

A long-exposure photograph of a waterfall, creating a soft, ethereal effect. The water flows over several tiers of rocks, with a prominent log lying horizontally across the lower part of the frame. The overall color palette is dominated by blues and purples, suggesting a twilight or dawn setting. The text is overlaid on the image in a golden-yellow color.

APOSTOLIC
DOCTRINE,
PRACTICE
and
EXPERIENCE

Rev J. Allan Ellershaw

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Contents

Chapter	Page
Introduction	4
1 The importance of Apostolic doctrine, practice and experience	5
2 We should promote Apostolic doctrine	12
3 We should adopt Apostolic practice	16
4 We should embrace Apostolic experience	24
5 What changes do we need to make?	30

Introduction

The material contained in this booklet is drawn from three sources:-

In May 2005 when I gave my Annual Report to the leaders of the Free Methodist Church in the United Kingdom, I attempted to answer two questions. First, what have we in the Free Methodist Church to offer the wider Christian Church, and second, what do we need to do to fulfil our calling to see spiritual transformation in our land? When I shared my report in the churches one member suggested that alongside a rediscovery of Apostolic practice we also need to embrace Apostolic experience.

In August 2005 I had the privilege of attending the World Methodist Conference European Leadership Summit on Evangelism held at Cliff College in Derbyshire. At that event I was given the opportunity to lead a seminar on “Reclaiming our Wesleyan Heritage”. To reclaim our heritage I suggested that we should do what John Wesley did; namely promote apostolic doctrine, adopt apostolic practice and embrace apostolic experience.

In September 2005 I was invited to share my thoughts on apostolic doctrine, practice and experience with the Bishops and Superintendents of the Free Methodist Church of North America at their annual gathering in Indianapolis, Indiana, USA. At that event it was suggested that I should expand the talk and produce a booklet as a resource for the leaders of the Free Methodist Church of North America.

My conviction is that to be true to the calling that God originally gave to the people called Methodist we need to draw on the New Testament principles that inspired our spiritual ancestors to promote New Testament doctrine, adopt New Testament practice and embrace New Testament experience. This booklet will attempt to explain the importance and significance of these for the 21st century Church.

The importance of Apostolic doctrine, practice and experience

My girlfriend Sue and I began attending a Free Methodist Church in 1971 soon after the movement was established in England. Following our marriage in November 1973 we joined the congregation at Crown Lane on the outskirts of Preston in Lancashire. After three years at Bible College in Birmingham we returned to Preston where I served as Assistant Minister with the Rev J Barrie Walton, one of the founding pastors of the work in England. So began our involvement with the Free Methodist Church, which after 18 years in pastoral ministry led to my appointment in 1995 as National Superintendent for the Free Methodist Church in the United Kingdom.

During the years I have served, both as a congregational minister and as the National Superintendent, I have developed a growing conviction that God has raised up the Free Methodist Church in the United Kingdom “for such a time as this”. I believe that the Free Methodist Church has a unique part to play as God prepares for the return of King Jesus.

So what is special about the Free Methodist Church? What do we have to offer? These are the questions I addressed in my annual report to our Conference in May 2005. I acknowledge that the Free Methodist Church is one among many denominations and streams of churches that God is using, but I believe there are at least three distinct contributions that we can offer to the wider Christian Church.

We Have A Spiritual Heritage From Which Others Can Draw

The Free Methodist Church is not the only new church stream that came into being in the United Kingdom in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In fact many effective groups trace their origins back to those days when the Holy Spirit moved in a fresh way through the churches. Those who established the Free Methodist Church in England however, decided not to plant a brand new church but to link up with the Free Methodist Church of North America. The Free Methodist Church began because in the late 1850s B T Roberts, an attorney and Methodist minister, became very concerned about holiness lifestyle issues, and social issues like opposition to slavery and freedom from “pew-rent”. Roberts called American Methodists back to the

original Wesleyan principles and passion found in John Wesley. So concerned was he about the worldliness he found in the church, that he publicised an article entitled “New School Methodism”, in which he claimed:

...the old school Methodists rely for the spread of the Gospel upon the agency of the Holy Spirit and the purity of the Church. The New School Methodists appear to depend upon the patronage of the worldly, the favour of the proud and aspiring and various artifices of world policy.

B T Roberts concluded his article by referring to Jeremiah 6:16 and calling the church back to the old paths. Sadly, he was expelled from the Methodist church (although the Methodists recognised their error 17 years after his death, and restored his ministerial papers) and so, with others of like mind, began the Free Methodist Church in 1860, with Roberts acting as its first Bishop.

B T Roberts wanted to rediscover the old paths, or to put it in contemporary language “to reopen Wesleyan wells”. So what are the old paths? And what are Wesleyan wells?

It has been suggested by some that the Wesleyan revival produced the nearest thing to New Testament Christianity ever seen in the United Kingdom. Dennis Kinlaw, in his book ‘We Live as Christ’ quotes a close friend as saying:

I am enamoured with the Wesleyan revival. I am a child of George Whitefield and not the Wesleys, yet I have to admit that the Methodist movement came closer to producing a Christian ethos than any other movement in the history of the Church. I only wish that Wesleyans today had more of what Wesley had.

I remember the day I stood at the side of John Wesley’s grave in City Road, London, and read the inscription. It was as though John Wesley’s contemporaries had written in stone what they thought was the key to John Wesley’s effectiveness:

This place made sacred by the mortal remains of the venerable apostolic Wesley. This great light arose by the singular providence of God to enlighten these nations and to revive, enforce and defend the pure apostolic doctrines and practices of the primitive church.

