

A MESSAGE TO THE MOTHER CHURCH

Joseph M. Y. Edusa-Eyison

JOSEPH M. Y. EDUSA-EYISON, METHODIST BISHOP, NORTHERN ACCRA DIOCESE OF THE METHODIST CHURCH IN GHANA REFLECTS ON THE RECENT BRITISH METHODIST CONFERENCE DECISIONS.

The church exists primarily to evangelise and win more souls to Christ. According to Kwesi Dickson, evangelism cannot be defined in terms of what we think, want to teach, or say to people. It is properly defined in terms of what God has done, what God is doing, and what God is saying to each people in their native context¹, all of which are contained in the scriptures. It is the declaration of God and his sovereign love and will to all peoples. Evangelism may be defined simply as proclaiming Christ to others. As the mainstay of a healthy and lively church, evangelism is indispensable for church growth. A church that has ceased to evangelise has ceased to grow spiritually. Evangelism begins with the bona fide knowledge of Christ as the personal, all-sufficient Saviour. Thus, one must have had an authentic, intimate knowledge of the Saviour to evangelise effectively. So, for the church to fulfil its call to evangelise, it must be

Christ-full, Christ-centred, and the Body of Christ indeed.

Methodism, started by John Wesley (1703-1791) and George Whitefield (1714-1770) in England in the early 1700s was a holiness movement or 'society' within the Church of England², hence the nickname of the 'Holy Club'. As a rule, Methodism is guided by the Methodist Quadrilateral - the Bible as the primary source of theology and doctrine, as interpreted by tradition, reason, and experience, determining for the church what passes for acceptable doctrine. In pursuance of this, the Methodists were meticulous with fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays and most days during Lent. They abstained from most amusement, luxury, permissiveness and had specific hours to visit the sick, teach the poor, and observe religious services in the church.

As John Wesley put it, the original design of the Methodist was:

*... not to be a distinct party, but to stir up all parties, to worship God in Spirit and in Truth. With this view I have uniformly gone on for fifty years, never varying from the doctrine of the Church [of England] at all; nor from her discipline, of choice, but of necessity.*³

Methodism has thrived because of its catechetical inclination following the teaching and learning sessions Susanna Wesley had with her children, who took them through the rudiments of the faith, which later paid off. The church continued the tradition through the establishment of Sunday Schools; the Class Meeting system where the scriptures were/are taught; through other group meetings, and sermons. The establishment of schools by the Church was to inculcate into its students permanent principles of life for effective spiritual growth and maturity. Aware that Christian maturity is a lifelong process, they exercised patience and faithfulness in ministry week after week to see lives formed in the image of Christ.

As the basis of this is the Bible, evangelism is impossible without grounding them into the Bible (2 Timothy 3:14-17), the most important curriculum for faith formation. In its application to life, we strive at holistic ministry where the scripture affects mind, emotions, and lifestyle. The application of the Bible to the daily lives of the people is significant here; otherwise, our Christianity remains of no effect. As the best preachers preach with their lifestyle, evangelism is most

¹ Kwesi Dickson & Paul Ellingworth, (ed.) *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, Lutterworth Press, London, 1969. p. 11.

² Rupert E. Davies, *Methodism*, Epworth Press, 1976, pp. 44-49.

³ Lamin Sanneh, " 'The World is my Parish' Methodism and the Roots of World Christian Awakening", in William J. Abraham and James E. Kirby (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies*, Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 191.

effective with a commensurate lifestyle, made possible through the power of the Holy Spirit of God, the Christian life a teacher.

Parental teaching should be diligent (Deuteronomy 6:7) as expected of the parent, in this case, Britain, as the sending/propagation agency of the Gospel. Paul, writing to Timothy, urges in 2 Timothy 2:2 as follows: 'And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others', firming up the credibility of the testimony. The British Methodist Church cannot renege on the original teaching they gave to the Methodist Church worldwide and thereby show a lack of diligence to the message.

