



Happenings Around the Church

PLURALISM REVISITED (Part 2)?

By Riley B. Case

It is the contention of this article that if rightly understood the idea of theological pluralism as introduced in the 1972 doctrinal statement, though badly misused after the Methodist-EUB merger, does reflect the thinking of John Wesley and should characterize the thinking of any new expression of Methodism. From Wesley comes the challenge, “*As to all opinions which do not strike at the heart of Christianity we think and let think*” (“The Character of a Methodist”). Thus, those of us from an evangelical or traditionalist perspective desire to be clear about what is the “heart of Christianity,” or what are the differences between doctrinal “opinions” and doctrinal “essentials.”

The same week I entered seminary back in the 1950s I was appointed to my first three-point circuit. The superintendent hurried the appointment because a big revival was planned in one of the churches and the circuit was without a pastor. My instructions were “to keep an eye on the revival and don’t let it get out of hand.” I was 22 years old at the time.

A couple of months later I was interviewed by the district Board of Ministerial Qualifications (BOM today). In those days we appointed as needed and credentialed in due time. The board was supportive and was concerned lest I be in some kind of trouble at my circuit, mostly because, as one person commented, "They're not really Methodist churches you know." I was bemused. Even then I was aware of what was behind the remark: my churches held revivals (two weeks in length no less) that might get out of hand; they did not use Methodist Sunday school material; two of the churches used a hymnal published by Lillenas (Nazarene); they speculated that persons who used alcohol were probably not saved; they said "Amen" and debated old-time Methodist issues such as sin in believers. They were worlds away from the kind of Methodism I was encountering at my seminary. Seminary Methodism did liturgical worship, disdained gospel hymns, communicated in four-syllable words and made caustic remarks about Billy Graham, or anything related to "fundamentalism."

I could handle this. I understood there were a variety of Methodist expressions. I grew up in a county-seat Methodist First Church in Indiana where our faith, though genuine, was properly softened as not to offend anyone. But I was also influenced by an alternate world of para-church groups, fundamentalism and direct preaching. I appreciated seminary. Neo-orthodoxy was popular in those days. We read Karl Barth and Emil Brunner. Wesley was being re-discovered. One of my professors, Colin Williams, taught what John Wesley meant by "the essentials," as distinguished from "opinions." The "essentials," which we held in common with all groups in the tradition of the historic faith, were specified as Original Sin, the Deity of Christ, the Atonement, Justification by Faith Alone, The Work of the Holy Spirit, and the Trinity. (see, Colin Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today*, pp. 15-17, Abingdon, 1960).

Meanwhile, old-time Methodism was much more alive than many of our leaders were willing to admit. It was reflected in our annual conference. North Indiana Methodist, one of the five conferences that now make up the Indiana Conference (three Methodist and two EUBs), covered an area strongly influenced by the Holiness Movement. Our bishop and many of the leading pastors of the conference were Boston graduates and were liberals but in the best sense of the word. They could talk not only about following Jesus but also about "accepting" Jesus. They were also encouraging to us who did not always agree with them theologically. In the conference we worked together to make our camping program

perhaps the best in the connection: over a 10-year period we averaged 3,000 senior high youth each summer at "Institute." Our junior high program enrolled another 1,800. The programs were unapologetically evangelistic. I eventually became Conference Coordinator of Youth Ministry and remember sub-district rallies of 200 and more. Our conference sponsored mission saturation programs. We were always within the top five of the connection in Advanced Giving. We designated and supported conference evangelists.

That would not continue. In 1967, just before the merger, I spent a month in a continuing education event at another Methodist seminary. I realized society and the church were changing fast. For one, professors and students were angry. In many ways it was like 2020. The world, the country and the church were militaristic and racist and sexist and imperialistic and wealthy in the midst of poverty. Interestingly it was not only evangelical Christianity that was to blame; it was also the old liberal theology that had characterized the church leadership for the previous fifty years. The church needed not just change but revolution.

