

Should United Methodists View Homosexual Conduct as a Matter of *Status Confessionis*?

Finding the Right Historical Analogy

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United Methodists are deeply and apparently irresolvably divided about whether homosexual conduct can ever be compatible with Christian teaching. Given that fact, which shows little sign of changing in the foreseeable future, a painful question arises. Is the contested issue so central to Christian faith that United Methodists should prefer to split the connection rather than yield to the opposing view; or is it one on which United Methodists can agree to disagree while sharing a common connection? To borrow a phrase from our Presbyterian brothers and sisters, does the issue of homosexual conduct rise to the level of *status confessionis*, that is, does it threaten the very integrity of the gospel? If it does, then, of course, United Methodists are obligated to hold fast to the position they regard as correct, and do whatever they can to see that it prevails, even, if need be, at the cost of church division. If not, however, then United Methodists are obligated to preserve church unity in a way that makes room for Christians of opposing views.¹

While one's answer to this question will depend on many considerations, one important factor will likely be the *historical analogies* that one employs to understand the dispute at hand. While unique in certain respects, the contemporary debate about homosexuality also exhibits certain "family resemblances" with other disputed issues of the past and present. These resemblances, in turn, help determine one's view on the topic of Christian teaching and homosexual conduct.

In this essay, I will explore three different analogies that United Methodists can employ to illuminate whether and in what sense the contemporary debate about human sexuality rises to the level of *status confessionis*. Two of these are relatively well known, because they are often invoked, with more or less explicitness, by "traditionalist" and "progressive" United Methodists, respectively.

- The analogy of orthodoxy's struggle against heresy
 - I will illustrate this analogy in this essay by examining the split between Trinitarian British Methodists and the Methodist Unitarian movement in the early 1800s.
- The analogy of liberation's struggle against oppression
 - I will illustrate this analogy by the split between the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South in 1844.

Although usually invoked by opposing sides of the sexuality debate, these two analogies have something important in common: both frame the contested issue as a matter of *status confessionis*. Traditionalists who frame the issue as a matter of maintaining Christian orthodoxy imply that their opponents are (wittingly or not) heretics, just as progressives who frame the issue in terms of human liberation imply that their opponents are (again, wittingly or not) oppressors. In both cases, the historical analogies employed tend to rule out the possibility of good faith compromise. Both make division all but unavoidable.

The last analogy I will explore is what we might call “conscientious disagreement in unity.” A contemporary example concerns the Christian legitimacy of military service. Pacifist Christians are conscientiously and irresolvably divided on this topic from other Christians who subscribe to the possibility of just war. Nevertheless, the Social Principles 164.1 states:

We support and extend the ministry of the Church to those persons who conscientiously oppose all war, or any particular war, and who therefore refuse to serve in the armed forces or to cooperate with systems of military conscription. We also support and extend the Church’s ministry to all persons. This includes those who conscientiously choose to serve in the armed forces or to accept alternative service.²

In effect, The United Methodist Church has determined that the issue of military service, for all its gravity, is not a matter of *status confessionis*, and accordingly the church embraces Christians of opposing convictions and consciences on the matter.

Of the three analogies to be considered in this essay, that of “conscientious disagreement in unity” is, I think, the least well known. I will therefore devote the most space to exploring it. The illustration I have chosen for that purpose comes from a relatively forgotten chapter in the history of early British Methodism, and concerns a dispute about the celebration of the Lord’s Supper in Methodist chapels.

Orthodoxy against Heresy: The Example of Methodist Unitarianism

The early decades of the nineteenth century saw many secessions from the main body of British Methodists, including the Methodist New Connexion (1797), the Band Room Methodists (1805), Independent Methodists (1806), the Primitive Methodist Connexion (1811), Bible Christians (1815), the Tent Methodists (1822), and so on. Because the cause of these divisions was usually a matter of polity and personality and rather than of doctrine or ethics, many were healed once a period of consolidation set in a generation or two later. An exception to this rule is provided by the Methodist Unitarian movement. It deviated from Methodist bodies of all stripes by its express rejection of the doctrine of the Trinity, and never reunited with any branch of Methodism.³

The origins of the movement can be traced to Joseph Cooke, who was born to Methodist parents in Worcestershire in 1795 (the same year in which Methodists settled on “The Pact of Pacification,” described later in this essay). Cooke was active in Methodist societies as a youth and was admitted into full connection as a preacher of the gospel in 1799. In 1805, however, two of his sermons came under attack for containing “unmethodistical” teaching, and he was officially instructed by the Conference of that year “to make the controverted topics a matter of close study for one year” and “not to agitate the points, directly or indirectly, in the pulpit or in private, among our people.”⁴ Finding him in violation of this warning, Conference expelled him from the connection the following year.

