John Wesley's Concept of the Church

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Few theological issues today are more alive than those which concern the nature of the Christian Church. If one could superimpose the various notions of the various churches, the first impression would be surprise at the extent of the area common to all, and the next greater perplexity at the tenacity with which each upholds the importance of its particular margin. Yet even here the gradations of difference would follow a fairly simple pattern of development. The "right-wing" "Catholic" concepts shade through the older Reformation churches into the "independent" churches, following a fairly regular historical development, with Quakers and the Salvation Army, despite their rejection of sacramental ideas, and the very name of Church, seen to be quite clearly a part of the system for all that are at the extreme left.

It would be seen that by far the greatest controversy turns on the concept of ministry, with only slightly less dispute about the relation of Scriptures to the Church. Towards the left of the scale, spirit of Christ rather than body of Christ seems to define the relation of the Church to its Lord; accordingly the sacramental notion fades away. Whereas all parts of the scale regard holiness as an essential element, there are many different notions about what it consists in. On the right it seems to be a sacramental right relationship with the institution of the Church; it shades through ideas that equate it with right doctrine, into a personal standard of outward behavior. Not unrelated is a sociological divergence between the mainly right-wing idea of the "multitudinous" Church, stemming ultimately from the Constantinian notion of an Una Sancta coextensive with a world empire, and the "gathered" Church of the left, whose pattern is the "little flock." The right is impressed by institutional perpetuity, the left distrusts human nature, and consequently seeks increasing freedom from institutions. For just this reason even Calvin rejected the need of apostolical continuity.
Where are we to locate the specifically Methodist concept of the Church, and in particular, what were John Wesley's own ideas?

Wesley was brought up to hold ecclesiological ideas which would have set him at the extreme Catholic wing of the Anglican Church, believing, as he puts it, "that none but members of the Anglican community were in a state of salvation." These ideas, he writes in a passage that dates within two years of his death, began "to abate of their violence" about 1729, that is, at the time when the Holy Club first came into existence at Oxford. Throughout all his life they continued to modify, although certain elements remained impervious, seemingly, to outside influence.

In tracing this process, it is convenient to divide Wesley's life into four periods. The first of these lasts from 1729 to 1744. It covers the formative period of Wesley's general ideas. The second corresponds to the formulation of Methodism in terms of a Church, a problem that occupied the chief place at Wesley's earliest annual conferences. The third emerges out of the second about 1750 and marks the tensions raised when these ecclesiological notions came into conflict with contemporary Anglican and Dissenting theories. The last period is clearly defined between 1769 and 1784 and shows Wesley accepting at last the responsibility of giving Methodism an organization that would outlast his own time.

The natural focus of the first period was Wesley's personal spiritual crisis of May 24, 1738, when he experienced the assurance of God's gracious pardon of his sins. But he had two other crises (of a different nature) in the period that profoundly influenced his ideas of the Church. Together with his brother, he found that these initial experiences of God's grace towards them were accompanied by the inescapable urge to preach the possibility of this same thing to all men. This led directly to open-air preaching. John Wesley first did this on April 2, 1739. Immediately the success of his work presented him with the problem of how to provide a pastoral organization to establish, strengthen and settle his converts. The other crisis was more directly ecclesiological. Wesley's contacts with the Moravian missionaries in England and America led not only to his religious crisis and its solution, but also to his being used by them as an envoy in their negotiations for recognition
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with the Church of England. Thus Wesley had a unique opportunity to study the theory of a non-Anglican Church pattern on the one hand, at precisely the same time as he was experiencing in practice the defects of the Established pattern in the face of an evangelical revival on the other. Wesley came out strongly critical of the Moravian pattern, especially of the way its episcopacy functioned (or rather failed to function), even though they possessed an impeccable Apostolic Succession.¹