It is clear that John Wesley's contemporaries saw him as an apostolic leader who rediscovered first century apostolic Christianity.

Our spiritual heritage therefore, can be traced back through a renewal in America in the 19th century to a spiritual awakening in England in the 18th century, but is based on the Pentecost outpouring in Jerusalem in the first century, for that is the source from which the Wesleys drew. This must be our source also.

We Have A Family Network To Which Others Can Belong

From the beginning of its existence the Christian Church grew as a family network. The connecting links between the work in Jerusalem, Antioch, Corinth and Ephesus were relational rather than structural or organisational.

In the late 20th century there was a tendency for new congregations and new streams of churches to "go it alone" and function independently because they felt let down by established denominations. At the beginning of the 21st century I believe God has been reminding His Church of the importance of belonging, accountability and spiritual covering. The ties that bind churches together today however, need to be based on relationships which are characterised by grace and truth rather than on administrative structures.

Just as God calls individual Christians to belong to a congregation of believers, so I believe He expects local churches to belong to a family network which can give them support and hold them accountable. I believe the Wesleyan movement of the 18th century can shed light on how to function as a family network of congregations, and how to ensure that each believer finds a place to serve and grow in grace.

It seems in the last few years that God has asked the Free Methodist Church in the United Kingdom not only to plant new congregations but to affiliate existing congregations who share our vision, values and calling. We also believe that to be true to our original calling we need to serve the whole Church of Jesus Christ irrespective of denomination or stream, because we, like John Wesley, want to see reformation and renewal in the whole Church of Jesus Christ, not just in our movement. At the time of writing this booklet the Free Methodist Church is ministering in over 70 nations worldwide, and has links with other churches through the "Evangelical Alliance" and the World Methodist Conference.

We Have An Unfulfilled Calling With Which Others Can Help

John Wesley believed God raised up the preachers called Methodist 'to reform the nation and in particular the Church; to spread Scriptural holiness over the land'. This vision was fulfilled in part during his lifetime, as can be seen from the following extracts taken from Howard Snyder's book 'The Radical Wesley':

From the time he began 'Field Preaching' in 1739 until his death 52 years later, he travelled some 225,000 miles and preached more than 40,000 times, sometimes to crowds of more than 20,000. At his death, he left behind 72,000 Methodists in Great Britain and Ireland and a fledgling Methodist denomination in America with some 57,000 members. (page 3)

After 30 years, in 1768, Methodism had 40 circuits and 27,341 members. In another decade, 99 circuits and 66,373 members. By 1798, seven years after Wesley's death, the totals jumped to 149 circuits and 101,712 members. By the turn of the century, about one in every thirty adult Englishmen were Methodists. (page 54)

Few can doubt that we need to see another move of God's Spirit across the land that will transform lives, societies and churches. As I studied the life, teachings and methods used by those who experienced spiritual awakening in the 18th century, I began to wonder if the principles they discovered could help us today.

In 1786 when John Wesley was 83 years old he shared his greatest fear for the people called Methodist.

I do not fear that the people called Methodist shall ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. I only fear that they shall exist as a dead sect having the form of religion, but not the power thereof, and that undoubtedly will be the case unless they hold fast to the doctrine, discipline and spirit with which they first set out.

As we saw earlier John Wesley's contemporaries believed him to be an "apostolic figure", who in his day and generation sought to rediscover apostolic doctrine and practice. Part of John Wesley's gift and genius was that he structured the church, with the system of society membership, of "classes" for mutual accountability, and pastoral care as well as outreach. Before his death in 1791 he named one hundred of his preachers as the "legal hundred" and gave the Methodist Conference authority

over the movement. Gradually Methodism became a separate “denomination”, with its structures of committees, General Conference, etc.

But two things happened:

- 1 The form was retained but Methodists (as witnessed by BT Roberts) lost sight of Wesley’s radical commitment to social issues like anti-slavery, to holiness lifestyle issues, and to outreach and a call to repentance and seeking earnestly after God.
- 2 The form was retained but it was no longer seen primarily as a channel through which the Holy Spirit could move mightily to guide, innovate, challenge, and forward Kingdom values.

Wesley was right to set up structure, but where it becomes an end in itself, where it is a substitute for the power and action of the Spirit instead of a channel through which this flows, or where it simply gets in the way, it has become a form of idolatry. Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Church in America and author of “The Purpose Drive Life”, complains:

We have imposed an American form of government on the church and as a result most churches are as bogged down in bureaucracy as is our Government. It takes forever to get anything done.

The Apostolic church was quick to note the direction the Spirit was moving, and to endorse, authorise, and further that movement. Church structure was a means to this, not a hindrance to it.

The Methodist movement that soon after John Wesley’s death lost sight of his priorities and Kingdom passions, has, sadly, in more recent years begun to doubt the reliability of apostolic New Testament truth itself. The need to restore apostolic doctrine, practice and experience is therefore plain for all to see. The challenge for the “people called Methodist” today, therefore, is not to try to copy John Wesley’s methods and structures but to go to the source from which he drew, and to be a people that proclaim New Testament (apostolic) doctrine, adopt New Testament (apostolic) practices, and exhibit New Testament (apostolic) experiences.

