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'The Devil in Solution': How Temperate were the Methodists? *

CLIVE FIELD

The association, made in Methodist, other Christian and secular circles, between Methodism and temperance is an extremely strong and persistent one. The identification of Methodism with total abstinence is especially deeply ingrained in the Methodist and popular psyche, the perceived Methodist view of alcohol being summed up in the late Lord Soper's immortal phrase 'the devil in solution'. Or, as Brian Duckworth put it in 1987 in his introduction to the last substantial Methodist report on alcohol: 'The impression lingers still that Methodism can be represented by a wine-glass with a line through it.'¹ So deeply held is the association that there is a widespread assumption, readily visible in the letter pages of the *Methodist Recorder* whenever there is a periodic public row about some apparent dilution of Methodist temperance principles (latterly about proposed amendments to Standing Orders to permit the consumption of alcohol on church premises and/or the use of alcoholic wine in Holy Communion), that Methodism and abstinence have gone hand in hand since John Wesley's foundation of the Methodist movement.

This assumption is far from being well-grounded. Wesley, in his attitude to drink as to so many other things, was somewhat ambivalent and inconsistent; he was certainly far from being an unequivocal practitioner or advocate of total abstinence. A fairly recent study by Ivan Burnett of his teaching on alcohol has concluded that he sanctioned moderate drinking of fermented beverages, but not of distilled ones (except for medicinal purposes).² Equally, the temperance movement itself, as we now know it, did not originate until the 1830s, and although several of 'The seven men of Preston', whose pledge in 1832 is conventionally regarded as the starting-point, had strong Methodist attachments,³ it was to be several decades later before the bond between Methodism and temperance was firmly established. Indeed, as Louis Billington has shown,⁴ during the 1830s and 1840s militant teetotalism was the cause of discord in Wesleyan Methodism, Primitive Methodism and the Methodist New Connexion. The Teetotal Wesleyan Methodists of Cornwall, studied by Michael Edwards⁵ and Cedric Appleby,⁶ were the most famous manifestation of these divisions, but by no means the only one. In 1841 the Wesleyan Methodist Conference was even moved to pass a series of resolutions against teetotalism. Not until the late 1870s had the various branches of Methodism inaugurated Bands of Hope and other temperance organisations at connexional level, and then not always on total abstinence lines, and at no stage has Methodism ever made abstinence an actual condition of society membership or of entry into the ministry, even if ministerial candidates in the Methodist Church were supposed to have been questioned on the subject until the mid-1960s.

Before the mid-nineteenth century, therefore, there is no great story to tell about the relationship between Methodism and temperance. The story since that

* Based upon a talk given to the Shropshire Branch of the Wesley Historical Society on 10 October 1998 at Market Drayton Methodist Church.

time, by contrast, is far too complex and extensive to be contained within a single paper, especially when viewed in relation to the overall history of the drink question in Great Britain. The intention here is quite specific, to review the (rather limited) evidence about the extent to which the ordinary British Methodist, ministerial or lay, actually subscribed to the temperance position, particularly to one of total abstinence. For those who wish to follow the unfolding of the broader story of Methodism and temperance, two specialised monographs can be identified, although, regrettably, not unreservedly recommended. These are by Clifford Urwin⁷ and George Thompson Brake,⁸ and were published in 1943 and 1974 respectively. Both authors were Methodist ministers and prominent temperance advocates (Urwin held office in the Methodist Church's Temperance and Social Welfare Department, and Brake was Vice-Chairman of the United Kingdom Temperance Alliance), and thus lacked impartiality. Neither work was especially scholarly, Urwin's being quite brief and lacking all critical apparatus, and Brake's essentially an exercise in historical journalism with uneven chronological balance. Urwin also penned a short but useful biography of Henry Carter, his predecessor and eventually colleague in the Temperance and Social Welfare Department.⁹ Carter served the Department for thirty-one years and was thus uniquely qualified to write a history of the temperance movement as a whole; unfortunately for our present purposes, his first volume (covering the years 1830-99)¹⁰ had little Methodist content, and the projected second volume, which would have dealt with the period of his own involvement, was suppressed under pressure from the prohibitionist lobby.

The deficiency has been partially rendered good by other published secondary writings on temperance. The best introduction to these may be found in David Gutzke's recent bibliography of alcohol in the British Isles,¹¹ which contains sections on temperance history and temperance biography/autobiography. The temperance histories include several scholarly monographs on aspects of the Victorian temperance movement, written during the past quarter-century and with useful chapters on temperance and religion. The temperance biographies/autobiographies are typically fairly hagiographical, but there are several for Methodist temperance reformers. Gutzke's bibliography may be supplemented for the Victorian period by Brian Harrison's article,¹² which is essentially the bibliography for the same author's excellent history of the Victorian temperance movement, now in its second edition.¹³ As regards primary sources, the single most important unpublished collection of *Methodistica* comprises the records of the connexional temperance department, latterly deposited at the Methodist Archives and Research Centre in the John Rylands University Library of Manchester,¹⁴ although not yet fully listed and partially embargoed (in respect of more recent material). Early Methodist temperance tracts and pamphlets, mostly from the 1830s and 1840s, have lately been republished on microfiche as part of the present author's *The People Called Methodists* project.¹⁵

