

THE FRAGRANCE OF THE SPIRIT

Towards the Sacramental Use of Oil in Methodism

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In a variety of ways the ritual use of vegetable oils is a significant and growing feature of secular society in Britain in the 1990s. Among the more conventional uses are oils for bathing, cosmetics and sun protection. Annual sales of these alone amount to hundreds of millions of pounds. Recently the use of oil has come to wider notice in the form of massage, aromatherapy and incense oils. If these latter conjure up images of New Age travellers peddling their wares at Glastonbury then a visit to your local branch of The Body Shop will be illuminating. There you will find an extensive range of vegetable oils, some of which claim to possess healing qualities, albeit of a fairly innocuous nature.¹ Altogether, as is borne out by the enormous success of enterprises like The Body Shop, the last twenty years or so have seen a remarkable increase in the ritual use of oils.

In this instance there is some truth in the observation by the writer of Ecclesiastes that there is nothing new under the sun. The ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia, Greece and Rome were all familiar with the use of oil for beautifying, for protection from sun and cold, and for medicinal purposes where oil was used both internally and externally. Besides such uses, oil could even have legal implications, as when it was poured over the head of a woman chosen in marriage, or rubbed into the skin to bind an oath.² What distinguishes these cultures from our own, however, is the contrasting experience of the religious use of oil. In antiquity the secular use of oil went hand in hand with the religious. Sometimes oil was offered as a sacrifice to the gods, whose statues might also be anointed with oil to their honour, and for purification. For similar reasons, the practice of anointing the dead was widespread. Ordinarily, people might anoint themselves prior to a religious ceremony or before consulting the local oracle or other holy person.

In modern times, however, the religious use of oil has all but disappeared from the corporate memory of many Christian denominations. True, rumours circulate among Protestants that Roman Catholics might anoint those *in extremis*. But that in itself is sufficient to confine the religious use of oil all the more securely within the closed archives of Protestant memory. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that, so far as society as a whole is concerned, any religious use of oil is generally supposed to stem from the more exotic 'Eastern' religions from whence it has found its way into quasi-religious Western rituals which reverence the body. In Britain few recall that the Christian use of oil plays a significant part in what is, arguably, the most important religious ceremony in national life – the coronation of the sovereign. In a moment so sacred and intimate that it is shielded from gaze beneath a canopy, the monarch is anointed with oil in a ceremony which is among the most ancient features of the

coronation rite. When the BBC won a hard-fought battle to televise the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953 it was on condition that the ceremony of anointing was not shown. At the crucial point in the proceedings every television and newsreel camera in Westminster Abbey was switched off. If anything, such an infrequent and esoteric use serves largely to enhance the aura of mystery which surrounds the Christian use of oil.

The Use of Oil in the Bible

All this is strange given Christianity's roots in Judaism. In the Old Testament, examples abound of the religious use of olive oil in ceremonies of anointing. Symbolic of the riches of Israel's inheritance in the land of Canaan, oil belonged with corn and new wine as the first-fruits offered to God.³ Pure olive oil, combined with aromatic spices in an elaborate preparation, provided the 'oil of anointing' for use in various rituals associated with the priesthood (*Leviticus 8.2*). After the Exile, following the disappearance of the monarchy, the most significant liturgical use of oil in Israel was the anointing of the high priest, who thereby became the chief holy person in Israel.

But whatever the later significance of the high priest in Israel, his anointing represents the restoration of a ritual that before the Exile had been associated supremely with the king. The royal oil of anointing was believed to confer the Spirit of Yahweh to enable the king to fulfil the responsibilities of office (*1 Samuel 10.1; 16.13*). When the fortunes of history eventually turned against her, hope increased in Israel that a figure would emerge to usher in the kingdom of God decisively. Whether this would be a member of the royal house or some other figure there was no clear picture; but, as the one supremely endowed with God's Spirit, he would be the 'messiah' or anointed one.

Apart from these cultic references, anointing was also associated with prophecy: many of the prophets speak of their gift of prophecy as an anointing. Hence the famous passage in Third Isaiah, read by Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth:

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted (*Isaiah 61.1; cf. Luke 4.18f*).

We cannot be certain, however, whether references to prophetic anointing are literal or symbolic. On the whole, it would be unwise to conclude that such references are anything more than a powerful metaphor. Even so, that many prophets felt it appropriate to describe their call as an anointing reflects the belief, universal in Israel, that anointing confers the Spirit of Yahweh. Thus, in the Old Testament, anointing is a conventional symbol of the Spirit.

More commonly, in Israel the possession of oil was evidence of wealth; and so the anointing of guests on festal occasions, such as a banquet or wedding, was a sign of joy and honour. Hence the 'oil of gladness' in Psalm 45.7. On the domestic side, oil was an essential item in even the poorest kitchen. The staple diet in Palestine included cakes of flour baked in olive oil. There again, oil was a household medicine used to soothe wounds (*Isaiah 1.6*) and as a potential source of healing for every kind of illness. Altogether, these various uses combine to make oil a powerful symbol in the Old Testament of vitality, strength and life. To have oil on one's head, therefore, was a sign of a good life in Israel (*Ecclesiastes 9.8*).

In the New Testament two passages in particular focus the issue so far as any Christian use of oil is concerned. While both relate to healing, their significance for

the wider use of oil should not be underestimated. The first passage is Mark 6.13:

And they cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many that were sick and healed them (εθεπαρουον).