Cooke went on to establish his own Methodist-style society and eventually oversaw the construction of a chapel capable of seating seven hundred in the town of Rochdale. In his inaugural sermon, Cooke explained the scriptural and hermeneutical principles that animated his ministry. “This chapel,” he declared, perhaps somewhat naively,

was built and opened, not for the purpose of preaching any system of doctrines taught by any man or number of men whatever, but for the purpose of communicating the truths, which, after a diligent and impartial inquiry, may appear to me to be contained in the Scriptures.⁵

Originally known as “Cookites,” his followers took the name “Methodist Unitarians” after his premature death in 1809. By the middle of the century, the Methodist Unitarian Association had erected chapels in towns throughout northeast Lancashire. Above the door of one chapel was set a stone inscribed with a motto that encapsulated the movement’s confession: “To us there is but one GOD even the FATHER.”⁶

The teaching for which Cooke was originally expelled from the main body of Methodists dealt with assurance of salvation, not the Trinity, and it seems that Cooke was correct, against his accusers, that his views were consistent with John Wesley’s own, at least as the latter held them toward the end of his life.⁷ Nevertheless, if Cooke was already inclined toward Unitarianism in 1806, as the evidence also seems to suggest, then a break between him and Wesleyan Methodism was only a matter of time. For the Wesleys, the doctrine of the Trinity belonged to the essentials of Christian faith. John included its affirmation in the Articles of Religion, and Charles composed what is perhaps the single largest collection of poetry dedicated to its exposition and defense ever to have been written.⁸ The Methodist Unitarians descended from Cooke could not but regard Trinitarian Methodists as captive to fundamental doctrinal error; Trinitarian Methodists could not but look upon Unitarian Methodists in the same light. A break between the two bodies of believers was, it seems, inevitable.

Liberation against Oppression: The Example of Slavery

In early nineteenth-century America, the Methodist Episcopal Church managed the issue of slavery by compromise, allowing for differences of regional practice on the issue. According to the “Compromise Law” of 1816, General Conference forbade Methodist ministers from owning slaves wherever they might be emancipated (i.e., the northern States), but was silent on the obligations of ministers elsewhere (i.e., the southern and southwestern States.) By the mid-1830s, however, many Methodists in the North were dissatisfied with the “Compromise Law.” They maintained that Christianity was opposed to slavery universally and in principal. In 1835, members of the New England and New Hampshire Conferences issued an “Appeal” declaring that “no slaveholder is truly awakened, and that no slaveholder can rightly be permitted a place in the Christian Church.” Southern Methodists issued a counter-appeal, conceding that Christianity was opposed to slavery as a system, but rejecting the inference that slaveholding as such was always a sin.⁹

In defense of their position, southern Methodists pleaded a Christian’s obligation to preserve the unity of the church if at all possible. The Rev. Thomas E. Bond Sr., a veteran lay preacher from Baltimore, argued that slaveholding *per se* was not a church dividing issue.

Secession from a Church is either a sin or a duty. It is a duty when we are required to believe what we think to be untrue, or to do what we believe to be sin, as a condition of membership; and it is a sin to do so for any lighter reason. The Methodist Episcopal Church has required neither the one nor the other condition in respect to slavery; and as the matter of slavery is the ostensible reason for withdrawing, the excuse fails them. Such a rule of duty should be clearly enjoined by the word of God to justify the measure; but this has not been shown, because it can not be shown. Slaveholding itself is nowhere, in terms, forbidden in Scripture, though the practice was general in the time of our Lord and his apostles.¹⁰

Methodists sympathetic to the abolitionist cause were unmoved, even in the face of their opponent’s seemingly unassailable arguments from scripture. When General Conference in 1840,

passed legislation expressly stating that the church's prohibition on owning slaves did not apply in states that disallowed emancipation, the abolitionist wing rebelled. Over ten thousand seceded to form the Wesleyan Methodist Church of America, with non-slaveholding a condition of membership.

