



THE
NEXT
METHODISM

THEOLOGICAL, SOCIAL,
AND MISSIONAL FOUNDATIONS
FOR GLOBAL METHODISM

EDITORS

Kenneth J. Collins *and* Ryan N. Danker



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Printed in the United States of America

Cover design by Strange Last Name

Page design and layout by PerfectType, Nashville, Tennessee

The next Methodism : theological, social, and missional foundations for global Methodism / editors, Kenneth J. Collins and Ryan N. Danker. – Franklin, Tennessee : Seedbed Publishing, ©2021.

pages ; cm .

ISBN 9781628249354 (paperback)

ISBN 9781628249361 (Mobi)

ISBN 9781628249378 (ePub)

ISBN 9781628249385 (uPDF)

OCLC 1289306393

1. Methodism--21st century. 2. Methodist Church--Theology. 3. Methodist Church--Doctrines. I. Collins, Kenneth J. II. Danker, Ryan Nicholas, 1979-

BX8332.N49 2021

287

2021952930



SEEDBED PUBLISHING
Franklin, Tennessee
seedbed.com

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INTRODUCTION



THE NEXT METHODISM

Kenneth J. Collins

To go through time, to preserve a well-established identity and yet to be relevant to the current moment, is the challenge that all great movements face, and not all have succeeded. To be sure, the flow of history is a difficult gauntlet to traverse. The historical process itself, made up of numerous contingencies, unforeseen factors, and even outright setbacks and adversity, has marked the death knell for so many heretofore thriving movements that now line the ash heap of history. For example, the Holy Roman Empire, as great as it once was, is now simply a topic for the historians. And though the church itself will never and can never fade away, on the authority of no one less than Jesus Christ (Matthew 16:18), such an assurance is no guarantee that any particular theological tradition will survive the vagaries of history with its identity fully intact. The compromising and co-opting forces of culture over time can transform a theological tradition and thereby undermine its earlier, commonly celebrated identity.

An important way that a theological tradition such as Methodism can remain both a faithful witness in terms of its past heritage as well as relevant to the challenges of today is the frank recognition that this tradition has been called forth by God to participate in the broad, rich, and generous life of the church understood as both the church militant and the church triumphant. In other words, the calling and evoking God, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, has raised up Methodism, through its many humble servants empowered by the Holy Spirit, to enjoy the fellowship of those saints from the past who are now reigning with Christ in glory and of those saints who are currently suffering with him on the earth. Such a call, such a vocation, means that the church is never simply about the present moment or about its current members, but that all of this is caught up in a much more grand vision of what the church actually is. In other words, the body of Christ has its life in both time and eternity, among those who have gone on before and among those now present. Simply put, the church is never only about us or the present moment. God's call is far more generous and embracing than that.

Revelation and Proper Doctrine

The Methodist tradition has been blessed with a legacy of gifts that have been passed down the corridors of history by earlier faithful witnesses. Such gifts have come in the form of proper doctrine that celebrates the truth of revelation, as well as the church's Spirit-enabled reflections upon it, and in the form of a proper life, one marked by the graces of Jesus Christ, especially holiness. Indeed, the preservation of correct doctrine over time, being theologically orthodox, is the challenge of any theological tradition that wants to maintain the integrity of its own witness and to do so within the context of the larger ecumenical church. Methodism has been especially well equipped to do this very thing in light of John Wesley's own claim that this tradition holds forth before the universal church what is, in fact, none other than real, true, proper scriptural Christianity.