Although physical disorder was generally regarded as a symptom of creation's bondage to demonic powers, so that Jesus' miracles of exorcism and of healing have much the same effect, here Mark distinguishes between the possessed and the sick. However, since a dualistic separation of body and soul is unscriptural, it is probable that anointing was used in exorcism as well as in healing. In both cases, the criterion for anointing would be a lack of wholeness.

If it should be pointed out that nowhere do the gospels report Jesus as having used oil then this need not raise a difficulty so far as any Christian use of oil is concerned. It could be that Mark intends us to understand that by using oil (which immediately brings to mind the Holy Spirit) the disciples, unlike Jesus, were relying upon an authority and power that was not theirs. Likewise, that Matthew and Luke omit Mark's reference is curious, but reflects the obvious fact that variations in the gospel traditions stem from different practices among the New Testament churches. Be that as it may, Mark at least is clear on the matter: when the disciples anoint they expect healing to follow.

Our second New Testament passage is James 5.14-15:

Is any among you suffering? Let him pray. Is any cheerful? Let him sing praise. Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders (πρεσβυτερουζ) of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save (σωσει) the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins he will be forgiven.

While it is conceivable that the 'elders' are simply senior Christians, in view of the formal structure of the church's ministry evident elsewhere in James, this is unlikely. No doubt some would regard this reservation of anointing into the hands of the presbyterate as a regrettable sign of advancing institutionalization in the New Testament churches. But, in fact, such signs are already present in Mark's gospel, where anointing is an activity of the Twelve and not of the wider group of Jesus' followers. It was almost inevitable that the apostolic authority to anoint should belong to the inheritance of their successors – the bishops and presbyters.

In general, it is the use of the Greek verb χριω in the New Testament which emphasizes the spiritual dimension of anointing.⁴ The noun associated with χριω is χριωμα from which we derive the English words 'chrism' and 'chrismation.' Significantly, χριωτοζ, meaning 'anointed one,' equivalent to the Hebrew 'messiah,' is the supreme designation of Jesus. As with prophetic anointing, however, the force of the symbolism attached to χριω makes it impossible for us to be certain whether scriptural references to χριωμα involve an actual rite. Certainly, there is nothing to suggest the literal use of oil in the baptism of Jesus or of anyone else in the New Testament. Attempts to discover a formal rite of baptismal chrismation from references to χριωμα remain unpersuasive. On the whole, it is safer to conclude that, so far as the New Testament is concerned, as a distinct rite rather than as a powerful symbol, anointing is associated with healing but not with baptism.

The Use of Oil in the Western Tradition

Nevertheless, from earliest times the Fathers mention the use of oil in connection with Christian initiation. In his treatise, *On Baptism*, Tertullian refers to the use of ‘blessed unction.’⁵ Likewise, Cyprian asserts that

It is also necessary that he should be anointed who is baptized; so that, having received the chrism, that is, the anointing, he may be anointed of God, and have in him the grace of Christ.⁶

As Jesus was anointed by the Spirit following his baptism, upon rising from the waters of baptism the Christian is anointed with oil as an outward sign of the inward receiving of the Holy Spirit. Gradually, a pattern developed of three baptismal chrismations: first with the oil of exorcism prior to baptism; then with the oil of thanksgiving upon rising from the water; and finally with the same oil at the laying on of hands by the bishop in what is now called confirmation.

Rites of healing involving anointing were also well established by the third century. Interestingly, while authority to bless the oil of healing was reserved to the bishop and presbyters, almost anyone could apply it.⁷ Accordingly, the use of ‘holy oil’ in healing was widespread among the laity for a variety of needs, which involved a generous interpretation of wholeness of being.

Increasingly, the liturgical use of oil came to be regarded in sacramental terms; prompted by the reflections of theologians such as Cyril of Jerusalem who wrote:

Beware of supposing this to be plain ointment. For as the Bread of the Eucharist, after the invocation of the Holy Spirit, is mere bread no longer, but the Body of Christ, so also this holy ointment is no more simple ointment ... after invocation, but it is Christ’s gift of grace, and, by the advent of the Holy Spirit, is made fit to impart His Divine Nature. Which ointment is symbolically applied to thy forehead and thy other senses; and while thy body is anointed with the visible ointment, thy soul is sanctified by the Holy and life-giving Spirit.⁸

Notice how carefully this statement is constructed so as to avoid unwarranted superstition. And yet, misuse of holy oil would appear not to have been a problem in the early Church: at least, the Fathers record no warning on the matter.⁹

Despite a history of the liberal use of oil lasting over a thousand years, in 1551 the Council of Trent considerably narrowed the recognized grounds for anointing. Henceforth, the sacrament of healing became that of extreme unction, reserved exclusively for those seriously ill or otherwise in grave danger of death. The reason for this stems from a general downgrading in medieval thought of the significance of physical healing in preference for spiritual healing in anticipation of imminent death. For the next four hundred years or so, Roman Catholic use of the oil of healing was restricted to extreme unction.¹⁰

Now in regarding anointing as an appropriate preparation for death, the Council of Trent was not entirely mistaken. Whereas the expectation in Mark is of recovery, the passage in James is less precise. An ambiguity in the Greek verb $\sigma\omega\sigma\omega$ makes it possible that those who receive the oil of anointing will either be healed presently or will be saved in the future through being raised to eternal life.¹¹ Since it is inconceivable that such an ambiguity could have escaped the attention of the writer, there are reasonable grounds for anointing the dying. Whatever its faults, the lasting

contribution of the Council of Trent on the liturgical use of oil may well be its provision for the anointing of those close to death.

