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### **Theology Through Social and Political Action**

Everyone knows that Methodists have traditionally opposed alcohol and gambling. Most Methodists in the UK know their church has been involved practical action and political campaigning on a wide range of other issues, from NCH (previously National Children's Home) to the anti-apartheid movement. The social and political action of the church has clearly been an important part of its life, with a strong relationship to the beliefs of Methodists. What can we learn about the theology of Methodists from the social and political projects they have chosen, and the way they have pursued them?

In this chapter I argue that the way in which Methodists in the UK have engaged in social and political activism since the union of the church in 1932 is crucial for appreciating how they understand the nature of the church, its mission, and the Christian life. Should the church be concerned only with how it conducts its own affairs, or should it concern itself with how local communities and nations order themselves? Does the good news it has to share end with bringing new members into knowledge and love of Jesus Christ, or does this gospel have implications for the social conditions in which people live? And should Christians be concerned more with their own holiness, or with working to make easier the lives of others?

Since 1932, the range of social and political issues addressed by the Methodist Church is wide and diverse, including the sale and consumption of alcohol, Sunday observance, welfare policy, war and peace, refugees, gambling and industrial relations, issues of race relations at home and abroad, sexual ethics, nuclear disarmament and domestic and international issues of poverty. Concern about many of these issues resulted in charitable activities, and many required political action alongside or in place of church based initiatives.

Recognizing the ongoing commitment of Methodists to social and political action begins to point to how the church understands its nature and mission. Taking note of the kind of issues the church has involved itself with, however, indicates much more about Methodist theology, and charting the changes in the concerns of the church since 1932 suggests ways

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Methodists have developed in their theological commitments. A survey of the agenda of the 1932 uniting conference gives a snapshot of the social concerns of the church at the time. The new department set up to reflect on social affairs is named 'Temperance and Social Welfare', and this title gives a good indication of the importance the uniting churches ascribed to the issue of limiting the sale and consumption of alcohol. The conference also gives attention to what activities are suitable for the Christian observance of Sunday, as well as concerns about betting and gambling. The 'Coalfields Distress Fund' is noted, which was set up to relieve poverty among Methodists in mining areas. Wider concerns are evident in the refusal of the conference to allow military training on Methodist school grounds, as well as

statements about welfare policy, unemployment, and world peace. Other reports show the widespread involvement of Methodist in caring more directly for those in need, through the city missions, foreign missions, Prisons Committee, and National Children's Home.

One issue that illustrates the change in Methodist attitudes over the 70 years since the uniting conference is how the church has treated the topic of alcohol. Long before 1932, members of the branches of Methodism had been active in the temperance movement, and in the years following union, this activity continued. Efforts were especially targeted on young people, and the Christian Citizenship Movement asked them to sign pledges to abstain from alcohol. As early as 1943, however, Liverpool district sent a memorial to conference asking that 'Temperance' be dropped from the title of the 'Temperance and Social Welfare' department. Conference rejected this suggestion, and other memorials in this period assert the continued importance of temperance. Seven years later, however, in 1950, the annual conference approved changing the title to the 'Department of Christian Citizenship'. An accompanying report stressed the continuing importance of the issue of temperance alongside other concerns, and it continues to be reported on regularly. A further 10 years later, in 1960, Temperance Sunday is renamed Christian Citizenship Sunday. In 1967, Temperance ceased to be one of the main headings under which the Department of Christian Citizenship undertook its work, and in the same year the department decided to disband the Order of Christian Citizenship with its pledge. The report of a Commission on Methodism and Total Abstinence in 1972 reported that only 30% of ministers reported that they were total abstainers, concluded that there were merits in both the abstinent and non-abstinent positions, and suggested alcohol should be seen in the context of other drugs issues. The 1987 report to conference, 'Through a Glass Darkly' took a further step in rethinking attitudes. It charted the social and health costs of alcohol consumption, and advocated either total abstinence or 'responsible drinking'.

Alcohol consumption, however, remains a live issue for the church. This can be seen in the narrow defeat of a proposal at the 2002 Conference

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to allow alcohol to be served with meals for external conferences at Westminster Central Hall.

The shift of attitudes on alcohol is mirrored in other issues associated with what was once called the 'Nonconformist Conscience', in particular gambling and Sunday Observance. In both cases strict attitudes evident at the time of union were gradually weakened in the decades that followed, in line with shifts in attitudes among the British population generally. Thus in 1964 a proposal was presented to conference to allow dancing and non-monetary games of chance on church premises, and in 1965 the tradition of reflecting on issues of Sunday observance on Low Sunday each year was abandoned. The 1965 conference showed a narrower concern about alcohol in recommending a law against driving under the influence of alcohol, but was more exercised by setting aside the requirement for divorcees to show penitence in order for them to be church members, and by reflections on disarmament and apartheid in South Africa. The liberalizing of attitudes to sexual ethics evident here is representative of other decisions in the same period. Examples include a contribution to the Royal Commission on Marriage and Divorce in 1957 approving reform of the law to make divorce easier, agreement with the Wolfenden Report in 1958 that

homosexual acts should no longer be a criminal offence, rethinking opposition to contraception in 1961, and support for the legalization of abortion in 1968.

