

‘A Division of Heart’: Pitfalls and Potential in Wesley’s Understanding of Schism

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Schism is not normally discussed as a matter of abstract speculation. When someone sets out to define schism, they are either charging someone with schism or defending themselves against the charge. No one defines schism in such a way as to incriminate themselves, so discussions of schism often have a self-serving or self-justifying character. This is simply a more pointed illustration of a problem with ecclesiology in general. Ecclesiology as a serious topic of theological debate arose in the Reformation when the identity of the church was suddenly in question. All sides wanted to claim that they were part of the true church, and in doing so they often de-churched their opponents. The standard magisterial Protestant affirmation that the church is found where the Word of God is rightly preached and the sacraments duly administered sounds like a positive affirmation, but it was clearly intended to exclude Roman Catholics and Anabaptists.¹ The more bald-faced aggressions of that era are politely passed over in most contemporary ecumenical discussion, but the exclusionary impulse of ecclesiology has left a lasting impression.

The promise of John Wesley's ecclesiology is that his mature definition of the church steered clear of such divisiveness. His standard for ecclesiality was very generous and comprehensive, in that it avoided the typical focus on institutional or visible marks of the church in favour of an emphasis on genuine Christianity – a necessarily social and ecclesial phenomenon, to be sure, but not one that he tied to particular historical forms. While Methodists were pressed on the need for Christian community, the relationship of such genuine Christian community to the Church of England was ambiguous. Wesley insisted that the role of

¹ On this point, see R. R. Reno, “The Debilitation of the Churches,” in *The Ecumenical Future: Background Papers for “In One Body Through the Cross”* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 46–72.

Methodism was to renew the Church from within, but the kind of vital Christian fellowship that would 'spread scriptural holiness over the land' need not have anything to do with the Church of England, strictly speaking. And while Wesley tried to avoid direct competition with the Church of England in terms of sacramental worship, the lack of structural connection between Wesley's Methodist Societies and the Church of England meant that vital fellowship between Methodists and the local parish was not as common as Wesley desired. Wesley was left to argue for unity with the Church as a matter of expediency rather than necessity, and such arguments were simply not enough to stop the inexorable press toward separation.

In this paper I will be exploring these themes through an examination of John Wesley's definition of the church and his definition of schism in Sermons 74, 'Of the Church' (1785), and 75, 'On Schism' (1786).² These sermons are part of a cluster of ecclesiological writings written in the final few years of his life.³ It is not surprising that Wesley felt compelled to explicitly articulate his key ecclesiological convictions in the wake of his ordinations and the continued pressure towards separation from among his own ranks. That is not to say that there was any substantial change in Wesley's ecclesiology at this time; what Wesley wrote about the church in these late writings has precedent in his earlier writings. But the directness with which Wesley tackles these issues gives these sources significance, and the frequency of his attention to ecclesiological matters during the final years of his life is noteworthy.

² This is a portion of a chapter on Wesley's view of schism and legitimate diversity which is still a work-in-progress. The whole chapter will include greater attention to historical context than can be provided in this paper. The chapter will also include significant focus on pneumatology in relation to the means of grace, including the Lord's Supper. The chapter, in turn, will be part of a larger book project on revivalist divisions in British Methodism.

³ See especially Sermon 97, 'On Obedience to Pastors' (1785), Sermon 101, 'The Duty of Constant Communion' (published 1787, though written in the 1730s), and Sermon 121, 'Sermon 104, 'On Attending the Church Service' (1787), 'Prophets and Priests' (1789). Of course the publication of the Sunday Service in 1784, including his redaction of the *Book of Common Prayer*, was a significant development in the developing arc of Wesley's relationship with the Church of England. Some short pieces on separation from the Church were also published in the *Arminian Magazine* after 1784, including 'Thoughts upon a Late Phenomenon,' (1788) and 'Farther Thoughts on Separation from the Church' (1789).

It is helpful to consider what Wesley wrote about schism in sermon 75 alongside the view of the church he presented in 'Of the Church,' written six months prior. The overall thrust of the sermon was to define the church in terms of the character of her members, rather than any external or institutional marks. His definition of the universal church was as follows:

The catholic or universal church is all the persons in the universe whom God hath so called out of the world as to entitle them to the preceding character; as to be 'one body', united by 'one spirit'; having 'one faith, one hope, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in them all.'⁴

