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Hymns on the Lord's Supper
250 Years

PAPERS PRESENTED
AT
THE SIXTH ANNUAL MEETING
OF
THE CHARLES WESLEY SOCIETY
October 1995
The Divinity School
Duke University
Durham, North Carolina

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Proceedings of The Charles Wesley Society 1995

Published in the United States by
The Charles Wesley Society, 1996

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The Wesleys' *Hymns on the Lord's Supper* from a Methodist Perspective

James C. Logan*

Historians probably will record no particular historical significance to the dates of 1673 or 1745. Historians are not to be faulted. Many who claim the heritage of John and Charles Wesley will pass over these dates also. These are publication dates. In Oxford in 1673 Daniel Brevint published the treatise, *The Christian Sacrament and Sacrifice*. In 1745 the Wesleys published their first edition of *Hymns on the Lord's Supper*. Brevint, an Anglican Non-juror who had been exiled in France, wrote "for those desirous to contemplate and embrace the Christian religion in its original beauty, freed of the encumbrance of controversy."¹

Little could Brevint have anticipated that less than a century later John Wesley would have "extracted" (in characteristic fashion) the substance of *The Christian Sacrament and Sacrifice* for use by the people called Methodists. It was this abridged treatise which formed the underpinning of the edition of the Wesley brothers' hymns on the Eucharist in their 1745 publication. During John Wesley's lifetime this volume went through nine editions, and Brevint's abridged treatise was issued in separate editions as well. Brevint could not have foreseen that his treatment of the principal themes of the seventeenth century Anglican eucharistic tradition would have become a basic document for the Wesleyan evangelical revival in the mid eighteenth century.

This brief historical introduction brings us to our present gathering of the sixth annual meeting of The Charles Wesley Society. Two hundred and fifty years ago the Wesley brothers' little volume of eucharistic hymns made its initial appearance. For those of us who claim the Wesleyan tradition, this is indeed a significant occasion, even if historians may miss the date. In this volume perspectives regarding the substance of *Hymns on the Lord's Supper* are explored, not only from a Methodist view but in the broader ecumenical spectrum of Anglican, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox visions as well.

A Methodist Perspective

At the risk of seeming pedantic, we must from the outset focus a critical eye on the appellation, "a Methodist perspective." Of the confessional perspectives included in this symposium no one is more subject to various interpretations than that of "Methodist." For the purposes of this presentation "Methodist perspective" and "Methodist tradition" will be used in two historical senses. First, "Methodist perspective" is historically defined by characteristic or distinctive

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¹See *Dictionary of National Biography*, pp. 291-2.

beliefs and the eighteenth-century Wesleys and Wesleyans. Later in this paper "Methodist perspective" will refer to the contemporary Methodist family and in particular to The United Methodist Church. In the latter sense of "Methodist perspective" the stance will of necessity be far more theologically diffused and diverse than in the early days of the movement, and the institutional identity and behaviors of contemporary Methodists will be seen to be both more complex and more amorphous. In short, the "Methodist perspective" as theologically focused and missionally defined is radically more problematic today than is our early history. Between the two "perspectives" lie nineteenth and twentieth century historical dynamics which have greatly modified and re-configured the original animating vision.

The Wesleyan theological message as "practical divinity" made no claim to originality. John Wesley's only claim was that of the "plain, old religion of the church." The force of the message, while in content not original, lay in its creative synthesis of the biblical doctrine of grace as portrayed in particular by St. Paul. Actually the Wesleyan message is a theological distillation of the Pauline epistles to the Romans and Galatians and the First Epistle of John. Recognizing that grace was a gift, and in the Christian vocabulary gift is a person, namely Jesus Christ, the Wesleys rang the changes on prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace. It is crucial to recognize from the start the Wesleys' intention. Theirs was not the attempt to set forth a new theology, evangelical or liberal, derived from religious experience. Their attempt was essentially descriptive. It was not experience which produced the theology, but theology named the experience. Their concern was to enunciate in sermon and hymn the faith of the ancient church as contained in scripture and mediated through experience.

The threefold configuration of prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace names and interprets the Christian experience. Presupposed for such a vigorous proclamation of grace was the doctrinal deposit of scripture and tradition: The incarnate and atoning Jesus Christ, active salvifically in the three offices of Prophet, Priest and King. Pushing the matter further, presupposed for the Christological doctrine was the fundamental, ontological grounding in the triune God. The Wesleyan understanding of "the scriptural way of salvation," therefore, necessarily entails a robust Christology and a bold affirmation of the triune God.

