

A Lifetime in Methodism

T O M S T U C K E Y



*A past President of the Methodist Conference,
Tom Stuckey, reflects on his life in the
Methodist Church, considering where
Methodism is now and its hope for the future.*

I am now 86 years old and look back over my life as a Methodist. As an only child, I was always reading and searching for answers. I remember how in Sunday School I was told off by my teacher for asking too many questions. When I left grammar school at 16, I began an apprenticeship in Westland Aircraft, Yeovil. At that time, as a precocious teenager in my search for meaning, I asked to be placed on the circuit plan. I felt I could make a better job of preaching than many of those who occupied the pulpit! Everything changed in 1957 at a Youth Camp in Weston-super-Mare where I gave my heart to Christ, experienced his presence and received a call to be a Methodist Minister. My parents were dismayed. They were told: 'Tom will grow out of it'. I never have, and my parents eventually came round.

I had to complete my apprenticeship before I could begin training at Richmond College, London in 1964. My life there of studying Greek, Hebrew and Theology took a new turn when I married Christine, my wonderful long-suffering wife.

My first appointment was in Scotland. Having to preach twice to the same congregation every Sunday was a formidable challenge. This homiletical (preaching) requirement necessitated additional theological study. I was fortunate to be able to go part-time to New College, Edinburgh. There resided world-famous biblical and theological professors who fed my searching mind and my soul. They instilled in me a love of learning.

THE SPIRIT AND THE WORD

Ordained in 1969, my second appointment was on a demanding council housing estate in south Bristol. Working 14 hours most days and never taking time off, the inevitable happened. In the season of Lent in 1973, I collapsed. It was during this period that the Bible really exploded in me with Holy Spirit vitality. Not only did my wife, Christine, and I receive the filling of the Holy Spirit and gift of tongues, but I became caught up in the tide of charismatic renewal which was bubbling up across the churches of Britain. It was inevitable that I should meet up with Rev Dr Bill Davies, (who established Dunamis – a movement offering fellowship and support for charismatic Methodists), contribute occasionally to the Dunamis magazine and find fresh ministerial colleagues beyond Methodism. Here was a new ecumenism.

For some of my more evangelical colleagues, this effervescent new wine of the Spirit exploded the traditional wineskins of their churches causing splits and the fragmentation of their congregations. My firm theological grounding in Edinburgh University helped



My preaching scarf depicts the theme of Word & Spirit

me to cast this releasing Holy Spirit experience within a 'Theology of the Word'. I remember in a sermon of that time saying,

- When the Word is without the Spirit we dry up;
- When the Spirit is without the Word we blow up;
- When the Spirit and the Word come together, we grow up.

On several occasions in my ministry, both before and after 1974, individuals, quite out of the blue, had said, 'One day you will be President of the Methodist Church!' This prophetic word indeed came to pass in 2005 – the very year before my retirement. My Presidential message (even some of the words) was given to me in a prophetic vision of Ezekiel 37. In my address about 'Word and Spirit', I again repeated the three-line phrase above. My Presidential address of 2006 to the Ministerial Session of Conference focused on Mark 1:15 in which I spoke of the present 'kairos' moment and 'the need for repentance'.

AN UNREPENTANT CHURCH?

In the ten years which followed, I took this message around the Connexion through preaching and study days linked with my books *The Edge of Pentecost*, *Singing the Lord's Song in a Strange Land* and *Covid-19 God's Wake-Up Call?* (These and my other six books are available through Amazon). While I was encouraged by the expectancy of my audiences when I preached, (many of whom answered my appeals publicly as they gave their hearts to Christ), repentance was not on the agenda of the ordained ministers; some of whom got quite angry.

Today I still stay with Methodism. I pray for Methodism, but I also weep over what Methodism has become.



The launching the joint initiative of 'Fresh Expressions of Church' at Lambeth Palace with Archbishop Rt Rev Rowan Williams.

Our church has secularized and mechanized the imperative of repentance. 'Let's do things differently: worship songs instead of hymns, a music group instead of the organ, chairs instead of pews, having chats in worship rather than sitting under the power of the Word. This is not repentance. It is too shallow and too churchy! Repentance (metanoia) is 'kingdom' orientated (Mark 1:15). It centres on our relationship with God and with others. It demands a total mental, wilful and spiritual shift of heart and mind by acknowledging that we have stumbled into the wilderness and lost our providential way. Why has this happened Methodism? The root cause is theological.

THEOLOGY AND SCRIPTURE

The Methodist Church does its theology within the dynamic framework of four components: scripture, reason, tradition and experience. This is given the label 'The Methodist Quadrilateral.' The key question is: 'which of these components do you put first?' Rev Dr Donald English, one of the 'greats of our church', argued that the Bible was the 'centre piece for our knowledge of God through Jesus by the Holy Spirit'. He saw reason, tradition and experience revolving around the Bible like the dangling pieces of a baby's mobile hanging over a cot or crib. Theology in Methodism no longer follows this approach. Any consensus which once we had about the authority of scripture has now disappeared. Methodism (according to a Conference Report) has seven different ways of looking at the Bible! Thus, we find that within the Quadrilateral, 'reason' and 'experience' usually become the starting point, while scripture is brought in to justify what we have decided to do. Does this sound back-to-front to you?



