

CONSTANT COMMUNION

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This article outlines John Wesley's approach to the Lord's Supper, including his high view of the sacrament and his practice of frequent Communion. It examines Wesley's concept of the Eucharist as a converting ordinance and asserts that it presupposed a reverent and penitential approach to the table. A reintroduction of frequent Communion to the contemporary church will require re-education of both clergy and laity and the teaching of liturgical studies in the theological curriculum.

I. The Lord's Supper for Wesley

To return to Wesley's 'Instituted Means of Grace', the entry on the Eucharist is very brief: 'The Lord's Supper: Do you use this at every opportunity? with solemn prayer before; with earnest and deliberate self-devotion?'¹ He has set out all the 'ordinary' means of grace, not excluding the 'extraordinary' which, in any case, occur at God's own initiative; but one ordinary 'means' is greater. As Charles put it, in one of the *Hymns on the Lord's Supper* (1745),²

The prayer, the fast, the word conveys,
When mix'd with faith, Thy life to me;
In all the channels of Thy grace
I still have fellowship with Thee:
But chiefly here my soul is fed
With fulness of immortal bread.³

The brothers wrote several hymns which placed the sacrament highest among the means, but nevertheless important they also

¹ *Minutes of Several Conferences* (1744), 17.

² I am grateful to Karen Westerfield Tucker for these hymn verses, in an article online at <http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/table-etiquette-means-and-manners>, accessed 2 August 2016.

³ Hymn no. 54, stanza 4.

usually remind us of the other, the ordinary means, which are neglected at peril. In another hymn, he insists,

Fasting He doth, and hearing bless,
And prayer can much avail,
Good vessels all to draw the grace
Out of salvation's well.

But none, like this mysterious rite
Which dying mercy gave,
Can draw forth all His promised might
And all His will to save.⁴

So this is no unqualified sacramentalism, even if their critics flung that title at the first Methodists. In eighteenth-century England, to receive communion more than the rubrical three times a year was already excessive enough to provoke comment. Nor did the Wesleys' strong Eucharistic theology veer towards Roman transubstantiation:

O the depth of love Divine,
Th' unfathomable grace!
Who shall say how bread and wine
God into man conveys!

How the bread His flesh imparts,
How the wine transmits His blood,
Fills His faithful people's hearts
With all the life of God!

Let the wisest mortal show
How we the grace receive,
Feeble elements bestow
A power not theirs to give.

Who explains the wondrous way,
How through these the virtue came?
These the virtue did convey,
Yet still remain the same.⁵

And in this, the brothers were classical Anglicans, not speculating, but thinking as their Church had taught them; and Methodism

⁴ Hymn no. 42.

⁵ Hymn no. 57.

followed them. Given the nevertheless high doctrine of the sacrament they held, it ought to be no surprise that they believed everyone should frequently avail themselves of it. It comes as a surprise to most Methodists to learn of Wesley's own practice. We have already heard that the Holy Club aimed at weekly communion, and moved from altar to altar to achieve it. We need to be careful not to descend yet again into Anglican-bashing, the usual Methodist line being that the eighteenth-century Church of England was seriously moribund, and the Methodists resurrected it. There were fine and faithful, and learned bishops at the time, as Professor William Gibson has shown;⁶ and in places like Oxford, and in most cathedrals, communion was available every Sunday. After they left Oxford and after their return to London from Georgia, both brothers record that they usually received communion at St Paul's Cathedral on Sunday mornings. When not at St Paul's, they found other Anglican celebrations in the city. But they also communicated when bringing the sacrament to the sick and the dying, usually on afternoon visits. In that early period, John's diary reveals that on average, he communicated 'just over once every four days.'⁷ In later years, when in London, John added a regular Saturday evening communion to his regular Sunday mornings, many now celebrated in one of the Methodist chapels. The easy access to sacramental service in the capital did not apply in the provinces, and it is clear that John took the initiative in providing such opportunities, on all the high holy days and especially in Holy Week and Easter. You can read the statistics in John Bowmer's careful account, but over the whole span of his long life, Wesley's average is once every five days, or about 70-90 times a year.

