

METHODIST RECORDER

BOOK REVIEW

by

Tom Stuckey

A prophet still speaks within Methodism but is anyone listening? John Vincent, driven by his fascination for Jesus and his passion for Methodism, has for over 60 years challenged our Church and still continues to do so. His latest book **Methodism Unbound; Christ and Methodism for the Twenty first Century** (Church in the Market Place Publications 2015, £9.99) revisits his 1966 'Christ and Methodism' and tracks his own theology and practice through his many subsequent publications. For those less familiar with his work it is an ideal introduction. The book again reminds us of the author's life-long commitment to John Wesley's vision, mission and way of doing theology from the 'bottom up'. He takes us back to our radical beginnings and he traces Methodism's journey over the last 50 years through its radical and reactionary stages into its present reshaping phase.

He begins by reflecting on our present sorry state and voices the loss of confidence felt at the grass roots in so many places. This he argues is hardly surprising since we have had two decades of directions and schemes from Westminster, most of which have come to nothing. If imaginative ideas arise today they are funnelled through the same inner group of people. What finally comes out at the other end is devoid of vitality. He identifies some of those moments over the past 40 years when Methodism had the opportunity to liberate itself from the stranglehold of its power structures but failed to do so. Of course not all will agree with his analysis. As Colin Morris writes in his Foreword 'this book will certainly inspire and may also infuriate you. Old Testament prophets tended to have the same effect on their hearers.'

The author's convictions can still be summed up in his 'Five Pillars of Christianity' – a Worldly God, the New Reality of the Kingdom, Priority for the Poor, a Journey downwards and Things in common. These spring from his belief in centrality of Christ, the call of discipleship, theology as practice and the importance of Mark's Gospel. It is on the last of these that John and I have often parted company. Mark's Gospel is his passion while mine is Paul's letter to the Romans. Throughout our years of ministry we have seen these two emphases create tension, even division between the radicals and the evangelicals. Sadly as theology has steadily disappeared within our church these are no longer seen as complementary. Methodism has opted for a dumb-down version of the latter.

The author's thinking on Methodism 'as a discipleship movement shaped for mission' leads to a discussion on our place within the ecumenism scene. He argues that since 1965 the internal divisions (evangelical/radical) within the various denominations have become more pronounced. Today at the local level we tend to align ourselves more with our 'fellow-feeling colleagues' with similar beliefs rather than with a particular denomination. The Church of England is in any case doing much better than we are at re-inventing itself through its cathedrals, 'outside Church' and 'Fresh Expressions'. Methodism is a 'Lost Church' no longer knowing where it fits. Does this suggest, says the author, that we will do better adopting a 'sect' type model? We should stop trying to create grand alliances since we may lose completely any sense of who we are and what we might become. John defines Church from the Incarnation and then turns to Wesley's practice of putting people into a class in a living room. This he argues is our true ecumenical location. It is bottom up, context-related and personally affirming. If Methodism is to be 'a discipleship movement shaped for mission' then it must not be interpreted, worked out or planned by those at the power centre of our Church (Westminster). This must be done at the margins. This top-down rather than bottom up approach must be resisted.

The book reaches its climax in its chapter on 'street corner projects'. Rather than seeing the smallness and the age of our congregations as fatal flaws their continued presence in poor areas is both a strength and sign of hope. Apart from a few welcome exceptions Methodism no longer exists in large buildings with decent congregations standing alongside the city churches of the Anglicans. We still have emerging churches alongside the poor. Our future will be assured when we cease being obsessed with management, organisation and head-counting. We can be confident in being modest. We began alongside the poor. Should we not be returning to our roots?

The author concludes by exhorting us to welcome the new vision of Methodism as a Movement. In his last chapter stocked with insights from John Wesley he invites us to shift from the theology of a saved elect to one of a saving remnant and confidently embrace the subversive moment of Jesus.

Although this book contains many of the familiar Vincent themes his reflections on the present state of Methodism are very pertinent and I find myself applauding much of what he is saying. I also appreciated the inclusion of personal biographical cameos. These will give the reader fresh insight into to the author's theological pilgrimage.

John Vincent is one our diminishing band of our elderly statesman who carry the spirit and theology of John Wesley in their bones. We must heed his wisdom. This is a positive and prophetic book. Methodism ignores it at its peril.

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