

Faith and Order Committee

Extract from Conference Agenda 2001

C. THE NATURE OF AUTHORITY

RESPONSES TO *A LAMP TO MY FEET AND A LIGHT TO MY PATH*

Introduction

1. The study document *A Lamp to my Feet and a Light to my Path: The Nature of Authority and the Place of the Bible in the Methodist Church* took its origin from the clearly different ways in which the Bible was being used by Methodists in discussions about human sexuality in the Methodist Conference of 1993. The document, produced by a Faith and Order Committee working party which met from 1995 to 1998, was received and commended for study throughout the Connexion by the 1998 Scarborough Conference. Responses were invited by 31 July 2000. This current report contains the Committee's reflections upon the responses received and offers proposals for a way forward with regard to the Bible's place and use within the Methodist Church.

The Responses: A Summary

- 2.1 Forty-one replies were received: fifteen from circuits, ten from other groups; and sixteen from individuals. The views expressed represented a wide range of opinions and were often firmly-held.

Prominent in the responses were the following points:

- the extent to which *A Lamp* . . . had stimulated useful discussion in churches, groups and circuits;
- a desire to re-assert the primary importance of the Bible as an authority within the Church's life;
- a concern to clarify a contemporary understanding of the Deed of Union;
- an unwillingness to support a move to limit the Methodist Church to a single model for understanding the Bible's use in the Church;
- an acceptance of diversity in the use of the Bible, but not a limitless diversity;
- a concern that the study document was not written in a helpful, accessible way and would not be looked at by many people;
- the crucial role that the Church as a whole plays in the task of interpreting the Bible as Scripture.

Clarification of each of these points follows in 2.2 to 2.8.

- 2.2 "This is one of the best study books that we have used for several years within this particular House Fellowship in that it has been very good for generating discussion . . .". [House Fellowship Group]

Twelve respondents declared how useful they had found *A Lamp* . . . to be. The majority of these spoke of it being 'well-balanced', 'stimulating' or 'challenging but worthwhile'. Representing just under a third of all those who responded, this indicates how fruitful more widespread reflection on the Bible's place in the life of the Church might be.

- 2.3 "We view with grave concern the possibility that this document could be considered to portray the character of the Methodist people, who will be seen by Christians and non-Christians alike as not being grounded on Biblical foundations . . . We reject this document as being worthy of consideration by the Methodist people - it should be rejected totally and the authors requested to consider seriously their position as members of the Christian Church." [Circuit Response]

A number of respondents wanted to see a greater emphasis placed upon the Bible than currently appears to be the case within British Methodism today. Different degrees of forcefulness were used to make this point.

- 2.4 ". . . 'The doctrines of the evangelical faith which Methodism has held from the beginning and still holds are based upon the divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures. The Methodist Church acknowledges this revelation as the supreme rule of faith and practice'." (The Deed of Union) We urge the Committee to recommend that the Conference re-affirms this fundamental principle . . ." [Circuit Response]

A number of respondents sought a re-assertion of the Deed of Union. It was, however, clear that the re-assertion was commended for a variety of reasons and from a variety of differing perspectives. These differences in turn produced differing 'readings' of the Deed of Union itself.

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- 2.5 “If the Conference decides to act upon the Report, our group would recommend that the Models as a whole should be used to demonstrate, and accommodate, the wide range of thinking within the Methodist Church.” [Circuit Response]

“(Model 1) . . . is felt to be the only perspective which would fall outside the limits of what should be acceptable to Methodism.” [House Group Response]

“We are convinced that regardless of whatever the actual intention was in the wording of the Deed of Covenant [sic], Wesley never intended to create an ambiguous definition of the role of the Bible. Rather we believe that the Deed of Union was intended to provide statements which should give a definitive and unequivocal position. Later analysis may cast doubt over the choice of words in expressing such certainty, but we cannot believe that such ambiguity was Wesley’s intention.” [Church Response]

“(Models 5 to 7) . . . seem to contradict the natural meaning of the Doctrinal Clauses in the Deed of Union.” [Circuit Response]

Whilst some respondents sought to specify a particular Model out of the seven suggested in 7.9 of *A Lamp* . . . (see Appendix), most resisted the view that a single Model should be adopted by the Church. Concerns were expressed about some of the Models (mainly 7.9.1, 7.9.6 and 7.9.7) but the majority of respondents implied or stated that it would be unwise to state the Church’s understanding of biblical authority more precisely than is declared in the Deed of Union. Thus, whilst some respondents did not feel that some of the Models *should* be deemed tenable within Methodism, there is little doubt that all seven Models *are* represented.

