

A LAMP TO MY FEET AND A LIGHT TO MY PATH (1998)

THE NATURE OF AUTHORITY AND THE PLACE OF THE BIBLE IN THE METHODIST CHURCH

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1. PREFACE

- 1.1 How does God speak to us through the pages of the Bible? Do we all hear his voice in the same way? How does the Bible guide our thinking and our actions? Methodists answer these questions in a variety of ways. The following report seeks to explore the nature of authority and the place of the Bible in the Methodist Church in the light of our different experiences of hearing God speaking to us through Scripture.
- 1.2 The concept of authority sits uneasily in a society which increasingly values personal autonomy and personal choice. 'Authority' tends to be linked in people's minds with 'authoritarianism', power as control, and with individuals' fear of losing their sense of personal freedom. On the other hand,

others are seeking certainties in this uncertain post-modern world and are looking for an external authority which will provide guide-lines for living. It is within this climate that a debate has arisen concerning the Nature of Authority in the Methodist Church.

- 1.3 During the 1993 Derby Conference widely differing opinions were voiced on the subject of human sexuality, based on different interpretations of the Bible. In this debate Methodists found themselves in situations of conflict with one another over the authority of Scripture. Sometimes this has led to helpful debate but sometimes bitter dispute has arisen.

QUESTIONS

Why do you think many people today are suspicious of authority, while others long for a 'clear lead' from authority figures? How much do these factors affect our attitude to the authority of the Bible or of the church?

'I also am under authority.' (Luke 7:8). 'For freedom Christ has set us free.' (Gal. 5:1). How should Christians resolve this tension?

2. INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 The origins of this document lie in a Notice of Motion which the 1994 Conference referred, without debating or voting on its substance, to the Faith and Order Committee for consideration. That original Notice of Motion read:

This Conference instructs the Faith and Order Committee to establish a working party to consider the nature of biblical authority and how it is implemented in the life of the Methodist Church. The Conference further instructs the Faith and Order Committee to bring to the Conference either of 1996 or 1997 a report in the form of a discussion document, to be received there and sent to circuits and churches for discussion and comment. These comments to be received by an advertised date, giving time for full response in the life of the church, so that in the light of them a definitive report could be brought to a future Conference.

- 2.2 The Faith and Order Committee reported back to the 1995 Conference:

The Committee wishes to respond positively to the spirit of the Notice of Motion, while noting that there are some difficulties with its precise wording. How, for example, can biblical authority be said to be 'implemented' in the life of the Church? Furthermore, in view of the diverse views held among the Methodist people about the nature of biblical authority, it is difficult to see how a 'definitive' report could be presented in the foreseeable future. Nor does the Committee believe that the question of biblical authority can helpfully be addressed without reference to other sources of authority in the Church.

The Committee, therefore, proposes to establish a Working Party to produce a relatively short document setting out, within the wider context of authority, the different views of biblical authority which

exist in Methodism. The working title of this document is 'The Nature of Authority and the Place of the Bible in the Methodist Church'. It is envisaged that the document to be produced would be a resource for study and discussion throughout the Connexion and that, in the light of responses received, the Faith and Order Committee might be able to offer a further report – though not a definitive report – to the Conference at a later date.

- 2.3 The Conference accepted this recommendation from the Faith and Order Committee and a working party was duly set up to produce the suggested study document.
- 2.4 The Committee offers a study document which illustrates the complexities involved in using the Bible, outlines the nature of authority in the Methodist Church and gives examples of the different views of the Bible which exist in Methodism. We would like to emphasize that this is not a definitive statement about the place of the Bible in the Methodist Church but rather an attempt to stimulate the serious exploration of this issue by members of individual Methodist congregations.
- 2.5 By the Bible the Methodist Church means the 39 books of the Jewish Scriptures, which we know as the Old Testament, and the 27 books of the New Testament which had come to be recognized as 'canonical', or normative by the fourth century AD. (Some other churches include in their canon additional Jewish Scriptures.) These books, originally written in Hebrew (OT) and Greek (NT), were copied many times by hand in antiquity and in mediaeval times, until the invention of printing made this unnecessary. Because these books were regarded as Scripture the manuscripts were treated with great care, but mistakes in copying were inevitable and there are many variant readings, though the great majority of these are relatively unimportant. Until recently, we had very few Hebrew manuscripts earlier than the ninth century, but some early manuscripts were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, and these have often thrown new light on the text. In the case of the New Testament, we have many early manuscripts (though these are often only fragments, or contain only a few books). At an early stage, the various books were translated from Hebrew and Greek into other languages, and early Church leaders commented on them. When there are variant readings in the Hebrew or Greek manuscripts, these translations and commentaries sometimes help to determine which of them is original.
- 2.6 When we talk about 'the Bible', therefore, we need to remember that there is no definitive text. The Authorized Version was based on very late texts of both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Modern translations are based on much earlier texts, but we cannot always be certain that we know exactly what was written in the 'original' text.
- 2.7 The glorious English of the Authorized Version is today difficult to comprehend, since words change their meaning over the centuries. Moreover, we have today a better understanding of the meaning of the original Hebrew and Greek, as well as better manuscripts. Today there are many translations of the Bible into English: inevitably, some are better than others. Some sound better than others when read in public worship, but are not necessarily the

most accurate translations; others, which sound less pleasing, may be better for study.

- 2.8 All translation involves interpretation, since there are many words in one language which have no exact equivalent in another. Some translators try to overcome this by paraphrasing, others try to produce a more literal translation. Inevitably, translators do not always grasp the full meaning of the original text. No one translation can be wholly satisfactory. The Methodist Church does not promote or authorize any one translation, ancient or modern.
- 2.9 Christians believe that God was at work, inspiring not only those who wrote the books that became our Bible, but those who collected them, recognized them as Scripture, copied them, edited them and translated them. But the men and women through whom God works are inevitably fallible and limited. The Bible is sometimes referred to as ‘the Word of God’, but in the Bible itself that phrase is used of God’s revelation of his purpose, and that purpose is revealed in many different ways. The Word of God can be expressed in both word and action: God reveals himself in creation, in the law, in prophecy, in history, and above all in Jesus (e.g. John 1:1; Ps.119; 1 Chron. 17:3; Isa. 45:23; John 1:14). The Bible bears witness to God’s self-revelation, but the Word of God itself is far greater than the words of the Bible.
- 2.10 All texts require interpretation. Very few people express themselves with total clarity: even when they do, the readers of the text may well have expectations which lead them to interpret it in a way very different from that which the writer intended. No doubt the ways in which this report is read will illustrate this point! Readers sometimes live in a quite different culture from that of the writer. In the case of the Bible, we are living in a very different world from that of its authors, and two or even three thousand years after they wrote. Interpreting the Bible is therefore a difficult task. But from the very beginning, it has needed to be interpreted, translated and applied. The Bible, for all its immediate appeal, is not an easy book to comprehend, and it needs constant study. Nevertheless, as Martin Luther wrote, ‘it is food which, the more it is read, the more delicious it tastes’!

