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The Priesthood of all Believers

The Practical Expression of the Principle in Wesley's Methodism

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HISTORIANS today are recognizing afresh the links which attach the Methodist Revival to the Protestant Reformation. The fact that Dr Franz Hildebrandt can offer a book with such a title as *From Luther to Wesley* indicates the trend of contemporary research. Indeed, it might be said that Methodism translated the doctrinal insights of the pioneer reformers, and Luther in particular, into experimental and practical terms. Hence the 'article of a standing or falling Church' — justification by faith — was realized as a personal experience, and not merely as a theological safeguard against the abuses of the Roman Mass. In the same way, the priesthood of all believers, which T. M. Lindsay regarded as 'the one principle of the Reformation', was expressed in actual practice in the predominantly lay constitution of Methodism.

It was with a certain amount of reluctance, however, that John Wesley pressed these convictions to their logical outcome. His evangelical conversion did not involve the immediate shedding of all his former ecclesiastical predilections. In doctrine the change was complete: in practice, so far as the ordering of the Methodist societies was concerned, the implications were more gradually recognized. Now and again we can see Wesley struggling against his previous inhibitions, but eventually his scriptural insights triumphed. It is not to be forgotten that, although Wesley's father was an Anglican of the then High Church school, both his grandfathers were prominent nonconformist ministers, and it would seem that in the long run it was this remoter ancestry which prevailed.

It was the very doctrine which is the theme of these articles which led Wesley to take such steps as would inevitably separate his followers from the Church of England. As T. E. Brigden has put it, in *A New History of Methodism*, 'he reasserted the priesthood of every believer, and before he renounced the doctrine of apostolical succession he had practically proved it to be an anachronism'. 'Practically' is the operative word. It was in the work of the Revival that he discovered that what is scriptural and evangelical is also supremely practicable, whereas theological theorizing beyond the sanctions of the Word is merely doctrinaire and therefore quite unrealistic.

The organization of eighteenth-century Methodism assumed the 'apostolic succession of all believers', as Dr J. S. Whale has neatly described it. In Wesley's mind the vital distinction within the institutional Church was drawn, not between clergy and laity, but between nominal and real believers.

Those whose faith was genuine rather than formal were immediately incorporated into the only priesthood which the New Testament allows — namely, that of all true Christians.

It must be understood that the Methodist ministry itself stems from this stock. Ordinations were not introduced until within seven years of Wesley's death, and only then in exceptional cases, mainly for work outside England. The mightily effective promotion and consolidation of the Revival was carried on almost exclusively by laymen, and even laywomen. Only a handful of Anglican clergymen were directly associated with the Wesleys in their mission — Fletcher, the Perronets, Piers, Hodges, Taylor, Manning, Grimshaw and a few more. In the nature of the case they could not desert their parishes for long periods in order to further the work. God raised up men to meet the need, and Wesley received them as his helpers.

As early as 1735 Howell Harris had been evangelizing Wales, 'tearing all before him like a large harrow'. He had been refused episcopal ordination three times over, but there was no gainsaying that the Lord owned his ministry even if men did not. Wesley met Harris in 1739 and rejoiced in his success. In the same year the first Methodist lay preacher was appointed in the person of John Cennick. Wesley himself speaks of Joseph Humphreys assisting him in the previous year, yet he was not a Methodist but a Moravian. Thomas Maxfield, who is traditionally regarded as the first, did not preach until 1742. Cennick was employed in June 1739 in missioning the Kingswood colliers, and is now saluted as the first Methodist lay preacher and therefore the precursor of the Methodist ministry.

It was not without hesitation that Wesley took this step. All his High Church prejudices, so strong before his conversion, revolted against such an enormity. But it is a tribute to the firmness of his new convictions that so soon after his enlightenment he was prepared to break with his ecclesiastical past in such a decisive fashion. He met with fierce opposition as a result of his action, but the rightness of what he did was confirmed by the fruits of this lay ministry. 'Soul-damning clergymen', he declared, in defence, 'lay me under more difficulties than soul-saving laymen.' In a letter to Alexander Mather he made a statement which, as Dr Cyril Eastwood claims, 'shocked Christendom as it had not been shocked since Luther married the nun Catherine von Bora in 1525'. Here is the gauntlet Wesley laid down to challenge all sacerdotal pretensions concerning the ministry of the Word: 'Give me one hundred preachers who fear nothing but sin, and desire nothing but God, and I care not a straw whether they be clergy or laymen, such alone will shake the gates of hell and set up the kingdom of heaven upon earth.'

In his *Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, Wesley pointed out that our Lord Himself was no priest after the order of Aaron, but of the tribe of Judah, and a carpenter by trade. None of the apostles was ordained in the ecclesiastical sense, but this did not hinder their effectiveness in ministry as the book of the Acts abundantly testifies. 'Was Mr Calvin ordained? Was he either priest or deacon? And were not most of those whom it pleased God to employ in promoting the Reformation abroad, laymen also? Could that great work have been promoted at all in many places, if laymen had not preached?'

Whilst Wesley stoutly defended the principle that allowed the unordained to preach, he insisted on the need for training and would by no means coun-

tenance the ill-equipped. He vigorously repudiated the charge of illiteracy. 'In the one thing which they profess to know, they are not ignorant men. I trust there is not one of them who is not able to go through such an examination in substantial, practical, experimental divinity as few of our candidates for holy orders, even in the University (I speak it with sorrow and shame, and in tender love), are able to do.'

