WESLEYAN WORSHIP AND THE MEANS OF GRACE

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This article explores the question, ‘What is Wesleyan worship?’ by investigating John Wesley’s use of the means of grace and of hymn singing. The role of hymns as a valuable mode of teaching doctrine is highlighted. The liturgical minimalism of nineteenth-century Methodism and the impact of revivalism are identified as contributing causes of the loss of Wesley’s worship practices among Methodists.

Introduction

I had better begin by defining my terms. My title was not ‘Methodist worship’, though these lectures will be very brief if Methodism is not included! I do, however, want to keep Mr Wesley - as his disciples still call John - as my plumbline. As I was preparing for this weekend, I was also reading - I am embarrassed to say, for the first time - David Hempton’s ground-breaking study, Methodism, Empire of the Spirit.¹ It is a breathtaking survey and reframing of the Methodist movement, and perhaps the first which adequately embraces both its British and its American forms. It is also most eloquently written and a joy to read. Hempton breaks the pattern of writing about Wesley and Methodism by those who are devoted to, and defensive of the man and his movement. That, I suspect, is where I still was when I began; I hope I have learned from Hempton. One thing Hempton and others have borne in upon me in recent times, though a glance at the membership of the World Methodist Council would confirm it, is that there is no one single way of being ‘Wesleyan’. All eighty member churches of the World Methodist Council claim Wesley, but in sometimes startlingly different ways - the broad division between British-originated bodies and American,

but then Welsh Methodism and Cornish Methodism; Afro-American, and variations within the African continent (Nigerian, Africanized, notably hierarchical, adopting Anglican titles and dress; the plainer evangelical Ghanaian) - and much more); Latin American, sometimes divided by Pentecostal influences (Chilé). I was told in Singapore recently, ‘to be a South-East Asian Methodist is to be Pentecostal’. And, I need hardly say here, there is the whole trajectory from Wesley of the Holiness movement.

It is interesting that Hempton’s book almost literally ends with the following observation:

> Above all, Pentecostalism is an enormously successful continuation of Methodism’s energy and mobility, which transformed the religious landscape of the North Atlantic region and beyond in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The next Christendom, already under construction in the global south, would not look the same if Methodism had never existed.²

How then could we distinguish what is truly Wesleyan and Methodist in the pot pourri of people who nowadays call themselves Methodist? Lutherans ask the same question about the true legacy of Martin Luther, especially as the 500th anniversary year approaches. Anglicans have a theological spectrum as wide as, and very like Methodism’s, and, although they almost always point to the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* as their point of unity, that loyalty varies widely. And that is an important observation, for it is in fact in *worship* that the various Christian traditions most truly reveal their selves, and perhaps above all, at the Eucharist.³ But as with the Anglican spectrum, from Anglo-Catholic ritualism to Low Anglican evangelicalism, and middle-of-the-road conservatism, Methodist worship presents a bewildering array of competing pictures.

The answer to the question: ‘What is Wesleyan worship?’ can surely not be found in its externals, though each reflects an inner belief and set of values. The World Council of Churches in its early survey of *The Ways of Worship* (1951)⁴ opened the doors for

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³ I will use this term without any intention to give it a meaning beyond the Greek for a ‘thanksgiving’ meal; it is so used across the globe in the ecumenical liturgical movement. Similarly, the word liturgy speaks of the order in worship, but of no particular order.

churches to observe and borrow from other traditions. Today, there is a great deal of similarity across the ecumenical spectrum, with a debt on the one hand, to the modern liturgical movement, and on the other, to the rise of evangelicalism and Pentecostalism. I will say more of this later. So, I have come to the perhaps obvious conclusion that it is best to start with the Reverend John Wesley, and ask what he said and did himself, and whether he can act as a mentor for our own day.