Fortunately, Catholic Tradition is not the static entity it is sometimes made out to be by critics and defenders alike. From its origins in the latter part of the nineteenth century, rapid advances in modern biblical scholarship brought about significant changes in Roman Catholic use of Scripture. By the advent of the Second Vatican Council in 1962 the time was ripe to reconsider the sacrament of extreme unction.¹² The outcome was a shift in emphasis from anointing in anticipation of death towards anointing in expectation of recovery. According to the Council fathers:

‘Extreme unction’ which may also and more fittingly be called ‘anointing of the sick’ is not a sacrament for those only who are at the point of death. Hence, as soon as any one of the faithful begins to be in danger of death from sickness or old age, the appropriate time for him to receive this sacrament has certainly already arrived.¹³

Subsequently, *The Apostolic Constitution on the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick* made it clear that the oil of healing is no longer to be regarded solely as a means of spiritual healing to speed the dying but as a source of healing for body and soul.¹⁴ Continuing this trend, *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* does much to simplify the liturgical use of oil.¹⁵ In particular, the catechism suggests that the most appropriate context in which to administer the sacrament of healing is at the Eucharist, which should include the ministry of the Word. While it is fitting for the oil of anointing to be blessed by the bishop, this may also be done by the presbyter. As if to lay the ghost of Tridentine theology, suitable occasions for anointing with the oil of healing now include preparation for major surgery.

Reformation Influence

Strikingly, among the churches in which Reformation principles have taken precedence over Catholic Tradition, the liturgical use of oil ceased entirely. Granted their general wariness regarding the sacramental use of material things, it was inevitable that the reformers should have examined the liturgical use of oil. What is surprising, however, is the speed and decisiveness of their reaction. Whereas the first *Book of Common Prayer* of 1549 contains an order for the anointing of the sick, the revised prayer book of 1552 makes no provision for the liturgical use of oil. In this, the intervention of Martin Bucer proved decisive. Rejecting liturgical use of oil as lacking any clear scriptural mandate, Bucer concluded that such use was

neither ancient, nor commended by any precept of God or laudable example of the saints; but has been introduced by a distorted imitation of an apostolic act, of whose imitation the ministers have manifestly neither a mandate nor a faculty.¹⁶

So far as many Protestants are concerned, Bucer has uttered the last word on the subject of anointing.

Similar concerns led John Calvin to conclude that extreme unction was a distortion of apostolic practice. Like Bucer, Calvin maintained that healing was a special gift which belonged exclusively to the apostolic generation, the imitation of whom was ‘a mere hypocritical stage play.’¹⁷ Luther was equally adamant on the point; though he was willing to accept that those who are anointed may receive forgiveness and peace.¹⁸ All the same, everything depends upon the faith of the believer and not the performance

of a ritual. As for any scriptural mandate for the liturgical use of oil, Luther placed no store on the letter of James which notoriously he referred to as a 'right strawy epistle.' Given this weight of opposition on the part of the Reformers, anointing remains highly contentious in those churches which owe their allegiance to Reformation principles.

A theological case for the sacramental use of oil

Despite all this it remains one of the more curious aspects of the history of dogma that those traditions which set great store on the authority of Scripture (*sola scriptura*) have been least faithful in honouring the biblical mandate which, in the case of healing, could hardly be clearer. To be fair, however, the liturgical use of oil turns upon a sophisticated sacramental theology, which remains acutely susceptible to misunderstanding. While shortage of space precludes a thorough treatment of the issues, some comments are in order.

Firstly, a regrettable feature of the debate about the Christian use of oil is the tendency of all sides to claim too much for biblical exegesis. Whereas the Council of Trent interpreted the practice of anointing described in James as one of seven sacraments instituted by Christ, which have always and everywhere been part of the Church's ministry, the reformers saw the same phenomenon as a gift given exclusively to the apostles. Both conclusions go beyond the evidence afforded by exegesis. Unlike the Eucharist, which is attested in all the New Testament traditions, anointing appears to have belonged exclusively to those New Testament churches for which Mark and James were recognized authorities. Equally unhistorical is Luther's dismissal of the letter of James as an inferior witness to Christ. The most that can be said is that James belongs in the setting of Palestinian, as opposed to Hellenistic, Christianity. Similarly, Calvin's assertion that the oil of healing was a gift to the Church subsequently withdrawn after the apostolic generation, ignores the evidence of the early Church. Besides, the idea of a post-apostolic generation is foreign to the New Testament.

Recognizing the development which took place in the Church concerning the liturgical use of oil enables us to hold a more nuanced understanding of Scripture. On the whole, the mandate for anointing found in James is probably best understood as a *permission* and not a dominical *command*. As Christians, we want to pray for those who are sick and to draw on every resource in our spiritual armoury to ensure their well-being. In the practice of anointing described in James, the Church has been provided with a spiritual resource which gradually gained wide acceptance.

Turning to more general issues of sacramental theology, the fundamental difficulty concerning Catholic doctrine on anointing is that the sacramental use of oil is supposed always to confer grace. To many Protestants, sacramentalism is tantamount to bottling grace in high-church ritual, to be released when the presbyter performs an appointed action regardless of the faith of the recipient. Since the real dynamic of grace takes place within the individual in response to faith (*sola fide*), the sacramental use of material things as a tangible sign of grace is essentially irrelevant and potentially misleading. At best, anointing is a superfluous sign pointing to grace already conferred by the Holy Spirit in response to faith.

