
Methodism— A Movement of the Spirit

by Frank Bateman Stanger

In his volume *The Church of the Spirit*, Francis G. Peabody, late professor of Christian Morals in Harvard University, draws a clear and decisive line between what he terms “the church of authority” and “the church of the Spirit.” “The church of authority” is adhered to by those who are primarily concerned with a dogmatic expression of Christianity in an institution. “The church of authority” is a visible church, characterized by stability, continuity, and legality. “The church of authority” proposes the way of conformity as the test of Christian loyalty, and insists upon the acceptance of the Christian religion as a governmental scheme.

In contrast to “the church of authority” there has co-existed with it through all the years of Christian history another type of faith and fellowship which may be spoken of as “the church of the Spirit.” This “church of the Spirit” offers a form of discipleship less easily defined because it is progressive, expanding, and spiritual. To “the church of the Spirit,” the most precious incidents of Christian history may not be those of theological development or ecclesiastical transition, but those of religious revival—the testimony of saints and seers, the experience of holy souls, the convincing evidence of the life of God in the souls of men.

“The church of the Spirit” has been described as an inflowing, refreshing, penetrating tide. “The church of the Spirit,” in subordinating opinions to obedience and dogmatics to loyalty, makes the audacious assertion that often “the church of authority,” in its institutional procedure, has been tempted to take the wrong

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road; making central what was incidental, setting logic before life; speculation before inspiration, the letter before the Spirit.

Peabody contrasts “the church of authority” with “the church of the Spirit” in these significant descriptive words:

Here, then, are two ways of Christian loyalty—the way of conformity and the way of consecration; the acceptance of the Christian religion as a governmental scheme, and the recognition of the Christian religion as a spiritual experience The fundamental difference is not so much in the desire for discipleship as in the way of approach to discipleship. One way is through intellectual consent; the other is through volitional consecration. To the one the chief agent of faith is the mind; to the other it is the will. The one teaching begins: he that knoweth the doctrine shall do the will; the other begins: whosoever willeth to do the will shall know of the doctrine.”¹

To the student of the New Testament it appears evident that Jesus Christ came not primarily to found an institution but to redeem and inspire personal and social life. Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom of God. All about Him were the demands for conformity; before Him was the vision of a spiritual Kingdom. His temporal fate was determined by “the church of authority” of his day; but His eternal Messiahship was indissolubly linked to “the church of the Spirit.” Jesus came not to destroy but to fulfil; not to contend with “the church of authority,” but to convert it into a “church of the Spirit.”

The New Testament ideal of the church is intensely spiritual. Even though the church was instituted by Jesus Christ during His earthly ministry, it was constituted by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. The early church was a Spirit-filled, a Spirit-empowered, a Spirit-guided, a Spirit-used body of Christian believers. The early church grew as the Spirit of God was active in His operations upon individuals and society.

The New Testament doctrine of the church is centered in its spiritual quality. Paul’s concept of the church is that of a social organism in which the Spirit of Christ prevails. He speaks of the church as the Body of Christ (Rom. 12:5; I Cor. 12:27; Eph. 1:23, 4:12; Col. 1:24, 2:19). To Paul the church is also the Bride of Christ (Eph.

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5:23,25; II Cor. 11:2). The present relationship of Christ to the church is one of spiritual betrothal. But God's redemptive purposes are focused cosmically on the Marriage Supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:7).

Admission into the church of Jesus Christ is a spiritual transaction. Paul declares: "For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit" (I Cor. 12:13). And the invitation to membership in the church is always sounded in spiritual overtones: "And the Spirit and the Bride say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely" (Rev. 22:17).

Just as truly the objective of the church's activity is spiritual in its emphasis. Paul speaks of this spiritual objective in his words to the Christians in Ephesus and vicinity:

There is one body, and one Spirit And He gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ²

The New Testament ideal of the church as "the church of the Spirit" may be summarized in the words of A. E. Garvie: "The church is not any ecclesiastical organization or social institution of man's devising and founding. It is an ever-continued divine creation; it is the society of all who believe in Christ as Saviour and Lord, and possess the Spirit of God."³

The spiritually-minded historian immediately recognizes those periods and personages in Christian history when "the church of the Spirit" manifested itself in outbursts of spiritual revival and in tides of creative spiritual activity. Only the briefest mention of but a few of the outstanding appearances of "the church of the Spirit" after the age of the Apostles must suffice.

