

## **METHODIST DOCTRINE AND THE PREACHING OF UNIVERSALISM (1992)**

The Conference of 1990 received a Memorial (M.7) from the Telford North (28/22) Circuit meeting requesting the Conference to instruct the Faith and Order Committee to determine whether the preaching of "Universalism" (i.e. that all people will inevitably be saved by God's love) is Methodist doctrine.

The Conference referred this Memorial to the Faith and Order Committee for consideration and report to the Conference of 1992.

### **Report to the 1992 Conference**

#### **Introduction**

1. The doctrinal standards of the Methodist Church are set out in the Deed of Union Section 2, sub-section 4. There it is said, "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 of the Protestant Reformation."

2. It continues, "The doctrines of the evangelical faith which Methodism has held from the beginning and still holds are based upon the divine revelation recorded in Holy Scriptures. The Methodist Church acknowledges this revelation as the supreme rule of faith and practice. These evangelical doctrines to which the preachers of the Methodist Church both ministers and lay men are pledged are contained in Wesley's Notes on the New Testament and the first four volumes of his sermons. 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 continued witness of the Church to the realities of the Christian experience of salvation."

3. The interpretation of doctrine is dealt with in sub-section 5 which declares that the Conference "shall be the final authority within the Methodist Church with regard to all questions concerning the interpretation of its doctrines."

4. As has often been said, those words demonstrate that while there is no doubt about where some of the source material for the formation of it is to be found, Methodist doctrine is not so easily determined. It is not clear what is meant by "the fundamental principles of the historic creeds and of the Protestant Reformation." The creeds consist of precise clauses intended to define doctrines or exclude heresy but the clauses themselves are not specified in the doctrinal standards. The Protestant Reformation had several strands which sometimes, especially in the area of eschatology, were not compatible. The Deed of Union does not define the exact nature of the Methodist commitment to Protestantism. Again, our doctrines are based upon the "Divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures" but the revelation is not identical with the Scriptures and the teaching of Scripture is diverse within a broad unity. Further, while our doctrines are said to be contained within Wesley's Notes on the New Testament and his 44 Sermons, it is expressly stated that these do not impose any theological system upon us.

5. Added to this, there is the insistence that the last word on the interpretation of doctrine rests with the Conference which leaves room for the continuing teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit and acknowledges the dynamic nature of Christian doctrine.

6. Methodist doctrine cannot, therefore, be determined by simple reference to any proof texts or documents. The Bible and Christian tradition set limits to the development of doctrine but their variety of thought and language allows considerable divergence of belief within those limits. The teaching of John Wesley and the past deliberations of Conference must have authority for Methodists today but that authority cannot be treated as infallible without calling in question the present work of the Spirit.

7. In determining Methodist doctrine it is important to consult all authorities and precedents from the past to ensure proper continuity but to do so creatively rather than in servile fashion and to take account of present experience and current theological insights before trying to form conclusions. This is the method adopted here.

### **The New Testament Evidence**

8. In considering New Testament teaching about the future, it is important to recognise that biblical language, like later language, is wide and varied. All religious language concerning the future belongs to the realm of faith and hope based on our experience of what God has done and our understanding of his nature. Part of the value of biblical language lies in this variety. "Be saved" is one among many images and one that is only rarely used in the New Testament. Not all images are compatible with each other and New Testament writers do not offer a single, literal account of how things will be.

9. Several passages in the Synoptic Gospels appear to indicate the final rejection of those who fail to respond to God e.g. Matthew 7:13-14, 21; 18:34-35; 25:30; Mark 3:29; 9:43-48; Luke 6:23-24. The clearest statement comes at the conclusion of the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matthew 25:46) with its explicit threat of eternal punishment.

10. The fourth Gospel contains many sayings offering eternal life to those who respond in faith to Christ without accompanying threats to those who do not but also passages like John 3:16, 36; which imply the eternal death of those without faith and John 5:29 which speaks of a rising to judgment. In other passages e.g. 3:18-21; 10:25-28; judgment is said to have taken place already. The emphasis in John is not on what the future will bring but on what the present response carries with it. It is not clear how this relates to pictures about the future in John or the rest of the New Testament. (Cf. John 12:31-32 with 12:44-50.)

11. Some have seen a faint sign of of universalism in Mark 12:18-27 where the implication could be that all will rise again. It is possible though, as Vincent Taylor said,<sup>1</sup> that Jesus is thinking only of the resurrection of the righteous. In Luke 14:14 he explicitly speaks of "the righteous" rising from the dead. Paul refers to "A resurrection of good and wicked alike" in Acts 24:15 but a universal resurrection does not necessarily mean that all will come to final blessedness.

