

Methodism in public life?

I RECENTLY gave a talk on the question of “What’s so Methodist about faith in public life?” The question itself assumes that there is something Methodist about faith in public life, or that Methodists have something to say about the role of faith in public life, perhaps in a unique way; I’m sure that most Methodists would see this as obvious.

Nevertheless, one way of looking at this question would be to dismiss it as anachronistic. In the time of John and Charles Wesley there was no such thing as “public life”, the phrase was unknown, with our sense of a public sphere or public life only developing after the time of early Methodism. Even in more modern texts devoted to Methodist social theology and ethics, the Wesley brothers, or even a uniquely Methodist contribution, may not appear. Yet there do appear to be some distinctive Methodist approaches to public life.

One distinctive mark of the Methodist in public life is the way in which Methodists learn how to act and behave in public. Methodists are inculturated into public life by example and practices which Methodists hold dear. For example, local preachers learn public speaking skills that have served many when entering elected public office. There is also a bottom-up development of concerned citizens in Methodism that the public benefits from, but is hardly known or valued.

Methodists are also encouraged to be good people. The Methodist, according to John Wesley, does positive good to their neighbours. In describing “The Character of a Methodist”, he wrote: “He



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does good unto all men; unto neighbours and strangers, friends and enemies. And that in every possible kind; not only to their bodies by feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting those that are sick or in prison.” This remains an important mark of the Methodist – what benefits the poor became the criterion for historical action in both private and public life.

Results

For this reason, Methodists can look back at the results of their public witness. Methodists have been important advocates of beneficence, education and health care, building many charities, schools and hospitals. Methodists have taken up many causes for the improvement of society and relief of suffering. For instance, John Wesley was opposed to slavery, Methodist suffragettes helped win women the vote, many Methodists opposed wars and Action for Children was begun by a Methodist presbyter.

The aim of Methodists in public life is not merely doing good, but seeking sanctification, not only for individual souls, but for society as a whole. How did John Wesley think societal change would come about? In his sermon on “The General Spread of the Gospel”, he imagined the realisation of the text Isaiah 11. 9: “The earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters covers the sea.”

A Christian nation or city would come about through the grace of God in the conversion of the individual, then the household, then the city, then the nation and finally the world. In this way all will eventually be converted to Christianity and will live a communistic life of harmony and peace, putting an end to poverty, hunger, climate change and violence. This Wesleyan bottom-up approach to social reform that begins action in public life with the actions of individuals, which flow outward and upward. Politicians and the rich may be the last to catch on.

So, it does seem that Wesley’s theology does point us in some directions. The Methodist emphasis on the grace of God is one. A potential outcome of this social grace is found in meeting needs of neighbours’ mercifully without calculation of whether they deserve our help. Having received grace as sinners, we continue to receive grace as we strive to be better Christians. That is, Methodists, it seems to me, are not content with a doctrine of total depravity, knowing that they cannot do good, but rather sense that being saved means that we can strive to do good and even when we get it wrong we can try, and try again.

However, before entering too deeply into John Wesley’s original teachings, it is worth noting that Methodists have an ambivalent relationship to Wesley’s social teachings. In large part his social teachings are more of a historical curiosity than a focal point for our social witness today. For example, Wesley was notoriously against democracy. This has not, to my knowledge, influenced Methodists not to vote in elections or engage in campaigns against democracy. On the other hand, the issue of gambling, which Wesley himself condemned in his sermons for adversely affecting the poor, remains a Methodist concern.

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World Wars of the 20th century which dramatically increased the scope of government involvement in policy and the lives of individuals and households. The state apparatus became a tool for great good, but also great harm, which Churches realised needed to be watched and possibly directed, as far as possible, to the common good and social justice. Methodists followed this direction, but without necessarily developing a sociology to accompany their focus on good works and outrage at social injustice.

Identify

Some would lament here John Wesley’s lack of understanding of structural sin, which must take us beyond individual responses to public issues. For instance, Wesley’s notes on Bible verses about principalities and powers tend to either spiritualise these powers, or to identify them directly with the King, as a benign or beneficial influence on public life. This is a far cry from more recent readings which sees the powers’ influence in ideologies, mammon and other powers that influence our common

life together. This is a weakness in Wesleyan political theology, which could not appreciate that political power could be abused and tyrannical.

The tension exists, then, between traditional individualistic and more modern structural responses to social deprivation. This can be seen in the modern Methodist, who is suspicious of charity and in favour of justice. Methodists have been brilliant at tackling needs around them. Whether it’s soup for a neighbour or a coin for the beggar, Methodists have often favoured direct action and a practical approach to public issues that is suspicious of slow moving government action. There is now, however, a suspicion of charity, which is parochial, hierarchical and is seen as disempowering the poor and creating dependency. This is despite the exhortation of both Jesus and John Wesley to give to the poor liberally, for as a means of grace, giving mercifully impacts positively both giver and receiver.

Despite some shortcomings in applying Wesley’s theology to our public life today, some of the touchstones for focus from the Wesleys are

still relevant. When approaching public issues, we might ask: How does it affect the poor? Does it offend God’s word? Does it impinge on human rights and liberty? For example, with the issue of climate change, I think the answer to all three questions are an unreserved “Yes”.

Just how Methodists respond to climate and the other issues of our time can have many answers. Methodism is a broad Church, holding still people of many different views, even opposing views. Being a Methodist can be consistent with a range of positions in public life and on questions of ethics. While that might mean for some that Methodists have nothing unique to contribute to public life in forms of content, there is something of a tradition of Methodist approaches to and positions on important social issues. This tradition cannot be locked in stone, but develops and must do so now, in our interconnected world, by listening to Methodists globally for guidance on how global issues affect the poor.

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