No shred of Moravian ecclesiology was ever given a place in Methodism. Both Wesley and his brother were very soon in conflict with the Church of England authorities over the question of preaching in another man's parish; since the Wesleys were Fellows of university colleges, they had, in the nature of the case, no parish of their own. Wesley, if he were to have any parish, had to "look on all the world as my parish." Accordingly, if a bishop forbade him to preach in parishes where there was already a minister, Wesley must either admit himself effectively silenced or disobey the bishop. He formulated the issue: "Is it just to obey Man rather than God?" He cited Anglican divines who had enunciated the rule in face of the issues posed by the Reformation: "Though it be lawful to obey Man for God's sake, it is not lawful to disobey God for Man's sake." As he put it: "To obey God, I have both an ordinary and an extraordinary call. My ordinary call is: Take thou authority to preach the Word of God. My extraordinary call is witnessed by the works God doeth by my ministry, which prove that He is with me of a truth in the exercise of my office." It is useful to note here, _apropos_ of Wesley's controversy with the bishops at this early stage of his work, that one of the remarkable features of Methodism is the strange tolerance showed on the whole by episcopal authority to Wesley. Never once do bishops do more than protest and rebuke him. Opposition, and at times the bitterest persecution, came usually from the parish clergy allied with the local magistrates or, more often, with a bigoted mob.

Five years of the Revival brought Wesley face to face with the ecclesiological problems of organizing his preachers and their converts. The parish clergy were not capable of caring for the souls awakened under Methodist preaching. The first

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¹ _Letters_, I, "To Hermnhutt," August 8, 1740, p. 349.
formal steps in this direction were the calling of annual conferences, first of those Anglican and ordained clergy that worked with the Wesleys, and later of the lay preachers whom they employed. The extent to which, all unknowing, they had become a Church already, is shown by the type of question they had to answer. The Conference of 1745 deliberated thus on the question:

Question: Is Episcopal, Presbyterian or Independent Church government most agreeable to reason?
Answer: The plain origin of Church government seems to be this. Christ sends forth a preacher of the gospel. Some who hear him repent and believe the gospel. They then desire him to watch over them, to build them up in the faith, and to guide their souls in the paths of righteousness. Here, then, is an independent congregation, subject to no pastor but their own, neither liable to be controlled in things spiritual by any other man or body of men whatsoever.

But soon after some from other parts, who are occasionally present when he speaks in the name of Him who sent him, beseech him to come over and help them also. Knowing it to be the will of God he complies, yet not till he has conferred with the wisest and holiest of his congregation, and with their advice appointed one who has gifts and grace to watch over the flock till his return.

If it pleases God to raise another flock in the new place, before he leaves them he does the same thing, appointing one whom God has fitted for the work to watch over these souls also. In like manner, in every place where it pleases God to gather a little flock by his word he appoints one in his absence to take the oversight of the rest, and to assist them of the ability that God giveth. These are Deacons, or servants of the Church, and look on their first pastor as their common father. And all these congregations regard him in the same light, and esteem him still as the shepherd of their souls.

The congregations are not strictly independent. They depend on one pastor, though not on each other. As these congregations increase, and the Deacons
grow in years and grace, they need other subordinate deacons or helpers, in respect of whom they may be called Presbyters or Elders, as their Father in the Lord may be called the Bishop or Overseer of them all.

Q. Is mutual consent absolutely necessary between the Pastor and his Flock?
A. No question. I cannot guide any soul unless he consents to be guided by me. Neither can any soul force me to guide him if I consent not.

Q. Does the ceasing of this consent on either side dissolve the relation?
A. It must in the nature of things. If a man no longer consent to be guided by me, I am no longer his guide. I am free. If one will not guide me any longer, I am free to seek one who will....

The Conference of 1747 asked: "Are the three orders of Bishops, Priests and Deacons plainly scriptural?" The answer is: "We think they are...but we are not assured that God ordained that the same plan should obtain through the ages."

There is no such determined scheme in the New Testament, nor was there any thought of uniformity of government before Constantine's time; "such an idea would not have been, had men consulted Scripture only." These questions were asked in a context which implied a radical criticism of the contemporary notions of the meaning of the word "Church." As yet nothing positive and distinctive is affirmed, but there are indications of a steadily hardening conception of the Church which will not coincide with any of the positions we have previously plotted on our scale. In this period the controversy is mainly addressed to the National Anglican Church, within whose framework Wesley was always consistently determined to keep his work in England, but the Dissenting "independent" churches are also in view, chiefly as a pattern into which all costs Methodism must not be allowed to slide.