Among the defining marks listed in his brief exposition, some could be taken as objective marks of the church, but Wesley skewed them in the direction of the individual believer's participation in the saving work of God, rather than in the external marks themselves. For example, when he mentioned 'one faith' he was not referring to the *fides quae* or content of doctrine as we might assume but rather to the living faith that believers share – the *fides qua* with which we believe and which is a gift of the Spirit. In referencing 'one Lord' Wesley did not offer a theocentric grounding for church unity but described the way that these believers are under the dominion of Christ who has 'has set up his kingdom in their hearts.' Likewise the 'one Father' mark of the church was explained in terms of how *believers* have the Spirit of adoption and cry out to him as Abba Father.⁵ The closest Wesley came to providing an 'objective' mark of the church was his comment on baptism, acknowledged as 'the outward sign our one Lord has been pleased to appoint, of all that inward and spiritual grace which he is continually bestowing upon his Church.'⁶ We know however, from Wesley's comments on baptism elsewhere, that he did not

⁴ Sermon 74, 'Of the Church,' §15, *Works*, III:50.

⁵ Sermon 74, 'Of the Church,' §§10-11, 13, *Works*, III:49-50.

⁶ Sermon 74, 'Of the Church,' §12, *Works*, III:49-50.

mean to imply that all who have the outward sign have a living faith and are therefore truly members of the church.⁷

Having thus identified the universal church as made up of all true Christians, Wesley laid out a similar criterion for particular churches: a national church is all believers in given nation, and all the Christians in a given city are the church in that city. On this basis he offered an interesting definition of the Church of England as 'those members, of the Universal Church who are inhabitants of England.'⁸ At the smallest level even two or three can be a particular church.⁹ Wesley specified no requirement for orders of ministry, historical or geographical ties, or even the dominical sacraments. At the very least, Wesley was extending potential ecclesial status to bodies of believers without any such historical or institutional marks. Indeed, his Methodist followers might have read this sermon and wondered if they were not already particular churches, despite their lack of ordained ministry and sacraments (and despite what Wesley said elsewhere about Methodism's ecclesial status).

Wesley then quoted part of the Anglican article on the church approvingly: 'THE visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in the which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly administered.' However, he went on to make two telling comments on the article. First, he interpreted 'congregation of faithful men' to mean 'a congregation of believers' or 'men endued with "living faith."¹⁰ Gwang Seok Oh argued that this was a new development for the later Wesley, but in fact Wesley made the very same claim in

⁷ See Sermon 45, 'The Means of Grace,' §§IV.1-2, *Sermons II* [vol. II in *The Works of John Wesley*], ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 196-198.

⁸ Sermon 74, 'Of the Church,' §17, *Works*, III:52; see also *Journal*, 6 February 1740, *Journal and Diaries II* [vol. XIX of *The Works of John Wesley*], ed. W Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990): 138. This, in itself, is a telling comment on the ambiguous place the Church of England held in Wesley's ecclesiology.

⁹ Sermon 74, 'Of the Church,' §15, *Works*, III:51.

¹⁰ Sermon 74, 'Of the Church,' §15-16, *Works* III:51.

the early 1740s.¹¹ 'Living faith' was one of Wesley's short-hands for genuine Christianity, and so provided a way for Wesley to interpret the Anglican article in such a way that only 'true Christians,' in Wesley's understanding of the term, were members of the church.¹² This cut against a more traditional magisterial Protestant emphasis on the church as a mixed body identified by the outward marks of Word and Sacrament. One way to try to resolve this tension is to argue that Wesley, in this definition, was referring to the 'invisible church' and not the 'visible church,' as David Field does in his exposition of this sermon.¹³ However, such a distinction was not made by Wesley in this sermon; nor is it characteristic of Wesley to distinguish between the visible and invisible church.¹⁴ Further, when Wesley moved on to defining *particular* churches (clearly an example of 'visible' churches), he offered exactly the same criteria as the universal church, and was here suggesting that his definition of the universal church agreed with the Anglican article, which specifically referenced the 'visible church.'

A more plausible solution is offered by Elmer Colyer in his recent book, where he suggests that Wesley's definition of the church in Sermon 74 referred to the church in its *esse*, or 'being', which in ecclesiology is normally distinguished from the *bene esse*, or those aspects of church life which are intended for its 'well being'. Colyer then suggests that Wesley views the

¹¹ See Wesley's *Journal*, 6 February 1740, in *Journals and Diaries II* [vol. XIX of *The Works of John Wesley*], ed. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 138; *An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, §§76-79, in *The Appeals to Men of Reason and Religion, and Certain Related Open Letters* [vol. XI in *The Works of John Wesley*], ed. Gerald R. Cragg (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 77-79. Cp. Gwang Seok Oh, *John Wesley's Ecclesiology: A Study in Its Sources and Development* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 203-5.