So vital to the life of the church is correct teaching that several chapters in this book explore Sacred Scripture as the Word of God, as revelation from on high, that not only forms the basis for proper doctrine about both God

and humanity, but it also constitutes, to use John Wesley's own idiom, the very "touchstone"¹ of the faith. Beyond the authority of the Bible for ongoing illumination, correction, and empowerment, keeping the church ever focused on her high calling, the question of interpretation, of course, immediately arises. How should Methodists read the Bible today and to what end? One chapter in particular addresses this very issue and explores the basic interpretive approach that the Methodist faithful should take in reading Sacred Scripture. In short, will the Methodist church itself be the master of the Bible, sitting in judgment on the Word of God, offering the pretense that Scripture is ever in need of a contemporary correction, or will the Methodist church instead be mastered by Scripture in which revelation will be *received* as the gracious and remarkable gift that it is? In other words, *how* the Bible is read or approached remains a vital concern, especially in these difficult times. Proper interpretation demonstrates the importance of decentering both individualistic readings that are self-referential or communal readings that are baldly ethnocentric, even tribal, in which both the self and the community never go beyond themselves to hear the still, small voice of a transcendent and holy God that ever seeks to address them.

The Importance of the Great Tradition

A consideration of the proper way to read and interpret the Bible immediately raises the issue of the importance of tradition in the life of the church. Indeed, so many other faithful interpreters have already done this vital interpretive work with both competence and great care. The early church fathers, for example, such as Augustine, Jerome, and Gregory Nazianzus have blessed the universal church with their commentaries and observations on the Bible. In reflecting on Scripture, they have articulated the vital teachings of the Christian faith, especially along the lines of the person and work of Jesus Christ and in terms of the doctrine of the Trinity. This blessed heritage cannot be neglected by any Christian tradition.

Add to these interpretive labors the value of the early creeds of the church, the rule of faith, and other elements, and we have all the makings of what many in the church, both Methodists and others alike, have referred to as the Great



DOCTRINE OR DEATH

William J. Abraham

Crisis cause choices, and choices create opportunities. This can happen on a host of fronts. In this essay I shall limit the discussion to issues related to Methodist doctrine and to the formation of the Global Methodist Church. In doing so, I shall make several assumptions that cannot be pursued here. First, I assume that the relevant range of doctrine is what we call canonical doctrine, that is, those doctrines that are officially adopted by a church. For us, this means those officially adopted through the action of a General Conference. This means we reject any effort to play off doctrinal confession against conciliar actions; we agree together on our doctrines precisely by conciliar action.

Second, I shall assume that we look to the Holy Spirit to provide relevant assistance as we adopt canonical doctrine. In this we follow the practice of the Council of Jerusalem as depicted in Acts 15. This does not mean we claim any

kind of infallibility, but it does mean we arrive at our decisions by prayer and spiritual discernment rather than by mere human argument and deliberation.

Third, I shall assume that attention to doctrine is but one desideratum (something needed or wanted) as we seek to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit in making our way into a better future. Thus, we absolutely want to commit to, say, authentic spiritual development, realistic holiness, and effective missionary work across the world.

Fourth, I shall assume that our agreement on doctrine transcends our various political endeavors as we seek to be salt and light in the culture (Matthew 5:13–16). We can and should expect significant differences of opinion on how to tackle the many issues that arise out of the current crises in our political contexts.

As we lean into the topic of canonical doctrine there are obvious distinctions that need to be observed. To begin, we are not limited to a single genre, but we can readily express our doctrinal commitments in the register of creeds, articles of religion, hymns, liturgies, sermons, and the like. Thus, we can provide a wide range of materials that will form the bedrock of our identity and of our work together in ministry. Furthermore, we need a range of material which will be sufficiently limited to provide our core commitments but sufficiently rich to work not just intellectually, but emotionally and morally. On the one hand, our doctrines provide means of evaluation of leaders; there are real boundaries to be observed. On the other hand, our doctrines provide crucial corporate means of formation and spiritual nourishment. Thus, economy and simplicity need to be balanced with depth and richness.