The area of controversy is still centered almost entirely on the question of ministry. The area is larger than in the first period, for the question is no longer the "itineracy" of ordained Anglican clergy into others' parishes, but the appearance

2John Simon, John Wesley and the Methodist Society, p. 261.
3Ibid., John Wesley and the Advance of Methodism, p. 37.
of a rival ministry, some who reside, and others who also "itinerate," none of whom were ordained. The issue is further complicated by the relationships between the Methodist people and the Anglican parish clergy. These relationships were often determined by the lack of holiness, or the lack of testimony to any sort of divine vocation, in the parish clergy, at least in the judgment of the Methodist people. It is a crisis arising from Wesley's concern that the "pure word" should be preached and heard universally. The result is the appearance of one or two principles that belong not to the Anglican, but rather to the Dissenting, end of the scale. These become fundamental to the Methodist concept of Church. One is the sovereign right of conscience, if needs be to overrule a bishop, or indeed any of the "non-essential" ordinances of the Church. (Wesley held that doctrine and worship alone were obligatory.) Another was the necessity of "mutual consent" between pastor and flock. "No man living, neither King nor Parliament, has the right to prescribe what Pastor I shall use." This is a clear restatement of the seventeenth century independent notion of "willingness." It is a principle that cuts clean across the notion of the parochial ministry of an Established Church, and runs somewhat counter to Reformed Church ideas.

The loosening up of Wesley's ideas in this period was helped by his reading of two books, both the products of the religious situation in England in the seventeenth century. One was Lord King's Primitive Church. This had been written in the more ecumenically-minded years at the end of the century, as a contribution to the movement for "comprehending" the Presbyterians and Dissenters. The other, Stillingfleet's Irenicon, dated from the more difficult polemical period of the Commonwealth, when it represented a last attempt to avoid the tragic and vindictive situation of 1661. By King, Wesley was convinced "that Bishops and Presbyters are essentially of one order... and that originally every Christian congregation was a church independent of all others." From Stillingfleet he learned

"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 in the Primitive Church."\(^8\)

The third period emerges out of the second; its differentia being that now Wesley faces, often reluctantly, the inferences of the definitions of the Church made in the earlier period. The period was under the shadow of the word "Separation," and its characteristics were the pressure put on Wesley to renounce his obstinate loyalty to the Church of England, and his resistent determination that his own ministry, and all ministry dependent on him (which was his conception of what Methodism constitutionally was), should remain inside the National Church. From one side his brother Charles, always more loyal to the Church of England than he himself, was pressing him to restrain the growing tendency of the unordained preachers to behave exactly like dissenting ministers, and in particular to stop them from administering the sacraments. On the other side, Wesley had to defend the pattern of Methodist ecclesiastical activities against the complaints of parish ministers. The official Church of England rubric had five "irregularities" to charge against Methodism: "Preaching abroad," extemporary prayer, the formation of religious societies, the "Permitting" of unordained clergy, and itineracy. On the opposite side, Wesley tells his fellow clergy that his preachers embarrass him when they charge certain things against Anglicanism, to which he has no defense. The authority of Anglican Canons and their "spiritual courts" he can put among the non-obligatory elements of their system. When, however, he questions the lawfulness of the very ministry of a clergyman who does not believe he is called of God, or expresses sympathy with the general Methodist dissatisfaction of the Anglican liturgy, he is being pushed into that area of "doctrine and worship" in which he had previously felt loyalty was essential. It is against this background that he said firmly that the Methodist service must always be regarded as a supplement to the worship of the parish church;\(^9\) used as a substitute it was highly defective. When Wesley launched American Methodism on its own ecclesiastical existence, he gave it not only orders but also a liturgy. The criticism of the fitness of Anglican clergy led to the rigidity of the tests evolved

\(^8\) *Journal*, January 20, 1746.