QUESTIONS

What translation of the Bible do you most use personally, or find most helpful when read in Church and why?

Look at a biblical passage in as many different translations as possible. Do the various translations help you to see new meanings in the text which you had not discovered before? (Eg. Psalm 8; Isaiah 7:14-17; John 1:1-18; Rom.3:21-5; Phil. 2:5-11)

Read Matt. 6:9-13 and Luke 11:2-4 in several different translations. Discuss what these words might have meant to the early church and what they mean for us today.

Christians often speak of the Bible as ‘the Word of God’. Do you find this description misleading or helpful? Why?

In what ways do our 'cultural assumptions' (where and when we live, our occupation, place in society and experiences) affect the way in which we read the Bible?

Is Martin Luther's statement, quoted in paragraph 2.10, echoed in your own experience? Try to give specific examples of how this has been, or has not been, true for you.

3. A BRIEF SKETCH OF THE HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLE WITHIN CHRISTIAN TRADITION

Early Examples of Different Methods of Interpretation

- 3.1 The Christian Church is and always has been a community of interpreters. Even within the Bible itself we can see the process of interpretation and continuing arguments about interpretation. Many of the disputes between Jesus and the Pharisees, as well as those between Paul and his fellow Jews, concerned the **interpretation** of the Law. In his letter to the Galatians, for example, Paul presents a particular interpretation of texts concerning Abraham as he argues that Gentile converts should not be circumcised because Abraham's true descendants are those who share his faith in God (Gal. 3:1-5:1). Paul points to the faith of Abraham which precedes his circumcision (Gen. 15:6); his opponents presumably pointed to the covenant obligation that all Abraham's descendants must be circumcised (Gen. 17:9-14). For the earliest Christians the Jewish scriptures were authoritative and they interpreted their meaning in the light of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The Gospel writers believed that Jesus' ministry was a fulfilment of the Scriptures (Matt. 5:17, Luke 24:25-6, John 5:39). The accounts of the passion are especially full of allusions to the words of the prophets (Zech. 9:9/Matt. 21:5, Is. 56:7 & Jer. 7:11/Matt. 21:13). The belief that God was at work in Christ illuminated the Old Testament scriptures and revealed new meaning in them.
- 3.2 From the very beginning, Christians have recognized that the living God cannot be confined to the pages of scripture. In 2 Cor. 3, Paul draws a distinction between the covenant chiselled in letters on stone and the covenant written by the Spirit on human hearts: the former is static, and can lead to death, while the latter brings life. Although Paul appealed to the scriptures (our Old Testament) as authoritative, he was persuaded that God had spoken more directly in the person of Christ: the scriptures now had to be read and interpreted in the light of Christian experience of the crucified and risen Lord.
- 3.3 In the early years of the Christian Church, the Old Testament remained its only scriptures. The first books of the New Testament to be written were Paul's letters, but it was only at a later period that they came to be recognized as 'scripture'. Until the gospels were written (towards the end of the first century AD), the traditions about Jesus were oral. Our four gospels were recognized as 'canonical' by the later Councils of the Church, which discussed individual writings at length and included some in the New Testament and excluded others. We see, then, that tradition, experience and reason all played a part in the writing and collection of scripture.

- 3.4 Early Church leaders understood the authority of the Bible in different ways. For example, Justin Martyr (c.100-165) wrote that God's Spirit inspired 'holy men' as a harp-player plays on a harp. Irenaeus (c.115-190) thought that the truth contained in Scripture was like a deposit in a bank to be guarded by the Church. During this time the canon of Scripture had not been ecumenically agreed. The word 'canon' derives from the Greek *kanon* meaning measuring stick or rule. It was used to refer to the collection of books that was acknowledged to be authoritative in the Church. Only after AD367, when Athanasius (296-377) wrote his now famous Easter Letter that listed the books of the Bible, had there been sufficient time for most disputes to be settled concerning which writings should test and measure the faith of the Church. A variety of approaches to interpretation was developed by other writers, such as Origen (184-254), Augustine (354-430) and Gregory the Great (c.550-604).
- 3.5 Allegorical methods of interpretation, used within Judaism, were taken over by Christians. It was assumed that authoritative texts must have meaning for the Christian community. If there was no obvious literal meaning there still must be a meaning (God could not say nothing). It was believed to be there in allegorical form. This method of interpretation gained popularity from the time of Origen. St Augustine described the approach by saying, 'Whatever appears in the divine word that does not literally pertain to virtuous behaviour or to the truth of faith you must take to be figurative'. So, for example, the general meaning of the parable of the Good Samaritan was clear, but details, the actors and places in the story, could be given additional significance.

The Reformers

- 3.6 The Reformers Luther (1483-1546) and Calvin (1509-64) felt that allegorical methods too easily allowed interpreters to find in Scripture what they wished to find. They challenged the Church's rule of faith in matters of interpretation and struggled to reaffirm the supremacy of the Bible for all theological teaching. Different understandings of the nature of Christian tradition were at stake. Significantly, Luther did not revert to a simplistic or literalist interpretation of the Bible. Instead he had a principle for discerning the authoritative value of different passages of the Bible which was simply whether or not a passage proclaimed Christ. On this basis he was critical of the epistle of James. He could also say that whatever does not teach Christ is not apostolic, even if it were in a letter by St. Peter or St. Paul. Calvin was a little more cautious and was careful to affirm that true interpretation rests not with an individual or in the Church but lies in the object of investigation itself, that is, in Jesus Christ and the Bible. He warned against allowing interpretation of the Bible to become a private, subjective matter and was convinced that no application of philosophical ideas or systems was necessary. The Bible needed only to be interpreted from within itself; one passage should be allowed to interpret another. All the Reformers emphasized that, as the Holy Spirit had first inspired the writing of the Scriptures, so now Scripture should be interpreted under the Spirit's guidance. They maintained the Spirit, and not the tradition of the Church, guides the authoritative interpretation of Scripture.