Regrettably, these longstanding divisions between Roman Catholic and Protestant dogmaticians have been overstated. That the oil of healing is supposed always to confer grace need not result in ritualism. Those who receive the oil of healing cannot be certain of recovery, though they can be assured of having received sanctifying

grace in some form which may sometimes lead to physical wholeness. To be sure, in the absence of faith whatever grace is conferred by the sacramental use of oil falls on stony ground and bears no fruit. On the other hand, an absence of any outward mark of healing need not imply a lack of faith on the part of the recipient. Whatever its visible effect, the sacramental use of oil remains a powerful sign of salvation.

As Cyril of Jerusalem articulated so clearly, the agency of the Holy Spirit is crucial to any sacramental use of material things. Only through the invocation of the Spirit can material gifts of bread, wine and oil confer sanctifying grace to be received in faith. In our submission, it is possible to maintain an orthodox view of anointing which avoids lapsing into either high-church ritualism or Zwinglian disdain for the sacramental use of material things. Properly understood, anointing need not present a stumbling block to the faithful.

John Wesley and Anointing

If we are to make a case for the sacramental use of oil in Methodism, then clearly it would be helpful to enlist the support of John Wesley. At first sight, however, this would appear not to be forthcoming. Of two recent studies in Wesley's sacramental theology, neither contains a single reference to anointing.¹⁸ The reason for this is not hard to determine. In his famous sermon on 'The Means of Grace' Wesley conspicuously fails to list anointing as being among the ordinary channels of grace.

The chief of these means are prayer, whether in secret or in the great congregation; searching the Scriptures (which implies reading, hearing and meditating thereon); and receiving the Lord's supper, eating bread and drinking wine in remembrance of Him; and these we believe to be ordained of God as the ordinary channels of conveying his grace to the souls of men.²⁰

Leaving aside for a moment the Lord's supper, the most striking feature of Wesley's list is its emphasis upon the work of the Holy Spirit within the individual without apparent need for the sacramental use of material things. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that commentators on Wesley's sacramental theology have not found it worth their while to pursue the subject of anointing.

Nevertheless, two observations encourage us to look again. In the first place, Wesley's sermons were never intended to be a systematic exposition of his theology.

Notwithstanding their order and clarity, the sermons remain *ad hoc* treatments of selected aspects of specific topics. Despite appearances, Wesley's list of the means of grace is not intended to be exhaustive; for instance, there is no mention of baptism. There again, as one form of meditation upon Scripture, preaching too ranks among the means of grace. Likewise, if prayer is a means of grace then presumably this includes prayer for healing, whether or not accompanied by the laying on of hands or even anointing.

Secondly, despite an emphasis on the subjective, it would be wrong to accuse Wesley of a lack of appreciation for the sacramental use of material things. After all, Wesley includes the Lord's supper among the means of grace; and he maintained a strong doctrine of the real presence. Moreover, at a time when the eucharistic life of the Church of England was at a low ebb, Wesley insisted that, 'It is the duty of every Christian to receive the Lord's supper as often as he can.'²¹ While all this may indicate a lack of systematic rigour in Wesley's treatment of the means of grace, it also suggests a respect both for Catholic doctrine and for the reformers' insistence upon

the need for personal faith.²²

Apart from the sermons, our second main source of Wesley's thought in this area comprises his *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*, which provides some revealing comments on the two passages central to our topic. In his expository note on Mark 6.13 Wesley notes the parallel with the 'general direction' about anointing in James, adding that

He shall be restored to health; not by the natural efficacy of the oil, but by the supernatural blessing of God. And, it seems, this was the great standing means of healing desperate diseases in the Christian Church, long before extreme unction was used or heard of, which bears scarce any resemblance to it: the former being used only as a means to health; the latter, only when life is despaired of.²³

Notice how, in stressing the decisiveness of God's action over against any natural property of oil, Wesley is in essential agreement with Cyril of Jerusalem.

Notwithstanding Wesley's sympathy with Reformation principles, in his expository note on James 5.14-15 we find firm evidence of his independence of mind. Against the grain of contemporary Protestant thought, Wesley evidently accepts that anointing may have a continuing role in the ministry of the Church. The note is worth quoting in full:

This single conspicuous gift [of anointing], which Christ committed to His apostles (Mark 6.13), remained in the Church long after the other miraculous gifts were withdrawn. Indeed, it seems to have been designed to remain always; and St James directs the elders, who were the most, if not the only, gifted men, to administer it. This was the whole process of physic in the Christian Church, till it was lost through unbelief. That novel invention among the Romanists, extreme unction, practised not for cure, but where life is despaired of, bears no manner of resemblance to this.²⁴

Tentative though it may be, Wesley's view of anointing here is entirely positive and thus stands in sharp contrast to that of Bucer, Calvin and Luther.

Of Wesley's personal interest in healing there can be no doubt. Every page of *Primitive Physik* betrays his endless fascination for all kinds of remedy from herbal medicines to electrification. Nor was this an idle curiosity; as always, Wesley's overarching interest was sanctification, in which physical wholeness is undoubtedly one aspect. From the evidence we have considered, there are grounds to believe that, in a less polemical age, Wesley would have approved the reinstatement of the sacrament of healing to its original status in the primitive Church.

Towards the Sacramental Use of Oil in Methodism

Be that as it may, currently there is no provision for the use of oil in official liturgies of the Methodist Church of Great Britain; though recently the connexional Faith and Order Committee has prepared a draft liturgy of healing which provides for the laying on of hands and anointing where desired.²⁵ More liturgically adventurous than in British Methodism, in North America, the United Methodist Church has an official liturgy of healing which includes anointing.²⁶ Rather than comment directly on specific liturgies, let us consider briefly what makes for good practice as regards what is probably the most contentious element in any proposed Methodist liturgy involving oil – the blessing of the oil.