¹² As Outler notes, *Works III*: 51 n.31, the BCP Catechism does refer to "lively faith" as a criterion for self-examination prior to communicating. 'A Catechism,' in *The Book of Common Prayer* (Cambridge: John Baskerville, 1762), n.p., Further, Wesley's appeal to the Latin text *coetus credentium* seems to be a conflation with the text of Article VIII of the *Augsburg Confession*.

¹³ David N. Field, *Bid Our Jarring Conflicts Cease: A Wesleyan Theology and Praxis of Church Unity* (Nashville: Foundry Books, 2017), 118.

¹⁴ He did make the distinction when discussing God's providential care in Sermon 77, 'Spiritual Worship,' §I.9, *Works III*:94.

sacraments as pertaining to the *bene esse* rather than the *esse*.¹⁵ Colyer also provides a helpful corrective to an overly pietistic or anthropocentric reading of Wesley's exposition, by grounding what Wesley said in this sermon in Wesley's understanding of salvation and of faith itself as a participation in the life of the Triune God. In other words, because faith is human participation in God's work, Wesley's focus on 'living faith' here should not be taken to suggest that the church is constituted the voluntary association of people of faith coming together, as is characteristic of a believer's church model. Colyer suggests that for Wesley, the church, in its essence, was constituted by the saving work of the Triune God, in which believers participate, regardless of the variety of ways this Trinitarian communion may be embodied. So Colyer comments with respect to the means of grace: 'Whatever formative function these creaturely structures or means of grace serve in and of themselves in the lives of those who use them, which Wesley would not deny, the transformative reality and power, for Wesley, finally resides in the Trinitarian persons who freely act on our behalf in and through these means of grace.'¹⁶

This thrust is all the more apparent in Wesley's second comment on the article, which concerns the claim that the church is a body in which 'the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments' are 'duly administered.' Wesley made this startling statement:

I will not undertake to defend the accuracy of this definition. I dare not exclude from the Church catholic all those congregations in which any unscriptural doctrines, which cannot be affirmed to be 'the pure word of God,' are sometimes, yea, frequently preached; neither all those congregations, in which the sacraments are not 'duly administered.' Certainly if these things are so, the Church of Rome is not so much as a part of the catholic Church; seeing therein neither is 'the pure word of God' preached, nor the sacraments 'duly administered.' Whoever they are that have 'one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one God and Father of all,' I can easily bear with their holding wrong

¹⁵ Elmer M. Colyer, *The Trinitarian Dimension of John Wesley's Theology* (Nashville: New Room Books, 2019), 207–18.

¹⁶ Colyer, 252. This assessment is closer to the mark than Ryan Danker's statement that Wesley viewed the essence of the church as found in its teaching, though Danker likewise emphasizes that Wesley saw the church's 'forms' as secondary. Ryan Nicholas Danker, *Wesley and the Anglicans: Political Division in Early Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), 144–45.

opinions, yea, and superstitious modes of worship: Nor would I, on these accounts, scruple still to include them within the pale of the catholic Church; neither would I have any objection to receive them, if they desired it, as members of the Church of England.¹⁷

The comment is notable, not least because Wesley had *retained* that part of the article when he revised it as a doctrinal standard for the Methodists in America, one year prior. Here he disclaimed Word and sacrament as essential to ecclesiality, distancing himself from the classic magisterial Protestant position.¹⁸ However, the comment consistent with the definition of the church which he laid out earlier in the sermon; he had not inadvertently left Word and Sacrament out of his definition.

Wesley's definition of the church afforded full ecclesial status to dissenting bodies, and its lack of reference to any essential role for mediating structures or ministries and its focus on the character of true Christians resonated with a believer's church view in some respects.¹⁹ However, the comprehensiveness and inclusiveness of Wesley's view went beyond what most in the believer's church tradition would accept. For example, seventeenth-century Puritan John Owen supported congregationalist polity because he believed it was instituted by Christ himself, and he had particular views about which ordinances were instituted by Christ: : 'preaching the

¹⁷ Sermon 74, "Of the Church," §19, *Works*, III:52.

¹⁸ Wesley's comments here also stand in tension with Joseph Wood's conclusion that Wesley held 'there is no Church without the Word or sacraments.' Wood, "Tensions Between Evangelical Theology and the Established Church," 244.