Far from quelling the dispute, the secession of 1842, galvanized anti-slavery sentiment among many northerners who remained loyal to the Methodist Episcopal Church. A regional caucus declared that "slaveholding is sin," and that "the Methodist Episcopal Church is responsible for slavery in its pale."¹¹ As this sentiment became more and more widespread, a collision with southern Methodists became inevitable.

The collision came in 1844, at General Conference, which took place in New York City and lasted nearly six weeks. The Conference convened in an uproar because one of the church's bishops, James O. Andrews, a native of Georgia, had recently married a woman who owned a slave and had thus become a slave-owner himself. Crowds packed the building to hear the bitter and prolonged debate between northern and southern Methodists on the subject of slavery. Eventually, the Conference voted 111 to 69 to suspend Bishop Andrew from the exercise of his office until such a time as he should liberate his slave. When southern delegates balked at the decision, Conference appointed a representative committee of northerners and southerners to find a way forward. A few days later, the committee proposed a Plan of Separation, which permitted the annual conferences in slaveholding states to separate from The Methodist Episcopal Church. The Conference approved the Plan of Separation by a vote 135 to 18.¹² Though divided over the issue of slavery, Methodists were in the end nearly unanimous that the time had come to separate.

Conscientious Disagreement in Unity: The Example of the "Plan of Pacification"

Dead on March 2, 1791, John Wesley had not been gone a full two months before the Methodist movement in Britain was convulsed by its first existential crisis. It pitted conservatives against liberals in a bitter battle over Wesley's legacy and the future of the Methodist connection. It unfolded over a period of several years and a succession of demoralizing General Conferences. And it raged at a time when Methodists were already divided in their political views of such dramatic events as the American and French Revolutions and rising international clamor for the rights of man.

At the center of the storm was a dispute over the Lord's Supper: should Methodist preachers be permitted to administer it in Methodist Chapels? Conservative or "Old Plan" Methodists were adamantly opposed to the idea. They maintained that the chapels were for preaching only and that Methodists should receive the sacraments at the Established Church, the Church of England. Liberals or "New Plan" Methodists insisted that the Methodist people should be able to receive the Lord's Supper, as well as baptism, marriage, and burial, from their own preachers in their own chapels without restriction.¹³

Important in itself, the debate about the Lord's Supper raised other fundamental questions, and everyone knew it. For one thing, there was the question of authority: who had the power to decide the issue now that Wesley himself was gone? Even more important, perhaps, was the prospect of separation from the Church of England. Methodists on both sides of the issue knew that as soon as the sacrament was administered in their own meeting houses, the movement's relation to the Church of England would change forever.

By spring 1795, British Methodism was in all-out crisis. All desired unity, but the opposing parties were far apart. A succession of Conferences had failed to resolve the issue, and many feared that the upcoming Conference would end in schism. Yet to the surprise and delight of many (though not all), the Conference of 1795 adopted a compromise plan that effectively resolved the dispute over the Lord's Supper and preserved the unity of the movement (at least for the most part). The compromise, known as "The Plan of Pacification," recognized that Methodists of good conscience stood on both sides of the divisive issue. Its essence was to permit Methodist societies to determine for themselves whether or not to allow the Lord's Supper, according to majority opinion in each local society.

What follows is a brief account of how Methodists, after years of bitter wrangling about the Lord's Supper, came at last to adopt "The Plan of Pacification."

