

# **THE NATURE OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH (1937)**

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## INTRODUCTION

The Church of Christ is the home of the Holy Spirit, and is therefore a family with a unique and developing life. It is a life of a distinctive quality, a life which under the guidance of the Spirit should be richer as time goes on, with fresh manifestations as new nations and races are added to the Church, and new apprehension of divine truth is given.

Christian fellowship means sharing in this developing life. It is therefore impossible to maintain that any one communion of Christian people, out of its own history and experience alone, can build up a complete doctrine of the nature of the Christian Church, or that any one period of history, even that of the first century itself, can furnish us with a complete statement. The purpose of the Conference is not to produce a dogmatic definition, distinctively Methodist, to be set side by side with other definitions of the past. Still less is it to produce a confession of faith by which loyalty or orthodoxy might be tested. It is rather to enable the Methodist Church:— (1) to think more clearly and definitely about the nature and purpose of the Christian community; (2) to maintain effectively the claim made in the *Deed of Union* (1932) that the Methodist Church ‘cherishes its place in the Holy Catholic Church which is the Body of Christ’, (3) to recover, or increase, the sense of reverence for the Church as the Body of Christ; to appreciate the true meaning and privilege of Churchmanship, of participation in Word and Sacraments; and to do all this without, on the one hand, exaggerating the place of the Church, and clothing it, as Rome has done, with attributes that are properly predicable only of God Himself, or, on the other and, transposing our conception of the Church to a remote and ideal realm (as has been the practice of many Protestants in the last two or three centuries) where the word Church has apparently little relation with the visible companies of Christians round about us. It is a misfortune that the conception of the Church has been over-estimated in Catholicism and often under-estimated in Protestantism.

A description of the nature of the Church of Christ should take account of its origin fellowship, allegiance, message, mission and ministry: also of its continuity in history, and its present structure. While these subjects cannot be kept separate, since each involves the others, none of them can properly be omitted.

According to the Deed of Union of the Methodist Church,<sup>1</sup> ‘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. The Methodist Church acknowledges this revelation as the supreme rule of faith and practice’. It is therefore natural, and indeed necessary, that in this document we should turn first to the New Testament for that account of the nature of the Church which was given by the earliest believers.

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<sup>1</sup> *Minutes of the Uniting Conference* (1932), 302; see also statement approved by the Wesleyan Conference of 1908.

## I. THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH ACCORDING TO THE NEW TESTAMENT

### 1. THE WORD 'ECCLESIA'

The word *Ecclesia* is used in the New Testament (i) for the assembly of the people of God in Old Testament times; (ii) for the congregation of the Christians actually assembled in some particular place; (iii) for the whole company of believers in some particular place; (iv) for the assembly of Christians in a particular house; and finally, in the sense which concerns us most closely, (v) for the universal Church on earth, to which belong all who are called by God, through the preaching of the gospel of Christ, to be members of His family.<sup>2</sup> Here we have a word which can be used both of a local community and of the universal company of Christians. The reality denoted is both visible and spiritual. It is visible because it is grouped in various local communities. It is spiritual because the call which has gathered them and the gift of the Spirit which they share, the allegiance by which they are bound, the destiny to which they move – all these are not of this world. They are not of man's contrivance but of God's gift.

### 2. THE METAPHORS USED TO DESCRIBE THE CHURCH; THEIR JUSTIFICATION

The Church of God, the company of Christians scattered throughout the Graeco-Roman world, is described in the Epistles of St Paul by certain daring metaphors. It is the Body of Christ<sup>3</sup>, the Body of which He is the Head<sup>4</sup>. It is the holy temple in which the living God dwells.<sup>5</sup> Believers are the household or family of God,<sup>6</sup> and Christ is the firstborn among the many brethren<sup>7</sup> who are to be conformed to His image. The Church is even regarded as the bride of Christ.<sup>8</sup>

But it is impossible to rest content with setting down these lofty metaphors as though they were a complete description of the Church as viewed by the New Testament writers.

Two observations may be made. First, the writers were well aware of the disparity between such ideal descriptions and the actual state of the primitive Christian communities. The very epistle which contains the description of the Church as the one Body of Christ begins with a reproof of the party spirit which has marred its unity, goes on to refer to the impurity and self-indulgence which have stained its holiness, and then alludes to the failures in spiritual insight which have caused many to fall short of the true apostolic faith. Strictly speaking, therefore, the Corinthian community is not completely one, nor perfectly holy, nor fully apostolic. Nevertheless for St Paul it is 'the Church of God which is in Corinth'. Nor is this a solitary instance. No New

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<sup>2</sup> The following are examples:

(i) Heb. ii. 12, Act vii. 38; (ii) e.g. 1 Cor. xi. 18, xiv. 4, 19, 28; (iii) often; e.g. Acts v. 11, viii. 3; (iv) Rom. xvi. 5, Col. iv. 15; (v) Acts ix. 31, I Cor. xii. 28, Eph. i. 22, etc., Phil. iii. 6.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Cor. xii. 13, 27; Eph. v. 30.

<sup>4</sup> Eph. i. 22, 23; iv. 15, 16.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Cor. iii. 17; 2 Cor. vi. 16; Eph. ii. 21.

<sup>6</sup> Gal. vi. 10; Eph. ii. 19.

<sup>7</sup> Rom. viii. 29.

<sup>8</sup> Eph. v. 25-30.

Testament writer knows of a perfect Christian community. Everywhere there is a sense of contrast between the Church as God wills it to be, and the Church as it is, with all the lapses and disasters which human frailty and sin have brought upon it.

If this is true even of the Church of New Testament times, to which later generations have often looked back as to a golden age, history bears ample witness to the same contrast throughout the subsequent centuries. The visible Church of Christ has been an imperfect and fallible instrument of God's will.

Yet there is a second observation to be made. The New Testament descriptions of the Church as the Body of Christ, the Temple of God, the workmanship of God, are justified. Ideal as they may seem to us after the chequered history of the Church for nineteen hundred years, there are realities behind them.

The metaphor on which St Paul dwells most frequently, that of the Body of Christ, can only adequately be explained by reference to his description of believers as being 'in Christ'. The supreme significance of this phrase, 'in Christ', for the thought of St Paul, has been firmly established in recent times. It is sometimes used of the individual believer: 'there is a new creation when anyone comes to be in Christ'<sup>9</sup>. It is oftener used of the company of believers,<sup>10</sup> who know what it is to have 'fellowship in the Holy Spirit'. Fellowship with other Christians is implicit in the use of the phrase 'in Christ'. But the ground of the fellowship of believers with one another is their communion with Christ. This, then, is the essential fact which differentiates the Church from all other visible institutions in human history. It is the Church of God because Christians are in communion with God through Jesus Christ. All the metaphors are modes of describing that which is real, even if ultimately indescribable – that relationship to God, so intimate and undeserved, which God has established with those whom He has called to walk with Him. The decisive element in the New Testament conception of the Church is the presence of the living Christ in the midst of His own. 'Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.'<sup>11</sup>

Again, this relationship of Christians with one another, resting on their relationship with Christ, is differentiated from all other human relationships because it is avowedly based on God's revelation of Himself in certain historical facts. In the New Testament doctrine of the Church the first place belongs not to man but to God. The Church is not described by anything that man has done or should do, but by what God has done. It is His creation. The Church exists because God has sent forth His Son in the fullness of time. The Church is here because Christ has come, and He is the Lord, the Son of God, the Word of God. There had been a supreme revelation. The long-expected Kingdom of God had become present and manifest in the activity of Jesus.<sup>12</sup> Jesus Christ had lived. Jesus Christ had died. Jesus Christ had been raised again from the dead in the power of God. There were witnesses of His resurrection, and the company of believers had received the gift of His Spirit. The living Christ was sending forth His Spirit into the hearts of those who were willing to receive His supreme gift. The Church is called the Body of Christ, the House or the Family of God, because God through His revelation of Himself in Christ has called it into being.