From this creative synthesis of grace a second Wesleyan distinctive follows. This is the attempt to maintain a full and balanced doctrine of grace through the working of a dialectic of faith and action, piety and knowledge, new birth and nurture, individual and corporate experience. The early Wesleyan doctrinal identity was a *conjunctive* theology. Rarely has the conjunction "and" played a more critical theological role. Why then should we be surprised that the Wesleyan revival was characterized in practice *conjunctively* as word and sacrament! True to the *conjunctive* character of Wesleyan theology is the systematic delineation

found in the 1988 Doctrinal Standards and Our Theological Task statement of The United Methodist Church:²

Justification and Assurance
Sanctification and Perfection
Faith and Good Works
Mission and Service
Nurture and Mission

We are particularly concerned to see how this conjunctive tradition manifested itself in practice both in the original revival and in the subsequent history of the people called Methodists. Originally the Wesleyan movement was a revival movement, part of the eighteenth-century evangelical revival ranging from Britain to the colonies of Massachusetts and Georgia and places between. As such the evangelical revival was a preaching revival. The Wesleyan revival within the context of the larger evangelical awakening possessed a certain distinctiveness. This is seen in John's effort to maintain the dynamics of both movement and church. In fact, the role which the sacrament of the Lord's Supper played in the revival is carefully, if not at times precariously perched between movement and church. Nurtured as they were in the Anglican spirituality of The Book of Common Prayer and the devotional practices of certain seventeenth and eighteenth century so-called High Church Anglicans meant that they simply could not avoid the constitutive role which Eucharist played in the formation of spirituality. In practice the Wesleyan "perspective" was again conjunctive—evangelical and catholic. Avoiding the nineteenth- and twentieth-century contexts and meaning, one could properly say that the Wesleyan tradition was a catholic evangelicalism.

Non-juror Anglicans had been forceful in advocating a recovery of eucharistic spirituality in the church. In the context of the revival the Wesleys sought to achieve the same by urging large numbers of persons to come to the table of the Lord. The record seems to indicate that once the people followed Wesley's injunction, they continued to come because at the table they were encountered anew with the justifying and sanctifying grace of God in Jesus Christ. Whether they could comprehend with their rational minds the eucharistic doctrine, they nevertheless experienced on a deeper level the real presence of the crucified and risen Lord. They sang:

²*The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church*, 1996, pp. 46–8.

We come with Confidence to find
 Thy special Presence here.
 Our Hearts we open wide
 To make the Savior room:

And lo! the Lamb, the Crucified
 The Sinner's Friend is come!
 His Presence makes the Feast.³

The little hymnal of 1745 indicates the mutual theological concurrence of the Wesley brothers. They found in the Brevint treatment of eucharistic themes a suitable structure by which to offer theological and devotional guidance to the Methodists. Charles's hymns provide a kind of poetical commentary on the Brevint text while not slavishly repeating the text. In some instances Charles goes beyond Brevint revealing a theological mind of his own.

The editing of the Brevint text by John reduced the topical index while maintaining the twofold division of sacrament and sacrifice. The themes of Memorial, Sign and Means of Grace, and Pledge of Heaven were not strictly a compendium. These were held in a unity through the undergirding logic of the atoning sacrifice and heavenly intercession. This underlying logic is, in fact, more obvious in the hymns than in the Brevint text. The hymns treat extensively the sacrament as implying a sacrifice complete with the continuing intercessory ministry of the heavenly Priest at the heavenly Altar.

He ever lives above
 For me to intercede,
 His all-redeeming love,
 His precious Blood, to plead.⁴

Charles's hymns are directly related to the Brevint text when treating sacrifice and heavenly intercession, but the hymns have their own distinctive Wesleyan character. Brevint's text reads:

The main Intention of Christ herein, was not the bare *Remembrance* of his Passion; but over and above, to invite us to this Sacrifice, not as done and gone many Years since, but, as to Grace and Mercy, still lasting, still *new*, still the same as when it was first offer'd for us.⁵

Charles's lyrics describe with the use of various poetic metaphors the sacrificial scene from Calvary to the Heavenly Altar and the interceding Priest to the earthly communicant, kneeling in pious meditation while being caught up in this divine history. Charles draws freely from the rich metaphors of the Epistle to the Hebrews and the Apocalypse. Priest, Victim, Lamb, Shepherd are metaphors

³*Hymns of the Lord's Supper*, No. 81.

⁴*Methodist Hymn Book*, No. 368.