Straightaway, the need to avoid anything which might impair ecumenical vision requires any Methodist liturgy involving anointing to make clear that the oil is blessed by the presbyter. Now this is not an attempt to establish an hierarchical priesthood in Methodism. Among the specific gifts of the Holy Spirit sought at the ordination of presbyters is oversight in the Church's ministry of healing. At the same time, it is desirable for the presbyter to prepare only sufficient oil for use during the service or immediately thereafter. This would reduce the scope for superstitious belief concerning the oil and would counter any suggestion of the reservation of 'holy oil' for veneration. Moreover, special arrangements would be required to store oil that has been blessed.

To avoid potential misunderstanding, the oil should be blessed in the presence of the people as part of the liturgy and not beforehand, especially not surreptitiously in the vestry. The blessing of the oil through the invocation of the Holy Spirit is an act which involves the entire eucharistic assembly and not the presbyter alone. Oil that appears from nowhere to be applied without explanation positively invites superstitious belief. Ideally, the oil belongs with the bread and wine on the communion table, as among the gifts of the people offered for blessing and use during the service.

Turning now to more general issues, the act of anointing has long been associated principally with the presbyterate and the diaconate. Where the oil of healing is used outside the sanctuary, such as at home or in hospital, it is appropriately seen as part of the diaconal ministry. At the same time, it may be desirable for designated lay persons to administer the oil of healing, especially where this forms part of a daily routine of holistic treatment. Here class leaders or pastoral visitors would be the most obvious candidates for a ministry which would doubtless include what we now refer to as 'extended communion.'

As longevity increases in Britain, further thought should be given to the use of oil in pastoral ministry among those who feel the onset of a sudden decline in their old age. Similarly, anointing in preparation for death could help meet a pastoral need among the terminally ill and others whose earthly life is drawing to a close. In ministry among those suffering from some form of mental illness or Alzheimer's disease and similar, the oil of healing expresses Christian love through a gentle touch which communicates more than words. Together with the laying on of hands, anointing gives Christian content to the ability of touch generally to communicate our deepest feelings towards others. More widely, in view of increasing recognition that wholeness of being includes the spiritual and the relational dimensions of human existence, a case can be made for extending the sacramental use of oil to facilitate healing in these areas.

Finally, if our attention has been focussed on the oil of healing, then this should not limit our horizons as to the potential use of oil on other occasions. As a sign of the Holy Spirit, it is appropriate to use the oil of anointing wherever the Church seeks spiritual gifts for the exercise of particular ministries – especially at ordination. Similarly, a suitable juncture for the use of oil at baptism would be at the point in the service when the minister makes the sign of the cross on the forehead of the baptized.²⁷ Even so, it may be doubted whether many Methodist ministers would find it expedient or even desirable to introduce a single baptismal anointing – let alone the oil of exorcism! More promising perhaps is the use of oil at confirmation, where it would remind the congregation of the charismatic nature of confirmation. In this, anointing may go some way toward meeting an acute pastoral need among those for

whom their baptism as infants appears to have deprived them of an opportunity to register a charismatic experience of renewal.

Conclusion

For over a thousand years the Church anointed the sick and others in the course of pastoral ministry without controversy or abuse. As the Second Vatican Council tacitly acknowledged, distortions which infiltrated the medieval Church should not be allowed to detract from the sacramental use of oil as envisaged in the New Testament. While suspicions of what is still considered to be the preserve of Roman Catholicism remain deeply rooted in some Protestant circles that are well represented in Methodism, increasingly there are signs that Protestants are beginning to rediscover anointing as a gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church.²⁸ With its spiritual roots in Wesley's broad theological outlook, Methodism is well placed to learn from Catholic tradition as well as from Reformation principles. Moreover, as we have seen, there is reason to suppose that Wesley himself would have approved of the restoration of the sacramental use of oil.

By virtue of its historical associations within the community of faith, oil is uniquely qualified to symbolize life, vitality and the presence of the Spirit. Substantial yet fluid, oil evokes the person and work of the Holy Spirit who permeates the created order. The pouring of oil at the Eucharist brings to mind the eschatological Spirit poured out on all flesh (*Joel 2.28*). And the elusive fragrance of oil is the fragrance of the Spirit whose presence can be invoked but never controlled.²⁹ All in all, the sacramental use of oil ranks among the means of grace by which the Church cares for the faithful so as to bring them safe home to God. Just so, anointing is a powerful sign of salvation and the triumph of the gospel over the forces of evil, among which death ranks as the last enemy. In the light of Jesus the Christ we discern new significance in the familiar words of the psalmist:

Thou preparest a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
thou anointest my head with oil,
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life;
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
for ever.³⁰

APPENDIX : Some Comments on a United Methodist Order for Anointing

The United Methodist Book of Worship (1992) contains a service of healing which provides for anointing and the laying on of hands.³¹ Its essential elements deserve to be better known in British Methodism as a suitable alternative to the draft order of healing offered by the British Faith and Order Committee. Like its British counterpart, the United Methodist liturgy provides for the celebration of the Eucharist as an integral part of the service. Sensitive to the pastoral issues involved in services of healing, the compilers of the United Methodist liturgy helpfully remind us in the rubric that

A Service of Healing is not necessarily a service of curing, but it provides an atmosphere in which healing can happen. The greatest healing of all is the reunion or reconciliation of a human being with God. When this

happens, physical healing sometimes occurs, mental and emotional balance is often restored, spiritual health is enhanced, and relationships are healed. For the Christian the basic purpose of spiritual healing is to renew and strengthen one's relationship with the living Christ.³²

At a practical level, advice is offered about the kind of oil suitable for use in anointing.