The Emergence of Biblical Criticism

3.7 One of the main results of the Reformation, together with the invention of printing, was that the Bible became both accessible and authoritative in ways that it had not been before. This led to the writing of a wealth of devotional commentaries on the one hand, and to the scientific, critical study of the Bible on the other. Both approaches believed that the Bible as it is must be taken with the utmost seriousness, and that it was no longer enough for the Church to tell people what the Bible meant. The Bible could and should be allowed to speak for itself. So from the end of the 16th century onwards, biblical scholars tended to move their research further away from the worshipping life of the Church as they applied scientific tools derived from history and other disciplines. At the heart of this new approach was the belief that the meaning of a biblical text was the meaning which its author had intended, and what its first readers or hearers would have understood. So before we can ask what a text means, we have to ask questions like, Who wrote this? When? Where? and, if possible, Why? This basically historical approach to the Bible has dominated academic Bible study until very recently. An Old Testament example of the results of this method is the recognition that the material gathered together in the Book of Isaiah does not all come from Isaiah of Jerusalem but from later writers too, each addressing a particular situation. It can be argued that the better we understand the situation, the more clearly we see the message. A New Testament example of the method is the recognition that the gospels both shape and reflect the beliefs of the early Christian communities, interpreting the words and actions of Jesus in order to show their relevance to their own situations. The Church has not always been comfortable with the results of such scholarship, though most Biblical scholars have been dedicated Christians who saw their work as taking the Bible seriously and allowing the Bible to speak for itself.

The 20th Century

3.8 The 20th century has seen the continuation of old and a blossoming of new approaches to the study of the Bible. Some of these new approaches modify, challenge or even undermine the historical approach. Some approaches try to trace how stories in the Bible arose and were told in successive generations, others invite the reader to treat the Biblical texts as literature and to identify imaginatively with situations and persons in them.

3.9 Significant archaeological discoveries happened soon after the second world war at Qumran, where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found. These scrolls include non-biblical texts which describe the life and beliefs of the community at Qumran, which existed at the time of Jesus, as well as manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible which are one thousand years older than any previously known. They have had a profound effect on scholarly understanding of Judaism near to the time of the writing of the New Testament. Archaeological discoveries contributed to the development of sociological approaches to the Bible that try to understand some of the day to day social and economic factors that shaped the lives of the earliest followers of Jesus.

3.10 The 20th century has also seen many attempts to read and interpret the Bible in the light of contemporary experiences within societies, in western countries and elsewhere. Liberation theologians in Latin America, Africa and Asia have

tried to interpret the Bible's message in situations of oppression and hardship today. Sometimes they made use of social and Marxist theories within the context of their Christian endeavour to preach good news to the poor today. The black experience of marginalization has led to a particular understanding of the Bible as a book offering emancipation from all oppression. Feminist theologians have developed a number of ways to reassess and to resist Biblical texts that either marginalize or recount the abuse of women. They offer critiques of patriarchal ideology underlying the Scriptures.

Summary

3.11 Thus, from the earliest days, Christian people have been engaged in the task of interpretation. Some approaches have emphasized the divine inspiration of Scripture over the human character of its writing. Some have been more concerned with human and historical matters. Some have stressed questions of how we hear God speaking to us through the text **now**. The very diversity of approaches indicates that no single human method or manner of approach can encompass all that the Bible tells us about God; the Word of God explodes any human constraints that we might impose on the text. It also suggests that the task of interpretation is not finished but is ongoing and forms an important part of responsible and expectant Christian faith today. With this in mind we are left with the question, 'How are we to use Scripture in our decision-making?'

QUESTIONS

'I find it bewildering that the Bible has been interpreted in so many different ways.' 'I find it exciting that the Bible has spoken in such different ways to people in different times and places.' With which of these statements do you most agree, and why?

How do you read the Bible? Do you look for symbolic/allegorical meanings? Do you find that information about its historical context helps in interpretation? Or do you read the text primarily in the light of your own experiences?

Some Christians talk about scripture, tradition, experience and reason as all playing a part in reaching decisions. Do you consider these four to be equally important?

It is very easy to read our own ideas into the texts (e.g. in allegory). Does this make the idea that they are authoritative dangerous?

Are some parts of the Bible more authoritative than others? If so, which, and how do we decide?

Does it undermine the authority of the Bible to suggest that God's word to us is always mediated through men's and women's understanding of it?

Marginalized groups have found the Bible coming alive as they have discovered that so much of it was written out of experiences similar to their own and therefore speaks directly to their current situation. If the Methodist Church in this country were to take the study of the Bible in this way

seriously, what difference would it make to our life and witness, theology and worship, and the study of the Bible?

4. THE AUTHORITY OF THE BIBLE IN THE METHODIST CHURCH AND THE PLACE OF THE BIBLE IN METHODIST DECISION-MAKING

- 4.1 In considering the key question of the authority of the Bible in the Methodist Church and the place of the Bible in Methodist decision-making, the first place to look is the *Deed of Union*. The second paragraph of Clause 4 of the *Deed of Union* begins,

The doctrines of the evangelical faith which Methodism has held from the beginning and still holds are based upon the divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures.

and the key sentence on the place of Scripture comes next,

The Methodist Church acknowledges this revelation as the supreme rule of faith and practice.

Thus a summary statement on the place of the Bible in Methodism would be:

The Methodist Church acknowledges the divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures as the supreme rule of faith and practice.

- 4.2 The *Deed of Union* is a very carefully worded statement, and we should notice what it says and what it does not say:

4.2.1 It does say that there is such a thing as a **supreme rule of faith and practice** for the Church!

4.2.2 It says that **the divine revelation**, which is **recorded in the Holy Scriptures** is the supreme authority for the Church. It does not say that **the Bible** is the supreme authority.

4.2.3 It does not define what it means by **the divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures**. One could interpret this as meaning that it is the actual words of the Bible that form the divine revelation. Alternatively, one could understand it to mean that the self-revelation of God took place in the great events of the Old and New Testaments, in the words of the prophets and Biblical writers and supremely in Jesus, and that the Bible is the record of that self-revelation.

4.2.4 It says that our doctrines are **based upon** God's revelation which is recorded in the Bible. It does not say that our Methodist doctrines are taken straight from the Bible.

- 4.3 This statement implies that the authority of the Methodist Conference (described below in section 5) is subject to the authority of God's revelation recorded in the Scriptures. Its authority is not independent of, nor superior to, the revelation recorded in Scripture. However, the Conference is the final authority in the interpretation of this revelation.