12. Again it is just possible to see a hint of universalism in Mark 10:27 with its insistence that no limits can be set on the freedom of God to save. The emphasis here is on the power of God which makes possible what men would regard as

impossible but it is reading too much into this passage to find here an assurance that all will be saved.

13. The stress on judgment is strongest in Matthew and much less obvious in Mark which is the prior Gospel. This has led some scholars<sup>2</sup> to ask whether judgment was part of the original teaching of Jesus or a later addition but passages such as Mark 3:29 and 9:43-48 do have to be taken seriously.

14. While it may be true that the threat of everlasting punishment is less securely based in the teaching of Jesus than is generally assumed, there is very little to suggest that everyone will ultimately possess eternal life. The preaching of Jesus emphasises the need to meet the conditions that God lays down if we are to enter the kingdom.

15. Stronger support for belief in universalism is found in the epistles. Passages like Romans 11:32; Ephesians 1:10; Philippians 2:10-11 and 1 Timothy 2:4 affirm that the will of God is that all will acknowledge Christ and find salvation through him. Universalists find support here but while these passages speak of the purpose of God that all should be included in the final triumph, they do not guarantee that his purpose will be fulfilled.

16. More crucial are Romans 5:18 and 1 Corinthians 15:22. The consequences of Adam's misdeed are contrasted with those of Christ's redemptive acts. Both passages assert that whereas Adam's sin brought condemnation and death upon the whole human race, the effect of Christ's death and resurrection is life for all.

17. There is no doubt that Paul's meaning is that the solidarity of the human race is such that Adam's sin brought guilt and condemnation on every human being. If the effect of Christ's activity is genuinely parallel to that of Adam, it is natural to assume that it also has a universal effect and that the destiny of all human beings is resurrection to eternal life.

18. Few commentators are prepared to affirm what seems to be the natural sense. They prefer to limit the resurrection to those whose faith is in Christ. But C. K. Barrett commenting on 1 Corinthians 15:22 writes of the statement about Christ, "Its parallel form suggests at first that Paul means that, as from the time of Adam all men die, so now the lot of all men is resurrection. But this can hardly be said to fit the context, in which, as in Paul's thought generally, resurrection seems to be the privilege of those who through faith are in Christ. Though the wording has been affected by the parallel clause, his meaning appears to be that all who are in Christ shall be brought to life; compare 1 Thessalonians 4:16: The dead in Christ shall rise. **This is not a denial that all men may ultimately come to be in Christ; indeed, this may be implied.**"<sup>3</sup>

19. It is difficult to be absolutely certain of Paul's mind and it is particularly easy here to allow our interpretation of Paul's words to be determined by our own theological presuppositions. John Hick, who himself adopts a universalist position, sums up the situation fairly when he says, ". . . one can quote Paul on either side of the debate. I would not in fact claim with confidence that he was a universalist; though I suggest that sometimes as he wrote about the saving activity of God the inner logic of that about which he was writing inevitably unfolded itself into the thought of universal salvation."<sup>4</sup>

### The Patristic Period

20. Some of the early Christian fathers held universalist views. Clement of Alexandria (c.150 – c.215) recognised different levels of spiritual attainment. Those at the lower levels might need education in the unpleasant consequences of disobedience but they would eventually be saved along with those at higher levels. Gregory of Nyssa (c.335 - c.394) also showed strong universalistic tendencies.

21. The most prominent teacher of universalism in the patristic age was Origen (c.184 - c.254). He insisted that if God is pure goodness, divine punishments can never be merely retributive. They must also be purgative and remedial. “Everlasting fire” must not be taken literally. Though some might endure severe punishment, damnation is not final and salvation is the destiny of all. He wrote, “If I may offer a conjecture on so great a matter, I think that, as the last month is the end of the year, after which the beginning of another month ensues, so it may be that, since several ages complete as it were a year of ages, the present age is ‘the end’, after which certain ‘ages to come’ will ensue, of which the age to come is the beginning, and in those coming ages God will ‘shew the riches of his grace in kindness’: when the greatest sinner, who has spoken ill of the Holy Spirit and is under the power of sin throughout the present age, will, I know not how be under treatment from beginning to end in the ensuing age that is to come.”<sup>5</sup>

22. Origen was strongly attacked for his views by Augustine of Hippo and condemned in Justinian’s *Edictum contra Origenem* in 534.