Olive oil is traditionally used in anointing but can become rancid. Sweet oil, which is olive oil with a preservative, is available in any pharmacy. Fragrant oils may be used, but care must be taken because some people are allergic to perfumes.³³

Either before or following the Eucharist, this prayer of thanksgiving is said over the oil:

O God, the giver of health and salvation,
we give thanks to you for the gift of oil.
As your holy apostles anointed many who were sick and healed them,
so pour out your Holy Spirit on us and on this gift,
that those who in faith and repentance receive this anointing
may be made whole;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.³⁴

Then, addressing the recipients by name, the 'worship leader' makes the sign of the cross in oil on their forehead using a thumb and lays hands upon them. As these actions are performed the following prayers are said to those named:

I anoint you with oil in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

I lay my hands upon you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

May the power of God's indwelling presence heal you of all illnesses – of body, mind, spirit and relationships – that you may serve God with a loving heart.³⁵

After the anointing and laying on of hands, this final prayer is offered:

Almighty God, we pray that our brothers and sisters may be comforted in their suffering and made whole.
When they are afraid, give them courage;
when they feel weak, grant them your strength;
when they are afflicted, afford them patience;
when they are lost, offer them hope;
when they are alone, move us to their side;
in the name of Jesus Christ we pray.³⁶

Where appropriate, as in the anointing of those close to death either at home or in hospital, the following petition may be included at the end of the prayer:

When death comes, open your arms to receive him/her.

Overall, the United Methodist service of healing is simple, yet dignified and reverential, while successfully avoiding extravagant claims for the power of the Holy Spirit at work in healing. Throughout, the language and tone of the service is calm and

measured so as to avoid the charged emotional atmosphere associated with certain forms of healing.

Merton Park, London April 1996

NOTES

- 1 For instance, oil from the Mexican jojoba shrub is said to possess soothing properties to heal mild skin disorders. Oil from the lavender bush soothes and relaxes mind and body, while rosemary oil improves clarity of thought.
- 2 Stephanie Dalley, 'Anointing in Ancient Mesopotamia', in *The Oil of Gladness: Anointing in the Christian Tradition*, ed. Martin Dudley and Geoffrey Rowell (London: SPCK, 1993), pp 19-25 (p 24)
- 3 In this paragraph I am indebted to J Roy Porter, 'Oil in the Old Testament', in *The Oil of Gladness*, pp 35-45
- 4 G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1921), p 485
- 5 Tertullian (AD 145 - 220), 'On Baptism', in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. III, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, repr. 1993), pp 669-679 (p 672)
- 6 Cyprian (AD 200 - 258), Epistle LXIX, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. V, pp 375-377 (p 376); cf. also 'Constitutions of the Holy Apostles', in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. VII, pp 387-508 (p 431)
- 7 'Let the bishop bless the water, or the oil. But if he be not there, let the presbyter bless it, the deacon standing by. But if the bishop be present, let the presbyter and deacon stand by, and let him say thus: O Lord of hosts... do Thou now also sanctify this water and this oil through Thy Christ, in the name of him or her that has offered them, and grant them a power to restore health, to drive away diseases, to banish demons, and to disperse all snares through Christ our hope, with whom glory, honour, and worship be to Thee, and to the Holy Ghost, for ever. Amen.' 'Constitutions of the Holy Apostles', Book VIII, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. VII, pp 479-500 (p 494)
- 8 Cyril of Jerusalem (c315 - c380), 'On Chrism', Catechetical Lecture No XXI, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. VII, trans. Edwin Hamilton Gifford (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, repr. 1989 (1893), p 149f
- 9 A possible exception is Clement of Alexandria (AD 153 - 217). While he commends the use of 'ointments' Clement warns against excessive use which can dry the skin and make the hair go grey. Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus*, Book II, ix, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. II, pp 237-270 (p 257)
- 10 Interestingly, the Eastern Church never restricted the sacrament of healing in this way. In Orthodoxy, anointing is not restricted to the forehead. The chest and even the joints of the body may all be anointed as part of the liturgy of healing. Shortage of space precludes our giving more attention to the liturgical use of oil in the East.
- 11 cf Abbott-Smith, p 436
- 12 The Council's acknowledgement of past errors in the administration of the sacraments is a masterpiece of understatement: 'With the passage of time, however, there have crept into the rites of the sacraments and sacramentals certain features which have rendered their nature and purpose less than clear to the people of today; and hence to that extent the need arises to adjust certain aspects of these rites to the requirements of our times.' *Sacrosanctum Concilium*,

