

RETURNING TO METHODISM

*We shall not cease from exploration and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started
and to know the place for the first time.*

If you have read my book *Turned east: half a life for Albania* (Weston Rhyn: Quinta Press, 2011), you will know that I was brought up, converted, and, in 1965, began preaching in Methodism; that some years later I embraced the predestinarian doctrines of Calvinism, and that in time I became a Strict Baptist minister and pastor.



Pastor, Baptist chapel, Hadlow

The book *Turned east* ends with me still in that Calvinist phase, and as a sequel is unlikely to be published, I desired to put on record some account of my return to a more Methodist belief: not to the Methodist Church (though there is overlap), but to the central Methodist belief that Christ shed his blood for all mankind, and (I hope) to something of the ethos which that belief generates in the believing heart.

I retired as Director of the Albanian Evangelical Mission on Christmas Day, 2011 – my 65th birthday – and took up preaching locally more frequently again, in whatever church was pleased to invite me – Baptist, Presbyterian, Evangelical, Congregational, or unaffiliated.

On Thursday 10th June 2014 I was invited to meet the Methodist superintendent minister, Richard Sharples. I had been told recently that I might be invited to take a 'local arrangement' service at Brymbo, and I contacted him to ensure he was happy for me, a renegade Methodist from the 1960s, to do so. He heard me speak at a Baptist church on pre-1611 English Bible translations, and at Crewe-by-Farndon on Primitive Methodism, and he invited me to

preach throughout the circuit. I was encouraged to begin becoming known by attending a series of Tuesday evening meetings held at Ruabon Methodist, which I did from the following week. It was a course on Methodist history; sixteen people were present on 17th June 2014, my first attendance. I have subsequently preached in all the Circuit chapels, continue to preach in the circuit, and from that have been recommended to two contiguous circuits.

The interview also has this significance, that in retrospect it is the first time I can pinpoint a date to the change in my theology. One of the four traditional questions asked of those who would be local preachers was, “Does he preach our doctrines?” Truthfully, I assured the minister that I both believe and preach all the doctrines in the Primitive Methodist Minutes of Conference, and I referred particularly to the 1849 consolidated minutes, though the statement of faith remained in the minutes till the Reunion of 1932. They include as §e “General redemption by the Lord Jesus Christ.”



Wrexham Methodist Church

Plainly I had come by now to a point where my Calvinism had disintegrated and I once again believed that Christ died to make salvation available to all mankind. It strikes me upon reflection that there must have been at least five influences which brought about this change.

Firstly, though not in either time or importance, the change can no doubt be ascribed largely to my intense exposure to and immersion in early Primitive Methodist writings from the time I began reading a lot about Primitive Methodism in 2011 or earlier, and subsequently to the MPhil thesis on early Primitive Methodism which I submitted in 2014. This influence was not to move me to hold that Calvinism was wrong and Arminianism correct, but rather that God was so manifestly present and powerfully working among the early Wesleyan and Primitive Methodists, and other Arminians, that in the light of this the denial of the teaching that Christ had died for all seemed hard to sustain. It is of course equally manifest that God has been present in grace and power among Calvinists. Nonetheless, to maintain the one and deny the other seemed no longer possible.



John Ride, 'The Apostle of Berkshire'

Secondly, the final step in my coming to faith in about 1963 was reading one of Charles Wesley's hymns (#452 in *The Methodist Hymn-book*), and another of Charles Wesley's writings wrought persuasively on my heart and mind¹. Here are two stanzas from it:

Thy Sovereign Grace to All extends,
Immense and unconfin'd'
From Age to Age it never ends;
It reaches All Mankind.
Throughout the World its Breadth is known,
Wide as Infinity,
So wide it never pass'd by One,
Or it had pass'd by me.

And:

Thy *Undistinguishing* Regard
Was cast on *Adam's* fallen Race;
For *All* Thou hast in CHRIST prepar'd
Sufficient, Sovereign, Saving Grace.
A *World* He suffer'd to redeem;
For *All* He hath th' Atonement made:
For those that *will not come* to Him
The Ransom of His Life was paid.

1 *Representative Verse of Charles Wesley* Frank Baker (Epworth Press, London, 1962)

An influence that started a good deal earlier than my intense reading in Primitive Methodism, in fact some years previously, was my widespread encounter with Calvinists whose religion was – or at least seemed – smug, dismissive, cold, bigoted, exclusive. Over the years this began to push me away not only from such people, but from their religion – though I hasten to add that I met some deeply gracious people among them too: I have much to be thankful to God for from my years among the Strict Baptists.

Then there is the question of mystery. Calvinism, both as encountered in some of its adherents and in many of its publications, seemed more akin to a logical, philosophical system of dogmas, whereas other forms of Christianity, not least Eastern Orthodoxy (which I have never embraced), retained a sense of mystery, an awareness that there are aspects of God, of salvation, of God's ways, character and work, that are not revealed. It seemed to me that it is not possible to reduce Christianity, certainly not the central fact of the Atonement, to a neat system which leaves no unanswered questions, no 'loose ends'.



St George's Aigósthena

And fifthly, though by no means least importantly, there are the frequent statements in Scripture that Christ did indeed shed his blood for all mankind. Even though there is much in both experience and Scripture which points to the Calvinist TULIP doctrines, these 'Arminian' statements cannot simply be expunged from Scripture or explained away: they must be true. If we cannot fit them into everything we read, and everything we know about ourselves and our conversion, then we are left with either denying one or other side of the mystery, or accepting that there is indeed a mystery here which we cannot solve, for the hidden things belong to God, and not all has been revealed.

To look from a pulpit over a congregation and believe that Christ had died for every one of them, and not just for the elect who might be among them, became and remains a joyful and liberating experience. I sometimes wonder

whether I am maybe more excited by the expansive Methodist call to all mankind than some who have believed in it throughout their Christian experience:

*Come, sinners, to the gospel feast,
Let every soul be Jesu's guest;
Ye need not one be left behind,
For God hath bidden all mankind.*

*Sent by my Lord, on you I call,
The invitation is to ALL:
Come, all the world; come, sinner, thou!
All things in Christ are ready now.*

This period of story begins in 1963 and it is now 2020 as I write. This chronology explains the presence at the start of the article of the quotation from T. S. Eliot's *Little Gidding*: "We shall not cease from exploration and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and to know the place for the first time."