### John Wesley

23. Wesley insisted that all could be saved. In his sermon on Justification by Faith, he declares, “He hath redeemed me and **all mankind**; having thereby ‘made a full and perfect, and sufficient sacrifice and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world.’”<sup>6</sup> He was certain that the grace of God and the atonement effected by Christ are for everyone. Rupert Davies writes, “So much is this the burden of all his evangelism and of the hymns which his brother wrote in the interest of that evangelism, so clearly is it presupposed by his published *Sermons* and *Treatises*, and argued by his controversial writings against Whitefield, Hervey, and their friends, that it is not necessary to quote specific statements. He said, and said, and said again: ‘For all, for *all* my Saviour died’.”<sup>7</sup> Wesley followed the 16th century Dutch Reformed theologian, Jacobus Arminius, who opposed the strict Calvinism of his day and taught that God’s offer of grace was universal. It was because of his opposition to Calvinism that Wesley split with Whitefield.

24. But to say that all can be saved is not to say that they will be. Wesley was equally insistent that our salvation was dependent upon the fulfilling of God’s requirement of faith. “Faith, therefore, is the *necessary* condition of justification; yea, and the *only necessary* condition thereof.”<sup>8</sup>

25. On occasion he did appear to relax the strictness of that requirement but only to realise he was on dangerous ground and so to pull back somewhat. For example, on 1st December, 1767, he reflected:

That a man may be saved who cannot express himself properly concerning Imputed Righteousness. Therefore to do this is not necessary to salvation.

That a man may be saved who has no clear conceptions of it. (Yea, that never heard the phrase.) Therefore clear conceptions of it are not necessary to salvation. Yea, it is not necessary to salvation to use the phrase at all.

That a pious churchman who has not clear conceptions even of Justification by Faith may be saved. Therefore clear conceptions even of this are not necessary to to salvation. That a Mystic, who denies Justification by Faith (Mr. Law, for instance) may be saved. But, if so, what becomes of *articulus stantis vel cadentis ecclesiae* (the article by which a church stands or falls)? If so, is it not time for us . . . to return to the plain word, "He that feareth God and worketh righteousness, is accepted with Him." 9

26. Wesley would be impatient of extended speculation of this kind and of the attempt to find ways by which everyone could be assured of salvation in the end when it is freely available now by faith and when those who believe can find immediate assurance of it. It would cut the nerve of his evangelistic endeavour.

27. Fundamental to Wesley's thought are divine grace and human freedom. Grace is universal but not irresistible. If there are times when he appears to doubt that we possess free will, it is only in order to stress our reliance upon prevenient grace in being able to exercise it. His conviction is clearly stated, "Suppose the Almighty to act irresistibly, and the thing is done; yea, with the same ease as when God said, "Let there be light; and there was light." But then, man would be man no longer: his inmost nature would be changed." 10 Holding this position so firmly, he could embrace neither predestination nor universalism.

28. Commenting on the predestinarian passages in Paul he avoids any suggestion of arbitrariness or irresistibility on the part of God by explaining the divine action in terms of the prior human response. So, for example, in dealing with Romans 9:18, he says, "So then – That is, accordingly He does show mercy on His own terms; namely, on them that believe. And whom He willeth – Namely, them that believe not. He hardeneth – leaves to the hardness of their hearts." 11

29. He rarely finds it necessary to comment at all on those passages which suggest universalism, taking it for granted that the word "all" generally refers to "all those who believe." In the crucial passage 1 Corinthians 15:22, he finds no problem because it speaks of a resurrection to judgment rather than to eternal life.

30. The fate of those who do not believe is everlasting separation from God. In his note on 2 Thessalonians 1:9, Wesley says, "As there can be no end of their sins (the same enmity against continuing), so neither of their punishment; sin and its punishment running parallel through eternity itself. They must be of necessity, therefore, be cut off from all good, and all possibility of it." Perhaps we may detect a hint that this was something he could not contemplate with any comfort in his comment on the previous verse. Paul speaks of God taking vengeance in flaming fire. "Does God barely permit this," asks Wesley, "or (as 'the Lord' once 'rained brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven,' Genesis 19:24) does a fiery stream go forth from Him for ever?" 12