You will see from the above that I have used the terms apostolic and New Testament interchangeably:

By apostolic doctrine I mean the doctrines taught by the apostles in the New Testament. By apostolic practice I mean the practices adopted by the apostles in the New Testament. By apostolic experiences I mean the experiences the apostles had as recorded in the New Testament.

John Wesley's lifelong desire was to call the Church in England back to primitive Christianity. If we are to inherit his legacy and fulfil the calling God gave him we must return to first principles. However it would be wrong to assume that this will remove all our problems. The New Testament church had more than its fair share of problems caused by inconsistent members. One difference between then and now however, is that the apostles were willing to confront issues and resolve problems whereas some churches today seem willing to tolerate sin in their aim to be inclusive and politically correct.

We should promote Apostolic doctrine

Those who responded to Simon Peter's invitation on the day of Pentecost to repent, be baptised and receive the Holy Spirit, were added to the Church and devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching (Acts 2:42).

The apostles had been with Jesus during His ministry from the time of His baptism in the River Jordan until the time of His death, resurrection and ascension (Acts 1:21-22). They saw the many convincing proofs that Jesus gave that He was alive and heard His post-resurrection teaching on the Kingdom of God (Acts 1:3). The features of apostolic doctrine can be summarised in four statements:

1 The apostles' doctrine did not arise from their own ideas

The teaching of the apostles was not something they had devised, nor was it their opinions on current social trends or secular wisdom dressed up in religious language. Sadly, much that passes for Christian teaching in the 21st century is secular thinking expressed in Biblical terms.

1 The apostles' doctrine was received from the risen Jesus.

They had heard the public and private teachings of Jesus during His earthly ministry and on various occasions they had asked Him to explain what He meant, but even then they had not really understood. They began to understand after the resurrection, when on the road to Emmaus, in the Upper Room and for a period of forty days Jesus Christ explained to them the truth about Himself and the cross in all the Scriptures (Luke 24:25-27, 45-49). The apostles' message was 'received from the Lord' (1 Cor 11:23).

1 The apostles' doctrine was revealed by the Holy Spirit.

Although Jesus took time during His last week in Jerusalem before His crucifixion to teach His disciples about the things to come, He realised that they were not able to understand or remember all He taught. He promised them that He would send the Holy Spirit to teach them all things and remind them of everything He had said to them (John 14:26). The Spirit of Truth would guide them into all truth by taking what belonged to Jesus Christ and making it known to them (John 16:13-15).

1 The apostles' doctrine was rooted in Scripture.

This was exactly what the risen Jesus had explained as He opened to their understanding the truth about Himself in the writings of the Law and the Prophets. The apostle Paul also makes it plain that all Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness (2Tim 3:16).

2 The apostles' doctrine focused on who Jesus was and what He had done

When the apostle Paul began to minister in Corinth he said that he determined to limit himself to speaking about Jesus Christ and Him crucified (1Cor 2:2).

The apostles' teaching about Jesus Christ can be summarised as follows:-

- 1 He is the Son who is the radiance of God's glory, the exact representation of His being (Heb 1:3)
- 1 He is the image of the invisible God (Col 1:15)
- 1 He was crucified for our sins and raised for our justification (Rom 4:25)
- 1 He ascended to heaven and gave gifts to His Church (Eph 4:10-13; Acts 2:33)
- 1 He wants His followers to be sanctified and to share His holiness (John 17:15-19, 1Thess 4:3, 5:23, Heb 12:10)
- 1 He ever lives to intercede for us (Heb 7:25)
- 1 He will return to reign and judge the living and the dead (Acts 1:9-11, Acts 17:30-3)

3 The apostles' doctrine emphasised what Jesus had taught them

We have noted how the risen Jesus taught His disciples and helped them to understand the Scriptures. Before Jesus ascended He also commissioned His disciples to go and make disciples who He said should be taught to observe all the things that He had commanded them (Matt 28:18-20).

The commandments Jesus gave can be summarised in three statements:

- 1 To love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength (Matt 22:37; Mk 12:30; Luke 10:27)
- 1 To love our neighbours as ourselves (Matt 22:39; Mk 12:31; Luke 10:27)
- 1 To love one another as Christ loved us (John 13:35).
This new commandment had a new focus (love one another) and a new standard (as I have loved you).

4 The apostles' doctrine called for a four-fold response

The apostles did not just teach the truth, they called for a response and expected the truth to transform lives. Specifically they called those who heard to:

- 1 Repent (Acts 3:19; Acts 17:30)
- 1 Believe (Acts 16:31; Rom 10:9)
- 1 Be baptised (Acts 2:38; Rom 6:4; Col 2:12)
- 1 Receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38; Acts 8:15; Acts 19:2-5)

If we want to present the apostles' doctrine today we must study and teach the New Testament. It can be helpful to look at successful churches for our models and methods of operation, but we must never mistake any useful structures or programmes as cure-alls. Thus, for example, there are useful New Testament principles involved in the late 20th century "cell church" movement, and indeed some of these were manifested in John Wesley's system of "classes", but "cell church" is not any kind of universal panacea, nor does it ensure "success". We are not too proud to learn from fellow Christians, but any approaches taken should arise from the pulsating life of the Holy Spirit within the Church, leading us to such things through the understanding of the New Testament principles. We need to focus on this, and not any delusion that by simply adopting someone else's successful "programme" our problems will be solved.