I. John Wesley’s Practice

I have a personal affection for John Wesley (and for Charles, I might add), despite the iconoclasm of recent studies. The spate of new biographies in recent years has revealed two real brothers, quite distinct from each other, deeply mutually loving and at the same time furiously differing with each other, who under the Spirit launched an instrument for the spiritual renewal of Britain and beyond, which continues until this day. I say this at the end of fifteen years of participation in the work (chiefly ecumenical) of the World Methodist Council, which represents some eighty distinct churches, and some 80 million ‘People called Methodist.’ It astonishes me that Christians from such different contexts, culturally, linguistically, spiritually and theologically can find a unity through the name of John Wesley. Five years ago, a proposal I made for the creation of a Standing Committee on Methodist Theology (which would add to the integrity of what we say together in dialogue with other churches) was passed but has lain on the table unacted upon. No one seems to want to pick it up. I wonder if some fear that if we really look at each other, we may be less united. Of course, Methodists place ‘theology’ a fair way down our list of priorities, yet we are defensive when other traditions (e.g. Roman Catholic, Lutheran or Reformed) appear to be able to articulate their dogmatic positions more clearly than we do. The theology of our practice in worship is pretty far down that list too.

Speaking personally, I have always been fascinated by that brief Rule of Life which the Holy Club set for its student members in Oxford in the 1720s:

1. To be regular in private devotions, including Holy Communion, once a week;
2. To attend carefully to ethical and religious conduct;
3. To meet from 6 pm to 9 pm daily to read the Bible and
discuss religious questions;
4. To visit the town and university prisons once or twice a week.⁵

These principal four undertakings tell us much: that for the Wesleys, the Eucharist was the first among the elements of worship; the second requires self-examination, personally, but with a significant group or communal dimension, linked with practising what one preaches;⁶ the third makes the study of the Scriptures foundational to interpreting contemporary issues; and the final requires ministry beyond the group, visiting prisoners as often as receiving Holy Communion. At its birth, Methodism was sacramental, biblical and evangelical, concerned with practical ethics and the love of neighbour, especially the poor. This balance was also later laid upon the life of the ‘Societies in connexion with the Revd John Wesley’, in further expositions of the ‘means of grace’, the Instituted and the Prudential. The expression is taken from the General Thanksgiving at the end of daily prayer in the Book of Common Prayer, where we thank God ‘for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life’, for the work of Christ, for ‘the means of grace and the hope of glory’. Wesley says,

By ‘means of grace’ I understand outward signs, words, or actions, ordained of God, and appointed for this end — to be the ordinary channels whereby he might convey to men preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace.⁷

Here we meet a little more of John Wesley’s liturgical understanding, for instance, in his opening up of what it means for the practice of prayer:

1. Prayer: private, family, public; consisting of deprecation [self-examination and confession], petition, intercession and thanksgiving. Do you use each of these? Do you use private prayer every morning and evening? If you can, at five in the evening? and the hour before and after morning preaching? Do you forecast daily wherever you

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⁵ Wesley probably based these on similar counsel in the writings of Jeremy Taylor (1613-1667). The list first appeared about 1729 or 1730 in the preface to Wesley’s second Oxford Diary. Similar questions appeared in his A Collection of Forms of Prayer for Every Day in the Week (1733).

⁶ There was a set of 22 particular questions for self-examination which was used by the Holy Club, the first of many such sets Wesley wrote for the Methodists.

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are, how to secure these hours? Do you always avow [advocate] it everywhere? Do you ask everywhere, ‘Have you family prayer?’ Do you retire [to pray] at five o’clock?  

What Wesley elsewhere called ‘the grand parts’ of public prayer - confession, petition and intercession, thanksgiving - were an important measure for him. After all, he was an admirer, and constant user of, the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. Behind all his advocacy of a dedicated life of personal prayer lies the Anglican tradition of his home and church. He desired to see ordered prayer. Four decades or so after the Act of Uniformity (note the last word) had imposed the Book on Church of England clergy and people (thus ejecting both his grandfathers from their ecclesiastical livings), it was time for this son of the Church to take one seemingly small permission: one could add, after the set prayer, extempore prayer. The Puritan objection was that no human words could take precedence over the Scriptures.

The second Instituted Means of Grace concerned the role of the Bible.

