

‘T’owd Trumpet’: Venn of Huddersfield and Yelling

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When Henry Venn accepted appointment as Vicar of Huddersfield in 1759, it was an unpromising charge. John Wesley had visited Huddersfield on several occasions prior to Venn’s move and characterized it as a wild and primitive place. Yet Venn enjoys the distinction of being the only evangelical of the period to have a parish that numbered in the thousands. His gifts as a preacher and pastor had a decisive impact on Huddersfield and Yorkshire and the church grew rapidly during his tenure. More than twenty men who sat under his ministry at Huddersfield went for training and accepted ordination. Perhaps of greater importance was the role Venn played after he left Huddersfield and moved to Yelling. This article examines three aspects of Henry Venn’s life and ministry: the timing and circumstances of his becoming an evangelical, his theological position, and the influence he exerted on succeeding generations through his friendships. Venn deserves a full-scale biography; we can do no more here than provide a rough sketch.

Family

The first Henry Venn, born 3 March 1725, was the son of Richard Venn, Rector of St Antholin’s, London.¹ Richard Venn was a respected clergyman with some well-placed connections. His most intimate friend was Henry Temple, who became the first Lord Palmerston and great-grandfather of the Prime Minister. Both the Bishop of London, Dr Edmund Gibson, and the Bishop of Chichester, Dr Francis Hare, were in Richard Venn’s circle of acquaintances.² In short, he had the kind of friends who could give valuable assistance in establishing an ambitious son.

In politics Richard Venn was a Jacobite—following the tradition of his forebears—but in time became reconciled to the House of Hanover. Theologically, he was a loyal churchman who opposed Latitudinarianism on the one side, and Dissent and ‘Methodism’³ on the other. Consistent with his convictions, Venn wrote against Methodists and refused St Antholin’s pulpit to George Whitefield, the first London clergyman to do so. He also made public cause against Dr Thomas Rundle, when the latter was nominated to the see of Gloucester, on grounds that Rundle was a Latitudinarian with deistical tendencies. He was backed in this action by Bishop Gibson. Venn died just before Henry’s fourteenth birthday.

Such strong and definite views rubbed off on at least one of his children. His son Henry was the terror of a neighbour whose father was a dissenting minister. There is a slight parallel between the religious pilgrimage of the first Henry Venn and Saul of Tarsus.⁴

Education and ordination

In 1742 Henry Venn went up to Cambridge, where he was an outstanding cricketer while achieving a sufficiently solid academic record to be awarded a university scholarship. In 1749 he took his MA and was elected a fellow of Queens’ College. Venn earned a reputation while at college as a conscientious and highly-motivated person. He was also exuberant, good-natured and much sought after as a companion because of his skill as a *raconteur*.

His ordination as deacon by Bishop Gibson in 1747 set off a chain of developments that transformed Henry Venn from a conventional churchman, like his father, into an evangelical.⁵ Venn himself left no account of his pilgrimage, and others who have described it have been partisan.⁶ There were at least three stages in his development, stretching over a period of more than twelve years.

Evangelical conversion

Henry Venn grew up in a religious environment. He was by nature serious-minded, but he had not thought independently about religion prior to his ordination. The following incident, which took place a few days before his ordination, illustrates his serious mien. He played in a cricket match between Surrey and All England, a game which had excited intense interest. Venn's side won. As the game ended he threw down his bat saying, 'Whoever wants a bat, which has done me good service, may take that; as I have no further occasion for it.' When his friends demanded to know why, he replied, 'Because I am to be ordained on Sunday; and I will never have it said of me. "Well struck, Parson!"'⁷

From 1747 to 1750 Venn resided at Cambridge and assisted as curate at several places. In his quest for a more satisfying spirituality, he engaged in various disciplines. Like John Wesley and Thomas Adam, he discovered in the writings of William Law a compelling challenge.

In 1750 he became curate to the Rev. Adam Langley of St Matthew, Friday Street, London and West Horsley, Surrey.⁸ Aside from a part of the summer spent at St Matthew, London, Venn lived at West Horsley as curate-in-charge. He had gone to West Horsley still in spiritual ferment. Here he spent much time in Bible study, meditation and prayer. Also during this time he was on friendly terms with Thomas Broughton.⁹ Since 1743 Broughton had been secretary of the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge.¹⁰ More important, Broughton had been a member of the Wesleys' 'Holy Club' at Oxford. He later broke with John Wesley over the relationship to the Moravians. If he cannot be classed as an evangelical, neither was he a typical old-fashioned churchman. Broughton was among the first London clergymen to allow George Whitefield to preach from his pulpit—in contrast to Richard Venn—and certainly knew a good deal about William Law's views. In 1752 Venn successfully intervened with Sir John Evelyn to get Broughton appointed to the living at Wotton.¹¹ Broughton could provide Venn with first-hand information on the Wesleys, Whitefield and the growing evangelical movement. But Venn was attuned primarily to William Law's counsels at this time.