Is it possible for those who are not first century apostles to promote apostolic doctrine? Some suggest that as the apostles' teaching was foundational it was laid

once in the first century and therefore apostles are no longer needed today (Eph 2:20). The twelve apostles were unique in that they knew the Man called Jesus and were eye-witnesses of His resurrection, yet I believe that every generation needs the ministry of apostolic teaching. Teaching that gives personal testimony to the reality of knowing the risen Jesus and ensuring that the Church in each generation is built on the foundations that Jesus Christ laid once, and for all. This will ensure that believers grow in a life of holiness and service to Jesus Christ and others.

The apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesians made it plain that the gifts the ascended Christ gave to His Church include apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor and teacher (Eph 4:11). The task of these five-fold ministries then and now is to equip God's people for works of service until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God.....attaining to the full measure of the fullness of Christ. Clearly "Christ likeness" is a work in progress and the five-fold gifts are still needed today.

We should adopt Apostolic practice

A great deal has been written in recent years about the need for visionary and apostolic leadership in the Christian church. At times however I have felt we have failed to explain how an apostolic leader should function. My reading of the New Testament leads me to conclude that some first century apostles like the apostles Peter and Paul were involved in church planting and missionary outreach whereas others like James and John seem to be more involved in the oversight of existing congregations. So both functions can be called apostolic. The most important question however, is not what the apostolic role looked like, but what apostolic practice looked like in the first century church. The early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles lead me to make the following seven statements about apostolic practice.

1 We adopt apostolic practice when we expect God the Holy Spirit to lead the Church.

The risen Jesus predicted that the Holy Spirit would lead the disciples and enable them to be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:4,8) He would set the agenda for the Church. The apostles did not begin the work in Samaria or Antioch. They heard about these developments after they had happened and later had to discern what was going on.

That the apostles expected the Holy Spirit to lead the Church can be seen very clearly in the incident recorded in Acts 16:6, 7,10. We are told that the Holy Spirit kept them from preaching in Asia and would not allow them to enter Bithynia. We know from later events that Paul did preach in Asia and Peter wrote to believers in Bithynia. Therefore we conclude that God sometimes says “no” because it is not the right time, and on other occasions because we are not the right person. If we are to adopt apostolic practice we must allow God to lead His Church by asking and listening for His direction. Sometimes we may find that God’s leading is neither what seems “obvious” nor our own natural inclination. Sometimes it may cut right across any preconceived “plans” or “strategies” we have formulated.

John Wesley made it clear that the people called Methodist did not begin with a strategy or a plan. In his booklet ‘A Plain Account of the People Called Methodist’ written in 1786, he wrote

The Methodists had not the least expectation at first, of anything like what has since followed, so that they had no previous design or plan at all, but everything arose just as the occasion offered. They saw or felt some impending or pressing evil, or some good end necessary to be pursued. And many times they fell unawares, on the very thing which secured the good or removed the evil.

2 We adopt apostolic practice when we offer to others what God the Holy Spirit has given to us.

Why was the preaching of the apostle Peter on the day of Pentecost so effective? Why did three thousand people repent, believe, get baptised, receive the Holy Spirit and join the Church? In part I believe it was because the crowd had already seen something remarkable about the disciples and wanted to know what was going on. While it is true that some made fun and others were perplexed, most were amazed for they heard the disciples declaring the works of God in languages they could understand (Acts 2:12). God was at work in His Church and Peter's task was not to create interest but to explain what God was doing and call for a response.

Peter spoke out of the fullness God had given him and soon after, while entering the Temple at the time of prayer, he was able to offer to a crippled man healing in the name of Jesus. 'What I have I give you' he said 'In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk'. (Acts 3:6.) All that Peter had to offer had first been given to him.

Bishop Payne in his book 'Reclaiming the Great Commission' claims that:

First century pagans became Christians because they experienced Christian community and encountered the power of God.

He concludes that the New Testament Church was 'a community of miraculous expectation.' For first century Christians however, offering to others what God had given to them also involved sharing possessions and meeting practical needs (Acts 2:45, and 4:32-37). If we are to adopt apostolic practices we must be willing to share with others the material and spiritual blessings God has given to us.

3 We adopt apostolic practice when we face up to new challenges enabled by the Holy Spirit.

Following the healing of the crippled man Peter and John were arrested. The authorities were disturbed that the disciples were still speaking about Jesus and offering healing in His name. Peter and John refused to stop speaking about Jesus because they believed that salvation is found in no-one else (Acts 4:12). After threatening them and warning them not to speak any more about Jesus Peter and John were released. On their release Peter and John reported to the Church what they had been told. Instead of bowing to opposition, the Church began to pray that God would consider these threats and enable them to speak with greater boldness. After they had prayed the place was shaken and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly (Acts 4:31).

The Christian Church today often seems ready to adjust its message to attempt to reduce opposition. Mistakenly some people think that this is what it means by being 'seeker-sensitive'. Those who first coined the term 'seeker-sensitive' did not advocate changing the message. The apostles did not try to remove opposition. Instead they prayed for greater boldness to withstand opposition. If we are to adopt apostolic practices we must be willing to encounter opposition and be strengthened by God's Spirit.

4 We adopt apostolic practice when we confront everyone and everything which grieves the Holy Spirit.

Why was it that Peter felt compelled to confront Ananias and Sapphira when they kept back part of the proceeds from the sale of their property? (Acts 5:1-11). It is clear that Peter's primary concern was not the money but that Ananias and Sapphira had agreed to lie to the Holy Spirit and test the Spirit of the Lord. Peter knew that if hypocrisy and dishonesty entered the Church the Holy Spirit would leave.