Preaching, though an interpreter to a large Methodist charismatic congregation in Cuba

Most people are put off by the term 'theology'. The term literally means 'thinking about God' or 'speaking of God' (from two Greek words; theos – God and logos – word). A theologian (from the two words) is therefore a person who not only thinks, but prays. Where does one start the process of theological thinking? My studies in Edinburgh have left me in no doubt. The starting point must be John 1:14. 'The Word became flesh'. This happened supremely in Jesus Christ and subsequently with the scripture which through the Spirit 'becomes the Word of God'. Tragically, contemporary Methodism does not start here.

Thus, a fourth line sentence to the three-line comment above about the relationship between Word and Spirit would be:

When Word and Spirit are no longer central, then a church becomes (in Wesley's actual words) 'A dead sect having the form of religion but without its power'.

HOPE FOR METHODISM

I mentioned above that I stay with Methodism, pray for Methodism and weep over Methodism. This implies that I still have hope for Methodism. At the start of the year, I wrote a letter to the Methodist Recorder complaining of how our Connexional institution 'has morphed into a bureaucratic management machine'. The letter concluded: 'Martin Luther stormed against a Church where Law had replaced Grace. Should a similar prophetic shift in thinking and maybe even personnel take place at the top of our Methodist Church?'

I received a host of responses more or less on the lines of 'At last someone is speaking up'. There is still a faithful hopeful remnant within our church.

My hope is further kindled by the experience of Elijah in 1 Kings 19. He is marginalized, fearful, in despair, feeling to be a failure and alone. An angel comes to him and he is commanded 'Go and stand on the mountain before the Lord'. His ministry is not over. Neither is mine. God tells him, him and us, (v.15-18) that there will be a purge, a change of direction as God raises up a new leader and prophet. God also reminds Elijah of the large company of the faithful at the grass roots who wait, work and pray for better times.

Back in Bristol, the Spirit told me that Methodism is God's Church not ours, therefore I continue to praise him for all that is past, and trust him for all that's to come.

REV TOM STUCKEY

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PRAYER FOCUS

WORD AND SPIRIT

Pray for a coming together of the Word and Spirit in the Methodist Church. Pray for the church to return to a theology with the authority of scripture at its centre; for true repentance where it has moved away from biblical principles; for churches to take seriously the need for prayer and Bible study (2 Timothy 3:16; Romans 12:2).

FOCUS ON THE CHURCH

The Methodist Church: The President, Rev Richard Andrew and Vice President of Conference, Matthew Forsyth in their last weeks in office. Pray for Conference 25 June – 1 July, that all discussion and decisions will be honouring to God; pray for the President and Vice President designate, Rev Mark Slaney and Caroline Stead, as they prepare to take up office (Psalm 37:3-6; Proverbs 19:21).

Children and young people: Give thanks for the number of young people seeking and exploring faith; pray for their growth and nurture in spiritual and biblical truth. Pray for the Holy Spirit to inspire youth and children's workers across the nation to teach God's love in dynamic and creative ways. Pray for all who go into schools to bring the Christian message of hope (2 Corinthians 5:17-21; Mark 9:42).

FOCUS ON NATIONAL ISSUES

The shaking of the nation: As God begins the shaking of the nation, pray for people's eyes to turn to the Lord in

the days that lie ahead; for the light of Christ to shine into the dark corners of our land. Pray for God to prepare each of us to speak out boldly and courageously to share our faith stories with those outside the church that they may find their hope in Jesus (Haggai 2:7; Psalm 46:1-3).

Integrity and accountability: For integrity and honesty in all institutions and services throughout the nation – both public and private sectors, such as in the media, government and the Royal family. Pray for all decisions made to be for the good of the population and not individual interests; for God to continue bringing into the light that which is hidden in darkness (Proverbs 10:9; 1 Peter 3:10-12).

FOCUS ON WORLD ISSUES

Focus on Yemen, the third most dangerous country globally for Christians. Pray for a loosening of control by Houthi rebels, an Islamic militant group who brutally persecute Christians. Pray that God would bring peace and justice to Yemen; that secret churches will be able to meet, and for leaders to find the strength to keep serving (1 Corinthians 16:13; Isaiah 41:9-11).

Focus on Sudan, ranked the fourth most dangerous country. Pray for a peaceful resolution to Sudan's civil war, a future for the church and protection over all believers. Pray for openings for Sudanese Christians to spread Jesus' peace to others (Jeremiah 32:17; Deuteronomy 31:6).