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<sup>9</sup> 2 Cor. v. 17; cf. 2 Cor. xi. 2.

<sup>10</sup> 1 Thess. i. 1; 1 Cor. i 30, xv. 22.

<sup>11</sup> Matt. xviii. 20.

<sup>12</sup> Luke xi. 20 (Matt. xii. 28); Luke x. 23-24 (Matt. xiii. 16-17); Luke xvii. 20-21.

Once again, this revelation was a revelation of God's will for mankind. It was set forth in terms which carry the mind beyond the life of the present age to the life of the world to come. God's purpose, hidden from all ages and now revealed, was to sum up or gather together 'all things in Christ, whether things in the heavens or things upon the earth'.<sup>13</sup> It is in the light of this divine purpose that St Paul contemplates the significance of the Church. Out of a divided humanity God has created a new and united humanity in Christ.<sup>14</sup> This is the beginning of a world-wide process of reconciliation, which will only be complete when all things are brought into submission to the rule of God.

The Church is therefore the instrument of the divine purpose. Many indeed were called; a few responded to the call. These few were to regard themselves as consecrated to the mission of reconciliation which is God's will. This is the divine method, to create a redeemed community, however small, in order that it may stand out against the dark background of the world as a society enjoying the unexampled blessedness of communion with God. So will the Church by living in Christ draw all men to God, to Him, that is, from whom it derives its very life.

The Church of the New Testament, therefore, is not to be described as a certain number of individuals who have formed themselves into an association for a common purpose. It is not a club or a religious society of the type familiar in the Graeco-Roman world. As the Body of Christ, the Church is regarded as a company of those who are in communion with God, as owing its very existence to God's revelation of Himself, as pledged to be God's instrument for his age-long purpose. Since the attainment of this purpose is beyond the reach of human strength, the Church is utterly dependent on the bestowal of the inexhaustible resources of God. For such a destiny there is available the exceeding greatness of God's power, according to the strength of His might which He wrought in Christ. For such a life as Christians in virtue of their membership in the Church, the Body of Christ, are called upon to live, all things are ready, all things are given, all things are ours; the love of God, the grace of Christ, the fellowship of the Spirit, all are ours as we are Christ's.<sup>15</sup> St Paul appeals to the unsearchable riches which are available in Christ because he is confident that out of the divine resources Christians can find the strength to break down the barriers which separate them from one another. The divine love has been shed abroad in human hearts through the Holy Spirit. In virtue of this gift the Church may be called the Body of Christ.

### 3. THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH

#### *(i) The Origin of the Church*

Whether we regard the Church as founded directly by Jesus in His earthly life, or ascribe its beginning to the day of Pentecost, there is one significant conviction of the New Testament writers which we do well to heed. They hold that the life of Israel, the People of God, before Christ came, and the life of the Christian Church afterwards, is one continuous life. The word *ecclesia* is in the Septuagint a translation of the Hebrew word applied to the people of God. The language which the Old Testament applies to the people of God is applied in the New Testament to the Christian Church without

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<sup>13</sup> Eph. i. 10.

<sup>14</sup> Eph. ii. 14 ff.

<sup>15</sup> 1 Cor. iii. 21-23

any explanation being thought necessary. 'Ye are an elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that ye may show forth the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvellous light . . . Ye are now the people of God.'<sup>16</sup> So, too, for St Paul, the Church is 'the Israel of God',<sup>17</sup> the people under God's covenant, the true heir of the promises of God.<sup>18</sup> From this view of the life of the Church as continuous with the life of Israel two conclusions are drawn. First, the origin of the Church lies in the will of God before the world began. Ultimately, the founder of the Church is the Lord, the redeeming God of Israel. Second, all that Israel had from God the Church has through Christ. In Christ the promises have been fulfilled. There were significant and decisive differences between the Old Israel and the New. In Jesus Christ God Himself had visited and redeemed His people. God had given Him to be 'Head over all things to the Church'. The indwelling Spirit, whose activity was the source and guiding power of the life of the newly constituted community, was regarded as involving the abiding presence and activity of Christ Himself. A new era had been inaugurated by the Spirit as a result of the revelation of God in the whole work of Christ, in His earthly life, in His suffering on the Cross, in His resurrection from the dead. In this new era the old sacrifices had ceased; the old priesthood was now obsolete. In the Church all believers were priests,<sup>19</sup> because through the Spirit they had direct access to the holy of holies. Like their Lord they could say Abba, Father, to the living God. The new experience thus made possible by Christ, and created in believers by His indwelling Spirit, included a new consciousness of son-ship, a new sense of power, and a new confidence in His final victory.

(ii.) *The Fellowship of the Church*

In the New Testament the Church is described as having fellowship,<sup>20</sup> sharing in a certain distinctive kind of life. In the apostolic benediction (2 Cor. xiii. 14) this is characterised as 'the fellowship of the Holy Ghost', a sharing of the gift of the divine Spirit. All that Christians have ever learnt of the experience of God's grace, the divine indwelling which is granted us in Christ, must be invoked to elucidate the meaning of this familiar phrase. There is a fellowship which only the Spirit can give,<sup>21</sup> and believers know what it is. The fellowship of Christians from the earliest times was fellowship with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ. The comprehensive word which describes the quality of this life is love.

Certain conclusions are drawn by the writers of the New Testament from the enjoyment of this fellowship of the Spirit which is the essence of the Church. First, the individual experience was never severed in thought from membership in the Christian community. As John Wesley said, 'The gospel of Christ knows no religion but social: no holiness but social holiness.'<sup>22</sup> The common experience issued in common

<sup>16</sup> 1 Pet. ii. 9, 10.

<sup>17</sup> Gal. vi. 16; cf. Phil. iii. 3; 1 Cor. x. 1; Rom. ii. 28; xi. 16-24.

<sup>18</sup> Gal. iii. 29, iv. 7; Rom. viii. 17; cf. Heb. vi. 12, 17; Jas. ii. 5. In the Johannine writings we find the same conviction. The Church is the vine of God and the flock of God as Israel had been before; John x. 16, xv. 1-8; cf. Rev. ii. 9.

<sup>19</sup> 1 Pet. ii. 5.

<sup>20</sup> The word *Koinonia* is primarily used to describe this act of sharing, or the inward communion, rather than the community.

<sup>21</sup> Phil. ii. 1.

<sup>22</sup> *Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley*, vol. I, p. xxii.

worship, and this was expressed in the two sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, in prayer, in preaching, and in the social activities of love.

Second, the experience is universal in its application. Life 'in the Spirit' can be lived in the world, amid the ordinary callings wherein men work, in the common vicissitudes of our human lot. It is in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ that we may see portrayed that care for the whole area of human life which should characterise the members of the community called by His name. Nothing that belonged to men to do or to suffer was outside His interest. He had a piercing insight into all the sorrows and hardships of human life. He understood the anxiety of common folk about common needs, and He longed to shepherd them to rest of soul. His parables prove how He delighted in all the healthful instincts and activities of humanity. The labour of men had an inexhaustible interest for Him. The busy life of His time was present to His mind because it was dear to His heart – landlord and tenant, employers and employed, women in their patching and their baking, shepherds, farmers, gardeners, merchants, bankers – all had their place in His talk. The New Testament writers were only being faithful to the mind of their Master when they applied their gospel of reconciliation to the common human relationships, and taught how husband and wife, master and slave, fathers and children, could live together 'in the Lord'.<sup>23</sup> In Christ the old barriers were done away; there were no longer Jews or Gentiles. The divine love which is the secret of reconciliation had transformed the old relationships. Life was lived on a new plane.