- 2.6 “The circuit accepts that the Report’s Models of biblical authority are a true description of the variety of attitudes towards biblical interpretation within our Circuit . . . However this diversity did raise a degree of anxiety for many people. The Circuit would value further work being undertaken to enable Methodism to live with this diversity . . .” [Circuit Response]

The fact that all seven Models of biblical authority *are* represented within British Methodism highlights that fact that diversity in the use of the Bible is real and even accepted as inevitable, but that it is far from comfortable.

- 2.7 “We feel that by the complicated treatment of the whole subject, you have disturbed the faith of some and bewildered others.” [Bible Study Group]

Five respondents drew attention to the Report’s level of difficulty. The language, it was suggested, was pitched at people who had done some formal study. It was felt that for an even wider readership, a more ‘user-friendly’ version would be needed.

- 2.8 “We would look to the leadership of our Church structures to provide certainty as well as a widening of our understanding.” [Church response]

“Lay people rely on preachers to explain the difficult parts (and it was felt that preachers need encouragement to do so).” [Church response]

“It was a surprise to most of the group to learn that the Conference reached decisions . . . Information about the Conference is pretty scarce in our Church.” [Fellowship Group response]

There was considerable respect for the role of the Church in the task of biblical interpretation. It was widely recognised that the task of interpretation is not simply a matter of an individual’s encounter with a biblical passage, even when a crucial role for God’s Spirit in the act of interpretation is acknowledged. But *how* the insights of many Christians, corporately, come into play is not always clear, as the diverse references to ‘leadership’, ‘preachers’ and ‘the Conference’ indicate. Whilst it is recognised that there are those given authority in the Church to take responsibility in the task of interpreting the Bible for today, how that authority is taken up and received is itself a matter of continued discussion.

The Responses: A Commentary with Resulting Questions

- 3.1 Forty-one may be seen as quite a low number of responses (nearly 1300 responded to the report on alcohol in the same year). One respondent stated quite openly that she responded individually as there would be no group context in her Circuit in which *A Lamp* . . . would be discussed: there were simply too many reports being ‘passed down’ for scrutiny and comment. There also appears to have been some doubt as to what *kind* of responses were being sought, this being a ‘study document’. The low number

could equally reflect the fact that this is not a burning issue for the Church, either because (despite the original 1993 context) it is not perceived at local level to be a problem or, more worryingly, because the Bible is little used in practice by Methodists.

- 3.2 The level of stimulus provided by discussion of this Report suggests that still more use could be made of it, or a revised or abbreviated version, throughout the Church, amongst people who have not yet discovered it, or had chance to work with it. Though reflection on the Bible's *use* is not the same as reflection on its *content*, the one surely feeds the other, and the former could in all likelihood stimulate the latter.

Points 3.1 and 3.2 raise these questions:

*Given that the Bible Society's research during the mid-1990s into the current **actual** use of the Bible by Christians revealed surprisingly low regular usage, how true could such findings be said to be of Methodist people?*

To what extent should the opportunity now be seized within the Methodist Church to stimulate widespread, informed, creative study of the Bible as an integral part of every Christian's life?

Who would determine what 'informed' study of the Bible amounted to?

- 3.3 Some respondents were clearly unwilling to distinguish the Bible's role as 'sole' authority from its role as 'supreme' authority ie amongst a number of authoritative sources for Christian doctrine. Support for the 'Methodist Quadrilateral' of Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience does not of itself stipulate whether Scripture is the *primary* source out of the four, though most Methodists have probably held to that position, following John Wesley's lead. Furthermore, the 'Quadrilateral' should be understood dynamically, noting the way in which Scripture is always being interpreted within the context of a vibrant faith and a living community.

Neither Wesley nor the Deed of Union supports the view of the Bible as the sole authority for doctrine. In the same way that the Reformation's appeal to *sola scriptura* (Scripture alone) was also accompanied by emphases upon *sola gratia* (grace alone) and *solus Christus* (Christ alone), so John Wesley's being a 'man of one book' was but a way of handling the primary written witness to the gracious activity of God in Christ. The call for the re-assertion of the Bible's 'primacy', 'centrality' or 'supremacy' - offered by a number of respondents in different ways - should thus be read in this light.

- 3.4 The fact that the 'supreme authority' referred to in the Deed of Union is 'the divine revelation recorded in the Holy Scriptures' rather than the Bible itself was addressed by at least two respondents. The concern was expressed that Paragraph 4.2 in *A Lamp* . . . permitted a 'clouding or watering down' of the basic contention contained in the words of the Deed of Union. No respondent, however, addressed the significance of the reference to Wesley's *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*. These are referred to directly in the Deed of Union, yet are not *in practice* in widespread use in British Methodism as an authoritative lens through which the New Testament should be read. The Faith and Order Committee notes that this is an issue which the Church will need to keep under review and may need to re-visit at some stage.