### Nineteenth Century Developments

31. Whether or not Wesley had any scruples about the idea of everlasting punishment, as the nineteenth century progressed increasing numbers of Christians certainly did. They were horrified at the injustice they saw in the notion of infinite punishment for finite sin. J. A. Froude expressed his abhorrence at what he regarded as a horrible doctrine powerfully in his novel, *The Nemesis of Faith*: “I mean that the largest portion of mankind, these very people who live about us, are our daily companions – the people we meet at dinner or see in the streets, that are linked with us with innumerable ties of common interests, common sympathies, common occupations – these very people are to be tortured for ever and ever in unspeakable agonies. My God! and for what? They are thrown out into life, into an atmosphere impregnated with temptation, with characters unformed, with imperfect natures out of which to form them, under necessity of a thousand false steps, and yet everyone scored down for vengeance; and laying up for themselves a retribution so infinitely dreadful that our whole soul shrinks horror-struck before the very imagination of it; and this is under the decree of an all-just, all-bountiful God – the God of love and mercy.” 13

32. F. D. Maurice was dismissed from his chair at King’s College following the publication of his *Theological Essays* in 1853. He rejected the notion of eternal death on the grounds that any such finality is incompatible with a belief in a God whose nature is supremely loving. He hoped for universal salvation without actually asserting it.

33. Maurice earned the severe strictures of the Wesleyan theologian, J. H. Rigg and was bitterly attacked by the Wesleyan London Quarterly Review which warned readers to steer clear of “this new complex and deadly heresy, which is little better than a modern Gnosticism of a refined character.” The reviewer went on to say, “If this is the true doctrine, not only the peasant and the beggar, but the cold-blooded murderer, the brutal ravisher, the most fiendish of slave-drivers of all the children of the devil on earth, and all the demons of hell, may ‘rejoice and sing merry songs’ together. Hell may hold carnival on earth to the glory of the God of heaven. This does not seem to be the way in which our Loving Saviour and His Apostles preached to sinners; nor from the general proclamation of such a gospel as this could we expect anything but a fearful increase in wickedness.” 14

34. There were still many orthodox preachers like the Anglican, H. P. Liddon, who could reflect “there are probably souls condemned for single unrepented sins, and there may well be thousands.” 15 Hell-fire sermons continued to thunder from many Methodist pulpits. As late as 1904 the Wesleyan Methodist Conference forced the resignation from his chair at Richmond of Joseph Agar Beet because of universalist tendencies expressed in his book, *The Last Things*. 16

35. Nevertheless a significant change of mood had taken place. In 1909 H. B. Workman could speak of the “all-pervasive universalism of the age” avowedly based upon what is perceived to be possible for a moral Governor of a moral world. He saw it as a “deduction from the universalism of appeal for which Wesley contended.” The difficulty of the twentieth century was, he thought, “to find in a scheme of perfect love any place for damnation at all, except as the continuance of present conditions – ‘myself am hell nor am I out of it.’” 17

### Current Methodist teaching and liturgical language

36. In “A Catechism for the use of People called Methodists”, question 19 asks, “What is the state of those who refuse to repent and turn to God?” and the unequivocal answer is given, “They continue to be under the judgment of God and to be separated from him.” Question 20 asks, “What is the promise of God to those who persevere in faith to their lives’ end?” The answer is, “The abundant life which they have already begun to enjoy will become theirs in full measure, they will experience for themselves Christ’s victory over death, and they will share fully the eternal joy of all believers in the presence of God. This is what is meant by heaven.” There is no hint of universalism here.

37. Hymns, while not perhaps a source of exact theology, nevertheless give some idea of what Methodists believe. Presumably Hymns and Psalms (1983) can be taken to be some sort of indication of what is currently acceptable. It is interesting, and probably significant, that nothing included in the section, “The Church Triumphant”, was written in this century. But there are hymns in this section and elsewhere which celebrate the life of heaven. Charles Wesley puts the emphasis on the grace of God and rejoices in the assurance of eternal life. Amongst the best known is *H&P* 216 with its final verse,

No condemnation now I dread;  
Jesus, and all in him, is mine!  
Alive in him, my living Head,  
And clothed in righteousness divine,  
Bold I approach the eternal throne  
And claim the crown, through Christ, my own.

The previous verse makes it clear that this state of assurance is one into which the writer has been awakened. The initiative lies entirely with God and the response is simple, “I rose, went forth, and followed thee.” Yet the response is enough to show that salvation is not automatic.

38. John Mason Neale also puts the stress on the divine action in salvation in *H&P* 813:

There he wins our full salvation,  
Dies that we may die no more.  
  