⁵Brevint, *The Christian Sacrament and Sacrifice*, Sect, II, para. 7.

fused into a whole picture of Christ crucified, Christ risen, Christ interceding, Christ returning. This is the great picture from which the miniatures of Memorial, Sign, Means, and Pledge emerge in their true meaning. The full reality of Christ crucified and risen, sacrificing and interceding is manifested in a real presence when in faith one participates in the Eucharist.

As a Memorial of the sacrificial death of Christ the sacrament is no more reminder of that event, but true *anamnesis*. Memory is possible because the Supper is the actual *anamnesis* of the atoning sacrifice. Therefore invitation to the Meal and promise of the Meal are inseparably linked:

Think on us, who think on Thee
And every struggling Soul release:
O remember Calvary,
And bid us go in peace.⁶

As Sign, the bread and wine are not bare signs, but efficacious signs of the grace they signify:

The sacred true effectual Sign
Thy Body and thy Blood it shews,
The glorious Instrument Divine
Thy Mercy and Thy Strength bestows.⁷

As Means of Grace the Eucharist does not itself confer grace, but the Holy Spirit through the sacrament confers effectual grace. A Christian, therefore, will not despise the

The Sign transmits the Signified,
The Grace is by the Means applied.⁸

As Pledge of Heaven, the sacrament is a communion feast in which Christians share in Christ and with each other, not only those present but the whole community of saints, in heaven as on earth. It is both anticipation and pledge of the Messianic banquet when Christ shall have secured his Kingdom.

With joy we celebrate his Love,
And thus his precious Passion shew,
Till in the Clouds our Lord we see,
And shout with all the Saints, 'Tis He.⁹

The Wesleys were content to leave the question HOW? with a simple exclamation.

⁶*Hymns on the Lord's Supper*, No. 20.

⁷*Hymns*, No. 28.

⁸*Hymns*, No. 71.

⁹*Hymns*, No. 115.

Ask the father's Wisdom *how*;
 Him that did the Means ordain!
 Angels round our Altars bow
 To search it out, in vain.¹⁰

The conveyance, however, is no fiction! It is a power.

Feeble elements bestow
 A Power not theirs to give
 Who explains the wondrous way,
 How these the virtue came?
 These the virtue did convey,
 Yet still remain the same.¹¹

The virtualism of Brevint as well as Charles is obvious in Brevint's comment:

So the body and blood of Jesus is *in full value* and heaven with all its glory *in such title* made over to true Christians, by this bread and wine which they receive in the holy communion.¹²

Charles is concerned to maintain the Real Presence by insisting that such is present in spiritual virtue, power or effect. He refused to slip into what in modern terms could be called a "psychologism." Hence in the end this is not simply memory but Real Presence.

A Contemporary Methodist Perspective

For the Wesleys the role of sacrament was so crucial to the evangelical matrix that one can only exclaim, Whatever happened on the way to the twentieth century? We come now to the second use of the phrase "Methodist perspective." Here I limit myself to American Methodism. Between the earliest days of American Methodism and the contemporary church there exists a chasm. What did happen on the way to the twentieth century?

In 1773 the appeal from the Methodists in the colonies to John Wesley for ordained ministers came directly from the deeply felt need for the sacrament. That sacramental practice and discipline should so quickly erode in the subsequent history is a perplexing puzzle.

From the outset the placement of the Methodists in the colonies was not parallel with the placement of British Methodists vis-a-vis the Anglican Church. The earliest lay preaching on the American scene was hardly a movement within the structures of an established church. Methodism in the colonies began as a revival movement rather than renewal movement within a church. In short, the American Methodists lacked from the outset an ecclesial context. It is instructive to note

¹⁰*Hymns*, No. 51

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²Brevint, Sect. V, para. 6.

that American evangelicalism was different from the original Wesleyan evangelicalism. The absence of an ecclesial context would haunt the American Methodists from 1784 across the nineteenth century. While American Methodist history in the nineteenth century reveals certain ecclesial sensitivities, an ecclesiology in the true sense was not a nineteenth century legacy.

Beginning as early as the decades immediately following 1784 the Methodists spread rapidly and extensively, particularly in the westward movement. As early as 1800 the camp meeting became one of the prized means of evangelization. Peter Cartwright could quip that when the settlers pitched their tents on the frontier, the first thing to jump from the bushes was a jack rabbit and this was promptly followed by a circuit rider. Cartwright even made light of the Presbyterians by claiming that they would prefer to see the Mississippi Valley given to the Devil than send in an unordained preacher. Cartwright gloried in the fact that Methodists were not imbued with such a sense of ecclesial niceties. Such attitudes were undoubtedly pervasive, and they are reflective of the historical and cultural environment of the Methodist movement.

