

WILL THERE BE A PLACE FOR CATHOLIC SUBSTANCE IN THE NEXT METHODISM?

by Bishop Timothy W. Whitaker

The United Methodist Church is poised on the edge of a great divide in 2021. It seems probable that the Church will split into at least two main bodies with perhaps several other groups going their own ways for a while. Because of our pattern over recent decades of preferring to fight with one another rather than to separate from one another, one cannot rule out the possibility that there may still be some kind of institutional stalemate in the next year.

An opportunity for reform

Whatever happens in the United Methodist Church during the next few years, this is a time of instability, but instability offers the opportunity for reform. By reform, I do not mean merely making necessary institutional corrections, such as dismantling a leadership structure and a bureaucracy that lack accountability, but recovering and appropriating for our time the genuine Wesleyan heritage.

Currently we United Methodists call “Wesleyan” whatever theology that fits with the dominant institutional agenda in America, and we give lip service to distinctive Wesleyan means of grace such as the class meeting while relying on technocratic strategies to “renew” the Church. After more than fifteen years of organizational theory, leadership theory and buzz words, the Church has continued to decline rapidly and also to disintegrate because we have forgotten that the lifeblood of the Church’s being is its spiritual and theological life rather than the business of its institutional existence.

A bright spot is that we have had many decades of scholarship in the study of Wesleyan history and theology, but strangely this scholarship has not engendered a movement of appropriating for the Church today the Wesleyan Way of making and living as disciples of Jesus Christ. The scholars have done their job, but they have not had a Church that is able to receive their scholarship and use it by implementing a spiritual and theological reform of the life of the Church according to the Wesleyan spirit. There is a disconnect between the stimulating research of Wesleyan scholars and the reliance of the United Methodist Church on sterile techniques for rousing the membership to life and reaching the hearts of people who have not heard the gospel proclaimed as real news from the living God.

The Wesleyan heritage with catholic substance

Because this moment of instability is an opportunity for recovering the genuine Wesleyan heritage, I wish only to lift up one concern that I contend is absolutely essential for a Methodist church and any Christian communion—catholic substance.

This term “catholic substance” is borrowed from the Protestant theologian Paul Tillich (1886-1965). In Volume Three of his *Systematic Theology*, Tillich asserted that the “Protestant principle” of reform needs to be accompanied by “Catholic substance.” I borrow Tillich’s term, but I define it in my own way.

“Catholic substance” can be understood as the historic deposit of the living tradition of the ecumenical Christian tradition. It includes rituals of Holy Baptism and the Holy Eucharist, the Christian liturgical year, liturgical practices and forms; the rule of faith embodied by the universal Nicene Creed and the Western Apostles’ Creed; the doctrinal decrees of the seven ecumenical councils from 325 to 787 C.E. (especially the first five—Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus, Chalcedon, and Constantinople II); the writings of the church fathers; the lives and writings of men and women saints, and a rich heritage of spiritual wisdom and practices in Eastern and Western Christian traditions of spirituality.

I employ the lower case “c” in writing “catholic substance” because it constitutes a tradition embodied by many Christian communions and institutions.

We Methodists have received a heritage that gives us a clear direction about a Way of being the church. This way includes the spiritual and theological teaching of John Wesley’s *Standard Sermons* and *Notes on the New Testament* and Charles Wesley’s hymns; engendering conversion and growth in

holiness by means of small groups and service to the poor; and distinctive Methodist liturgies including the Covenant Service, which directs a Christian to participate in Christ's total self-surrender to God, and love feasts, which cultivate a culture of personal testimony. This heritage needs to be recovered. However, we should also be aware that the Wesleyan heritage rests upon a foundation of catholic substance—the entire tradition of the apostolic and catholic faith.

There would be no “apostolical man,” as some Methodists described Mr. Wesley, unless there were apostles chosen by Jesus Christ to be the foundation of his church. There would be no Standard Sermons and Notes without the canon of the scriptures of the Christian church. There would be no Methodist hymns and liturgies without the liturgical tradition of the universal tradition of the Christian church. There would be no Methodist church with its own distinctive Way beginning in the eighteenth century unless there were a Christian church instituted by Jesus Christ through the apostles and constituted by the Holy Spirit in the first century C.E.

John and Charles Wesley are the church fathers of Methodism. The Holy Spirit inspired and led them in discovering a movement that has proven to be a way of transforming lives and renewing the church. But we must always remember that they themselves were priests in a catholic church, the Church of England. The Wesleys' creative activity of evangelism and nurture took place within the context of catholic liturgy, doctrine, and order.

In his contribution to A Library of Christian Thought, Albert Outler's John Wesley (Oxford University Press, 1964) perhaps marked the beginning of a resurgence in Wesleyan studies. In his preface to this volume of selections from John Wesley's writings, along with editorial introductions and notes, Outler observes, “One might apply a faintly fuzzy label to this [that is, Wesley's] distinctive doctrinal perspective: *evangelical catholicism*. Its most important immediate source in Wesley's thought was the Anglican theological literature in which he had steeped himself at Oxford and in Georgia. Its deeper wellspring was the Bible and its interpretation by the ancient Fathers of the Church....”

