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**‘LETTER FROM AMERICA’:
A UNITED METHODIST PERSPECTIVE**

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It is an honor to be asked to comment upon this set of reflections by British Methodists upon the theological dimensions of their recent heritage and present challenges. I offer these reflections as a close relative, from my North American setting within The United Methodist Church, and as one active in world Methodist discussions over the nature of the Wesleyan theological tradition.

The Theological Nature of Methodism

On behalf of these larger discussions, my first comment must be a commendation of this work for the evidence that it gathers to counter a common stereotype that Methodism simply is not a *theological* tradition. For many insiders this self-understanding has been embraced as a way of stressing that Methodists have historically placed more emphasis upon the importance of proper Christian practice (whether this be in terms of personal behaviors or of service to those in need) than of conformity to a detailed doctrinal creed. While this basic point is true, it is a mistake to equate theological concern with enforcing conformity to a creed or to overlook the theological dimension of judging which practices might be appropriately Christian. The preceding essays reveal that theological concern and debate have been very present in the life and developments of British Methodism in the period under review, and they suggest that the same would be true if we were to investigate Methodists of any other period or context.

To be sure, many outsiders who affirm the stereotypical judgment of Methodism have argued that it is not enough simply to show that the tradition engages theological issues, the question is whether we have done so in a ‘serious’ manner. Two issues are usually emphasized in this connection. The first is that ‘serious’ theology is expected to interact with current movements of thought in the theological academy and in culture at large. While nineteenth-century British Methodists have sometimes been found wanting

in this regard, these essays repeatedly highlight the engagement of recent British Methodism with contemporary theological emphases, with the ecumenical developments of the period, and with broader cultural trends. The intermixed calls for even greater engagement (e.g., Marsh) only strengthen the sense of the seriousness of their theological concern in this regard.

The second characteristic usually assumed to be essential to ‘serious’ theology is that it be comprehensive and systematic. From the beginning many outsiders have judged Methodists as deficient in this regard since Wesley bequeathed to us a set of sermons and annotations on the bible, not a systematic theology. The main response of Methodist theologians from early in the nineteenth century was to try to compensate for this unfortunate lacuna by authoring Methodist compendiums and (later) systematic theologies. But since the middle of the twentieth century there has been a growing number of voices challenging the primacy given to the academic model of systematic theology as the only—or the best—expression of serious theological activity. These voices have called for a model more connected to the life and practice of the church in the world (cf. Maddox 1990). One strength of the preceding essays is their resonance with this call. While they engage the writings of several theologians, they do not privilege academic textbooks as the standard form for theological expression. They devote considerable attention to the broader theological forms embodied in the life and praxis of the church—ranging from liturgy and hymns to conference reports and social programs. In the process they help belie the fear that such ‘occasional’ forms will inevitably be haphazard, failing to embody a coherent theological vision for the Christian life. They also challenge explicitly the assumption that such embodied theology will be driven entirely by the needs of the situation without attention to normative concerns (i.e., that it will be ‘pragmatic’ in the negative sense of that term). Ironically, while they are thereby demonstrating the seriousness of theological concern in recent British Methodism, they are also reopening the possibility of reengaging John (and Charles) Wesley seriously again as mentors in understanding the nature and practice of theology.

The Wesleys as Theological Mentors

In this light, one of the things that I find encouraging about the present project is precisely the degree to which there is interest by several of the participants to include John Wesley more explicitly among their theological mentors! As Tim Macquiban points out, there has been real hesitance on this count through much of the recent history of British Methodism. These essays suggest two factors that contributed to this hesitance.

The first factor is the active engagement of British Methodism in ecumenical discussions and in possible reunion plans with the Church of England.

There was clear concern that focusing attention on Wesley would emphasize issues that separate Methodists from others in the Christian family. There were also hints of doubt about the value of the distinctive theological emphases of Wesley. Similar issues caused hesitancy for some time among Methodists in the United States as well. But as we have been renewing dialogue with Wesley, many of us have found that we were actually renewing dialogue with much of the core of the Christian tradition. Moreover, we became convinced that some of Wesley's distinctive emphases are important gifts that our tradition has to bring to the table as we seek to commune more fully with our fellow traditions. Brian Beck (2003, ch. 4) has suggested that heightened interaction between British and American Methodist theologians in the context of the Oxford Institute for Methodist Theological Studies helped renew British interest in explicit engagement with Wesley. If so, we have only been returning interest on our debt to our founding roots.