Law published a new book, *The Spirit of Love*, in 1752. Venn's eager anticipation turned to disappointment when he discovered in his mentor's new treatise views he considered to be theologically unsound. This impressed on him the fallibility of systems of interpretation and caused him to give a new importance to the Bible.¹²

Sometime during 1752-3 Henry Venn's spiritual crisis was resolved. An emphasis on the atoning merits of Christ alone replaced the theme of personal holiness through self-discipline learned from William Law. From this time on his preaching took on new forcefulness and he began to be marked out as an evangelical.¹³

The evidence suggests that Venn had had no personal contact with other evangelicals through the years 1747-52. Like Thomas Adam and other evangelical contemporaries, he had undergone profound religious change without the direct intervention of others.¹⁴ The roots of the Evangelical Revival reached out in various directions rather than tapping into one source.

Early association with other evangelicals

It was not long following his conversion that Venn formed close friendships with numerous evangelicals. During the period 1753-60 he found a secure place within the circle of leaders of the Evangelical Revival. By the beginning of 1754, he was dissatisfied with his curacy at West Horsley and began looking for another position. He wrote to John Wesley that Spring, seeking help in finding an appointment. Instead he was offered, and accepted, the curacy at Clapham. About this time a leading Clapham figure, John Thornton, who quickly became Venn's intimate and lifelong friend, experienced an evangelical conversion through the influence of Martin Madan.¹⁵

Already Venn was corresponding with various people. One correspondent was the respected dissenting pastor, Risdon Darracott (1717-59), who had been a student at Dr Doddridge's Northampton Academy and was now living in Somerset.¹⁶ Darracott was a friend to many of the evangelical leaders and it is possible that Venn was introduced to Samuel Walker of Truro through Darracott. In any event, in a 20 November 1754 reply to Venn, Darracott describes Walker's leadership in the spiritual awakening in Cornwall and notes with appreciation the religious societies and clerical club as well as Walker's personal qualities. He pointed out that Walker was a 'regular' and had no connection with the Methodists.¹⁷ This letter also refers obliquely to 'work you [i.e. Venn] just mention in a Plantation of Negroes.' Whitefield had returned to America in 1754 for another preaching mission and it is possible Venn shared with Darracott the latest word from Whitefield.

In spite of negative reactions to the Wesleys on the part of people like Walker,¹⁸ Venn maintained friendship with that circle as well as the Whitefield-Countess of Huntingdon group and circumspect evangelicals like Walker.¹⁹ At this stage Venn seemed to be closer theologically to the Wesleys than to Whitefield. Whitefield's Calvinism was a break with traditional Anglicanism, and Venn's roots were deep in the tradition. Venn attended the Wesleys' 1756 Bristol Conference. And Samuel Walker commented, in a letter to Thomas Adam on 7 June 1758, that he had met Venn who was 'still of late a sort of dependent on J. Wesley, but now brought to believe for himself. I saw and preached for him when in town' (Davies, p 170). Yet in 1756 and 1757 Whitefield preached for Venn at Clapham and they itinerated together. Venn was seriously ill for eight months during 1756 and felt this forced inactivity gave him time for reflection which clarified his religious views.

It is quite possible that just preceding Walker's visit to Clapham in 1758 Thomas Haweis, Walker's protégé then at Oxford, had been with Venn. Haweis was at Clapham at Venn's invitation about 1758 and during this time tried to reconstruct Venn's theology. He reported that Venn had not swayed from his position but nevertheless claimed credit for Venn's subsequent changes of view.²⁰ The Countess of Huntingdon also was dissatisfied with Venn's theology and counselled him concerning what he should preach.²¹ Yet as late as 1759 Charles Wesley recorded in his *Journal*:

Mr Venn . . . comforted my heart, by assuring me that Mr Madan is entirely clear of predestination; that one Mr Haweis (sic), an Hutchinsonian, preaches, in a church in Oxford Christ crucified, with amazing success, both townsmen and gownsmen flocking in crowds to hear him.²²

In Henry Venn the cross-currents of the developing evangelical movement met. The Countess of Huntingdon tried to steer Venn away from Wesley's influence. The Wesleys included him

in their annual conferences and he was fully exposed to their debates on church order during the crucial 1756-7 period. There is no hint that Venn ever accepted John Wesley's teaching on perfection, and later in life he specifically criticized this aspect of Wesley's theology as being unbiblical. When Walker observes that Venn was until recently dependent on Wesley, he undoubtedly refers both to Venn's frequent fraternizing with the Wesleys and to theological attitudes. Walker adds, 'He is a man very desirable in his temper, humble and teachable' (Davies, p 170). We can conclude that Venn was sufficiently his own man to remain on friendly terms with all of the evangelical leadership. He tried to maintain this attitude throughout his life.

The tenor and content of Venn's theology at this time are reflected in fifteen sermons published in 1759. These are Christocentric and cover the main themes of evangelical preaching: the nature of sin, the cross, faith, judgement and heaven (*Sermons*, 1759). The previous year he published a sermon attempting to demonstrate the 'pure Gospel of Christ' by contrasting 'popery' with the religion of Jesus.²³ Venn's published sermons, unfortunately, are heavy going and lack the charm and dynamic found in his letters.

