



Juvenile Journal

Publication of Juvenile Africanity, Imo State University,

Owerri, Nigeria.

ISSN: 2006-7046

Vol.9 No. 9 August 2024

<https://mejhpqs.online/index.php/jjja>

Facing the Present Day Ecclesiological Challenge in Methodist Church Nigeria: Lessons from our Wesleyan Heritage

Nwaike, Kingsley Raphael PhD.

Wesley University Ondo, Nigeria.

Abstract

The bid to survive the massive progress being made by the neo generation churches at the expense of the membership of the mainline churches in Nigeria has left most mainline churches with almost no alternative but to copy those factors that enhance the exceptional growth of the new generation churches. This paper therefore seeks to opine that Methodist church Nigeria, in seeking to face the challenge posed by the neo generation Churches should do that with the consciousness of preserving the distinctive ethos with which Methodism was established (scriptural holiness). More so, John Wesley was indeed a great leader who was able to transform the religious landscape of his time with orderliness desired in worship. The researcher will adopt historical phenomenological research method for this work. The researcher believes that if the church can carefully return to its distinguishing marks, she will not only overcome the challenge facing her but will remain a biblical Church, ready for the coming of our Lord.

Keywords: Wesleyan Heritage, Ecclesiology, Methodist Church, Nigeria, Present Day Challenge

Introduction

The words of John Wesley about the fate of the people called Methodist; best captures the aim of this research. He said “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 the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out.”

Today, we are glad to see that Methodism has not only made tremendous impact in Europe and America but it has also penetrated the African continent with a teeming number of

members. Methodism in Nigeria which Started in 1842 as the premier church in Nigeria still exists with about seventy two (72) Dioceses and twenty (20) Archdioceses. However, Methodist church Nigeria cannot shy away from the obvious fact of losing her members to neo generation churches. This challenge has informed certain moves by the church to recover her lost territories. Some of this move include: the 2007 vision and mission statement of the church, the policy on church planting by conference and the formation of a board to see to the proper training of ministers that will help the church grow spiritually and numerically. These moves which tend to be slow in yielding the desired results may be due to the competitive nature of the Nigerian Christian religious landscape. It is such that ministers or churches that are not ready to scratch where it is itching will be behind. Nigeria as a nation is faced with so many challenges ranging from poverty to political instability. This has made the people susceptible to any wind that sounds an alarm of hope and abundance. This has paved way for some churches to win members by using certain pneumatological manifestations and means that in most cases are not biblical. The words of Ngozi Iheanacho best capture the state of Christianity in Nigeria:

The contemporary Nigerian church is engulfed by the quest for materialism, prevalent in the society. Rather than find solace in the Christian hope of eternal life, signs of total submission to capitalistic tendencies, especially in insatiable material acquisition, looms large in Nigerian churches. Spiritual growth and moral sanctity towards better eternity is fast giving way to material craving, as the 'new idea of fulfilment of life and ultimate reality'.

The big question is what should Methodist church Nigeria do to retain her members, win more souls for Christ and remain active in serving humanity?

Ecclesiological Challenges facing Methodist Church Nigeria:

This paper cannot do justice to all the challenges facing Methodist Church Nigeria however this paper will centre on the obvious challenge of losing her members to new generation churches. This challenge which has been a recurrent decimal in most yearly address of Bishops to synod has led to many Methodist ministers, copying blindly some those factors that enhance the flourishing growth of these new generation Churches without any conscious efforts to sieve the positive out of the negative. "There are scores of congregations and their pastors who have

become debilitated because of unfocused, unrealistic, unbiblical understandings about the nature and purpose of the Church. The early goal of Methodist to ‘spread scriptural holiness throughout the land has become a diffused, poorly defined mandate to be all things to all people.’ Who are we and what are we supposed to be doing as Methodist?

Many Methodist ministers in the name of exercise of pneumatological manifestation give away orderliness which in scripture is necessary for any effective move of the spirit. In 1 Corinthians 14:1-5, 26-33; Paul took time to teach strong biblical principles on orderliness in service. Paul made it clear in 1 Corinthians 14:33 that “God is not an author of confusion.” We are in a dispensation where most Churches in Nigeria have wrongly applied the use of tongues and prophecies as spiritual gifts. As a guide, William Barclay succinctly lay down the aim of all prophecy. It is in threefold. (i) It must aim to build up; to increase a man’s knowledge of Christian truth and his ability to live the Christian life. (ii) It must aim at encouragement. In every group of people there are those who are depressed and discouraged. Within a Christian fellowship, a man should find something to cheer his heart and nerve his arm. A service may begin by humbling a man through showing him his sin,

but it is a failure unless it ends by pointing him to the grace of God that can enable him to conquer it. (iii) It must aim to comfort; in every fellowship they must be people whom life has hurt, they must be able to find beauty for ashes, the oil of Joy for mourning and the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness.