This heritage is dear to the heart of the Methodist and must not be relegated to the background. The teaching received in church must make us committed followers of Christ. But unfortunately, current happenings make it difficult. Just as it is possible to be a hearer of lectures without being a student, a listener to sermons without being a doer of the word, and a taker without being a giver, it is possible to be a listener to Jesus without being a committed follower. This leads to a church with very few genuine disciples though numerical

strength may be huge. Methodism as a discipleship making movement, appreciates that discipleship and evangelism are not 'in-house' projects, but begin and end outside the walls of the church. Therefore disciple-making is an engagement with the world - not a withdrawal from it - emphasising its missionary nature, because the church exists to transform the world.⁴

As spiritual people, we are expected to lead holy lives and be ethically and religiously committed to the same. John Macquire believes that spirituality has to do with becoming a person in the fullest sense. To the Wesleys, spirituality begins with the stirring of conscience started by the prevenient grace of God which is operative in all humanity. According to the Wesleys, spirituality should not only be an inward state of affairs but also outwardly expressed by bearing fruits of perfection, love, joy, and peace. Thus, to be spiritual is to live a life worthy of emulation in the practice of one's faith. It is to live out the life of Christ, which is tough, except one has the Lord on one's side.

THE RECENT DECISIONS OF THE BRITISH METHODIST CONFERENCE

The recent resolutions of the June 2021 British Methodist Conference on same-sex relationship, cohabitation

and divorce are somewhat contentious to the extent that they are contrary in context and content to the position and teaching of the scriptures.

As already indicated in my narrative, the foundation of Methodism is established in the scriptures and the church's doctrine. Therefore, any decisions or thoughts seeking to undermine the church's established foundation is simply disappointing and unacceptable.

The position of scriptures on marriage is that, although marriage is a human institution, it was not originated by human beings but conceptualised, designed and mainstreamed by God (Genesis 2:18,22), and intended to be only between a man and a woman (Genesis 2:24, Ephesians 5:31). This arrangement, which was to be respected and upheld through all generations was infringed upon by the sin of Sodom (Genesis 19:1-5) and was duly punished.

Again, marriage is the only human institution compared to the relationship between Christ and his church (Ephesians 5:25). If the bond between Christ and his church is so sacred and robust and cannot be destroyed, then the bond between the man and the woman in marriage must not be altered or destroyed. Against

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this backdrop, the recent position of the British Methodist Conference of supporting same-sex marriage is egregious and must be rescinded.

CONCLUSION

Methodists have always been convinced of sin and believed in individual responsibility for one's actions; the Methodist simply being one who lives according to the method laid down in the Bible. Methodism claims and cherishes its place in the Holy Catholic Church, which is the Body of Christ. It rejoices in the inheritance of the Apostolic Faith. It loyally accepts the fundamental principles of the historic creeds and the Protestant Reformation; a group raised to spread Scriptural holiness through the land by the proclamation of the Evangelical Faith.⁵ A church that is incarnational in its worship, Methodism responds to the exigencies of the times without compromising the Gospel's teachings - its message being

determined by the changing conditions and by an unchanging message.⁶ This is perfectly in line with the mission of the Universal Church. As a charismatic movement, Methodism has occupied a central place in the early history of evangelicalism.⁷

Evangelism is the primary vehicle for church growth. It conveys a specific timeless message from an unchanging God to a changing world. A decision to embrace and encourage same-sex relationships without question puts spokes in the wheel of evangelism by denting its message and eventually deflating the momentum for church growth. Martin Wellings observes that by the 20th century, Methodism had moved to the margins and had disappeared.⁸ So, as Evangelicals, Methodists must not embark on a journey of embracing same-sex relationships that tend to compromise the Wesleyan Heritage and lead the church into perdition.

The Rt. Rev. Prof. Joseph M. Y. Edusa-Eyison is the Bishop, Northern Accra Diocese of the Methodist Church Ghana. He is formally Vice President of the Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon, Accra Ghana, and later Vice Principal of the Methodist University College Ghana.



⁵ The Message and Mission of Methodism, 1946, p. 16.

⁶ The Message and Mission of Methodism, 1946, p. 2.

⁷ Martin Wellings, 'British Methodism and Evangelicalism' in William J. Abraham and James E. Kirby (eds.), The Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies, Oxford University press, 2009, p. 156.

⁸ Wellings, 'British Methodism and Evangelicalism', p. 156.