



# Methodism as part of the Protestant Tradition

It is widely accepted that the Protestant Reformation focused on three main matters of belief: the supreme authority of scripture, salvation by grace through faith in Christ and the priesthood of all believers.

## **B.1 The supreme authority of scripture**

The Methodist Church affirms that the Bible contains all that is necessary for salvation, and that nothing should be thought necessary to salvation which is not contained within the books of the Bible or which may not be proved from them. As with other Protestant Churches we recognise only 66 books as part of the Bible, 39 in the Old Testament, as in the Hebrew Bible, and 27 in the New Testament. Other books, and portions of books in the so called “Apocrypha” are recognised as being suitable for reading and study, but are not regarded as having the same authority as the books of the Old and New Testaments.

In the Bible, which we seek to have in the most accurate and intelligible form possible, we have the record of God's revelation of himself in the experience of his people. As such the Bible is often referred to as the Word of God. This record of God's word to his people reflects the historical, cultural and religious circumstances of those people at various stages of history. Our circumstances are often very different from those in which the Bible was written, so we have to apply them with wisdom to our situation. For instance, the laws concerning the diagnosis and treatment of leprosy (Lev. 13:1-14, 57) should not be applied directly to public health issues today.

How then can we assess the authority of different parts of the Bible, and how can we hear the Word of God to us through its words? The Bible is effectively God's plan of salvation, which is crystallised in the life and work of Jesus Christ, described by the Gospel according to John as “the Word made flesh.” We must test scripture against other parts of scripture; never taking small parts in isolation, and ultimately all interpretations must be made in the light of the words and actions of Jesus. The Bible was the source of authority for John Wesley. He described himself as a 'man of one book' yet at the same time he steeped himself in a wide variety of literature and learning and encouraged others to do the same, affirming that we must view the Bible through the windows of tradition, reason and experience.

## **B.2 Salvation by grace through faith in Christ**

Salvation, in the terms of the Apostles Creed is the forgiveness of sins that allows us to enjoy eternal life, thus saving us from death. The Protestant reformers emphasised that this salvation is a product of God's grace alone. As Paul said: 'For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God' (Eph. 2: 8 & 9).

Salvation means not only the forgiveness of sins, but also freedom; freedom from the fear of death and hell, and freedom from the fear that life is without purpose or meaning. This can all be ours because of God's grace: his undeserved goodness to us. Neither good deeds nor pious religious practices in themselves, can earn salvation, whether they are done by us or on our behalf. Indeed such attempts to earn salvation show our concern to do something by ourselves for ourselves. This concern with self is the very opposite of that denial of self which is required of those who would follow Jesus. All that is asked of us is that we have faith. Faith in this context is not a confession of faith such as the Apostles' Creed or a specific religious faith, but primarily trust in God through Christ. We have to recognise God's loving kindness reaching out to us, especially from the cross of Christ, and accept this personally.

## **B.3 The priesthood of all believers**

The title 'priest' is never used in the New Testament of any office holder or leader in the church, other than of Christ, the head of the church. The reformers taught, however, that there was 'a priesthood of



all believers;’ not primarily that each individual believer has a priestly function, but that the Church as a whole exercises a priestly role. This is based on both the Old and New Testaments. The Old Testament promised that the people of Israel would be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus. 19: 6), whilst the New Testament describes Christ as “The Great High Priest.” Therefore the Church, as the “New Israel” and “the Body of Christ”, also exercises a priestly function, as a “royal priesthood, a holy nation.”

Every Christian can approach God directly without any human intermediary. Each can receive the forgiveness of God without any priestly absolution. All Christians, however, share the responsibility and privilege of intercession and leading others into personal relationship with God. Within the church there are different gifts or functions, but all are included in the “priesthood of all believers.” There is, however, no sacrifice for other priests to make because Christ has made the one sufficient, perfect and unrepeatable sacrifice. All that we as individuals, and as a church, can do is to follow the sacrificial example of Christ.