Equivocation: The Conference of July 1791

The issue of the Lord's Supper was already a source of tension among Methodists during the latter years of Wesley's life. Wesley urged the value of the sacrament and encouraged Methodists to receive it whenever possible in the Established Church. But many seldom did so for a variety of reasons, including local hostility toward Methodists, Methodist objections to clergy morals, or other conscientious objections to the rites of the Established Church. Veneration for the beloved old man kept the issue in check during his lifetime, but it was obvious "to all reflecting persons, that, as soon as he should be removed by death, the flame must break out."¹⁴

Indeed, no sooner was Wesley buried than the two opposing sides began to press their case in advance of the Conference of 1791. The trustees of the Methodist chapels at Hull, Birmingham, Sheffield, and other places sent circulars to the other Societies, strongly pressing the need to maintain connection with the Church of England, as Wesley desired. "We cannot consent to have the Sacrament administered among us by the Methodist preachers," read one, "nor to have preaching in the chapel here during the hours of divine service in the church."¹⁵ Other Methodists sent out circulars expressing the opposing view, and the battle was joined.

Confused, in mourning, and incapable of unified action, the General Conference sought to resolve the issue by appeal to Wesley himself. "We engage," the Conference determined, "to follow strictly the plan which Mr. Wesley left us."¹⁶ While ingenious, the resolution had a major defect: the two sides could not agree on what Wesley's plan was. Nor was this surprising, because John Wesley's practice with respect to the administration of the Lord's Supper among Methodists was ambiguous.

"Old Plan" Methodists pointed out that Wesley was always adamant that the non-ordained, no matter how effective as preachers, should not administer sacraments. Since the overwhelming majority of Methodist preachers were not ordained, this precluded the regular celebration of the Lord's Supper in Methodist societies. More fundamentally, Wesley believed that God had raised up the Methodist movement to stimulate a spiritual revival within the Church of England, and that, to effect this purpose, it was necessary to keep as close as possible to the Established Church. "I live and die a member of the Church of England," Wesley had declared, and the Church Methodists (as they were also known) intended to do so, too.

Meanwhile, "New Plan" Methodists believed they had the authority of John Wesley squarely on their side. In the earliest years of the revival, Wesley, though an ordained priest, had been reluctant to administer the Lord's Supper among Methodists, urging them to receive the sacrament in their parishes. When some priests began to turn Methodists away, however, Wesley

changed his practice rather than permit his people to go without the sacrament. Later, believing himself pressed by similar necessity, Wesley broke with ancient church law by himself ordaining a small number of Methodist preachers. For the liberals, Wesley's "plan" had never been to follow a single rigid program, but to follow the guidance of Providence toward greater freedom for the work of revival, unhindered by the dead hand of ecclesiastical tradition.

Social, political, and economic differences also contributed to discord between Old and New Plan Methodists. Sympathy for Old Plan Methodism tended to run high among trustees, who, in addition to having responsibility for erecting and maintaining the Methodist chapels, were often people of social and economic standing. Many shared the Wesley brothers' deep love of the Church of England, and some looked askance at the "leveling" tendencies of thinkers like Thomas Paine, whose doctrines were influential among other younger and more liberal Methodists. For their part, New Plan Methodists sometimes resented what they regarded as the trustee's domination over the worship of the Methodists. They pointed out that many Methodists were too poor to rent pews in the parish church, and were sometimes ordered out when time came for Communion, or were prohibited from entering the church altogether by clergy hostile to Methodism. For these reasons, they maintained, Methodists should be free to receive Communion at their own services.¹⁷

Desperation: The General Conference of July 1792

Methodists assembled for the second General Conference after Wesley's death, in a spirit of great disquiet and agitation. On some issues, they were still capable of taking decisive action. They determined, for example, that no Methodist, no matter his status in the Established Church, should undertake to ordain anyone without prior approval of Conference, although, of course, Wesley himself had done precisely this. On the issue of the Lord's Supper, however, the Conference was at an utter impasse.

Finally, after much wrangling and debate, the Conference resolved in desperation to submit the question to lot. The action was justified by reference to the apostles' method of selecting Matthias to fill the place of Judas (Acts 1:26). The lot was drawn and the words read to a hushed assembly: "You shall not give the Sacrament this year." Neither the method employed nor the result met with universal approbation. Many of those present refused to vote. One Isaac Brown ran out of Conference crying "Shame!" Another contemporary decried the episode as one that would "disgrace Methodism to the end of the world."¹⁸

