

A sacramental spirituality for Methodism?

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IT IS NOT ALWAYS EASY FOR US TO SEE OURSELVES as others see us. But the kindly observer who commented, ‘The patron saint of Methodism is St Vitus’, summed up with reasonable accuracy many people’s impressions of the Methodist Church. Methodists, surely, are supremely *busy* people, always rushing around organizing things and setting up committees to do good works. They can generally be relied upon to play their part in running Christian Aid Week, the sponsored walk for the local hospice or the group protesting about homelessness, and they are known, even now, to be activists in trades unions and political parties. The notion, however, that spirituality, let alone sacramental spirituality, might play a significant part in Methodist self-understanding comes as something of a surprise to many people.

It is certainly true that Methodists are often activists, in the best and the worst senses of that term, both tendencies being rooted in their origins. The first Methodist Conference met in London in 1744 and drew up rules for the travelling preachers. These were revised by the Conference of 1753, entitled ‘The Twelve Rules of a Helper’, and directed to be read annually in the pastoral session of the May Synods. The first rule is: ‘Be diligent. Never be unemployed. Never be triflingly employed. Never *while* away time, nor spend any more time at any one place than is strictly necessary.’¹ These words, almost certainly written by John Wesley, or at the least approved by him, have cast a long shadow. Wesley himself exemplified the rule; how else could he have accomplished so much? Dr Johnson is said to have complained about him: ‘John Wesley’s conversation is good but he is never at leisure. He is always obliged to go at a certain hour. This is very disagreeable to a man who loves to fold his legs and have his talk out as I do.’²

Wesley’s spirituality

Despite appearances, Wesley’s ceaseless activity was itself an expression of his spirituality, not a substitute for it. All his life he

retained a sense of wonder and gratitude for what Christ had done for him. His deep desire to share his love of the Saviour with all who needed God led him to cross boundaries and ignore conventions. On one occasion, when accused of attempting to take upon himself the title of the Apostolate of England, he replied that, were he to let any soul drop into the pit whom he might have saved from hell, he was not satisfied that God would accept his plea, 'Lord, he was not of my parish'. This sometimes gave his ministry a somewhat frenetic appearance, but it was, in his terms, an outpouring of gratitude in response to God's grace. This finds clear expression in his translation of a hymn by the Lutheran Paul Gerhardt who lived a century before him:

My Saviour, how shall I proclaim,
How pay the mighty debt I owe?
Let all I have, and all I am,
Ceaseless to all thy glory show.

Too much to thee I cannot give;
Too much I cannot do for thee;
Let all thy love, and all thy grief,
Grav'n on my heart for ever be.³

Those who viewed Wesley's busy ministry from the outside, as it were, would understandably think that his constant concern for evangelism, his heavy involvement in education and his frequently reiterated emphasis on the need to care for the poor and needy were the very foundations of his work. Closer acquaintance brings the recognition that all this busyness had its roots in his gratitude for the grace of God. One of the most difficult – and misunderstood – aspects of Wesley's teaching concerns what is often called 'Christian Perfection', but which he preferred to call 'Perfect Love'. This consists of loving God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength, and when we achieve it we find that 'no wrong temper, none contrary to love, remains in the soul; and that all the thoughts, words and actions are governed by pure love'.⁴ Such a doctrine of sanctification has an implicit sacramental basis to it. It is not based on moral striving, but rather on a sharing in the life of God and the mind of Christ which – if it is possible at all – is only possible as a gift of God's grace. Wesley believed that all Christian believers were called to a life of holiness. His own early experience made him aware that this was not achieved by keeping the rules (though he *did* keep the

rules, which is how he and his colleagues earned the nickname 'Methodists'), but by an unbroken relationship with Christ who is himself the Holy One.⁵ And how is that unbroken relationship to be maintained? Certainly for Wesley himself, sharing in the eucharist was a primary means of grace. In Geoffrey Wainwright's words, 'he found in the *Lord's Supper* a sacramental sign of the fellowship graciously bestowed by the Triune God and the responsive sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving on the part of those who will glorify God and enjoy him for ever'.⁶