Trust him, then, ye fearful pilgrims:  
Who shall pluck you from his hand?  
Pledged he stands for your salvation,  
Leads you to the promised land.

But he carefully ends with a prayer:

O that we, with **all the faithful**,  
There around his throne may stand!

The promised land is clearly not for all.

39. The nearest the hymnbook comes to universalism is in a few triumphalist verses reflecting Biblical passages. The anonymous hymn, *H&P* 256, is an example:

He is Lord, he is Lord;  
He is risen from the dead, and he is Lord;  
Every knee shall bow, every tongue confess  
That Jesus Christ is Lord.

He is King, he is King;  
He will draw all nations to him, he is King;  
And the time shall be when the world shall sing  
That Jesus Christ is King.

One suspects that this kind of optimism is more concerned to affirm the power of God and the Lordship of Christ than to promise eternal life for all. The effect is more emotive than theologically persuasive.

40. The nearest we come in the Methodist Service Book to universalism is the Final Prayer of the Sunday Service which looks forward to “the heavenly banquet prepared for all mankind.” The suggestion is that God intends everyone to partake but that is not to say they will. The prayer reminds us of, and may reflect the parable of the big dinner party in Luke 14:15-24 where a major point is that those for whom it is prepared refuse the invitation. The prayer need do no more than echo Wesley’s insistence that all can be saved.

41. The theology of the Burial Service is made evident in the Thanksgiving, “We thank you because he has conquered sin and death for us, and opened up the kingdom of heaven to all believers.” At the committal it offers “sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ.” But this is on the assumption that the deceased has died in faith. A second form of the service tones down the assurance and is intended for use with regard to those who are not so obviously within the Christian community. It reads, “Forasmuch as our *brother* has departed out of this life, we therefore commit *his* body . . . **trusting the infinite mercy of God**, in Jesus Christ our Lord.” It is a gentle way of introducing doubt about the eternal destiny of the deceased rather than an assurance of salvation. It proclaims the priority of grace and takes refuge in a reverent agnosticism about the fate of the departed. It sounds a positive note but is not universalist because even infinite mercy can be rejected.

42. No official Methodist statement is unequivocally universalist and accordingly local preachers in training have been taught, “Hell would appear to be something which people bring upon themselves in spite of the efforts of God to prevent them, in which case sermons using hell as an encouragement to belief might still have their uses. Whether hell is full or empty (the words apply to places and are therefore inappropriate, but they are all we have) is unknown. But the possibility of there being room must always be there. The way must be open for us to say a final ‘no’ to God, even if no one ever says it.”<sup>18</sup>

### Theological considerations

43. This broad, and necessarily sketchy, survey of the documents available to us in determining Methodist doctrine leads us to the conclusion that the Methodist Church has never officially embraced universalism. But it is also true that

universalist tendencies have always been present in the Church at large. Some leaders of Christian thought, from Origen to Karl Barth, have been led towards universalism even if they have not always adopted it completely. The belief that all would eventually be saved was revived in the sixteenth century by groups on the fringe of the Protestant Reformation, the Anabaptists and the Socinians. The Cambridge Platonists accepted it in the seventeenth century. The force of nineteenth century objections to the doctrine of everlasting punishment is still deeply felt and sermons threatening hell are now rare. The Burial Service phrase about “trusting the infinite mercy of God” with its proper readiness to leave the fate of the unbeliever and the non-Christian in the hands of God may well reflect the majority opinion in today’s Church. It is a healthy, humble and compassionate approach. God wants to save everyone. Most of us would like to think that he will. No Christian can be content with the thought that some might for ever be separated from God. Has the time, then, come for the Methodist Church formally to assent to the doctrine of universalism?

44. The argument for doing so is not based only on a sentimental humanitarianism. It rests even more importantly, upon a conviction about the nature of God. The God of love whose gracious purpose is to save all is also the almighty God who is able to fulfil his purpose. In the end, therefore, it is argued, all will be saved.