¹⁹ There has been much debate about the lineage of Wesley's ecclesiology, and the degree to which his Anglicanism was tinged with other (possibly contradictory) influences. In his introduction to Wesley's 1785 sermon, 'Of the Church,' Albert Outler suggested it represented an 'unstable blend of Anglican and Anabaptist ecclesiologies' and yet was 'one of Wesley's more daring syntheses.' *Sermons III* [vol. III in *The Works of John Wesley*], ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986), 46. On the other hand, David Rainey argued in a 2010 article that the sermon showed 'no sign of Anabaptist influence.' *Journal of Systematic Theology* 12, no. 4 (October 2010): 428. Joseph Wood likewise stressed the Anglican character of Wesley's ecclesiology in his doctoral dissertation, while noting how his Evangelical commitments stood in tension with his Anglicanism. Joseph Wood, "Tensions Between Evangelical Theology and the Established Church: John Wesley's Ecclesiology" (Ph.D., Manchester, UK, University of Manchester, 2012). It is regrettable that Outler chose the term 'Anabaptist' in describing Wesley's ecclesiology, and Rainey is right to reject any direct Anabaptist influence. Nevertheless, Wesley's view of the church and of schism did exhibit some tendencies that are typical of a 'believer's church' ecclesiology (as I will discuss), while also retaining Anglican features, particularly in relation to the sacraments.

word, administering the sacraments, mutual watchfulness over one another, and the exercise of that discipline which he hath appointed unto his disciples.'²⁰ In Wesley, we have a similar affirmation of the local assembly as a particular church, but without the specific commitments to a particular form of polity or discipline as essential for ecclesiality (not to mention sacraments), and without the sectarian call to come apart from the corrupted, mixed body. Wesley enforced discipline within the Methodist Societies but he did not view such discipline as constituting the boundary of the church *per se*, as that would imply that real Christians *ought to* separate from the Established Church and form pure churches.

While Wesley's basic standard for ecclesiality appears thin, it could at the same time be quite rigorous, if we keep in mind that his vision of 'living faith' excluded many of those who called themselves Christians. Later in the sermon, when he came to address the question of the church's holiness, he rooted it again in his vision of what it meant to be a true Christian.

The Church is called 'holy,' because it is holy, because every member thereof is holy, though in different degrees, as He that called them is holy. How clear is this! If the Church, as to the very essence of it, is a body of believers, no man that is not a Christian believer can be a member of it. If this whole body be animated by one spirit, and endued with one faith, and one hope of their calling; then he who has not that spirit, and faith, and hope, is no member of this body. It follows, that not only no common swearer, no Sabbath-breaker, no drunkard, no whoremonger, no thief, no liar, none that lives in any outward sin, but none that is under the power of anger or pride, no lover of the world, in a word, none that is dead to God, can be a member of his Church.²¹

Again, there is in this passage, broadly speaking, a believer's church impulse toward the integrity of the church, but Wesley urged real Christians to remain within the church with those who were

²⁰ John Owen, 'Of Schism; the True Nature of it Discovered and Considered, with Reference to the Present Differences in Religion,' in *The Works of John Owen, Vol. XIX* (London: Richard Baynes, 1826 [1657]), 213, 605. Ibid. 605. Because these means were exercised in the local congregation, Owen argued that congregational government is the means of church-government that can claim to be instituted by Christ himself.

²¹ Sermon 74, 'Of the Church,' §28, *Works*, III:56.

outwardly but not truly her members, acknowledging that, in time, 'God might call them too' into true Christianity and true church membership.²²

Is there a way to reconcile Wesley's statements in 'Of the Church,' with his inclusion of Word and Sacrament as marks of the church in his revised article on the church? Colyer's distinction between *esse* and *bene esse* imposes categories that Wesley did not explicitly use in this sermon, but as he notes, there is precedent for Wesley using the terms in precisely this way. In *An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, when Wesley commented on Article XIX, he described 'the due administration of the sacraments' as 'requisite, if not to the *being*, at least to the *well-being* of a Church.'²³ Thus Wesley questioned whether due administration of the sacraments was absolutely necessary for ecclesiality as early as 1743. This generous view of ecclesiality also accords well with Wesley's willingness to recognize true and saving Christian faith among those with whom he had profound theological and practical disagreements.²⁴

On a charitable reading, one could argue that in his revised article on the church, Wesley was setting forth a normative definition of the visible church for the Methodists in America, but that he did not view this definition as constituting the boundaries of the church catholic, strictly speaking. Wesley continued to hold that the sacraments were indispensable means of grace, and continued to believe that all churches ought to preach the 'pure Word of God.' However, in his sermon 'Of the Church' he set out to establish the identity of the universal church, a large part of which did not share his opinions on many matters of doctrine and discipline, including

²² Sermon 74, 'Of the Church,' §29, *Works*, III:56. We can note an echo here of Wesley's earlier argument against separation from the 1750s: it might have been *lawful* for the Methodists to separate (that is, they *could* form separate churches) but it was not *expedient* for the greater mission of reviving the church and bringing nominal members to vital Christianity. *Reasons Against a Separation from the Church of England* (1758), in *The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design* [vol. IX of *The Works of John Wesley*], ed. Rupert E. Davies (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), 334-49.