It is important to recognize that none of these issues can be reduced simply to a concern for standards of personal conduct. Alcohol was a real social ill during the times when the temperance movement was at its height, with families going hungry for want of money spent on beer. Winning abstinence pledges was in many cases an important means of relieving economic hardship, and the relationship between alcohol consumption, crime, and ill-health remains significant. Campaigns against gambling were similarly aimed at enabling money to be spent for more urgent needs, and the recent alliance between trades unions and churches to restrict Sunday trading indicates that concerns for Sunday observance, too, had a social dimension. Nonetheless, taking together the moves to relax standards in relation to alcohol, gambling, Sunday observance, and sexual ethics, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that over a long period and on a broad scale Methodists have been placing progressively less emphasis on traditional standards of personal conduct.

Looking more closely at a second issue, the work of the church in relation to issues of poverty, provides further insight into developments in Methodist social and political action since 1932. As with alcohol, the church had a long history of concern and action on the issue. Robert Wearmouth details the influence Methodists had in the Trades Union movement and in the beginnings of the Labour Party, and this political involvement continued in the decades after union (Wearmouth 1957). The work of the urban missions, pioneered by Hugh Price Hughes and others also continued after 1932, and

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the conference agenda of the uniting conference contains reports from missions in Bermondsey, Birmingham, Bolton, Bradford, Bristol, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester and Salford, and Sheffield, and reports from Glasgow, Newcastle and Nottingham are included in following years. The National Children's Home was already active in 1932 and has remained a key part of the mission of the church ever since, and Methodist Homes for the Aged began in 1945. The Coalfields Distress Fund of 1932 is followed by other initiatives in response to particular instances of economic hardship, such as a fund for refugees from Germany in 1939, which was succeeded by a wider Refugee Fund, and then the Methodist Relief Fund, which had an international remit. Methodists later collaborated with others in the projects of the World Development Movement and Christian Aid. More recently, the church has been involved domestically in the urban project Mission Alongside the Poor, which predated the Anglican Faith in the City initiative. Among broader issues of social justice, the British Methodist Church has shown particular concern for race relations. South Africa featured in conference reports as early as 1952, and remained a regular concern in the following decades, to such an extent that in 1971 complaints were made to the Department of Christian Citizenship that South Africa was receiving too much of the department's attention. Domestic issues of racism are a frequent concern from the 1960s onwards.

In contrast to the significant shifts in standards of personal conduct such as alcohol, gambling, and sexual ethics, the social and political action of the church in relation to poverty represents a substantial commitment that has been continuous throughout the past 70 years. Indeed, this engagement with society stands in

continuity with the history of the church from the Wesleys onwards. Since 1932, Methodists have refined their methods of tackling problems of economic disadvantage, such as by recognizing the importance of working alongside those in need rather than setting up projects 'for' them. But the commitment to addressing poverty and other social justice issues both directly and by campaigning for political change is consistent and impressive. Since the level of attention given to issues such as alcohol and gambling has been reducing for some time, continued strong emphasis on social justice issues means that they now have a relatively greater importance for the church than in 1932. Methodists are now likely to be less interested in whether they drink alcohol or buy lottery tickets, and more interested in social justice issues such as racial discrimination, relief of the debt of two-thirds world countries, or fair trade.

In 1935, the Christian Citizenship Movement of the Methodist Church published an affirmation aiming to mark 'a way of discipleship and embody a Rule of Christian life and work for the complex circumstances of our time' (Conference Agenda, 1935). Part of the affirmation was a parallel set of 'Personal Resolves' and 'Social Aims'. The 'Personal Resolves' are commitments the members of the movement make in their individual lives; the 'Social Aims'

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are commitments to work in the wider world. So under the heading 'Peace', members agree to 'accept Christ's way of peacemaking in every relationship' as a personal resolve, and to work for 'the repudiation of war by the nations' as a social aim. Similar sections treat issues of work, money, gambling, temperance, family life, and leisure and worship. This affirmation recognizes that discipleship requires an understanding of holiness with personal and social dimensions, which accords with earlier traditions of the church from the Wesleys onwards.

My contention is that in the years since this affirmation was written, the Methodist Church in the UK has changed its emphasis from this balance between attention to the personal and the social, to a clear preference in its proclamation for issues of social holiness and justice. There are two ways we could interpret this change. First, we could say that the church followed broader social trends, becoming more liberal in social attitudes, and softening its previous strict line on personal behaviour in relation to alcohol, gambling, and issues of sexual morality such as divorce and abortion. This is a picture of a church either that does not believe there should be significant differences between the behaviour of those within the church and those outside it, or does not believe it is realistic to expect members of the church to behave differently. We might point to the decline of the class meeting as contributing to this change in expectations about what the church will look like: without small group meetings of this sort, sustaining church members in lives that are at odds with society is very difficult indeed.