The second factor causing hesitance about focusing attention on Wesley as a theological mentor is the fear of a type of 'Wesley Fundamentalism,' where his stance on every issue—or at least every issue he addresses in his *Sermons* and *Notes on the New Testament*—is considered to be normative for contemporary Methodists. The basis for this fear is the status assigned to these documents for defining Methodist doctrine in the Model Deed, a status continued in the current constitutions of most Methodist bodies. The problem is that these documents were not produced originally to be such standards. They are occasional pieces that articulate not only Wesley's sense of central Christian doctrines but also his views on a range of more peripheral matters. Few have wanted to assign normative status to these latter views, and in the twentieth century many decided that the most convenient way to avoid this was to ignore Wesley's writings as outdated.

Those who recognized that this was inadequate sought a way of determining which of Wesley's convictions should be considered constitutive of Wesleyan identity. The most common answer in earlier Methodist reflection has been to focus on Wesley's 'distinctive' teachings, the teachings which served to define his movement over against others. These include his emphasis on 1) the universal availability of God's saving grace, 2) the assuring witness of the Spirit, and 3) the possibility of present holiness of heart and life. While they must play a role, the problem with defining the Wesleyan tradition by these themes alone is that they give little sense of whether and how Wesleyans might share such core Christian convictions as the triune nature of God and the normative revelation of Christ. An approach that focused on identifying Wesley's characteristic 'concern' or emphasis regarding such core convictions would be more helpful, and several of the preceding essays push in this direction. On these terms the Wesley 'standards' are seen not as a catalog of items to be affirmed but as a designated locus within which to discern his concern. It is also easier on these terms to broaden

the range of consideration, including Charles Wesley and others more actively as mentors for contemporary Methodist theological reflection.

The Limits of the ‘Wesleyan Quadrilateral’

While on such hermeneutical issues, let me express sympathy with the questions raised in several of these essays about the connotations of the term ‘the Wesleyan Quadrilateral.’ This term was introduced into broader discussion by its incorporation into the United Methodist *Discipline* as an image for capturing the dynamics of authentic theological reflection. The goal of those who coined it was to stress that Wesley recognized the inadequacy of ‘scripture alone’ as a guide for deciding theological debates. But the geometrical image has proven prone to suggesting that scripture, tradition, experience, and reason are four relatively *independent* guides in theological discernment. This raises questions whenever there is apparent lack of agreement among the four, and the tendency in the U.S. setting at least has been to respond by urging the relative primacy of either the *past* criteria of scripture and reason or the *present* criteria of experience and reason. Wesley was faced with a similar polarization in his early Enlightenment setting and consciously refused to join either side (cf. Gunter 1997). We would do well to do likewise.

Two things grounded Wesley’s resistance to any forced option between the authority of scripture in theology and that of experience, reason, or tradition. One was his commitment to the unity of God’s truth. The other was his mature recognition of the fallibility of our understandings of our experience, tradition, and scripture itself, that these understandings are human *interpretations* and should remain open to the possibility of reconsideration. Thus, for example, when confronted with an apparent conflict between scripture and experience, the way that Wesley tried to move forward was not to debate which was more authoritative but to reconsider his interpretations of each of these—and of tradition—seeking an interpretation that could ‘do justice to all.’

This suggests that a better image for capturing the dynamics of theological reflection on debated issues than that of a four-sided geometrical figure would be the image of dialogue—or, to put it in good Methodist terms like Dawes, of ‘conferencing.’ Indeed, healthy theological reflection most typically involves overlapping dialogues: ongoing dialogue between scripture, tradition, experience, and reason; all considered in dialogue with other interpreters. While it takes time, Methodist history witnesses to the emergence of growing agreement on several issues through such ‘honoring of the dialogue’ (cf. Maddox 1999).