²³ *An Earnest Appeal*, §78, in *Works*, XI:78. See Colyer, *The Trinitarian Dimension*, 217 n. 71.

²⁴ For example, Sermon 39, 'Catholic Spirit,' §§I.3-11, *Works*, II:83-87.

sacramental practice. Wesley's broad-minded catholic spirit prevented him from de-churching those with whom he disagreed but with whom he recognized a common 'living faith' in Christ. In other words, Wesley left the minimum threshold for ecclesiality very low, and held that the pure preaching of the Word a right administration of the sacraments were normative but not constitutive marks of the church. Still, even if this explanation holds, one cannot escape the tensions between Wesley's various statements on the church, and a plain reading of Wesley's revised article on the church would imply that Word and sacrament are essential.

Wesley's definition enabled him to avoid the typical divisiveness that has characterized most ecclesiologies and he recognized that the Protestant marks of 'Word and Sacrament' were designed to exclude Roman Catholics and other believers.²⁵ As such, with its minimal requirements and scriptural simplicity, Wesley's standard for ecclesiality provides a theological basis for the kind of mutual recognition that has proven elusive in much ecumenical work. Wesley provides no doctrinal test for ecclesiality (though we must keep in mind that Wesley's 'religion of the heart' presupposes orthodoxy on many basic matters of doctrine), nor does he provide a practical test for ecclesiality, in terms of polity or mode of worship (though here too Wesley had his own views of course). Rather, the test of ecclesiality was simply the presence of genuine Christianity – which is to say, the saving work of God in the life of his people.

In Wesley's sermon 'On Schism' we find similar resonances with some aspects of a believer's church perspective. In his earlier writings on separation from the Church of England

²⁵ As Robert K. Martin comments, 'It seems that his overarching sensibility is not primarily oriented toward a kind of ecclesiological discrimination that excludes and ostracizes, but rather his driving passion is toward inclusion and cooperation (or greater communion) of Christians who strive to live the way of Jesus Christ and help others along the way.' Robert K. Martin, "Towards a Wesleyan Sacramental Ecclesiology," *Ecclesiology* 9 (2013): 24.

he had typically defined schism in a minimalist way as absence from Anglican worship.²⁶ In this late sermon Wesley began by arguing that, strictly speaking, the scriptural term schism referred to divisions within a particular church, rather than separation from a church. Focusing on three uses of *schismata* in 1 Corinthians, Wesley echoed arguments made by John Owen in the seventeenth century, noting how each Pauline use of the term refers to a division within the Corinthian community.²⁷ Wesley then defined the biblical meaning of schism as 'an alienation of affection in any of them toward their brethren, a division of heart, and parties springing therefrom, though they were still outwardly united together...'²⁸ His conclusion to the first part of the sermon was that separation from the Church of England would not be schism in the scriptural nature of the term.

...it is apparent to every impartial reader that it does not in any of these [scriptural references] mean a separation from any church or body of Christians, whether with or without cause. So that the immense pains which have been taken both by Papists and Protestants in writing whole volumes against schism as a separation, whether from the Church of Rome or from the Church of England, exerting all their strength, and bringing all their learning, have been employed to mighty little purpose. They are combating a sin which had no existence but in their own imagination, which is not once forbidden, no, nor once mentioned either in the Old or New Testament.²⁹

Thus, one could easily read the first half of the sermon as an argument that the Methodists would not be guilty of schism in the scriptural sense if they separated from the Church of England.

²⁶ As Frank Baker notes, 'Any 'variation' of customary church order could be permitted without entailing separation, but regular absence from Anglican worship in order to attend the worship of some other Christian body clearly constituted separation.' Frank Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970), 288. This of course, was a debatable point. See Danker, *Wesley and the Anglicans*, 110–18. Indeed, in his book on Joseph Butler, Bob Tennant suggests that there was 'ample ground for suspension and possibly for excommunication' of Wesley when he met with Butler in August 1739. Bob Tennant, *Conscience, Consciousness and Ethics in Joseph Butler's Philosophy and Ministry*, Studies in Modern British Religious History (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell & Brewer, 2011), 133.