Under the exigencies of the frontier, the rituals or orders which Wesley sent over in 1784 never really became operative. It was not a traumatic experience for the Methodists to set aside the prescribed orders. In the camp meetings and elsewhere the original message of grace—prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying—became truncated. The characteristic message became a simple threefold one of free grace, free will, and individual responsibility. In many of the camp meetings the Lord's Supper was the opening worship. But the real business was the preaching and the conversions. In this context it is easy to see why the American Methodists could choose to “hang loose” with prescribed orders of worship including most of the rubrics of the Lord's Supper. As early as 1792 the Methodists had deleted the entire Ante-Communion. In fact any or all of the ritual with the exception of the Consecration could be omitted. The sacramental controversies occasioned by the practices of the lay preacher, Robert Strawbridge, did not give rise to really serious sacramental reflection. The practices of a Robert Strawbridge in Maryland, the attempted revolt of the Virginia Palmyra group seemed only to emphasize the individualism already becoming an intrinsic part of the proclamation of the gospel. As Paul Sanders observed, “It is clear what was happening. Wesley had tried to produce a church by decree; he had succeeded in surrounding a preaching movement with the appurtenances of a church. And the new church went on behaving much as it had behaved as a missionary campaign.” It should be no surprise that the hymn book, *Hymns on the Lord's Supper*, never had an American edition. The best source of eucharistic thought and practice from the Wesleyan tradition never surfaced in the American Methodist movement.

Perhaps the sacramental tradition could have been preserved in the hymnody, if not in theological treatises, of the Methodists. In 1790 in Philadelphia a col-

lection of evangelistic hymns was published over the names of Coke and Asbury. This volume was a re-print of a collection of hymns published earlier in England by a Robert Spence, a publishing endeavor hardly approved by John Wesley. Among the American Methodists this collection of hymns continued to be used with occasional augmentation until 1836. The hymns were appropriate for the preaching of the revival but certainly did not cover the range of life. Not until 1849 was a more comprehensive hymnal published. An examination of the hymnal reveals only one hymn treating the sacrament in terms of sacrificial imagery. No hymns interpreted the sacrament as an eschatological Meal. The evolution of the American Methodist hymnal clearly shows the prominence of other dimensions of church life rather than sacramental practice. Eucharist had never really played in the American Methodist experiment the central role which it had played with the Wesleys.

Considering bibliographical productivity, Clarke's *Discourse on the Nature and Design of the Eucharist* was published in New York in 1842. One looks in vain for an indication that Clarke's treatment had any influence on the American developments. History and culture were the determining factors. The Real Presence was eclipsed by a popular interpretation of the injunction, "This do in remembrance of me."

Theological developments in nineteenth century American Methodism reflect the same tendencies as the ecclesiastical The Wesleyan synthesis of grace had already been replaced by a considerably less nuanced doctrine of grace in the preaching of the revivalists and circuit riders. The early preachers had little formal theological education, and even the admonitions of an Asbury to study while in saddle were not sufficient. Grace came to focus upon the experience of conversion with perhaps more moralistic instructions substituting for sanctification. A theological transition, to use the words of Robert Chiles, was transpiring. Already at the hands of Richard Watson (1781–1833) the attempt to systematize Wesleyan doctrine had taken an apologetic turn casting the theology of grace more in a rationalistic mode. This was certainly at some distance from the more experiential interpretation of the Wesleys. Watson's work was probably read more than Wesley's own sermons, and played a formative role in the Course of Studies syllabi for years.

The language of prevenient grace came more and more to be the language of gracious ability. Note the syntactical transition, grace becomes the modifier rather than the noun. A process was underway whereby prevenient grace would eventually be moved from the Christological grounding of Wesley to an anthropological entering in creation. By the dawn of the twentieth century prevenient grace had become a metaphysical principle of freedom of the will.

Modifications and changes in the doctrine of the atonement called for appropriate modifications in the doctrine of grace. Without the doctrine of prevenient grace to act as the glue holding the synthesis of grace in an integral unity, justifi-

cation and sanctification seemed to be fractured. Already justification had been rendered in theological shorthand as "being born again." Increasingly the life of sanctification became one of legal obedience.

