

More authority than the Pope? Conference, the Deed of Union and Methodist Theology

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Abstract

Over the last two hundred years, British Methodism exported its ecclesiology and its standards of doctrine to several countries around the world. After gaining independence, these churches have generally continued to retain the doctrinal clauses inherited from the founding denomination. Despite this, theological discourse within these churches has often had no explicit connection to these criteria. Curiously, this is particularly true in the British Methodist context where the neglect of these standards has coincided with an increasing emphasis on the magisterial authority of its annual Conference. Here the constitution of the British Methodist church is explored in order to determine whether or not there is a distinctive theological method latent within its Deed of Union and whether or not this approach might be relevant to important theological questions globally.

Keywords

*British Methodist Theology; Global Methodist Theology; Deed of Union;
Process Theology; Doctrinal Development*

Introduction

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, British Methodism planted churches in a number of overseas contexts (Pritchard 2013). While these churches have now become autonomous, several of them have retained the doctrinal clauses outlined in the British Methodist (BM) constitution. Here I refer to the “Title Deed” of the BM Church, the “Deed of Union” – agreed upon by three branches of BM (Primitive, United and Wesleyan) which came together in 1932 to form one Church (Deed of Union 1932:303). The purpose of this Deed was to set out the “basis of the union, including

the constitution and doctrinal standards of the united Church” (Howdle 2000:92, 231).¹ However, this reunion was the fruit of “some twenty years of tortuous negotiations” and this vital tension is creatively reflected in the document itself (Wellings 2013:41).

During the preparatory stages there were discussions around whether the new Church ought to have doctrinal “standards” or a doctrinal “statement” (Currie 1968:277–281). While the Primitive and United Methodists had historically adopted lists of specific doctrines to be upheld the Wesleyans wanted to have doctrinal standards which made explicit reference to John Wesley’s *Sermons* and *Notes on the New Testament* (Beck 2017:6; Wesley 2020). Furthermore, the interplay between Wesley’s reception of the scriptures and the interest in the burgeoning world of historical criticism (Peake 1913) revealed very different conceptions of the authority of scripture among the participants (Kent 1966: 20–43).² Prominent voices in the debate included figures like the Primitive Methodist and biblical scholar Arthur Samuel Peake (1865–1929), the liberal politician Sir Robert Perks (1849–1934) and the progressive theologian John Scott Lidgett (1854–1953) who became the first president of the newly formed denomination (Lidgett 1897:22). In contrast, John Ernest Rattenbury (1870–1963), and Henry Lunn (1859–1939) were of a more traditional orientation (Lunn 1933; Rattenbury 1948) – the former becoming president (1939–1950) of the Methodist Sacramental Fellowship (Wallwork 2013:19; Brake 1984:34).

The above illustrates the complex history and origins of the Deed of Union. However, the synergy resulting from the dialectical presence of traditional, evangelical, and liberal forces is distinctive. Indeed, it is this which accounts for the rich diversity contained within the doctrinal

1 Shortly after John Wesley’s death, in 1791, Methodism had split into a plethora of different factions. Prior to reunification, the legal basis of these various Methodist denominations was non-statutory. However, in the 20th century, the legal foundation of the churches reuniting was grounded in an Act of Parliament. For example, the Methodist Church Union Act of 1929 gave the newly formed Methodist Church power to proclaim a Deed of Union which laid out the basis of the union between the various Methodist denominations including the constitution and doctrinal standards of the newly formed Church (Howdle 2000:92, 231)

2 For example, Peake considered Wesley’s reception of the bible to be outmoded and resisted calls from conservatives to make the scriptures synonymous with divine revelation – even though he believed the scriptures contain revelation (Thompson 2015:338).

standards which are able to both: (a) secure adherence to the fundamental components of the Christian heritage while (b) allowing sufficient latitude for a broad range of theological positions.³ This inspired combination is evident in the standards themselves, which state that Methodist doctrine should be continuous with:

1. The “Body of Christ”
2. The “Apostolic Faith”
3. The “fundamental principles” of the “Historic Creeds”
4. The “fundamental principles” of the “Protestant Reformation”
5. An unfaltering commitment to “Scriptural Holiness”
6. An unfaltering commitment to the “Evangelical Faith”
7. “The doctrines of the evangelical faith based upon the divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures.”
8. “The Methodist Church acknowledges this revelation [Holy Scriptures] as the supreme rule of faith and practice.”
9. “These evangelical doctrines to which the preachers of the Methodist Church are pledged are contained in Wesley’s Notes on the New Testament and the first four volumes of his sermons.”

