Norman Wallwork


In November 1945 the Revd C. R. B. Shapland, an early member of the Methodist Sacramental Fellowship (MSF), remarked to the committee, ‘Today if we are remembered at all in Methodism, it is as a rather quaint people with a fondness for Holy Communion and an addiction to ecclesiastical trimmings.’ There was an element of truth in Shapland’s ‘wry lament’, quoted on p. 89 of Norman Wallwork’s fascinating and informative history of the MSF. The Fellowship prized Holy Communion, and took much more interest in liturgy and ceremonial than the average Methodist. But its members, though sometimes eccentric, were never ‘quaint’, and if the controversies of the mid-1930s had faded from memory by 1945, this was not because the MSF was forgotten. Rather, it had established itself within Methodism, and was set fair to exercise considerable influence in an age of liturgical reform and ecumenical endeavour. *The Gospel Church Secure* – a title taken from a Charles Wesley hymn – tells the story of the Fellowship, beginning with its genesis in the early 1930s.

A ministerial group, drawn from the Wesleyan strand of the wider Methodist movement, concerned about lax attitudes to the sacraments and fearing that the impending union of Wesleyan, Primitive and United Methodists would attenuate Wesleyan orthodoxy, spirituality and ecclesiology, proposed the formation of a ‘Methodist Catholic Society’. In 1935, despite the unexpected secession to Rome of its leading spirit, T. S. Gregory, this body took shape in the Methodist Sacramental Fellowship, open to both ordained and lay people. In those early years anxieties about the MSF’s alleged ‘Romeward’ leanings and fears of dividing the recently-united Church led to controversy, and this was sedulously fostered by the Protestant Truth Society. Encouraged by the sparkling oratory of J. E. Rattenbury, Methodist resentment at this external interference pushed the Conference to close ranks and enabled the MSF to surmount suspicion, and the Fellowship was on course for years of acceptance and steady, albeit modest, growth. In addition to the members’ discipline of a daily office and the mutual support of an annual conference/retreat, work was undertaken to re-appropriate the sacramental emphases, insights and teaching of the Wesley brothers. Classic and long-neglected Wesley texts, including Charles Wesley’s *Hymns on the Lord’s Supper* and John Wesley’s abstract from Thomas à Kempis’s *A Companion for the Altar* were re-published and MSF members championed the centrality of Holy Communion, modelling a full eucharistic celebration rather than Communion tacked on to a
preaching service. After 1945 there was eager engagement with ecumenism, first with the Church of England and then with the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches. MSF members and sympathisers were active in the various phases of liturgical reform, contributing significantly to the *Methodist Service Book* (1975) and the *Methodist Worship Book* (1999). These texts enshrined in the authorised liturgies of the Methodist Church prayers, practices and principles which would have been recognised by only a minority of Methodists in 1932, including the statement in the ‘General Directions’ in the 1975 Sunday Service that ‘The worship of the Church ... in its fullness ... includes the Lord’s Supper or Holy Communion.’ By the 1970s, in a frankly pluralist Church, some members of the MSF were adopting eucharistic vestments, creating religious orders, and exploring the possibilities of Marian theology. Although some of these developments have not entered the Methodist mainstream, David Walton’s foreword to *The Gospel Church Secure* is surely correct in affirming that ‘many core aims of the MSF have now become firmly embedded in Methodism as a whole’ (p. vii).

The MSF is fortunate in its historian. Norman Wallwork has been involved with the Fellowship since 1964, and he writes with an encyclopaedic knowledge of its history, happenings and personalities. In addition to this unrivalled experience, he was also able to draw on the MSF archives for extensive quotations from lectures, *Bulletins* and memoranda. He has produced a consummate insider’s history, illustrated by a cornucopia of anecdotes, reminiscences, curiosities, and character studies which are true to life and unfailingly kind. Ernest Rattenbury, Donald Soper, Kingsley Lloyd, Gordon Wakefield, John Newton and many others are deftly described. At times the delight in amusing detail is particularly striking. Where else would one find, shortly after sections on the introduction of Merbecke settings for the Communion Office and reactions to the Anglican-Methodist Conversations report of 1963, the revelation that a crèche was made available for the Fellowship’s Low Sunday Weekend in 1966, leading to an embarrassing incident when a staff changeover in the crèche prompted this unflattering and all-too-audible summary of Donald Soper’s address: ‘Brenda says it’s all a load of waffle’ (p. 118).

For the historian of twentieth-century Methodism, there are several significant issues to tease out in the story of the MSF. One is around origins: why did the Fellowship begin? What were its antecedents within and beyond Methodism? What was its appeal? Attention has often focussed on the centrality of Holy Communion, but (as Norman Wallwork recognises) the proponents of a ‘Methodist Catholic Society’ were also concerned to reassert credal orthodoxy in the face of undogmatic Protestantism. Nor should it be forgotten that Rattenbury was the leader of Wesleyan opposition to Methodist Union, fearing