One Circuit drew attention to, and affirmed, the quadrilateral which "John Wesley established" whilst arguing strongly for the Bible as the sole authority. One Church response stated: "The Deed of Union was found to be unhelpful, difficult to understand and in need of simplifying. The Catechism was more helpful."

3.3 and 3.4 together raise these questions:

*Through what 'filters', 'lenses' or 'traditions' are British Methodists **actually** reading the Bible?*

What might it mean to 're-assert the Deed of Union' as the framework within which the Bible should be read and used in British Methodism?

What is to be made of the fact that Wesley's Explanatory Notes on the New Testament are scarcely used in practice?

- 3.5 The relatively small number of responses, and the very small number of responses within that batch which sought to promote a single Model, suggest that it might be most unwise for the Methodist Church in Great Britain to state that its members should opt for one Model out of the seven proposed in *A Lamp* . . . as normative. However, as it is not clear that all Models are to be viewed as equally compatible with the Deed of Union, there is an argument for reducing the range of possible Models which Methodists

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should be encouraged to support. Furthermore, some of the Models can be deemed to be mutually exclusive, thus recognizing that some Methodists are in fundamental disagreement with each other about how the Bible is to be used, and therefore how theology is to be undertaken, and decisions about belief and action reached. To fail to opt for a normative Model, or narrower range of Models, would merely acknowledge that all Models *are* held to by some Methodists. To opt for a narrower range would seem to be more in keeping with the Deed of Union.

- 3.6 The concern to assert that diversity in the use of the Bible not be viewed as a limitless diversity might be seen as in tension with the tenor of the previous point (3.5). It could be felt preferable to strive for a greater sense of unity in the use of the Bible. One Circuit strongly asserted the need for an unambiguous statement of a “defined role for the Scriptures”, though did not feel able to specify what the sought-for “definitive and unequivocal position” might be.

To accept all seven proposed Models as tenable, even if not as equally consistent with the Deed of Union, might be seen as suggesting ‘anything goes’. It does not, however, follow that support for the seven Models promotes indifference to the Bible. There are other positions about the Bible which go beyond the seven proposed which should not receive Christian support in any form (eg that the Bible is such an old book it should not be deemed at all relevant). So long as the supporters of all Models are themselves active members of Churches, and engaged in the task of being Christian disciples, then the responsibility of deciding how to use the Bible will remain part of their Christian calling, *whichever Model they support*. It is then the responsibility of the whole Church to continue its collective calling (*‘Our Calling’*) mindful of the fact that people differ about how the Bible is to be understood and used.

The fact *that* the Bible must be used, however, is not in dispute. Part of the collective calling includes continuing the internal debate as to the Bible’s use. In this way, as one Circuit response put it: “. . . appreciating hermeneutics as a ‘rainbow’ not as a ‘battleground’ or as ‘confusion’ may freely validate the enrichment offered by each view and so, given an attitude of open humility, deepen and extend the possibility of tolerance between apparently competing claims for the ‘high ground’ of Biblical authority.”

3.5 and 3.6 raise the following questions:

What practical steps will need to be taken to enable Methodists to ‘live with this diversity’ in the use of the Bible, bearing in mind the great influence this will exert on the lives of individual Christians, and on the life of the Church as a whole?

How wide is the accepted diversity to be? How many Models should be supported?

To what extent, and in the light of 3.3 and 3.4, does support for a range of Models of biblical authority and interpretation affect contemporary adherence to the doctrinal standards contained within the Deed of Union?

- 3.7 The concern expressed by the five respondents that the Report was not very readable, and proved too demanding, raises a range of important issues, issues with which the Committee is familiar through feedback to, and discussion about, many Conference Reports. Though not usually spelt in full by respondents, these issues include:
- the extent to which Methodists are a ‘reading people’;
 - the apparent unfamiliarity of many contemporary Christians (for whatever reasons) with some of the terms needed for discussions about matters of faith and belief;
 - the relative ease with which the faith of the faithful can be disturbed, and what this signifies about levels of Christian education;
 - the form in which such discussions are presented to people (in terms both of language and visual presentation);
 - the ability of those compiling such Reports to find the right language to connect with a wide range of potential readers;
 - the local stimuli available (via interested individuals, or through established group settings) for the promotion of discussions about such matters of faith and theology.

The Faith and Order Committee can at this stage do no more than note this concern, together with the positive point which these criticisms, and our own observations, lead to: that, as a Report, *A Lamp* . . . could still have more useful work to do throughout the Connexion.

- 3.8 At least one respondent picked up on the fact that there were really two distinct, but directly related, issues in view in *A Lamp* . . . : authority within British Methodism, and the function of the Bible within

that authority structure. Observation of the Report's dual concern does, however, serve as a reminder of how closely the Bible's use and the Church's self-understanding and work must be held together.