The above indicates the likelihood that these doctrinal standards (i–ix) could play an important role in global Methodist theological discourse. This list is found, in its entirety, in the constitution of the Methodist Church Nigeria (2006:8–10), Kenya (2015:4), Ghana (1964:7), Ireland (2018), Sri Lanka (2020), the Bahamas (2019), Zimbabwe (1997:5) and many others globally.⁴ These standards are also upheld, in a slightly different chronological sequence, in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (2016:14–16). However, while they may be important (constitutionally), these standards are rarely employed systematically if they are even mentioned at all. This neglect is perhaps most striking in the British

3 This it seems is in keeping with John Wesley’s Anglican Latitudinarian Heritage (Pratt Morris-Chapman 2019b).

4 The American founded, United Methodist Churches have a different doctrinal standard and are not under discussion here.

Methodist (BM) context which, having exported these criteria around the world, will offer an important case for discussion.

In this essay BM doctrinal standards will be examined in order to determine whether they present a distinctive methodology for doing theology? While there have been studies, particularly within BM, which have tried to extrapolate theological data from the various (and diverse) theological publications connected with BM history (Shier-Jones 2005), the present enquiry is not intended to serve as an ethnographic study and does not seek to “unmask” the theological content embedded within the peculiar culture of a particular denomination (Marsh 2004). On the contrary, it rather seeks to explore whether or not there is a distinctive methodology implicit within the founding documents of BM – one retained within the constitutions of a number of Methodist churches globally.

The State of British Methodist Theology

Many British Methodists assume that the national Conference has unlimited powers when it comes to interpreting doctrine. At the 2019 Birmingham Conference, after the Faith and Order Committee presented its report, someone even “rejoice[d] that Conference has more power than the Pope!”⁵ Indeed, many publications, and even Conference documents have given this impression. This has grown in tandem with an increasing failure to distinguish between Conference Statements (which carry authority), Reports to the Conference (which describe but do not prescribe), and the publications of prominent Methodist thinkers (which are by no means authoritative). Even more incredible, for a protestant denomination, is that there is a quasi-ultramontanist propensity in some prominent Methodist thinkers to conflate conference reports and statements with papal encyclicals (Dawes 2004:115). However, while the Deed of Union does state that Conference is the final authority in BM for interpreting its doctrines, it makes explicitly clear that Conference has checks and balances upon it. In 1932, at the Conference in which the Primitive, United and Wesleyan Methodists joined together, the doctrinal standards of the newly formed

5 A Chair of District stated this from the front following the report of the Faith and Order Committee.

British Methodist Church were affirmed and, moreover, the authority of the BM Conference with regard to the interpretation of its doctrines outlined. The original document states:

Doctrinal Standards Unalterable: (a) The Conference shall not have any power to alter or vary in any manner whatsoever the clauses contained in this Deed which define the doctrinal standards of The Methodist Church. (b) The Conference shall be the final authority within the Methodist Church with regard to all questions concerning the interpretation of its doctrines (Deed of Union 1932:303).

Here it is clear that: (b) Conference is given authority to interpret BM doctrine. However, it is also clear that: (a) Conference was never supposed to become a law unto itself. Its interpretation was to be governed by “Unalterable” doctrinal standards (George 1980:260–263). However, following the decision, in 1976, to remove clause (a) there has been an increasing emphasis on the authority of Conference (Brake 1984:193). For example, a number of theological publications within the British Methodist (BM) context have attributed a “magisterial” authority to Conference (Dawes 2004:109). These writers, and conference reports, draw attention to (b) the second clause (George 1980:261). Nevertheless, while the “unalterable” can now be altered with a special resolution (The Methodist Church Act 1976:6), after a consultation involving every single congregation (Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes 2005:6), these BM doctrinal standards do actually remain in place (at the time of writing).