Courtship and marriage

About 1752 Henry Venn became acquainted with Miss Eling Bishop, daughter of Dr Thomas Bishop, late Rector of Tower Church, Ipswich. He was a man who gained some prominence for his theological scholarship. Unfortunately, his theological erudition was more than matched by his financial imprudence and he died leaving his family in difficult circumstances.²⁴ Eling Bishop had a sobering spiritual experience when she prepared for her first communion at the age of twenty-one. She was still spiritually unsettled when she met Henry Venn, and he attributed their mutual attraction to each other to their common spiritual quest.

Upon the things of eternity our whole conversation turned from our first acquaintance. Much concerned we both were to gain heaven, though very ignorant of the way. We began our engagement as two pilgrims seeking a better country; and as we travelled on, were favoured with more light, directing our steps to the city in which we were to dwell safely, even the Lord Jesus Christ ['The Life and Character of Mira', Venn MSS F2].

During the years of their courtship Venn introduced his fiancée to his circles of friends, including the Wesleys and the Countess of Huntingdon.²⁵

Henry Venn married Eling Bishop in 1757 while he was curate at Clapham. She was a vivacious and intelligent woman admired for her household management skills. Henry Venn was decidedly fond of his wife—as she was of him—so that one friend later charged him with being the most uxorious man he had ever known.²⁶

In addition to his curacy at Clapham, Venn held three lectureships in the City of London. Increasingly he was discouraged with the cool response at Clapham.²⁷ Then his friend, Lord Dartmouth, urged Sir John Ramsden to appoint Venn as Vicar of Huddersfield.

In the Spring of 1759 Venn made an inspection visit to Huddersfield. The decision to move was a difficult one. His income promised to be about half what it had been at Clapham and his family would be deprived of their closest friends.²⁸ His wife was reluctant to leave the London area. From Huddersfield Venn wrote to tell his wife of the challenge that awaited them there: ' . . . such a vast multitude of souls to hear—under my care, fourteen hundred

families!—and out of other parishes, together, my audience this afternoon could not be less than upwards of three thousand!’ (*Life*, p 75). The move from Clapham to Huddersfield marked the end of the second phase in Henry Venn’s pilgrimage.

Vicar of Huddersfield

Huddersfield was an overgrown village in 1759, with a population of some 5,000. It was considered a rather unlikely field in which to labour. The Methodists were already established there before Venn arrived. Within his first year at Huddersfield Venn was facing difficulties in the parish, created by the presence of a Methodist society. Venn appealed directly to John Wesley, who assured him the Methodists would cease to carry on their society since there was now an evangelical incumbent. Local Methodist loyalists, however, never accepted Venn and eventually—without Wesley’s knowledge or approval—Methodist lay preachers resumed their activities. Whereas before this time Henry Venn, in contrast to Samuel Walker, had said little about church order, he now was forced to take a stand. After 1761 relations between Venn and the Wesleys changed perceptibly.²⁹

Upon arrival at Huddersfield, Venn had thrown himself into the work with his usual energy. He had a large parish both in population and area, and set a high standard in pastoral care. His preaching, however, was the pivot of his ministry. Affectionately known as ‘T’owd Trumpet’, his preaching attracted large crowds from the beginning. For relief from his strenuous labours, each Spring he went to London where he was a welcome preacher in various pulpits. He also itinerated at times with other evangelicals.

Already before he left Clapham for Huddersfield, Venn had begun work on a book. He submitted several sample chapters to his friend Thomas Adam and received every encouragement to complete it. The demands of pastoral duties caused work on the manuscript to be delayed and *The Complete Duty of Man* was not published until 1763. Venn intended it to be an evangelical alternative to *The Whole Duty of Man*, a book that had been a major source of Christian devotion and nurture for three generations but was considered by evangelicals to be doctrinally defective.³⁰ Although Venn’s book never achieved acceptance beyond evangelical circles, it had an amazing durability there. It went through more than twenty editions, with an edition as recently as 1841. Venn conceived the book as a guide to practical Christian living. It also depicts the mind of ‘centrist’ evangelicalism. Speaking of the meaning of faith, for example, Venn says faith is constant dependence on Christ for wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption. False notions of faith include speculation, antinomianism, opinions received through education, or the expectation that each person receives a certain inward feeling in confirmation of divine acceptance. Rather than seeking to introduce the novel emphases of either Whitefield or Wesley, Venn turns flank on both. He was on his guard against both perfectionism and antinomianism throughout his ministry. He shows his mistrust of emotionalism in religion in the following passage:

That the blessed God can impress on the mind so strong a sense of pardon, as to make his dear obedient children certain of their salvation, none but those will doubt, who take upon them to limit the mercy and power of the Almighty, and prescribe to his wisdom. . . . Nevertheless, it is one thing to *feel the joy of pardon*; another to know you depend upon the *Lord Jesus Christ only*, for pardon and supply of all your wants. One thing to exult in God’s love to your soul; quite another, to call upon him, who is exalted to be a prince and a saviour, to give repentance and remission of sins to all who believe in his name. And to say, real faith in him, can be evidenced no otherwise than by feeling an immediate testimony of pardon, is as gross a mistake, as to suppose no credit can be given to the *written* promise of a friend any longer than you hear him enforce it with repeated declarations of his affection for you. In every other case

this would argue violent distrust of the promise-maker, how then can it be the only test of faith in Christ.³¹

Venn saw himself as an exponent of Reformation doctrine as mediated through traditional Anglicanism and enlivened by the evangelical spirit. This does not mean Venn underwent no changes between 1747 and the early 1760s.