Ministry

For the period between *circa* 1850 and the eve of the First World War it is possible to build up a broad picture of the views of British Methodist ministers on total abstinence from a number of national or connexional surveys. The findings of these have been recovered from a variety of published temperance, Nonconformist and Methodist sources and aggregated.¹⁶ The surveys pose

problems of interpretation arising from imperfect and inconsistent methodologies, including uncertainties regarding the inclusion or exclusion of supernumeraries and overseas missionaries; the resulting data should accordingly be viewed as indicative rather than definitive. Nevertheless, they are probably accurate enough for our current purpose in demonstrating the underlying trend. The data suggest that the proportion of Methodist ministers adhering to the abstinence position rose continuously from 10 per cent in 1848 to 34 per cent in 1866 to 40 per cent in 1873 to 56 per cent in 1880 to 80 per cent in 1890 to 90 per cent in 1897 and to 94 per cent in 1914. In other words, there was an increase of 30 per cent in the quarter-century from 1848 to 1873 and 50 per cent in the quarter-century from 1873 to 1897. The 1897 figure of 90 per cent compares with one of 80 per cent for Baptist and Congregational ministers and 68 per cent for Presbyterian Church of England ones. The 1914 figure of 94 per cent, which probably represents the peak of abstinence in the Methodist ministry, compares with one of around 90 per cent for Baptist ministers and 85 per cent for Congregational ones.

Although by 1914 each of the three principal Methodist denominations (Wesleyan, Primitive and United Methodist) had not dissimilar rates of total abstinence in the ministry, they had taken varying lengths of time to reach this position. Apart from Wales, where they were prominent as total abstainers from the 1830s,¹⁷ Wesleyan ministers were generally slowest in embracing the cause. Whilst broadly supporting temperance, they were initially opposed to total abstinence, fearing its divisive consequences. Indeed, the Wesleyan Conference did not sanction the establishment of connexional adult temperance societies based wholly on total abstinence principles (as opposed to the dual basis of temperance and abstinence) until 1892. Hardly surprising then that only 2 per cent of Wesleyan ministers were identified abstainers in 1848, and that the proportion rose relatively slowly before the 1880s, reaching 12 per cent in 1860, 13 per cent in 1866, 30 per cent in 1872, and 33 per cent in 1879. There was then a rapid rise to an estimated 70 per cent in 1890 and to an estimated 92 per cent in 1914. The major reason for this sea change in Wesleyan ministerial attitudes seems not to have been the conversion of existing ministers to abstinence principles but the retirement and/or death of older preachers who were non-abstainers and their replacement by students and probationers who were abstainers. Half of Wesleyan theological college students were total abstainers by 1862, and some 95 per cent by 1891 and 100 per cent by 1899.

Primitive Methodist ministers, by contrast, were much more committed to the teetotal cause from its early days. Already in 1848 they accounted for 19 per cent of the names on a national list of Protestant ministerial abstainers, compared with 5 per cent for the Wesleyans. In that year probably 22 per cent of Primitive Methodist ministers abstained, rising to around 50 per cent by *circa* 1870, 90 per cent in 1881 and 1890, 98 per cent in 1897, and then holding steady at 99 per cent from 1900 until 1914. Even the Primitive Methodists, though, were put somewhat in the shade by the Bible Christians, whose ministry had apparently become 100 per cent abstaining by 1866 at the latest and never ceased to be so until its absorption into the United Methodist Church in 1907. The Bible Christians also surpassed their two other partners in the United Methodist Church, the United Methodist Free Churches and the Methodist New Connexion. The proportion of Free Methodist ministers who abstained was 57 per cent in 1866, 63 per cent in 1871, 73 per cent in 1873, 80 per cent in 1884,

86 per cent in 1892 and 96 per cent in 1897, a position which was then maintained until the 1907 union. For the Methodist New Connexion progress was rather more at a Wesleyan pace, with 35 per cent of ministers abstaining in 1873, 51 per cent in 1877, 66 per cent in 1881, 78 per cent in 1886, 86 per cent in 1897, and 93 per cent in 1906. For the three constituent bodies of the United Methodist Church, the overall figures for abstaining ministers were 61 per cent in 1866, 70 per cent in 1873, 84 per cent in 1880, 92 per cent in 1890, 94 per cent in 1897, and 95 per cent in 1914.

For the period after Methodist union the best evidence about ministerial attitudes to drink derives from three postal surveys conducted by the Christian Economic and Social Research Foundation in May 1962, May 1972 and June 1982.¹⁸ On the first occasion questionnaires were sent to all active ministers and probationers in Great Britain, and 75 per cent were returned; on the second to all active and retired ministers in Great Britain, and 69 per cent were returned; and on the third to a random sample of 50 per cent of active ministers and probationers in Great Britain, and 80 per cent were returned. The results from these surveys can be interpreted in various ways, depending upon how the significant numbers of non-respondents are dealt with. Making no deductions for non-respondents, the proportion of active ministers returning themselves as abstainers decreased from 65 per cent in 1962 to 42 per cent in 1972 to 37 per cent in 1982, or by 28 per cent in two decades, whilst the non-abstainers increased from 10 to 29 to 43 per cent, or by 33 per cent. On a scale where net abstinence is denoted by a + and net non-abstinence by a -, the ratio of abstainers to non-abstainers moved from +55 to -6. Assuming that non-respondents divided the same way on abstinence as respondents, and thus effectively eliminating them from the calculations, 87 per cent of Methodist ministers abstained in 1962, 59 per cent in 1972, and 46 per cent in 1982, a twenty-year fall of 41 per cent, with non-abstainers correspondingly rising from 13 to 41 to 54 per cent, a rise of 41 per cent. On this interpretation the balance of abstainers to non-abstainers changed from +74 to -8. However, taking a very pessimistic view of the data, and classifying all non-respondents as non-abstainers too ashamed to own up to the fact, the ratio of abstainers to non-abstainers swung from +30 to -26.