The process of claiming for Christ every activity of the Christian man and redeeming every department of the corporate life of the world began in those New Testament days. Though victory in the age-long struggle has been gradual and retarded, and though we do not yet see all things subject to Him, it is only in Christ that we see the promise of a guiding light for every region of the common life of man.

Third, there is another element in the life of the Church as a closely knit body which results directly from its consciousness of the conditions of its existence; the sharing of material goods and the mutual supply of material needs. The Johannine account of the conversation in the Upper Room gives special prominence to the Saviour's symbolical washing of the feet of the disciples, leading to the significant words, 'ye also ought to wash one another's feet'. The recognition of the duty of meeting the needs of the less fortunate members of the Church is seen in the voluntary pooling of resources for this purpose in the early days after Pentecost, and the care for the widows. That such mutual care was felt to be a natural function of the Church is clear from the Epistle of St James, and from the collection for the necessitous Churches in Palestine, which St Paul organised among the Gentile Churches. It was the natural result of the devotion with which the disciples had first given themselves to the Lord, and as such carried to a higher plane the traditional Jewish insistence on almsgiving. That it was a conspicuous element in the subsequent activity of the Churches is seen in the comments of pagan writers. Such giving is much more than what is commonly known as charity. It is not an act which the Christian may perform or not as he pleases. As a member of the Church, he must think of himself as a member of the family of which his heavenly Father is the head; and he will regard what he possesses as his own, only in so far as he uses it as his Father directs, and for the needs of those who are united with him as the objects of his Father's love and care.

This recognition of the needs of others, however, and the duty and indeed the naturalness of supplying them, was not limited to the members of the Christian family.

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<sup>23</sup> Col. iii. 18-iv.1; Heb. xiii. 1-5; I Pet. ii. 18-25; iii. 1-9; Jas. ii. 1-9.

The command of Christ that love should be shown to enemies and persecutors, the importance He attached to the feeding of the hungry and the visiting of the sick, and the wide extension that He gave to the term neighbour, led to a zeal and even a passion, in the members of the Christian Church, for almsgiving and other deeds of love to outsiders, which often surprised and sometimes astonished their pagan critics; and to a tradition of devotion to the poor which has never been wholly forgotten.

Fourth, the experience is open to all, and to be offered to all. Most of the followers of Jesus were slow in those early days, and indeed have ever since been slow, in recognizing and acting on this inevitable consequence of the Christian experience. Yet it was implicit from the beginning in our Lord's teaching on the nature of the love of God. No boundaries can be set to the message of a community whose goal is the reconciliation of all things to God, and which dares to take for its pattern the illimitable activity of the love of God himself.

### (iii.) *The Allegiance of the Church*

The Spirit is regarded as the gift of Christ to His friends. 'Being therefore by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Ghost, he hath poured forth this.' The new-found experience in which they share inevitably involves a common allegiance to Jesus Christ. One of the earliest confessions of faith<sup>24</sup> is 'Jesus is Lord,' and St Paul declares that the power to make this confession aright is given in the new experience, and only to those who share it. According to St Matthew's Gospel,<sup>25</sup> our Lord Himself connected the building of His Church with the confession of His Messiahship. The same connection is made by St Paul. In a passage<sup>26</sup> from which John Wesley drew most of his teaching on the Church, he speaks of a sevenfold unity, in which the one Lord is central, and no form of earthly ministry is mentioned. Elsewhere,<sup>27</sup> apostles and prophets are mentioned as the foundation; and authoritative discipline certainly finds a place in the administration of the Church of the New Testament. But all is subordinate to the common allegiance, and this allegiance is due supremely to Jesus Christ, the One Head of the Church 'which is His Body'.

As Hort pointed out,<sup>28</sup> the founding of the Church at Antioch, where the disciples were first called Christians, was not due to the activity of any recognised Apostle. 'No Apostle had led or founded a mission; no Apostle had taught there.' But there Jesus had been preached as Lord.<sup>29</sup> Barnabas, the apostolic delegate, could not but see in the fact of the Christian congregation there 'the grace of God'. The disciples therefore in Antioch were recognised by the sign of their common allegiance as belonging to the Church of God.

### (iv.) *The Message of the Church*

The message of the Church is the gospel, or Word of God. It is the function of the Church to understand, interpret and proclaim this Word. The relation of the Church to the Word of God is a living question which takes us beyond the problem of the

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<sup>24</sup> 1 Cor. xii. 3; Phil. ii. 10-11; Rom. x. 9; xiv. 9; John xiii. 13.

<sup>25</sup> xvi. 16.

<sup>26</sup> Eph. iv. 4-6.

<sup>27</sup> Eph. ii. 20.

<sup>28</sup> *The Christian Ecclesia*, 59-61.

<sup>29</sup> Acts. xi. 20-23

authority and place of the Bible, and beyond the place of preaching in the creation and the continuation of the visible Church. If we go back to the New Testament, the Word of God is, first and foremost, Jesus Christ Himself as manifested in time – in His earthly life, in His death, in His risen life. This is the meaning of the presence of our four Gospels in the New Testament. The burden of the Epistle to the Hebrews is that God has spoken to us His final word through His Son.<sup>30</sup> For St Paul, Christ is the image, or visible manifestation, of the invisible<sup>31</sup> God. The ‘mystery’ which once was hidden and which now is revealed is described as ‘Christ in you’; as<sup>32</sup> ‘Jesus Christ’, as ‘Christ crucified’,<sup>33</sup> as Christ who in the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings may be known.

But this message must be proclaimed by apostles, prophets, and evangelists; for the world cannot hear without a preacher. We have, then, a second meaning of the Word of God. It is the Word as preached.<sup>34</sup> Only later does it become the Word of God as written in the Holy Scriptures. But when ‘Word’ is used in these secondary or derivative senses, the conviction is held by the early Christians that if the Word is to be effective, the Spirit of God must be operative both in the preacher and in the preaching – not only in the writing but also in the interpretation of the written Word. The Church, we say, *has* a message; but it can be delivered and understood only in so far as the Spirit of God is known, acknowledged, and operative in the community; only in so far as Christians are living in Christ, and representing Christ to the world. The Church of Christ proclaims Christ even more by what it is than by what it says.<sup>35</sup>

For the writers of the New Testament there is an intimate connection between the Word of the Cross and the way of life which the members of the Church are called upon to tread. If the Church is the Body of Christ, it will bear the marks of the dying of Jesus that the life of Jesus may be manifested in that Body. These marks are not only the dying to sin, but the bearing of one another’s burdens, and the joyful acceptance of suffering for Christ’s sake. In such a world as this, love ever finds fresh burdens to bear. To go where sinners are, to refuse either to leave them, or to compromise with their sin; to devote oneself utterly to their recovery, to labour with a yearning which is given by God Himself till Christ be formed in them – this way of bearing sin is an inalienable part of the witness of the Church, because such love flows from the communion of Christians with their Lord. The sufferings which ensue, even the sufferings of death itself, are transfigured by the same power of God which raised Christ from the dead.<sup>36</sup>

It is this intimate communion between Christ and His people that gives fullness of meaning to the two sacraments. Baptism is for St Paul a symbol that believers have entered into communion with Christ in His death and resurrection. The Lord’s Supper is a symbol of the continuance and renewal of this communion, and a proclamation of

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<sup>30</sup> Heb. i. 2; cf. Rev. xix. 13.