One might assume from the above, that these constitutional standards would at least make some sort of appearance within BM theological discourse. Over the years, members of the BM church have engaged in various forms of theological research including: ethnographical theology (Marsh 2019; Shier-Jones 2005), systematic theology (Greggs 2009; Stobart 2011), pastoral theology (Leach 2015), liberative theologies (Reddie 2012; Craske 1995), African theology (Dedji 2003; Pratt Morris-Chapman 2019), ecclesiology (Chapman 2004; Watt 2012), biblical studies (Lieu 2006; Marshall 2008), church history (Hustler 1997; Macquiban 2000), missiology (Walls 1996) and so on. However, while these writers have contributed to a wide range of subjects, few have ever mentioned (let alone reflected

upon) the churches doctrinal standards. Moreover, those who do engage with the Deed of Union have tended to view the annual Conference (its “conferring”) as the defining original feature of a BM theological method. A prominent example of this tendency is Stephen Dawes, whose influence, particularly his publication *Why Bible Believing Methodists Shouldn’t eat Black Pudding* (1993), has been considerable within BM.⁶

The BM Conference: more authority than the Pope?

In an article entitled “Revelation in Methodism” (2004) Stephen Dawes’ argues that the Deed of Union gives Conference a “Primacy” comparable to the primacy given of Peter in the Catholic Church. This “magisterial” role gives:

Conference the role of discerning what it is about God that is being revealed now in Jesus Christ and/or in the Bible. It establishes the conference as the official interpreter of God’s will ... It makes the Conference, in effect, Methodists corporate *magisterium* (Dawes 2004:115)

While Dawes is quite right to highlight the “corporate” nature of the Methodist Conference (as opposed to the Primacy given to the Bishop of Rome) his belief that Conference has the authority to contradict the teaching of the Bible – “although the Bible says No, we will say Yes” (Dawes 1993:79) – actually gives Conference more authority than the Pope (Flannery 1988:756). Nevertheless, Dawes considers that the phrase, the “primacy of Conference” reflects “the constitutional position of the Conference as the authoritative body in Methodism” to determine how the church will “interpret scripture” and so “order its life and doctrine” (2004:115).

This magisterial view of the Conference – that it can contradict the Bible – is puzzling when it is considered that the Deed of Union indicates that our doctrines must (constitutionally) be guided by the “Fundamental Principles” of the “Protestant Reformation.” What were these principles?⁷

6 For example, compare this publication with the official conference report (1999).

7 Certain features of a number of recent BM Conference documents (1998; 1992) resemble Counter-Reformation propaganda in that they (1). Overstress the ambiguity of what the Scriptures say about a given issue & (2). Overstress the impossibility of discerning what the Principles of the Reformation might be. Despite this more recent trend, it is plain

Well, fundamentally, the Reformers placed the authority of the word of God over and above the authority of the Church:

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 (BM Conference 1937:4.6.7).

The above, a Conference Report on the Nature of the Church (1937), indicates that the idea that Conference could blatantly contradict the scriptures would be unconstitutional – it would be at variance with a fundamental principle of the Protestant Reformation. Despite this, the influence of this magisterial conception of the conference has been considerable and is echoed in a number of BM Faith and Order reports.

A Lamp to My Feet?

An example of how this approach has impacted upon BM Conference reports is *A Lamp to my Feet* (1998), which discusses the nature of authority in British Methodism.⁸ While the general tone of the report is more cautious than that found in Dawes' work, it nevertheless promotes the idea that the annual British Methodist Conference can be viewed on a par with the great ecumenical councils of Christian history "from Acts 15 onwards." As a result, the report implies that BM "Conference Statements" can be viewed as "binding" in the same way as the council of Nicaea (BM Conference 1998). This understanding of the Conference jars with a Reformed conception of the church:

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

that earlier Conference reports do clearly assert that the Reformers placed the authority of the scriptures over and above that of the church (1937; 1960; 1982).

8 This report mirrors many of the arguments set out by Dawes (1993).

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 ... It is a misfortune that the conception of the Church has been over-estimated in Catholicism and often under-estimated in Protestantism (BM Conference 1937).

This citation, from the “Nature of the Church” (1937) illustrates why the BM Conference, though very important, was not designed to be infallible.⁹ Its statements (even if they carry authority) are not, on this view, intended to be interpreted as “binding” dogmatic definitions. Nevertheless, *A Lamp to my Feet* (1998) promotes this idea, maintaining that “every generation” must be given the opportunity “to determine, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit,” what god is saying now – even if this entails the creation of theological statements that contradict what god (accidently?) said yesterday (BM Conference 1998).

A Work in Progress

The idea that the (annual) BM conference is able to modify the churches canonical heritage is also advanced in *A Work in Progress* by the late A Shier-Jones (2005:12). Her valuable attempt to extrapolate theological data from various (and diverse) materials connected with BM history might be interpreted as an ethnographical study of BM Dogmatics (Shier-Jones 2001).¹⁰ This work, coupled with her contributions to *Unmasking Methodist*

9 Interestingly, a footnote at the bottom of this report states that it has been “superseded” by “Called to Love and Praise” (BM Conference 1999). This offers another illustration of the revisionist trend in contemporary BM.