Although there is some evidence to support the third interpretation, notably the findings in 1962 that non-abstainers took longer on average to reply than abstainers, with an implication that non-respondents probably included a higher proportion of non-abstainers, there can be little doubt that it exaggerates the decline in subscription to total abstinence. The truth is probably an amalgam of all three interpretations. But the direction and scale of the overall trend are clear enough; whereas in 1962 around two thirds of Methodist ministers still abstained, by 1982 only a minority did so, perhaps not that much more than a third. The major decline occurred between 1962 and 1972 and slowed during the next decade. The decline seems to have been attributable to a combination of two factors. First, a significant number of hitherto abstaining ministers changed their position for various reasons; the commonest reasons given in 1972 for moving away from abstinence were: preference for temperance arguments (31 per cent), reassessment of position (20 per cent), protest against the bigotry of total abstainers (14 per cent), personal reasons (13 per cent), courtesy and Christian charity (10 per cent), and total abstinence as a hindrance to religion (9 per cent). Second, abstaining ministers retired and were replaced by those who

had never abstained; in both 1972 and 1982, it was striking that those ordained since 1962 were much less likely to abstain than those ordained before 1962. The effects of these trends can be clearly seen in 1982, when 44 per cent of non-abstainers were previously abstainers who had changed their minds, and 56 per cent had never abstained. Picking up these two tendencies, and projecting them forward to the present day, it seems doubtful whether, were the 1962, 1972 and 1982 surveys to be replicated now, the number of abstaining ministers would be much above one fifth (although this is still rather higher than the 14 per cent average for ministers of all denominations recorded in the Ansvur Survey of English Social Behaviour in 1994-95).¹⁹

As if this decline in the number of abstaining ministers was not serious enough, there was another feature worrying to the traditionalists brought out in the 1962 and 1982 surveys: a shift from 'occasional' to 'temperate' patterns of drinking amongst those who admitted to being non-abstainers. In 1962 73 per cent of non-abstainers considered themselves to be occasional social drinkers and 27 per cent to be temperate; by 1982 the figures were 42 and 58 per cent, a shift of 31 points away from occasional drinking. There was a clear continuum whereby ministers shifted from a position of abstinence to one of occasional non-abstinence to one of temperate non-abstinence. In 1962 53 per cent of occasional drinkers and 59 per cent of temperate drinkers had once been abstainers.

The most recent data on ministerial attitudes were collected as part of a lengthy postal questionnaire sent in 1997 to all circuit ministers in Great Britain. This was devised by John Haley, William Kay and Leslie Francis as part of Haley's doctoral research at Trinity College, Carmarthen.²⁰ The number of questionnaires returned was 1,336, a response rate of 74 per cent. Although no specific question was asked about the temperance habits of the ministers themselves, some clues as to their views and practices may be found in the responses to the statement that 'Church members should not drink alcoholic beverages.' The proportion of ministers who agreed strongly with this was 1 per cent, with 5 per cent agreeing, 13 per cent uncertain, 52 per cent disagreeing, and 29 per cent disagreeing strongly; in other words, of those expressing an opinion, those who disagreed that church members should not drink alcohol outnumbered those who agreed by thirteen and a half times. The pattern of replies was not affected by gender, but age was significant: those who agreed or agreed strongly were preponderantly over 45, whilst those who disagreed strongly were preponderantly under 45.

The figure of 6 per cent of ministers who thought it wrong for members to drink was lower than those who agreed that members should not buy National Lottery tickets (65 per cent), should not smoke (45 per cent), should not normally buy or sell on Sundays (40 per cent), should not buy tickets for small-prize raffles (23 per cent), and should not engage in sporting activities on Sundays (10 per cent). However, it was a little higher than for those who agreed that church members should not attend the theatre or cinema (2 per cent), should not watch television on Sundays (1 per cent), and should not take part in social dancing (also 1 per cent). Clearly, for ministers, immorality is now much more extensively bound up with gambling, smoking and, to a lesser extent, non-observance of Sundays; the drinking of alcohol, especially in moderation, is no longer regarded as sinful.

Laity: early years

The position with regard to the laity is less easy to determine. There is certainly very little direct survey evidence at the connexional level for the period before Methodist union in 1932, and nearly all of that is for office-holders in the non-Wesleyan denominations. They probably took their temperance cue from the ordained ministry, and may not have been representative of the rank and file in their own Churches, still less of the Wesleyan laity. In Primitive Methodism, for example, the proportion of local preachers who abstained was 81 per cent in 1897, 88 per cent in 1906, and 90 per cent in 1911.²¹ For Sunday school workers abstainers accounted in Free Methodism in 1891 for 85 per cent each of superintendents and secretaries, male teachers, and female teachers;²² five years later, abstainers still represented 85 per cent of female teachers, but the other two categories showed a small drop, to 82 and 80 per cent.²³ Amongst the Bible Christians 79 per cent of Sunday school teachers were teetotal in 1897;²⁴ and for the Independent Methodists 97 per cent in 1908 and 96 per cent in 1912.²⁵ The best survey evidence for members is for Independent Methodism, where 92 per cent abstained in 1906, rising to 98 per cent in 1912.²⁶ Less precise data for the Bible Christians suggest that 90-95 per cent of their members abstained in 1900,²⁷ and seven in eight in 1906-07.²⁸ Since Bible Christian ministers were the most committed of all Methodist ministers to the abstinence position, it seems reasonable to assume that the proportion of abstaining members in this Church was also higher than for the four other principal Methodist denominations.