²⁷ See, for example, "Of Schism; the True Nature of It Discovered and Considered, with Reference to the Present Differences in Religion," in *The Works of John Owen, Vol. XIX*, vol. XIX (London: Richard Baynes, 1826), 125–26.

²⁸ Sermon 75, 'On Schism,' §I.7, *Works*, III:63. This emphasis on 'alienation of affection' matches Wesley's comment on 1 Corinthians 1:10. John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (London: Epworth Press, 1950 [1754]), 586.

²⁹ Sermon 75, 'On Schism,' §I.9, *Works*, III:63-4.

The second half of the sermon, on the other hand, was aimed at discouraging the Methodists from separating, even if it would not have been 'schism' in the strict, biblical sense. Here Wesley defined schism in a more 'remote' sense as 'a causeless separation from a body of living Christians.'³⁰ Note that Wesley specified that, even in its 'remote' sense, schism was causeless separation from body of *living* Christians – and he had frequently cast doubt on the presence and prevalence of such true Christians in the Church of England. He then went on to describe such separation as both evil in itself (because a breach of the law of love) and an action that leads to evil consequences (producing evil fruit both in terms of inward and outward sin which become an evangelistic stumbling-block).³¹

Just as with Wesley's sermon on the church, his view of genuine Christianity was definitive for his understanding of schism. Schism was not defined in terms of church polity (indeed schism in its strict biblical sense implies, for Wesley, ongoing compliance with church polity) but in terms of affection, nor was it framed as a contravention of God-ordained ecclesial authority; rather it was sinful because of the evil fruit it produced, which Wesley expounded in terms of the corruption of the hearts of those involved, leading to evil actions. Again, Colyer's recent book is helpful in emphasizing how Wesley's emphasis on love and affections is not naïve or simplistic, but has deep theological roots in Wesley's vision of salvation as transformative participatory communion with the Triune God and one another.³²

Wesley then went on to lay out those situations in which he believes separation *would* be justified. While he did grant that one should separate from a body of Christians on matters of

³⁰ Sermon 75, 'On Schism,' §II.10, *Works*, III:64. This definition again echoed earlier treatments going back to the 1740s, where schism was defined as a 'causeless separation from the church of Christ.' *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, III.30, in *Works*, XI:312; Wesley to John Lewis, 2 July 1747, in Randy L Maddox, "A Zealous (but Respected) Adversary: John Lewis's Correspondence with John Wesley," *Wesley and Methodist Studies* 7, no. 1 (2015): 131.

³¹ Sermon 75, 'On Schism,' §II.11-16, *Works*, III:64-6.

³² Colyer, *The Trinitarian Dimension*, 237–51.

conscience, he restricted such conscience-objection to situations where one is constrained to commit an act forbidden by Scripture or forbidden from carrying out an act commanded by Scripture. In either case, the sin would be on the heads of those who forced the believer to separate. Wesley wrote personally here, declaring his loyalty to the Church, but also noting the grounds on which he would feel obligated to separate:

I am now, and have been from my youth, a member and a Minister of the Church of England: And I have do desire no design to separate from it, till my soul separates from my body. Yet if I was not permitted to remain therein without omitting what God requires me to do, it would then become meet and right, and my bounden duty, to separate from it without delay. To be more particular: I know God has committed to me a dispensation of the gospel; yea, and my own salvation depends upon preaching it: 'Woe is me if I preach not the gospel.' If then I could not remain in the Church without omitting this, without desisting from preaching the gospel I should be under a necessity of separating from it, or losing my own soul.³³

Here we see Wesley's strong sense of his own extraordinary calling as an evangelist, and by extension the extraordinary calling of Methodism, which pressed him toward his own ecclesiastical irregularities and would be grounds for separation if the occasion should ever arise.³⁴ David Field, in his recent book on Christian unity in Wesleyan perspective, misses some of the nuances of Wesley's position. He summarizes Wesley's point by saying 'A church that is genuinely characterized by love will seek to structure itself so that its members are not forced to go against their consciences,' and 'A church with a genuinely catholic spirit provides room for theological and practical diversity.'³⁵ While that sounds similar to what Wesley is saying here,

³³ Sermon 75, 'On Schism,' §II.17, *Works*, III:67.

³⁴ As Adrian Burdon comments, 'The calling of God was, for John Wesley, the ultimate authority by which he tested both his own actions and those of his preachers. If the call he heard put him in conflict with the practices of the church of his birth and ordination, then that church must yield.' Adrian Burdon, *Authority and Order: John Wesley and His Preachers* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2016), 76.

³⁵ Field, *Bid Our Jarring Conflicts Cease*, 135.