Nevertheless, once done, the outcome was universally honored by all parties. For the following year, Methodists adhered scrupulously to the rule, which stipulated that "The Lord's Supper shall not be administered by any person among our Societies in England and Ireland, for the ensuing year, on any consideration whatsoever, except in London." The principal Methodist chapel in London was excepted because the sacraments had long been administered there, either by Wesley himself or other ordained clergy of the Established Church, and there was no division of opinion about it. Elsewhere in the connection, administration of the Lord's Supper ceased, even by Anglican clergy who had been accustomed to offer the sacrament in Methodist preaching houses.¹⁹

Experimentation: The Conference of July 1793

The Conference of 1793 convened with no taste for a second recourse to lots. The previous year's decision had been a mere postponement, and now partisans on both sides were ready for

action. Some wished to make permanent the ruling of the previous year, while others declared that they would leave the Methodists if they did not have the sacraments.²⁰

Finally forced to act, the Conference of 1793, had recourse to an experiment in compromise. The Conference resolved to prohibit the preachers from administering the Lord's Supper in any part of the connection, with a single exception: when the local society desired it "unanimously." Even in such cases, which were anticipated to be few, the sacrament was to be offered outside of regular church hours, and according to the form of the Church of England.²¹

Conservative Church Methodists were dismayed by the concession. The trustees of Methodism's oldest chapels, including those in London and Bristol, wrote public letters accusing the Conference of a departure from the original plan of Methodism. Meanwhile, liberal Methodists regarded the decision as a weak half-measure. One Methodist preacher, stationed near Bristol, wrote in private correspondence,

I baptize and bury without control; and last Sunday week I gave the Lord's Supper . . . to about four hundred people, many being there from Bristol. . . . Our Church bigots here dare not molest me. . . . I have not a doubt, that, in the next Conference, a simple majority of any society will be allowed the Lord's Supper and something more than that.²²

Such criticisms notwithstanding, the Conference's action demonstrates the emerging role of a third bloc of Methodists that wanted to find a path forward that would accommodate the concerns of both conservatives and liberals. The outlook of this middle group is reflected in two public letters sent to "The Members of the Methodist Societies" by the presiding officials of the 1793 Conference (John Pawson and Thomas Coke) shortly after its adjournment. While the desire to remain in connection with the Church of England is strongly affirmed, considerable weight is also given to the desire of the people in some societies to receive Communion in their own chapels. When faced with similar dilemmas, the authors pointed out, Wesley himself had "deviated from the Establishment" on grounds of unavoidable necessity. In the present circumstances, the Conference sought to act in such a way as would respect the consciences of all. "For we could not bear that the Sacrament, which was instituted by our Lord as a bond of peace and union, should become a bone of contention."²³

Detonation: The Conference of July 1794

The intense pressures working against the compromise of 1793, became evident the following year, beginning with the Conference of 1794. A large delegation of trustees from various chapels attended the conference, having met previously in London to caucus. Invited to speak, they stressed the importance of cleaving to Methodism's original plan, as they understood it. Meanwhile, the number of societies electing to receive the Lord's Supper was far in excess of what had been anticipated only the year before, and extended now to forty-eight circuits and one hundred eight chapels. The connection was ready to explode, and it needed only a match to ignite it.

As it happened, the match was struck in Bristol, longtime residence of Charles Wesley, that quintessential Church Methodist, and home of Broad Mead chapel, the first society house built by John Wesley. The Bristol trustees were fervent in their desire that the Lord's Supper not be administered in their building, and that local Methodists receive the sacrament in the Established Church only, which was friendly toward Methodists. They desired, moreover, that all the chapels on the Bristol circuit observe the same practice, and so petitioned the Conference that one chapel, which had licensed the sacrament, be transferred to a neighboring circuit. The Conference refused to agree to the trustees' request, but nevertheless sought to meet their

concerns another way. The Conference proposed to appoint to the circuit the Rev. Thomas Vasey, an ordained older of the Church of England, and it was hoped that he could administer the sacrament throughout the circuit without controversy. The Old Plan trustees might have been content with this compromise, but they did not know that the Conference had also assigned a certain Henry Moore to assist Vasey in his duties. Moore was a Methodist preacher but not an Anglican priest. When the trustees learned that Moore had assisted with the Lord's Supper on the Bristol circuit, they promptly sent him a letter declaring him unwelcome to preach or trespass in the Broad Mead chapel. Moore came anyway, and several trustees stood in the pulpit to block him from preaching. Moore departed to preach elsewhere, leading all but a handful of the congregation in his wake.²⁴

The incident at Bristol ignited a firestorm that quickly spread through the whole connection. A pamphleteering war broke out that touched on the Lord's Supper, the rights and duties of trustees, the power of the Conference to appoint preachers, Methodism's relation to the Established Church, the example of John Wesley, and more. Even non-Methodists joined in.