I think that there is a tendency by later Methodists to take for granted the catholic substance which characterizes both the Church in which the Wesleys served as priests and their own theology and spirituality. Any Christian communion that is self-consciously Wesleyan or Methodist has a responsibility not only to taste the distinctive Wesleyan heritage but also to drink deeply from the well of catholic substance, the living tradition of the apostolic and catholic faith.

For Methodists who truly understand the story of the Wesleys and of their faith, the concepts of being a “movement” and of being church are never in opposition to each other, but they always go hand in hand. Yes, the Wesleyan Way is always a movement of the Holy Spirit in the human heart and in the life of the church, but this Way presupposes and needs the substance of a church that is solidly built upon this gospel and the whole Christian tradition.

Recovering catholic substance in the next Methodism

How may we recover catholic substance along with the Wesleyan Way in the next Methodism?

We should be aware that the Wesleyan heritage is not a substitute for, or an alternative to, the historic ecumenical Christian tradition, but it constitutes only one way of appropriating the living tradition of the apostolic and catholic faith. While this seems only too obvious, this is a very necessary observation simply because there is a tendency among Methodists to think that we can take for granted the catholic substance on which the Wesleyan heritage rests. If we have to say so, then we must always acknowledge that, first of all, we are Christians, and, then and only then, we are Methodists. Like all other Christians, we also have a responsibility to know and to live according to the living tradition of the apostolic and catholic faith.

Reforming liturgy

The center of the life of the church is the worship of one God, the Father, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, in the one Spirit (cf. I Corinthians 8:6, 12:1-13; Ephesians 4:4-5). From the beginning, the church has lived from its common worship on the Lord's day, and all of its actions have flowed from its worship. The distinctive Methodist emphases on evangelism and service should be grounded in worship. Jesus said that “the greatest and first commandment” is, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” (cf. Matthew 22:34-37). Then Jesus added that there is “a second [commandment] like it,” “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (cf. Matthew 22:39-40). With our emphases on “doing good” and “mission,” we Methodists have a tendency to think and act as if the first commandment is submerged into the second commandment, forgetting that obeying the first commandment to love God is enjoying worshipping God together.

Not everything that is called “worship” today is really worship according to the historic ecumenical Christian tradition. Before we launch into the next Methodism, we need some serious

evaluation of what we are doing in our services of worship. Currently there is a breakdown in discipline concerning how worship is ordered and led. Despite the fact that John Wesley submitted the Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America, a version of the Sunday liturgy of the Church of England, to the American Methodists. It has not been the American Methodist tradition to require all clergy and congregations to adhere to a uniform liturgy, but even in American Methodism there have always been requirements to adhere to the official “ritual” of the Church and to expect the clergy and congregations to abide by certain norms.

There should be some freedom for clergy and congregations to adapt to their own local communities, but only within the limits of a common liturgical practice, including strict adherence to the rites for the sacraments and other services such as marriages and funerals.

The heart of reforming Methodist worship should be the celebration of the Eucharist every Sunday—one of the marks of both the historic ecumenical Christian tradition and the distinctive Wesleyan heritage. Our practice should be guided by John Wesley’s sermon, *The Duty of Constant Communion*, and our spirituality should be nourished by Charles Wesley’s many eucharistic hymns.

Not so long ago the life of Methodist congregations revolved around a Sunday morning liturgy in which the mighty acts of God were celebrated, a Sunday evening service when an evangelical invitation was offered to all persons, and a Wednesday prayer meeting that consisted of exposition of scripture and intercession for the world, the church, and its members. When a flurry of activities that are not worship dominates the weekly round of a congregation’s life, then the life of the church is distorted from being a “royal priesthood” (I Peter 2:9) into becoming a busy organization. The point is not that we should return to a pattern that served the church several generations ago, but that we should learn from past practices how the life of the church is ordered according to a rhythm of continual worship and prayer from which flows faithful living in the world.

There is a weighty question that is asked of all persons who are ordained for ministry in the United Methodist Church. The question is, “Will you be loyal to The United Methodist Church, accepting and upholding its order, liturgy, doctrine, and discipline defending it against all doctrines contrary to God’s Holy Word, and committing yourself to be accountable with those serving with you, and to the bishop and those who are appointed to supervise your ministry?” The collapse of discipline in our Church in recent times is notorious, but we ought not miss how all clergy make a solemn vow to accept and uphold the liturgy of the Church. This will only happen if the Church has a liturgy and if this liturgy is grounded in the historic ecumenical Christian tradition.

Teaching doctrine

Liturgy, the worship of God, and doctrine, the teaching of the church, are intertwined. On the one hand, doctrine is derived to some extent from liturgy, as demonstrated by the fact that some of the greatest Christological texts in the New Testament are hymnic, e.g. Philippians 2:6-11, Colossians 1:15-20, and John 1:1-18. On the other hand, doctrine shapes liturgy so that there can be right praise that is ordered according to the revelation of God’s relation to us. As a particular concern, one reason that the Nicene Creed or the Apostles’ Creed should be recited every Sunday is because liturgy is the school of the church, and the members need to know the church’s rule of faith by heart.