- para 62, in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M Abbott (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1967), pp 137-182 (p 159)
- 13 *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, para 73
 - 14 Published 30 November, 1972
 - 15 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994), paras 1517-1519.
 - 16 Bucer, *Censura*, cited in Geoffrey Rowell, 'The Sacramental Use of Oil in Anglicanism and the Churches of the Reformation', in *The Oil of Gladness*, pp 134-153 (p 138)
 - 17 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T McNeill, trans. F L Battles (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1961), iv, 19, 18
 - 18 Martin Luther, *On the Babylonian Captivity*, 6:570
 - 19 John R Parris, *John Wesley's Doctrine of the Sacraments* (London: Epworth, 1963); Ole E Bergen, *John Wesley on the Sacraments: A Theological Study* (Zurich: United Methodist Publishing House, 1972)
 - 20 Sermon 16, 'The Means of Grace', *The Works of John Wesley*, Volume I, ed. Albert C Outler (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), pp 376-397
 - 21 Sermon 101, 'The Duty of Constant Communion', in *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. III, pp 147-157 (p 148)
 - 22 Wesley's fluctuating attitude towards the sacrament of infant baptism is an even stronger indication of his desire to hold together objective and subjective dimensions of the means of grace.
 - 23 *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (London: Epworth, repr. 1976), p 158
 - 24 *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*, p 868
 - 25 *Orders of Service for Healing and Wholeness*, The Faith and Order Committee of the Methodist Church, September 1995. Experimental liturgies involving anointing can be found in Howard Booth, *Healing is Wholeness* (London: Methodist Division of Social Responsibility, 1987). These of course are unofficial and derive from a variety of sources mostly from outside Methodism. Their quality is rather uneven.
 - 26 cf *The United Methodist Book of Worship* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1992) The essential elements of the United Methodist service of healing are set out in the appendix to this article.
 - 27 *The Methodist Service Book* (London: Methodist Conference, 1975), pA11
 - 28 For example, the Lutheran churches of North America have recently introduced a liturgy of healing which makes provision for anointing. *Occasional Services: A Companion to the Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis, 1982). Interestingly, some Pentecostal churches also make use of oil as an attestation of the presence of the Holy Spirit at work within the lives of individuals. This is consistent with a Zwinglian view of the sacramental use of material things.
 - 29 Clement of Alexandria refers to 'the fragrant unction of the Holy Spirit,' *The Paedagogus*, Book II, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. II, pp 237-270 (p 253)
 - 30 Psalm 23.5f
 - 31 United Methodist Publishing House, Nashville, Tennessee.
 - 32 *ibid* p 613f
 - 33 *ibid* p 614
 - 34 *ibid* p 620
 - 35 *ibid* p 620f; alternative forms are also provided
 - 36 *ibid* p 621

AN ORDER FOR HOLY COMMUNION WITH THE LAYING ON OF HANDS AND ANOINTING

Introduction

Our Lord Jesus Christ proclaimed the coming of the kingdom of God not only by preaching but also by healing the sick. He brought healing in all its fulness: physical cures, the healing brought by forgiveness of sin, restoration of broken relationships, assurance of salvation, acceptance of the sinner by God. His miracles are evidence of God's desire that his people should be completely whole: healthy in body, mind and spirit, holy in life. The power of the risen Christ has not changed: for us today he still brings health, life, joy and peace.

Christ heals in many ways, especially through those who dedicate their lives to the service of the sick. God works through prayer and the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist, through the rites of Confession, of Laying on of Hands and Anointing, as well as through those who are engaged in medical research and technology and the day to day running of hospital and nursing services. It is for us, trusting in God's unfailing love, to make use of all available means by which we may be brought to that wholeness and holiness which is God's will for us.

Our heavenly Father, in his love for us, gives spiritual strength through Jesus Christ our Lord to enable us to use sickness for our profit and to his glory.

There is no easy answer to the problem of pain and suffering. Those who ponder the gospel will find comfort and help in the assurance of Christ's healing power and his love, and also in the mystery of redemption, in which the suffering and death of Jesus bring a deeper and more complete healing to the world.

On the cross Christ conquered the power of sin and death, once and for all, by bearing the worst that could be done to him without bitterness or resentment. When human pain and suffering is offered up in union with the pain and suffering of Christ it can become redemptive for us and for others. Those who bring to God in Christ the pain and brokenness of human life, small or great, know that whether we live or die, we are the Lord's, and nothing can separate us from his love.

The aim of the Christian, in sickness or in health, is to give glory to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Scripture Sentence

Remember that in your baptism you died to sin and rose again to new life in Christ.

Hymn

Collect for Purity

**Almighty God,
to whom all hearts are open,
all desires known,
and from whom no secrets are hidden:
cleanse the thoughts of our hearts
by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,
that we may perfectly love you,
and worthily magnify your holy Name;**

through Christ our Lord.

Amen.

1

Collect of the Day

Almighty and everlasting God,
mercifully look upon our infirmities
and in all our dangers and necessities
stretch forth your right hand to help and defend us;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

2

New Testament Reading

Hymn

Gospel

Sermon

Hymn

Prayers of Intercession – A time of open prayer followed by

Lord God, we ask you to give us your blessing;
to your Church, holiness,
to the world, peace,
and to all people, knowledge of your law.
Keep safe our families,
protect the weak,
heal the sick,
comfort the dying
and bring us all to a joyful resurrection.
We ask these things through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

2

Lord's Prayer

The Blessing of the Oil

Almighty God, giver of health and salvation, sanctify this oil for the healing of
your people, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

The Peace

The peace of the Lord be with you always.

And also with you.

The Peace is shared

Act of Penitence

Sisters and brothers in Christ,
in our baptism we died to sin
and rose again to new life in Christ.
Therefore, in preparation for the laying on of hands
and the anointing
let us call to mind our sins.

Silence

**Almighty God, our heavenly Father,
we have sinned against you and against our neighbour,
in thought and word and deed,
in the evil we have done
and in the good we have not done,
through ignorance, through weakness,
through our own deliberate fault.
We are truly sorry and repent of all our sins.
For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, who died for us,
forgive us all that is past;
and grant that we may serve you in newness of life,
to the glory of your Name. Amen.**

3

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.
Hear then the word of grace:
Your sins are forgiven.
Amen. Thanks be to God.

