

# **THE MISCELLANY OF METHODIST WORSHIP**

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*In this article a number of distinctively Methodist forms of worship, which are only infrequently celebrated today, are examined. The eighteenth-century Love Feast, Watchnight Service and Covenant Service are all discussed and anecdotal reflections on their contemporary use are given. John Wesley's Sunday Service is described as the foundation of much contemporary Methodist and Uniting/United liturgy. 'Form and freedom' are identified as the characteristic feature of Wesleyan worship.*

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Any treatment of the worship practices of John Wesley should acknowledge a number which have not survived to the modern age. The members of the societies were expected regularly to attend the services of the Church of England, so many of these distinctive practices grew up to meet other spiritual needs, to provide richer fare.

## **I. The Love Feast**

The Moravians were the inspiration for the Love Feast, and took them to be like the 'Agape' in the early Church. A library of studies has grown up around this assumption. Positively, the love feast harnessed the Methodist enthusiasm for the Lord's Supper with something which was a supper, but of a different kind. The eating and drinking were really secondary, though as a sign of sharing they were enacted with some enthusiasm, people clambering across pews to break cake with a friend (not encouraged!). They were primarily faith-sharing occasions, testimony-services, rejoicing in a common faith and a common experience of salvation, and, of course, hymn-singing. Wesley's *apologia* was as follows:

In order to increase in them a grateful sense of all God's mercies, I desired that, one evening in a quarter, all the men in Band, and on a second, all the women, would meet; and on a third, both men and

women together; that we might together 'eat bread', as the ancient Christians did, 'with gladness and singleness of heart'. [cf Acts 2:46] At these Love-feasts (so we termed them, retaining the name, as well as the thing, which was in use from the beginning) our food is only a little plain cake and water. But we seldom return from them without being fed, not only with the 'meat that perisheth', but with 'that which endureth to everlasting life'.<sup>1</sup>

We must not forget the charismatic element in these special Methodist occasions. In New Year's Day 1739, John recorded this in the first reference to a Love-feast at Fetter Lane, attended by some sixty people:

About three in the morning, as we were continuing instant in prayer, the power of God came upon us mightily, insomuch that many cried out for exceeding joy, and many fell to the ground. As soon as we were recovered a little from that awe and amazement at the presence of His majesty, we broke out with one voice, 'We praise thee, O God; we acknowledge thee to be the Lord'.<sup>2</sup>

Wesley kept his reports of such phenomena tantalising sober. We know that he was shocked by some things which happened at his gatherings. People cried out and fell to the ground - but they recovered, and sang an ancient liturgical hymn, the *Te Deum*! Really? It is possible, but what is he not telling us? An audience of Nazarenes and Wesleyans might be able to supply some answers. The truth is, these things are hard to manufacture.

In the year of John Wesley's tercentenary in 2003, I conducted a Love-feast in a vast ex-Methodist tabernacle in Auburn (a Melbourne suburb), with a goodly crowd of genuinely believing ex-Methodists. I even set some people up to give a testimony, but they were formal, and formally received. The hymns were sung, but with no danger of being accused of lust. The cups of water and pleasant slices of cake were taken with all the propriety of the solid middle class which built and still attended the church. The power of God did not come upon us mightily. That was not how that congregation expressed such an emotion.

In my ecumenical life, testimony has found a new place. One of the most significant movements within the search for Christian unity is the Global Christian Forum. It aims to widen the churches'

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<sup>1</sup> John Wesley, *Works*, vol. VIII, 258-9, quoted in John Bishop, *Methodist Worship in relation to Free Church Worship* (London: Epworth, 1950), 102.