Those attitudes were a harbinger of things to come. They appeared to drive the merger of 1968-72. The merger was a chance to start over and get things right this time. The 1972 General Conference created autonomous super-boards and introduced quota systems and monitoring agencies and shifted priorities. In the new doctrinal statement, "pluralism" and a new thing called the "quadrilateral" opened the theological doors to "anything goes." Anything except evangelicalism (labeled "fundamentalism"), that is. Growing evangelical expressions in society and in the church were seen not as assets but as hindrances in the rush to change the world by way of liberation movements, identity caucuses and institutional heavy-handedness.

Many good things have taken place within United Methodism over the years, not the least of which is a growing church in the central conferences. But not even clever public relations efforts can hide the serious problems of the present time in the American church. It is not helpful here to go into a litany of what those problems are except to comment that doctrinal confusion plays a key factor. With no clear understanding and commitment to our doctrinal essentials there is no center in the church's teaching, no core, and no sense of belonging together.

I cite the erosion of our understanding of Original Sin as an example. Wesley was clear that one was not a Christian who did not believe in Original Sin--“All who deny this, call it “original sin,” or by any other title, are but heathens still” (sermon on Original Sin, *Sermons II*, p. 223). But sin seemed an embarrassment to modernists who were beginning to dominate at the turn of the 20th century. This can be traced in the hymnals. The official M.E. hymnal of 1848 includes a section on “Depravity” with 17 hymns. This is changed to “Lost Condition” in the 1878 hymnal with 10 hymns. This is changed to “The Need for Salvation” in 1905 and 5 hymns. By 1935 the section is simply deleted and there are no sin hymns. The head of the M.E. South Board of Education opined that Wesley was simply wrong in his idea of sin. The 1935 hymnal, however, did add 58 hymns in a new section called The Kingdom of God which, supposedly, the church would attain by social planning and hard work.

So with the baptismal ritual. Once Methodism introduced baptism by saying: “forasmuch as all men are conceived and born in sin...”; by 1935 baptism is introduced with “forasmuch as all men are heirs of life eternal...”

But without a doctrine of sin as, say, articulated in Article VII in the Articles of Religion (*Of Original or Birth Sin*) there is no need for Atonement, (about which Wesley said, “It is properly the distinguishing mark between Deism and Christianity” (Letters, VI, 297-298). And without a need for Atonement there is no need for a Savior or for the Incarnation. And without the Incarnation Jesus is nothing but a great teacher and nothing special at that since many of his teachings can be found in other great teachers.

The denomination as a whole is not at that point yet, but it appears that those who identify themselves as *progressives* are heading in that direction, to a point where the church’s message is reduced to political and social action advocacy. The substance of Christianity is gone. The emperor has no clothes.

It is time to move toward amicable separation. Would a traditional or evangelical expression of Methodism be narrow and rigid and unloving? This is often the criticism leveled against traditionalists. On the contrary the opposite seems to be

true. At the present time it is the mainline religious culture that is often rigid and parochial and narrow. It has lost contact with the larger evangelical world—and perhaps we should even say, the larger Christian world--the world of fundamentalists and dispensationalists and Pentecostals and restorationists and Southern Baptists and Assemblies of God and Seventh Day Adventists and Missouri Synod Lutherans and Amish and conservative Mennonites and Old Order Brethren and mega-churches and para-church groups and independent Christian churches. Most of our seminaries and our church leadership are simply out of touch with this whole world. Within this world there is a lot of disagreement but in the end, there is Christian fellowship because what we have in common is greater than what divides us.

By contrast, within the American United Methodist world I grew up in and have served for over 60 years I have experienced, at least recently, accusations of hatefulness, racism, homophobia, sexism and divisiveness because of being associated with evangelical renewal groups. I have seen leaders in the church take out ads in secular papers to denounce the very church in which they were called to serve.

We need fresh expression of religious pluralism, where the core of faith is taken seriously but where the catholic spirit of think and let think operates in all other areas.