45. It is also based upon confidence in the sufficiency of Christ’s atoning work. He offered on the cross “a full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the whole world.” Universal salvation must, therefore, be a possibility. Some argue that it must be a certainty for without universal salvation the victory of Christ must be incomplete. Without it the bliss of heaven cannot be perfect. Just as there is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, so there must also be sadness in heaven over one sinner who does not. This they find impossible to contemplate. As Archdeacon Michael Perry puts it, “God cannot create and love human souls and be satisfied to see them eternally unhappy or even eternally annihilated. Love cannot create and then acquiesce happily in the loss of what it has loved. The soul of man is too precious a thing either to spoil or to do away with.”<sup>19</sup>

46. Powerful as these arguments are, account must be taken of other considerations. The first is that God has granted us genuine freedom and responsibility. Our salvation requires our positive and totally voluntary response to him. Equally, human beings are free to keep God out of their lives if they so desire. That may be hell in the Christian view but we are free to choose it and choose it eternally. God does not assign us to hell. We bring it upon ourselves but we are allowed to reject God’s love eternally.

47. John Hick counters this argument by claiming that “God does not have to coerce us to respond to him, for he has already so created us that our nature seeking its own fulfilment and good, leads us to him . . . Since man has been created by God for God, and is basically oriented towards him, there is no final opposition between God’s saving will and our human nature acting in freedom.”<sup>20</sup> He rejects the criticism that this entails a universal predetermining of humanity on the grounds that this presupposes that human beings could have chosen their own basic nature. All human beings are contingent, dependent beings, conditioned by the creator. With Augustine, Hick believes that God has so structured our nature that our hearts are restless until they find their rest in him. He is convinced that God will continue

to be at work for the salvation of humankind, even after death until the work is done.

48. Hick's position does not rule out the possibility of judgment or punishment for finite sin. It allows that any punishment imposed upon the sinner may be purgative, reformatory and temporary, not merely retributive.

49. But it may still be thought inadequate in its treatment of human freedom. It is one thing to say that we are made with a leaning towards God and experience restlessness and unease when that leaning is not obeyed. It is another thing to say that that leaning is irresistible. If we cannot resist, it is hard to see how we can be said to be free. The freedom we may feel is merely illusory. Even more important, if the pull towards God is irresistible, the grace of God is called into question.

50. Another view, somewhat similar to Hick's but careful to preserve human freedom and responsibility, is that salvation must always be through our response to God's word but that, given infinite opportunity to respond beyond death, we shall all eventually do so. It is more perhaps a matter of hope than of doctrine but it springs from both confidence in God's grace and compassionate concern for all humanity.

51. The doctrine of universal grace is instrumental in Methodist belief. Grace is God's unconditional love for sinners in action. It is undistinguishing, extravagant self-giving. It is utterly free from self-concern in enabling the loved one to be. It finds its ultimate expression on the cross. The cross is both the demonstration of the length to which human opposition to God may go and the only response which God in his love will make to that resistance. Grace ceases to be grace if **at any point** it refuses to bear with rejection and applies even the kindest form of coercion. Grace involves God in an ultimate risk and must allow the possibility that the joy of heaven will never be complete. Geoffrey Wainwright sums up the situation sensitively, "A love which took self-giving to the point of suffering crucifixion is likely to be deep enough to persist while ever there is a chance of response. God's grace may then be expected to assume and develop even the slightest human motion towards love. Considerations of theodicy will point to a particular divine care for those individuals whose own capacity for love has been tolerably restricted by nature or society. It may be that the only way to fail salvation is by wilful refusal." But he goes on, preferring the idea of eternal death to that of everlasting punishment, "Programmatic universalism would be a totalitarian threat to the freedom which must characterize any human response in kind to the love of God towards us. Deliberate closure to the love of God to the point of irretrievability spells death. That such death should be subjectively experienced, permanently and eternally, makes no sense. Hell will be empty, though God may continue to bear in his heart the wounds incurred through taking the risk of love in creation."<sup>21</sup> The most serious objection to universalism is that it denies that risk and thus is untrue to the nature of God.

## Conclusion

52. The attractiveness of the doctrine of universalism is obvious and no doubt some Methodists accept it for reasons of moral concern and Christian compassion. The spirit of Christ leads us to long that, in the end, everyone will be saved. Our experience of God's grace assures us that he will use every means to persuade men and women to turn to him. But he will not violate human freedom. Were he to do so, he would not be the God revealed to us on the cross. The Methodist Church

continues to hold in tension the universality of God's persistent love and the freedom of human beings to reject that love eternally. Preaching should reflect this and from time to time one or other emphasis held in tension may be stressed. Nevertheless the Methodist Church has been right not to adopt as part of its official teaching the doctrine that "all people will inevitably be saved."

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#### RESOLUTION

The Conference adopts this report as its reply to Memorial M7 (1990).

(Agenda 1992, pp.113-123)