<sup>2</sup>

conversation to include both those who have engaged in theological dialogue for a century and more and are (relatively) large and historic, and those which have grown up in the last century, and who are generally known as evangelicals and Pentecostals, broadly defined. There is a large legacy of mistrust, for many regard 'ecumenism' as an invention of the Devil. Both the pro- and anti-cases on that topic are acknowledged. A Forum meeting promises a 'safe place' to meet where no-one will be proselytised or forced into polemics. Half of every forum meeting is spent in small groups listening to each member express, in their own terms, when their life was encountered by Jesus Christ, and how that has brought them to their present ministry. The word 'testimony' is not used, because only some know it (nor is the word 'ecumenism'!). But when people speak honestly of such an intimate part of their very being as their relationship with Christ, the account by a Methodist nurse from Norway, or a Baptist teacher from North India, or a bearded Coptic monk, or a Catholic bishop from Paraguay sounds extraordinarily alike. And that communal experience changes opinions and lives. Regrettably, I can say no more now of the Forum, but its 'method' is now being used in local contexts across the world to open up new relationships where only enmity or ignorance had reigned before.<sup>3</sup>

## **II. The Watchnight**

We know Wesley admired the watchnights of the Moravians which he saw in Herrnhut in 1738, where those keeping the night watch sang a hymn on every hour. At Fetter Lane, they also held one on New Year's Eve. However, it seems likely that the Methodist use began spontaneously in Kingswood where some people met at the school, and spent the night in prayer, praise and thanksgiving. Someone brought this to Wesley's attention, and we have his characteristic response:

Some advised me to put an end to this; but upon weighing the thing thoroughly, and comparing it with the practice of the ancient Christians, I could see no cause to forbid it. Rather I believed it might be made of more general use. So I sent them word, I designed to

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<sup>3</sup> See the website, [www.globalchristianforum.org](http://www.globalchristianforum.org).

watch with them on the Friday nearest the full moon, that we might have light thither and back again.<sup>4</sup>

Thus began a monthly watch-night, and it spread. The first to be held in London was on Friday 9th April 1742. It would appear that the prayer, praise and thanksgiving, not to mention song, was noisy, producing complaints, and at times, vigorous opposition from other revellers, especially at New Year's Eve, for which behaviour it became a pious substitute. Charles wrote some 18 hymns for these 'solemn assemblies'. The monthly meetings eventually declined, leaving the New Year event the sole observance.

I remember watch-nights in my own childhood in country Victoria, though as relatively tame affairs. I also remember overhearing general carousals in the nearby streets. I suppose we sang appropriate hymns, but I don't remember Charles Wesley's

Oft have we passed the guilty night,  
In revellings and frantic mirth

later changed for those who never did such things to

How many pass the guilty night...

and continuing,

We will not let our eyelids sleep,  
But humbly lift them to the skies,  
And all a solemn vigil keep;  
So many years on sin bestowed,  
Can we not watch one night for God?<sup>5</sup>

When I was teaching at the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Institute at Bossey, the two sisters of Grandchamp who 'animated' the community's worship, several times arranged a vigil of prayer to last all night in the chapel of the château, people taking turns to read and offer prayer, with long periods of silence in between.<sup>6</sup> We sat or

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<sup>4</sup> Bishop, *Methodist Worship*, 105. Westerfield Tucker has commented on this and the American experience in Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, *American Methodist Worship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 65-66.

<sup>5</sup> Hymn 766 in Wesley's *Supplement to Hymns for the People Called Methodists* (London: John Mason, 1831 reprint.)

<sup>6</sup> These sisters grew out of a regular retreat by Reformed pastors' widows and wives which met in the village of Grandchamp, near Neuchâtel. The theological students

lay in whatever position was comfortable on the carpeted floor, with Bibles and other books from which we read. It was a very fruitful and memorable time, of genuine spiritual refreshment. I also tried something similar for Easter Eve for my church youth, sharing the leadership with some of the group, and leaving the small and warm chapel at dawn to go into our large church, and gather around the Lord's Table in the sanctuary, to greet the Risen One. It has not been forgotten by any who were there.