3

The Laying on of Hands and Anointing

Our help is in the name of the Lord
Who has made heaven and earth.

Saviour of the world, by your cross and precious blood you have redeemed us;
We look to you to save and help us.

The apostles anointed the sick with oil and healed them.
Blessed be God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit now and for ever. Amen.

Those who wish come forward to receive the laying on of hands.

N, may Christ the Light of the world free you from all that harms you and fill you
with his healing love. **Amen.**

*Having received the laying on of hands, they return to their places. During the laying
on of hands silence may be kept or a hymn may be sung.*

Those who wish come forward for anointing.

N, I anoint you with oil in the name of Christ: may God the Father make you
whole, and grant you the inward anointing of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

*Having received the anointing, they return to their places. During the anointing
silence may be kept or a hymn may be sung.*

Offertory Hymn Preparation of the Gifts

Eucharistic Prayer

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give our thanks and praise.

It is right to give you thanks and praise,
O Lord, our God, sustainer of the universe:
you are worthy of glory and praise

Glory to you for ever and ever.

At your command all things came to be:
the vast expanse of interstellar space,
galaxies, suns, the planets in their courses,
and this fragile earth, our island home;
by your will they were created and have their being.

Glory to you for ever and ever.

From the primal elements
you brought forth the human race,
and blessed us with memory, reason and skill;
you made us the stewards of creation.

Glory to you for ever and ever.

But we turn against you, and betray your trust;
and we turn against one another.

Again and again you call us to return.

Through the prophets and sages
you reveal your righteous law.

In the fulness of time you sent your Son,
born of a woman, to be our Saviour.

He was wounded for our transgressions,
and bruised for our iniquities.

By his death he opened to us
the way of freedom and peace.

Glory to you for ever and ever.

Therefore we praise you,
joining with the heavenly chorus,
with prophets, apostles and martyrs,
and with those in every generation
who have looked to you in hope,
to proclaim with them your glory,
in their unending hymn:

**Holy, holy, holy Lord,
God of power and might,
heaven and earth are full of your glory.**

Hosanna in the highest.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

Hosanna in the highest.

Blessed are you, Lord our God,
for sending us Jesus, the Christ,
who, on the night he was handed over to suffering and death,
took bread, said the blessing,
broke the bread, gave it to his friends,
and said, Take this, and eat it:
this is my body which is given for you.
Do this for the remembrance of me.'

In the same way, after supper,
he took the cup of wine;
he gave you thanks,
and said, 'Drink this, all of you:
this is my blood of the new covenant,
which is shed for you and for many
for the forgiveness of sins.
Whenever you drink it,
do this for the remembrance of me.'

Glory to you for ever and ever.

Gracious God,
we recall the death of your Son Jesus Christ,
we proclaim his resurrection and ascension,
and we look with expectation for his coming
as Lord of all the nations.

We who have been redeemed by him,
and made a new people by water and the Spirit,
now bring you these gifts.

Send your Holy Spirit upon us
and upon this offering of your Church,
that we who eat and drink at this holy table
may share the divine life of Christ our Lord.

Glory to you for ever and ever.

Pour out your Spirit upon the whole earth
and make it your new creation.
Gather your Church together
from the ends of the earth into your kingdom,
where peace and justice are revealed,
that we, with all your people,
of every language, race and nation,
may share the banquet you have promised;
through Christ, with Christ, and in Christ,
all honour and glory are yours,
creator of all.

Glory to you for ever and ever. Amen.

The Breaking of the Bread

We break this bread to share in the body of Christ.

**Though we are many, we are one body
because we all share in one bread.**

1

The Prayer of Humble Access

**Lord, we come to your table,
trusting in your mercy
and not in any goodness of our own.**

**We are not worthy even to gather up the crumbs under your table,
but it is your nature always to have mercy,
and on that we depend.**

**So feed us with the body and blood of Jesus Christ, your Son,
that we may for ever live in him and he in us.**

Amen.

3

The Communion of the Ministers

The Invitation

Come to this sacred table, not because you must but because you may;
come, not to declare that you are righteous,

but that you desire to be true disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ;

come, not because you are strong, but because you are weak;

not because you have any claim on heaven's rewards,

but because, in your frailty and sin,

you stand in constant need of heaven's mercy and help.

5

The Communion of the congregation

The Body of Christ keep you in eternal life. **Amen.**

The Blood of Christ keep you in eternal life. **Amen.**

Silence

Post Communion Prayer

**We thank you, Lord,
that you have fed us in this sacrament,
united us with Christ,
and given us a foretaste of the heavenly banquet
prepared for all people.
Amen.**

Hymn

Blessing and Dismissal

The blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
remain with you always.

Amen.

Go in peace in the power of the Spirit to live and work to God's praise and glory.
Thanks be to God.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The numbers against the right hand margin ascribe material for which acknowledgement is made as follows:

- 1 *The Alternative Service Book 1980* © The Central Board of Finance of the Church of England 1980
- 2 *An Anglican Prayer Book 1989* © The Provincial Trustees of the Church of the Province of Southern Africa 1989
- 3 *The Methodist Service Book* © The Methodist Conference Office 1975
- 4 The Episcopal Churches of North America
- 5 *Holy Communion for Lent and Passiontide* : A draft order prepared by the Faith and Order Committee of the Methodist Church 1993