Later developments

It is understandable, if regrettable, that in the generations succeeding Wesley, the sacramental roots of the call to holiness in discipleship began to be lost. In practical terms, those who were influenced by the early Methodist movement learned to engage in good works and social concern. Diligence and frugality were commended, along with a concern for the poor. Almost inevitably, those who were diligent and frugal tended to become prosperous, leaders within their communities and activists in all kinds of good causes.⁷ This trend both continued and developed throughout the nineteenth century, when it may be said that Methodism 'was a dynamic influence on the respectable poor, enabling some to become aspiring middle class'.⁸

Small wonder then, that Methodism became associated in the popular mind with a pragmatic and 'busy' Christian lifestyle which seemingly left little room for the reflective, and less room for the sacramental. From a purely practical point of view, there were difficulties in the years following Wesley's death in 1791. Wesley's own practice had been to receive the eucharist every four or five days throughout his ministry, and he often urged the members of the Methodist societies to practise 'constant communion' (to quote the title of one of his sermons). In an age when the eucharist was rather infrequently celebrated in most parish churches, the Methodist movement appeared as a revival in sacramentalism. It is not too much to claim that:

the Lord's Supper played a vital part in the spiritual life of the early Methodist Societies and of the individuals who made up those societies. Many were converted at the Lord's Table, others partook of its blessings in the sick rooms and on their death-beds; all joined

in those crowded celebrations which were seldom seen in the eighteenth century outside Methodism.⁹

In Wesley's lifetime Methodists communicated in the local parish church, or in their own building if he or another ordained preacher was available. After his death the question of whether or not the eucharist could be celebrated at Methodist services became a major focus of controversy. Eventually it was more or less resolved by what is called the Plan of Pacification in 1795 and gradually, over quite a long period of time, Methodists became accustomed to receiving the eucharist from their own ministers rather than in the parish church. But by that time the tradition of frequent communion, and the spirituality that went with it, had been partly lost.

There were other developments in the nineteenth century which reinforced these trends. Some of the smaller Methodist bodies, such as the Primitive Methodists and the Bible Christians, came into being because it was felt that the Methodism of the day was failing to reach the poor and the labouring classes with the Gospel. It seems as if such movements instinctively adopted a simpler style of discipleship. It was not that they were anti-sacramental, but rather that the Bible was usually the direct inspiration for their leaders and thus, in an age when most denominations tended to emphasize *either* the word *or* the sacraments, they tended towards the former. Wesleyan Methodism, always the most sacramentalist of the major Methodist traditions, probably became less sacramentally aware as the nineteenth century progressed. In a pre-ecumenical age, when denominations achieved their sense of self-identity by the ways in which they differed from others, the growing influence of the Oxford Movement within the Church of England had the paradoxical effect of alienating many Wesleyans who were otherwise well-disposed towards the mother church, and of helping Methodism to become a more consciously Nonconformist movement than its historic origins might suggest. Yet this was not to be the end of the story. There is a sense of praise and gratitude in early Methodist spirituality which was never entirely lost, and which has been increasingly discovered in recent times, largely thanks to the ecumenical movement.

The recovery of sacramentality

In 1932 the three main Methodist denominations came together to form the present Methodist Church. There were many factors

involved and a number of theological difficulties to be overcome, one of which was the question of who could preside at the eucharist, although the matter was largely debated in terms of church order rather than because any of the protagonists saw sacramental life as central to the church.¹⁰ Only three years later, in 1935, several leading Methodists, concerned about the neglect of the sacramentality which had been so much a part of Methodism's origins, founded the Methodist Sacramental Fellowship. It had several aims, including, as might be expected, the restoration of the eucharist to a central place in Methodism's worship and devotion. Significantly, the aims also included a commitment to work and pray for Christian unity. It went through a difficult time in the early years, but gradually began to influence the denomination, 'much assisted by the hymns', as Gordon Wakefield rightly points out.¹¹ It is in hymnody, and in the official liturgies of the Methodist Church, that we can most clearly see the recovery of Wesley's sacramental tradition, and it is to these we must turn.