II. The Duty of Constant Communion

Constancy was Wesley's watchword: he communicated with the same constancy at the age of 86 as he did at the age of 36. There was no sea-change after Aldersgate. Sermon 101, 'The Duty of Constant Communion' is one he claims to have preached first to 'my pupils at Oxford' and 55 years later republished it, having only slightly

⁶ For example in William Gibson, *The Church of England 1688-1832: Unity and Accord* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001).

⁷ John Bowmer, *The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper in Early Methodism* (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1951), 51.

abbreviated it with wisdom attained in maturity (he says). His opening summary of it reads,

'Do this in remembrance of me.' Luke 22:1

It is no wonder that 'men who have no fear of God should never think of doing this. But it is strange that it should be neglected by any that do fear God, and desire to save their souls; And yet nothing is more common. One reason why many neglect it is, they are so much afraid of 'eating and drinking unworthily,' that they never think how much greater the danger is when they do not eat or drink it at all. That I may do what I can to bring these well-meaning men to a more just way of thinking, I shall,

- I. Show that it is the duty of every Christian to receive the Lord's Supper as often as he can; and,
- II. Answer some objections.

And he does, both. As ever, he adapts another source, one of his father's *Discourses*, some 184 pages on 'the perpetual obligation that lies on adult Christians to communicate and even to frequent Communion' (here he is using 'frequent' as a verb). John, by contrast, wants 'communion' to be 'constant', no doubt inspired by St Paul's 'constant prayer' (Rom. 12: 12, 1 Thess. 5:17), a state of mind rather than a canonical calculation. Like his father, he knows there are objectors to these encouragements, and he composed three sermons to counter them: the others being *The Means of Grace* and, *On Attending the Church Service* (in which he justifies his plea that no Methodist gathering should be scheduled at the time the parish church is at worship.) They could all be called classical Anglican sermons, yet by now, some of Wesley's followers were drifting towards the old Puritan practice of infrequent communion, with various justifications.⁸ Some, for good reasons, did not find the formal services at the Church answered their need, particularly by contrast with the warmth and participation of the Methodist gatherings. More familiar to us are from those who regard themselves as unworthy to receive. In our own time, we have so successfully preached the reality of sin, that our people do not believe in the reality of salvation! Wesley replies that the only worthiness is found in the words, 'I repent'.⁹ He adds, since Jesus commands this obedience, Jesus must consider us sinners *worthy* to

⁸ He deals with the rule of communion thrice yearly in #20 of *The Duty of Constant Communion*, where he argues that it the Church insists on three, how much better to accept this grace far more often?!

⁹ J. Wesley, *The Duty of Constant Communion*, # 14.

receive - so how can we refuse? And is this an argument against receiving often? No, because if you refuse to receive once, it is no worse than refusing a thousand times: you have broken the invitation of your baptism by refusing another invitation of the Lord. We are, he might have said, constantly invited to respond to God's grace.

Then another familiar objection (certainly Puritan) that 'constant communion ... abates our reverence for the sacrament.' How can this be, Wesley asks, if God has asked you to do it?¹⁰ True reverence for the sacrament will never diminish by familiarity. And if you did not find the satisfaction you expected in the sacrament, whose problem is that?¹¹ Did you properly prepare? (Were your expectations the right ones?) But much of Wesley's argument turns simply on the loving command of Jesus, 'Do this'. The whole sermon rewards re-reading in our day.¹²

Wesley stays with his biblical and spiritual arguments. He says nothing of the prudential: that a main reason for infrequent Methodist communions was the paucity of Anglican ordained presiders,¹³ and the tension between lay and ordained presiders became a hallmark of early nineteenth-century Methodism. He bent over backwards to avoid schism, delaying any resolution of the concern. With his death, that issue explosively opened up, and was not resolved until 1836, when the Wesleyan Methodist body decided to ordain their preachers.

