

The Free Methodist Synthesis¹

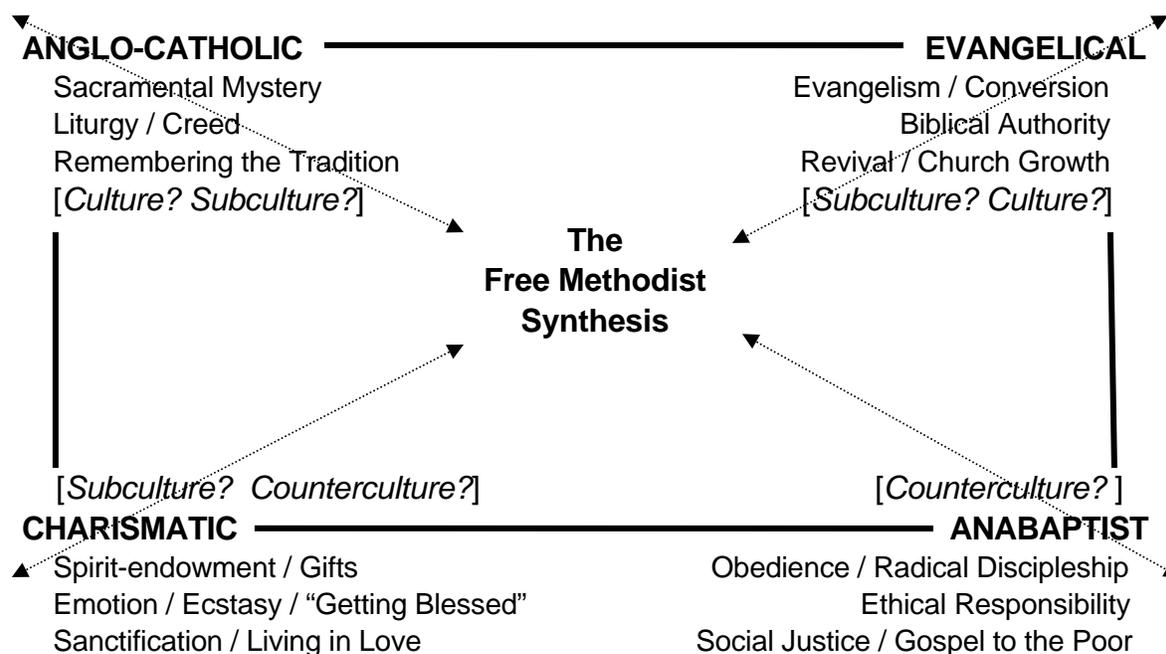
Howard A. Snyder

Methodists like to talk about the so-called "Wesleyan Quadrilateral" of Scripture, reason, tradition, and experience. I propose a different kind of quadrilateral (or square) to illustrate the strengths and dilemmas of Free Methodist identity (as illustrated on page 3).

The strange thing about Wesleyans, and particularly Free Methodists, is that they don't fit neatly into the main categories of Christian history. In a sense they are a hybrid of four traditions: Anglican, evangelical, charismatic, and Anabaptist. Free Methodists are *evangelicals*, but only in some ways. They are *charismatic* in one sense but not in another. They have *Anabaptist* (radical Protestant) roots through Moravianism but also *Roman Catholic* roots through Anglicanism. A complex DNA.

These four diverse traditions, each contributing to the Free Methodist synthesis, have contrasting ways of understanding worship, sacrament, evangelism, community, discipleship, and mission. Each tradition views the church's role in culture differently. The dynamics can vary also in different cultural contexts. For example, liturgical sacramental worship was once "culture" (in England and in medieval Europe), but in many American Protestant churches has become "counterculture." (Interestingly, a focus on the gospel for the poor has almost always been countercultural, and affirming women in leadership generally has been, as well.)

When Free Methodists ask about their soul or identity, they thus draw on one or more of these four traditions. So the Free Methodist soul can be mapped as follows:



¹ Howard Snyder, "Seven Keys to Free Methodist Renewal," in Gerald E. Bates and Howard A. Snyder, eds., *Soul Searching the Church: Free Methodism at 150 Years* (Marston Memorial Historical Centre, 2007), 142-147, 157-158. Posted on Free Methodist Church in Canada website with permission of the author.