Hymnody has been crucial to Methodist spirituality from the very beginning. John Wesley's younger brother Charles was a fine poet whose gifts were well employed in producing hymns to which Methodists took with enthusiasm. John may have written some hymns himself, though more often he translated material from Lutheran and Moravian sources.¹² F. L. Wiseman considered that the hymns were a kind of *journal intime*, conveying Charles Wesley's mental states and emotional reactions,¹³ and there may well be truth in this judgement. Many of them display deep personal devotion and it sometimes seems as if the line between private prayer and corporate public worship has been ignored. For some they are problematic on that account. J. Ernest Rattenbury, a distinguished Methodist scholar, asks: 'How far can Wesley's hymns be regarded as records of his own personal experience? Were they not written, as hymns usually are, for other people to sing? Did this man speak of himself or of another? Can they even be properly called hymns if they are merely Confessional literature?'¹⁴ Rattenbury's answer to his own question is that Wesley used the eighteenth-century device of personation, whereby the poet imagined himself to be, in turn, a penitent, an adoring believer, a lover of Christ and so on. Yet personation, as used by Jonathan Swift and others, was designed to achieve the detachment without which satire, for example, is impossible.

Detachment is perhaps the last thing which Wesley's hymns seem designed to achieve. Much nearer the truth is the theory of two American literary scholars, Madeleine Forell Marshall and Janet Todd, who seem to have grasped the purpose of the Wesley hymns in a way which has sometimes been denied to more obviously sympathetic interpreters. Contrasting the hymns of Charles Wesley with those of his older contemporary from the Independent tradition, Isaac Watts, they write: 'Watts wanted to teach his people to voice familiar devotional states, while Wesley taught his people to feel religiously'.¹⁵ The importance of this insight can hardly be overstated. Deep spiritual emotion suffuses Wesley's hymns because he felt passionately about the God whose praises he set forth and because he wished, through his hymns, to assist others to that same experience. Methodists not only learned their theology from the corpus of Wesley's hymns, they learned how to enter into it as lived personal experience. And a significant part of that experience was about sacramental grace, focused on the eucharist, but affecting Methodist spirituality as a whole.

The eucharist as source of Christian discipleship

In 1745 the Wesleys published a collection of 166 hymns under the title *Hymns on the Lord's Supper* and it went through at least ten editions in John Wesley's lifetime. That in itself might be judged a testimony to the strength of their sacramentalism. Even more important is that, as Donald Rogers has pointed out, the hymns cover the whole of our Christian discipleship, 'the prevenient grace of God, our initial response, our commitment and the sacrifice of ourselves, our communion with our fellow Christians and our expectation of everlasting life'.¹⁶ Yet they were written for use at the communion liturgy of the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*, which focuses heavily, and rather narrowly, on the passion story. The Wesley hymns apply sacramentalism much more widely, and in this they followed in part the lead given by Daniel Brevint, who became Dean of Lincoln in 1682, and whose sermon, 'The Christian sacrament and sacrifice' prefaced the hymns in the 1745 collection.

The note of gratitude for grace received, with a concomitant offering of ourselves in discipleship and service is clearly struck in the following hymn:

God of all-redeeming grace,
By thy pardoning love compelled,

Up to thee our souls we raise,
Up to thee our bodies yield.

Thou our sacrifice receive,
Acceptable through thy Son,
While to thee alone we live,
While we die to thee alone.

Meet it is, and just, and right,
That we should be wholly thine,
In thine only will delight,
In thy blessed service join.