If we want to function as a New Testament Church we must be more concerned about how comfortable the Holy Spirit is in the church, and less concerned about what people feel and think. Too often out of concern for the opinions or sensitivities of immature or carnal Christians we have tolerated attitudes and

actions that have grieved the Holy Spirit (Eph 4:30). We must be more sensitive to God and less concerned about pleasing people. This is not to say that we should confront new believers about every tiny inconsistency. We should give the Holy Spirit time and space to bring about a transformation. We must accept and love people before we can confront them effectively.

There was a time when Peter himself was confronted publicly by the apostle Paul because Paul thought Peter had acted hypocritically (Gal 2:11-14). It was not that the early apostles were looking for opportunities to score points or find fault but they were concerned that to be a Church that was led by the Holy Spirit it was vital that they lived in ways that pleased Him.

Years later John Wesley believed it right to call all members of the first Methodist Societies to consistent Christian living. John Wesley is well-known for his practice of interviewing members quarterly and only issuing membership tickets to those whose lifestyle supported their claim to be followers of Jesus Christ. He had compassion however for those who failed and knew they needed help. For these he established a Saturday evening support group and noted that those who attended were restored and began to “outrun their brethren”.

If we are serious about adopting apostolic practice we need to be serious about self discipline and church discipline.

5 We adopt apostolic practice when we appoint Spirit-filled people to serve the Church.

As the church in Jerusalem grew it was claimed that Greek widows did not receive the same level of support as Jewish widows. The apostles took this situation seriously but decided that they could not oversee the distribution of food themselves as this would take them away from their calling to prayer and ministry of the Word. The apostles chose to involve the congregation in the selection of seven to serve tables. The apostles made it clear that the qualifications for service in the church were to select those who were ‘full of the Spirit and wisdom’. The congregation selected the seven who had these qualities and the apostles commissioned them and turned the responsibility over to them (Acts 6:1-7).

The Christian Church in the 21st century would be much more effective if, when looking for office-holders and leaders, we selected those whose lives showed they are ‘full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom’. It can be too easy, whatever method of selection there is for leaders, to focus on correct application of procedure, rather than on making sure that those appointed are genuinely Spirit-filled. In Acts 6 the appointment was for the practical ministry of “waiting on tables” – i.e. determining charitable distribution. Yet the apostles, whilst leaving the actual selection to the congregation, directed them for these practical tasks to appoint Spirit-filled people. Whatever our procedures, this should be our primary focus. I particularly like the way in Acts 6 that leaders and members worked together to select Spirit-filled workers.

6 We adopt apostolic practice when we evaluate a congregation’s effectiveness by considering the evidence of the Holy Spirit’s presence.

It is not uncommon in these days when so many churches are plateau-ed or declining, to hear of district overseers conducting church evaluations. But how do you evaluate the health of a congregation? Do you conduct an evaluation based on attendance, numbers and income? The first evaluations of congregations were conducted by the apostles and from these we can gain some helpful insights.

When the apostle Peter returned to Jerusalem to explain to his fellow apostles why he had participated in the establishment of a new Christian Church in the home of a Roman soldier at Caesarea, he was expecting opposition. Peter himself had only been convinced to go because God told him to go, and he could see no reason to withhold baptism from those Gentile believers when it was clear that ‘they had received the Holy Spirit just as we have’ (Acts 10:47). But would his fellow apostles in Jerusalem see things the same way? Peter ought not to have been concerned, because when they heard how God had led Peter and how the Holy Spirit had come upon the Gentiles, they had ‘no further objections’ and praised God (Acts 11:15-18). It is clear that the apostles were prepared to consider new developments that took them outside their own comfort zone if they could be sure that God had initiated these developments.

When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that a new congregation had been established in Antioch they sent Barnabas to see what was going on. What was

Barnabas to look for as evidence of a healthy church? We read that when he saw the evidence of the grace of God he encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts (Acts 11:23).

It is clear that the apostles evaluated churches by asking such questions as “Is God at work in this place?” and “Is the grace of God encountered in this place?” The question was not “how big”, “how rich”, but “is this church in step with Jesus?” This is the same question the apostle John was prompted to raise as he sought to evaluate the health of the churches in Asia in Revelation chapters 2 and 3. Did the churches reflect the character of the risen Jesus, and were they listening to the voice of the Holy Spirit?

7 We adopt an apostolic practice when we settle disputes in the church by doing what pleases the Holy Spirit.

The first century Church experienced potential division between Jewish and Gentile wings of the Church. The big question was “Did Gentile believers need to observe all the dietary and ceremonial parts of the Jewish Law?” This issue threatened to split the Church and so it was decided that delegates from the churches should go to Jerusalem to consult with the apostles and elders. It is clear from the record of the proceedings in Acts 15 that there was “much discussion”. Different points of view were shared, testimonies were given, Scriptures were consulted before the decision was reached. The decision which was conveyed in a letter to the churches included the statement that the decision ‘seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us’ (Acts 15: 28).

The aim of the decision was not to play politics or try to secure peace at any price, but to make a decision that pleased the Holy Spirit. The important question was “What is God doing and how can we live in harmony with His promptings and character?”