George Matheson call Montanism "the Methodism of the second century." Tertullian, the most vigorous mind among Christians of the third century, found himself repelled by the moral laxity of "the church of authority," and committed himself to that which

reaffirmed the life of “the church of the Spirit.”

St. Augustine is a spiritual paradox. “There were two men in this Doctor of the Church,” wrote Sabatier, “the son of Monica and the orthodox bishop, the man of the Spirit and the man of authority.”⁴ The subtle discriminations of Augustine’s ecclesiastical imperialism strengthened the foundations of “the church of authority”; but his humble confessions of penitence and pardon have given him a more universal and permanent leadership in “the church of the Spirit.”

None can read the moving stories of Peter Waldo, the prosperous merchant of Lyons who literally gave up all for Christ, and of St. Francis of Assisi, the founder of a new Order to bring back the apostolic spirit, without being convinced of their true membership in “the church of the Spirit.” The Dominican monk Eckhart applied himself to revive the “divine spark” within a man which links him with God. The sermons of Tauler, the *Imitation of Christ* of Thomas á Kempis, and the *Theologia Germanica* still speak to the spiritual experience of lives for whom the dictates of the hierarchy have become meaningless or silent.

During the Reformation and post-Reformation periods it was the “heretics” who kept aflame the light of the Spirit. Wyclif in England, Hus in Bohemia, the Anabaptists in Switzerland, the Puritans and The Society of Friends in England and later in the New World—all proclaimed a religion of the Spirit and made their direct appeals to the individual conscience and the experience of the soul.

All of this has been intended as an historical background against which to declare the truth that the Wesleyan Revival in eighteenth century England marked a dramatic and decisive appearance of “the church of the Spirit.” A study both of the religious experiences of the leaders of the Wesleyan Revival and of the activities inspired and sustained by that Revival clearly stamps Methodism as a movement of the Spirit. In the words of Peabody: “The teaching of John Wesley . . . though it has become perpetuated in a great organization, was essentially, not so much an achievement of statesmanship, as a call to spiritual experience.”⁵ In reality, neither the life of Wesley himself nor the Methodist Revival, of which he was the prime human mover, can be understood apart from the relationship of each to the Holy Spirit.

John Wesley’s religious quest was a search for “a religion of the Spirit.” It is impossible to understand the first thirty-five years of his life without viewing those years as a personal and passionate quest

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for spiritual experience and satisfaction. He wanted above all else “a religion of the Spirit.” He was greatly impelled in his quest by the writings of Thomas à Kempis who emphasized the inwardness of religion; of Jeremy Taylor who accentuated purity of intention; and of William Law who insisted upon the whole-heartedness of religion. Wesley’s fruitless years as a missionary in the New World revealed dramatically the spiritual barrenness of his soul and his hunger for inner spiritual reality.

Some of his conversations with the Moravian Peter Böhler, in the weeks just prior to his Aldersgate experience, are expressive of this intensive quest for personal spiritual certitude. Wesley writes, under date of May 12, 1738:

When I met Peter Böhler again, he consented to put the dispute upon the issue which I desired, namely, Scripture and experience. I first consulted the Scripture. But when I set aside the glosses of men, and simply considered the words of God, comparing them together, endeavoring to illustrate the obscure by the plainer passages; I found they all made against me, and was forced to retreat to my last hold, ‘that experience would never agree with the literal interpretation of those scriptures. Nor could I therefore allow it to be true, till I found some living witnesses of it.’ He replied, he could show me such any time; if I desired it, the next day. And accordingly, the next day he came again with three others, all of whom testified, of their own personal experience, that a true, living faith in Christ is inseparable from a sense of pardon for all past, and freedom from all present, sins. They added with one mouth, that this faith was the gift, the free gift, of God; and that He would surely bestow it upon every soul who earnestly and perseveringly sought it. I was now thoroughly convinced; and by the grace of God, I resolved to seek it unto the end: 1. By absolutely renouncing all dependence, in whole or in part, upon my own works or righteousness; on which I had really grounded my hope of salvation, though I knew it not, from my youth up. 2. By adding to the constant use of all the other means of grace, continual prayer for this very thing, justifying, saving faith, a full reliance on the blood of Christ shed for me; a trust in Him as my Christ, as my sole justification, sanctification, and redemption.”⁶

Wesley's spiritual quest was abundantly satisfied in a profound religious experience which took place on May 24, 1738, which is known as his "Aldersgate experience." With an inspiration that is both abiding and illuminating his own words are vibrant with a sense of inner spiritual satisfaction:

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's Preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation: and an assurance was given me, that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."⁷

The spiritual content of Wesley's "Aldersgate experience" was the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. He was truly a man "born of the Spirit." And this spiritual re-birth had been "Not an opinion, neither any number of opinions put together, be they ever so true. It is the vision of the soul, the power by which spiritual things are apprehended, just as material things are ascertained by the physical senses."