A second, and more positive, interpretation of the shift of attention towards social issues in this period is that it shows the church deciding to engage with the world. Previously, much of the church's address to society was negative and critical reaction towards society, based on its consumption of alcohol, involvement in gambling, and behaviour on Sunday. Many working for change in the church during these years believed that outdated church attitudes were impeding its mission, and that the church had to alter its approach to social issues in order to be taken seriously by

those outside. This is a picture of the church grappling with changed times, and recognizing the necessity of recasting its message in the light of them. We might also note in this context that a focus on social issues does not mean individuals escape demanding choices about how to conduct their lives. Recognizing the need to campaign against apartheid in South Africa required similar or greater fortitude and commitment as campaigning for temperance had required in earlier days. Personal holiness is not neglected, then, but understood as requiring a different kind of discipline: instead of looking inward to reflect on how to keep separate from the vices of the world, we look outward to engage with it and change it.

I suspect that both of these interpretations have a role in understanding the shift of emphasis towards social issues by the Methodist Church since

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1932. The church is not separate from society, but part of it, and therefore the church is inevitably affected by broad shifts in national opinion. In days when temperance and strict observance of Sunday became less attractive to the nation as a whole, it became harder for the church to sustain an unfashionable witness. For many in the church, however, changing the character of the church's social and political agenda was not accommodation to social trends, but part of the mission required by these new times. If the church had frozen its social policy in 1932, it would have been giving up on its responsibility to speak to the society to which it belongs.

We can gain three key insights about Methodist theology from the developments in this period I have outlined. First, the engagement of the church with the world outside its doors, suggests that the church retains its orientation towards an Arminian view of salvation, rather than a Calvinist one. John Wesley opted for the Arminian view that human free will was compatible with the sovereignty of God. This led to the affirmation that 'all can be saved' against the Calvinist view that God has predetermined an elect group for salvation. These theological doctrines have a direct impact on the way the church engages with the world. On the Calvinist view, the actions of human beings cannot change the decrees of God, so the focus of the church becomes living faithfully as the elect of God. On the Arminian view, everything is at stake in the mission of the church: all can be saved, and so the church has a responsibility to be active in doing all it can for those outside the church. The Methodist Church continues to see its mission in this latter, Arminian, perspective.

The second insight about the nature Methodist theology we can draw from its social and political action is allied to the first. In its mission to the world outside it, the Methodist Church remains committed to the view that concern for the souls of those it meets cannot be divorced from concern for their social and economic welfare. This was the case from the beginnings of Methodism, when setting up schools, homes for widows, and even access to loans, were natural responses to the needs of those the church encountered. The kingdom of God has consequences for how society is ordered, and Christians contribute to the realization of the reign of God by working for just societies that provide for those who are in need. This aspect of Methodist belief accords with commitments of liberation theologians that the church must concern itself with social justice, and Methodist theologians have been closely identified with liberation theologies in Latin America.

The third insight is that the social and political activism of the Methodist Church reveals its optimism about what can be achieved by human efforts in association with divine grace. There would be no sense in all the social and political activity of the church if its members did not believe that this activity had the potential to make a difference in the world. On a personal level, the Wesleyan doctrine of Christian Perfection expressed the belief that

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sanctification could lead to genuine change in the life of the Christian. The engagement of the church with the world about it shows that the church is optimistic about such change in a social context, too. Working to enable the reign of God is not merely a Christian duty, but expresses a belief that such action can contribute to real improvements in the lives of those in need.

I began this chapter by suggesting that taking note of the social and political activity of Methodists in the UK since 1932 would reveal aspects of how they understand the nature of the church, its mission, and the Christian life. My conclusion is that the brief survey I have presented indicates that Methodists are committed to the idea of a public church, its social mission, and a corporate vision of the Christian life characterized by action:

- *a public church*: British Methodists are not content to belong to an inward looking ‘holy club’ but retain believe that the church has an important contribution to make in the shaping of public life, by reflecting together on social and political questions, and seeking to communicate the results of these reflections to those outside the church.
- *a social mission*: alongside evangelism, the commitment of the church to ‘spread scriptural holiness through the land’ (CPD Vol 2:1, 213) continues to include working to improve the economic and social conditions of those in need, through direct intervention and campaigning for political change, and the church retains an optimism about what may be achieved by human efforts in cooperation with the grace of God.
- *a corporate Christian life of action*. There is a clear shift in the British Methodist Church during the twentieth century away from concern with alcohol, gambling, and Sunday observance and towards broader issues of social and economic justice. Taken together with the liberalizing of attitudes on issues in sexual ethics such as abortion and divorce, this shift indicates a decreasing emphasis on earlier conceptions of personal holiness and more focus on engaging with society, with greater attention to the social dimensions of what it means to be a holy people.

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