### **III. The Covenant Service**

Another event came to be associated with the New Year, and is regarded by many as Methodism's particular gift to ecumenical liturgy: the service for Renewing the Covenant. John Wesley received the idea of 'covenant' from scripture and from the Puritan piety of his parents (before they later 'conformed' to the Church of England). In his journal he acknowledged that he had borrowed from 'that blessed man Richard Alleine' and a later work by Richard's son-in-law (his daughter had married a cousin, Joseph Alleine, a Puritan priest ejected in 1662) in which they had devised directions for renewing the covenant. Wesley drew heavily on these for this service, and added exhortations, extempore prayer and hymns, especially Charles' *Come, let us use the grace divine*. Wesley introduced the practice in August 1755 thus:

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 with all our heart and all our soul.<sup>7</sup>

It was preceded by a fast (on Friday, as usual) and some 1800 people met in the 'French Church at Spitalsfield'.<sup>8</sup> In 1757, he celebrated it

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who were to become the founders of the Taizé Community (in France), Roger Schutz and Max Thurian, were inspired and 'formed' by these sisters. After the Second World War, they wrote a Rule together.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Bishop, *Methodist Worship*, 107. Interestingly, the 'forefathers' in this account must refer to the Puritans, the folk ejected in 1662, and not to his Anglican or Patristic forebears. Wesley had some important debts to the traditions which his parents left behind in their youth, passed on not least by his mother.

<sup>8</sup> This was a chapel, L'Eglise de l' Hôpital, built in 1743 for Huguenot refugees (a word they contributed to the English language), mostly weavers, from France after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes (1685). It has been used as a synagogue and is presently a mosque.

on Good Friday evening. He did not link it with any particular part of the liturgical calendar. He also regarded it, like the Love Feast, as a private rather than a public service. John Bishop writes:

The service is intended to mark a new turning back from sin, a fresh acceptance of God's purposes for His people and a renewal of the bond between their souls and God. The strength of the service stands in its equal stress on the emotions and ethics. The heart is warmed anew towards God, as is right; but the will is also stirred up to right living, without which none can see God.<sup>9</sup>

Even with the somewhat neutralised form in which the Covenant service was edited for the 1936 *Book of Offices*, it is a powerful spiritual undertaking. Even so, it is too much for some! I found that it was wise to publish the words of the actual Covenant in the church bulletin a week before, and ask people seriously to consider it before they vowed it on the coming Sunday.

The service has the advantage of a splendid study by the late David Tripp.<sup>10</sup> The British, the United Methodist and the Uniting Church have all produced new versions of the service, retaining words which go back to the Alleines and Wesley, but in each case, making the link with the Baptismal covenant more explicit. It is also usual to join in Holy Communion at this service, binding the event to the New Covenant itself. In the Uniting Church, it occurs at the beginning of the church's year in February, though some offer it on Advent Sunday. In fact, it can be powerful on a Sunday in the Easter season, parallel to Roman Catholic and Anglican renewal of Baptismal vows in that season.

#### **IV. The Sunday Service**

Perhaps the most widespread legacy of Wesleyan worship, and also the subject of an eminent study, is 'The Sunday Service'.<sup>11</sup> Dr Karen Westerfield Tucker has given us, as the editor of a collection of essays from across the Methodist world, not the usual treatment of

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<sup>9</sup> Bishop, *Methodist Worship*, 108.

<sup>10</sup> D. H. Tripp, *The Renewal of the Covenant in the Methodist Tradition* (London: Epworth, 1969).

<sup>11</sup> Karen B. Westerfield Tucker (ed.), *The Sunday Service of the Methodists, Twentieth-Century Worship in Worldwide Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon / Kingswood, 1996). The book is a festschrift for the distinguished Methodist liturgical scholar the late James F. White, to which I contributed a chapter on the Uniting Church.

liturgy as texts, but of genuine contextual accounts of what Methodist (and United/Uniting) worship looks like in sixteen nations. In many ways, it poses the question with which I began these lectures, 'What is Wesleyan worship?'<sup>12</sup>

The Sunday Service was the title in the 'prayer book' Wesley prepared in 1784 for the new nation of the United States, and for 'His Majesty's Dominions', meaning Canada as well as the British Isles. Again, there are a number of important studies of it, analysing the changes made to its 1662 matrix. They include an edited psalter (edited for Christian use according to Wesley's lights), a lectionary, propers and collects, minimal services for morning and evening devotion, baptism for infants and - needed in the former colonies - 'for those of riper years', and an order of Holy Communion. Wide permission was given for the alternative use of extempore prayer. Obviously I cannot dig very far into this subject now.<sup>13</sup>