Too often today in church conferences the decisions reached are contrary to the Spirit of Jesus and show little desire to please God. It will be noted from the above that in each situation the apostles faced they were led by the Spirit. Those who want to adopt apostolic practice and be led by the Spirit often find they have to move out of their natural comfort zone. Peter found himself preaching in the

home of a Roman soldier. Paul, the one-time persecutor of the Church found himself ministering as an apostle to the Gentiles. John Wesley, the dignified Anglican minister, found himself preaching in the open air and wrote:

In the evening of Saturday 31st March I reached Bristol, and met Mr Whitefield there. I could scarcely reconcile myself at first to this strange way of preaching in the fields, of which he set me an example on Sunday; having been all my life (till very lately) so tenacious of every point relating to decency and order, that I should have thought the saving of souls almost a sin if it had not been done in a church.

In the early days John Wesley's open air preaching was at times disturbed by manifestations of people falling to the ground in anguish. George Whitefield thought such scenes should be discouraged as they would distract people's attention from the message and encourage them to look for visions and manifestations. Wesley believed that while some displays were false many were the result of the Spirit of God working in people's lives. To Whitefield's dismay these things also began to happen when he preached!

What steps can we take to develop apostolic practice in the Free Methodist Church?

1 We need to develop a new paradigm.

We need to develop a fresh way of looking at the world and the Church. Scripture tells us that God has promised to lead His people and establish His Kingdom. We are also told that the Son of God could do nothing but what He saw the Father doing (John 5:19). We cannot therefore expect to produce anything of worth unless our endeavours are initiated by the Father, prompted by the Son and promoted by the Holy Spirit. To adopt apostolic practices we must in every situation seek to be led by the Holy Spirit. This means we must avoid resisting, grieving or quenching the Holy Spirit, and seek to be filled with the Holy Spirit as we walk in the Spirit and produce the fruit of the Spirit (see Acts 7:51, Eph 4:30, 1Thess 5:19, Eph 5:18, Gal 5:16, Gal 5:22-23).

1 We need to establish new priorities.

Spiritual leaders who want to adopt apostolic practices need to establish apostolic priorities. Our priorities must be prayer and ministry of the Word (Acts 6:4). Then for us, like the early Church, new ministries will arise out of times of waiting upon God (see Acts 13:1-3).

1 We need to operate with new patterns.

It is clear that the apostles functioned in teams. Their ministry was not just what “I” did, but what “we” do. When the apostle Peter went to Cornelius’ household he took six people with him who were later able to verify at Jerusalem what they had seen (Acts 11:12). We must get away from the one-man ministry model of one bishop, one superintendent, or one pastor. For my own part I usually travel in the United Kingdom with my wife Sue and have begun to ask God to raise up those who will serve as advisers and assistants as we look to Him to raise up teams.

We should embrace Apostolic experience

Although John Wesley's epitaph only mentions apostolic doctrine and practice, I believe it would be possible for the spiritual descendants of John Wesley to promote apostolic doctrine and adopt apostolic practice but fail to see a spiritual awakening. It is clear that both the first century apostles and John Wesley ministered out of a personal experience of knowing God's transforming grace. They had a personal experience to which they gave testimony. I am convinced that the thing that made John Wesley effective was not just the doctrines he preached or the methods he used, but the experience of God to which he bore witness.

John Wesley's effectiveness as a Christian minister was transformed on the day he was able to testify 'I felt my heart strangely warmed and an assurance was given me.....' It was John Wesley's emphasis on experiencing God's life-changing presence and that "God's Spirit witnessed with his spirit" that led him to be barred from preaching in churches and being called "an enthusiast". It was this message however, that the crowd were desperate to hear. They wanted to know a God who could supernaturally transform their lives and give them the assurance of sins forgiven.

John Wesley's effectiveness as an open air preacher followed what some would see as his personal Pentecost. In the early hours of 1st January 1739 he was praying with a group of believers (including his brother Charles and George Whitefield), when the power of God came mightily upon them:

About three in the morning, as we were continuing constant in prayer, the power of God came mightily upon us, inasmuch that many cried out for exceeding joy and many fell to the ground. As soon as we were recovered a little from the awe and amazement of the presence of His Majesty, we broke out with one voice "We praise Thee, O God, we acknowledge Thee to be the Lord." ("Radical Wesley" by Howard Snyder, page 30)

We in the 21st century live at a time when many people have lost patience with the established Church, but according to the following statistics are open to experience the supernatural, life-transforming power of God.

In 1984, 48% of the population in the United Kingdom reported having religious or spiritual experiences. By the year 2000 this number had increased to 76% of the population. This may reflect a greater desire to experience God, or a greater openness to talk about spiritual experiences, or both.

Some business gurus in America have noted that although America is still a consumer society, there is a subtle shift away from being consumers of things (material possessions) towards being consumers of experiences. If this is the case it is essential that the 21st century Church not only promotes apostolic doctrine and adopts apostolic practice, but embraces and presents apostolic experience.

In the apostle John's first epistle chapter 1 v 1-3, he shares how he and his fellow apostles managed to communicate truth about the eternal God who 'was from the beginning' to those who were only able to use their natural senses. The apostles did this by sharing their personal testimony, of how, through knowing Jesus Christ, they had heard, seen and touched the One who was from the beginning.

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.

