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## THE BEGINNINGS OF THE METHODIST COVENANT SERVICE

THE ONE major contribution of Methodism to religious liturgy is the order 'For Such as would Enter into or Renew their Covenant with God'. Like most of Wesley's ecclesiastical innovations, it was not an original idea, but an inspired adaptation. At the knees of his marvellous mother he had heard of the value of making an explicit covenant with God; for Susanna Wesley had been brought up among the Puritans, whose every thought was conditioned by the covenant relationship. Covenant theology provided their mental climate; they had their 'Solemn League and Covenant' for the nation, church covenants for their corporate religious life, and a spate of individual signed covenants as seals of their personal devotion to Almighty God. The genius of Wesley's service was that it preserved a method of personal covenanting for individuals and generations whose spiritual temperature was far lower than that of the Puritans, and at the same time fused this personal dedication into a congregational rite. The Methodist Covenant Service became a corporate renewal of individual discipleship.

Although Nonconformity was in his blood, not until 1947 did Wesley make his first experiments with a simple form of covenant service. At the Christmas morning service that year (it commenced at 4 a.m.!) he

strongly urged the wholly giving up ourselves to God, and renewing in every point our covenant that the Lord should be our God.

For several days he preached on this theme, with sermons on Moses' Covenant (Dt 29<sub>10</sub>), Josiah's Covenant (2 K 23<sub>3</sub>), and the Covenant entered into by Judah under Asa (2 Ch 15). This was in London. The following February he used practically the same course of sermons at Bristol, and in July at Newcastle.<sup>1</sup> None of them was published, but the kind of thing that he must have said is revealed by his *Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament*. On 2 Ch 15 he wrote:

V.12. *Into a covenant*.—The matter of this covenant was nothing but what they were before obliged to. And tho' no promise could lay any higher obligation upon them, than they were already under, yet it would help to increase their sense of the obligation, and to arm them against temptation. And by joining all together in this, they strengthened the hands of each other.

V.15. *Rejoiced at the oath*.—The times of renewing our covenant with God, should be times of rejoicing. It is an honour & happiness to be in bonds with God. And the closer, the better.

We cannot be quite sure that Wesley asked his congregation to make some visible or audible renewal of their covenant on these occasions, but it seems most likely that he did indeed follow the hint contained in 2 K 23<sub>3</sub>: '... and all the people stood to the covenant.' 'Standing to the covenant' became the normal corporate response which Wesley expected from his people. Even so, any such response would be for this one occasion only, an impressive accompaniment of this particular series of sermons on renewing our covenant, rather than an end in itself.



The preparation of the fifty volumes of his *Christian Library* brought the idea much nearer to fruition. This series of extracts from 'the Choicest Pieces of Practical Divinity which have been publish'd in the English Tongue' included a number of pleas for the making of personal covenants, from the pens of Robert Bolton, John Preston, John Howe, and others. In particular, Volume 24 (published in 1753) presented a Puritan best-seller by Joseph Alleine (1634-68), a nephew of Richard Baxter, one of Wesley's predecessors at Lincoln College, Oxford, and an ejected colleague of Wesley's own ejected grandfather. In this posthumous work—*An Alarm to Unconverted Sinners*—Alleine warmly commended the making of a kind of marriage contract 'for better, for worse' with our Lord, and provided both general directions and a form of words. This form of words was repeated in Volume 30 of the *Christian Library*, in Wesley's extract from *Vindiciae Pietatis: or, A Vindication of Godliness*, by Joseph Alleine's father-in-law Richard Alleine (1611-81), together with Richard Alleine's own 'Directions'. Actually *Vindiciae Pietatis* contained the first publication of the basic material of the Methodist Covenant Service, and it was always to Richard rather than to Joseph Alleine that Wesley looked for his inspiration.

In August 1755 various strands of thought and practice were suddenly gathered together in Wesley's mind, and woven into a clearly-discernible pattern. On Wednesday, 6th August, his *Journal* records:

I mentioned to the congregation another means of increasing serious religion, which had been frequently practised by our forefathers and attended with eminent blessing, namely, the joining in a covenant to serve God with all our heart and with all our soul. I explained this for several mornings following, and on Friday many of us kept a fast unto the Lord, beseeching Him to give us wisdom and strength to promise unto the Lord our God and keep it.

Mon. 11.—I explained once more the nature of such an engagement and the manner of doing it acceptably to God. At six in the evening we met for that purpose at the French church in Spitalfields. After I had recited the tenor of the covenant proposed, in the words of the blessed man, Richard Alleine, all the people stood up, in testimony of assent, to the number of about eighteen hundred persons. Such a night I scarce ever saw before. Surely the fruit of it shall remain for ever.