Such, then, were Wesley's full-time preachers, whom he stationed in the growing circuits of Methodism to minister to his societies. They are the forebears of the present-day Methodist ministry. But in addition to these itinerant preachers, there was also a band of local preachers, who find their place in modern Methodism too. Indeed, the distinction between preachers in Methodism is not strictly between ministerial and lay, but between itinerant and local, although this solidarity has been jeopardized of late by the infiltration of uncharacteristic conceptions of the ministerial office.

It is not known exactly when the name local preacher first appeared, or when the function began. In the Conference of 1747 we hear of thirty-eight preachers present who 'assisted chiefly in one place', as well as twenty-two itinerants. In 1753 twelve local preachers are actually designated as such. In 1755 there is a reference to 'our chief local preachers' and also to a dozen 'half itinerants' — men who now and again left their home and work to go off on a preaching tour. One of these was William Shent, a barber in Leeds. In a letter to George Whitefield in 1767, Wesley clearly distinguishes between the travelling preacher and his counterpart. 'We are so far from having any travelling preacher to spare that there are not enough to supply people that earnestly call for them — but some of the local preachers are equal both in grace and gifts to most of the itinerants.' In a recent and definitive study, J. C. Bowmer, the official Methodist Archivist, comes to the conclusion that local preachers emerged during the decade 1750-1760, though the precise title is not always used.

Another group known as exhorters are mentioned as early as 1746 in Cornwall. They were confined to their own societies and, as the name implies, they urged sinners to be saved and believers to grow in grace. These were in one sense the predecessors of the local preachers, although their work continued when the other was established, and still exists.

Nor were these authorized offices the only channels for the gospel. 'O let me commend my Saviour to you' was on the lips of every Methodist. When he became a Christian, he was given to understand that he was enlisted in the gospel army and must seek to witness for his Lord. 'The priesthood of believers, once more as in apostolic days,' wrote Dr J. W. Bready in *England: Before and After Wesley*, 'constrained every faithful convert to become a missionary.'

If the proclamation of the Word, both to the saved and unsaved, was entrusted principally to laymen, so also was the pastoral oversight of the flock. The itinerant preachers rarely stayed long in one spot. Wesley kept his men on the move, either within the circuit or from one circuit to another. He believed that it hurt both preachers and people for an itinerant to remain more than six or eight weeks in one place. In these circumstances, the care of the societies rested with the local leaders. These were placed in charge of the classes and were the true guardians of the sheep. It was they who met the members week by week and visited them in their homes. It was they who informed the travelling preacher of special needs.

What Wesley called a 'prudential regulation' proved to be one of the inspired innovations of the Methodist movement. A new ministry of the laity had come into being: what Dr R. W. Dale called 'a great and remarkable Church institution; perhaps one of the most striking and original of all the fruits of the Revival.' The classes formed the vital tissue of the entire Methodist body. And yet they were composed of laymen and led by laymen. Here the priesthood of believers found its outstanding expression. For all that was claimed by the sacerdotal system of spiritual supervision was fulfilled in this fellowship of saints. Yet it was deliberately kept out of the hands of any kind of ruling class. The itinerants were not to control it. 'I positively forbid any preacher to be a leader,' enjoined Wesley in 1783; 'rather put the most insignificant person in each class to be leader of it.'

Side by side with the class meeting, and sometimes included in it, was the prayer meeting, which once again exemplified the universal priesthood. Our Lord's priestly ministry involves the continual intercession which He makes for His people, and in this heavenly exercise Christians are not only privileged but obligated recipients, upon whom is laid the duty of praying for others. The apostolate of prayer is not confined to any priestly caste, but is incumbent upon all believers. In the life of Methodism, the prayer meeting has sought to present a corporate opportunity for its discharge.

This lay responsibility for preaching and pastoral care is woven into the fabric of Methodism. It colours the conception that is held both of ministry and laity. Methodism seeks to express the scriptural truth that every layman is a clergyman (belonging to the *klēros* or inheritance of God) and every minister is a layman (belonging to the *laos* or people of God). Here it stands squarely in the protestant and evangelical succession, though nowadays not all its members realize and acknowledge its historical position. 'The great sign and pledge of the non-sacerdotal character of Methodism is found in two facts,' observed Dr W. H. Fitchett. 'Its ministers share their preaching office with the lay preachers, and their pastoral office with the leaders.'

It is for this reason that the Deed of Union insists that ordained ministers 'hold no priesthood differing in kind from that which is common to the Lord's people and they have no exclusive title to the preaching of the Gospel or the care of souls.' This parity extends to the administration of the sacraments, for where necessary, a layman may be authorized to dispense the ordinance of the Lord's Supper. Although the practice is not widespread, the principle is dear to the people called Methodists.

In view of the historic attitude of Methodism to this vital doctrine of universal priesthood, it is at once astonishing and disturbing that eight of the twelve Methodist representatives on the joint commission should endorse the statement on page 25 of the Report. 'But "the priesthood of all believers" does not mean that every individual believer has the *right* to perform every ministerial or priestly function. Within the exercise of the corporate priesthood there fall to be performed certain actions, historically and generally regarded as priestly These are said to include the celebration of Holy Communion and the pronouncing of absolution. Whatever this latter assertion reflects, it is not historic Methodism. Neither is it historic Anglicanism, as Evangelicals within that communion are not slow to make clear. In its origins, it is historic Romanism.