III. A Converting Ordinance

Professor Karen Westerfield Tucker points out that it is modern Methodists who speak so repeatedly of the sacrament as a 'converting ordinance', not Wesley himself; he saw it chiefly as the paradigm of God's gracious 'means of grace'. Do Wesley's arguments, in the sermon we have just examined, add up to a

¹⁰ J. Wesley, *The Duty of Constant Communion*, #16.

¹¹ J. Wesley, *The Duty of Constant Communion*, #18, 19.

¹² It might be noted that the great Cambridge leader of the English Evangelicals, Charles Simeon, encouraged frequent communion because it was 'a medium of communion with Christ actually present with his disciples hosting them with bread and wine as the Giver of Grace'. See Wainwright and Westerfield Tucker, *Oxford History of Christian Worship*, 521.

¹³ The same practical challenges faced both Luther and Calvin, both advocates for the Lord's Supper on the Lord's Day. They insisted on ordination for the presiders, and not enough former Roman priests were available for all the Reformed altars; the few presiders were spread widely, and the result was infrequent communions.

universal invitation to all (and sundry) to come? Surely not. There is plenty in *The Duty of Constant Communion* which takes seriously the need to examine ourselves before ‘we eat the bread and drink the cup of the Lord’ (‘in an unworthy manner’ 1 Cor. 11:27), or ‘we eat and drink judgement’ (v. 29). Indeed he goes on to say, ‘If we judged ourselves, we would not be judged’ (v. 31).

This insistence on a penitent approach is (as Wesley says) no more than the normal practice in the Book of Common Prayer, to the invitation to communion which reads, as it did for many years in Methodist liturgies,

Ye that do truly and earnestly repent of your sins, and are in love and charity with your neighbours, and intend to lead a new life, following the commandments of God, and walking from henceforth in his holy ways; draw near with faith and take this holy sacrament to your comfort

Or, to use another phrase characteristic of Wesley, all those who ‘flee from the wrath to come’ are welcome to the Lord’s Table. On that basis he withdrew the ticket of any member who was not so desirous; and *issued* a ticket to any who were not members of his societies but exhibited such an intention to come to a Methodist celebration.

I must repeat one story which Bowden records; it tell us much about practice under Wesley. ‘Mr (Henry) Moore was in 1789 the Superintendent of the City Road circuit. One gentleman, who usually received the Lord’s Supper at the New Chapel, had been with his family to the theatre. Mr Moore objected to his coming to the sacrament for that reason; and not being a member of the Society, he had to obtain from Mr Wesley a note of admission. The gentleman had called upon the Revd John Richardson, and got from him a promise to apply to Mr Wesley, when he returned to London, for the note desired. Mr Wesley had preached, he went into the vestry, and Mr Moore, having shortly followed him, saw Mr Wesley writing the note, and about to hand it to Mr Richardson, when Mr Moore, addressing Mr Wesley, said, ‘Sir, do you mean to give a note of admission to the holy Sacrament to Mr -----?’ Mr Wesley replied, ‘Yes, Henry, I have reason to believe that the report of his conduct is a mistake’. ‘I have fully examined it, Sir’, rejoined Mr Moore, ‘and I find it no mistake; and if you give him a note, I shall not take the sacrament myself’. Looking earnest at Mr Moore, Mr Wesley said, ‘I would take the sacrament if the devil himself were

there'. 'And so would I, sir,' rejoined Mr Moore, 'but not if you gave him a ticket of admission'.¹⁴

This offers many illuminations. It illustrates Wesley's approach to rules: they exist, but they admit of exception. It tells us that a class ticket admitted to communion, because membership of a class implied self-examination and a state of repentance. It was also built on baptism, which he regarded as a sufficient qualification for enjoying the privileges of the Supper.¹⁵ And I rather like the relationship between Messrs Wesley and Moore.