A clue to the immediate cause of this long-prepared event is the word 'another'—'I mentioned to the congregation *another* means of increasing serious religion . . .'. On 7th July he had held a 'day of solemn thanksgiving', after reading about such practices in the rather hotch-potch *Historical Collections relating to Remarkable Periods of the Success of the Gospel*, published the previous year by his friend John Gillies of Glasgow. Gillies had also described how the renewal of a church covenant in Massachusetts in 1680 had led to a widespread revival.<sup>2</sup>

From the beginning Wesley took great pains to prepare his followers adequately for this new type of religious exercise. Three or four days of explanation and exhortation preceded the first Covenant Service in London, and the same procedure was followed when he extended the experiment farther afield—at Bristol in October, and at Dublin, where the first Covenant Service was held on Good Friday, 1756. In 1758 Wesley appointed the Friday preceding the great event

as a preparatory day of 'solemn fasting and prayer', with services at 5.0 a.m., noon, and in the evening. Gradually this period of preparation was confined to the covenant day itself, as on Friday, 29th February 1760:

A great number of us waited upon God, at five, at nine, and at one, with fasting and prayer; and at six in the evening we met at the church in Spitalfields to renew our covenant with God.

As yet there was no distinctive shape to the service; Wesley usually commenced with a hymn and a prayer, and then introduced and recited Richard Alleine's five 'Directions' for making or renewing a covenant with God. Nor was there any real liturgy about the actual renewal itself, though we may trace in Wesley's comment on the Bristol service in 1755 a kind of formula which he doubtless used frequently: 'We now solemnly and of set purpose, by our own free act and deed, jointly agreed to take the Lord for our God.' Wesley alone read the form of covenant, and the people signified their acceptance either by standing (the normal procedure), by raising their hands, or by both.<sup>3</sup> There followed a period of prayer and the singing of a hymn.

Charles Wesley prepared no special collection of hymns for Covenant Services, but one included in his *Short Hymns on Select Passages of the Holy Scriptures* (published in 1762) became an immediate favourite, and was popularly known as 'the Covenant Hymn'. This was 'Come, let us use the Grace Divine', on Jer 15: 'Come and let us join ourselves to the Lord in a perpetual covenant that shall not be forgotten.' While conducting a Covenant Service at the 1778 Irish Conference, John Wesley testified:

It was a time never to be forgotten; God poured down upon the assembly 'the spirit of grace and supplication', especially in singing that verse of the concluding hymn—

*To us the covenant blood apply,  
Which takes our sins away;  
And register our names on high,  
And keep us to that day.*

He included this hymn (its original three eight-line verses subdivided into six common metre verses) in the section 'For the Society, Praying' of his famous *Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People called Methodists*, and it still retains its position in Methodism as 'the Covenant Hymn', though one verse has been omitted.

Young Robert Roe thus summed up Wesley's conduct of the 1776 Covenant Service at Spitalfields:

There was an amazing number of serious people, to whom he mentioned the propriety of the meeting, and gave an exhortation; after which, we sealed our engagements by prayer and the Lord's Supper.<sup>4</sup>

This description reveals an essential feature of every Covenant Service from the beginning, yet one which might easily be missed in a casual perusal of Wesley's own references. There was no doubt at all in Wesley's mind that the *Country Parson's Advice* of his Oxford days must be followed, and the covenant



sealed at the Lord's Table. The choice of a focal point for the London gatherings was largely dictated by this consideration. It is true that Wesley wanted a building in which all the London Methodists could assemble at one time, and that for this neither the Foundery nor West Street Chapel was adequate. The disused Huguenot church on the southern corner of the junction of Black Eagle Street and Grey Eagle Street was larger than both of them put together, and no doubt that was one of the reasons for using it. But just as important was the fact that the Spitalfields building was episcopally consecrated, so that Wesley could in good conscience administer the Lord's Supper there to his covenanting people.

Such crowds assembled on these occasions that other clergymen were needed to assist him. At the Covenant Service on Easter Monday, 1757, Wesley was the only ordained minister present, and his *Journal* records:

At five in the evening about twelve hundred of the society met me at Spitalfields. I expected two to help me, but none came. I held out till between seven and eight. I was then scarce able to walk or speak, but I looked up and received strength. At half-hour after nine God broke in mightily upon the congregation. . . . And when I returned home between ten and eleven I was no more tired than at ten in the morning.

Whatever the length of time or the physical strain involved, Wesley was quite clear that Covenant without Communion was incomplete.<sup>5</sup>

Like the Love Feast, the Covenant Service was essentially 'for members only'. Both during Wesley's lifetime and for long afterwards, attendance was restricted to those who could show the doorkeepers either their current class-ticket or a note of admission signed by Wesley (or in later years by one of the preachers). Sometimes the church would empty after a preaching service, to be refilled immediately by those who presented their tickets or notes.<sup>6</sup> Conversion was not a condition of membership, however, but simply 'a desire to flee from the wrath to come'. Both for the unconverted members and for visitors, the Covenant Service frequently proved a spiritual turning-point. Wesley seems constantly to have been impressed with its powerful effects—the same effects that caused Robert Southey to condemn it as 'highly reprehensible'.<sup>7</sup> In 1766 he wrote: 'This is always a refreshing season, at which some prisoners are set at liberty';<sup>8</sup> and in 1784: 'Many found an uncommon blessing therein. I am sure I did, for one.'<sup>9</sup> Hardly a service went by without some such comment:

Many mourned before God, and many were comforted.<sup>10</sup>

Many were filled with peace and joy, many with holy fear, and several backsliders were healed.<sup>11</sup>

It was a solemn season, wherein many found His power present to heal, and were enabled to urge their way with strength renewed.<sup>12</sup>

Several received either a sense of the pardoning love of God or power to love Him with all their heart.<sup>13</sup>

During his extensive travels Wesley might hold Covenant Services on almost any day of the year. For his London headquarters, however, there gradually

evolved the tradition which was later bequeathed to Methodism as a whole. The pattern was first sketched out on Friday, 1st January 1762, and each succeeding New Year's Day witnessed a Covenant Service for the London Methodists at Spitalfields, whatever day of the week it might be. Often it followed a watchnight service held on the previous evening. Then in 1778 came the opening of the City Road chapel, and the transfer to these larger headquarters of the annual gathering (by now the impropriety of administering the Lord's Supper in an unconsecrated building had ceased to trouble Wesley greatly). The new centre speedily led to a new (and permanent) date, the first Sunday evening in the New Year, which was first tried in 1780, and finally settled in 1782.

Every Covenant Service so far recorded by Wesley had taken place in the evening, commencing usually at 5.0 p.m. and often continuing until 9.0 p.m. on account of the many communicants, who sometimes numbered two thousand and were rarely fewer than one thousand. The change to a Sunday made it practicable to commence earlier and so to avoid the late hours unpopular in those days of slow travel and early rising. Accordingly on Sunday, 1st January 1786, Wesley recorded in his *Journal*:

We began that solemn service, the renewing of our covenant with God, not in the evening as heretofore, but at three in the afternoon, as more convenient for the generality of people.

Both in London and elsewhere, Sunday afternoon remained the standard time for the Annual Covenant Service for a century and more.

Strangely enough, not until this later Victorian era did the Covenant Service really achieve its full status as a prescribed form of Methodist liturgy. Up to 1779 no printed material had been available for the service except that in the *Christian Library*, but in that year one of Wesley's preachers, Thomas Lee, published some of Alleine's 'Directions' in a penny pamphlet entitled *Extract from the Thirtieth Volume of the Christian-Library*. In his preface, Lee pointed out that in the Sheffield area he had been accustomed to conduct a Covenant Service in the principal places, and was publishing this extract so that the practice might the more easily spread even to the tiniest country societies. Although in this case there was no question of administering the Sacrament, and although Lee was a senior preacher, there is little doubt that Wesley administered a reprimand for this unauthorized venture into print. The thing had been done, however, and Wesley made the best of a bad job—or perhaps he regarded it as bringing good out of evil—by himself publishing forthwith somewhat fuller *Directions for Renewing our Covenant with God*, an 'official' pamphlet frequently reprinted.

These *Directions*, however, remained a form of spiritual guidance rather than an Order of Service. There was no question of including them among the accepted 'forms' of Methodism, which consisted solely of those contained in Wesley's revision of the *Book of Common Prayer*. This is why American Methodism still has no Covenant Service in its *Book of Offices*, which is based on Wesley's *Sunday Service of the Methodists*. Even in Great Britain, although Wesleyan ministers were urged by the 1854 Conference to 'use all due care in



preparing for that observance', the Covenant Service was not actually included in the Wesleyan *Book of Offices* until within living memory.

In spite of the apparent formlessness of this tradition, there is little doubt that the usage and phraseology of the Covenant Service remained basically the same for one hundred and eighty years, until its drastic revision for the Book of Offices authorized in 1936. The spiritual challenge of the original Directions and Covenant had increasingly been regarded as strong meat, and the present form is certainly more palatable to modern taste. It is much attenuated, but enough remains for all of us to breathe a prayer of gratitude to Almighty God, in this the bicentenary year of its institution, for what Wesley in his eighty-sixth year termed 'a scriptural means of grace which is now almost everywhere forgotten except among the Methodists', and also for the one from whom he had received it as a torch passed down the centuries, 'that blessed man, Richard Alleine'.

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<sup>1</sup> Wesley's *Standard Journal*, III.361, VIII.176-9

<sup>2</sup> This was first pointed out by the Rev. Frederick Hunter in the *London Quarterly Review* for 1939, pp.78-87.

<sup>3</sup> W. Myles: *Chronological History of the People called Methodists*, 4th ed., 1813, p.77; J. Nightingale, *A Portraiture of Methodism*, 1807, p.234.

<sup>4</sup> *Arminian Magazine*, 1784, p.19.

<sup>5</sup> On at least one occasion Holy Communion was followed by the renewal of the Covenant. See *Journal*, VII.118.

<sup>6</sup> *Arminian Magazine*, 1784, p.19; Nightingale, op. cit., p.128; W. Peirce, *Ecclesiastical Principles and Polity of the Wesleyan Methodists*, 3rd. ed., 1873, p.99.

<sup>7</sup> *Life of Wesley*, 2nd ed., 1820, II.512.

<sup>8</sup> *Journal*, V.125.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, VI.470.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, IV.158.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, V.43

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, VI.135.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, VI.320.