The theological transition can in broad strokes be captioned as a fundamental shift in theological paradigms. Where originally the paradigm had been a strong Christological one where grace was singular and the basic operations of grace were salvific operations of the one Christ, the paradigm had become an anthropological one. How otherwise can one account for the fact that early Methodists sang:

O Love divine, what hast thou done!
The immortal God hath died for me!
The Father's co-eternal Son
Bore all my sins upon the tree.
The immortal God for me hath died:
My Lord, my Love, is crucified!

while by the 1930's Epworth Leaguers were literally singing into the hymnal the words of the Boston Personalist, Earl Marlatt:

Are ye able, said the Master,
"to be crucified with me?"
"Yea, the sturdy dreamers answered,
"to the death we follow thee."
"Lord we are able."

Across the nineteenth century the theological changes had taken place while in terms of actual eucharistic practice at best the celebration of the sacrament was quarterly. This was in part due to the necessity laid upon the Methodist to observe the sacrament at their quarterly conference where an ordained elder in the form of the presiding elder would officiate.

The nineteenth century for American Methodists was a complex one to say the least. Historical, social, and cultural forces converged to create environments where decisions of faith and practice were made without an informing vision of the Wesleyan distinctive of word and sacrament, justification and sanctification, evangelical and sacramental. To speak of a "Methodist perspective" in the twentieth century is to speak of a movement which emerged from the nineteenth century with an ecclesiocracy without an ecclesiology, with the efficacy of grace predicated more on human agency than on divine initiative, with infrequent celebrations of the sacrament and these chiefly as exercises in human recall with a concomitant individualizing of the sacrament. The carefully nuanced doctrine of grace as interpreted sacramentally by the Wesleys—questing grace calling forth answering faith and questing faith meeting answering grace—had been modified almost beyond recognition.

A fuller picture of the "Methodist perspective" requires that we mention some contemporary "perspectives" which may be promising for a new time. I cite a few indicators or developments within contemporary American Methodism.

1. Wesleyan Studies. Beginning in 1925 with the publication of George Croft Cell's *The Rediscovery of Wesley*, Wesley as theologian and practitioner, was released from an ecclesiastical captivity. The volume of doctoral research in Wesleyan studies continues to increase. The forceful contributions made by the late Albert Outler to theological and ecumenical studies have gained wide recognition in ecumenical as well as Methodist circles. The publication of an annotated edition of the Works of John Wesley, now under the editorship of Richard Heitzenrater, provides a rich opportunity for a renewed and broader encounter with the Wesleyan tradition. A growing sense of uneasiness in the churches about a sense of ecclesial identity has potential to open new questions, begin new quests and possibly probe the tradition for trajectories for the church in our time. Hopefully such can occur without a retreat into an ecclesiastical "tribalism." What is needed is not a Wesleyan "fundamentalism" of theology and practice nor a hypocritical and misguided "triumphalism."

2. Liturgical Renewal. The re-birth of interest in liturgical renewal stretching from the local parish to the halls of research scholarship offers possibilities for expression of a fuller Wesleyan and ecumenical perspective in faith and practice. The new orders for baptism and Eucharist bring the traditions of the past into interface with contemporary expression. In some local churches fresh configurations of meaning are emerging and being celebrated. The contributions of American Methodist scholars in liturgical studies such as Laurence Stookey and James White complimented by the solid scholarship of Geoffrey Wainwright enrich both the denominational body and the ecumenical body as well.

3. Ecumenical Dialogue. One of the most exciting centers of ferment in The United Methodist Church in recent times has been the dialogue on sacraments and ministry occasioned by the Faith and Order study, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*. It very well may be that the sacramental recovery which concerns many of us will come more directly by encountering the ecumenical developments than any other way. Though United Methodists do need to make that encounter more substantively than one finds in the response to BEM (Churches Respond to BEM, II).

4. Inter-confessional Developments. A real sign of hope on the horizon is the possibility of church union discussions between the historically African American churches (African Methodist Episcopal, African Methodist Episcopal Zion, and Christian Methodist Episcopal) and The United Methodist Church. In the African American church a sacramental tradition has long existed which accords the Eucharist a place and role in the life of the congregation not recognized in other Methodist bodies. Sacramental renewal may well stand a drawing closer of these churches.

Conclusion

Lest I be misunderstood, the argument of this presentation has not been for a recovery of a particular doctrinal formulation, though it is necessary to do specific doctrinal analysis to understand our situation. My concern is to recapture a Wesleyan vision which would be untrue to the Wesleys if it were not a vision infused with a "catholic spirit." Such a vision is not unique to the Wesleys. The tapestry which they wove—the tapestry so vividly seen in the *Hymns for the Lord's Supper*—brought threads from many traditions and confessions. It was a new tapestry which communicated in a new day the "old religion of the Church." Our task for today can be no less.