Personal crisis

Henry Venn's ministry at Huddersfield met with success from the outset. Yet he was deeply perplexed. When he accepted the call to Huddersfield, he knew his income would be reduced but hoped to offset the loss by a lower cost of living. This hope proved to be unfounded and he became apprehensive over the burden this placed on his family. He had not yet resigned his London lectureships and in his distress considered returning to London. He credited his wife, and her alone, with dissuading him from leaving Huddersfield—apparently sometime in 1760. This crisis had special importance for both Henry and Eling Venn.

Venn had accepted the call to Huddersfield as divinely directed and saw that his ministry was abundantly fruitful. But under the weight of anxiety over his family's financial well-being, he rebelled at continuing to serve at Huddersfield. '. . . unbelief, pride, and selfishness conquered me entirely', Venn wrote later ('Life and Character of Mira'). 'I was grieved at my own vileness, and self-condemned.' This experience led Venn to see the sinfulness of human nature in a new way. From this time on his preaching contained a stronger emphasis on human depravity. Venn had now made a self-acknowledged shift in his theological position. He soon discovered, to his dismay, that he was being claimed by the Calvinists as a convert. While never for a moment discounting what had happened to him, he wrote already in April 1763, '. . . I could wish almost that the change in my sentiments were never named; for I hate opinions, and would not give a pin's point to have any one believe as I do, till the Scriptures, by the Spirit's teaching, open his understanding.'³²

Eling Venn was unable to find the same spiritual freedom as her husband. Since about 1753 she had been attempting to follow the path of perfection taught by Wesley. Increasingly she had been impressed with her imperfections rather than achieving the sanctification she longed for. Henry Venn insisted she had her eyes on herself rather than on the true source of her deliverance.

It was Eling Venn who refused to return to London when her husband's faith wavered. She saw the fruitfulness of his labours and put a premium on doing one's duty. But Henry Venn found the resolution to his perplexity when he cast himself more completely on the grace of God. This, in turn, helped his wife to see her own problem in a new light.³³ This crisis produced one other result. The Venns adopted an attitude of dependence upon divine providence to meet their financial needs. Though their financial means did not change appreciably, they were able to face their obligations with equanimity thereafter.

The way in which personal experience informed his pastoral ministry is illustrated in a letter Venn wrote to Lady Margaret Fitzgerald more than twenty-five years later. Venn tells her ladyship that human depravity is 'incurable till we leave the body', but it plays a constructive role or else God would destroy it. 'But how', asks Venn, 'shall ingrates, as we are, be brought to accept as the chief mercy of God, his own Son?' How else can we humans be made to face our true condition? 'If we believe in St Paul's case, these benefits are not to be obtained but through a deep heartfelt sense of our sinfulness.' From Paul's own experience we observe the

value of spiritual struggles. From our human point of view, Venn argued, we would have called for God to transform Paul through love which would humble him and eradicate sin. But that is not the way God deals with human nature. Paul rejoiced in persecution and testing because Christ's power was allowed to do its work in him. The follower of Christ is called to submit himself to the grace of Christ rather than deny his sinfulness. In contemplating both our own depraved nature and the grace of Christ we get a true estimate of our situation which in turn enables us to love others redemptively.³⁴ Venn came to view human depravity not as a morbid, hopeless condition, but as an opportunity for the grace of Christ to do its perfect work.

Between 1747 and 1761 Henry Venn had passed through three phases. During the first period he took tentative steps toward becoming an evangelical. By 1753 he was numbered among the evangelicals. Theologically, he was a traditional Anglican, fully aware of the new currents introduced by John Wesley and George Whitefield. In 1760, through a personal crisis, he underwent a subtle change that caused him to give greater emphasis to man's depravity and Christ's all-sufficiency. The change was one of emphasis rather than substance. But it was a change which he himself described with feeling and led to thoroughly Christocentric preaching.

Resignation from Huddersfield

Eling Venn's health was never robust. In 1767 she again fell ill and died in September, leaving her husband with five young children. Henry Venn's own health was under strain because of over-exertion. By 1770 he was suffering from consumption and had nearly ruined his strong voice by constant preaching to large crowds both in churches and out of doors. At the age of 46 he was forced to resign his large parish at Huddersfield, then the largest held by any evangelical incumbent in England, and accepted the rectorship at Yelling, a small rural parish in Huntingdonshire.