In this picture, the converging arrows point to the authentic Free Methodist soul, the hard-to-maintain Free Methodist synthesis. The diverging corner arrows show what happens when one of the four traditions "wins" over the others. The FM person or congregation moves away from its historic soul to an exaggerated emphasis. The disaffected Free Methodist (person or congregation) becomes Anglican, Calvinist conservative, charismatic, or joins the Mennonites or some radical discipleship community.

Where do you or I — or our parents or our grandparents, our children, or church — fit on this map? A little reflection reveals the range of possibilities. Free Methodist history shows, think, that the closer we get to the center, the more fully we embody the authentic Free Methodist soul.

Yet that soul is big enough to embrace a broad range. Some committed Free Methodists feel at home toward the upper left of the map. They deeply appreciate tradition, sacrament, and liturgy. Others find themselves at the lower right, embracing radical discipleship, social justice, and ministry to and among the poor, with less emphasis on creed and sacrament.

Charismatic Free Methodists celebrate our historic emphasis on living by and in the Spirit. Free Methodists who see themselves primarily as evangelicals stress conversion and biblical authority over discipleship, sacrament, or counter-cultural witness.

Is it not clear, though, that Free Methodism at its best combines all these? Has this not always been true of the Free Methodist Church at its best?

Certainly this was true of John Wesley. In fact, this is the heart of the remarkable Wesleyan synthesis; part of the genius of Wesley's optimism of grace. Though with somewhat different accents, this synthesis was the genius also of B.T. and Ellen Roberts.

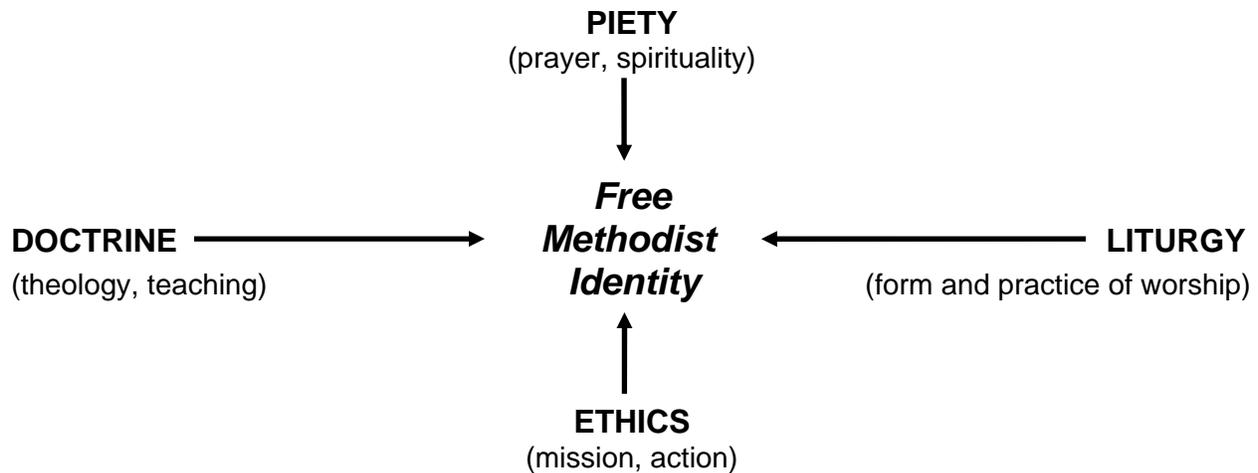
If this map is accurate, then renewing the Free Methodist soul means helping our congregations understand and *experience* authentic Free Methodism. It means helping our people experience the Free Methodist synthesis and practice the Free Methodist charism, maintaining the Bible standard of Christianity and preaching

Our Default Identity

Free Methodism identity can be pictured in another way: What is the "glue" that holds us together? Where do we really find our center, our sense of identity?