This passage of Scripture suggests that we can know God as we hear His voice, perceive His hand at work in our lives and then experience His life-transforming touch. Or, to put it another way, we need to speak of a God who for us, has become audible, visible and tangible. Until we know God through knowing Jesus there is no basis for fellowship with God or with one another.

It is my conviction that if we are to experience God as the first century apostles did, we need to take the steps the first apostles took as they grew in their relationship with Jesus Christ. But what were those steps?

1 The apostles began to live in the company of Jesus.

Each of the twelve apostles could look back to a time when they had heard the call of Jesus Christ and had left all to follow Him. From that day forward they allowed Him to set the direction and agenda of their lives. As the days went by they found the experience of living in the company of Jesus truly amazing. They were amazed at His teaching (Mark 1:22), at His ability to forgive sins (Mark 2:12) and to change lives (Mark 1:27). When they faced storms and adversity they were amazed that even the winds and the waves obeyed Him (Mark 4:41). They came to the conclusion that Jesus did everything well (Mark 7:37) and that He was ‘the promised Messiah’ (Mark 8:29).

However, although they knew who Jesus was, they did not understand His ways and had no idea that He would die on a cross (Mark 8:32), or that He called them to deny themselves and take up their cross and follow Him (Mark 8:34). Their thoughts were on the crown and throne in Jerusalem, and on who would be the greatest (Mark 8:34). James and John wanted Jesus to do for them whatever they asked. They asked to sit one on the right and the other on the left in the Kingdom (Mark 10:32-33). It is clear that the disciples thought that they were heading to Jerusalem and to a crown, whereas Jesus knew He was heading to a cross. This misunderstanding of what it meant to follow Jesus would cause the apostle Peter on one dark night to question if he really knew Jesus (Matt 26:72-74). The sad fact is that most 21st century Christians have not got beyond the desire to live in the company of Jesus. We want Him to amaze us and do all that we ask but we are distressed when He allows us to experience the darkness of a Gethsemane or the weight of a cross.

2 The apostles began to walk in the footsteps of Jesus.

The cross for the first apostles was not only the place where Jesus Christ died, but it was also the place where their hopes died. They had hoped that He would be the One to save Israel (Luke 24:21). They did not say it in so many words, but it is also clear that they hoped that He would be the One to transform their circumstances and raise them to be rulers in the Kingdom He was about to establish. At the cross their hopes of advancement died and they were totally confused until, on the road to Emmaus and in the Upper Room and for a period of forty days between His resurrection and ascension, Jesus explained to them the truth about Himself in all the Scriptures. Then they began to understand that in the Kingdom of God death to self comes before resurrection life, and a cross comes before a crown. Only then did they realise that Jesus Christ had called them not only to live in His company but to walk in His footsteps. Or as the apostle Paul explained it in his own testimony 'I have been crucified with Christ, yet it is not I who live, but Christ who lives in me.' (Gal 2:20). From that day forward, the apostle Paul's consuming passion was to know Jesus Christ and to experience the power of His risen life. He longed to lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus had laid hold of him (Phil 3:10-12).

3 The apostles began to move in the Spirit of Jesus.

Although the apostles had forty days of teaching when the risen Jesus explained the truth about Himself in all the Scriptures, they were still told to wait in Jerusalem until they were clothed with power from on high. Only then would they be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). They had been informed but they needed to be enthused. It was not enough to know Jesus' teaching and understand His ways; they needed to experience His life-changing Spirit.

So what did Pentecost do for the early apostles? The apostles had moved in the miraculous before Pentecost (Mark 7:7, Luke 10:17-20). They had experienced the moving of the Spirit of God among them, but at Pentecost they experienced the moving of God's Spirit within them (John 14:17). So what was the distinctive experience of Pentecost? It is clear that being saturated and filled with the Holy Spirit released their tongues in praise to God (Acts 2:4,11). Looking back on the

event however, at the Council of Jerusalem, the apostle Peter claimed that the members of Cornelius' household had received the Holy Spirit just as the apostles did on the day of Pentecost.

God, who knows the heart, showed He accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as He did to us. He made no distinction between us and them for He purified their hearts by faith. (Acts 15:8-9)

It is therefore clear that to move in the Spirit of Jesus is to experience purity as well as power. Or, as the apostle Paul expressed it in his letter to the Galatians, we are called to live by the Spirit, and as we do, we will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature (Gal 5:16).

4 The apostles exhibited the mind of Jesus.

When the apostles lived in the company of Jesus they had looked for status, but after Pentecost they exhibited a very different mindset as they rejoiced because they had been counted worthy to suffer disgrace for His name (Acts 5:41).

So convinced were they about the uniqueness of Jesus that when they were told by the authorities not to speak any more about Jesus they declared that 'salvation is found in no-one else for there is no other name under heaven given to men, by which we must be saved' (Acts 4:12). When the Jewish elders and teachers of the Law saw the courage of Peter and John and realised that they were unschooled, ordinary men they were astonished and realised that these men had been with Jesus (Acts 4:13).

It is interesting to note that it was not the healing of a crippled man that astonished the elders and teachers but the courage of Peter and John and their willingness to risk their lives. It was their selflessness that caused others to remember that these men had been with Jesus. They no longer functioned out of selfish ambition but in humility considered others better than themselves. Their attitude was the same as that of Christ Jesus (Phil 2:1-10). The apostle Paul also makes it clear in 1 Cor 2:9-16 that Christians have the mind of Christ and that the Holy Spirit reveals the mind of Christ to us.