A second indicator of the temperance position of the laity before 1932 is membership of the various connexional temperance organisations.²⁹ The most reliable, but still far from perfect, statistics are for the connexionally-organised Bands of Hope, the juvenile temperance association. They increased rapidly in number during the fourth quarter of the nineteenth century, evidently peaking some time around 1897, coincidentally the year of the golden jubilee of the Band of Hope movement. At that time there were 763,000 members of Bands of Hope in the five main British Methodist Churches, 430,000 in Wesleyan Methodism, 209,000 in Primitive Methodism and 124,000 in the three branches of what was to become United Methodism. Although these were very large figures, overall they were equivalent to no more than 44 per cent of Methodist Sunday school membership in 1897, the proportion ranging downwards from 67 per cent for the Bible Christians, to 45 per cent for both Wesleyan and Primitive Methodists, to 39 per cent for the Methodist New Connexion, and 34 per cent for the Free Methodists. With the possible exception of Primitive Methodism (where changes in the basis of reporting make strict comparisons difficult), the numbers in Methodist Bands of Hope fell away steadily from the late 1890s until 1914 and then slumped dramatically in the 1920s. Just after Methodist union, in 1934, membership of Bands of Hope was down to 124,000 with a further 83,000 in other juvenile temperance organisations; the former figure was equivalent to a mere 10 per cent of Sunday school membership and even the combined figure to no more than 17 per cent. The Second World War effectively killed off the juvenile temperance movement in Methodism; by 1955, the last year for which data appear to have been published, there were only 10,000 members of Bands of Hope and 7,000 members of other juvenile temperance organisations, the total of 17,000 representing 2 per cent of the Methodist Sunday school population.

Membership statistics for adult temperance organisations are far less reliable and far more difficult to interpret, particularly for the later nineteenth century. There are many reasons for this, including the following: not all Methodist temperance societies were organised on exclusively abstinence principles, and thus could legitimately include moderate drinkers; many Methodists had joined secular or non-sectarian temperance societies before connexional ones were established and never switched their allegiance to the latter; not all abstainers joined temperance societies; some temperance societies covered both adults and children; some Methodists were members of more than one connexional temperance body and were thus double-counted; the structures and membership categories of temperance societies often changed, making it impossible to construct time series; and there were frequent complaints about the patchy collection and reporting of statistics.

Under these inauspicious circumstances, the best estimate of registered Methodist adult abstainers aged 15 and above in the run-up to the First World War is 160,000 in Wesleyan Methodism, 140,000 in Primitive Methodism and 80,000 in United Methodism. This totals to 380,000 which is equivalent to around 46 per cent of the British membership of 830,000 at that time, the ratio seemingly being best in the case of the Primitive Methodists where the equivalent of two in three members were possibly abstainers. However, not far short of half of these 380,000 were aged up to 20, so the number of true adults, those aged 21 and over, who were registered abstainers was perhaps 250,000, and not all of these would necessarily have been members; some could well have been adherents who formed the clear majority of Methodism's worshipping community at this time. Over the next twenty years the number of registered Methodist adult abstainers aged 15 and above slumped by 240,000, to reach 140,000 in 1934, even though society membership held steady at 830,000; the ratio of abstainers to members had thus dropped to 17 per cent in the aftermath of Methodist union in 1932. By 1939, seemingly the last year for which figures for the adult section of the connexional abstainers' roll were published separately, the proportion had fallen again to 13 per cent. Even if we ignore the fact that some of these abstainers will have been adherents rather than society members, and even if a generous allowance is made for Methodist members who abstained in practice but did not formally register themselves as such on the connexional roll, it is hard to imagine that more than a third of the membership practised abstinence by the 1930s. In 1955 the number on the connexional roll, for juniors and adults combined, stood at 90,000, down from 260,000 in 1934.

A third indicator of lay commitment to temperance before the First World War may be found in the number of Methodist signatories to petitions to Parliament to enact legislation to control the drink trade. These were certainly impressively large on occasion, for instance 597,000 Wesleyans and 79,000 Free Methodists in 1883,³⁰ and 610,000 Wesleyan³¹ and 200,000 Primitive Methodists³² in 1908. However, two considerations should be borne in mind in interpreting these data. First, the signatories will almost certainly have included many juveniles and adult adherents who were not members, so comparisons with membership figures will certainly be misleading. In 1908, for instance, the combined Wesleyan and Primitive Methodist signatories may only have represented a third of the overall worshipping constituency for these two denominations. Second, signing a petition to control the drink trade does not necessarily equate with total abstinence; many Methodists were anxious to see

legislation to curb the social evils arising from alcohol abuse but saw no conflict between that and temperate or occasional social drinking in their personal lives. The latter point will also apply to a petition in favour of local option presented to Parliament in 1894 by 18,600 Methodist local preachers, amongst them 8,000 Wesleyans (equivalent to 47 per cent of the connexion's lay preachers) and 6,800 Primitive Methodists (representing 41 per cent of theirs).³³

Laity: since the 1960s

Not until the 1960s is there again sufficient evidence to judge the temperance habits of the Methodist laity. Several surveys were conducted during that decade, prompted in part by a desire to measure Methodist and Anglican attitudes to drink and other issues at a time when organic union between the two Churches was being mooted. David Clark, for example, investigated the situation in Rugby, Trowbridge, Ellesmere Port and Bromley in 1962-63, finding that 48 per cent of members of Methodist leaders' meetings and just 2 per cent of members of Anglican church councils supported total abstinence very strongly, 39 per cent and 72 per cent respectively had no strong feelings, and 7 per cent of Methodists and 22 per cent of Anglicans disapproved of total abstinence very strongly.³⁴ An unpublished survey of Methodist members in the Leeds and Bradford areas undertaken in the summer of 1963 by the Renewal Group discovered that only 37 per cent thought drinking was wrong, 49 per cent that it was not, and 12 per cent that it was all right for others; this compared with 73 per cent who thought that gambling was wrong. However, another study of Methodist members in the Leeds District conducted in 1968 by Bryan Turner reported that 61 per cent felt it was necessary for Methodism to 'press upon the nation the importance of temperance'.³⁵