We trust, of course, that we find our center in Jesus Christ, made real to us by the Holy Spirit. But how do we picture Jesus Christ and the work of the Spirit? Our understanding of Jesus Christ doesn't come to us directly from the Bible; like everyone else, we get it partly through our heritage, our family tradition. And that tradition, that story, is shaped by past and present stories and contexts.

Jesus, the church, and the gospel itself are shaped for us by the interplay of four parts of the Christian life: *Doctrine, piety, liturgy, and ethics*. Our sense and source of identity is found in some combination of these four dimensions. So the Christian life generally, and a church's sense of identity, can be pictured in this way:



These four are all connected, of course, because all involve both thought and action. They overlap. Piety includes the ethical dimension, doctrine informs liturgy, and ethics shapes how we worship.

In most churches and denominations, however, one of these four tends to be strongest. One of the four, generally, is the default position to which, when push comes to shove, the church moves. This element provides the primary sociological bond; the strongest glue. Some churches put the greatest emphasis on doctrine; others on ethics, or liturgy, or piety.

So a *pietistic church* places the biggest accent on spiritual experience. A *doctrinal church* centers its life and existence in its creed or statement of faith. A *liturgical church* finds its identity in its worship practices, often (but not always) centering in the sacraments. An *ethics-centered church* stresses the way Christians should actually live in the world and usually focuses especially on Jesus as our example.

What holds Free Methodism together? What is the glue? Where do we find our center?

This will vary, no doubt, from church to church and from region to region. My observation however is that most Free Methodists find their identity in piety more than in the other three. Doctrine, worship, and ethical action are all important, but spiritual or devotional experience trumps the others.

Consider this thought experiment. In a Free Methodist gathering, four Christians who are essentially unknown to the congregation each give their testimony. The first emphasizes the importance of sound doctrine. The second speaks of the centrality of worship. The third talks of being witnesses in society. The fourth talks of his or her daily time of prayer and Bible reading.

Which person (without the congregation knowing more) will be seen as the most authentic, the best Christian? In most Free Methodist churches, I think, it would be the pietist — the one who most quickly and persuasively testifies to deep personal spiritual experience. We are more impressed by spiritual experience than by doctrine, ethics, or liturgy.

Or consider this: In a typical Free Methodist sermon (if there is such), where will

the preacher end up? What kind of application or appeal will be made? In my experience, at least, nine times out of ten the appeal will be to piety. That is, it will be an appeal to more prayer, or deeper dedication or rededication — essentially to some private and individual spiritual transaction with God. It is less likely to be an appeal to doctrine ("Believe this; be convinced of this"), or liturgy ("Begin worshiping in this way"), or ethics ("Change your behavior; live out your faith in this way"). I have heard all four kinds of appeals, but the pietist one is the run-away favorite.

This is natural enough. Methodism from the first has been a pietist movement, influenced by Continental Pietism. But Methodism and certainly John Wesley, were always strongly action oriented, as well. Piety and devotion were never ends in themselves; they were the *means* toward loving God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind, and our neighbors as ourselves. They were means of grace. Wesley's insistent emphasis on "all inward and outward holiness" was a way of holding piety and mission together; a missional piety. That's partly why Wesley and his followers were called Methodists, not Pietists.

As Free Methodists we tend to collapse mission into piety. Devotion becomes the meaning of mission, and the goal of mission is to make us more pious. During Free Methodism's thirty-year "movement phase" piety and mission were arguably more in balance than today, despite some excesses.

Perhaps the malady that affected Free Methodism during its sect phase was not so much legalism as a too inwardly- focused pietism.

It is not either/or. Piety is essential. But our piety should be informed and shaped by doctrine, liturgy, and missional ethics. Vital Free Methodism that incarnates comprehensive mission will be all these things: Pietistic, biblically doctrinal, healthily liturgical, and missionally ethical. Can we learn to practice a more missional piety — "all inward *and outward* holiness" — rather than allowing inward spirituality to substitute for outward mission?

Note: The analysis in this chapter is based on multiple sources in history, sociology, and theology. For ease in reading I have not referenced these sources but have provided a bibliography for any who may want to investigate these matters in depth.

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