One member of the Church of England sympathetic to the Old Plan Methodists objected to the "theological hand-grenades . . . bitterness, and I might almost say, the blasphemies" employed by New Plan Methodists.²⁵ This did not prevent him from using strong language himself. Ridiculing the "high complimentary stile" the innovators used to refer to John Wesley, he wrote:

You call him your *venerable Father*. —You pronounce him the *best judge of what tends either to the advancement or dissolution of Methodism*. You declare yourselves in the very predicament which he supposed, and you assert that *you have followed his directions*; and all this (who would believe it?) at the very moment that you are treating his most earnest advice with contempt, and trampling his most solemn injunctions under your feet.²⁶

Henry Moore took up the pen in reply. Contending that Wesley, himself, trampled church custom underfoot "whenever the conversion or edification of souls required it," Moore declared:

We will follow his steps. In all these things we will wait the call of Providence, and act accordingly. And we shall see which will prove the "dull, dry, separate part," those who would dragoon [i.e. compel by force] their Brethren to Church, or those who, allowing liberty to all, in those things in which GOD allows, still proceed in the good old way, "Friends to all; Antagonists to none."²⁷

Meanwhile, Methodists still hoping to reconcile the parties were running out of time and ideas. "What could be done to reconcile the Preachers and the people in the painful struggle of the day," a district superintendent asked his assistant while the two walked the streets of London. "Sir," the man replied, "I am at a loss how to answer you."²⁸

Pacification: The General Conference of July 1795

For the fifth time since Wesley's death, the preachers gathered for Conference, cognizant that Methodism was in a dreadful state of affairs. To preside over the conference, the preachers elected a friend and traveling companion of Wesley, Joseph Bradford, who was thought to be unattached to either party in the dispute. The first man appointed to preach took for his text Ephesians 4:3, "Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."²⁹ In response to his appeal for brotherhood, the body determined to dedicate the entirety of the next day to

fasting and prayer. All participated, even a caucus of trustees who had come to conference to press their case, and the first full day ended with the Lord's Supper.

The next morning the assembled preachers resolved upon a course of action. The conference voted to create a special committee charged with the task of devising a plan that would bring peace to the fractious societies. They determined that the committee should have nine members, one being Joseph Bradford, the president chosen for his neutrality. The other eight were to be elected by ballot. Voting took place in considerable anxiety. Partisans on both sides feared that the composition of the special committee would be unfavorable to their cause. In the event, however, the outcome was exactly equal, with four respected preachers elected on each side. The result made a deep and favorable impression on the assembly. "We were astonished at the choice and clearly saw that it was of God," the Conference later reported in a letter "to members of the Methodist Societies." It evidenced beyond a doubt the "impartiality of the body of Preachers."³⁰

The nine members of the special committee met six evenings in a row, for about three and a half hours a night, after having participated all day in the business of the conference. At last they set their plan before the Conference. The Conference discussed the plan, made a minor alteration, and then adopted it unanimously.

"The Plan of Pacification," as it was known, determined that the Lord's Supper was not to be administered in any chapel unless the trustees, stewards, and leaders, as representatives of the people, favored its use by a majority. The same method was to be used to determine whether or not the society wished service in church hours, or their preachers to baptize or bury the dead. When once a society had decided to receive the Lord's Supper, however, it could not subsequently be withdrawn. Only preachers appointed by the Conference could administer the sacrament, and only according to the rites of the Established Church. The "Plan" concluded by ordering that if any preacher or other leader should disturb the peace of any society by advocating for or objecting to the use of the sacrament, he should be tried, and if found guilty, expelled from the connection.³¹