As a participatory observer, who has worshiped in more than 40 Methodist Churches in the East, I have observed that most of our youths are no longer comfortable with the way our services run. Organization is lacking in the way we flow with our order. In most cases, the choir will sing something completely different from the message; the band will take five minutes to start playing after they are invited to lead in songs. In some cases, they may be setting the sound in the course of the service. In some services, the members wander if the bulletin was for the service because items are not followed as written. The time management in most of our services is nothing to write home about. Members stay for over 5 to 6 hours in one service. Some ministers, who attempt the use of prophecy and tongues, do that with a show of pride and pomposity that stirs conflict amongst ministers. If we must make headway, we must go back to history and learn from our founder John Wesley the great organizer.

Our Wesleyan Heritage: a Historical Analysis

The history of the Church in relation to orderliness and its distinctive ethos that qualifies it to retain the name 'Methodist' has been narrowed down by most scholars to the Holy club experience. To the researcher, this goes beyond the holy club experience to the entire 18th century Methodism. The historical analysis can be complicated. This is because, John Wesley had a very high evangelical grace that made him at some times to do things contrary to the Church of England where he pledged his total allegiance, yet he never abandoned his high churchmanship; he was neither here nor there. He was a high church man and also a great evangelist. This double stands of John Wesley has over the years, opened the church to a sort of instability in certain church practice. 'Certain casualness about worship, for instance homeliness and informality carried sometimes to an extreme.'

His ability as a good organizer to balance his evangelical grace in such a way that he was never expelled from the Church of England remains a great lesson for contemporary Methodist. John Wesley had the gift of being a good organizer. This was no doubt one of the reasons why him rather than his brother

Charles or George Whitefield, became the acknowledged leader of the Methodists. His organization ensues from his personal life to corporate organization. He was a priest of the Church of England, yet was able to start and maintain societies which latter metamorphosed to what we know today as Methodist church. In relation to the established church of England, let us analyse John Wesley's societies and see some features that distinguished it from the Church of England and ask ourselves if we still have things that can distinguish us at such a time like this.

The church had Morning Prayer in the latter part of the morning and evening prayer in the afternoon; the societies had simple preaching services at 5am and 5pm. The church had Holy Communion; the societies had love-feast. The church was established, clearly linked with the state and largely governed by the bishop; the society were free from state control and governed by the conference which in effect meant by Mr Wesley. The church has amorphous congregations with virtually no ecclesiastical discipline; the societies were rigorously disciplined bodies with intimate fellowship in society meetings and class meetings. The church, theoretically at least, was the church of the majority of the

population; a society is likely to appeal only to a minority.

The point is that Wesley's organizing ability has produced whether by accident or design, whether by chance or providence, a system easily adaptable for the purposes of Church. 'The Methodist Church today, though clearly recognized as what is called a mainstream denomination, bears clear marks, both in its terminology and in its ethos, of its societary origin.' The question which we must ask ourselves as Methodist is, should such marks be erased for any reason?

Rupert Davies in his book 'Methodism' went further to outline certain characteristics that set apart eighteenth century Methodist. They are summarized thus:

- a. The conviction that doctrine which is not proved in devotion and life and does not issue in practical charity is valueless.
- b. The heart of Christianity lies in the personal commerce of a man with his lord who has saved him and lives in him to change his character.
- c. The stress on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, the person of the Trinity who is often neglected by institutional Christianity.

- d. The desire to make known the gospel and above everything else the love and pity of God for each individual sinner.

- e. The development of a church order in which the laity stands alongside the ministry, with different but equally essential functions.

Rupert went further to observe that 'Methodist theologians have not yet given enough attention to the doctrine of the Holy spirit, where certainly they ought to have something important to say.' Failure to give attention to this summarized concept of scriptural holiness creates room for the practice of private revelation above the Bible which John Wesley was against. Robert Barclay during John Wesley's time said 'revelations are not to be subjected to the examination of the scriptures as to a touchstone' Wesley replied in a letter to Barclay written February 10, 1748, as follows: 'here there is a difference (between Quakerism and Christianity) the scriptures are the touchstone whereby Christians examine all, real or supposed revelations.' He went further to state that 'I began to read the Bible, as the one, the only standard of truth and the only model of pure religion.' Williams has this to say "Reformation and revivals like those led by Wesley seem necessary for the rejuvenation of the Church,

perhaps because the Church is constantly tempted to forsake its God-given mission in favour of a more socially acceptable and comfortable function” Any denomination that lacks agreement about the theological purpose of the church becomes irrational in its efforts to be busy in much activity. Present day Methodists must come back to appreciating and working towards the purpose of the Church.