2. Searching the Scriptures by,
   (i) Reading: Constantly, some part of every day; regularly, all the Bible in order; carefully, with the Notes [meaning Wesley’s own Explanatory Notes on the Bible, 1755]; seriously, with prayer before and after; fruitfully, immediately putting into practice what you learn there?
   (ii) Meditating: At set times? by any rule [JW recommended Richard Baxter’s]
   (iii) Hearing: Every morning? carefully; with prayer before, at, after; immediately putting into practice? Have you a New Testament always about you?

Of course, anyone who used the Book of Common Prayer’s Morning and Evening Prayer service daily, did read the Scriptures in order, but Wesley bade his followers go further, and deeper than that. It does make me wonder whether (cf what he says of ‘Hearing’) our present services of worship regularly allow any time for meditating, for pondering the words we have just heard in church? Is there a tendency to rush forward in our services, never allowing a minute to pass between the singing of the last verse of the hymn and the

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reading? I also hold a high view of the ministry of Lector, the person appointed to read. In this we who pretend to hold the Scriptures in high regard might take a leaf out of the Roman Catholic recovery of their place in worship and personal life. Catholic lectors are chosen for their gifts, and required to read beforehand and study each lection, check its difficult words or unfamiliar names, its logic, its emphases and its meaning (using a commentary if necessary) and pray it, before they come to worship, and there are a number of publications which teach this. Alas, Protestant love of democracy frequently trumps the discernment of gifts!

But let me make another possibly polemical point. I suspect that the practice of daily prayer and Bible reading has diminished in many Protestant churches, though certainly not in all. It is always a challenge for young evangelicals to maintain the self-motivated ‘quiet time’. I had the privilege of teaching in a theological college of the Church of England in the 1980s, which had a daily discipline for all members, both faculty and students, to be present in the college chapel every weekday at 7 a.m. Morning Prayer was said, followed by twenty minutes of silence for meditation, then the Eucharist from the Greeting of Peace, every morning for three years’ training. It is still typical of my former Lincoln students that they keep this discipline. They use the modern Anglican prayer books, but above all, they read the Scriptures in order, daily, and consequently know them better than many preachers. The discipline of the Daily Office is a means of grace, and was recovered by many churches in the 1960s (one persuasive commendation was by a Baptist), and through movements like Taizé and the ‘new monasticism’ in the 1970s and beyond. Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Life Together was also influential, not least as a counterpoint to his misunderstood ‘religionless Christianity’. There is also no lack of guides to lectio divina (biblical meditation) available today. Meditation is a distinct exercise, a conscious time of reflection on the passage just read. We might note that, in our activistic traditions and our frenetic and noisy world, this means of grace offers us the beautiful gift of silence.

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10 Attendance at Evening Prayer was also required. Lincoln Theological College had one advantage now rarely possible: the community lived within the central city within reasonable reach of the college.
There are two other ‘means’ noted in Wesley’s list, which we
cannot deal with further here: first, the practice of fasting (his
question is not ‘Do you fast’ but ‘How do you fast every Friday?’),
Wesley’s own practice also including Wednesdays, abstaining from
food overnight and until 3 pm; and drinking only water. I am glad to
say that the Evangelism committee of the World Methodist Council
has been commending it for some years. The second is ‘Christian
Conference’, by which he meant a kind of ordered conversation, the
opposite of idle chit-chat, or even the learned converse of a Dr
Samuel Johnson. It was a means of grace, conscious of its Christian
purpose. And while Wesley himself was in the Chair of the
Methodist Societies annual Conference, that Conference spoke only
worthy words. I have seen it used effectively in our own day in the
guided conversation during a retreat; Bible studies in a congregation
in my experience would benefit from gentle guidance back to the
point!