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in these years for Methodist preachers. In most Reformed Churches sound learning had become the substitute for Apostolic Succession. For the Methodists this was not enough. These tests were prescribed:

1. Do they know in whom they have believed? Have they the love of God in their hearts? Do they desire and seek nothing but God? Are they holy in heart and in all manner of conversation?

2. Have they gifts, as well as grace, for the work? Have they in some tolerable degree a clear, sound understanding? Have they a right judgment in the things of God? Have they a just conception of the Salvation by Faith? And has God given them any degree of utterance? Do they speak justly, readily, clearly?

3. Have they success? Do they not only so speak as generally either to convince or affect the hearts? But have any received remission of sins by their preaching? a clear and lasting sense of the love of God? As long as these three marks undeniably occur in any, we allow him to be called of God to preach. These we receive as sufficient reasonable evidence that he is moved thereto by the Holy Ghost.

The most critical feature of the period was the way it ended Wesley's hopes of setting Methodism under the guidance of a conference of evangelically minded ordained clergy, and so retaining it securely inside the Church of England. Thus it might have been a "Society" in the sense of an order of like-feeling Christians, and not a "Society" in Hooker's sense of a branch of the Church Catholic organized autonomously. In 1764, Wesley dispatched a letter, usually called the 'Scarborough Irenicon,' to all the Anglican clergy whom he felt still sympathized with him. It was an invitation to form a "close union" between Methodists and parish clergy. This would mean that they would refrain from mutual hindrances by refusing to criticize and disparage each other; that they would love as brethren; that they should defend and help each other, "to rob the poor blind world of its sport: O they cannot agree among themselves!" Hardly any replies at all were received.

Letters IV, "To Various Clergymen," April 19, 1764, pp. 237, 238.
Wesley felt this shortage of ordained clergy in a practical way. It meant that the Methodists could not have frequent celebrations of Holy Communion. The Anglican service, which has always been used by the Methodists, is one of the better pieces of the Church of England worship, reflecting the Reformation concern to give high prominence to the saving work of Christ. Wesley called it "a converting ordinance"; it was both Word and Sacrament. To escape this embarrassment Wesley once went as far as to allow a Greek bishop, Erasmus, to ordain a medical doctor, so as to help him. Nevertheless he objected to any of his Methodist preachers obtaining ordination this way, on the curious grounds that they lacked the necessary education. Thus "sound learning" was not entirely eliminated from his ideas of ministry, and it should be stressed that he expected all his preachers to study several hours a day. But Wesley was a son of his century; there was a general feeling abroad that a university education was essential for ordination. Other evidences of Wesley's unwillingness to live out the implications of the concept of the Church as evolved in Methodism, were his insistences in 1763 that the word "church" be never used of Methodism, and that no preacher call himself a minister.

From this it will be seen that the key issue of the period was the ministerial office—could limits be set upon the activities of Methodist preachers, or must they be recognized as ministers in some Reformation sense? The Wesleys withstood the strongly flowing tide, determined to avoid becoming just another Dissenting denomination. But in 1769 John announced two matters to the Conference. The one was his disappointment at the failure of his *Scarborough Irenicon*; the other, his intention to build a Methodist organization that should outlast his life, based not on a caucus of sympathetic ordained clergy, but on a conference of his own preachers.

The working out of this forms the theme of the fourth and last period. It is an irony of history that, in view of the part

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12 *Ibid*.
that the care of Methodists in America after the War of Independence was to play in the final solution of the question, 1769 was the year when preachers were first officially designated for America. The very first Conference these preachers held in America in 1773 called attention to the vital need of authority for these men to administer the sacraments there. Wesley was still adamant. During the War of Independence some preachers at one Conference ordained each other, but the next year annulled the proceedings under the pressure of Francis Asbury, their General Superintendent. Only in 1784 did Wesley act, and acted in the end remarkably suddenly. He ordained two of his preachers as Presbyters, and set apart Thomas Coke, already an ordained Anglican minister, as Joint Superintendent of the work in America, with instructions to set apart Asbury in the same office. These sentences from the documents connected with these acts explain Wesley's intentions:

Whereas many of the People of the Southern Provinces of North America who desire to continue under my care and still adhere to the Doctrines and Discipline of the Church of England are greatly distrest for want of Ministers to administer the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper....I, John Wesley, think myself to be providentially called at this time to set apart some persons for the work of the Ministry in America....