<sup>31</sup> 2 Cor. iv. 4; Col. i. 15.

<sup>32</sup> Col. i. 27.

<sup>33</sup> 1 Cor. i. 23, ii. 12.

<sup>34</sup> 1 Pet. i. 25.

<sup>35</sup> Matt. v. 13, 14; Eph. v. 8; Phil. ii. 15, 16.

<sup>36</sup> The passages on which this paragraph is based are (a) Gal. v. 13-25, especially 24-25; Gal. vi. 1-16; 2 Cor. iv. 7-15; Gal. iv. 19; cf. the whole of 1 Corinthians where the practical problems of the Church are faced in the light of the Word of the Cross, 1 Cor. i. 17-ii. 6; vi. 7, xiii. 4-6; Eph. i. 19-20; (b) 1 Pet. ii. 19-25; iii. 14-18; iv. 12-16; (c) Heb. xii. 1-4; xiii. 12-13.

the Lord's death, 'until He come'. Its purpose is marred when the Body of Christ is riven by factions or desecrated by selfishness.<sup>37</sup> It points forward to the richer life in the future, when Christ shall be manifested in the full glory of the Kingdom of God. Both Sacraments are therefore modes of proclaiming that Word which is Christ Himself, active in the life of the Church.

As a summary of the message of the Church of the New Testament, we may take the unanimous statement of the Lausanne World Conference on Faith and Order (1927), in the section entitled *The Church's Message to the World*:

'Jesus Christ as the crucified and living One, as Saviour and Lord, is also the centre of the world-wide Gospel of the Apostles and the Church. Because He Himself is the Gospel, the Gospel is the message of the Church to the world. It is more than a philosophical theory; more than a theological system; more than a programme for material betterment. The Gospel is rather the gift of a new world from God to this old world of sin and death; still more, it is the victory over sin and death, the revelation of eternal life in Him who has knit together the whole family in heaven and on earth in the communion of saints, united in the fellowship of service, of prayer and of praise.'

The Word of God, thus interpreted as Christ Himself living on earth, crucified, risen; Christ himself as preached; Christ Himself as revealed in the pages of the Scripture; – this Word of God calls the Church into existence, and perpetually sustains it. But once called into existence by the Word, the Church is sent forth so to manifest Christ in the glory of its life as to be itself God's message to men as well as the preacher of it.

#### (v.) *The Mission of the Church*

The task of the Church has been in part defined by the preceding account of its nature. Its mission is to be the instrument of the age-long purpose of God, to live this life of fellowship in the gifts of the Spirit, to be loyal to its supreme allegiance, to proclaim and live its message.

But in the early years of the Church the mission is understood more clearly and expounded more explicitly as time goes on. The primary task is the work of evangelism. When the Gospel of St Matthew comes to be written there is a general acceptance of the mandate of the Risen Christ to make disciples of all the nations.<sup>38</sup> His followers are to be his witnesses unto the uttermost part of the earth.<sup>39</sup> Gentiles are to enter the Church on equal terms with Jews. Personal religion is set in the forefront. The Church exists for the conversion of sinners and the multiplying and perfecting of saints. The reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles in one body through the Cross points forward to the ultimate goal of the Church, the reconciliation of all things to Christ whether things upon the earth or things in the heavens.<sup>40</sup>

The vision of this all-inclusive ideal does not blind the eyes of St Paul to the immediate practical duties which that ideal implies. While preaching and living out their message of reconciliation, Christians are called to be active in all the common

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<sup>37</sup> Rom. vi. 3-11; 1 Cor. xi. 17-34

<sup>38</sup> Matt. xxviii. 19; cf. Luke xxiv. 47.

<sup>39</sup> Acts i. 8.

<sup>40</sup> Col. i. 20; Eph. i. 9, 10.

tasks of love. Those who watch over the Church are eager that its members should care for the poor, show sympathy with the suffering, and restore those overtaken in a fault. They would have its members strong in the Lord and in the power of His might; they would have them resist unto blood, striving against sin; their growth in faith, obedience, and holiness, is essential if the mission of the Church is to be fulfilled. Indeed, the accomplishment of all the heightened moral demands found in the Sermon on the Mount and in the distinctively ethical sections of the Epistles, is an essential part of the work of the Church, for it is only by the power of the Spirit manifested in the life of the Church that such demands can be fulfilled. The aim is that the saints, or members of the Church, shall be perfected, that all should attain to unity in faith and knowledge of the Son of God. Thus the Church will be God's instrument, entirely adequate for the purpose for which He intended it.<sup>41</sup> That purpose is to prepare the way for the goal and the consummation of all history, the final coming of the Rule or Kingdom of God, which has already been manifested in the redemptive activity of Christ.

A mission so universal, a function so comprehensive, may justly be called catholic. The true catholicity of the Church may be found in its mandate and its task.

#### 4. THE MINISTRY OF THE CHURCH IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

It is not without significance that one of the chief New Testament passages on the nature of the Christian ministry is written when St Paul is contemplating the supreme end for which the Church exists;<sup>42</sup> and another, when he is dealing as a pastor with a local community which had misunderstood the nature of that love which is the real unity of the Church, and the Spirit's chief fruit.<sup>43</sup>

It must never be forgotten that the word 'minister' means properly 'servant'. The New Testament words for 'minister' and 'ministry' are applied widely to most varied types of service. Indeed, there is a universal ministry within the Church. As all Christians are priests in virtue of their access to God, so all Christians are ministers in virtue of their membership in the one body. Not only in St Paul's letters<sup>44</sup> but in I Peter (iv. 10) we find that the possession of any gift was regarded as implying a debt to others, the discharge of which would be a ministry. The commonest forms of kindness to others are spoken of by our Lord as a ministry to Himself.<sup>45</sup> Within the body the members are differentiated according to the gift bestowed upon them by the Spirit, and amid the large diversity of gifts certain ministries are noteworthy. In the early chapters of Acts we read of the Apostles and the Seven in the Church of Jerusalem. These apparently sufficed for the earliest period. But the preaching of Stephen, the subsequent persecution and the scattering of the members of the Church of Jerusalem, the spread of the Christian message – all these events gave rise to a missionary ministry, and to some form of organization in the local churches thus founded.

In 1 Corinthians the ministries are described as apostles, prophets, teachers, miracles, gifts of healing, helps, governments, divers kinds of tongues; in the Epistle to

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<sup>41</sup> Eph. iv. 13.

<sup>42</sup> Eph. iv. 11-13

<sup>43</sup> 1 Cor. xii. 27-31.

<sup>44</sup> Rom. xii. 4-7; 1 Cor. xii. 4-28. The word translated 'gift' is '*charisma*,' a gift of God's grace. According to St Paul, all gifts are '*charismatic*'.

<sup>45</sup> Matt. xxv. 44-45.

the Ephesians, as apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers. These lists testify to the rich variety of the ministries exercised in the early Church.

