

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life



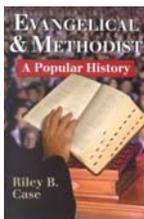
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Reaching today's people

In this time when disagreement is so sharp within American churches, members need to focus on questions that will promote fruitful dialogue rather than widen existing divisions.

Reading *Evangelical and Methodist: A Popular History* (Abingdon Press, 2004), by Riley B. Case, has brought several such questions to my mind.



Case, an Indiana clergyman and a leading conservative voice in the United Methodist Church, rightly observes that Methodism is less powerful now than it was in early America. He wants today's UMC to use early Methodism as a model for renewal, recovering what he sees as the Wesleyan emphasis on reaching the common people and on changing hearts.



Finding areas for discussion

Case wants strict conformity to a narrow interpretation of doctrine, which conflicts with my understanding of the Bible, Christian history, and the nature of religious expression, so I find that recommendation unhelpful for church renewal or even for dialogue.

Like Case, however, I believe that church history can help us see where change may be needed today. Like him, too, I see the need for today's church to reach more people than we're now reaching. Where I see room for discussion is in evaluating why and how the early church was more effective than the modern church.

Revising church practices

Part of the early Wesleyan movement's success came from its willingness to abandon or revise church practices that had become ineffective because of changes in society, and we need that kind of willingness today.



Head religion and heart religion



Is Christianity mainly about changing hearts or about changing minds? The answer depends on who you ask.



The most widely used method of describing personality types—the Myers-Briggs system—describes some people as “feeling types” and represents them by the letter F. They give top priority to how people will be affected by decisions and events. And the people these F's tend to focus on are mainly those they know and interact with individually. Myers-Briggs labels others “thinking types,” represented by T. They care about people, too, but they tend to be more concerned about doing the greatest good for the greatest number. They want to be logical and objective in their decision-making, and to look beyond the individuals they know personally.



Our own type looks better to us

Neither of these types is better than the other, but we tend to see our own as better. T's often see F's as unduly emotional and fuzzy-thinking, and F's are likely to see T's as cold, unfeeling, or crass.

T's and F's are distributed about equally in the U.S. population, but most churches include a much higher proportion of F's. Thus we often hear that real Christianity is “heart religion,” as Riley Case implies. However, Christianity also includes “head religion,” and we need to be sure all our members know that.

Many T's drop out or stay away

We drive away T's when we don't show them how Christianity makes sense. To reach them, we can't keep presenting it only in the ways that bring tears to the eyes of F's. We can't expect T's to accept ancient doctrines blindly. Reaching T's requires avoiding claims about the natural world that contradict what science reveals. It requires considering theologians' views and scholars' findings about biblical documents. It requires looking at religious themes as the arts and the humanities present them. God speaks to T's as well as to F's. To reach the T's, the church must speak their language too.

As Case reminds us, early American Methodism did not even retain all of the formal Anglican practices and doctrines that John Wesley had preferred. What American Methodist preachers and bishops preserved from Wesley were his innovative departures from traditional Anglican practice, like going wherever people gathered and making use of small groups led by laypersons.



Many identities or one?

Just as Wesley adapted Anglicanism to serve the working-class people he wanted to reach, and his American followers adapted Methodism to serve rural frontier society, Case found that he had to adapt his seminary learning in order to communicate effectively with different types of congregations.

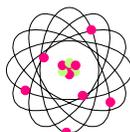


He recalls the jolt he got when as a student pastor he was appointed to a church that was in the midst of a two-week “amen-shouting, foot-stomping Methodist Holy Ghost revival.” It made the revivals in his home church seem almost bland. But he got a jolt in the opposite direction from seminary—“a totally different world,” he says, “in which we discussed books and movies and spoke in four-syllable words.” A realization soon struck him: “There is not one Methodist identity, but several.”

Case believes, however, that the one authentic identity the UMC needs to adopt is that of early American Methodism. This “populist evangelicalism,” he says, was democracy in religion, not filtered by educated clergy or institutional structure but receiving its authority directly from the Holy Spirit. He believes that if today’s church recovered this style, it too would experience a spectacular level of growth unprecedented in modern church history.

Today’s America is different

I agree that Methodism comes in various forms. However, I don’t think the form of early Methodism is the best form for today’s church, for two reasons. First, because America has changed. Formal education is much more widespread. Science has vastly increased our knowledge about the physical world. Modern technology makes us instantly aware of



people and events all over the world. People move and travel, and a high proportion of them live in urban rather than rural settings. Entertainment and contact with other people are much more readily available now than they were in early America. We can’t realistically expect all the church methods that were effective then to be effective now.

Second, I believe the church needs to be a place where Christians with somewhat different understandings of Christianity can all find kindred spirits, work together toward common goals, and feel at home.



Top-heavy structure

Riley Case sees today’s church hampered not only by the lack of a single clear identity but also by elitism and top-heavy institutional structure. He feels that renewal must get its impetus mainly from non-official sources, not from church agencies or the insiders who habitually run them.