II. Born in Song

On my ecumenical travels, I often hear a single summation of the
Methodist genius: how well you sing! We can, of course, but we often
don’t and we frequently breach the sound advice of our founder in
his directions for singing, particularly this one:

5. Sing Modestly – do not bawl so as to be heard above or distinct
from the rest of the congregation that you may not destroy the
harmony, but strive to unite your voices together so as to make one
melodious sound.

but especially the last,

7. Sing spiritually – have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim
at pleasing Him more than yourself, or any other creature. In order to
attend strictly to the sense of what you sing, and see that your heart is
not carried away with the sound, but offered to God continually; so
shall your singing be such as the Lord will approve here, and reward
when he cometh in the clouds of heaven.

13 I made some suggestions about translating these means into the Uniting Church in
a chapter I contributed to the late Robin Pryor’s Open to God: Discovering New
14 In Select Hymns: with Tunes Annexed (1761), John Wesley included a short guide to
singing this collection of Methodist hymns.
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True Methodist hymnody is about the words; the function of the tune is to express the words well. Do we still sing hymns whose content John Wesley would have approved? Of course, of the making of hymnbooks there is no end, and each one contains fewer of Charles’, let alone John’s verses. That also varies due to time and culture. When examining Bachelor of Divinity theses for the Pacific region, I was always struck by how few hymns the missionaries taught and used; it was noticeable that Charles’ Eucharistic hymns were seldom known, or hidden in the Easter section. But then the 1933 hymnbook for England (and Australasia) did the same. The liberal theology of the time avoided sacramentalism, and not only lost a precious part of our heritage, but weakened the link between the teaching of the Cross and the Lord’s Supper.

No, it is not hymn-singing that is characteristic of the Wesleys; it is the way in which the hymns teach doctrine, not only as engaging the intellect, but as leading to doxology, to the glory of God and the building up of the church. I believe there is a role for praise-singing, but not only praise - we have noted John Wesley’s plea for all the ‘grand parts’ of prayer and the same applies for song. What know they of the faith who only praise - and never are penitent, or pray for others (intercession)? Methodism, at least as I learned it, chose a set of hymns with a variety of themes and purposes. Nor am I opposed to what we might call the singing of mantras (as in some Taizé responses, but also in charismatic song) - but in their place, within liturgical fullness. I also think there is a place for a variety of instruments both for accompaniment, and for enjoyment on their own in worship.16 You do not need the Cornish or the Welsh to remind you that there is something special, and theologically significant, in a community of human voices singing in harmony, unaccompanied.

III. Liturgical Minimalism in Methodism

This leads me to my final assertion. We will return to Wesley in the context of Eucharistic worship in my next lecture, but I want to say something about one major reason why the worship forms of the

16 We should soberly note that at least one division in Methodism occurred because of objections to the placing of a pipe-organ in the chapel in Leeds! (1827-29, the secession of the ‘Protestant Methodists’.) More fruitfully, we might remember David’s ministry to Saul.
Wesleys failed to survive the nineteenth century. Wesley himself understood the need for adaptation to change. The seemingly (to us) minor proposal to ‘add’ extempore prayer to the set forms of the Church of England actually brought down the whole point of seventeenth-century Restoration uniformity. Wesley took this process further in the liturgical changes he made to the Book of Common Prayer when he edited it for use in North America, but he was not ready for American Methodism on horseback with the movement westwards. There are parallels with the kind of worship which suited, but also was possible in, the goldfields of Australia. What is possible in a neat pew-lined white-washed chapel in the town is not possible in a tent for a heterogeneous crowd of people on the move.

The influence I have in mind is summed up in the word ‘Revivalism’, which time requires me only to summarize. Faced with the exodus from the east coast of the United States, the questions for the churches included: How could a ‘learned clergy’ be sustained in such conditions? Educational standards for ministers had to be revised. What did the circuit-rider actually need for his message to be sound? Some Presbyterians began to offer ‘reduced Confessions’ (e.g. replacing the Westminster Confession) for the young man on the move across the continent. What does ‘liturgy’ look like at a camp in the outback? Charles Grandison Finney (1792–1875), a Presbyterian lawyer-cum-revivalist preacher, became ‘the Father of Revivalism’ and provided it with theology and tactics, and rode the tide through the Second Great Awakening (1790–1840). Now Finney is a figure worthy of study, and revivalism embraces a wide theological spectrum; and it is possible to study revivalist liturgy. But let me cut to the chase.