To conclude our historical survey, we must in practice, trace how the double stands or ability of John Wesley has led to ‘double tradition of worship’ by contemporary Methodist. ‘Methodists who are most in accord to the principles of John Wesley have always been accustomed to use of liturgies from the Anglican Book of Common Prayer and have from time to time produced liturgies closely allied to them’ This has given rise to a group that prefers purely ‘liturgical worship. On the other hand, John Wesley as noted by Nwabara, ‘defied canon laws by spiritually praying extempore.’ This has also given rise to another group within the church that prefers ‘spontaneous worship’. In 1958, the Methodist conference appointed a commission to look into this matter. In 1960, the commission came up with a recommendation that will help both groups by declaring that ‘without the enlivening

operation of the Holy Spirit, all forms of worship are dead.’ This also gave rise to the ‘Methodist service book’, which also suggests ways in which non-liturgical worship can have more meaning. We must at this point, mention that the church over the years has tried to hold together form and spontaneity in worship with the interest of making worship meaningful to all. Therefore any attempt in our contemporary time to make worship a thing of show, a display of self, an act of divination and sorcery which make worship void of its edifying role can never be seen as our Methodist practice.

Lessons from our Wesleyan Heritage:

1. The church from all said above should try to retain the distinctive mark of orderliness which John Wesley laid down for us. Our services should be well organized in such a way that members are not in any way distracted but edified. The church should go back to the days where choir members study the passages for service and come up with corresponding hymns and anthems that drive home the message. We should like John Wesley learn to balance our service to suit the worshiping community and glorify God.
2. In the face of unhealthy prophetic display or poor understanding of biblical prophetism, the church should never fall into

the temptation of accepting people who through fake prophecies rub people of their wealth. The church should not for want of more members or money shift grounds to accommodate unbiblical practices in our services. Members should be thought to 'Do all the good they can, by all the means they can, to all the people they can..... As long as they can.'

3. Just like in the eighteenth century Methodist practice, and Paul's instruction to the Corinthians, the church should in line with her mission; work towards developing spiritually fulfilled members. This should not just be written on our boards and bulletins. Ministers must return back to conscious teaching and discipleship that will make our members to be more like Christ. In the phase of many unbiblical, unfocused and unnecessary practices, teaching not preaching should be emphasized. The church should never aim at entertaining members but enriching their spiritual and physical lives. The church should fight to retain its evangelical and disciplinary distinctive qualities. We should practice more of our early societal qualities as noted above.

4. Finally, the church should encourage members with spiritual gifts to participate in services and use their gifts for the good of all.

Spectator kind of worship should not be tolerated. No man in worship, whether he leads it or shares in it, has any right to direct it according to his own personal preference. He must seek the good for the whole worshiping fellowship. He must lead people closer to each other and also to God.

Conclusion

In this work, we have succeeded in analyzing historically the distinguishing quality of scriptural holiness, orderliness and organization possessed by John Wesley and handed over to us. We have analyzed the present state of our Church where most of these distinguishing qualities are fast fading in our services. We therefore recommend that if the Church must overcome the Challenge of numerical and spiritual decline, she must return to the faith of our fathers. We shall conclude this work, leaning closely to the words of Frank baker and William Willimon e'tal.

'Methodism, having ceased to be part of the Church of England, has inevitably come to resemble more closely the gathered Churches and that is one of the reasons why Methodism has drawn closer to the rest of what are now called free Churches; yet its ethos has features clearly distinguishable from those of the gathered Church, even one with

connexion system such as Presbyterianism. Methodism, like every other church, should seek not only to learn from other churches, but to preserve its distinctive contribution, when we fully make that contribution; I hope that we shall recognize our debt to John Wesley, the organizer.’

William H. Willimon and Robert L. Wilson also said “Wesley channelled the spiritual energy that was ignited through his preaching into an effective, efficient, and functional organization that knew what it was doing and had the structure to do it. Wesley bequeathed to us a heritage that gives us the means of revitalizing today’s Church.”

References

Barclay, William. The letters to the Corinthians; Revised Edition. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1979.

Frank Baker. John Wesley Contemporary Perspectives. Westminster, London: Epworth Press, 1988.

Mack B. Stokes. The Bible in the Wesleyan Heritage. Nashville; Abington Press, 1979.

Ngozi N. Iheanacho “A Critical Look at Contemporary Nigerian Christianity” in International Journal of theology and reformed tradition vol 1. 2009 p104.

Rupert Davies. Methodism. London; COX & Wyman, 1963.

Rupert Davies. What Methodists Believe Nailsea, Bristol: Mowbrays, 1976.

Samuel Nwabara. Plucked from the burning. Enugu; Chuka Printing, 1992.

William H. Willimon & Robert L. Wilson. Rekindling the Flame: Strategies for a Vital United Methodism. Nashville; Abington Press, 1987.

www.Imarc.cc/one_meth/vol-02-no-02.html.
John Wesley “Thoughts of Methodism”
retrieved on Saturday 7th January 2017