O that every work and word
Might proclaim how good thou art,
'Holiness unto the Lord'
Still be written on our heart.¹⁷

It is a pity that subsequent hymn books within Methodism (including the present one), although retaining this hymn, have placed it outside the section of hymns for Holy Communion, and thus obscured an important connection. Nevertheless, its characteristic theology of the Christian life is quite unmissable. Believers offer themselves as 'living sacrifice' (Rom 12:1) not out of grim duty, but as a response to God's 'pardoning love'. Made 'acceptable' through Christ, they now live and die to God 'alone'. In the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* communion service, during the *Sursum corda* the priest exhorts the congregation: 'Let us give thanks unto our Lord God' and receives the response: 'It is meet and right so to do'. In Wesley's hymn this is echoed in, 'Meet it is, and just, and right/That we should be wholly thine', so that the giving of thanks is implicitly defined as total surrender to the God of grace and taking delight in his will. The 'holiness unto the Lord' which, as we have seen, was a central feature of John Wesley's understanding of discipleship, here becomes the goal of our response to the 'God of all-redeeming grace'.

The Wesleys had no great interest in theories of eucharistic presence. Number 57 in the collection is a four-verse hymn expressing the impossibility of ever knowing the *how*, but concluding that even if this is something we can never know, 'sure and real is the grace'. Number 88 begins by making a link between the eucharist and daily living, via the Lord's Prayer:

Give us this day, all-bounteous Lord,
Our sacramental bread.

Most astonishing of all is number 72, a two-verse hymnic epiclesis which has rarely been absent from subsequent Methodist hymn books:

Come, Holy Ghost, Thine influence shed,
And realize the sign;
Thy life infuse into the bread,
Thy power into the wine.

Effectual let the tokens prove
And made, by heavenly art,
Fit channels to convey Thy love
To every faithful heart.

Many years ago the Congregationalist Bernard Lord Manning claimed, in the polemic tone of those times, that through this hymn Methodism possesses 'a feature of our eucharistic worship which neither the confused and truncated canon of the Roman Mass nor the Anglican rite has preserved'.¹⁸ However that may be, it is important to note the kind of sacramentalism which Wesley here presents. It is sometimes said that sacramentalism is strong in the Catholic tradition because of the strand of theological thinking (most fully developed in Aquinas) which sees grace as adding to nature rather than destroying it. Conversely, if some Protestant traditions have found it more difficult to be sacramentalist, that could be because of the strand of theological thinking (most fully developed in Calvin) which sees nature, including human beings, as wholly corrupted by the fall, so that grace needs to replace it. John Harrod is surely right to see in Charles Wesley's hymn a theology, remarkable for its time and place, in which physical things such as bread and wine are not only outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual grace, but can also be used by God to become vehicles of grace. This in turn has profound implications for our understanding of the natural world, so that on some occasions we are hard pressed to separate the material from the spiritual.¹⁹

That the present hymn book in use within Methodism contains more of Charles Wesley's eucharistic hymns than any of its predecessors is a sign of some recovery of a traditional Wesleyan sacramentalism. Such hymns are, of course, usually sung within the

liturgy, and liturgies also make statements about a church's self-understanding.

Sacramentalism and Methodist liturgy today

In 1784 John Wesley issued an abridged version of the *Book of Common Prayer* for use in the American colonies. This was revised in 1786. Nineteenth-century revisions, such as the 1882 Wesleyan *Book of public prayers and services* still followed the Prayer Book tradition, as did the *Book of offices* of 1936, the first service book after Methodist Union. It was not until 1975 that something substantially different came along. *The Methodist service book* of that year retained the 1936 Communion Service, but added an entirely new one. This is plain, even austere, though some characteristic Methodist notes are sounded. The Thanksgiving contains the phrase: 'we ask you to accept our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving'. Its best feature is the post-communion collect, which, having thanked God for feeding us in the sacrament and uniting us with Christ, continues: 'and given us a foretaste of the heavenly banquet prepared for all mankind'. Had there been more space to explore Wesley's eucharistic hymns we would have seen that this note of eschatological expectation is characteristic of many of them too.