'Form and Freedom' are the words Westerfield Tucker uses to sum up Wesley's legacy in worship. His devotion and loyalty to the Book of Common Prayer (he wrote, 'I believe there is no Liturgy in the world, either in ancient or modern language, which breathes more of a solid, scriptural, rational piety than the Common Prayer of the Church of England.') stand behind all his modifications, so his new book is 'a liturgy little differing from that of the church of England'. In his native England, that devotion remained among the Methodist people at least to the 1960s, when the 1936 Book of Offices was still in use; I used to attend a Methodist Church in Muswell Hill (London) which regularly sang Morning Prayer, and if much of our worship became non-sacramental and some version of revivalist-minimalist, we did tend to read from a book when it came to the sacrament.

In the preparation of *Uniting in Worship*, now in two editions of 1988 and 2005, for the Uniting Church, we looked to Anglican liturgies, as well as Methodist and Presbyterian, sharing in the

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<sup>12</sup> I have omitted, due to time, any consideration of the 5 a.m. service (retained, I am told, in Tongan Methodism). On this see Adrian Burdon, *The Preaching Service: The Glory of the Methodists - A study of the Piety, Ethos and Development of the Methodist Preaching Service* (Joint Liturgical Studies) (Nottingham: Grove Books, 1991).

<sup>13</sup> See James F. White (ed.), *John Wesley's Prayer Book: The Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America* (Cleveland: OSL Publications, 1991). An earlier edition was under the title *John Wesley's Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1984). See also Dr Tucker's essay 'Form and Freedom: John Wesley's Legacy for Methodist Worship', in *The Sunday Service of the Methodists* on which I have drawn.

ecumenical gifts of recent scholarship - and the Lima Report (which gave a list of elements essential to the celebration of the two Gospel sacraments).<sup>14</sup> There is a 'style' of the language for prayer which was found throughout the new worship books of that era, chosen to suit public reading, rich enough to bear repetition, doctrinally concise, the language, perhaps of the Revised Standard Version of the Bible. And of course, none of them, even for Anglicans, require the strict usage of the Book of Common (imposed) Prayer: they are all Directories of Public Worship, the invention of the Puritan Westminster Assembly (1644). 'Form and Freedom' was their watchword. Yet the books are still regarded as too formal for use in some congregations and some cultures, even though they still make good models, the abandonment of which leaves the churches' beliefs without important moorings.

Another story from the Global Christian Forum: A Pentecostal bishop (sic) asked me whether my Church used creeds. Crossing my fingers, I said 'Yes.' 'How?' he asked. 'On most Sundays as part of worship, as an affirmation of faith following the sermon,' I said, true to my congregation in North Melbourne. I said that I and many other preachers sometimes choose to preach on a section of a creed, or to preach a series of sermons on the Nicene or Apostles' Creed as a refresher course in basic doctrine. And then I remarked that, although they don't contain all doctrine, they are a useful summary, even a check-list, which was universally agreed in churches both East and West, and (in the language of the Uniting Church's *Basis of Union*), 'framed in the language of their day, and used by Christians in many days', and 'for instruction in the faith, in worship, and as acts of allegiance to the Holy Trinity.'<sup>15</sup> At this the bishop sparked up. 'Yes', he said, 'that's what I want: most of my young pastors think there is one God, the Holy Spirit! I say to them: that's not biblical! I need something they can learn so that they are regularly grounded in Scripture and God the Holy Trinity.'

Even if we do not eat and drink the Body and Blood of Christ every Sunday, we are bound to preach Christ and him crucified. (I

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<sup>14</sup> *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982) (Faith and Order Paper 111). The lists are at B20 and E27.