At much the same time Cyril Rodd was carrying out fieldwork in a middle-class Birmingham suburb with few immigrants, interviewing samples of Methodist members, Anglicans, Roman Catholics, and those with no church affiliation. Several batteries of questions were put on a range of social issues, including three questions on alcoholic drink: 'Do you think that every priest or minister should be a total abstainer?', 'Do you think it would help a priest or minister to get alongside ordinary people if he had a pint in the local pub?', and 'Would you call yourself a total abstainer?' An attitude score was calculated on a scale of 0-3, where 3 represented the temperance position and 0 the pro-alcohol position. The number of Methodists scoring 3 was 26 per cent of men and 31 per cent of women, with 12 and 12 per cent scoring 2, 22 and 24 per cent scoring 1, and 40 and 33 per cent scoring 0. For the other samples the percentage of males and females scoring 0 on the drink scale was very much higher: 76 and 54 for the Anglicans, 69 and 53 for the Catholics, and 78 and 85 for those with no religious affiliation. However, even for the Methodists gambling was by far the more burning issue; the proportion recording the top score (5 in this instance) was 54 per cent of men and 41 per cent of women.³⁶

To these independent investigations was added in 1972 a rather more official, but still small-scale, survey conducted on behalf of the Commission on Methodism and Total Abstinence, which had been set up on the direction of the 1971 Conference.³⁷ Ministers in nineteen circuits were asked to arrange for their membership to complete a voluntary questionnaire on the subject. No details are known to exist of the number of members approached, the number responding, and the extent to which they were representative. Of those who did respond, 30 per cent claimed to be total abstainers and a further 42.5 per cent to be abstainers

apart from social occasions (such as a toast at a wedding). Men were somewhat less abstinent than women, and the under-40s less than the over-40s. There was little sign of changing attitudes to alcohol; 83 per cent maintained that they had always taken up their present position, and less than 3 per cent had moved to a total abstinence stance from a previous pattern of drinking. When asked about the Church's teaching on abstinence, 43 per cent said that they had not heard much at all, and only 15 per cent thought the Church said too much about it.

A second official enquiry followed a decade later. In response to a directive of the Methodist Conference in 1981, the Division of Social Responsibility set up a working party to consider responsible attitudes to alcohol and decided to undertake a survey of the laity to inform its deliberations.³⁸ Under its auspices 1,600 self-completion questionnaires were distributed to a cross-section of Methodist members in early December 1982 and 477 (or 30 per cent) returned by 1 February 1983. The relatively low response rate probably introduced a degree of bias in the results, especially since no attempt was made to weight the data to reflect the demographic profile of the Methodist Church. In particular, it should be noted that women and those aged 65 and over, both groups with a stronger inclination to the temperance position, were under-represented.

Respondents were first asked what they thought the current attitude of the Methodist Church to drink was. In reply, 12 per cent thought that it was that its members should practise total abstinence, 16 per cent that its members may consume alcoholic beverages in moderation, 62 per cent that its members may choose either total abstinence or drinking in moderation, 3 per cent that its members may consume as much alcoholic beverage as they want, with 7 per cent don't know. They were then asked what they thought the current attitude of the Methodist Church *should* be, and a similar pattern of replies was obtained: 16 per cent supported the total abstinence line (over half of whom were over 65 years of age), 15 per cent favoured drinking in moderation, 65 per cent were for individual choice, and 4 per cent were for unrestricted drinking. When questioned as to how their own attitudes towards drinking alcohol had changed over the past few years, 19 per cent said that they had become more opposed to the use of alcohol, 11 per cent that they had become less opposed, and 70 per cent that they had remained the same.

As for the usage of alcoholic beverages, 19 per cent had never drunk at any stage in their lives, 7 per cent had drunk at some stage but no longer did so, and 74 per cent drank sometimes. At 26 per cent, the proportion of Methodist teetotallers in 1982-83 was *less* than the 34 per cent average for churchgoers as a whole obtained by the Ansvur Survey of English Social Behaviour in 1994-95.³⁹ Of this 26 per cent, 48 per cent approved of moderate drinking by others and 14 per cent kept alcohol in the home for friends. Of the 74 per cent who drank, 40 per cent did so at home, 40 per cent at parties or social events, and only 23 per cent in licensed premises. Those who said that they drank nowadays were very likely to have others at home who also drank, whilst those who did not drink were more likely to have others at home who did not drink. Compared with five years previously, 8 per cent said that they had not drunk then but did now, 9 per cent that they drank somewhat more now than then, 41 per cent that they drank about the same, 15 per cent that they drank somewhat less, 1 per cent that they did not drink now but had done then, and 22 per cent that they did not drink now and had not done so then.

The figure of 26 per cent for those who never drank at all in 1982-83 was increased for particular types of alcoholic beverages. Thus a further 8 per cent (i.e. 34 per cent of the whole sample) never drank table wines, a further 15 per cent never drank fortified wines such as sherry, a further 40 per cent never drank spirits, a further 33 per cent never drank beers, a further 45 per cent never drank home brew wines, and a further 63 per cent (89 per cent in all) never drank home brew beers. All in all, those Methodists who drank did so temperately. The proportion of the whole sample (drinkers and abstainers) who drank alcohol at least weekly was 19 per cent for table wines, 19 per cent for fortified wines, 13 per cent for beers, and 7 per cent for spirits; those who drank at least monthly constituted an additional 17, 12, 12 and 10 per cent respectively. The frequency of Methodist consumption of beer and spirits was somewhat below the national norm at that time but about the norm so far as wines and fortified wines were concerned.