Aftermath

The "Plan of Pacification" was a compromise. It aimed to provide a solution that would be wholly satisfactory to neither party, but sufficiently acceptable to both to permit them to continue in connection with each other. In this aim, the Plan proved largely successful. Writing a few years later, an early historian of the Methodist movement wrote, "Since then the connection has enjoyed peace respecting the Sacrament."³²

Of course, this does not mean that the "Plan of Pacification" ushered in an era of universal peace or worked out as all hoped. Some liberals, unhappy with the "Plan," also objected to the composition of Conference, which they regarded as too dominated by clergy. The result was the formation in 1797, of the "Methodist New Connexion," which adopted a more democratic form of church governance. Nor did things turn out as many conservative Methodists must have desired. "Old Plan" Methodists undoubtedly hoped that the majority of societies would cleave to the traditional practice of receiving the Lord's Supper in the Established Church. This did not happen. While such societies continued to exist in Britain until the end of the nineteenth century, the great majority of Methodist societies elected to receive the sacrament in their own chapels. The gradual separation from the Established Church, which they endeavored to avoid, happened in time anyway.

Still, the "Plan of Pacification" left a permanent stamp on the character of British Methodism, which inevitably imbibed of the spirit of both parties. The liberals and conservatives

who adopted it in 1795, knew that Methodists of good conscience and deep conviction disagreed on an issue of great moment. Recognizing this, they nevertheless worked out a way to live, work, and worship together, believing that they would be stronger together than apart.

Conclusion

History, as the saying goes, does not repeat itself, but it does rhyme. If a majority of United Methodists believe one of the first two analogies offers the closest rhyme for the contemporary sexuality debate, the church will split. If, on the other hand, a majority finds the closest rhyme in the third analogy, then the possibility of life together remains open. I think the closest analogy is the last, and I will briefly offer three reasons why.

Substantial Agreement Undergirding Disagreement

Old and New Plan Methodists agreed on the importance of the Lord's Supper, while disagreeing on its proper administration, and especially the qualifications required of those celebrating it. Similarly, traditionalist and progressive United Methodists agree on the importance of marriage, while disagreeing about who is eligible to marry.

Congruence with the Spirit of Wesleyanism

Both Old and New Plan Methodists could claim with considerable justification to be acting in the spirit of John Wesley, albeit in different ways. The former upheld Wesley's loyalty to catholic tradition, while the latter imitated his willingness to deviate from catholic tradition for the sake of evangelical outreach. Similarly, traditionalist United Methodists can justifiably claim to have the weight of catholic tradition on their side of the sexuality debate; while progressives can justifiably claim to be extending more recent changes in Christian sexual morality that have won widespread acceptance, such as divorce and remarriage.

Mutual Dependence in Service of the Gospel

At a certain point, Old and New Plan Methodists came to realize that they were not going to change the others' minds, that each party was bound by conscience to their respective positions. Still, they evidently recognized in each other something essential to themselves, with which they were unwilling to part, for fear of drastically diminishing their own witness to the gospel. Similarly, I believe, many traditionalist and progressive United Methodists recognize that they will be substantially diminished if they split on the question of whether homosexual conduct can ever be compatible with Christian teaching.

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¹ Note that I am not asking whether United Methodists are in fact treating the issue of homosexual conduct as a church-dividing issue. I am asking whether they *should* treat it as a church-dividing issue.

² An essay that explores in depth the analogy between the church's positions on military service and homosexual conduct is L. Edward Phillips, "Homosexual Unions and the Social Principles," in *The Loyal Opposition: Resisting the Church on Homosexuality*, eds. Tex Sample and Amy E. DeLong (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 88–95.

³ My information about the obscure movement comes entirely from Herbert McLachlan, *The Methodist Unitarian Movement* (Manchester: At the University Press, 1919).