- 4.4 Obviously Wesley's *Notes on the New Testament* and his 44 *Sermons* are rooted in the Bible, and his views on the Bible can be gleaned from these works as well as from his other letters and writings. Wesley held that Scripture is the Word of the living God and that Scripture's authority rests upon this fact. In the Preface to the *Notes* Wesley writes

The Scripture, therefore, of the Old and New Testament is a most solid and precious system of divine truth. Every part thereof is worthy of God; and all together are one entire body, wherein is no defect, no excess. It is the foundation of heavenly wisdom, which they who are able to taste prefer to all the writings of men, however, wise or learned or holy. (Preface to *Notes*, paragraph 10)

He goes on to describe the inspiration of the human authors as follows,

God speaks, not as man but as God. His thoughts are very deep, and thence His words are of inexhaustible virtue. And the language of His messengers, also, is exact in the highest degree; for the words which were given them accurately answered the impressions made upon their minds. (Preface to *Notes*, paragraph 12)

- 4.5 For Wesley Scripture was authoritative because its human authors were inspired by God and thus for the Christian the Bible is the final authority in faith and practice.

This is a lantern unto a Christian's feet, and a light in all his paths. This alone he receives as his rule of right and wrong, of whatever is really good or evil. He esteems nothing good, but what is here enjoined, either directly or by plain consequence; he accounts nothing evil but what is here forbidden, either in terms or by undeniable inference. (*Sermon* 'The Witness of our own Spirit', paragraph 6)

- 4.6 However, this statement of his position on Scripture is not all that Wesley had to say on the question. He accepted that the human authors of Scripture played an active role in the process of writing; they did not receive the words by passive dictation but rather used their memories and sometimes quoted the Old Testament inaccurately (*Notes* on Matt. 2:6 and Hebrews 2:7); they also repeated traditions from the Jews which were not exact (*Notes* on Matt. 1:1). Wesley did not see this acceptance as being contrary to his fundamental position on the inspiration and trustworthiness of Scripture; in each case he explained that the apostles did this knowingly and gave a reason for the imprecision. Equally, he was clear that reason has an important role to play in religion; indeed, religion he argued, should **exalt and improve** our reason (*Notes* on 1 Cor. 14:20). This does not mean that reason was another source of revelation in Wesley's thought, rather it is a logical faculty which helps us to grasp the revelation given in Scripture. What it does mean is that reason has a vital role in the interpretation of Scripture. One example of the use of reason is described by Kenneth Cracknell who, in his paper *Doctrinal Standards: A Study Course on the Doctrinal Clause of the Methodist Church*, comments on

... Wesley's own close attention to the text, and his readiness to amend the King James Version whenever he felt it necessary, some 12,000 times! As a former Lecturer in Greek at Oxford University, not only did he carry out

his daily Bible study of the New Testament in Greek, but he was also aware of better textual methods and had access to better texts than the 1611 translators had.

- 4.7 Finally, Wesley also argued that the Spirit inspires and assists those ‘that read it (the Bible) with earnest prayer’ (*Notes* on 2 Timothy 3:16). This current activity of the Spirit who inspired the original authors is clearly vital to Wesley’s understanding of inspiration, indeed he goes on to argue from this statement ‘hence it is so profitable for doctrine . . . instruction . . . reproof’ etc (*Notes* on 2 Timothy 3:16). The authority of Scripture rests on the present day activity of the Spirit as well as the inspiration of the original authors. The very fact Wesley provided *Notes on the New Testament* indicates that he believed that Church leaders under the guidance of the Spirit had a responsibility to guide the interpretation of Scripture within the Church. He argued that this should happen according to what he called the analogy of faith. The Scriptures should be expounded

according to the general tenor of them; according to that grand scheme of doctrine which is delivered therein, touching original sin, justification by faith and present inward salvation . . . Every article, therefore concerning which there is any question should be determined by this rule; every doubtful Scripture interpreted according to the grand truths which run through the whole. (*Notes* on Romans 12:6)

- 4.8 This point about the interpretation of Scripture is an important one. There is, according to Wesley, a theme which runs throughout Scripture, that of sin and faith and present salvation. Wesley’s great concern with the subject of Scriptural holiness is well known; it is this theme which provides us with the key to interpreting what the Bible has to say. Any individual text must be interpreted with reference to the general tenor of what Scripture has to say about these subjects.
- 4.9 The only other statement on the Methodist view of the Bible is in Question 52 in the *Methodist Catechism* which was authorized at the 1986 Conference,

52. What is the Bible?

The Bible, comprising the Old and New Testaments, is the collection of books, gradually compiled, in which it is recorded how God has acted among, and spoken to and through, his people. The writers expressed themselves according to their own language, culture and point in history and in their different ways were all bearing witness to their faith in God. The Bible is the record of God’s self-revelation, supremely in Jesus Christ, and is a means through which he still reveals himself, by the Holy Spirit.

- 4.10 Notice the six points in the answer:

- 4.10.1 The Bible is not one book but a collection of books, gathered together over a long period of time,
- 4.10.2 The Bible records how God acted among his people and spoke to them,
- 4.10.3 The writers expressed themselves in the language and forms of their day,

4.10.4 The writers in the Bible saw things differently and wrote in different ways, but all were expressing their faith in God.

4.10.5 The Bible shows us how God was making himself known to us.

4.10.6 The Bible is one of the ways in which God still makes himself known to us.

4.11 There is little other relevant material, except for one of the questions which each ordinand is asked in the Ordination Service, ‘Do you accept the Holy Scriptures as containing all things necessary for eternal salvation through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ?’ This is old phraseology going back to disputes about the Bible in the time of the Reformation. It is important to note what it asks and what it doesn’t ask. The question insists that the Bible contains **all things necessary for eternal salvation**, not that it tells us **everything we would like to know** about God, or the meaning of life, the universe and everything.

QUESTIONS

Read again the summary comments on the *Deed of Union* in paragraph 4.2 and on the Catechism in paragraph 4.10. Do you find these provide for you a helpful description of what the Bible is, and is not? What would you want to add or take away from them?

What does it mean to describe the revelation in the Holy Scriptures as ‘the supreme rule of faith and practice’?

To what extent is the Bible useful in providing guidance to the Church regarding its life and work, or to individual Christians regarding their daily life and work?

What other things would you like the Bible to tell us?

If the Bible doesn’t provide immediate ready-made answers to our modern day ethical problems, what general principles should we apply? How, for example, would you deal with questions such as pollution, third-world debt and embryo research?

