
This book ranges wide, encompassing the theological issues of God, God’s world and God’s people. Wide-ranging, yes, but it is, by the author’s own admission, only a snapshot of recent Methodist thought. ‘This book details the theological work in progress of the British Methodist Church from 1932 up to the present day’ (p. 1). It is not only a book about what British Methodism is saying theologically, but also how it acts theologically. It therefore gives us this church’s kerygma, its proclamation in word and deed, and in this way, the author argues, gives us an ‘even more definitive theology of a church than a set of doctrines or a confession might …’ (p. 6).

A variety of sources are drawn upon: the works of John Wesley, liturgical texts, hymnody, Faith and Order Reports, Statements on Social Responsibility, and others. Some of the source material quoted does not originate in Methodism itself. In a discussion of the kenotic model of the incarnation (p. 69) a collect from the Methodist Worship Book is quoted. The reader, if Church of England as in this reviewer’s case, is likely to think, ‘That’s one of ours.’ In fact it is the collect for Lent 3 in Common Worship (Lent 4 in ASB and coming, ultimately, from the 1928 Prayer Book). Perhaps it would have been helpful, in a book that focuses specifically on Methodist theology, to have acknowledged where material originates in the wider Church. It would have made clear, in one way at least, the ecumenical openness of the Methodist Church.

The author turns to the one organizing structure approved by the Methodist Conference in order to marshal the array of material brought together in this volume: the structure of *Hymns & Psalms*. Given the theological weight that Methodism has historically given to hymns, this is fitting. The book thus falls into three main sections: God’s Nature, God’s World and God’s People. The individual chapters usually begin with John Wesley’s theological reflections. Wesley’s theology, however, is not idolized. Methodism is anything but a confessional church. No one theology is held up to be permanent, even those of the ‘founding father’ himself. Theological utterance and practice are tested in the present and what is found wanting can be discarded. What
proves of lasting worth is upheld and honoured. Some of John Wesley’s views on the
environment, for example, now look dated: ‘… few today would agree with Wesley
that earthquakes are the effect of God’s anger for humanity’s sin’ (p. 129). Equally,
however, his approach could be innovative, striking out in ways which some modern
theology follows. For instance, Wesley refused to locate the *imago Dei* in a specific
location in the human person or identify it with a single human characteristic (p.
163). He saw it in three ways: the natural image, the political image and the moral
image. ‘Wesley’s approach to the whole doctrine of the image of God in humanity
was remarkably similar to that being currently advocated by trinitarian scholars
such as Gunton and Schwöbel’ (ibid.). Each theological topic is therefore set in the
historical context of Wesley’s thought, allowing one to see both the continuities and
the discontinuities with his theological legacy.

Inevitably when one reads a book like this, one compares the Methodist approach
to that of one’s own tradition. In a discussion of Methodism’s theological appraisal
of the natural order and how this has changed to include a positive evaluation of the
non-human world, we learn that some Methodist eucharistic liturgies now express
thanks and praise ‘for the stars in their splendour and the world in its wonder …’
We also have, ‘through his mighty resurrection he overcame sin and death to set
the whole creation free’. The consequences of the resurrection are cosmic, not
just earthly and human. One is implicitly challenged to compare the liturgies of
one’s own church. The Church of England’s newly authorized eucharistic prayers
have no reference to any particular aspect of creation like ‘stars’, nor the cosmic
dimensions of the resurrection. When one considers that global warming is now
an almost weekly matter of comment in the media, and the picture from the Apollo
spacecraft of planet earth rising above the moon’s horizon has impressed on our
terrestrial imaginations the spatially minute part our planet has in the universe, one
is surprised at the liturgical lacuna.

The issue of authority raises its head in the discussion of a number of issues.
Naturally the Bible resides as the prime authority within the Church. But
Methodism has wrestled hard with the nature of its authority. ‘There is unlikely
to be a consensus of opinion about how the Bible is to be used to enable decision-
making’ claims a Faith and Order Report of 2000. We learn that ‘In spite of the
claim for the pre-eminence of Scripture, Methodism has never attempted to make
a statement or declaration that depends on its justification on Scripture alone’ (p.
173). In the 1979 report on human sexuality six ‘witnesses’ were called upon: ‘the
Bible, reason, the traditional teaching of the church, the personal and corporate
experience of modern Christians, the understanding provided by the human
sciences, and what might be called the spirit of the age’ (p. 174). For some, this
last witness might ring alarm bells, but it shows how Methodism attempts to take
seriously the reality of the situation in which it finds itself. For any who might feel
that Methodism might sell out to the ‘spirit of the age’, the conclusions it reaches in