Some will say that we are wrong to use the experience of first century apostles as our pattern because they lived before Pentecost whereas we live after Pentecost and can receive at our conversion all that Jesus Christ has to offer.

I am not suggesting that it must take us weeks, months or years to take the steps the disciples took. I am suggesting that our experience of Jesus Christ should lead us beyond a desire to live in the company of Jesus, to a willingness to walk in the footsteps of Jesus, move in the Spirit of Jesus and exhibit the mind of Jesus. Unless this has happened we have not progressed very far in our knowledge of Jesus, and therefore have very little to offer a world that is hungry to encounter God's life-changing presence as they encounter the risen Jesus.

Indeed, unless the Church, which is the Body of Christ, begins to walk in the footsteps of Jesus, move in the Spirit of Jesus and exhibit the mind of Jesus, the world will not be able to know God and will not see Jesus.

What changes do we need to make?

A retired Baptist minister who has joined one of our churches in England encourages those of us who preach to ensure that our messages always include a “so what?” section, which gives some idea of what a practical outworking of the message could look like.

While it is true that we all need to seek God’s direction as to how we respond to the call contained in this booklet I thought I should conclude by sharing some of my thoughts about the response we need to make. I have already made some applications in the previous chapters. In the following paragraphs however, I have attempted to summarise my thoughts.

1 If we are to promote apostolic doctrine we must be a people of the Book.

This means that we should be known as a people who read, study, love and live by the Bible. According to Deuteronomy 17:18-20 God expected the kings of Israel not only to be guided by the Law but to make their own hand-written copy. It seems fair to suggest that by making a copy of the Law God was encouraging the king to have a working knowledge of God’s Word and His ways. Can we expect to be effective if we fail to study God’s Word?

To study the Word of God means to try to understand what it meant to those who read it and to know how to apply its teaching today. To do this we need to use a good Bible translation, a good Bible dictionary, a good Bible handbook and good Bible commentaries.

2 If we are to adopt apostolic practice we must be a people who are led by the Holy Spirit.

To be led by the Holy Spirit we must turn away from any tendency to resist, grieve or quench the work of the Spirit. According to Scripture we resist the Holy Spirit when we assert our own will instead of yielding to God's will (Acts 7:51). We grieve the Holy Spirit when we allow wrong attitudes to affect our relationships with others (Eph 4:29-32). We quench the Holy Spirit by either despising the prophetic ministry i.e. either claiming prophecy is not for today, or by failing to test prophetic words and allowing evil to be accepted as good (1Thess 5:19-22). We test prophecy by considering if its content is Biblical and its fruit is wholesome.

3 If we are to embrace apostolic experience we must be a people who really know Jesus Christ.

Like the apostle Paul before us our consuming passion should be to know Christ and to be found in Him, not having a righteousness of our own that comes from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith (Phil 3:9). For us to experience God's righteousness and avoid self-righteousness we need not only to know Christ personally but to preach the holiness message fearlessly. It is not enough for us to want to live in the company of the earthly Jesus, we must also be willing to walk in the footsteps of the crucified Jesus, to move in the Spirit of the risen Jesus and to demonstrate to a godless world the mind of the eternal Jesus.

I believe God is calling us to return to New Testament apostolic doctrine, practice and experience and in doing so we will be walking in the footsteps of the Wesleys. Dr A Skevington-Wood states that through the ministry of the Wesleys:

...a truly apostolic ministry was re-introduced to the Church of England; holding the apostolic doctrine, fulfilling the apostolic mission and displaying the apostolic spirit.

May God help us to see what the early apostles saw, as we seek to do what the apostles did.

The following questions could be considered by the leaders of your congregation:

1 In what ways are we in this church seeking to present apostolic doctrine?

- 1 How central are Biblical teaching, thinking and values to the life of our church?
- 1 What are we doing to spread the message of scriptural holiness through the land?
- 1 How do we respond to John Wesley's claim that "till you press believers to expect full salvation now, you must not look for any revival" ?

2 In what ways do we adopt apostolic practices?

- 1 Do we see what the Father is doing? (John 5:19)
- 1 Do we really know Jesus Christ and the power of His resurrection? (Phil 3:10)
- 1 Do we hear what the Holy Spirit is saying to this church? (Rev 2 & 3)

3 In what ways are we open to apostolic experiences?

- 1 Is there evidence we resist the Spirit of God by asserting our own will? (Acts 7:51)
- 1 Is there evidence we grieve the Spirit of God by our relationships one with another? (Eph 4:29-32)
- 1 Is there evidence we quench the Spirit of God by our attitude to spiritual gifts? (1Thess 5:19-22)

Superintendent Allan Ellershaw began his ministry as a Free Methodist pastor in 1977 and was appointed to oversee the work of the Free Methodist Church in the United Kingdom in 1995. During the years he has served as Superintendent he has grown in his belief that John Wesley was an apostolic leader and that the 21st century Church also needs apostolic leaders. Leaders who will teach what the first apostles taught, function how the first apostles functioned and experience what the first apostles experienced.

In this booklet he explains how he came to this conclusion and what he understands by the terms Apostolic Doctrine, Apostolic Practice and Apostolic Experience.



Left: Rev. J Barrie Walton
One of the Founding Pastors of the
Free Methodist Church in the United Kingdom

Centre: Rev J Allan Ellershaw, Superintendent of the
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Right: Rev David Harvey
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in the United Kingdom