5. THE NATURE OF AUTHORITY AND THE SHAPE OF THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES IN METHODISM

5.1 How then are the Scriptures to be interpreted? Within the corporate life of the Church, who is to define what the ‘divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures’ means today? This is not a new question; as we have seen, and will see again in this report, the Church has always had to tackle the problems of interpretation. In the early 1740s, John Wesley was faced with the problem of differing understandings of doctrine and the interpretation of Scripture among the leaders of the revival in England. His answer in 1744 was to gather together a small conference of people who accepted his leadership, to consider the questions ‘What to teach, how to teach and what to do; that is how to regulate doctrine, discipline and practice’. This conference became an annual event and the precursor of the modern day Methodist Conference. Today the

Conference still seeks to answer the questions that Wesley answered and as part of this work most of the reports which the Conference issues discuss the relevant Biblical material. We move on, therefore, to consider the role of the Conference and how decisions are made in the Methodist Church.

- 5.2 The *Deed of Union*, which is our basic constitutional document, says very clearly that

The governing body of the Methodist Church shall be the Conference (*Deed of Union* 11)

The government and discipline of the Methodist Church and the management and administration of its affairs [are] vested in the Conference (*Deed of Union* 18)

The Conference shall be the final authority within the Methodist Church with regard to all questions concerning the interpretation of its doctrines (*Deed of Union* 5, *Methodist Church Act* 1976 3(2))

Thus the Conference, which meets annually and is made up largely of elected representatives, is the determining authority for all issues within the life of the Methodist Church, both in questions of law and polity and in matters of faith and order.

- 5.3 The Standing Orders to be found in *The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church* lay down the constitution of the Conference, the ways in which it makes its decisions and the procedures by which it exercises its authority within the Connexion. Calling a governing body a 'Conference' is itself suggestive, indicating that our approach to decision-making is consultative, collaborative and conversational. Material for discussion, debate and decision is brought to the Conference by national committees, Districts and Circuits as well as by members of the Conference through Notices of Motion. The Conference itself will discuss or debate this material under the guidance of the President who will try to make sure that all opinions are properly heard. Some of the decisions made have to be referred to Synods or Circuits before the next Conference can ratify them, and in matters affecting the doctrinal clause of the *Deed of Union* there has to be considerable consultation before the Conference can effect any changes. In other cases the Conference will decide to seek opinions and views as widely as possible before finalizing a report. Decisions duly made then become binding on the Connexion and it is the responsibility of those concerned to implement them.
- 5.4 The general doctrinal position of the Methodist Church is set out in the first paragraph of Clause 4 of the *Deed of Union*:

The Methodist Church claims and cherishes its place in the Holy Catholic Church which is the Body of Christ. It rejoices in the inheritance of the apostolic faith and loyally accepts the fundamental principles of the historic creeds and the Protestant Reformation. It ever remembers that in the providence of God Methodism was raised up to spread scriptural holiness through the land by the proclamation of the evangelical faith and declares its unflinching resolve to be true to its divinely appointed mission.

This paragraph contains a grateful acknowledgement that the Methodist Church owes its origins and its continued life to the grace of God. It recognizes the authority for Methodism of the 'fundamental principles' of the historic creeds and of the Reformation, as well as that of the mission to which Methodism was called in its beginnings. The crucial place of the Bible is implied throughout this paragraph in the references to apostolic faith, the historic creeds, the Protestant Reformation and 'scriptural holiness', as indicated in Section 4.

- 5.5 If we ask what our doctrines are we discover that the Deed of Union does not offer a direct answer to the question. Rather, it tells us where these doctrines can be found. Firstly, as stated above, in the fundamental principles of the creeds and the Reformation. However, no-one has ever defined exactly what these 'fundamental principles' are! To attempt to do so would be a major task and so in the interests of brevity, we can confine ourselves to the following point:
- 5.6 In the Reformation a major point at issue was the authority of Scripture as against the authority of the Church. The Reformers argued that Christian doctrine should be based on the teaching of Scripture and that the Church has authority to define doctrine only in so far as it is faithful to the Word of God in Scripture. This raises the question of who, if anyone, can provide an authoritative interpretation of Scripture, and thus decide whether or not the Church has been faithful to biblical teaching. Whilst encouraging individuals to read the Bible, the main Reformers did not, on the whole, simply argue that each person should interpret Scripture for him or herself. The individual needed guidance; the question was from where that guidance should come. Calvin's *Institutes*, for example, which looks like a work of systematic theology, was intended as a guide to enable people to understand the message of the Bible.
- 5.7 Secondly, the *Deed of Union* goes on to state that the distinctively Methodist understanding of Christian doctrine is drawn from the teaching of John Wesley:

These evangelical doctrines to which the preachers of the Methodist Church are pledged are contained in Wesley's *Notes on the New Testament* and the first four volumes of his *Sermons*.

but straight after that it insists that in Methodism we do not in fact make any sort of list or statement about what our doctrines are! It puts it like this:

The *Notes on the New Testament* and the 44 *Sermons* are not intended to impose a system of formal or speculative theology on Methodist preachers, but to set up standards of preaching and belief which should secure loyalty to the fundamental truths of the gospel of redemption and ensure the continued witness of the Church to the realities of the Christian experience of salvation.

- 5.8 This is a very important point and needs to be carefully noted. Except for the statement of faith found in the *Deed of Union* Clause 8a,

All those who confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour and accept the obligation to serve him in the life of the Church and the world are welcome as members of the Methodist Church.

neither here nor anywhere else in our constitutional documents are 'our doctrines' ever closely defined in terms of formulae, lists, definitions or any other kind of statement of faith to which Methodists have to give assent. From time to time, however, the Conference adopts reports, makes Statements on particular doctrinal matters or authorizes liturgical or educational material. The Statements at least must be seen as in some way defining 'our doctrine' in a particular instance and giving a definition which is binding for us. This is part of the way in which God's Spirit leads us onwards. The 1937 Conference Statement on *The Nature of the Christian Church* put it like this:

a life which is under the guidance of the Spirit should be richer as time goes on . . . and new apprehension of divine truth is given.

