Methodist Identity in Scotland: Methodism as influence[1]

[I]

Perhaps let me begin by quoting the opening sentence of a small booklet published by the Synod of the Methodist Church in Scotland in 1989: 'Is there Methodism north of the Border?'[2] The question is telling; for many people Scottish Methodism is little more than a footnote in the greater story of Methodist success in the rest of the British Isles. This feeling is, however, nothing new. In the early 1800s, the poor state of Methodism in Scotland was treated as something of a scandal by the rest of the connexion. Jabez Bunting, one of the more significant Methodist figures to have been involved both sides of the border, gave his own response to the sharp decline of Methodist membership in Scotland beginning in 1825. He said:

> I think if Methodism in Scotland were put up to auction, it would be the best thing that could be done with it...We have spent more money in Scotland than we can account for to God, or to our people.

Dr. Adam Clarke was similarly concerned about the financial drain of Scottish societies for so little result. In his words,

> I consider Methodism as having no hold in Scotland, but in Glasgow and Edinburgh. If all the other Chapels were disposed of, it would be little loss to pure Methodism; and a great saving of our money, which might be much better employed.[3]

The reputation of Scottish Methodism has never really recovered from these condemnations, and it was not only Wesley's first preachers who spoke of coming to Scotland as an 'exile'! Numerous pamphlets appeared in the mid-nineteenth century lamenting the state of the Scottish movement, and ever since the majority of publications concerning Methodism north of the border have attempted to give some explanation for its so-called failure.

However, in this paper, I would like to make a different assessment of the Scottish Methodists, focusing, not on its failures, but rather looking at what we might call its successes. In part, you may say, this is due to my current membership at the Methodist congregation in Aberdeen, but I believe it runs deeper than simply a defence of the church I have been a part of for three years! For me, Scottish Methodism has been like the discovery of something surprisingly good, and that feeling has not been alterred by delving into its past history. What I present today is the beginnings of my discovery.

In short, my hunch is that Methodism in Scotland represents a norm of Methodist identity, rather than an aberration. Already I am on shakey ground in speaking of a Methodist 'norm', but what I mean is simply that the progress of Methodism in Scotland is full of the trends and impulses we would expect of Methodism in general. Indeed, I am encouraged in this project by the suggestion of Andrew Walls that Scottish Methodism may in fact provide a lens through which we can see more clearly the nature of

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[1] Paper presented at the Methodist Identities Conference at Wesley House, Cambridge on 28th August 2007.

[2] *Exploring Scotland with Wesley* (Synod of the Methodist Church in Scotland, 1989), 1.

[3] Both these quoted in Wesley F Swift, *Methodism in Scotland: The First Hundred Years* (London: Epworth Press, 1947), 70.

Methodism in general.[4] Whether or not this is the case, let me proceed to sketch out some trends of the Methodists north of the border.

[II]

First, we note that Methodism in Scotland has had a particularly transitory existence. Of course, this may be viewed as a rather negative aspect of its life, leaving a legacy of closed buildings and fading memories. However, looked at from another angle, it can be seen as a strength.

The transitions of the Methodist Church in Scotland are somewhat hidden beneath the surface of official statistics. Membership figures begin in 1767, a good twenty years after the first known Methodist existence in Scotland, which can be reasonably claimed by Aberdeen. In 1767, the figure stands at 468 members in 5 circuits with 7 preachers. In six years this had grown to 735 in 8 circuits with 8 preachers. It declined over the next couple of years until 1785, when Wesley allowed a number of ordained preachers to minister in Scotland. This appeared to have the desired effect, as membership grew to around 1,200 in 10 circuits over the next six years, after which there was a general increase until a high point of 3,786 in 1819. A sharp decline the following year brought the membership nearer 3,000, which set the standard for the foreseable future. In fact, despite fluctuations, current membership remains at this level. In 2006, the Scottish District accounted for 2,997 members in 8 circuits.

What is interesting from this is the unsteady progress of Methodism in Scotland. Methodism grew, it appears, in fits and starts, with membership figures hovering almost erratically round a fixed point for a number of years before inexplicably jumping to another level. These jumps are not necessarily tied strictly to specific known events, so it is difficult to provide a standard explanation for the growth and decline of the movement.

Standing behind these membership figures are the stories of the genesis, growth, decline and extinction of countless societies. Some were simply preaching stations on the route of circuit preachers while others were well established churches with new buildings.