The loss of his wife, his own poor health, and the decision to leave Huddersfield drove Venn into a period of much soul-searching. He divulged this in a letter to Mrs Riland: 'When I consider the slow progress I have made, the many, many evil thoughts and desires, the continual defilement and extreme weakness and inconstancy of mind I labour under, I am ready to cry out, "Is there unfaithfulness in God? Where is His promise?"' Several years earlier Venn had been offered a position in the United States and then the incumbency at Halifax. He had turned down all such offers because he enjoyed the prestige of having the largest parish of any evangelical in England. 'Lucrative views were not of force to determine me', he wrote to James Kershaw. Only ill health could bring him to accept a small rural parish where 'instead of a large congregation, the glory of the country, I shall have very few.'³⁵ Venn knew existentially the meaning of depravity.

Although Venn told his good friend, Mrs John Riland, 'I go to Yelling a dying man', he married a second time and lived another twenty-six years. A somewhat different career lay ahead of him.

When Venn resigned as Vicar of Huddersfield, naturally the question of succession was raised. All efforts to ensure that Venn would be followed by another evangelical failed. An influential group of parishioners took steps to open a chapel. Against the counsel of his curate, John Riland, Venn sanctioned this decision and even made a contribution toward the cost of construction. Later he came to regret deeply this action for it always cast a shadow over his churchmanship. It also identified clearly the problem all evangelicals faced. But one

answer was beginning to emerge. Venn's close friend, John Thornton, had already begun to change evangelical prospects by buying up livings to ensure that there would always be evangelical incumbents. Unfortunately, the Huddersfield parish underwent a schism over the question of succession.³⁶

Rector of Yelling

In 1770 tensions between followers of the Wesleys and the Countess of Huntingdon group erupted. Some evangelical friends also became involved. Henry Venn's name is not found among the controversialists.³⁷ Venn himself was 'not hot on doctrine', as he once approvingly described John Berridge. '. . . I have always been too much on the side of free grace for many Arminians—too much on the side of experimental religion for many Calvinists', he wrote to his friend James Stillingfleet in 1774 (*Life*, p 201f). In his approach to dogma Venn adopted a somewhat pragmatic attitude. A friend who had once heard Venn speak critically of John W. Fletcher, a major protagonist on the Wesleyan side of the controversy with the Calvinists, was surprised later when Venn spoke in warm appreciation of Fletcher, the acknowledged saint among evangelicals. "“Oh, yes”, replied Mr Venn; “but I did not then *know* him. I have since lived under the same roof with him”” (*Jerram*, p 59). Although he might have chosen another word, Richard Cecil doubtlessly spoke for Venn and many other evangelicals when he termed these labels 'trash' (*Jerram*, P 60).

Venn's years at Yelling contributed to the evangelical movement in quite another way than his parish work at Huddersfield. Shortly after he arrived at Yelling in August 1771 he began re-establishing ties with Cambridge. In the Spring of 1772 he paid a visit to Cambridge. In October he reported that several undergraduates from Cambridge visited him: 'Two are just gone out; and three more are going. They have much of the wisdom of the Egyptians; but, like Moses, are all for the service of the God of Israel' (*Life*, p 193). After the young Charles Simeon made Venn's acquaintance in 1782, Simeon made sure that a steady stream of students made their way to Yelling to sit at the feet of Henry Venn.³⁸ The most frequent visitor to Yelling was Simeon himself, of course. Venn also delighted in spending time at Cambridge. He reported in a letter written on 2 February 1783 that

Several days I lately spent at Cambridge with four young clergymen—Mr Atkinson, Fellow and Tutor of Trinity Hall, *full brother* to Miles of Leeds, Mr Simeon, Dr Jowett, and Mr Parish; all our discourse was to the purpose. I prayed with them twice a day. Their affection for me was expressed in the most obliging manner. They have, since I left them, been over with me. The Lord has touched their hearts to love the truth; for this is the footing on which our acquaintance is built. He who knoweth all hearts, knoweth I long to be doing something for Him! Mr Simeon's ministry is likely to be blessed. We may indeed say, 'A great door is opened.' Many gownsmen hear him. What follows is as true—'there are many adversaries.' He comes over to advise with me on every occasion; but the Wonderful Counsellor is with him [*Life*, p 359].

The Venn correspondence during these years glows with the satisfaction he felt in helping prepare young men for the Christian ministry. He also took pleasure in being received respectfully in Cambridge after facing the taunts for many years as a 'Methodist'. He noted in a letter of 22 April 1786, 'That after preaching in barns and in Surrey Chapel, I should be respected at Cambridge, was very extraordinary information.'³⁹ In this buoyant mood he offered a steady stream of encouragement and counsel to his young friends.

Recent scholarship has focused attention on the influential role Charles Simeon played in the nineteenth-century Anglican Church—a justifiable recognition.⁴⁰ Some writers have noted Henry Venn's supportive relationship with the young Simeon. But there is little in Simeon's

multi-faceted ministry which does not exist—albeit at times in only germinal form—in Venn’s ministry: a thoroughly organized system of pastoral care, preaching as the mainstay of ministry, constant cultivation of young men for the ministry, concern for evangelical succession, a characteristic attitude toward theological system, a concern for practical discipleship. In short, Henry Venn provided a model for Simeon and others and not only fatherly advice and spiritual support. We will touch on aspects of these only briefly.