As an immediate result of this inner experience of regeneration there began to be realized in Wesley's mind and heart the Scripture truth of "the witness of the Spirit." "The Spirit . . . beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God" (Rom. 8:16). Before Aldersgate, Wesley did not really know; but at Aldersgate "an assurance was given" him.

Soon Wesley formulated his doctrine of "the Witness of the Spirit." To Wesley "the Witness of the Spirit" did not consist primarily of rationalization or emotion or imagination. Rather it is, to use his own words:

An inward impression on the soul, whereby the Spirit of God immediately and directly witnesses to my spirit, that I am a child of God; that Jesus Christ hath loved me, and given Himself for me; that all my sins are blotted out, and I, even I, am reconciled to God."⁸

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In all his preaching and writing Wesley emphasized personal, spiritual living. The Christian walks “not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.” In his Sermon on “The Holy Spirit” he discusses the primary work of the Holy Spirit in relation to the Christian believer:

What is most necessary, is, to be sure, as to ourselves, that we are ‘passed from death unto life’; to keep our bodies pure and undefiled, and let them reap that health which flows from a magnanimous patience, and the serene joys of devotion . . . but the light that most necessarily attends it is a light to discern the fallacies of flesh and blood, to reject the irreligious maxims of the world, and to practise those degrees of trust in God, and love to men The object which this light brings us most immediately to know, is ourselves; and by virtue of this, one that is born of God, and has a lively hope, may indeed see far into the ways of providence, and farther yet into the Holy Scriptures⁹

Wesley’s sermons reveal his thoughts concerning the spiritual nature of the life of the believer. The Christian has “crucified the flesh.” The Christian manifests “the fruit of the Spirit.” The Christian is characterized by “holiness of conversation.” The Christian is careful to avoid “grieving the Holy Spirit.” And the Christian is “sealed by the Holy Spirit.” Wesley is careful to explain what he means by this “seal of the Holy Spirit”:

We are sealed by the Holy spirit of God, by our receiving his real stamp upon our souls: being made the partakers of the divine nature

We are sealed by the Holy Spirit unto the day of redemption, as a sign of God’s property in us, and as a mark that we belong to Christ.

The Holy Spirit within us, is the security of our salvation; he is likewise an earnest of it, and assures our spirits that we have a title to eternal happiness.¹⁰

Wesley’s entrance into this “religion of the Spirit” through his “Aldersgate experience” and his resulting “life in and through the Spirit” led him to his distinctive emphasis upon sanctification, holiness, Christian perfection. Time and time again he affirmed that

the distinctive note of Methodism was to be found in its insistence upon holiness of heart and life. Wesley wrote:

Christian Perfection is the grand depositum which God has lodged with the people called Methodist; and for the sake of propagating this chiefly he appeared to have raised us up."¹¹

Wesley is clear in his analysis of the content of Christian Perfection. It is neither divine perfection, nor angelic perfection, nor Adamic perfection. It is neither freedom from ignorance, nor from mistakes, nor from infirmities, nor from temptation. It is not exemption from the necessity of Christian discipline nor from the obligation of doing good. Rather

it is purity of intention, dedicating all the life to God. It is the giving God all our heart; it is one desire and design ruling all our tempers. It is the devoting, not a part, but all, our soul, body, and substance to God

It is all the mind which was in Christ, enabling us to walk as Christ walked. It is the circumcision of the heart from all filthiness, all inward as well as outward pollution. It is a renewal of the heart in the whole image of God, the full likeness of Him that created it

It is the loving God with all our heart, and our neighbor as ourselves.¹²

And from the very nature of the case such a realization of Christian Perfection is an inner experience, made possible through the activity of the Holy Spirit within the human personality. In this connection Wesley described Christian Perfection as

that habitual disposition of the soul which, in sacred writings, is termed holiness; and which directly implies, the being cleansed from sin, 'from all filthiness both of flesh and spirit'; and by consequence, the being endued with those virtues which were also in Christ Jesus; the being so 'renewed in the spirit of our mind' as to be 'perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect.'¹³

Not only were Wesley's doctrines of Christian experience and

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Christian living Spirit-centered, but also his views concerning the Christian church. Wesley's answer to the question "What is the Church?" leaves no doubt as to his spiritual convictions:

The catholic or universal church is all the persons in the universe whom God hath so called out of this world as to entitle them to the preceding character; as to be 'one body,' united by 'one Spirit,' having 'one faith, one hope, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in them all.'¹⁴

Certainly, even such a hurried summary as this of the prominence of the Person and work of the Holy spirit in the life and ministry of John Wesley and in the religious revival which he fathered in eighteenth century England is convincing proof of the truthfulness of the declaration that Methodism in its origin and genius was truly a movement of the Spirit. How aptly Mr. Wesley confirms this in his statement of the true reason for the establishment of the Methodist Societies:

Such a Society is no other than 'a company of men, having the form and seeking the power of Godliness, united in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they may help each other to work out their salvation.'¹⁵

Methodism in the deepest sense is truly a movement of the Spirit. This is both its genesis and its genius. It follows inevitably that for Methodism to be fully effective in any given set of historical circumstances or at any particular period of time it must be true to its original genius of spirituality. Whenever and however it is viewed, Methodism must be seen as truly a movement of the Spirit.

That this is a valid critique for Methodism's continuing judgment upon itself was confirmed in the founder's own words as he tried to view Methodism's future, distant scene. In his "Thoughts upon Methodism" Mr. Wesley wrote:

I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America: but I am afraid lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the

form of religion without the power. And this undoubtedly will be the case unless they hold fast both the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out.¹⁶

Here, then, seems to be the all-important question: is contemporary Methodism true to its genius as a movement of the Spirit? does present-day Methodism deserve to be called “living?” There are certain sins which are peculiar to “a church of the Spirit,” and modern Methodism must examine its life and activities in relation to them.

Whereas the greatest internal danger to “a church of authority” is that of non-conformity, the sins of “a church of the Spirit” are to be sought in spiritual defections and moral delinquencies. To “the church of the Spirit” the unpardonable sin is the apostasy of spiritual life. Peabody, in the volume already referred to, mentions four sins peculiar to “the church of the Spirit”: spiritual illiteracy; spiritual complacency; spiritual indolence; spiritual intolerance.

Are “the people called Methodists” in our day evidencing the sin of spiritual illiteracy? Spiritual illiteracy does not refer primarily to academic ignorance. Rather it has reference to a lack of spiritual-mindedness. The spiritually-illiterate person lacks susceptibility to spiritual influences and insight for spiritual realities. To quote from Peabody:

He may contend for the faith once delivered to the saints without appropriating the faith which made them saints. He may know much about religion without having much religion of his own. He may be learned in the letter and illiterate in the Spirit. He may be so preoccupied as a theologian with the proofs of God that he overlooks the evidence of his own religious life.¹⁷

The sin of spiritual illiteracy eventually means the hardening of the spiritual arteries and the decline of spirituality.

Is there any evidence of the sin of spiritual complacency in contemporary Methodism? The possessor of professed spiritual life dare not permit any self-contained ecstasy to cause himself to be set apart from ordinary life. A. E. Garvie reminds us that “it is a vital interest of the church, whether its rulers at the time recognize it or not, that it should be led by the Spirit of truth into the interpretations

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and applications of the Gospel which will answer the questions and meet the needs of the world, in which it is to bear its witness, and do its work.”¹⁸

Is there any Methodist proneness to the sin of spiritual indolence? Is the grace of God so graciously received that the recipient relaxes all tension of spiritual effort? Are moral heroism and ethical doing missing in our contemporary religious manifestations?

The church, as an organism, deserves to be called “living” only as it adjusts itself to its environment, or its environment to itself. If it fails to do one or the other it dies. To use the expression of Garvie: “There must be self-adaptation for self-preservation.¹⁹ The church cannot affect a world by which it is unaffected. The church is “living” in the measure in which it is influencing and being influenced by the world. The life of the church is preserved both by progress and permanence.

In this connection Garvie points out that

The fulness of the life of an organism, however, depends on the range of environment to which it relates itself: the wider its environment the richer is its life. The more points of contact it has with the world around, the more abundant content will it have in itself The church will live most that relates itself most widely to the world The church must seek to relate itself as an organism, as an organ of religious and moral life, as far as possible, to the totality of its environment in the world.²⁰

It must be realized, however, that in its attempt to avoid the sin of spiritual indolence the church may go too far in the opposite direction. To return to the figure of Garvie, self-adaptation to the world may go too far to be consistent with self preservation. And here we discover the worldly church whose worldliness becomes as tragic a sin as the spiritual indolence it seeks to circumvent.