In addition, we need a balance between first-order doctrinal commitments and second-order proposals about their grounding in Scripture. Our first task is to speak directly of God, salvation, the church, holiness, and the like. However, we also need to make clear that our doctrine is not just informed by divine revelation as mediated in Scripture but grounded in revelation. So, we boldly declare who God is and all he has done for us through the Son in the working of the Holy Spirit. Yet, we also make clear that this is no mere human philosophy; it is warranted by and nourished from the whole sweep of Holy Scripture. Finally, it is crucial that we maintain a balance between continuity, criticism, and course correction. There is a faith once delivered to

the saints; there is also material that needs to be looked at afresh in the light of new knowledge. Without the former, we lose our bearings and the deep truths of the gospel; without the latter, we fail to make relevant adjustments in the light of new circumstances. It is small wonder that we must depend on the assistance of the Holy Spirit if we are to succeed in this endeavor.

The most striking feature of the proposed doctrinal commitments of the Global Methodist Church is the addition of the great creeds of the church. This is not the place to rehearse the standard objections that have been lodged against this move across the history of the church. What we need is a brief, constructive defense. The best point of entry is to have a quick look at our history.

Methodism was initially a work of the Holy Spirit centered on the transformation of human beings from sinners to saints. Its deepest aspiration was conspicuous sanctity as spelled out in a vision of the Christian life informed from first to last by divine grace. No longer simply a movement led by John Wesley, Methodism became in time, with Wesley's blessing, a full-orbed church in the United States. To this end, it adopted a set of Articles of Religion together with other materials and practices. Thus, it lodged its own distinctive concerns about the Christian life within the classical faith of the Fathers and the Reformation.

British Methodism adopted Wesley's forty-four canonical sermons as its official doctrines. The debate about the number and status of these remains a matter for research among scholars. The adoption of the Articles of Religion and, later, the Evangelical United Brethren Confession of Faith, meant that the deep, generous orthodoxy of the church was essential to the very identity of United Methodism. Thus, there was really no need to add the great creeds of the church. The polemic against orthodoxy was not a rejection of orthodoxy; it was a rejection of dead orthodoxy shorn of experience of God and the genuine victory over evil that was at the heart of the commitment to entire sanctification. Thus ended Act One.

Tragically, in the nineteenth century the focus on experience and transformation lost its moorings in the wider faith of the church. To put the issue sharply, some influential Methodist scholars and leaders readily became the pioneers in North America of the Liberal Protestant theological experiment



HOLY LOVE AS A KEY TO WHAT SANCTIFICATION IS ALL ABOUT

Kenneth J. Collins

Any Christian theological tradition as it goes through time, ready to offer its witness to a new age, must be mindful of the basic marks of the church that make it the body of Christ in the world and not some other entity. In the fourth century, at the First Council of Constantinople in AD 381, the ancient ecumenical church affirmed four chief characteristics: the church is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. In light of this, the clarion call of historic eighteenth-century Methodism to “spread scriptural holiness over the land”¹ was and remains, among other things, a celebration of the very identity of the church.

Holiness as Holy Love

Both John and Charles Wesley underscored the necessity of holiness in practical Christian living. When the Wesley brothers wrote about holiness they

often employed the expression “holy love” to convey the full extent of their meaning. In fact, an examination of *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley* reveals more than sixteen such uses.² Indeed, so important was this expression to John Wesley in particular, which helped to specify a vital part of his own theological posture, that this expression repeatedly emerged in his letters, journals, sermons, and, of course, in his classic *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*.³ One of the reasons this particular rhetoric was so important to Wesley is that he believed, judging from an examination of its numerous occurrences in his writings, that holy love has very much to do with the essence of who God is, that is, how the Most High has been revealed to us in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. It’s hard to get more important than that.