10 The subject of her doctoral thesis reinforces this interpretation.

Theology, a collaboration with Clive Marsh (Marsh & Shier-Jones 2004:38),¹¹ represents an important attempt to uncover the theological content embedded within the peculiar culture of BM.¹² However, while it is vital to understand what BM's actually believe today,¹³ her decision to privilege the ability of the contemporary church to appropriate divine revelation resonates with the revisionist approach taken by Dawes'. For example, Shier-Jones implies that the Conference has the power to contradict the tradition of the past:

The Holy Spirit might, of course, inspire the Church, via a [Methodist] Conference report, to reach a policy or belief which seems to some to be contrary to scripture or tradition ... At the heart of this understanding of revelation there is an expectation of something different ... through the Conference the living Word continues to speak. It meets annually to reflect (Marsh & Shier-Jones 2004:93).¹⁴

This extract offers yet another manifestation of the revisionist approach taken by these writers. The idea that Conference may act as the final authority in BM is one thing, the suggestion that a Methodist Conference has the authority to contradict the ecumenical councils of the past is quite another. Even the Vatican itself does not go this far:

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- 11 It may be possible that Marsh's methodology has had an influence on Shier-Jones' approach in that she also interprets Methodism's "artistic, cultural, and media resources, experiences, practices, and activities" to be theological resources in that they "are the kind of things which are doing theological work, whether we like it or not." Thus, like Marsh, Shier-Jones' work seems to explore the "theological freight" that these resources "carry, and [examines] what kinds of theological insight emerge from discussion of their content and use" (Marsh & Shier-Jones 2004:1–14; Marsh 2019:2–3).
 - 12 Marsh has tended to take what might perhaps be described as an inductive / ethnographical approach to theology and this methodology is utilised by many leading BM theologians (Marsh & Shier Jones 2004:xii).
 - 13 It is very important to understand what BM believe today. However, what we believe today is not to be conflated unquestioningly with the doctrinal standards of the church. It should not be taken for granted that what we believe today is commensurate with the doctrinal standards of the church.
 - 14 This point is itself justified by another Conference document. "It has been the Church's experience that the Spirit works through both tradition and spontaneity" (BM Conference 2000). What is curious is that this Conference statement does not concern whether the Conference can make decisions which seem to contradict Apostolic Faith but rather discusses issues pertaining to Presidency at the Lord's Supper (Marsh & Shier-Jones 2004:93).

The task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living teaching office of the Church alone. Its authority in this matter is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. *Yet this Magisterium is not superior to the Word of God but is its servant. It teaches only what has been handed on to it.* At the divine command and with the help of the Holy Spirit, it listens to this devotedly, guards it with dedication and expounds it faithfully. All that it proposes for belief as being divinely revealed is drawn from this single deposit of faith (Flannery 1988:756).

In sum, by suggesting that the BM Conference has the authority to contradict “scripture or tradition,” these writers give the “magisterium” of Methodism (Conference) more power than Roman Catholics give to the Holy See.¹⁵ Essentially, the whole tenor of these writers is constitutionally problematic. Put simply, how could the BM church, which accepts the “fundamental principles ... of the Protestant Reformation” (Deed of Union 1932:302) give its Conference more authority than the Pope?¹⁶

From the above it would appear that these writers hold two contradictory convictions. They believe, simultaneously, that: (1) the annual BM Conference is to be considered like “all other Church Councils from Acts 15 onwards” and (2) those “conferring” today should possess a certain disdain for earlier conciliar statements (Dawes 2004:112,116; Shier-Jones 2005:12). If this BM conception of the authority of its annual Conference is rooted in the authority given to Ecumenical Councils of the past then surely the Conference ought to have reverence for the Councils and

15 This understanding of our annual Conference is ecumenically perilous. It also contradicts the Thirty-Nine Articles. Article XX: “The Church hath power to decree Rites or Ceremonies, and authority – in Controversies of Faith: And yet it is not lawful for the Church to ordain anything that is contrary to God’s Word written, neither may it so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another. Wherefore, although the Church be a witness and a keeper of Holy Writ, as it ought not to decree anything against the same, so besides the same ought it not to enforce any thing to be believed for necessity of Salvation” (Articles of Religion 2017).