- 5.9 The Conference exercises authority over the preachers. In matters of doctrine this authority is seen in Conference itself in that ordinands are required to affirm that they 'believe and preach our doctrines' before they are admitted into Full Connexion, and in that each Chairman of District has to answer annually to the Conference that the ministers in his or her District have all given a positive affirmation to the same question at the Spring Synod. Similar authority is exercised over Local Preachers through the Local Preachers Meeting and over members exercising office through the Church Council.
- 5.10 In fact, the Conference, like all other Church Councils from Acts 15 onwards, makes all kinds of decisions on all manner of issues in a variety of ways but how those decisions are actually made on the floor of the Conference can be influenced by the time of day, the state of the weather, the dullness or the brightness of a particular speech, who it is that is speaking, what previous lobbying has gone on, what pressure groups are interested and who has put forward the Notice of Motion or the report. How people get to be members of the Conference can be subject to equally non-theological factors in their Synods. Quite how individual members of Conference balance all these things in their minds before they vote is known only to God. However, many would feel that, despite human failings, the action of the Holy Spirit can be perceived in the ultimate outcome of debates.
- 5.11 Again, although the Conference makes all kinds of decisions on all manner of issues, in practice its authority is limited, perhaps least limited in matters of finance and property and most limited in matters of 'doctrine'. The average Church member will be affected by Conference decisions on ministerial stipends, but not by the latest report of the Faith and Order Committee (even by this one when it appears), for he or she is not likely even to have heard about it. The issue is not just one of poor communications. Rather it is that some Methodist churches are congregational in their outlook, hardly looking outwards even as far as the Circuit let alone the Connexion. So parts of Methodism have no strong sense of connection with the Conference, no interest in its debates and do not regulate their life by its decisions to any great extent. To such chapels, circuits, members or ministers it can be a matter of complete and utter indifference what Conference decides or thinks. Of course there are many churches, circuits and ministers who value belonging to a wider

network for the fellowship, support and help they can receive from it and give to it. For them the guidance and encouragement of the Conference is something to be welcomed.

QUESTIONS

If the Bible needs to be interpreted, who should be responsible for that interpretation? Should Christians be free to make up their own minds as to its meaning, or should they accept the judgement of the Church?

To what extent is your local church aware of the decisions reached at the Conference and what weight is given to them in local life?

If the influence of the Conference over your belief and practice is limited, to whom or what do you look for guidance in these matters? Why? What would be lost if each individual church or circuit was left simply to make up its own mind?

Can the work of the Holy Spirit be seen in the decisions of the Conference? If so, how?

6. THE HANDLING OF BIBLICAL MATERIAL IN RELATION TO SOME SPECIFIC ISSUES

- 6.1 Examples can be given of various ways in which Methodists have developed attitudes, or made doctrinal or ethical judgements. In some of them interpretations of different scriptural passages have been weighed. Sometimes, on the other hand, there has been little or no explicit reference to the Bible.
 - 6.1.1 Methodist people have been content to set aside biblical texts dealing with food regulations and, more recently, the text about women covering their heads in church.
 - 6.1.2 The debates on sexuality, going back to the Conference of 1979, illustrate the difficulty of making an authoritative judgement when people interpret biblical material differently. The problem is compounded when other factors are considered along with biblical teaching.
 - 6.1.3 The Methodist Church has taken strong attitudes on the use of alcohol and engagement in gambling when explicit biblical instruction is weak or non-existent. The same is true about the Christian use of Sunday.
 - 6.1.4 The Methodist Church permits the marriage of divorced persons, even though there are biblical texts that explicitly forbid divorce. There are other texts that are ambiguous on the matter.
 - 6.1.5 In early Conference reports (1933 and 1939) on the ordination of women there was no explicit reference to the Bible. A report in 1961 carefully considered biblical material bearing on this issue. Following this report, when the final decision to ordain women was taken (1971), it was assumed that no biblical impediment existed.

- 6.1.6 Within the universal Church interpretation of biblical texts about baptism has given rise to two traditions. Some allow the baptism of believers only; others allow the baptism of infants. The Methodist Church stands within the tradition which affirms that infant baptism is true baptism.
- 6.1.7 Sometimes Christians discover fresh insights in areas of the Bible long since set aside because they seemed irrelevant to later societies. For example, in recent years Methodists have shown considerable interest in the biblical concept of Jubilee, a year in which environmental, social and economic relations were to be restored to an earlier, more just norm, reflecting the idea of a people, freed from slavery in Egypt to become the people of God. The Jubilee ideal – restoring of rights, remitting of debts, freeing of slaves – aimed to prevent the emergence of a society in which the rich grew richer and the poor poorer. This interest in Jubilee also comes from renewed understanding of the Gospel’s concern for the poor and from grasping that much of Jesus’ teaching relates strongly to the Jubilee vision (see Leviticus 25 and Luke 4:16-19).
- 6.1.8 The Methodist Church has always upheld a firm biblical position on many matters in the ethical realm, for example murder, theft and adultery. About these things there has been general agreement.
- 6.2 Methodists are not alone in having to struggle with problems like these. Many churches have refused to take a firm position on issues where conflicting views have been so deeply held that agreement was unlikely: pacifism is such a case. Some questions that perplexed Christians before us are no longer seen as a problem: the Bible clearly prohibits the lending of money with interest, but in later centuries this prohibition was deemed to be unworkable in changed economic and social conditions (but see 6.1.7). For many years a particular interpretation of Scripture supported the practice of slavery: Christians have come to see that a wider understanding of the Bible makes slavery an evil that cannot be tolerated.
- 6.3 It is important to recognize that it is people who are involved in making judgements and therefore agreements will not be possible on all issues. Some people are happier with a clear, defined position; others have more tolerance towards uncertainty; and yet others are stimulated by the process of working things out. Loving our brothers and sisters may involve recognizing these differences and not expecting that what is acceptable for us must be so for them.
- 6.4 The reading, discussion and interpretation of Scripture continues. As already mentioned in this report, the Church has always believed that the Holy Spirit guided and inspired the original writers of Scripture. In our struggle to interpret the Bible and apply it to our lives, we look to the same Spirit to guide and inspire us too; recognizing always that

Thou hast more truth and light to break
Forth from thy Holy Word.

(Hymns and Psalms 477)

QUESTIONS

Why do we ignore some parts of the Bible and give weight to others when making ethical decisions?

Should preachers be encouraged to tackle ethical issues in their sermons?

Christians with opposing ideas have often used the Bible to argue for their own point of view. Can you think of any examples? Does it concern you that there is not always a 'Christian view' with regard to ethical issues? Why or why not?

How can we disagree without being disagreeable?

7. SCRIPTURE AND THE METHODIST CHURCH TODAY

Where are we now?