That’s probably a valid point. Renewal movements often start from the grass roots and happen from the bottom up. Throughout church history, prophets have often opposed entrenched religious institutions and their powerful leaders. Even Wesley did this, opposing the Anglican establishment of his day and consequently being rejected by it.



Institutions have advantages

Scrapping institutional church structures isn’t necessarily the answer, however. Institutions can specialize and thus do ministries that reach many kinds of people. Professional staffs add a level of skill and knowledge that are important in today’s high-tech world. Also, because denominational agencies represent a large membership, they often can get a hearing that individuals acting alone couldn’t get. These advantages are especially important today, when big government, big business, and big communications media are so powerful.

The crucial question about church agencies seems to be not whether they should exist, but rather which policies they should follow. When many members disagree on which course of action is consistent with Christian teaching, how should we decide which side

of a controversial issue the church should officially support?

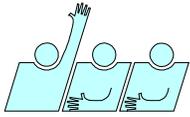


Beyond democracy

Riley Case assumes that democracy is the answer—that the majority of church members will express God’s will. Historically, however, what has eventually been recognized as God’s will has often come through minority voices inspired by the Holy Spirit. Wesley himself, in fact, was one such voice.

He was authoritarian in some ways but innovative in many, such as radically altering the entire character of the ministry by sending out circuit riders to the American frontier. Then the populist evangelism of early American Methodism was to some extent a departure from Wesley’s model. Rather than

reverting to either of these, we may need to make our own innovations now, in our institutional church structures and decision-making processes.



Democracy is far better than any authoritarian system, of course, but I wish the church find an even better decision-making process that would let minority positions be apparent in the outcome. A consensus-based discernment process, for example, could help our large institutions preserve some of the personal responsiveness typical of smaller groups.

Being as innovative as our ancestors

Instead of going back as Case proposes, how could we help our churches reach ordinary people as effectively as early Methodism did, by imitating its willingness to innovate, rather than its methods? How can we focus not on its specific doctrinal statements, but rather on its determi-



nation to reach people that traditional churches had failed to reach?

I think Case is right to be concerned about reaching people. Unlike him, however, I don’t see doctrine either as what attracted people to early Methodism or as what people most need from the church today.



Even though John Wesley was highly educated, he communicated effectively with rural and working-class people, even slaves, and made education available to them—not just religious education but also reading, writing, classical literature, and other nonreligious subjects. Riley Case stresses the value of the changed heart over the trained mind, yet early Methodism did a lot to train minds as well as to change hearts. Doesn’t today’s church also need to do that?

While relatively few Americans look to the church for general education today, we’re seeing an increased desire for knowledge about the Bible, and that’s where the church can surely contribute but often doesn’t. I was chagrined recently when a life-long active Methodist in his seventies said some contents of a *Newsweek* article about the gospel accounts of Jesus’ birth (December 13, 2004) were news to him. It’s shocking when churchgoers must depend on the secular press to inform them about biblical scholars’ findings. Why aren’t our Sunday School classes and Bible study courses conveying such information?



Wesley and early American Methodist leaders reached social outcasts such as prisoners, women, children, menial laborers, and others whom society treated as worthless. The church let them know that God loved them and saw them as valuable, and

This issue, many back issues, a list of the books I’ve written about, and more information about *Connections* are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, mailing address, and \$5 for the coming year’s issues. If you want me to mail you paper copies of any of the 12 years’ back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues you want.



I’m a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman’s wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 denominations plus some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

Methodists offered them a loving human community to be part of. Today's church needs to be doing that too, for the people who are similarly unappreciated or even rejected by today's society.

The heart of our message

How can today's church touch the hearts and also the minds of people all across the theological spectrum and the range of personality types? Can we provide both genuine feeling and serious thinking, not just sentimental repetition of religious clichés? Can we stop making majority approval our measure of faithfulness? Can we welcome a wide range of un-

derstandings of Christianity within the church, and recognize that Christians can come to different conclusions about some issues?

I agree with Riley Case that the church will be more effective if it proclaims the Christian message with a clear and unified voice. However, I believe the heart of that message is the unconditional love shown by Jesus. What we need to copy from the early American church is not its methods or its doctrine, but its willingness to innovate in order to reach the people who most need to hear that message.



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Connections

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Safe spaces and spiritual food

Riley Case observes that what the Good News movement has done for many evangelicals in the UMC has been "to provide safe space for persons to be themselves, to share their stories, to speak their language and give expression to their worship." As this and other similar unofficial movements become known to more church members, he reports, many are saying, "I never knew there were so many other United Methodists who shared my convictions." He also mentions many members who say they are spiritually starved for a kind of food they haven't found in mainline churches.



What's ironic to me is that I hear very similar comments continually from *Connections* readers. They also crave safe space among kindred spirits, opportunities to share their personal stories and hear others' stories, and spiritual food they're not finding. But they want a very different kind of food. They are starved for the meat of serious analysis of ideas and beliefs within the church, and for dialogue that considers many possible responses to current issues, including controversial ones.

Both of these groups need safe space and spiritual food, but which group is already the majority in the church and thus getting many of its needs met? Which is still underserved by existing church activities?