In the Epistle to the Philippians (i. 4) we read of the overseers ('episkopoi,' translated in A.V. and R.V. 'bishops') and the deacons. The overseers appear also in Ephesus, where they are identified with presbyters or elders (Acts xx. 17, 28), and in Crete, according to Titus i. 7, where the word overseer is apparently applied to the 'elders' of the preceding verses. The presbyters, or elders, were local officials. It is probable that 'presbyteros' is the title denoting the office, while 'episkopos' describes the function.<sup>46</sup> The itinerant ministry seems to have been formed by apostles (with whom prophets<sup>47</sup> were associated at an early date) and evangelists.<sup>48</sup>

The word apostle was used in a narrower sense, of the Twelve, but also in a wider sense. Certainly others besides St Paul were called by this name in addition to the Twelve. The Twelve were solemnly chosen and 'sent forth' by our Lord in His earthly life. In the wider sense the word apostle probably meant a Christian missionary solemnly sent forth by the Church acting under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, in order to preach the Gospel and to form Churches. So Barnabas and Saul had been sent forth from Antioch.<sup>49</sup>

As to the relation of the apostle to the Church, we may notice (1) that while this form of ministry, whether of the Twelve or in the wider sense, was regarded as God's gift to His Church, so were all the rest, including some which certainly have not been perpetuated; (2) that the privileges which separated the Twelve from all others, their call by the Lord in the days of His flesh and the intimate personal companionship which ensued, were incommunicable; (3) that while there is no trace of a formal commission of authority for government to the Twelve from Christ in His earthly life,<sup>50</sup> the spiritual leadership which belonged to them as witness of the resurrection and as personal companions of our Lord gave them a certain authority in administration. So too St Paul claims divine authority for the edification or 'building up' of the church.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Apparently a local Church was normally governed by a body of presbyters. It is also possible that the presbyters correspond to the 'pastors' of Ephesians, iv. 11, the 'poimenes,' another descriptive title. Cp. the charge of St Paul to the presbyters (Acts xx. 28), to be shepherds of the Church of God; 1 Pet. v. 2; John xxi. 16. Of the teacher we know little but the name. Probably he took a large part in the catechetical instruction of new converts. cf. Luke i. 4.

<sup>47</sup> The prophets were conspicuous in the first century Church, and St Paul speaks of the Church as built on the foundation of apostles and prophets. The gifts of the prophets were those of inspired eloquence, with its power to edify, comfort, or arouse enthusiasm; insight into religious truth; the appeal to the hidden recesses of the conscience.

<sup>48</sup> Two evangelists are mentioned by name, Philip and Timothy. In later tradition Philip was called an apostle; (Eusebius iii. 31.)

<sup>49</sup> Acts xiii. 3; cf. 2 Cor. viii. 23; Rom. xvi. 7.

<sup>50</sup> The promise of binding and loosing (which according to Rabbinic parallels means the power of teaching what was right and what was wrong in cases of perplexity, and probably includes also the right of admitting to or excluding from the community) was made to St Peter, according to St Matthew, but was also made to the disciples as a body, representative of the Church (Matt. xvi. 19; xviii. 18). Spiritual authority resides in the Church as a whole, in so far as the Church is indwelt by the divine Spirit (John xx. 22-23).

<sup>51</sup> 2 Cor. x. 8.

From the foregoing description it is clear that we cannot speak of 'the threefold ministry' as claiming the authority of the New Testament. Further, there is no evidence that definite prerogatives or powers are to be transmitted. We have no information about the manner in which the elders were ordained. There are four passages in the New Testament in which the laying on of hands is connected with an act answering to ordination. In Acts vi. 6, there is the laying of the hands of the Twelve Apostles on the Seven at Jerusalem. In Acts xiii. 3, the representatives of the Church at Antioch laid their hands on Barnabas and Saul, after the prophetic intimation had been received from the Spirit that they had been called to a particular work.<sup>52</sup> There are two passages in the Epistles to Timothy (1 iv. 14 and 2 i. 6), which appear to refer to some prophetic monition that Timothy should be set apart for his immediate task. There is no trace of any special prerogative attached to the ordination rite, but the gift, or *charisma*, which was 'given' with the laying on of hands by the elders, had already been recognised as potential in Timothy. It was an individual capacity which now received external recognition. The society gave an authorisation which strengthened the power and confidence of the individual. We may conclude that though it is highly probable that the laying on of hands was largely practised in the apostolic age as a rite introductory to many of the varied ministries to which members of the churches might be called, the New Testament tells us little, and therefore it is difficult to believe that any principle essential to the Church, or constitutive of the very being of the Church, was involved in that rite.

The dominant principle of the ministry in the New Testament is that of the manifold bounty or grace of God. This was distributed through all the varieties of natural dispositions and faculties, and through the new gifts disclosed as the result of revelation, so that both alike might be used for the building up of the holy temple of the Church.

The relation of all these varied ministries to the Church is expressed from two points of view. In 1 Cor. xii. and Romans xii., the Church, as the Body of Christ, is the recipient of the fullness of the divine gift of the Spirit, and within the body various members are given particular functions. The functions include those of the apostolate, the prophetic order, the teaching ministry, church government and the healing gifts. In these passages the ministry may be said to come into being through the Church.

On the other hand, in Ephesians iv., the ministries of apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor and teacher are given by the glorified Lord to the Church for the building up of the Body of Christ. The stress here is on the gift of the ministry to the Church. It might even be said that the Church comes to its unity and fullness of growth through the ministry.

These two views, however, are complementary rather than contradictory. In 1 Corinthians and Romans the ministry is not created by the Church. It is created by the Spirit, whose divers gifts (*charismata*) mark out this man and that for special functions. The Church recognizes, relates, and disciplines the gifts and activities of different kinds of ministers.<sup>53</sup> In Ephesians again, no less than in 1 Corinthians and Romans, the one Body is the home of the one Spirit. It is the fullness (*pleroma*) of Christ Himself.<sup>54</sup> The gifts, though special to certain members of the Church, are possessed by the Church as a whole. Thus we may say that in the New Testament the

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<sup>52</sup> This was not ordination to the apostolate; cf. Gal. i. 1.

<sup>53</sup> 1 Cor. xiv. 26-33; xvi. 15.

<sup>54</sup> Eph. i. 23.

ministry of the Word and the Sacraments is a divine gift to the Church, and was in those early days an integral part of its organic life. It was a ministry within the Church, exercising in the name and by the authority of the Lord Who is the Head of the Church, powers and functions which are inherent in the Church.

#### 5. SUMMARY OF NEW TESTAMENT TEACHING

The Church, therefore, as we find it in the pages of the New Testament, may in very truth be called the Body of Christ. Its members are 'in Christ'; through Him they have access in one Spirit unto the Father. It has come into being as the result of the redemptive activity of God in Christ, and knows the mystery of the divine purpose which has been hidden and is now revealed. The Church is in possession of the divine resources to equip its members for their task. It feels itself to be the true inheritor of the ancient promises made to the People of God. It is one in allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ, one because its members share in the divine gift of the Spirit, one in the message proclaimed, and one in the mission to which it is called by God. Its unity is expressed in life and in common worship, particularly in the ordinances of Baptism and the Supper of the Lord. It is holy because it consists of men and women called out of the world to live a new and consecrated life. It is catholic because it consists of all the believers throughout the world who profess Christ, and who, grouped as they are in local communities, everywhere recognize one another as belonging to the Church of God. It is catholic also because of its mandate in the revealed purpose of God, and the task to which it is committed. It possesses ministries which are recognized as God's gift for the evangelization of the world and for the enrichment of the life to be lived within the Church. As an institution in time and space it is an imperfect embodiment of its great ideal. The whole Church, the local churches, the individual members, are continually failing in insight. They are frail in faith. They are tardy in the fulfilment of the tasks of love. Sometimes there are those who are overtaken in flagrant sins. But the spiritual realities are there, and they are shared within the Church and communicated to those without.