Lord King's account of the Primitive Church convinced me that Bishops and Presbyters are the same order, and consequently have the same right to ordain....For many years I have been importuned to exercise this right...but I have steadily refused, because I was determined as little as possible to violate the established order of the National Church to which I belonged....

But the case is wholly different between England and America....

The English Government has no authority over them, either civil or ecclesiastical....

As our American brethren are now totally disentangled both from the State and from the English hierarchy, we dare not entangle them again in either with the one or the other. They are at full liberty simply to follow the Scriptures and the Primitive
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Church.

Asbury consented to being "set apart" only when the American Conference approved it, but he accepted the title of Bishop, rather than Superintendent, because it was felt to be a more scriptural word. The word "Church" was also adopted at once. Thus the Methodist Episcopal Church began its life.

In the nature of the case Wesley had to proceed differently in England. The same year saw him form his Conference of Preachers, promised in 1769. He nominated one hundred of them to act in his place, with of course this difference. He had had an ecclesiastical standing in the Church of England. The legal body that succeeded him had no connection with that church, and only a juridical relationship to the state. A nineteenth century churchman once said: "The Conference is the living Wesley."¹⁶ British Methodism has always had its conference as its source of authority, although the composition of it has been modified from time to time.

There are evidences that the Conference of One Hundred Preachers, which was an idea slightly older than the Methodist Episcopal Church, may not after all have represented Wesley's final idea for the future shape of Methodism in Britain. He seems to have inclined in his last years, perhaps at the suggestion of Dr. Coke, to the notion of a British counterpart to the American church. He left at least three men whom he had set apart as superintendents, and who might have inaugurated such a succession had it been required. In any event, however, after Wesley's death in 1791, the Conference rejected the idea both of an episcopally-governed church, and even the practice of ordination by the imposition of hands, except in the case of preachers for overseas. The practice was only used generally after 1836.

It remains now to crystallize the concept that emerges from the tensions of this half-century. Wesley's thinking pivoted on what he could discover of Bible teaching and primitive practice. His favorite Bible passage for inspiration about the Church was Ephesians 4. Preaching on this theme in 1788, he defines the Church as "All the persons in the Universe sic whom God hath so called out of the world...as to be "one body united by one spirit; having one faith, one hope, one baptism, one God

¹⁶Jabez Bunting, quoted B. Gregory in Sidelights on Conflicts of Methodism, P. 505.
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and Father of all."\(^{17}\) This, he says, is enough; there is no need to add, as the Anglican Article does, anything about preaching the Word or administering the sacraments. Another pregnant saying is found in his Notes on Acts 5:11: "Here is a native specimen of a New Testament Church; which is, a company of men, called by the Gospel, grafted into Christ by baptism, animated by love, united by all kind of fellowship, and disciplined by the death of Ananias and Sapphira."\(^{18}\)

On this material he brought two essential Anglican principles to bear. The first was the conviction that a visible church should show a unity co-extensive with the normal social and political unit in which it was set. It should be a national church, at least in England. In this respect Wesley was perhaps more loyal for sociological than for theological reasons. At all events, he did not hesitate to enter the American field in rivalry with the Church of England. Secondly, he never wavered in his belief that episcopacy was the best type of church government. Even when Stillingfleet had convinced him that the Apostolic Succession was a fable and that episcopacy could boast neither divine right nor divine once-for-all ordinance, he still upheld it on pragmatic grounds. For America he changed the name bishop to superintendent; consecrate to set apart, but he retained the substance.