Methodism's new service book²⁰ has no fewer than nine eucharistic orders; three for ordinary seasons, and one each for Advent, Christmas and Epiphany, Lent and Passiontide, Maundy Thursday, Easter and the Day of Pentecost. Each of these is rich in seasonal imagery. Additional anaphoras are provided for the Covenant Service, Ordinations of Presbyters and Deacons, Marriage and a Service of Healing and Wholeness. If nothing else, this demonstrates how Methodism has moved away from the Prayer Book tradition, where the eucharist is related primarily to the passion, to something much nearer the world of the Wesley hymns, where it is a response to grace freely given and received, and related to the life of holy discipleship. A few snippets from the new liturgical material will illustrate the point.

From the Advent eucharist Thanksgiving:

Through him, our Priest and King,
accept us as a living sacrifice,
a people for your praise.

From the Thanksgiving in the second eucharist for Ordinary Seasons:

And so, God of love,
we remember that Jesus died and rose again
to make all things new.
Through his offering for us all
we offer our whole life to you in thanks and praise.

From the Christmas and Epiphany eucharist comes what is perhaps its clearest expression:

Lord and Giver of every good thing,
we bring to you
bread and wine for our communion,
lives and gifts for your kingdom,
all for transformation through your grace and love.

With such language the Methodist tradition has begun to re-explore its roots and to discover that it has the potential to see the world, and our discipleship within it, as shot through with the transforming grace of God – in short, as sacramental.

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NOTES

1 The most accessible form of the 1753 version is in *The constitutional practice and discipline of the Methodist Church*, vol 1 (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 1988), pp 77–78. For the 1744 version see A. B. Lawson, *John Wesley and the Christian ministry* (London: SPCK, 1963), pp 31–33.

2 Quoted in Gordon Wakefield, *Fire of love: the spirituality of John Wesley* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1976), p 23.

3 *Hymns and psalms* (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 1984), 743.

4 John Wesley, *A plain account of Christian perfection*, 1741, revised 1767. The reference is to the edition published by the Epworth Press (London, 1952), p 42.

5 Colin Williams, *John Wesley's theology today* (London: Epworth Press, 1969), p 175.

6 Geoffrey Wainwright, *Methodists in dialogue* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1995), p 284.

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- 7 Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable enthusiast: John Wesley and the rise of Methodism*, 2nd edn (London: Epworth Press, 1992), pp 447ff, has a useful summary of a complex debate.
- 8 John Munsey Turner, *Modern Methodism in England 1932–1998* (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 1998), p 2. For a more detailed analysis see by the same author, ‘Victorian values – or whatever happened to John Wesley’s scriptural holiness?’, *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* 46:6 (1988), pp 165–184.
- 9 John C. Bowmer, *The sacrament of the Lord’s Supper in early Methodism* (London: Dacre Press, 1951), p 200.
- 10 There is a useful account of Methodist union in John Kent, *The age of disunity* (London: Epworth Press, 1966), pp 1–43.
- 11 Gordon S. Wakefield, *An outline of Christian worship* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), p 135.
- 12 Henry Bett, *The hymns of Methodism*, 3rd edn (London: Epworth Press, 1945), pp 21–33, suggests some canons of criticism to help distinguish between the brothers’ work.
- 13 F. L. Wiseman, *Charles Wesley: evangelist and poet* (London: Epworth Press, 1932), p 199.
- 14 J. E. Rattenbury, *The evangelical doctrines of Charles Wesley’s hymns* (London: Epworth Press, 1941), pp 28–29.
- 15 Madeleine Forell Marshall and Janet Todd, *English congregational hymns in the eighteenth century* (Kentucky: The University Press, 1982), p 10.
- 16 Donald G. Rogers, *A selection of John and Charles Wesley’s hymns on the Lord’s Supper* (Exeter: The Methodist Sacramental Fellowship, 1995), p 3.
- 17 *Hymns on the Lord’s Supper*, 139.
- 18 Bernard L. Manning, *The hymns of Wesley and Watts* (London: Epworth Press, 1942), p 42.
- 19 John Harrod, ‘Wesleyan reflections on ecology’ in Philip R. Meadows (ed), *Wesleyan theology in today’s world* (Oxford: Applied Theology Press, 1997), pp 142ff.
- 20 *The Methodist worship book* (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 1999).