#### 6. METHODIST LOYALTY TO THE PRINCIPLES OF NEW TESTAMENT TEACHING

The foregoing pages contain a statement of the constitution and life of the Christian Church as it appears in the pages of the New Testament. The Methodist Church holds to the principles which have been expounded in the preceding paragraphs. We join with Christians of all communions in the confession that the history of the Church, including that part of it to which we own our loyalty, has fallen far short of the ideal outlined in the New Testament. But that ideal is our ideal. We make it our own, since 'the Methodist Church acknowledges the Divine Revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures, as the supreme rule of faith and practice'. We do claim that none of the forms of organization taken by the Apostolic Church should be determinative for the Church for all time. For example, while many among us may be firmly convinced that the order of the ministry as it has been developed amongst us closely resembles the order which apparently prevailed in the first century, we do not on that account regard it as a divine provision binding upon the whole Church of God. Such a claim is untenable by those who hold, as we do, that in the New Testament, order, important as it is, is never equated with faith. While all true ministries derive from Christ, none of the forms of ministry which prevail in the various Churches of Christendom today can legitimately claim the authority of our Lord in His earthly life.

Christ constituted a community of disciples and believers. They had two simple rites. He gave them what the early Church passed on, a new life in the Spirit, an experience of God, a store of teaching, a gospel, and a mission. The Church did not die. The Church, as we believe, cannot die. 'The gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.' The historic continuity of the living Church is vital to Christianity.

## II. THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH IN HISTORY

Owing to the course which the history of the Church has taken, there are today many separate religious bodies, which are called Churches in the accepted modern sense<sup>55</sup> of the term. Many of these claim special fidelity to the New Testament itself, while one, at least, even claims a unique authority as the Church of Christ. Hence it is necessary to state the place of Methodism in the Church Catholic. This statement will include, first, an exposition of the continuity of Methodism with the Church of the past; second, a survey of the fundamental principles of the Protestant Reformation, so far as they affect our present subject; third, an exposition of the reasons for the existence of Methodism as a distinct body, or 'Church', in the modern sense, and finally, certain positive affirmations as to the nature of the Church, which should enable Methodism to make common cause with Christians of all communions in proclaiming Jesus Christ and the Apostolic Faith, and spreading Scriptural Holiness throughout the world.

### 1. THE CONTINUITY OF METHODISM WITH THE CHURCH OF THE PAST

The actual statement of the *Deed of Union* (1932) indicates the position of the Methodist Church with regard to its inheritance from the past.

'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. 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 unfaltering resolve to be true to its divinely appointed mission. 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. The Methodist Church acknowledges this revelation as the supreme rule of faith and practice. The Methodist Church recognises two sacraments, namely, Baptism and the Lord's Supper, as of divine appointment and of perpetual obligation, of which it is the privilege and duty of members of the Methodist Church to avail themselves.'

In the *Deed of Union* a continuity of Methodism with the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church is affirmed.

First, it is implied, inasmuch as the Methodist Church 'claims and cherishes its place in the Holy Catholic Church which is the Body of Christ'.

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<sup>55</sup> This is not the New Testament sense. See p. 7.

Second, it is asserted by the acceptance of the Apostolic Faith which we have inherited from the past.

Third, continuity is implied by the fact that the two sacraments are observed 'as of divine appointment and perpetual obligation'.

Fourth, continuity is asserted in the explicit acceptance of the fundamental principles of the historic creeds.

Fifth, the continuity of Methodism with the Church of the past is asserted by its acceptance of the fundamental principles of the gospel, which were re-affirmed at the time of the Protestant Reformation. It was in loyalty to those principles that other widely spread communions before Methodism have come into being within the one Church.

Sixth, the continuity of Methodism with the Church of the past is asserted in the re-affirmation of the mission for which Methodism was raised up; it was and is our task 'to spread Scriptural Holiness through the land'.

The true continuity with the Church of past ages which we cherish is to be found in the continuity of the Christian experience, the fellowship in the gift of the one Spirit; in the continuity of the allegiance to one Lord, the continued proclamation of the message, the continued acceptance of the mission. All these we share with the New Testament Church. Our spiritual ancestry goes back through a multitude of saints which no man can number. The experience is communicated; the message is passed on. The bread of life is the gift of God, but it is broken from hand to hand. The influence of one human personality on others is the chief means used by God for propagating the truth by which the Church lives. Most men are won to Christian faith, or confirmed in Christian conviction, by the beauty of Christian character, the attraction of holiness embodied in personal form. Behind each believer of today there stretches a long chain, each link a Christian man or woman, till we find ourselves, with the first disciples, in the company of the Lord Himself. Through such a succession of believers Methodists may echo the confession of one of the early Apologists: 'Christians trace their genealogy from the Lord Jesus Christ.' In these genealogies there is no distinction between laymen and ministers, men and women. Indeed all Christians may be priests in this holy office. As Dr G G Findlay has said, 'Those who share St Peter's faith share his power. Each confessor of the Son of God is empowered to open to the penitent, so far as human hands may, that gate of faith through which he himself has passed.'

This is our doctrine of apostolic succession. It is our conviction, therefore, that the continuity of the Church does not depend on, and is not necessarily secured by, an official succession of ministers, whether bishops or presbyters, from apostolic times, but rather by fidelity to apostolic truth. The office is contingent on the Word, and not the Word on the office. Indeed, the apparent discontinuity of office has sometimes been due to a reassertion of the true and essential continuity of experience, allegiance, message and mission.

Nevertheless, the Word of Life has been transmitted to us by a multitude of ministries, known and unknown, remembered or forgotten. We humbly acknowledge that our present fellowship derives from those who have been our fathers in God, and we acknowledge our debt to the Church of the past which has endured from one generation to another, by the power of Him who would not suffer it to be destroyed by assaults from without or faithlessness within. We give thanks to Him that, even in the days of its feebleness and faithlessness, the Word and Sacraments of His Church have

never been wholly without power, and that men have been continually ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven.

## 2. THE PRINCIPLES OF THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION

In considering the continuity of Methodism with the Church of the past, account must be taken of its deep and permanent debt to the Protestant Reformation, a debt which is avowed in our *Deed of Union*.

It must be regretfully confessed that while there has been a true continuity of faith, experience, witness and sanctity within the Church, this continuity did not prevent disastrous breaches of fellowship in Christendom, the effects of which persist to this day. The Great Schism between the Eastern and Western Churches, which was completed by the anathema laid on the Patriarch of Constantinople by Pope Leo IX in A.D. 1054, and the breaking away of the Church of Sweden and the Church of England from the Papacy in the sixteenth century, demonstrate that Churches which claim the unbroken succession of their Bishops from apostolic times have been unable to preserve the outward unity of the Church. The guidance of the Spirit had been promised by our Lord to ensure that the growth and development of the Church might be in accordance with the will of God. But it is evident that not all the changes which have befallen the Church have been the result of the Spirit's guidance. At various periods accretions from paganism have become embedded in worship, in practice, even in doctrine, and secular aims have governed the thought and policy of the accredited rulers of the Church. Such a period was the early sixteenth century.