Since God is love, which John Wesley refers to as the Almighty’s “darling attribute,”⁴ and the Most High is, of course, holy, then the great problem for humanity is that it is neither of these things and certainly not in the way that God is. In other words, sin in the form of both actual sins (plural), both of commission and omission, inward and outward, as well as inbred sin (singular), that is, an ongoing corrupted nature, have together barred the way. God is bliss, to be sure, the very essence of holiness, happiness, and love, but humanity by itself cannot find its way back to this bliss in whose image it was originally created. Again, the alienating, perverting, and disruptive power of sin blocks the way. This is why the phrase “holy love” by itself could never be, as odd as this may seem, an apt description, a suitable summary, of the practical theology of either John or Charles Wesley. Given the fallenness of humanity, this phrase simply describes the being of God. How, then, could holy love ever describe humanity? For that, two things will be required.

The Foundation and Reception of Holy Love

First of all, the atoning work of Jesus Christ, the God/Human, the Mediator, the one who can overcome the alienation, the chasm, the broad expanse between God and humanity, is absolutely necessary. Given the intensive and extensive nature of our sin and alienation, only someone who is not a part of the problem can redeem. So then, unless God comes, takes on flesh, becomes

incarnate, and then descends to the lowest depths of torture, mocking, and shame at Golgotha, holy love, the very radiance of the divine life, would not be a possibility for any human being—none at all!

Second, though the atoning work of Christ at the cross is the basis, the foundation, for both the forgiveness of sins and for the renewal of our nature, these gifts must be communicated to humanity and received. In other words, provision has *already* been made by the Redeemer for all people, but such a provision must be embraced. How will this happen? How will this wonderful occurrence take place? In one word: grace! That is, unless grace is also in the picture, holy love cannot mark the lives of human beings, any human being. Indeed, men, women, and children, left to their own devices, would simply remain in their sins and be dominated by its guilt and power. Therefore, the proper summation of John Wesley's practical theology, in particular, is *both* holiness (holy love) *and* grace (both free and cooperant)—never one without the other. Moreover, just how the holy love of God is communicated to believers is precisely the challenge of sanctification, the very lifeblood of the church.

Remarkably enough, not everyone wants to receive what provision Christ has made in his atoning work simply because the reception of the forgiveness of sins (justification) and holiness or holy love (the new birth) is very disruptive to the lives of sinners. In other words, the embracing of such salvific graces calls for both transformation and renewal that flow in the wake of repentance. Indeed, God loves us so very well in Jesus Christ that the Most High refuses to leave us where we are. We are, therefore, ever called forward into transcendence. However, some would rather hold onto their own sins by either failing to acknowledge them or if they are, after all, grudgingly recognized in moments of honesty and self-awareness, then they simply refuse to repent of these sins such that holy love, the presence of the Holy Spirit in their hearts, this miracle of grace, never happens.

The Possibility of Error and Misunderstanding

Thinking of sanctification as holiness and then taking up the rhetoric of holy love as John Wesley did in his own writings is helpful to illuminate not only the

Including essays from

William J. Abraham · Timothy C. Tennent · Bill T. Arnold
Jessica LaGrone · Scott Jameson Jones · Joel B. Green
Jason E. Vickers · David F. Watson · Mark Tooley · Maxie Dunnam
Kevin M. Watson · Timothy W. Whitaker · Wendy J. Deichmann
Scott Kisker · Jerry P. Kulah · Mike Lowry · and others

The Next Methodism invites readers on a journey to discover the vitality, richness, and sheer goodness of the broader Wesleyan tradition. Methodism began in England as a movement to spread scriptural holiness across the land, to reform the church, and, ultimately, to reform the nation. It was a gracious movement of the Holy Spirit guided by Scripture, the tradition of Christian witness, and the light of reason.

Methodism is now itself on the cusp of renewal and the authors of the present volume—scholars and church leaders committed to the Wesleyan message—are convinced that this renewed Wesleyan movement will emerge as unapologetically orthodox, authentically sacramental, vigorously engaged with the poor, and loving toward all people in nothing less than the holy love of Jesus Christ. The next Methodism will proclaim the good news of Christ that sets captives free in the power of the Holy Spirit to the glory of God the Father.



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ISBN 978-1-62824-935-4



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