The interaction of liturgy and doctrine indicates that doctrine matters not merely because it consists of correct thinking and speaking about theology, but because doctrine is essential for right praise or worship of God “in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24). We cannot worship and be in a right relationship with God unless our liturgy is ordered according to the truth that God has revealed to us. The word *orthodoxy*, which means “right praise,” is usually defined as adherence to the doctrine of the church, but the word is a reminder that the true purpose of teaching the doctrine of the church is to enable members of the church to truly know God and to rightly worship God.

Teaching orthodox doctrine is essential for the spiritual health of the church and its members. Why is there so much unbelief, lack of spiritual satisfaction, and dissension in our Church? One reason for disquiet in the Church is that leaders have substituted their own theological agendas for the doctrine of the Church. When personal opinions and feelings are taught instead of the doctrine of the Church—whether in a Sunday School class, from a pulpit, or in a seminary lecture—the body of Christ is wounded rather than made well and strong.

In their book, The Identity of the Church (SCM Press, 1987), Anglican theologians A.T. and R.P. C. Hanson observe, “To reduce Christian doctrine to the individual interpretations, insights and whims of each theologian, and finally of each individual Christian or arbitrary group of Christians, which is the logical outcome of much contemporary theology, is in fact to dissolve Christianity.” They add, “It is not the Bible that unites Christians, but the church’s tradition in interpreting the Bible, as the history of the ecumenical movement has shown. What we need is agreement on *doctrine*, on what we teach when we

are not just repeating the words of the Bible.” They offer their own working definition of orthodoxy as the teaching of 1) the Trinity; 2) the Incarnation; 3) the Atonement; 4) the church; and 5) the two sacraments of baptism and holy communion. This definition is a good starting place for identifying the essentials of orthodox doctrine.

As a practical matter, the renewal of orthodoxy in the church entails several practices.

A major project is to recover catechesis (“oral instruction”), the ancient church’s name for serious teaching of the doctrine and the way of life of the church to persons seeking to be baptized.

Moreover, there has to be discipline in what is taught in a congregation. The church of the future will be strong in its faith and witness only if the people are nourished by solid doctrinal teaching. Shallow and sentimental piety is no substitute for doctrinal vibrancy. The church’s faith is damaged and its unity is threatened when individuals or groups are allowed to teach unsound theology that is contrary to orthodoxy.

The pulpit must be the ordinary place where a congregation learns how to think theologically in accordance with the rich and deep tradition of the church. In his book with its suggestive title, The Reformed Imperative: What the Church Has to Say That No One Else Can Say (Westminster Press, 1988), Presbyterian theologian John H. Leith (1919-2002) writes, “The primary source of the malaise of the church...is the loss of a distinctive Christian message and of the theological and biblical competence that made its preaching effective. Sermons fail to mediate the presence and grace of God. Many sermons are moral exhortations, which can be heard delivered with greater skill at the Rotary or Kiwanis Club. Many sermons are political and economic judgments on society, which have been presented with greater wisdom and passion at political conventions. Many sermons offer personal therapies, which can be better provided by well-trained psychiatrists. The only skill the preacher has—or the church, for that matter—which is not found with greater excellence somewhere else, is theology, in particular the skill to interpret and apply the Word of God in sermon, teaching, and pastoral care. This is the great service which the minister and the church can render the world. Why should anyone come to church for what can be better found somewhere else?”

Doctrinal teaching and preaching are integral to the educative function of the healing grace of God in the spiritual life of the church and its members. According to Luke Timothy Johnson’s translation of Titus 2:11-14 in his Letters to Paul’s Delegates (Trinity Press International, 1996), the apostle Paul says, “For God’s grace has appeared. It gives salvation to all people. It educates us, so that, once having rejected ungodliness and worldly desires, we might live prudently, righteously, and in godly fashion during the present time, as we await the blessed hope and the appearance of the glory of the great God and of our savior Jesus Christ. He gave himself for us, so that he might ransom us from every kind of lawlessness, and might purify a special people for himself that was eager to do good deeds.”

A Plea for catholic substance

The division among United Methodists is usually depicted as a gulf between progressives and evangelicals. There is one thing that both groups tend to have in common—a neglect of catholic substance.

Progressives have inherited the liberal tradition that takes a polemical stance against the wholesome tradition of the church.

Evangelicals profess orthodoxy, but evangelical bodies have a record of being seedbeds for liberalism. This is probably because evangelicals’ passion for personal experience causes them to treat the liturgical and doctrinal traditions of the church as forms of “dead orthodoxy.”

As Albert Outler observed, John Wesley was an evangelical catholic. The next Methodism could be a church that is reformed to be both evangelical and catholic; a church that has an evangelical spirit in a catholic body which practices catechesis and eucharistic worship; a church that seeks to evangelize people of all ages, races, and social classes and to nourish them in the rich resources of the apostolic and catholic faith.

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