Wesley was careful to restrict this 'conscience clause' to scriptural commands and prohibitions, and warned his readers that they would be guilty of schism without such cause.³⁶

Wesley's restrictive criteria for separation in 'On Schism' seem to conflict with his earlier comments on the inevitability of ecclesial diversity in 'Catholic Spirit.' In that sermon Wesley argued that the frailty of human knowledge necessitates a legitimate diversity of churches.³⁷ As he says, 'a variety of opinion necessarily implies a variety of practice.' How do we navigate the conflicts between different Christian bodies over worship? 'No man can choose for, or prescribe to, another. But every one must follow the dictates of his own conscience, in simplicity and godly sincerity. He must be fully persuaded in his own mind and then act according to the best light he has.' In other words, we should find a particular congregation where we can worship God without violating our conscience.³⁸ As Robert Monk has noted, this principle of freedom of conscience in choosing one's church affiliation was central to congregationalist stream of Puritan thinking. John Owen, again, made such a plea, albeit while insisting on the necessity of a strong Protestant doctrinal core, preserved by the power of the state.³⁹ It should be noted that Owen's Anglican opponent in a protracted debate about schism,

³⁶ '...suppose the church or society to which I am now united does not require me to do anything which the Scripture forbids, or to omit anything which the Scripture enjoins, it is then my indispensable duty to continue therein. And if I separate from with without any such necessity I am justly chargeable (whether I foresaw them or no) with all the evils consequent upon that separation.' Sermon 75, 'On Schism,' §II.17, *Works*, III:67. Cp Field, *Bid Our Jarring Conflicts Cease*, 171–79. Field does not provide enough specificity to the types of conscience objections that might necessitate separation, and argues that churches should make room for disobedience to church discipline by members who feel that such disobedience is an act of obedience to God. As a practical matter, it would not be possible for any Christian body to allow for freedom of conscience on all matters, since the variety of potential conscience objections is endless. Field writes with a view to contemporary debates about sexuality and wants to propose a comprehensive sense of Methodist unity that allows for differing viewpoints on that question. These contemporary proposals may be worth entertaining in their own right, but I do not see a basis for them in Wesley's sermon on schism. We must also recall Wesley's sermon 'On Obedience to Pastors,' where he urged the Methodists to obey their pastors in all things indifferent, that is, all things not specifically commanded or prohibited by scripture. Sermon 97, 'On Obedience to Pastors,' §III.6-12, *Works*, III:380-3.

³⁷ Sermon 39, 'Catholic Spirit,' §I.4, *Works*, II:83-4.

³⁸ Sermon 39, 'Catholic Spirit,' §I.8-10, *Works*, II:85-6.

³⁹ 'And if there do ensue hereon some variety in outward rites and observations, as there was in all the primitive churches, who pleaded that the unity of faith was commended and not at all impeached by such varieties; yet whilst the same doctrine of truth is preached in all places, the same sacraments only administered, wherein every protestant

Edward Stillingfleet, argued against allowing for conscience objections as grounds for schism, since believed it would produce endless division.⁴⁰ Of course, Wesley too, in 'Catholic Spirit,' was discussing debatable matters, which he often (though not always) termed 'opinions,' and not the non-negotiable heart of the Christian faith.⁴¹ Wesley's non-negotiable core was 'living faith' or the 'religion of the heart,' but these were not content-less concepts and implied several fundamental doctrines as well as a description of the inward and outward experience of the believer.⁴² Wesley's point, then, was that even among those who share the religion of the heart, differences of opinion and practice are inevitable and we should follow the dictates of our conscience in joining ourselves to a body where we can worship him in the way we believe scripture enjoins.

Is there a conflict, then, between what Wesley wrote in 1750 in 'Catholic Spirit' and what he wrote thirty-six years later in 'On Schism'? While at first glance the 1786 sermon seems more restrictive in limiting matters of conscience to the commands and prohibitions of scripture, one could argue that this criteria was implicit in 'Catholic Spirit.' Wesley always presupposed that our opinions should be derived from Scripture as best we understand it. The way he articulated it in 'On Schism' is helpful in avoiding a trifling use of conscience as an excuse for leaving a congregation.⁴³ The aim of 'On Schism' was different from that of 'Catholic Spirit,' and it was

[sic] subject of the nation will be at liberty to join in Protestant Christian worship, and to partake of all church ordinances, in the outward way, and according unto the outward rites of his own choosing, without the authoritative examination or prohibition of any pretended church-power but what in his own judgment he doth embrace; no inconvenience will follow hereon, unless it be judged such, that the Protestant religion, the liberty of subjects, and the due freedom of the conscience of men sober and peaceable, will be prevented.' John Owen, "Some Considerations About Union Among Protestants," in *The Works of John Owen, Vol. XVII* (London: Richard Baynes, 1826), 604.

