Wesley and Inclusive Grammar:
A Note for Reflection

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The recent release of the *Methodist Hymnal* and the work underway on a book of worship have escalated discussion of the issue of inclusive grammar in United Methodist circles. When one surveys that discussion, it soon becomes clear that the debaters (on both sides!) typically assume that the issue is a forced choice: *either* we maintain historic Christian practice *or* we conform to contemporary egalitarian sensitivities (witness the responses to a survey on the issue by the *United Methodist Reporter*, 28 May 1990).

Both simple alternatives implied by this shared assumption are surely theologically suspect. On the one hand, those who would champion an unquestioning conformity to the supposed precedent of Christian tradition forget the central insight of the Reformation period. Tradition can inform us, but it must always be tested in light of the central

teachings of Scripture. If (as most would claim) Scripture affirms male/female equality and God's transcendence of human sex distinctions, then authentic contemporary Christian linguistic practice should seek to embody these convictions, regardless of previous precedent.

On the other hand, a nonchalant rejection of traditional precedents simply because of contemporary sensitivities smacks of Enlightenment arrogance and begs the question of theological authority. On what grounds would we know that our contemporary sensitivities are true or normatively Christian? Would it not, again, require appeal to the central convictions of Scripture?

Without doubt, one could refine these simple alternative in ways that would suggest greater convergence. However, it might be even more appropriate to question the beginning shared *assumption* that historic Christian practice is opposed to (or devoid of) the use of inclusive grammar. Careful historical study greatly qualifies this claim.

An excellent example would be the precedent of biblical language. Preparation for the *new* Revised Standard Version increased our awareness that the original biblical languages often used inclusive terms for humanity in contexts where existing English translations opted for noninclusive terms. Moreover, it reminded us that even when noninclusive *terms* are found in the original, the text should be translated in the context of the broader biblical *teachings* about equality of male and female. As such, while scriptural practice is somewhat ambiguous, one could well argue that it provides more warrant *for* inclusive grammar than *against* this practice.

The specific point that I would like to add to the ongoing Methodist discussion of the issue of inclusive grammar is that the precedent within our own tradition is *also* more ambiguous than is often assumed. I refer in particular to the linguistic practice of John Wesley. In doing so, I am not assuming that Wesley's precedent on this matter is automatically *normative* for later Methodists. However, his *formative* influence must surely be recognized, with whatever appropriate warrant that carries.

It is undeniable that both John and Charles Wesley typically used the word "man" in contexts where they intended it as a generic term for

"humanity." However, this usage must be seen in historical context. In Old English the word *man* meant simply "person" or "human being," with the separate words *wer* and *wif* meaning an adult human male and female, respectively. Over time *wifman* evolved into the word "woman" while *wer* disappeared and *man* began to be used ambiguously both for an adult male and for humans of both sexes. During the eighteenth century there was further development as the word "man" increasingly narrowed its reference solely to an adult human male.[1]

In other words, the Wesleys wrote at a time when the word "man" could be used generically but was increasingly narrowing its meaning to refer only to males. Reconsidered in this light, one can notice John beginning to become aware of the limitations of the word "man" in his later writings. For example, in his *Journal* entry for 9 July 1761 he speaks of the lovefeast as having a design of free and familiar conversation "in which every man, *yea, and woman*, has liberty to speak whatever may be to the glory of God" (*Journal* [Curnock] 4.471, emphasis added).

Without a doubt, the most important example of John Wesley seeking to avoid an ambiguous use of "man" when he wants to include both males and females is to be found in his edited version of the Anglican Thirty-Nine Articles, which he sent to the newly independent Methodist community in America to become their Articles of Faith.[2] This example is particularly relevant to the current discussions of inclusive grammar because it involved a formal public document, not just a personal communication.

On three occasions in his editing of the Articles Wesley changed an original phrase "Christian men" to simply "Christians." The first two instances were obviously changed to make clear that both women and men were being described (Remember that the original Anglican Articles were written during a time when "man" was less ambiguously generic!). The first instance is Anglican Article XXVII which had said that baptism was a mark whereby "Christian men" are discerned from others that are not christened. The second instance is Anglican Article XXX which stipulates that the Lord's Supper will be served in both kinds to "all Christian men alike." The third instance is the most interesting. In Anglican Article XXXII it is argued that it is as lawful for bishops, priest and deacons "as for *all other* (emphasis added) Christian men, to marry at their own discretion." Wesley again alters this to simply "Christians." While the wording is ambiguous, Wesley's alteration

allows the possible insinuation that both males and females could be bishops, priests, and deacons! As Earl Kent Brown has shown, Wesley's actual opinion and practice on this latter issue was itself ambiguous, fluctuating over time.[3]

In short, while a cursory exposure to Wesley's works might suggest that he was unconcerned about the issue of inclusive grammar concerning humanity, a more careful look suggests that he provides yet further warrant for the contemporary efforts to render United Methodist public worship materials in inclusive language.

Endnotes

1. Cf. the discussion in Casey Miller & Kate Smith, *Words and Women* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1976), 25.

2. For a convenient parallel comparison of the relevant portions of these two documents, see Thomas Oden, *Doctrinal Standards in the Western Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 121–22.

3. Earl Kent Brown, *Women in Mr. Wesley's Methodism* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1983).