Methodist understanding of the Church, summed up in 'The Connexional Principle' (as spelt out in the 1999 Conference Report *Called to Love and Praise*, pp47-50), promotes, in turn, an inter-relatedness in debates about the use of the Bible in the Church. Those who support one Model of biblical authority *need* those who support other Models. However difficult that process of living with diversity may be, Methodist understanding of the Church supports that discomfort as part of what it means to live within the Body of Christ, in the service of the Kingdom of God in the world.

Recommendations

- 4.1 The Faith and Order Committee is of the opinion that there is insufficient evidence from the responses to *A Lamp . . .* to suggest the wisdom of promoting any **particular** Model or Models from the seven ways of understanding the Bible presented in section 7.9 of the original Report. *We therefore recommend that these seven simply be acknowledged as different ways in which Methodists do in fact use the Bible today.*
- 4.2 The discussions which have occurred within the Methodist Church in connection with *A Lamp . . .* indicate the value of exploring the Bible's place and use in the Church today. In the light of this, *we strongly urge that close attention be given by individuals, Churches, circuits, districts and all committees and working groups operating at all levels of the Church's life to the place of the Bible in their life and work.*
- 4.3 In keeping with the vision adopted at the Methodist Conference of 2000 ('*Our Calling*'), we urge that attention be paid to all that motivates people to study the Bible, so that the fruits of that study be evident in the way that each individual, Church, circuit and district contributes to the four key areas of Christian life: worship, learning & caring, service and evangelism. *We recommend that individuals, Churches, circuits and districts look at all possible ways of using existing channels (personal rules of life, courses for individuals, training in groups) for the promotion of the reading, study and practical use of the Bible.*
- 4.4 We urge that the existence of a variety of Models for understanding biblical authority be acknowledged within the various ways in which the Bible is taught in all aspects of the Church's life. *We therefore further recommend that particular attention be paid to the ways in which the Bible is handled in the contexts of preparation for Church membership, in Local Preacher Training and Continuing Local Preacher Development, and in Foundation and Ministerial Training. It is not envisaged that specific new work be undertaken here.* Our concern is to ensure that, as part of normal monitoring and revision procedures of these areas of the Church's life, the diversity in the understanding and use of the Bible known to be present in British Methodism is reflected in the way that Christianity is discovered, learned and taught within the Methodist Church.

***RESOLUTION

- 40/2. The Conference adopts the Report.

APPENDIX

The following 'Models of Biblical Authority' appear in *A Lamp to my Feet and a Light to my Path*:

- 7.9.1 The Bible is the Word of God and is therefore inerrant (free of all error and entirely trustworthy in everything which it records) and has complete authority in all matters of theology and behaviour. It is 'God-breathed' and its human authors were channels of the divine Word. The Christian's task is to discern accurately what the Bible teaches and then to believe and obey it. Reason, experience and tradition should be judged in the light of the Bible, not the other way round.
- 7.9.2 The Bible's teaching about God, salvation and Christian living is entirely trustworthy. It cannot be expected, however, to provide entirely accurate scientific or historical information since this is not its purpose. Nevertheless, it provides the supreme rule for faith and conduct, to which other ways of 'knowing', while important, should be subordinate.
- 7.9.3 The Bible is the essential foundation on which Christian faith and life are built. However, its teachings were formed in particular historical and cultural contexts, and must therefore be read in that light. The

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way to apply biblical teaching in today's very different context is not always obvious or straightforward. Reason is an important (God-given) gift which must be used to the full in this process of interpretation.

- 7.9.4 The Bible's teaching, while foundational and authoritative for Christians, needs to be interpreted by the Church. In practice it is the interpretation and guidance offered by Church leaders and preachers which provides authoritative teaching. Church tradition is therefore of high importance as a practical source of authority.
- 7.9.5 The Bible is one of the main ways in which God speaks to the believer. However, the movement of God's Spirit is free and unpredictable, and it is what the Spirit is doing today that is of the greatest importance. The Bible helps to interpret experience, but much stress is placed on spiritual experience itself, which conveys its own compelling authority.
- 7.9.6 The Bible witnesses to God's revelation of himself through history and supremely through Jesus Christ. However, the Bible is not itself that revelation, but only the witness to it. Christians must therefore discern where and to what extent they perceive the true gospel witness in the various voices of the Bible. Reason, tradition and experience are as important as the biblical witnesses.
- 7.9.7 The Bible comprises a diverse and often contradictory collection of documents which represent the experiences of various people in various times and places. The Christian's task is to follow, in some way, the example of Christ. And to the extent that the Bible records evidence of his character and teaching it offers a useful resource. However, in the late 20th century it is simply not possible to obey all its teachings since these stem from very human authors and often represent the ideology of particular groups or classes in an ancient and foreign culture. Reason and experience provide much more important tools for faith and practice.