⁴⁰ Edward Stillingfleet, *The Mischief of Separation* (London: H. Hills., 1709 [1687]), 26.

⁴¹ On Wesley's terminology concerning 'opinions' see Randy L. Maddox, "Opinion, Religion and 'Catholic Spirit': John Wesley on Theological Integrity," *The Asbury Theological Journal* 47, no. 1 (1992): 63–87.

⁴² Sermon 39, 'Catholic Spirit' §§1.12-15, *Works*, II:87-88. See also 'A Letter to a Roman Catholic,' §§6-11, in Albert C. Outler, ed., *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 494–96.

⁴³ Church bodies, however, are not tasked to avoid asking people to violate their conscience as a general principle, as Field suggests. Left so vaguely-defined, that criterion would paralyze denominational bodies. If, as Field

written in a different context. 'Catholic Spirit' was written to build bridges at a time when Wesley still held out hope for a pan-evangelical coalition; 'On Schism' was written after Wesley had begun to ordain and was being charged with schism by many Anglicans on one side and urged to further separate by many Methodists on the other. 'On Schism' therefore provided some defense against the charge of schism *should* the Methodists separate while at the same time warning the Methodists strongly against separation.

Thus, Wesley's mature standard for ecclesiality was generous and identified a wide variety of Christian bodies as 'churches,' therefore undercutting one of the main grounds for laying a charge of schism. As Owen argued a century earlier, nonconformists cannot be charged with schism until it is proved, 'either that they are not churches because they are congregational, or that although they are churches, yet they have not power to govern and reform themselves.'⁴⁴ On the other hand, if one agreed with Wesley that there were so few essentials for ecclesiality, one had very few theological justifications for *leaving* a particular body, save a conscience-violating omission of a scriptural command or commission of a scriptural prohibition. Again, what was missing from this treatment of schism was any discussion of particular forms of church order or polity or authority; by omitting those concrete institutional matters, Wesley leaves the impression that they are not relevant to the question of schism.

suggests, the general principle is that churches should never ask members to violate their conscience, then churches would have no grounds to take a position on baptism or church polity, for example. So, we could try to synthesize Wesley's approach by distinguishing between conscience objections on matters of 'opinion' and conscience objections on essential matters. The church body can sometimes, for practical reasons, justifiably take a stand on debatable matters which may violate the conscience of some members (which may prompt them to join another body), but it would of course be wrong to ask members to violate their conscience by requiring something the Word of God forbids or vice versa. The task, then, is to have standards of doctrine and discipline that are scriptural, as best as can be discerned, and leave to individual believers the question as to whether the denominational position is scriptural or not (and hence, whether there is a matter of conscience to be addressed).

⁴⁴ Owen, 'Some Considerations About Union Among Protestants', 583.

Wesley viewed communion with the Triune God and other believers as essential to the church, thus making the church in its essence an end in itself and not only a means of grace. Thus, Colyer rightly pushes back against a tendency in recent scholarship to emphasize the functional nature of Wesley's ecclesiology.⁴⁵ Indeed, given his views on the essentially social nature of Christianity, Wesley's view of salvation is deeply ecclesial – in a broad sense. But by side-stepping visible marks in defining the church, and questions of authority and polity in his definition of schism, Wesley left particular visible churches (including the Church of England) in an ambiguous place. The Trinitarian and ecclesial communion that Wesley described as the essence of the church was found in the Methodist Societies. He continued to protest vigorously against Methodist separation from the Church of England, but was left to appeal primarily to arguments for missional expediency and claims that refusal to separate was part of Methodism's 'peculiar glory.'⁴⁶ Even his robust sacramentology and affirmation of the potential efficaciousness of the ministrations of unholy ministers were undermined by such ecclesial forms being treated as part of the (functional) *bene esse* rather than the *esse* of the church. Thus, apart from Wesley's own belief that Methodism was especially raised up by God to renew the Established Church, there was little compelling theological reason to resist separation.

⁴⁵ Colyer, *The Trinitarian Dimension*, 196–203.

⁴⁶ 'Thoughts Upon a Late Phenomenon' §7, *Works*, IX:536; 'Farther Thoughts on Separation from the Church,' §4, *Works*, IX:539. See also Sermon 112, "On Laying the Foundation Stone...." §II.12-16, *Works*, III:588-591; 107 "On God's Vineyard, §II.8, *Works*, III:511