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- ⁴ Ibid., 12, 9.
- ⁵ Ibid., 17
- ⁶ Ibid., 63.
- ⁷ Cooke's opponents objected to his saying that a sense of pardon is not always essential to saving faith. Early in his ministry, Wesley maintained that it was essential, but later held that it was a "common" but not universal "privilege of the children of God." See McLachlan, 5–15.
- ⁸ Charles Wesley, *Hymns on the Trinity* (1744), preface by S. T. Kimbrough, Jr., introduction by Wilma J. Quantrille (Madison, NJ: The Charles Wesley Society, 1998).
- ⁹ Gross Alexander, *History of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South* (New York: The Christian Literature Co., 1894) 10.
- ¹⁰ Charles Elliott, *History of the Great Secession from the Methodist Episcopal Church* (Cincinnati: Swormstedt and Poe, 1855), col. 260.
- ¹¹ Alexander, *History of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South*, 13.
- ¹² John James Tigert, *A Constitutional History of American Episcopal Methodism* (Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1908), 447.
- ¹³ For language of "Old Plan" and "New Plan," see William Myles, *A Short Chronological History of the Methodists* (Rochdale 1798), 21.
- ¹⁴ John Beecham, *An Essay on the Constitution of Methodism* (London: John Mason, 1851), 32.
- ¹⁵ John Blackwell, *Life of Alexander Kilham* (London: Groombridge, 1838), 129. Cf. W. Harrison, *The Separation of the Methodists from the Church of England* (Epworth Press, 1945), 37–38.
- ¹⁶ See George Smith, *History of Wesleyan Methodism* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1862), 2:15.
- ¹⁷ Robert Leonard Tucker, *The Separation of the Methodists from the Church of England* (Wipf and Stock, 1918), 155–60; cf. Beecham, 36.
- ¹⁸ Walter Harrison, *The Separation of the Methodists from the Church of England* (Epworth Press, 1945), 41.
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ Tucker, *Separation of the Methodists*, 159.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² Letter of Samuel Bradburn to Alexander Kilham, dated Dec. 12, 1793, cited in Harrison, *Separation of the Methodists*, 44.
- ²³ Harrison, *Separation of the Methodists*, 43.
- ²⁴ Ibid., 50–51.
- ²⁵ Alexander Knox, *Candid Animadversions on Mr. Henry Moore's Reply, by the Author of 'Considerations on a Separation of the Methodists from the Established Church'* (Bristol: Bulgin and Rosser), 30.
- ²⁶ Alexander Knox, *Considerations on a Separation of the Methodists from the Established Church, addressed to such of them as are Friendly to that Measure, and particularly to those in the City of Bristol, by a Member of the Established Church* (Bristol: Bulgin and Rosser, 1794), 19. The same writer scoffed at the claim that New Plan Methodists did not wish to coerce the Old, but merely wished to secure liberty for those like themselves who, in their own words, "love their brethren most, and delight to join with them in all the means of grace." To this he replied, "And do you seriously think that even this hint contains in it no 'compulsion of any kind?' I am much mistaken if every impartial man, who is acquainted with the general economy of your Societies, will not discover in it, the menace of as effectual a species of torture as was ever was applied by an inquisitor" (p. 21).
- ²⁷ Henry Moore, *A Reply to a Pamphlet, entitled 'Consideration on a Separation of the Methodists from the Established-Church,'* (Bristol: R. Edwards, 1794), 10.
- ²⁸ The anecdote is recounted many years after the fact in a letter published in *The Wesley-Methodist Magazine*. The writer, Jonathan Edmondson, was the assistant in the story. According to Edmondson, his reply to the superintendent, the Rev. William Thompson, continued: "But I am of opinion that you can form some general plan of pacification." The two men then spent several days drawing up a plan before sending it Thomas Coke and others leading figures. This, according to Edmondson, became the basis of the Plan of Pacification adopted at the Conference of 1795. Jonathan Edmondson, Rochester, Jan. 15th, 1835. *The Wesley-Methodist Magazine* being a continuation of the Arminian or Methodist Magazine; first published by the Rev. John Wesley, A.M. Vol XIV of the Third Series (London: J Mason, 1835), 58:131.
- ²⁹ Mrs. Richard Smith, *The Life of the Rev. Henry Moore* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, and Co., 1844), 132.
- ³⁰ Harrison, *Separation of the Methodists*, 54.
- ³¹ Tucker, *Separation of the Methodists*, 109.
- ³² William Myles, *A Short Chronological History of the Methodists* (Rochdale 1798), 21.