The effect of this is a type of ecclesiology that tries to combine elements of both the Independent and the Catholic extremes. This type is first described in a practical and functional way in the Minutes of the 1745 Conference. There is at least the germ of Wesley's distinctive ideas. Three features may be noted.

First, it is seen that the Church cannot be defined exhaustively in terms of the three traditionally mutually exclusive categories of church government--Episcopal, Presbyterian or Independent.

Secondly, like the Baptist and Independent theology of the seventeenth century, Wesley's thought recognizes that the preaching of the pure word is the formative element of a local church. The Church is a phenomenon that occurs where the Word of God is proclaimed purely.

Thirdly, it also recognizes, unlike these, that the preaching

\(^{17}\)Wesley, Sermon, LXXIV, "Of the Church," I, 14.

of the pure word implies the priority of a preacher, whose ministry is however envisaged, not as a static figure as in the Reformed pattern, but as an itinerating, missionary figure.

The effect is to focus on the idea of "Connexion"\textsuperscript{19} as the distinctive Methodist feature. The minister is the connection between the different churches; these depend on him. Thus Wesley resolves the tension between the classic opposing ideas of Church—on the one hand the Catholic, \textit{Una Sancta}, idea; on the other the Independent, Little Flock concept. The Independent notion of unity was of an association of equal sister churches, a concept obviously difficult to realize in practice. For the Catholic, unity was no problem; it radiates from the center through an apostolic ministry. The Wesleyan idea was in between the extremes. The ministry provides the unity, be it the ministry of Wesley himself, or be it the Methodist ministers of today. Neither he nor they belong to any one local church. Their ministry is shared by all. The itinerant system thus is the symbol not only of an evangelical ministry deriving in idea from the missionary journeys of the Apostles, but it also signifies that no minister belongs to a local church. It rather represents the connection between that church and the whole Church.

We may therefore conclude with the following composite statement of the concept of the Church as it was developed under John Wesley:

The Church is identifiable throughout the world as the company of those who believe the Gospel proclaimed by God in Jesus Christ. This invisible, universal Church becomes visible under the form of different "Societies," each of whom has its own organization determined according to its situation in place and time. For Wesley's own situation, the best organization was of one episcopally-governed church for each national grouping, negotiating its own relationships with the civil government.

A church is called into local existence by the preaching and the believing of the pure Gospel. The outward mark of a church is holiness, which in its members is the evidence of its life and vigor. While the preaching of the Word and the adminis-

\textsuperscript{19}"Connexion" and its derivatives are nineteenth-century words, not found in Wesley, who used instead phrases such as "depend," or "general union of our Societies."
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tration of the sacraments are the forms in which a church manifests its community life, the substance of its common life is fellowship, i.e., the possession of the spirit described in Ephesians 4. As all members share in this, they share responsibility for the function of the Church. Thus in one sense, the ministry is secondary to the Church itself, insofar as the local church is itself a corporate ministry (as in the Baptist pattern). From another point of view, however, the ministry is essential to the Church, insofar as it connects and unifies the independent local churches.

This triple aspect in the life of a church, i.e., its prime dependence on God through his Word, its local independence of other churches, and its "connexional" dependence on the ministry--repeats itself in the classical pattern of Methodist ministry. For, traditionally, a Methodist minister needs a triple authority: first, the direct personal call of God; secondly, the call of the "Connexion" as a result of testing the evidences of the prior divine call; and thirdly,--because "no man can prescribe what Pastor I use"--there must be a willingness on the part of the local community to accept his ministry. Wesley favored episcopacy, not because it had any Divine Right--he utterly rejected the fact of the Apostolic Succession--but because he believed it to be the most effective form of government that was in accordance with Scripture and the practice of the early church.

The concept of the Church and its ministry has evolved much in Methodism since Wesley's day. Yet one basic principle lies behind all its complicated pattern. Methodism derives organically from the evangelistic and pastoral ministry of Wesley himself. He took all responsibility before God and man for what was done. To use the modern phrase, he was the "essential minister." That ministry he delegated, by his own freely accepted responsibility, to the constitutional bishops of America, and to a conference in Great Britain, legally constituted.