The conditions of the time and the urgency of reaching the New World for Christ meant new ecclesiology and new modes of evangelisation. All the churches looked to gaining new members; to be a Christian is to worship; worship means word and sacrament. But arguments over their meaning and effect, which lay behind much of the disunity of the denominations, were a hindrance to the

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17 Of course, both Britain and America had had experience of camp meetings, and the earliest were in fact Eucharistic in character. Some were held over several days, camping in the forests. See Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, American Methodist Worship (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), ch. 5, and see index.

18 One study I found helpful is William G. McLoughlin, Jr., Modern Revivalism: Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham (New York: Ronald Press, 1959), but there is a large library on the general subject.
stark choice the revivalists pressed upon their hearers: Christ or the devil? Finney and his imitators addressed the primary need as they saw it: liturgical and doctrinal minimalism. Revivals were not to deal with doctrine; the sacraments (though baptism often occurred) were to have no part of their meetings; and hymns which taught the more divisive notions of Christian faith were not sung. Everything was focussed on one thing, one moment: conversion. Afterwards, the converts could learn what they needed in the free market of the churches they joined.

Modern Protestantism almost universally went revivalist to meet the challenge. Every service of worship adopted revivalist principles: singing popular hymns and songs, full of emotion, holy and otherwise, rejecting liturgical books and fixed forms, creating ‘orders’ of service which made the sermon the main focus, and excluded the sacrament which had followed it since apostolic days. This is strong evidence that imitating a revival does not make for a revival. My own view is that the church’s main task is preparatio evangelica, to prepare the ground for the seed which the Holy Spirit grows (cf 1 Cor. 3:6-7). But part of that preparatio is the provision of the fullness of the Gospel, not parts chosen on the assumption that they might appeal to certain groups. So while rejoicing in the fruit that has come from revivalism, I think we should be equally grateful for liturgical scholarship which reminds us of what the Church has enacted in its proclamation and celebration of the Gospel since the days of the apostles, and which John Wesley knew.

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19 Geoffrey Wainwright and Karen Westerfield Tucker offer the comment that Wesley’s familiarity with the variety of liturgies in Oxford, such as that which preceded the University Sermon, also influenced the development of Methodist orders of service. See Geoffrey Wainwright and Karen Westerfield Tucker, eds. Oxford History of Christian Worship (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 521.
The Means of Grace: Traditioned Practice in Today's World is a book about Wesleyan spiritual practices and the life of...Â I'm excited to bring this vital Wesleyan spiritual material into a book form that is geared both for individual and small group study. If you'd like a copy of The Means of Grace, check out this link: The Bible tells us that Jesus’ followers are called disciples. Wesleyan Church Practices.

Sacraments - Wesleyan beliefs hold that baptism and the Lord's Supper "...are tokens of our profession of Christian faith and signs of God's gracious ministry toward us. By them, He works within us to quicken, strengthen and confirm our faith." Baptism is a symbol of God's grace, showing that the person accepts the benefits of Jesus' atoning sacrifice. The Lord's Supper is also a sacrament commanded by Christ. It signifies redemption through Christ's death and shows hope in his return. Communion serves as a sign of Christians'...Â Worship Service - Worship services at some Wesleyan churches may be held on Saturday evening in addition to Sunday morning. Many have some type of Wednesday night service as well. The Wesleyan Church. 1. Faith in the Holy Trinity. 210. We believe in the one living and true God, both holy and loving, eternal, unlimited in power, wisdom and goodness, the Creator and Preserver of all things. Within this unity there are three persons of one essential nature, power and eternity â€“ the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. 2. The Father.Â 216. We believe in the Holy Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son, and is of the same essential nature, majesty, and glory, as the Father and the Son, truly and eternally God. He is the Administrator of grace to all, and is particularly the effective Agent in conviction for sin, in regeneration, in sanctification, and in glorification. He is ever present, assuring, preserving, guiding, and enabling the believer.