Let me use, as an example, the area covered by what is now the North of Scotland Mission Circuit, which stretches from Aberdeen in the south to Buckie in the north, a distance of around 70 miles. Take Buckie, a small fishing village on the Moray coast. A society was formed and was included in the Inverness Circuit in 1779, and by the end of the century had a purpose built Chapel, the first of any denomination in Buckie, which then had a population of around 700. The society flourished, and yet by 1835 it was extinct and the building sold to the Episcopal Church. In 1850, David Wilson, a circuit steward and member of the leaders' meeting in Aberdeen, could say that Methodism in Buckie was merely a 'reminiscence of bygone times.'[5]

However, Methodism is certainly not extinct in Buckie today, as I have discovered. There is now a membership of 140 and a lively congregation! What happened in between? Well, in 1860, James Turner arrived on the Moray Coast from Peterhead and led a revival which led to the rebirth of the Buckie Society. In the following years a building was again procured, and eventually the growing congregation moved to the present building in 1907. The Moray Coast churches have all, in fact, benefitted from a series of revivals, mainly in 1860, 1899 and 1921.

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[4] A. F. Walls, *Some Personalities of Aberdeen Methodism 1760–1970* (Aberdeen, 1973), 8.
[5] David Wilson, *Methodism in Scotland: A Brief Sketch of Its Rise, Progress, and Present Position, in That Country* (Aberdeen: John Ogilvie, A Brown & Co, G & R King, 1850), 13.

Around Aberdeen, also, preaching stations and small societies have come and gone with surprising regularity. Some, like Newburgh, would never revive, while others, as with Buckie, sprung to life again, perhaps only to disappear in a few years. The pattern here, then, is of a strong centre – Aberdeen – around which satellite societies gather and disperse. Circuit boundaries in Scotland have also been particularly fluid, with many smaller, rural societies being passed around the larger, supporting churches located in the towns.

What do we make of this? Perhaps, that Methodism in Scotland has existed always as a direct result of the Spirit's work. In one sense, of course, this is nothing less than a definition of all church existence. But in another sense, it is particularly true of the trends we have observed. Methodism has come and gone – has not been ashamed to come and go. On the whole, Methodism has not necessarily lingered in a place after its life has faded. Where it *has* existed, then, it has done so as a vital presence of God's kingdom activity.

[III]

This leads us nicely on to our second consideration. I think that the trend of Methodism in Scotland has been to feed into the wider evangelical church. As such, Methodism in Scotland has tended to be, and to an extent still is, *a movement rather than a denomination*.

This, of course, is not a particularly novel statement. However, the history of the Christian church in Scotland makes Methodism's place within that history specially interesting. The differences between the English and Scottish national churches have often been noted. Scotland is famed for its Presbyterian heritage, and at the time of Methodism's arrival to Scotland, this was at its height.

Little under a century later, however, the Scottish Church was in the throes of Disruption. The clash was between the Moderates and the Evangelicals, the latter group having reached a stage of predominance in the life of the established church. The issues leading up to the Disruption of 1843 were inevitably more complicated than a simple theological difference – the political decision about church patronage was as much about highland/lowland culture as it was about theology. But there is no doubt that there was a real evangelical awakening which coincided with the more structural issues. As David Wilson, the Aberdeenshire circuit steward mentioned before, noted rightly at the time, the theological question at large in Scotland concerned the extent of the atonement.[6] McLeod Campbell and Edward Irving are just two of the names that spring to mind connected to this great Scottish controversy, both arguing, in their own way, that God's love was broader than the Westminster Confession of Faith would allow, and both being vigorously sidelined for their views. But the tide was turning, and the latter half of the nineteenth century saw seismic shifts in the the theological landscape of Scotland. At the very least, the strict adherence of the Scottish Churches to Calvinism was partially softened.

Such a move was sure to be welcomed by the Methodists, and indeed we find that the Evangelicals and the Methodists held each other in high regard in the years leading up to the Disruption. Jabez Bunting had been in correspondence with Thomas Chalmers, the leader of the Evangelicals, from at least the 1820s. They shared an 'appreciation of evangelical principles, a common interest in the missionary cause and a similar assessment of the nature and value of established churches'. This mutual regard went

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[6] Wilson, *Methodism*, 23.

beyond the individuals to the respective movements they represented – the Evangelicals who became the Free Church and the Methodist connexion.[7] When the Disruption came in 1843, there was an initial euphoria from the Methodist people. Bunting spoke at the General Assembly of the Free Church in 1845 and declared that in spite of all that had previously passed between Arminians and Calvinists, in terms of the currect view of the Gospel, old controversies had passed away and 'abundant proof is afforded, that between the Wesleyan Methodists and the Free Church there exists a blessed and essential unity of faith.'[8]

We may put Bunting's words down to enthusiasm, but the rest of the connexion obviously thought the same, as the English Methodists donated substantial sums of money to the newly established Free Church, so much so, infact, that the Methodists themselves complained that money was being diverted away from them.[9] The *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine* in June 1845 declared that if ever Wesleyan Methodism were in need, they would only have to send across the border to the Free Church of Scotland, and find 'perhaps hands not so full of gold, but hearts as full of love, and tongues as loud'.[10] The promise did, in fact, come true. In the late 1800s, the minister of the Aberdeen congregation, the Rev. Scott, appealed to the Free Church to help with a substantial debt incurred by building costs. They responded willingly.[11]

There was obviously a sense of initial comradeship between the two, developing from a shared sense of calling and commitment to the evanglical cause. There were implications, however, for the Methodist societies. David Wilson notes that many who had been part of Methodist congregations before the Disruption went over to the Free Church after it.[12] For some, Methodist structure had not sat well with their ingrained Presbyterianism, and so the opportunity to go to an evangelical church with a Presbyterian structure was highly favourable.