16 While the second Vatican Council (Dei Verbum, promulgated November 18, 1965) declares that the interpretation of the Word of God is entrusted to the “teaching office of the Church,” it explicitly states that “this Magisterium is not superior to the Word of God, but is its servant” (Flannery 1988:756).

indeed the doctrines promulgated therein?¹⁷ It would be quite illogical to claim Conference's continuity with the Apostolic Faith and yet to believe, concurrently, that Conference has the ability to contradict it (BM Conference 2005:2.17).

Models of doctrinal development

At this juncture it is helpful to probe the underlying theory of doctrinal development promoted by these writers. While there are a variety of different conceptions of doctrinal development available (Clutterbuck 2009:95), the examples cited above, advance a variant of process theology. Utilising the work of Alfred North Whitehead and his doctoral student Charles Hartshorne, process theologians have argued that “the complex relationship between space, time, energy and matter” imply that everything in the universe is contingent. On this understanding, god is also contingent and, as a result, is in a state of transition (Warner 1991:10). On this revisionist approach, our theological past can be thrown away. However, regardless of whether or not BM theologians find this revisionist model appealing, it is difficult to see how this conception of doctrinal development could be reconciled with our constitution. Nevertheless, there are other ways to understand the idea of doctrinal development.

According to Clutterbuck, there is an organic conception of doctrinal development: “which can bring together change and continuity, faithfulness and maturity.” This organic approach appears to be more commensurate with our constitution than the revisionist, process theology, approach taken by Dawes and Shier-Jones. On this organic view, our doctrinal standards offer us a way to “test the faithfulness of a later development in doctrine to the origins of Christianity” in order to ensure that the interpretation of divine revelation given by the Conference is in continuity with our past. On this view, our doctrinal standards would enable Conference to discern and identify true developments from corruptions (Clutterbuck 2009:103).

17 Nevertheless, Dawes believes there is “much to be said for this methodology” and argues that the Methodist Conference ought to preface its rulings with the prologue, “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us (as in Acts 15.28)” (Dawes 2004:111–116). It is important not to conflate the Holy Spirit with the spirit of this age.

This organic idea of doctrinal development, which stresses continuity with the past, certainly resonates with the BM tradition:

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”. 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 reaffirmation of the mission for which Methodism was raised up; it was and is our task “to spread Scriptural Holiness through the land” (BM Conference 1937).

On this interpretation, the doctrinal standards contained in the Deed of Union ensure that BM teaching remains in continuity with the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. According to Wainwright, it was this ecumenical heart (and not process theology) which motivated the BM church to permit Conference to amend our doctrinal standards in 1976. It was to free us to become more (not less) organically connected with the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church (Wainwright 2006:288).

Unfortunately, many have interpreted this decision (1976) as a license to kill off the past. Exaggerating the “ambiguity”¹⁸ of our doctrinal standards (*ad absurdum*), the 1976 Act is cited in order to reinforce the idea that Conference can do (theologically) whatever it likes, contradicting itself in

¹⁸ Latterly a number of reports (conveniently) argue that “It is not clear what is meant by “the fundamental principles of the historic creeds and of the Protestant Reformation” (BM Conference 1992:4).

the process. This it seems leads *A Lamp to my Feet*, to include the following view of scripture:

The Bible is one of the main ways in which God speaks to the believer. However, the movement of God's Spirit is free and unpredictable, and it is what the Spirit is doing today that is of the greatest importance. The Bible helps to interpret experience, but much stress is placed on spiritual experience itself, which conveys its own compelling authority. On this view, to give too high a status to the Bible may prevent us from hearing what God is saying to us today. We should be guided principally by the convictions which emerge from our own Christian experience as individuals and as a church community, which on occasion will go against the main thrust of the Bible's teaching (BM Conference 1998:7.9.5).

It is highly questionable as to whether or not this understanding of the authority of scripture is commensurate with the Deed of Union. On the contrary, it would appear that the assumptions underpinning this, and other reports are based on a revisionist interpretation of the 1976 Act (Brake 1984:193; BM Conference 1999:4.6.7).

The Deed of Union and Methodist Theology

While the doctrinal standards identified in the Deed of Union have largely been ignored or undermined, the BM Conference has occasionally used them systematically. Perhaps the most interesting example of the way in which these standards have been used to discern authentic doctrinal developments is the Faith and Order "Statement on Episcopacy and Methodist Doctrinal Standards" (1982).