So who were 'unconverted'? In Wesley's time, they were those who *lacked the assurance of faith* - but now it means rather someone *without any faith at all*. Wesley did not believe that someone notoriously caught up in a life antithetical to Christ, with no intention whatsoever of changing, could wander in on a whim and approach the Lord's Table. Those who entered with a note of admission had exhibited some sign of a desire to turn from such a life. And in our time we cannot assume that the passerby has received baptism. Hence the United Methodist Church - after some controversy - has this Invitation to the Lord's Table:

Christ our Lord invites to his table
all who love him,
who earnestly repent of their sin
and seek to live in peace with one another.¹⁶

Our recent 'openness' is, I suspect, more a response to our society's pathological fear of causing offence, or of being guilty of exclusivism, encouraged by alarm at declining church attendance (particularly of young people),¹⁷ than to anything resembling the urgent desire to change the direction of one's life and allegiance, found in the biblical word, *metanoia*.

There are no prizes for guessing where I am going in this lecture. I believe that if anything John Wesley thought was central to the

¹⁴ Bowmer, *The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper*, 117, quoting from G. J. Stevenson, *City Road Chapel*, 376, n.d.

¹⁵ Bowmer, *The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper* 103ff. It is noted that Wesley did not mention Confirmation (p. 104).

¹⁶ Sad to say, the Uniting Church adopted this form, only to negate it entirely by providing an alternative making no such demand. See *Uniting in Worship 2*, 209.

¹⁷ One of Hempton's major arguments is that Methodist decline began soon after its early meteoric rise, and especially as it settled into a public institution which conformed to current cultural values. Present church leaders seem to think decline is a judgment on their own times and ministries; many have so worried before them.

Christian life he wished to inculcate through his evangelistic ministry, it is this. It was equally a radical recovery proposed by all the leaders of the sixteenth-century Reformation with the single exception of Zwingli, who was the proponent of the argument that anything done too often loses its mystique. In fact, he created a liturgy which worked hard to restore the mystery.

Sadly, the history of the churches illustrate that the deep memory of past disputes is more efficiently passed on than their resolution. Luther and Calvin set out to rid the sacrament of superstition and obfuscation, and each had a basic method to do so: in Luther's case, being a pastor aware of the thinking of the ordinary folk, he disturbed as little as possible of received practice, but removed texts he saw as misleading, and he reclaimed practices he saw as unnecessarily lost - the laity receiving the cup is an example. In the early Lutheran Communion, communicants fainted when the bread was put *in their hand* and they were offered the chalice! Luther reformed minimally, and kept what he knew helped people's devotion. Calvin was more radical. His principle was: the rule of Christian worship rests on what the Scriptures say; anything not so justified is to be excluded. Thus, he prefaced the sacraments with the biblical 'warrant' each needed: Matt. 28 for baptism, and 1 Cor. 11 for the Eucharist. Having read the warrant, the service could proceed without challenge. The result was rather bare, and had the unfortunate result of both casuistical arguments about what could be done and ignorant iconoclasm. All of which has made their heirs supersensitive to symbol, and the use of the arts in worship.

If we are to recover 'constant communion', we need to re-educate the present generations of our lay people, and absolve them of the liturgical fears which inhibit their prayer; and we need to re-educate our pastors to know what celebrating the fullness of the Supper has involved down the ages, so that they can see what is essential, and what can be changed, in our own time. The great United Methodist liturgical scholar, James F. White, entitled one of his essays, 'You are Free- If', that is, if you know what you are doing, and why. The result will be determined locally, in the congregation. It will involve the pastor, who needs to know how to balance word and sacrament without loss to either; the Communion stewards in their preparation of the elements; the Sunday School because children will participate with joy; the musicians in their choice of hymns and other music; the property trust, because few of our church buildings support this practice; all with the generous consent of the laity. However, the first step will be the re-introduction of the teaching of liturgy in our

theological curricula, the lack of which affects every part of our contemporary mission. Christians are a worshipping people; doctrine points us to the One worthy of our worship.

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