

Charles Wesley's Eucharistic Hymns

Churchman 63/2 1949

Frank Colquhoun

One of the more obvious weaknesses of Evangelicalism in modern times has been an apologetic and defensive attitude towards the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. This has been due, almost certainly, to what John Wesley called "an over-grown fear of Popery" and the consequent suspicion of any doctrine or rite which savoured of the "blasphemous fable" of the Mass. As a result there grew up among Evangelicals the idea that it was highly dangerous to attach too much importance or give too much prominence to the Lord's Supper, lest the sacrament should become a substitute for the Saviour, and that in consequence "sacramentalism" in any shape or form was contrary to the Evangelical genius and tradition.

Happily this unhealthy state of affairs is rapidly being remedied, and one of the most encouraging features of present-day Evangelicalism is a fresh interest in the sacraments of the Gospel and a recognition of their essential place in the corporate life of the Church. In the case of the Lord's Supper this is finding expression in the "Family Communion", which is now adopted in many parishes and which is a serious attempt to restore the Holy Communion to the centre of the worshipping life of the people of God. Such a step is a return not only to the ideals of the early Church and of the Reformation: it is also a return to the faith and practice of the Evangelical Revival. Both John and Charles Wesley were, in the best sense of the word, "sacramentalists". They not only advocated but practised frequent Communion. They were convinced of the Evangelical value of the Lord's Supper both as a converting and as a sanctifying ordinance. They taught a "high" view of the sacrament, as can be seen at once by an examination of their "Hymns on the Lord's Supper", published in 1745 along with selected extracts from Dean Brevint's "The Christian Sacrament and Sacrifice".

I

Such an examination of the hymns has recently been undertaken by Dr. J. Ernest Rattenbury, the leading modern authority on Wesleyan hymnody.¹ His book is an important one, not only because of its exceedingly valuable exposition of the hymns themselves, but because of the light it throws upon the eucharistic faith and practice of the great Evangelical fathers. The volume includes as an appendix the hymns in full (166 in all), together with the Brevint extracts, which were selected and arranged by John Wesley. The hymns are directly based upon Brevint and in certain cases are a much improved paraphrase of his words. It is important to recognise that both the Wesley brothers fully accepted Brevint's sacramental theology, which was of the old-fashioned High Church variety. Perhaps it is even more important for the modern Evangelical to remember that Charles Wesley wrote these sacramental hymns "not in his days of quiet retirement, but in the heat of revival, in the midst of persecution, in the most exciting hours of his career. They are essentially revival hymns" (p. 143). Moreover, not only was Wesley's evangelistic passion at its height, but at the time the sacrament of the Lord's Supper was generally if not universally neglected in the Church of England. It is more than a half-truth to say that the Evangelical revival was also something in the nature of a Sacramental revival.

But here a word of caution must be entered. Let it not be supposed for a moment that the Wesleys cherished Roman sympathies. Their sacramental views were as strongly anti-Roman as they were anti-Zwinglian. They decisively rejected the Roman dogma of transubstantiation:

No local Deity
We worship, Lord, in Thee.

Throughout the hymns any mechanical conception of grace is counteracted by the firm insistence on *faith* as the only means by which the sacramental benefit can be enjoyed. And while a doctrine of the “real Presence” is clearly taught, there is no notion that the Presence is confined to the sacred elements. The Presence of the Lord was sought not in the bread and wine but in the banquet itself, of which He was the presiding Host.

In Thy ordinance appear,
Come, and meet Thy followers here.

In the rite Thou hast enjoin'd
Let us now our Saviour find.

So while the Wesleys did not for a moment accept the Roman idea of the real Presence, it is equally true to say that they had no room for the Zwinglian doctrine of the real absence of Christ from the sacrament. To them the Lord's Supper was “not a dead external sign” but a living rite which actually *conveyed* the grace of God to the believing soul and in which Christ Himself was “chiefly” present. Such was not only their theological belief: it was also their rapturous experience. That is why these eucharistic hymns ring with the note of exultant joy.

II

The hymns are classified under six headings, following closely the order of the Brevint extracts. The first section is concerned with the sacrament “as it is a Memorial of the Sufferings and Death of Christ”. Now, as we have seen, neither Brevint nor Wesley was a memorialist pure and simple, and perhaps the chief interest of the hymns in this part of the book lies in the fact that Wesley cannot content himself with a view of the sacrament which regards it as nothing more than a memorial of a past event. Ever present to his consciousness is the thought of the Christ who not only died but who is alive for evermore and whose Presence becomes a present reality in the act of Communion. Nevertheless there are some deeply moving hymns in this opening section—hymns which call Calvary to mind in words which glow and burn and live. Even as a memorialist Wesley can be strangely affecting. As he contemplates the Cross his imagination catches fire, as for example in the magnificent poem beginning “God of unexampled grace”:

Endless scenes of wonder rise
With that mysterious tree,
Crucified before our eyes
Where we our Maker see:
Jesus, Lord, what hast Thou done?
Publish we the death Divine,
Stop, and gaze, and fall, and own
Was never love like Thine!

Undoubtedly Wesley is more in his natural element when he passes on to the next section and sings of the Lord's Supper "as it is a Sign and Means of Grace". Following Brevint he believed that "As to the present graces that attend the due use of this Sacrament, it is first a *figure* whereby God *represents*, second an *instrument* whereby He *conveys* them". So Wesley came to the Lord's table expecting to receive something—or, more correctly, expecting to meet with Someone.