On a purely practical note, the Disruption set in motion a huge church building programme on the part of the Free Church. Often these new buildings were in the new centres of population created by the recent rise of industry, where the established Church had not yet ventured. It seems, however, that Methodism had made some connection in these areas, as we saw in the case of Buckie. With the arrival of the new churches – including the growing Congregational Church – perhaps Methodism was seen as redundant. This explains why the evangelical awakening did not tangibly affect Methodist *membership*, while adherence to the Methodist societies is likely to have declined.

It is, of course, doubtful that Methodism was the driving force of the Disruption; however, before it, Methodist societies were a viable source of spiritual nourishment for those dissatisfied with the established Church. As such, it often harboured those who would later become leaders and office bearers in the new Free Church. It thus exercised an indirect influence on the formation of the Free Church. In doing so, it inevitably worked itself out of a job, as the Free Church took over the role that the Methodists might otherwise have played.

It could be said, then, that this was Methodism's success. But perhaps that is claiming too much. At the very least, Methodism was able to contribute to the spiritual awakening

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[7] A J Hayes and D A Gowland, *Scottish Methodism in the Early Victorian Period: The Scottish Correspondence of the Rev. Jabez Bunting 1800–57* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981), 14.
[8] Wilson, *Methodism*, 25.
[9] Hayes and Gowland, *Bunting*, 20.
[10] Quoted in Hayes and Gowland, *Bunting*, 20.
[11] Walls, *Personalities*, 12.
[12] Wilson, *Methodism*, 23–5.

of Scotland because it was a movement rather than a denomination, and was not so narrow-minded as to only look to its own affairs. The work of Bunting, and others like him, shows a willingness to work together with others in the fellowship of the Gospel. I am sure Wesley would have approved!

[IV]

Which leads us, finally, to note just a couple of concrete instances in which the Methodists in Scotland impacted the wider church. The first, perhaps inevitably, is hymnody, the trade mark of the Methodist life. Andrew Walls calls this 'an indirect and unrecognized legacy of a tiny Methodist enterprise'.[13] The Scottish Church was known, and in part still is, for its singing of Psalms. However, in the late 1700s all this was to change in a tiny village outside Aberdeen called Monymusk. Sir Archibald Grant, the local benefactor, had been impressed with the singing of Methodist soldiers and so had hired a discharged soldier named Thomas Channon to lead singing at the church in Monymusk. On a visit to Aberdeen in 1761, Wesley was invited out to Monymusk to hear the choir, and commented that they sung with 'such voices as well as judgment that I doubt whether they could have been excelled at any cathedral in England'.[14] Soon, the singing at Monymusk had spread along Donside to the established churches in Aberdeen itself, and a tradition was born.

Another tradition attributed to the Methodists, at least in the North East of Scotland, was the holding of evening services. Methodist societies began to hold regular meetings on Sunday evenings, so as to avoid clashing with the Episcopalians in the city. These, however, became so popular that the other churches decided to follow suit, and moved their usual afternoon services to a time later in the day.[15]

[V]

In conclusion, then, let me offer a brief assessment. Methodism in Scotland has never been strong numerically; despite an influx of industrial workers – the class commonly associated with Methodist growth – Methodism has remained at the margins of Scottish Church life. To a large extent, this is due to the particular religious atmosphere of Scotland, and, since the Disruption, a viable evangelical Presbyterian alternative. Nevertheless, Scottish Methodism displays a remarkable strength of character, not least in existing in a context which is far from conducive. The ebb and flow of Methodism reveals an attentiveness to the Spirit's movement, and often a willingness to go to places where no other denomination has gone before.

At its best, then, Methodism in Scotland has existed as a movement, with an influence far broader than its membership. Perhaps Bunting was financially astute to suggest that Scottish Methodism should be put up to auction, but the spiritual life of the nation would be far poorer if it had been. In this sense, Methodism in Scotland has remained true to its calling, to spread scriptural holiness through the land, and to set forth the demands and privileges of the Christian life.

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[13] Walls, *Personalities*, 6.

[14] Quoted in Walls, *Personalities*, 6.

[15] Ernest Wilkinson, *The Story of Early Methodism in Aberdeen* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University, 1972).

Finally, we may note the challenge of this history for Methodist identity today. What would Methodism look like if it sought to be a movement rather than a denomination, a transitory community intent on establishing the Kingdom where the Spirit is at work rather than holding on to past reminiscences? At the very least, we would have recovered one sense of what Methodist identity might be: a people living in Christ, not for the sake of ourselves, but for the world.

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