In 1981, the Conference had requested the Faith and Order Committee "to explain its judgement by reference to the Doctrinal Clauses of the Deed of Union," as to whether or not BM should embrace the "Historic Episcopate" – whether or not such a move would "violate our doctrinal standards" (BM Conference 1982:181). Unlike a number of recent reports, which focus

disproportionately upon the divine revelation recorded in the scriptures,¹⁹ this document examines the question at hand in relation to the whole raft of doctrinal standards listed in our constitution.²⁰ For example:

No case can be made that episcopacy violates the Apostolic Faith or the historic creeds. The creeds were composed, and the Faith was preserved for centuries within a church that was episcopally ordered. Neither can it be argued that the repudiation of episcopacy was one of the fundamental principles of the Protest Reformation (BM Conference 1982:3).

Here we see, in accordance with our constitution, how it carefully examines whether or not the “fundamental principles” of the “historic creeds”, the “protestant reformation”, etc., would prevent Methodists from embracing the Historic Episcopate. It also examines the question in relation to the Evangelical Faith:

Methodism is identified with the Evangelical Faith, but that faith is not essentially anti-episcopal. John Wesley completed his life’s work within an episcopal body and approved of the ordering of the Church of England. He sought episcopal ordination for the ministers and superintendents who were to carry on the work in America (BM Conference 1982:4).

After examining the question in this way, “the Committee reached the conclusion that these standards would not be violated [if we accepted the Historic Episcopate] and reported this to the Conference” (BM

19 Some also refer to the quadrilateral. This method (good or bad) was developed by Albert Outler after the Deed of Union was written and *is not* mentioned in our doctrinal standards. Moreover, it *is historically questionable* whether it is representative of Wesley’s approach since the Anglican triad, from which Outler developed the quadrilateral, is also historically suspect (Pratt Morris-Chapman 2018).

20 In view of this, it might be necessary for the BM Conference to ask its Faith and Order committee to commission a large-scale review of the theology promoted in the reports produced over the last three decades in order to determine whether or not there are serious violations of BM doctrinal standards? Moreover, a review of the curriculums used in BM systems of theological education (whether lay or ordained) might also be valuable; to ensure that the theological formation given (to preachers and ministers in training) is continuous with BM doctrinal standards. If this remains unchecked, situations could arise in which church leaders are unaware of BM doctrinal standards, unable to comply with them and, unable to authentically confirm their allegiance to BM doctrines (as is currently required in BM).

Conference 1982:4). This, constitutionally, is how official BM theological proposals should be examined by Conference: “all theology purporting to be Methodist has to be tested” against our doctrinal standards (Stacey 1984:266).

Conclusion

This essay has explored whether or not there is a theological method implicit within the Deed of Union. Following a critique of revisionist methodologies, which assume the BM Conference has the authority to contradict scripture and tradition, the article explored how the doctrinal standards contained in the Deed of Union might be utilised so as to guide the BM Conference in its interpretation of doctrine. Here it is anticipated that these criteria could enable Methodists to make theological decisions which are continuous with the faith of the Apostles and, moreover, which further Christian unity – ensuring that BM doctrine is both Apostolic and Catholic in nature.

In summary, it is hoped that this methodology, imbedded within the Deed of Union, has the potential to shed light on a number of important theological questions both nationally and internationally. For example, within the British Methodist context, they could actually be brought to bear upon recent discussions surrounding the redefinition of Marriage within the BM Church (British Methodist Conference 2019) in order to determine, constitutionally, whether or not a development of this nature coheres with the doctrinal standards outlined in the Deed of Union.²¹ Moreover, given that many Methodist Churches around the globe grew out of BM, it is possible that this methodology could be utilised elsewhere. For example, in 2006 the Zimbabwean Methodist church was asked to “revisit its position in relation to polygamy” (Methodist Church Zimbabwe 2006:13). It is therefore likely that this question could also be examined in relation to the doctrinal standards identified in the Deed of Union so as to ascertain whether or not the evidence against polygamy is greater than that which would permit it. In conclusion it is envisaged that this methodology (and future adaptations of it), embedded within the constitutions of a

21 At the time of writing this has not yet happened.

number of Methodist churches globally, might offer a distinctive Methodist theological approach to a variety of contemporary theological questions.²²

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22 It is my humble prayer that, at the very least, it will lead to questions about the (great pretender) “Wesleyan Quadrilateral” (Pratt Morris-Chapman 2018).

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