The Protestant Reformation was primarily an appeal to the revealed will of God against the corruptions which had infected the practice of the Church in the course of many centuries. It was a rediscovery of the heart of the gospel. This appeal to the Word of God against practical abuses determined the emphasis of the Reformation message, and led to a further appeal against unevangelical accretions in the realm of doctrine.

First, stress was laid on the gospel truth that salvation is by faith alone. By the word 'faith' Luther understood that 'believing in God which means that I put my trust in Him, give myself up to thinking that I can have dealings with Him, and believe without any doubt that He will be and do to me according to the things said of Him. Such faith which throws itself upon God, whether in life or in death, alone makes a Christian man'.<sup>56</sup> This faith was set over against the popular belief, which was fostered by the whole penitential system of the mediaeval Church, that man must make himself fit to receive the grace of God.<sup>57</sup>

Second, the stress of the Reformation message was laid on the Person of our Lord Jesus Christ as the one Mediator between God and man, by His life on earth, and by his one perfect sacrifice upon the Cross. By this appeal to the apostolic gospel, the popular invocation of other intercessors, who were supposed to share with our Lord the procuring of pardon, was swept away.<sup>58</sup> Luther and Calvin held firmly to the faith of the old Church as expressed in the historic creeds. But the Reformation introduced

<sup>56</sup> *Works* (Erlangen ed.) xxii, 15; cp. Calvin, *Inst.* III ii, 7. 'Faith is a firm and sure knowledge of the divine favour towards us, founded on the truth of a free promise in Christ, and revealed to our minds, and sealed on our hearts, by the Holy Spirit.

<sup>57</sup> Calvin, *Inst.* III, iv, 3 and 25.

<sup>58</sup> Augsburg Confession, Art. xxi.

into the world a deeper understanding of the Person and the Work of Christ than had prevailed since the apostolic age. Both the Person and the Work of our Lord were indissolubly joined in Luther's thought. The humanity of Jesus in His earthly life, which had always been a dogma of the Church, became an article of practical piety. 'We are undone,' said Luther, 'if we cannot say this *Man* is God.' So, too, Calvin said, 'When Christ is known, we have the sum of the gospel.'<sup>59</sup> Fixed on this blissful centre believers could rest and find certainty.

Third, the Protestant Reformation laid a new stress on the New Testament teaching as to the priesthood of all believers. The God who had manifested Himself in Christ was accessible to every believing man. Again, by this rediscovery were dispelled the popular beliefs as to the power of Pope and priesthood to bar the way to God. 'At the Eucharist,' says Luther, 'we all kneel beside our priest or minister, and around him, men and women, young and old, master and servant, mistress and maid, all holy priests together, sanctified by the blood of Christ. We are there in our priestly dignity . . . We do not let the priest proclaim for himself the ordinance of Christ; but he is the mouthpiece of us all, and we all say it with him in our hearts with true faith in the Lamb of God who feeds us with His Body and Blood.'

The re-statement of the central gospel at the time of the Reformation included the revivification of the New Testament doctrine of the Church. The appeal to the revealed will of God as contained in the Scriptures proved that the principle governing any definition of the limits of the Church must be the Gospel, the Word of God which it proclaims and which ever creates it anew. The Word of God is primarily Jesus Himself, the Incarnate Lord. This evangel is proclaimed and heard in the congregation. It is also set forth in the Sacraments, where it is the visible word (*verbum visibile*). The Sacraments are Sacraments of the Gospel. The essential thing in them is not what we say and do in them but what God in Christ says and does in them. Accordingly the Church on earth, as the Augsburg Confession defined it, is 'the congregation of saints in which the Gospel is purely taught and the Sacraments rightly administered.'<sup>60</sup> By the 'congregation of the saints' the Reformers mean the whole company of believers. The presence of hypocrites or unbelievers in the Church does not destroy its true character as the community of those who have faith. Luther saw as early as 1513 that this was what St Paul meant by 'saints'. He speaks often of the Church as 'the communion of saints' and regarded it as the living fellowship indwelt by the Spirit of God, 'where one labours for another as one member in the body for another'.

It was a tragedy that after this bold proclamation of forgotten truths, the heralds of such a message were regarded as heretics, and cast out of the official Church. As a result, the whole visible structure of the Church was changed. There have come into existence a number of separated 'Churches', of which the Methodist Church is one. Since the early sixteenth century most of the various communities in Western Christendom have formulated their message in confessions of faith, which have had a potent influence on subsequent religious history. Thus the faith of the Lutheran Church is formulated in the Augsburg Confession (1530), that of the Reformed Church in various other confessions, the chief of which, perhaps, are the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), and the Westminster Confession of the Scottish Presbyterians (1647). So, too, the Anglican Church formulated the Thirty-nine Articles (1562), and the Roman Church itself became a community of this type by the adoption of the decrees of the

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<sup>59</sup> *Commentary on Acts*, viii. 35.

<sup>60</sup> Art. vii. Compare the *Thirty-nine Articles*, Art. xix.

Council of Trent (1545-1563). When Methodism came into being a special emphasis was laid on its evangelical witness by the choice of Wesley's *Notes on the New Testament* and the first four volumes of his sermons as containing the evangelical doctrines, to which the Methodist preachers were pledged.

### 3. THE PLACE OF METHODISM WITHIN THE ONE CHURCH OF GOD

At this point it is fitting that we should indicate the relation in which Methodism stands to the one Church of God. Within that one Church Methodism has undoubtedly been from its birth. Like the other communions which arose in Protestantism it was begotten by the Word of God. John Wesley regarded the movement which he led as raised up by God to 'spread Scriptural Holiness throughout the land'. In its message, the Fatherhood of God, and the Deity both of the atoning Saviour and of the witnessing and sanctifying Spirit, came to be freshly recognised, in contrast to the Deism and Socinianism which were prevalent in eighteenth century England. Fresh emphasis was laid on certain neglected truths:- the exceeding sinfulness of sin, the universality and completeness of the redemption wrought by Christ, the necessity of the New Birth. In the name of Jesus Christ the Methodist preachers offered a free, full, and present salvation based on the sacrifice of the Cross, bestowed on condition of repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ, and certified inwardly by the witness of the Spirit of God, outwardly by a life of holy obedience and love. This was also the message of the other Methodist Churches united with the Wesleyan Methodists in 1932.

Particular stress has always been laid on three features of the original message, – (1) the doctrine of Assurance, or the Witness of the Spirit, that is, the personal certainty of the forgiveness of sins and of restored sonship; (2) the need for believers to press on towards holiness or perfect love, a goal that is attainable in this earthly life; (3) the practice of Christian fellowship. With all their failures to rise to the height of their calling, Methodists are still profoundly conscious of their unexhausted mission.

It was the desire and intention of John Wesley and his brother that the Societies which they organized and tended should be closely linked with the Church of England, within which the Movement had originated. But the Methodist Societies were never an integral part of the Church of England.<sup>61</sup> It is therefore incorrect to declare that those Societies 'separated' from the Church of England, without far-reaching qualifications.

The movement was regarded with suspicion, hostility or indifference by most of the bishops and the clergy of the Church of England in the eighteenth century. As early as 1738 John Wesley was, as he said,<sup>62</sup> 'almost universally excluded from the pulpits of the Established Church.' He based his action in preaching in the parishes, both in the open air and in meeting-houses, against the will of the parochial clergy, on his authorization to preach received at his ordination,<sup>63</sup> and also on his position as a Fellow of Lincoln College. None the less, his action did not conform to the order of

<sup>61</sup> Overton and Relton, *History of the English Church* (1906, 1924), vii. 6, 74-75; J. S. Simon, *John Wesley and the Advance of Methodism* (1925), 149-151; so Dr J. H. Rigg, whom Dr Simon quotes.