- 7.1 The *Methodist Catechism* (Question 52, see paragraph 4.9) sets out the Methodist understanding of the role of the Bible. The Bible is thus the primary witness to God's self-revelation, above all in Christ, within the formative events of the life of God's people, pointing the Church of today to the present activity of God. The Church through the centuries has heard the Word of God in the Bible in many different settings, and has affirmed its authority by accepting it as 'canon'.
- 7.2 Today the Holy Spirit speaks through the Scriptures to awaken and nurture faith and provide ethical direction for the Christian community. Through exploration of the Bible, the Church's ongoing task is to discern God's revelation afresh in every time and place. True biblical interpretation depends on the Holy Spirit, recognizes the literary character and the historical and cultural background of each book, takes account of the teaching of the rest of Scripture, and acknowledges a rich diversity of theologies and contexts.
- 7.3 In the incarnation, God chose to accept the limitations of time, place and culture, and made himself vulnerable to misunderstanding and rejection. Indeed, God's Word is always heard within a particular time, place and culture and is always open to the possibility of misunderstanding and rejection. We must therefore seek to interpret God's will behind the written word, reckoning with the possibility that the contents of the Scriptures themselves sometimes encourage us to challenge certain statements found in Scripture.
- 7.4 Drawing conclusions for today's ethical issues is complex even when that issue is dealt with in Scripture. Modern ethical questions, unimagined by Biblical writers, such as those raised by genetic engineering, make it obvious that the Church needs to discover how to apply the guiding principles used by Jesus, Paul and the early Church as they were faced with the emerging issues of their day. These principles can be summarized in the words of the two great commandments: love God and love your neighbour. Of course, working out what these mean in any situation is an extremely complex and difficult matter.

Different Perspectives

- 7.5 Within this broad agreement there are differences of interpretation. For example, we may agree with the Psalmist that ‘your word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path’ (Psalm 119:105), but what is meant by ‘your word’? If the Psalmist meant (as he probably did) ‘God’s word of instruction and promise in the Law’, is it legitimate for us to see the text as referring to the whole Bible? Or may we say that God speaks a ‘word’ to us in many ways – sometimes through a passage of Scripture, at other times through a friend, a preacher, or in private prayer?
- 7.6 A key text is 2 Timothy 3:16: ‘All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness’ (NRSV), but there is no single way to interpret this. What does the writer mean by ‘scripture’? After all, the New Testament had not been compiled when these words were written. Certainly, the author gives ‘scripture’ a high place by describing it as ‘inspired by God’ (literally, ‘God-breathed’). But does that mean that it is without error of any kind (‘inerrant’) as some claim? Does it mean that all Scripture is of equal value? And what do we make of the description of Scripture as ‘useful’? It certainly means that it is valuable, helpful for the purposes listed; but does that necessarily mean that it is authoritative or binding in the absolute sense?
- 7.7 The point of raising these questions is not to imply that there is nothing on which we can agree, or that any opinion about the Bible is as valid as any other opinion. As we have seen already, there is a broad area of agreement about the importance and place of the Bible in the Church’s life. We mention the differences, and illustrate them from the two familiar texts above, to show that we cannot expect only one specific view of the Bible’s authority to win the day and convince everyone else. Though we agree on the central issues, there are many open questions which lead different Christians to view the Bible in somewhat different ways. It is necessary to remember that salvation is by faith in Christ and not through attitudes to Scripture, or doctrines held, or the living of a perfect life.
- 7.8 If we can begin to understand how and why Christians come to a range of views of the Bible, some of which might seem strange or questionable to us, perhaps we can come to respect each other’s perspectives, and together make biblically-informed decisions about Christian living in the world today.

Models of Biblical Authority

- 7.9 The seven following examples represent different perspectives on biblical authority which are held within the Church. They are not precise definitions, and any one of us might feel that our own position is a mixture of two or three of these examples. But they are intended to illustrate briefly the range of views which are held, and the reasons for holding them.

7.9.1 *The Bible is the Word of God and is, therefore inerrant (free of all error and entirely trustworthy in everything which it records) and has complete authority in all matters of theology and behaviour. It is ‘God-breathed’ and its human authors were channels of the divine Word. The Christian’s task is to discern accurately what the Bible*

teaches and then to believe and obey it. Reason, experience and tradition should be judged in the light of the Bible, not the other way round.

This view is concerned to safeguard the conviction that the Bible has its origin in God. It works from the premise that God cannot be the author of error, and therefore the Bible cannot contain error. To give undue status to any other source of authority is to exalt fallible human insight over the infallible Word of God.

- 7.9.2 *The Bible's teaching about God, salvation and Christian living is entirely trustworthy. It cannot be expected, however, to provide entirely accurate scientific or historical information since this is not its purpose. Nevertheless, it provides the supreme rule for faith and conduct, to which other ways of 'knowing', while important, should be subordinate.*

This view also stresses the divine origin of Scripture, its supreme authority for Christian belief and practice, and its priority over other sources of authority. But it holds that reliable information on, for example, historical or scientific matters may not fall within God's purpose in giving the Bible.

- 7.9.3 *The Bible is the essential foundation on which Christian faith and life are built. However, its teachings were formed in particular historical and cultural contexts, and must therefore be read in that light. The way to apply biblical teaching in today's very different context is not always obvious or straightforward. Reason is an important (God-given) gift which must be used to the full in this process of interpretation.*

This view emphasizes that the Word of God contained in a collection of books written in times and places very different from our own cannot simply be read as a message for our own situation. We must work out by the use of reason how far and in what way the ancient text can appropriately be applied to the modern situation.

- 7.9.4 *The Bible's teaching, while foundational and authoritative for Christians, needs to be interpreted by the Church. In practice it is the interpretation and guidance offered by Church leaders and preachers which provides authoritative teaching. Church tradition is therefore of high importance as a practical source of authority.*

This view is concerned to stress that the people of God, the Church, existed before the Bible and that the Bible therefore does not exist independently of the Church. Interpretation of the Bible is essentially a matter for the Church community, and especially its appointed leaders, rather than for private individuals.

- 7.9.5 *The Bible is one of the main ways in which God speaks to the believer. However, the movement of God's Spirit is free and unpredictable, and it is what the Spirit is doing today that is of the greatest importance. The Bible helps to interpret experience, but*

much stress is placed on spiritual experience itself, which conveys its own compelling authority.

On this view, to give too high a status to the Bible may prevent us from hearing what God is saying to us today. We should be guided principally by the convictions which emerge from our own Christian experience as individuals and as a church community, which on occasion will go against the main thrust of the Bible's teaching.

- 7.9.6 *The Bible witnesses to God's revelation of himself through history and supremely through Jesus Christ. However, the Bible is not itself that revelation, but only the witness to it. Christians must therefore discern where and to what extent they perceive the true gospel witness in the various voices of the Bible. Reason, tradition and experience are as important as the biblical witnesses.*

This view emphasizes that the Bible mediates the Word of God but is not identical with the Word of God. We can discover which parts of the Bible are God's Word for us only if we make use of all the resources of reason, church tradition and experience.