Venn helped the younger generation arrive at a mediating position theologically. One cannot read the following oft-cited statement by Simeon without hearing the voice of Venn in the background:

The author is no friend of systemizers in theology. He has endeavoured to obtain from the Scriptures alone his view of religion; and to them it is his wish to adhere, with scrupulous fidelity; never wresting any portion of the Word of God to favour a particular opinion, but giving to every part of it that sense, which it seems to him to have been designed by its great Author to convey. He has no doubt that there is a system in the Holy Scriptures (for truth cannot be inconsistent with itself); but he is persuaded that neither Calvinists nor Arminians are in *exclusive* possession of that system.⁴¹

Venn’s theology also encouraged his young protégés in Christian action. Simeon, Wilberforce, the Thorntons and John Venn were all taught that the Christian gospel was not only an individual experience but a call for responsible action, for it was a whole gospel. In a letter to his son John in 1791, Venn shared what he called

an extraordinary but a very just thought. Religion, it must be owned, chiefly respects the soul and is not thought so necessary to the good of the body. Yet I dare affirm, however, paradoxical it may seem, that the *Commandments* of Christ effectively received do as much towards the health of the body as ever his miracles, and it may with truth be said, *these* never healed more diseases than the due observation of those have prevented and kept off [Venn MSS C1].

Venn’s close friend John Thornton, the wealthy evangelical philanthropist, provided him with the model for Christian activity. He encouraged and inspired the younger generation to combine their spiritual commitment with active stewardship. Out of that came the Clapham Sect tradition which promoted evangelism, missions at home and abroad, education for the masses, philanthropic programmes, social reforms through legislative action.

Last years

Writing to Mrs John Riland in July 1791, Venn commented that this was the first time in forty years he had visited London in the Spring without preaching. He was only 65 years old but in failing health. During those forty years Venn had been guest preacher in many pulpits. The annual excursion to London frequently extended into a longer itineration to other parts of England in company with evangelical colleagues. He had often preached in the Countess of Huntingdon’s chapels. When she was forced to register them as dissenting bodies in 1781 Venn, along with many other evangelicals, ceased officiating for her. Venn had wavered on the question of church order in 1771 when he wanted to ensure that his successor at Huddersfield would be an evangelical. He was also vulnerable to criticism because he had preached in unconsecrated places and maintained friendly relations with a variety of revival leaders and Dissenters. There is more than a hint of special pleading in John Venn’s defence of his father’s conduct with respect to church order, but the main conclusion seems accurate: Henry Venn did not advocate irregularity and became much more concerned later in life to maintain church order. It is possible to say this without discounting the extent to which he

had itinerated and lent support to a movement which generally put the question of church order to new tests.⁴² The surest proof of his settled views is the influence he exerted on men like John Venn and Charles Simeon, both of whom were firm adherents to the Established Church.⁴³ *Ecclesia Anglicana* in the eighteenth century seemed highly resistant to change. Only gradually did the evangelical leaven do its work. To concerned men it appeared that risks had to be taken and the first Henry Venn willingly took such risks. For men like Henry Venn the fundamental question revolved not around the church's Articles, liturgy and theology but the absolute necessity of bringing men and women into vital relationship with Jesus Christ. It was not ultimately a matter of ecclesiastical or theological system but rather of commitment.

The gifts of evangelist and pastor were combined in Henry Venn. At times the evangelist predominated, but he proved himself a highly competent pastor. He showed no particular talent for organization. Venn was an exemplary evangelical. His home was happy and wholesome. His personal piety and devotion were genuine and attractive. In his theology he was both evangelical and Anglican. He was an evangelical in emphasizing the great Reformation themes of justification by faith, personal regeneration and an experiential faith. But he loyally adhered to the Anglican Church.

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Endnotes:

- 1) The year is given incorrectly as 1724 in Henry Venn (ed.), *The Life and a Selection of the Letters of the Late Rev. Henry Venn, MA* (Hatchard: London 1837, fifth edn), hereafter cited as *Life*, and the mistake was repeated in the Memoir prefixed to the 1838 edition of *The Complete Duty of Man*. John Venn gives the correct date in *Venn Family Annals* (London 1904) and *Dictionary of National Biography*. Until the Uniform Calendar Act of 1751, the new year began 21 March and the winter quarter would have been written 1724-25.
- 2) It appears that the Venn-Gibson friendship developed following the Rundle case when Richard Venn was an accessory to Bishop Gibson's designs. See Norman Sykes, *Edmund Gibson* (London 1926), chapter 8 and appendix E, pp 415-7.
- 3) Historically, the term Methodist has been used in two senses: 1) it was the designation for all who were associated with the eighteenth-century evangelical revival and was often equivalent to 'enthusiast'; 2) gradually Methodist became the name for followers of the Wesleys. Even in the nineteenth century there were still those who used the term in the first sense. In Wales, of course, it was used in this manner throughout the century.
- 4) See *Annals*, pp 65-8, for other anecdotes illustrating Venn's temperament as a youth.
- 5) He was ordained priest by the Bishop of Ely two years later.
- 6) This includes John and Henry Venn, Thomas Haweis and A. C. H. Seymour. J. C. Ryle's popular account of Henry Venn in *Christian Leaders of the Last Century* (Edinburgh 1868) purports to follow the *Life* but at crucial points adopts Seymour's interpretation given in *The Life and Times of the Countess of Huntingdon* (London 1839). Ryle is not always factually reliable.