The Challenge of Reclaiming Holistic Spiritual Formation

Having stressed some areas of resonance, let me conclude by focusing on a challenge that I believe needs to receive greater attention than is evident in these essays. This challenge is to provide the theological frameworks that can help present Methodist communities to reclaim the kind of holistic spiritual formation that was at the heart of the early Methodist movement. I hasten to add that this is not a challenge unique to the British church, the need is just as great among United Methodists (cf. Maddox 2002). Indeed this challenge faces the entire Christian family, but it ought to be of particular concern to Methodists since it was a task that dominated Wesley's theological interest and efforts in his time.

There are several facets to be addressed in meeting this challenge. One need is to find winsome ways of articulating the nature of dynamic and mature Christian life. Wesley's most helpful way of expressing this was in terms of our sharing in God's life and God's love, to the point that this love becomes the ruling disposition of our lives. His common distillation of this broader sense was to speak of 'holiness of heart and life' or 'Christian Perfection.' Unfortunately, these phrases have proven prone to moralistic, static, and unrealistic connotations, resulting in the growing uncomfortableness with and neglect of this aspect of our Wesleyan heritage that several of the preceding essays note. But this theme was not just a personal idiosyncrasy for Wesley, it was one of the places where he was in touch with the long tradition of Christian spirituality. As such, it is vital that we find new ways of articulating his basic vision that can avoid such connotations.

At the core of any vision of the Christian life are assumptions about what motivates and enables our choices and actions—i.e., about what scholars call 'moral psychology.' Why is it hard to make sense of Wesley's (and the Bible's!) affirmation that through God's grace we can form deepening dispositions of love for God and neighbor? I believe that a major reason is the broad influence in present North Atlantic culture of assumptions in moral psychology from thinkers like Kant and Rousseau. Kant is one of the major voices suggesting to us that habits and emotional dispositions are mainly obstacles to truly moral action, which should be motivated by rational conviction alone. Rousseau championed an alternative view that portrays ideal moral action as flowing spontaneously from our innate dispositions—as long as these dispositions have not been overwritten by societal norms, which he viewed as inevitably distorted. Both of these suggestions remain prominent in our culture and call into question the need for, or wisdom of, careful efforts to form character dispositions in ourselves and our children. Thus, part of our challenge is to renew both in broad intellectual life and at the level of local communities of faith an appreciation for this formative

task. Like Margaret Jones, I see the emphases of ‘virtue ethics’ very helpful in this regard (cf. Maddox 2001).

This leads me to say that I see more at stake in realities like the decline of the class meeting and the displacement of the General Rules than simply the transition of Methodism from being a ‘society’ to becoming a ‘church.’ Earliest Methodism was actually a ‘society within a church’ and its wisdom was that the combined practices of church life (liturgy, preaching, sacrament, etc.) and society life (accountability groups, fellowship gatherings, etc.) served well to form balanced and stable Christian dispositions. The reality for Methodists in the post-Wesley setting is that we have tended to be either mainly a society, or mainly a church, rarely blending well the strengths of both aspects of our heritage. While British Methodists have clearly devoted more attention to formal ecclesiology than have their American counterparts in recent decades, it is not clear to me that they have managed this balance any better.

This can be related to the emphasis on social and political activism. David Clough does a fine job of surveying recent British Methodist debates and efforts in this area and of tracing connections back to Wesley and early Methodism. But the focus is entirely on *what ought to be done*, with no consideration of *what will incline us to do it?* Put another way, his account suggests that present calls to social action in British Methodism are formulated the same way that they are in United Methodism—solely as duties or obligations. There is little hint of Wesley’s hard-won insight that works of mercy are as important for the one who does them as for those who receive, for these works are another ‘means of grace’ by which God empowers and shapes our dispositions.

Hopefully these are enough examples to give some sense of the dimensions of this important challenge that I see facing Methodist theologians around the globe. Let me close by giving thanks for the commitment and insight that it is clear my British colleagues bring to our joint efforts in seeking a way forward on this and other fronts in Methodist theology.

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