- 7.9.7 *The Bible comprises a diverse and often contradictory collection of documents which represent the experiences of various people in various times and places. The Christian's task is to follow, in some way, the example of Christ. And to the extent that the Bible records evidence of his character and teaching it offers a useful resource. However, in the late 20th century it is simply not possible to obey all its teachings since these stem from very human authors and often represent the ideology of particular groups or classes in an ancient and foreign culture. Reason and experience provide much more important tools for faith and practice.*

This view also stresses that the Bible was written by people addressing particular times and situations. But, guided by the insights of, for example, feminist and liberation theologies, it further argues that before we can discover in it God's Word for us we must strip away from it those elements which betray the vested interests of particular groups, for instance, the interests of male dominance or of political and economic power-blocks.

- 7.10 If we go back to the *Deed of Union* and its summary statement that, 'the Methodist Church acknowledges the divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures as the supreme rule of faith and practice' we can see that most, if not all, of these positions are compatible with possible interpretations of this ambiguous phrase!

The Bible in the Worshipping Community

- 7.11 Most of the approaches listed above can be heard underlying the preaching from Methodist pulpits each week. However there is a risk that preachers, both ordained and lay, may at times give the impression that they believe their own method of interpretation is the only appropriate one, with the result that congregations are not enlightened concerning the rich heritage of biblical

interpretation within Methodism. Where this happens, it overlooks the fact that many in the pew have been challenged to think carefully about the interpretation of Scripture through secondary education and the many courses now available for adults. For these, the fact that preachers appear to handle Scripture without indicating or justifying their approach, can lead to a loss of respect.

- 7.12 Some would argue that the pulpit is not the place for such teaching, and that it should take place in Bible-study groups or house fellowships. However, this view overlooks the fact that the majority of church-goers do not attend such meetings. Their encounter with the Bible is when it is read and expounded in Church. Therefore responsibility for teaching about the Bible, its content, and ways of hearing God through it lies with those who in their ministerial or local preacher training have been educated in the exploration of Scripture. It is essential that in their sermons all preachers should wrestle with the meaning of the Bible and its interpretation for today.
- 7.13 However, the task and the joy of reading the Bible and the challenge of interpreting it for today is not merely for preachers but for every Christian. The annual Membership Ticket points out that every member of the Methodist Church should be 'committed to prayer and Bible study'. Through such Bible study, both individual and corporate, the Church tries to relate the will and ways of God as discerned in the Bible to the complex issues of life and faith in today's world. The collect for Bible Sunday reminds the Church that God 'caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning', and prays that we may 'hear, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them'.

QUESTIONS

What responses do you make to the questions in 7.5 and 7.6?

Read again the seven perspectives on biblical authority described in paragraph 7.9. Which of them do you feel most comfortable with and why?

In the light of what has been said about the *Deed of Union* and the *Catechism* (paragraphs 4.2 and 4.10), do you think any of the seven perspectives fall outside the limits of what should be acceptable in Methodism?

Does the Church do enough to help its members to grapple with the problems of understanding the Bible? Should there be more opportunities for learning about the Bible? If so, have you any practical suggestions?

8. CONCLUSION

- 8.1 It is clear that there are diverse views held within the Methodist Church concerning the models of Biblical authority and for this reason there is unlikely to be a consensus of opinion about how the Bible is to be used to enable decision-making. The existence of differing approaches to Scripture often causes disagreements about fundamental issues. Could our diversity be seen as a strength rather than a weakness?

- 8.2 In the Bible God is encountered in wrath and forgiveness, in power and in vulnerability. It is not surprising that Christian people who experience God's self-revelation in such diversity also recognize that God's Word in Scripture is encountered in different ways. Each model of Biblical authority emphasizes something individual Christians wish to affirm about Scripture as God's Word and together these models remind us that we can encounter and be encountered by God, yet never fully comprehend the divine nature. Thus, if we listen to each other, our diversity may enable us to gain new insights into the nature of God and safeguard us from too narrow a view.
- 8.3 It is the task of every generation to try to determine, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, how the Word of God in Scripture informs our decision-making in the present. Just as previous decisions have been made in the light of Biblical scholarship, so future decisions must take into account current thinking among Biblical scholars.
- 8.4 However, the task of interpreting Scripture is not merely for theologians but for every Christian person. For this reason, it is important that preachers should use the different models of interpretation as a resource alongside insights from current scholarship, while continuing to emphasize that God continues to encounter and challenge his people through the pages of Scripture.
- 8.5 The nature of authority in the Methodist Church encompasses decisions taken by individuals, by small groups, local Church Councils, Circuit Meetings, District Synods and by Conference. The place of the Bible is to inform this decision-making. When these decisions are discussed in the light of prayerful consideration of Scripture then the Methodist Church is continually engaged in seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit in interpreting the Word of God for today's world. This is the mission of the whole Church of God and is a process involving all Christian people.
- 8.6 Those who drafted this report included people from all parts of the Methodist constituency, and although labels are inadequate, they could be described as evangelical, liberal and catholic. All wish to restate their belief in the authority of the Bible for us. We believe that God was at work in those who wrote the books of the Bible, and in those who recognized them as canonical. We believe that God continues to work in those, though limited and liable to error, who edit and translate those books. The Word of God is far greater than any human expression of it. To affirm this is to affirm too that the presence of the living God is inexhaustible, life-renewing, life-transforming; so the Church may live in expectation and hope that God will continue to lead it into truth.

QUESTIONS

How might reflection on this report now affect your own reading of the Bible, your preaching or listening to sermons, your approach to group Bible study, your approach to controversial issues of Christian belief and behaviour?

‘God has spoken . . . in many and various ways’ (Heb. 1:1). Are we sufficiently willing to recognize the multi-faceted nature of God’s revelation, and the diversity of our own interpretations of that revelation?

Do we understand how sincere Christians can hold opinions radically different from our own, and are we prepared to acknowledge that they may have glimpsed some aspect of divine truth which we have failed to comprehend?

RESOLUTIONS

The Conference receives the report, commends it for study, and invites individuals, local churches, circuits and districts to send comments on it to the Secretary of the Faith and Order Committee not later than 31 July 2000.

The Conference directs the Faith and Order Committee to report to the Conference of 2001 on the comments received.

(Agenda 1998, pp. 40-66)

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