The correlation in the 1982-83 sample between (non-)abstainers and age is underlined in some more recent data on Methodist adolescents. These have been collected as part of the Teenage Religion and Values project based at the Centre for Theology and Education at Trinity College, Carmarthen, and directed by Leslie Francis and William Kay.⁴⁰ During the course of the 1990s they developed an extensive database from questionnaires completed by some 33,000 pupils in years 9 and 10 of state-maintained secondary schools in England and Wales, i.e. by thirteen- to fifteen-year olds. Unlike conventional surveys and polls, the sample is sufficiently large to permit a Methodist sub-sample to be identified. Some insight into the attitudes of Methodist adolescents towards alcohol is given by their responses to the statement that 'It is wrong to become drunk.' The proportion of professing Methodists who agreed with this was a surprisingly low 25 per cent, compared with 19 per cent of all adolescents and 17 per cent of those with no church affiliation. This figure of 25 per cent did not vary by gender or location, but it was influenced by age: whereas the percentage for Methodists in year 9 was 28, it was only 21 in year 10. Personality also made a difference: the Methodist figure ranged from 18 per cent for extroverts to 22 per cent for ambiverts to 30 per cent for introverts. So, too, did frequency of church attendance, 32 per cent of Methodists who went to church weekly agreeing with the statement, as opposed to 21 per cent for occasional or lapsed churchgoers. This 32 per cent can be compared with weekly churchgoers from other denominations identified from the database at an earlier stage of its development: in 1994 31 per cent of Anglican, 21 per cent of Roman Catholic and 39 per cent of Free Church adolescents agreed that it was wrong to become drunk, suggesting that Methodists no longer stand out from other Protestants in their condemnation of alcohol abuse.

The very latest evidence derives from a self-completion questionnaire survey carried out by Patricia Batstone in 1998, mostly among readers of the *Methodist Recorder* and delegates to the Methodist Conference and District Synods, which drew 650 responses from 171 circuits, 11 per cent of them from ministers and 6 per cent from deacons.⁴¹ Since this was originally conceived as a census of Methodist teetotallers, the overall results (65 per cent abstainers, 23 per cent occasional drinkers, 6 per cent moderate drinkers, and 4 per cent social drinkers, with 81 per cent opposed to the licensing of Methodist premises and 61 per cent concerned about the weakening of Methodism's traditional stance on alcohol) could not have been expected to be representative of the whole connexion and

are of relatively little interest. More revealing, perhaps, is the pattern of the replies for the sub-sample of teetotallers, 93 per cent of whom had made their temperance position public, with 26 per cent claiming to have experienced a degree of marginalisation as a result. Home and family were cited by 52 per cent as a major influence in leading them to adopt this position, followed some considerable way behind by exposure to the effects of alcohol (26 per cent), Sunday school and church (24 per cent), temperance teaching (18 per cent), and scripture or religious education (12 per cent); medical reasons were relatively infrequently given (allergic reactions by 7 per cent, and health by 5 per cent). Although the sub-sample were mostly lifelong abstainers (only 17 per cent of them had ever drunk, and almost a third of these had been inebriated at some time), their commitment to the cause was not absolutely rock-solid: 33 per cent would accept alcoholic Communion wine, 39 per cent would take their turn at buying a round of drinks at a social gathering, 18 per cent would serve alcohol to guests in their own home, only 20 per cent were current members of any teetotal or temperance organisation, and just 4 per cent had their name on the Nationwide Teetotallers' Publicity Register.

Conclusions

Although the survey evidence reviewed above is less plentiful than might be wished, it is suggested that it will support ten tentative conclusions about the relationship of British Methodism to temperance:

- so far as can be judged, total abstinence has never been a specific condition of entry into either the Methodist ministry or membership – persuasion through argument and example rather than prohibition has been the policy and practice
- the association of Methodism and temperance does not go back to the origins of Methodism – it was largely a creation of the mid- to late-Victorian period, and before that era Methodist attitudes to teetotalism were ambivalent and sometimes hostile
- the association was probably strongest for a relatively short period between 1890 and 1914 – at this time more than nine tenths of Methodist ministers and just under half of Sunday scholars and church members (but a much smaller proportion of adherents) were probably total abstainers
- of the various Methodist denominations, Wesleyan Methodism was the slowest to commit to the temperance cause, the Primitive Methodists and, more especially, the Bible Christians the most enthusiastic
- lay commitment to temperance fell away dramatically after the First World War, particularly amongst Sunday scholars and adherents, but ministerial commitment to total abstinence held up relatively well until the early 1960s when it, too, started to collapse
- today probably no more than one fifth of Methodists are total abstainers, and even fewer would support the Methodist Church officially nailing its colours to the abstinence mast – other social ills, not least gambling, are regarded as much more important
- whereas formerly, ministers and, to a lesser extent, lay office-holders were significantly more likely to abstain than the rank-and-file, nowadays there is

little to distinguish between ministers and laity in terms of their attitudes to and usage of alcohol

- abstaining Methodists are to be found disproportionately amongst the older age cohorts, creating a certain inexorability about the decline of Methodism's support for the temperance line – as these cohorts die off (and Methodist death rates are now almost twice the national average), and are succeeded by those with a less rigorous attitude to drink, abstinence is bound to become even more unfashionable
- amongst the minority of Methodists who do still abstain, there is a much greater willingness to tolerate drinking in others, and amongst the majority who do drink there has been a shift from occasional to moderate drinking
- although Methodists continue to abstain more than the civil population (where the proportion, according to three recent Government surveys, is around one in ten adults),⁴² their level of abstinence is no longer such as to set them hugely apart from ministers and churchgoers as a whole – the gap between Methodism and other Churches has closed rapidly since the 1960s

The statistical basis for several of these conclusions is summarised in Table 1. This shows changes in the proportion of Methodist abstainers at twenty-year intervals, derived from actual and (in a few instances) extrapolated or conjectural data, rounded to the nearest 5 per cent. It is intended to be only the broadest of approximations.