- 7) *Life*, p 13. Writers continue to confuse Henry Venn (1725-97) with his grandson Henry Venn (1796-1873). For example, this particular incident is attributed to grandson Henry in Ian C. Bradley, *The Call to Seriousness: the Evangelical Impact on the Victorians* (Macmillan: 1976) p 28.
- 8) John Venn, Clapham, gives the year as 1750 in his Memoir of his father. In *Annals*, John Venn, Cambridge, lists the year as 1751 while in *Alumni Cantabrigienses*, Pt I:IV, p 297, it is 1750.
- 9) John and Henry Venn in *Life* emphasize the ‘retirement’ of these years and, consequently, lack of outside influence in his religious development. This seems overdrawn. Cf. John Walsh, ‘Origins of the Evangelical Revival’, in *Essays in Modern English Church History*, G. V. Bennett and J. D. Walsh (eds) (A and C Black: 1966) pp 132-62.
- 10) He held the post until his death in 1777. He was also an agent for Bishop Gibson in his surveillance of the Moravians and Methodists.
- 11) See A. H. W. Harrison, *The Evangelical Revival and Christian Reunion* (Epworth Press: London, 1942) p 43.
- 12) See A. K. Walker, *William Law, His Life and Work* (SPCK: London 1973), chapters 19 and 20, for an analysis of this book and the controversy between Law and John Wesley.
- 13) There is insufficient evidence to date Venn’s ‘conversion’ more precisely. Grandson Henry in extensive notes compiled in 1838-9 in preparation for a study of the eighteenth-century revival—which he never completed—listed the major leaders and the year each began ‘evangelical preaching’. He put his grandfather’s change as occurring in 1748. This was in fact the beginning of his crisis, which did not culminate until 1752-3. Venn MSS F53. (Venn family archives are now located in Church Missionary Society Archives, London.)
- 14) He made this point in conversation with Cambridge students years later. Cf. J. Jerram, *The Memoirs of the Rev. Charles Jerram* (London 1855) p 92. John Walsh, op. cit., examines in detail the question of ‘origins’ and concludes that the movement did not spring from a single source.
- 15) Madan was converted about 1750 under John Wesley’s preaching.
- 16) Unfortunately, Darracott’s biography omits all reference to Venn. Cf. J. Bennet, *The Star of the West*, 1813.
- 17) This letter is given in full in G. C. B. Davies, *The Early Cornish Evangelicals* (London 1951) pp 171-2. The original is in Venn MSS C75. It is of interest that much of Darracott’s report is based on information supplied by a young friend, an intimate of Walker’s. This was almost certainly Thomas Haweis, who spent time with Venn several years later.
- 18) Walker began taking a definite stand against the Wesleys from about 1753 onward. Cf. Davies, *idem*, p 71ff and chapters 5 and 6.
- 19) Walker took an equally magnanimous attitude toward the Methodists but early assumed an independent and critical position on doctrinal and ecclesiastical principles.