The church must beware of worldliness. It is not to be “conformed to this world,” either in its objectives, or moods, or methods, or standards of judgment, or quality of life. A church which conforms to the world is a spiritually impotent church. Arnold Toynbee has intimated that the Christian Church may have “sold out” to science and materialism as long as three centuries ago. A worldly church is ineffective in its attempted impact upon the society of which it is a

part. As a modern writer has declared: "The witness of the church is too often feeble and impotent. It has little influence upon public opinion, partly because so many Christians have surrendered their right to speak. They have become conformed to the age."

And what about the last mentioned sin, that of spiritual intolerance? Spiritual intolerance has been described as "the sin of small minds in their dealings with great themes." John Wesley urged upon all his followers a truly catholic spirit. His words have made an indelible impression upon all thoughtful minds:

Every wise man, therefore, will allow others the same liberty of thinking which he desires they should allow him; and will no more insist on their embracing his opinions, than he would have them to insist on his embracing theirs. He bears with those who differ from him, and only asks him with whom he desires to unite in love that single question, 'Is thy heart right, as my heart is with thy heart?'²¹

The observant and thoughtful person must answer this question: Is contemporary Methodism true to its genius as a movement of the Spirit? What is the outcome of the battles between this "church of the Spirit" and the sins of spiritual illiteracy, or spiritual complacency, of spiritual indolence, and of spiritual intolerance?

Upon those who sincerely believe that Methodism is triumphant in its contemporary spiritual warfare there rests heavily the ever-increasing responsibility to help keep Methodism deeply conscious of its obligation to be true to its genius as a movement of the Spirit. And the God of grace and of glory will pour His power upon His people, granting them wisdom and courage for the facing of this hour.

Upon any who may just as sincerely feel anguish of heart because of what they view as spiritual defections in contemporary Methodism there shine bright rays of hope and promise. To use the words of W. E. Sangster, "Methodism can be born again." And how is it possible for this ecclesiastical re-birth to take place? Ponder, in conclusion, these further words by this Greatheart of the Christian Faith:

Here, then, is a task for everyone who sees the need of it—that first things shall be first in Methodism: that religion is

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not just meetings; that the worship of God, the pursuit of holiness, the culture of the soul, and the saving of the people, shall be our chief occupation; that, however hard pressed the church may be financially, spiritual things shall be at its center and that we would rather close the doors than give the primacy to anything else.²² ■

Footnotes

¹Francis G. Peabody, *The Church of the Spirit* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1925), pp. 37, 39.

²Ephesians 4:4, 11-13.

³Alfred E. Garvie, *The Preachers of the Church* (New York: George H. Doran Co., nd.), p. 13.

⁴"Essay on the Over-Soul" (edited 1875), quoted in *The Church of the Spirit*, p. 63.

⁵Peabody, *The Church of the Spirit*, p. 80.

⁶John Wesley, *Journal*, May 12, 1738.

⁷*Ibid.*, May 24, 1738.

⁸Sermon on "The Witness of the Spirit," *The Works of The Reverend John Wesley, A.M.*, Vol. I, John Emory, ed. (3rd. Am. ed., New York: Methodist Book Concern, nd.), p. 87.

⁹*Ibid.*, Sermon on "The Holy Spirit," Vol. II, p. 535.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, "Grieving the Holy Spirit," Vol. II, pp. 518, 519.

¹¹Sermon on "Thoughts upon Methodism," 1768, *The Works of The Reverend John Wesley, A.M.*, Vol. XIII, Thomas Jackson, ed. (3rd. ed., London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1831), p. 9.

¹²John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (New York: Lane and Scott, 1848), pp. 171, 172.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁴Sermon "Of the Church," *Works*, Vol. II, p. 157.

¹⁵"The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies," *Discipline of the Methodist Church*, 1956 (New York: Methodist Publishing House, 1957), p. 35.

¹⁶"Thoughts Upon Methodism," *Selections from the Writings of The Reverend John Wesley, M.A.*, Herbert Welch, ed. (New York: Methodist Book Concern, 1918), p. 205.

¹⁷Peabody, *The Church of the Spirit*, p. 108.

¹⁸Garvie, *The Preachers of the Church*, p. 34.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 21.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 24.

²¹"Catholic Spirit," *Works*, Vol. I, p. 348.

²²W. E. Sangster, *Methodism Can Be Born Again* (New York: The Methodist Book Concern, 1938), p. 51.