Table 1
Estimated Percentage of Abstainers Among British
Methodist Ministers and Members, 1850-1990

Date	Ministers	Members
1850	10	
1870	40	
1890	80	
1910	95	50
1930	80	30
1950	70	30
1970	45	30
1990	20	20

In the face of these findings, the stereotypical view of Methodism's association with total abstinence must be qualified to a considerable extent. That association has neither been continuous throughout Methodist history nor universal even during the short period when it was at its strongest. There appears to have been a significant, and widening, gulf between the situation on the ground and the thrust of connexional teaching. Methodism may have deserved its reputation for temperance, in the sense of its ministers and members distancing themselves from the abuse of alcohol and practising moderation, but, on the basis of the evidence presented here, its enthusiasm for total abstinence from it seems to have been a trifle overstated in Methodist and other

historiography. For a good many Methodists, the devil never seems to have dissolved in their drink, but to have remained at the bottom of the glass, leaving them free of impurity.

NOTES

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- 4 L. Billington, 'Popular Religion and Social Reform: A Study of Revivalism and Teetotalism, 1830-50', *Journal of Religious History*, Vol. 10 (1978-79), pp.266-93
- 5 M. S. Edwards, 'The Teetotal Wesleyan Methodists' [of St Ives], *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society*, Vol. XXXIII (1961-62), pp.63-70
- 6 C. J. Appleby, 'The Hayle Teetotallers', *Journal of the Cornish Methodist Historical Association*, Vol. 6 (1981-84), pp.7-16
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- 8 G. T. Brake, *Drink: Ups and Downs of Methodist Attitudes to Temperance*, London: Oliphants, 1974. Now out of print, this is summarised in: G. T. Brake, *Tracing the Temperance Sentiment in the Methodist Church*, Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 1999
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- 11 D. W. Gutzke, *Alcohol in the British Isles from Roman Times to 1996: An Annotated Bibliography*, Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996, especially pp.148-67, 208-32
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- 13 B. Harrison, *Drink and the Victorians: The Temperance Question in England, 1815-1872*, second edition, Keele: Keele University Press, 1994
- 14 Prospective users should quote accession numbers MA4767 and MA6001
- 15 *The People Called Methodists: A Documentary History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain and Ireland on Microfiche*, editor-in-chief: C. D. Field, Leiden: IDC Publishers, 1988-98, Phase III, Part 3, MP-1199 to MP-1234 and MP-1611
- 16 The principal sources used for the extent of ministerial abstinence prior to the First World War are: O. A. Beckerlegge, *The United Methodist Free Churches: A Study in Freedom*, London: Epworth Press, 1957, p. 57; Brake, *Drink*, pp. 12, 14, 24-5, 98; *The Brooklet: The Organ of the Free Methodist Temperance League*, 1885, p.137, 1892, pp.97, 125; D. Burns, *Temperance History: A Consecutive Narrative*

- of the Rise, Development and Extension of Temperance Reform, London: National Temperance Publication Depot, [1890-91], Vol. I, pp.161, 303, Vol. II, pp.84-5, 155, 193, 292; Burns, *Temperance in the Victorian Age: Sixty Years of Temperance Toil & Triumph, from 1837 to the Great Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria's Reign, 1897*, London: Ideal Publishing Union, 1897, pp.93-5; W. E. Codling, *Intemperance and our Relation to it as Wesleyan Methodists*, London: sold at the Wesleyan Conference Office. 1879, p.19; *Free Church Yearbook*, 1906, pp. 315-16, 1907, pp.265-7, 1908, pp.268-9, 1911, pp.270, 278, 1912, pp.258, 263, 268, 273, 1914, p.251; Harrison, *Drink and the Victorians*, p.167; *The Jubilee of the Band of Hope Movement: A Jubilee Volume*, edited by F. Smith, London: United Kingdom Band of Hope Union, 1897, pp.201-3; *Methodism and the Liquor Traffic*, second edition, Manchester: United Kingdom Alliance, [1860], pp. 15-16; *Methodist Papers on Temperance*, edited by G. Maunder, C. Garrett and T. B. Stephenson, No. 1, London: S. W. Partridge, [1867], p.4; *Methodist Temperance Magazine*, Vol. IV (1871), pp.42-4, Vol. V (1872), p.6, Vol. XVI (1883), p.263, Vol. XVII (1884), p. 237, Vol. XIX (1886), p.68, New Series, Vol. IV (1890), p.165, New Series, Vol. VI (1892), pp.113-14, New Series, Vol. VIII (1894), p.162, New Series, Vol. IX (1895), pp.15, 166, New Series, Vol. XI (1897), p.40, New Series, Vol. XIII (1899), p.165; *Minutes Made at the . . . Annual Conference of the Primitive Methodist Connexion*, 1900, p. 142; *Minutes of Proceedings of the . . . Annual Assembly of the United Methodist Free Churches*, 1871, p.71; *Proceedings of the . . . Oecumenical Methodist Conference*, 1881, pp.212-13, 216, 1891, p.428; *Report of the Temperance Committee to the Conference* [of the Wesleyan Methodist Church], 1894, p.1; *Temperance Spectator*, Vol. VIII (1866), p.88; *United Methodist Free Churches Magazine*, Vol. XXVII (1884), p. 209; P. T. Winskill, *The Temperance Movement and its Workers: A Record of Social, Moral, Religious and Political Progress*, London: Blackie & Son, 1891-92, Vol. III, pp.4, 14, 234-5, 239, Vol. IV, p.67; *Working Men and Religious Institutions: Full and Extended Report of the Speeches at the Conference at the London Coffee House, Ludgate Hill . . . Jan. 21 1867*, London, 1867, p.36
- 17 W. R. Lambert, *Drink and Sobriety in Victorian Wales, c. 1820-c. 1895*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1983, pp.122, 142-3
- 18 *Methodist Ministers and Total Abstinence: Report on an Inquiry made with the Goodwill of the Christian Citizenship Department of the Methodist Church*, London: Christian Economic and Social Research Foundation, 1962; *Methodist Recorder*, 1 November 1962, pp.1-2, 16 November 1972, pp.1, 11 and 21 October 1982, pp.1, 10-11. Summarised in *Report of the Christian Citizenship Department of the Methodist Church*, 1962-63, pp.2-3; Brake, *Drink*, pp.119-20; Brake, *Policy and Politics in British Methodism, 1932-1982*, London: Edsall, 1984, p.441; *Through a Glass Darkly*, p.25; 'Methodist Attitudes to Alcohol', p.50. Cf. *Ministers of the Congregational Church and Presbyterian Church of England and Total Abstinence*, London: Christian Economic and Social Research Foundation, 1962
- 19 *UK Christian Handbook: Religious Trends*, No. 1 (1998/99), p.5.4; cf. the undated special edition of *Quadrant*, the membership magazine of the Christian Research Association, published late in 1995 which was devoted to the survey. Of the ministers included in the survey, 52 per cent claimed to drink alcohol at least once a week, 18 per cent at least once a month, 7 per cent less than once a month, and 9 per cent hardly ever