- 20) *Evangelical Magazine*, June 1798, VI, pp 221-7. This Memoir called forth uncharacteristic vehemence from John Venn, when in 1804 he learned it had been prefixed to an unauthorized edition of his father's *The Complete Duty of Man* (noted in Michael Hennell, *John Venn and the Clapham Sect* [Lutterworth: London 1958] p 268). It is not correct to suggest that Henry Venn cut himself off from contact with Haweis after 1777, as implied by Hennell, 75, n5. The two men were on friendly terms throughout life. However, Haweis is not a trustworthy guide in his recounting of past events (as demonstrated in A. S. Wood, *Thomas Haweis* [SPCK: London 1957] p 170f).
- 21) [A. C. H. Seymour], *Countess of Huntingdon*, 1839, I:p125. Both Haweis and Seymour give the impression Venn was not yet firmly evangelical. Seymour reports an incident which occurred about 1757: 'The conversation of Lady Huntingdon, and those devoted men by whom she was surrounded, was attended with the happiest results to Mr Venn. The light of Divine truth burst through the darkness in which his mind had been involved, and he now strenuously laboured to extend, by every means in his power, the knowledge which had been imparted to him.' (p 224) That this is not accurate will be demonstrated at a later point.
- 22) Cited in Davies, *idem*, p 186 (from Charles Wesley, *Journal*, II:p 216).
- 23) *A Sermon on James 3:17*, 1758. One cannot trace either Wesley's perfectionism or Whitefield's predestinarianism in these early sermons.
- 24) The exact year of meeting cannot be determined. Eling Bishop's birth year is variously given as 1723 and 1724. The correct year is 1723. Henry Venn, in a memoir of his wife written for their children, immediately following her death in 1767, says they met when she was in her 29th year. 'The Life and Character of Mira', Venn MSS F2. 'Mira' was Venn's nickname for his wife.
- 25) There is a letter from John Wesley to Big Bishop giving general counsel and encouragement in religious matters. Venn MSS C35.30 October 1755.
- 26) The aged James Stillingfleet, Hotham, told this to the younger Henry Venn in 1824 while the latter was doing research in Yorkshire in preparation of his grandfather's *Life*. Venn MSS F13.
- 27) There was some opposition to him as evidenced by representation made against him to his wife. See 'The Life and Character of Mira', Venn MSS F2.
- 28) Both Haweis and Seymour give false accounts of the reasons for moving.
- 29) See *Journal of John Wesley*, IV:p 470, 15 July 1761; Venn was included in the group of revival leaders who received Wesley's letter of appeal for unity, *Journal*, V:p 61, 19 April 1761; on 22 June 1763 Wesley wrote a letter—at once plaintive and unyielding—to Venn lamenting the breach that had developed between them and laying blame on certain persons, including George Burnett, close friend of Thomas Haweis and Samuel Walker, who was Venn's first curate at Huddersfield. He pleaded for unity and good will. *Letters of John Wesley*, IV:pp 214-8. There is little depicting Venn's actual views about Wesley. We are largely dependent on Wesley's account which is necessarily one-sided. Even so, there is evidence of the painfulness of the situation for both parties.
- 30) George Whitefield jibed at it as *The Half Duty of Man*; but John Wesley wrote disparagingly of Venn's book and defended *The Whole Duty of Man*. See Charles W. Lowry, Jr, 'Spiritual Antecedents of Anglican Evangelicalism', *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church*, 12, 1943, pp 143-45.

- 31) *The Complete Duty of Man*, (Crowder, Robinson, Carnon and Newberry: London 1779, 34th edn) p 124. Emphasis in original. It is instructive to compare Venn's views in this regard to Bishop Gibson's evaluation of the Methodist revival, especially his warning against antinomian tendencies in Whitefield's teaching. Cf. Norman Sykes, *Edmund Gibson*, pp 301-32, especially p 305.
- 32) *Life*, p 31. See Venn's further comments on his Calvinism, *idem*, p 31f; John Venn's summary of his father's experience is given on p 30. There is no suggestion whatever that Venn was influenced by other advisers during this episode. George Burnett, protégé of Samuel Walker and close friend of Thomas Haweis, was Venn's curate and remained a lifelong friend, but nothing is said of him in this connection.
- 33) There are two interpretations of Wigg Venn's influence on her husband. James Stillingfleet told the younger Henry Venn in 1824 she exerted undue influence over her husband. John Riland, as curate, lived in the Venn home for several years prior to Eling Venn's death in 1767 and wrote a tribute to her at the time of her passing which flatly contradicts Stillingfleet. Cf. John Riland, 'Eusebia—a Sketch of the Character of Eling Venn', 23 November 1767, Venn MSS F1. The sequence of developments given by Henry Venn in his account of his wife written soon after her death—which is followed here—makes his own spiritual development determinative for her. M. M. Hennell, *John Venn and The Clapham Sect*, pp 23-5, follows Stillingfleet's interpretation.
- 34) Venn MSS C8, 25 November 1777. Cf. John D. Walsh 'Yorkshire Evangelicals in the Eighteenth Century', PhD Thesis, Cambridge University 1956, chapter 1, 'Moderate Calvinism'. Chapter 5 studies Henry Venn in greater detail. I have been able to peruse this important thesis only hurriedly.
- 35) *Life*, pp 162, 166, and 169.
- 36) For further aspects of the problem of succession see John Walsh, "The Magdalene Evangelicals", *Church Quarterly Review* 1958, pp 499-511.
- 37) L.E. Elliott-Binns, *The Early Evangelicals* (London 1953) chapter 11, summarizes the issues and events.
- 38) A fascinating account of one such visit is given in James Jerram, *The Memoirs of Rev. Charles Jerram*, pp 89-96.
- 39) Grandson Henry Venn published a series of these letters which passed between Henry Venn and Charles Simeon under the title, 'On the Relations between Elder and Younger Evangelical Clergymen,' *Christian Observer*, January 1871, pp 43-52, including excerpts not published elsewhere.
- 40) The most recent example is the stimulating essay by the late Max Warren, 'Charles Simeon', *Churchman* 92:2 (1978) pp 112-124. At no point does Warren indicate the roots of Simeon's initiatives either in the eighteenth-century revival or in his relationships with men like Henry Venn and John Thornton who laid the foundation stone for the future Simeon Trust.
- 41) Introduction to *Horae Homileticae*, Vol I, xxiii. in his recent study of Simeon, Hugh Evan Hopkins notes the important relationship between Venn and Simeon. See *Charles Simeon of Cambridge* [Hodder and Stoughton: London 1977].
- 42) Cf. John Venn's comments in *Life*, p 170f.

43) Charles Smyth, *Simeon and Church Order* (Cambridge 1940).