We come with confidence to find
Thy special Presence here.

Wesley did not profess to explain *how* the Lord's "special Presence" was thus found in the divine ordinance: he was content to accept the fact. "While Wesley evades any definition and commits himself to no theory, he has no doubts that the Sacraments are channels through which the grace of God flows . . . that the Sacramental Elements and action are God-ordained vehicles of His power. . . . His only evidence is the typical Methodist appeal to experience; and a joy, the glad and conscious communion with God, of which his *Journals*, as well as the Hymns, give record, are the only evidence he offers or needs" (p. 47). Thus he inquires:

Who can 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!

Wesley did not know how. To him it was an incomprehensible mystery, as it was also to the Angels that "round our altars bow". But though the manner might be unknown, the grace bestowed was sure and real:

Sure and real is the grace,
The manner be unknown;
Only meet us in Thy ways,
And perfect us in one.
Let us taste the heavenly powers;
Lord, we ask for nothing more:
Thine to bless, 'tis only ours
To wonder and adore.

The third section is headed: "The Sacrament a Pledge of Heaven". The two dozen or so hymns here grouped together express something of what we have come to know as realized eschatology. The eucharist is regarded as a joyful anticipation of the heavenly feast: at the Lord's Table the future glory becomes a present reality. It is noteworthy, as Dr. Rattenbury points out, that at this point Wesley went far beyond anything found in Brevint's more pedestrian writings for the reason that "the Evangelical Revival gave a note of triumphant joy to Sacramental devotions unknown to Caroline divines; the positively rollicking character was a novelty in Eucharistic worship" (p. 63). An example from one of the hymns will illustrate this point.

By faith and hope already there,
Even now the marriage-feast we share,

Even now we by the Lamb are fed;
Our Lord's celestial joy we prove,
Led by the Spirit of His love,
To springs of living comfort led.

III

In passing to the sacrificial hymns (“The Holy Eucharist as it implies a Sacrifice”) it is important to bear two things in mind: first, that Wesley held a definite doctrine of the eucharistic sacrifice; and second, that this doctrine was as far removed as possible from the Roman dogma of the Mass, with its idea of the eucharist as a propitiatory sacrifice for the sins of the living and the dead. To Wesley, loyal Protestant as he was, such an idea was utterly abhorrent. The Mass was a denial of the all-sufficient, all-atonement death of the Cross, which was the very centre of his faith. Dr. Rattenbury's chapter entitled “Priesthood and Sacrifice” is particularly valuable in this respect and deserves careful study. The Wesleys' sacramental views have been misrepresented from two opposite directions: by Anglo-Catholics on the one hand, who have tended to read into them later Tractarian ideas; and by Methodist writers on the other hand, who have attempted to water down the Wesleys' High Churchmanship.

What doctrine of sacrifice, then, is revealed in the hymns? It is significant that Wesley here keeps very close to Brevint, who while distinguishing the Communion from the once-for-all sacrifice of the Cross, speaks of it as “a devout and thankful commemoration, to be offered up every day”. And he adds: “This is what the Apostle calls, *To set forth the death of the Lord*; To set it forth as well before the eyes of God His Father, as before the eyes of men”. Moreover, he writes:

This Sacrament, by our remembrance, becomes a kind of *Sacrifice*, whereby we present before God the Father that precious Oblation of His Son once offered. And thus do we every day offer unto God the meritorious sufferings of our Lord, as the only sure ground whereon God may give, and we obtain, the blessings we pray for. Now there is no ordinance or mystery that is so blessed an instrument to reach this everlasting Sacrifice, and to set it solemnly forth before the eyes of God, as the Holy Communion is. *To men* it is a *sacred Table* where God's minister is ordered to represent from God his Master the Passion of His dear Son, as still fresh, and still powerful for their eternal salvation. And to *God* it is an *Altar* whereon men mystically present to Him the same Sacrifice as still bleeding and suing for mercy.

Here is the key to the Wesleys' doctrine of the eucharistic sacrifice, and incidentally their justification for the use of the word *altar* in reference to the Lord's Table. In the Communion they “set forth” the sacrifice of the Cross not only before men but before God, convinced that while the work of atonement was “finished”, the Death was “ever new”:

Still the wounds are open wide,
The blood doth freely flow
As when first His sacred side
Received the deadly blow:
Still, O God, the blood is warm.

So Wesley can speak of “presenting our Saviour's death” to the Father, of “offering up the Lamb of God” in the eucharist.

To Thee His passion we present,
Who for our ransom dies;
We reach by this great instrument
Th' eternal sacrifice.

The Lamb His Father now surveys,
As on this altar slain,
Still bleeding and imploring grace
For every soul of man.

We are not now concerned to inquire whether this conception of the eucharistic sacrifice is shared by modern Evangelicals, or even whether it is acceptable to them. We simply stress the fact that this is what John and Charles Wesley taught, and that such a view was in no wise contrary either to their Protestant faith or to their evangelistic fervour. As loyal sons of the Reformation and with hearts burning with love for souls they could sing at the Holy Table:

With solemn faith we offer up,
And spread before Thy glorious eyes
That only ground of all our hope,
That precious bleeding Sacrifice,
Which brings Thy grace on sinners down,
And perfects all our souls in one.

FRANK COLQUHOUN