- 20 The data quoted have kindly been made available by Haley and Kay
- 21 *The Jubilee of the Band of Hope Movement*, p. 202; *Free Church Yearbook*, 1906, p. 316, 1911, p.278
- 22 *The Brooklet: The Organ of the Free Methodist Temperance League*, 1892, p.128
- 23 *The Jubilee of the Band of Hope Movement*, pp.202-3
- 24 *Ibid.*, p.203
- 25 *Free Church Yearbook*, 1908, p.268, 1912, p.281
- 26 *Ibid.*, 1906, p.315, 1907, pp.265-7, 1908, p.268, 1912, p.281
- 27 *Extracts from the Minutes of the . . . Annual Conference of the Ministers and Representatives of the People Denominated Bible Christians*, 1900, p.64
- 28 *Free Church Yearbook*, 1906, p.315, 1907, pp.265-7
- 29 These are quoted selectively by Brake, *Drink*, passim. The annual reports of the Temperance and Social Welfare Department of the Wesleyan Methodist Church and Methodist Church have also been drawn upon in the following section. Methodist society and Sunday school membership figures have been derived from: R. Currie, A. D. Gilbert and L. Horsley, *Churches and Churchgoers: Patterns of Church Growth in the British Isles since 1700*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977
- 30 *Methodist Temperance Magazine*, Vol. XVI (1883), pp.97-9, 203, 263
- 31 *Temperance Pioneer*, New Series, Vol. II (1908), p.182
- 32 *Minutes of the . . . Annual Conference of the Primitive Methodist Church*, 1909, p.158
- 33 *Report of the Temperance Committee to the Conference* [of the Wesleyan Methodist Church], 1895, p.1; *Methodist Temperance Magazine*, New Series, Vol. IX (1895), p.162
- 34 D. B. Clark, *Survey of Anglicans and Methodists in Four Towns*, [London]: Epworth Press, 1965, p.87
- 35 B. S. Turner and M. Hill, 'Methodism and the Pietist Definition of Politics: Historical Development and Contemporary Evidence', *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain*, 8, edited by M. Hill, London: SCM Press, 1975, p.168
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- 37 *Report of the Christian Citizenship Department of the Methodist Church*, 1972, p.6; *Methodist Church Conference Agenda*, 1972, pp.496-7
- 38 The data quoted here come from an unpublished report. The survey is briefly noted in *Through a Glass Darkly*, p.25 and in 'Methodist Attitudes to Alcohol', pp.50-1
- 39 *UK Christian Handbook: Religious Trends*, No. 1 (1998/99), p.5.4. Other recent British-based research on the effect of religion on attitudes to and usage of alcohol amongst adults includes: K. Mullen, M. Blaxter and S. Dyer, 'Religion and Attitudes Towards Alcohol Use in the Western Isles', *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*, Vol. 18 (1986), pp. 51-72; L. J. Francis, 'Attitude Towards Alcohol, Church Attendance and Denominational Identity', *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*, Vol. 31 (1992), pp. 45-50; and L. J. Francis, 'Denominational Identity, Church Attendance and Drinking Behaviour among Adults in England', *Journal of Alcohol and Drug Education*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (Spring 1994), pp.27-33
- 40 The Methodist data derive from an unpublished analysis by Francis and Philip Richter, generously made available to the author by Francis. The other denominational data derive from a published analysis of the entire database at an earlier stage of its development, when it only comprised 13,000 cases: L. J. Francis

and W. K. Kay, *Teenage Religion and Values*, Leominster: Gracewing, 1995, pp.118-20

- 41 P. Batstone, *Stand Up – and Be Counted! Some Methodist Attitudes to Alcohol: A Report on an Enquiry Conducted into the Strength of Total Abstinence in the Methodist Church Today*, Dunkeswell: Cottage Books Publications, 1999. Summarised in *Methodist Recorder*, 9 September 1999, p.3
- 42 Office for National Statistics Social Survey Division, *Drinking: Adults' Behaviour and Knowledge*, London: Stationery Office, 1997, pp. 4-5, 10; Office for National Statistics Social Survey Division, *Results from the 1996 General Household Survey*, London: Stationery Office, 1998, p.186; Joint Health Surveys Unit, *Health Survey for England '96*, London: Stationery Office, 1998, Vol. 1, p.322