<sup>62</sup> Overton and Relton, vii. 77; cf. Simon, *John Wesley and the Advance of Methodism*, 33.

<sup>63</sup> Letter to C. Wesley, June 23, 1739.

the Church of England. Wesley's principle was, 'Church or no Church, we must attend to the business of saving souls'. Or rather, as he said elsewhere, he would keep in view the interests of Christ's Church in general, and of practical religion; not considering the Church of England, or the cause of Methodism, but as subordinate thereto.<sup>64</sup>

Further, Wesley laid great stress on sacramental worship in the parish churches. But Methodists were frequently repelled from the Lord's Table, and this became one of the reasons which led Wesley, and after his death the Conferences to authorize some of the preachers to administer the Sacraments.

A third factor in the situation was the conviction born in Wesley's mind as the result of his reading of Lord King's book<sup>65</sup> that the New Testament knew no distinction between *episcopos* and *presbyteros*, and that therefore he was 'a scriptural *episcopos* as much as any man in England or in Europe'. Acting on this conviction he ordained superintendents and presbyters for America, when he failed in his efforts to induce the Bishop of London to ordain. Later, he ordained presbyters for Scotland and England. Again it was the need for the Word and the Sacraments which influenced his action. In the fourth place, there were large numbers among the early Methodists who had no spiritual home; there were many others who had been Dissenters. To all these, already outside the Established Church, the rules of Anglicanism meant nothing.

Thus in spite of Wesley's ardent desire that the societies should be within the Church of England, Methodism was compelled to become a distinct religious community. It was guilty of no 'schism'.

Methodists can never surrender the conviction that the evangelical revival in the eighteenth century was the work of God. Methodism has been vouchsafed the fruits of the Spirit, in evangelization, in religious experience, and in the lives of its children. However far its adherents have fallen short of the perfect love to which all Christians are called, their avowed ideal has been to be 'the friends of all, and the enemies of none' who own the one Lord and the one faith.

The Methodist Church, like other world-wide communities within the one Church, cannot be content with the present broken communion of Christendom. Not one of these communities can legitimately claim to be the whole of the Catholic Church on earth. Neither are these separate communities analogous to the local 'church' in primitive Christianity. Today the Church of Christ on earth means all the believers, in whatever community they are found, who confess Jesus as Lord, to the glory of God the Father. We acknowledge that all the communities which make this confession and maintain it among their members, whether the Roman Catholic, Orthodox Eastern, Lutheran, Reformed, Presbyterian, Anglican or Free Churches may humbly claim to belong to the Body of Christ.

### III. AFFIRMATIONS

1. God, who has given us the Gospel for the salvation of the world, has appointed His Church to witness by life and word to its redeeming power. Through His revelation in Jesus Christ He has called His people to live under His rule and to be the

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<sup>64</sup> Letter to S. Walker, September 3, 1756.

<sup>65</sup> *An Enquiry into the Constitution, Discipline, Unity, and Worship of the Primitive Church*; published in 1691.

instrument of His eternal purpose. The Church of the living God rests ultimately not on the will of men, whether as individuals or societies, but on the creative will of God. As members of the Church, men have freely and gladly rendered their consent to the call of their Father, but it was His choice of them and not their choice of Him, that is the origin and renewing power for the life of the Church. Of this Church Jesus Christ is the Head, the Holy Spirit its continuing life.

2. The Church of Christ on earth is a redeemed society of believers, whose duty and privilege it is to share in the gift of the Holy Spirit, and to enjoy that communion with God the Father which has been granted in the forgiveness of sins through our Lord Jesus Christ. As they share in that gift, so they share in their allegiance to Jesus Christ who gave it; they share in that message not only by preaching Christ, by worshipping Christ in the Sacraments and assemblies for fellowship, but also by shewing forth Christ in daily life. The mission of the Church is to be the instrument of God's purpose for mankind; to multiply the number of those redeemed persons who share the gift of the Spirit and reveal the power of God in their lives; to bring every human activity into the obedience of Christ; and, as a sacramental society, to testify that ordinary life may be holy, and that the common things of God's creation may be the revelation and tokens of His love. The message of the Gospel is to be carried by the Church to every creature; all men and nations, all races and classes, are to be reconciled by the power of the Cross of Christ to God and to one another. The age-long task of the Church will be to build up all its members, thus redeemed, in holiness and perfect love, and so to prepare for the coming of the Kingdom in glory.

3. The Church today is gathered for the most part in certain denominations or 'Churches'. These form but a partial and imperfect embodiment of the New Testament ideal. They are already one in Christ Jesus; they have not to create that unity; it is there; and it is the gift of God. But it is their duty to make common cause in the search for the perfect expression of that unity and holiness which in Christ are already theirs.

4. In the light of the foregoing description of the nature of the Church, it is clear that the full Christian life can only be lived in fellowship, and within the communion of the Christian Church. It is the privilege and the duty of Christian people to honour its ordinances, especially the public preaching of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments, to claim their inheritance in the rich and varied traditions of worship, sanctity, and missionary ardour which come down to us from its past, and to make common cause with all who own allegiance to our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ in spreading the gospel of universal reconciliation throughout the world.

5. While the true life of the Methodist Church consists in its fellowship with the whole Church of God, as already described, it possesses those marks whereby, since the days of the Apostles, the Church has been known of men. Such are: the possession and acknowledgement of the Word of God as given in Scripture, and as interpreted by the Holy Spirit to the Church and to the individual; the profession of faith in God as He is incarnate and revealed in Christ; the observance of the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper; and a ministry for the pastoral office, the preaching of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments. But while the nature of the Christian Church must be described by what it has, as well as by what it is, the real significance of what it is can only be understood when its members manifest that living faith which is fellowship with God and Jesus Christ His Son, and which is expressed in prayer, in worship, in all the means of grace, in the acceptance of the task to preach the gospel to every creature, in the pursuit of holiness, and in the service of love to all mankind.

6. The Church is an institution, pervaded by the Holy Spirit, whose members are enabled and inspired by His presence to share with one another all that they have received from God. Nothing makes this function of the Church more clearly manifest to those who are outside than the extension of this activity to include not only the faith and the consolations, the rites and the ministry of the Church, but also all that its members could value in the material means for human well-being, alike in mind, body and estate. Moreover, just as the Church recognizes the paramount duty of evangelization, whereby its spiritual gifts and possessions are imparted to others, and others are drawn into its fellowship with the Father and the Son, so in the name of Him who bore the griefs and carried the sorrows of mankind it must set itself to work the works of God in combating disease and poverty, ignorance and vice, and the whole mass of social evil in the world. This activity may involve far-reaching changes in the structure of society. But since self-seeking and callousness and greed are the contradictory of the spirit of the followers of Christ, the Church is of necessity set under our Lord to be both the critic and the saviour of the world, the corrupt society which 'lies in the evil one' and yet is the object of the love of God. It cannot rest, therefore, until, at whatever cost to itself, that society has been transformed.

7. Since the Gospel brings victory over sin and death, God has knit together the whole family of the Church in heaven and on earth in the communion of saints, united in the fellowship of service, of prayer, and of praise; and the Church on earth looks forward to the vision of God, the perfect consummation of its present fellowship in the life of heaven.

*(Agenda 1937, pp. 365-402)*

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The above statement was superseded in 1999 by *Called to Love and Praise* (see Volume 2, pp. 1-59).