hand, the Moravians perhaps had a deeper understanding of the communitary nature of the Church than did Wesley.

²⁶⁴On Zinzendorf's ecclesiology, see Knox, pp. 399-403; Lewis, pp. 52, 109-10; Addison, pp. 34-64; Clifford W. Towlson, *Moravian and Methodist. Relationships and Influences in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Epworth Press, 1957), pp. 18, 30-34, 130, 169, 177; J. Taylor Hamilton and Kenneth G. Hamilton, *History of the Moravian Church* (Bethlehem, Pa.: Moravian Church in America, 1967), pp. 17, 101-02, 157-58.