<sup>15</sup> The *Basis of Union* (para. 9) also commits 'her ministers and instructors to careful study of these creeds and to the discipline of interpreting their teaching in a later age'. For commentaries see that by J. Davis McCaughey, *Commentary on the Basis of Union of the Uniting Church in Australia* (Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1980), and D'Arcy Wood, *Building on a Solid Basis: A Guide to the Basis of Union of the Uniting Church in Australia* (Melbourne: Joint Board of Christian Education, 1986).

must observe that in a Preaching Service, it is possible to avoid mention of the Cross; but it is very difficult to avoid in the Lord's Supper!) We are told that John Wesley preached for about thirty minutes, though some of his printed sermons would take much longer: that is because they were adapted as instruction. More amazing, I think, was his ability to preach to, and be heard by, crowds of thousands in the open air. It was a gift the orators of his age had or cultivated. In a delightful book, Geoffrey Blainey says that the tradition of public speaking began to diminish only with the invention of the microphone from about the 1920s.<sup>16</sup> This applied to both parliamentary and pulpit speaking.

The sermon has been under critical scrutiny in many ways since the new Enlightenment of the 1960s. I am unmoved by the 'incessant brightenings, lightenings, lengthenings, abridgements, simplifications and complications' which C. S. Lewis so brilliantly sends up in his *Prayer: Letters to Malcolm*.<sup>17</sup> The use of data projectors, mercifully unknown to Lewis, is nothing but a distraction. The invasion of technology into church services is, in my view, one of the most serious threats to worship across the board, a serious sign of our uncritical view of contemporary culture. The (un)predictable malfunctioning of such 'visual aids' are an irritant and a distraction. The attention of the congregation is broken; any atmosphere of prayer vanishes. The technology obtrudes itself between the gifted leader and the expectant congregation. Let's trust the human-to-human communication which is one of the great gifts of our Creator.

Technology (ignoring things like electric light) in almost every case reduces the human, the created element in the liturgy. In order for the Scripture to be heard, the lector must now know how to use a microphone (not a natural endowment in many cases). The preacher's words must be supplemented by images on the screen behind them, and since not all listeners are privy to the preacher's ideas of the visual, they are distractions; worse, they may supply alternative (and additional) *words*. The simple message of a candle of light (and heart: symbols are dangerous) is diminished by the burnt matches stuck to it - and in some traditions, the votive candles which can so beautifully stand for our prayers now automatically

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<sup>16</sup> Geoffrey Blainey, *Black Kettle and Full Moon, Daily Life in a Vanished Australia*, Camberwell (Melbourne: Viking/Penguin, 2003), 137ff.

<sup>17</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Prayer: Letters to Malcolm* (London: Collins/Fontana, 1974), 45. His first Letter is about liturgy - and the rest about personal prayer.

light up when a coin is inserted (a new version of ‘when the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs’). All these experiments in trying to improve direct forms of human communication merely add to clutter.

My time is up, but I add a footnote. If you want to read a first-rate *apologia* for modern biblical preaching, read Pope Francis’ first Apostolic Letter, *Evangelii Gaudium, The Joy of the Gospel* (2013). Any evangelical should find there the deepest encouragement and affirmation, perhaps from a surprising source. His Chapter Three is about preaching, about its audience and contexts, its charisms, its style, its integrity, the right way to prepare to preach - and all of it in a spirit of humility characteristic of its author. The Second Vatican Council already revolutionised what it called ‘the Table of the Word’, and has much to say to those of us who believe we have a tradition of proclamation.

Let Karen Westerfield Tucker have the last word:

Investigation of Wesley’s theology and practices related to worship is not the road to nostalgia, but it is, in my opinion, the road to better, and more faithful, worship. Wesley’s emphasis on preaching and teaching the word of God charges us to look seriously at the words we use in worship. Our words may reinforce the narcissism that is rampant in our culture; or our words may be those that praise God and form us in the Christian faith. And because worship is not only a gift from God to us, but is also a means of grace, Wesley reminds us that we should come honestly and expectantly: acknowledging our need of God and anticipating the grace that God has promised.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Karen Westerfield Tucker, ‘Table Manners: Means and Manners’, United Methodist Church Discipleship Ministries, article at <http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/table-etiquette-means-and-manners>, accessed 2 August 2016.

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