

ALTARS AND ALTAR CALLS

A Catholic Evangelical in the Circuit Ministry

Philip Blackburn

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1 Catholic and Evangelical – Incompatible?

It never occurred to me that there could possibly be any incompatibility between simultaneous membership of the Methodist Sacramental Fellowship and the Methodist Revival Fellowship (as it then was) until some time after I returned to work in an English circuit, following nineteen years with the Methodist Missionary Society. This was through a chance remark, not unkindly spoken, by my Superintendent, the Revd W Norman Stainer-Smith, that *in spite of* my ‘high chapel’ practices, including strict adherence to the Book of Offices and the regular chanting of canticles and psalms, the congregations in my pastoral care were growing, large numbers of young people were being converted and confirmed, and there was a steady flow of candidates requesting ‘notes’ to preach. Yet it was a self-confessed High Churchman, John Wesley, who ‘sparked off,’ under God, the Evangelical Revival in eighteenth century England.

When serving abroad in isolated mission stations in Belize, Jamaica or the Bahamas I was very grateful for the bulletins and newsletters from both the Methodist Sacramental Fellowship and the Methodist Revival Fellowship, keeping me in touch with current thinking in the home church. I owe a great debt to the Methodists of the English-speaking Caribbean with their warm formality in worship. Everywhere I served for the first nineteen years of my ministry the main Sunday morning worship was liturgical – according to the 1936 Book of Offices – either Morning Prayer with four hymns, four chants and sermon, or the first office of Holy Communion, with hymns, psalms and sermon. The evening services were less structured – more like the contemporary services in English Methodism, but in the Jamaican country circuits we used Cliff College choruses along with the Methodist Hymn Book.

2 Belonging

While serving in Wesley College, Belize, I was invited by the circuit Superintendent, the Revd T Stanley Cannon, to take the confirmation classes at Wesley Church, the mother church of the District. The date of the first class was duly announced in the Sunday service at Wesley Church, and also during prayers in Wesley College. I expected about a dozen to turn up, but forty-seven candidates appeared. During four years I was privileged to prepare hundreds of people for church membership. Out of my *last* class of 84, 77 persons were approved by the Leaders’ Meeting for

confirmation in Wesley Church by the Chairman of the District, the Revd W Hartley Totty. For this to be done decently and in order we needed two rehearsals! Unfortunately torrential tropical rain kept many intending worshippers away from that triumphal service, but all 77 confirmation candidates were present. That has been an inspiration to me for the rest of my ministry. There are more people than we realize in our congregations who are ready to commit themselves openly to Christ. Like most evangelicals, I have emphasized commitment to Jesus, but also I equally emphasize the need for committed Christians to belong to the church, the Body of Christ. This is catholic and evangelical teaching. Let me quote from the Report of the Joint Commission between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Methodist Council (Fourth Series: *Towards a Statement on the Church*). Paragraph 11 – ‘Being a Christian has necessarily both a *personal* and a *communal* aspect. It is a vital relationship to God in and through Jesus Christ in which *faith*, *conversion* of life, and *membership* in the church are essential. Individual believers are joined in a family of disciples, so that *belonging to Christ* means also *belonging to the church* which is his body.’

In Methodism we have enjoyed a low standard of membership, offered to those who were still seeking salvation and giving evidence of their serious intentions by their life and conduct. The assurance of sins forgiven came to many seekers, who were already members of the Methodist Societies, when, like Susannah Wesley herself, they received the sacramental bread and wine in Holy Communion. Until recently, the quarterly tickets of church membership were clearly marked with a capital letter, so that intending communicants could be more carefully scrutinized by the Poor Stewards, especially in the larger congregations. (I shall never forget the 1952 Covenant Service in Belize, where I assisted in serving 656 communicants at Wesley Church.) Only members in good standing with the current letter on their quarterly tickets were allowed to reach the communion rail. This discipline persisted in parts of the West Indies until after World War II. Members who were under discipline, or on trial without a current quarterly membership ticket would find it difficult to pass the Poor Stewards.

3 Open Table?

I have never refused the elements to any person who has presented himself at the altar, but neither have I ever invited the public to share in ‘the mysteries.’ It is now a widespread custom, but a distortion of our Methodist discipline, for ministers to invite ‘all who love the Lord Jesus’ to partake of the Lord’s Supper. This malpractice has led to chaotic proposals to admit children, many of whom love the Lord Jesus, to Holy Communion, with the danger that unbaptized children may by default be given the elements. This malpractice also, I believe, is partly responsible for the decline in church membership in British Methodism. ‘Why should I bother to be confirmed if I can have communion anyway?’

When non-members have asked me for permission to come to Holy Communion I have answered that *all* may come, but that first it is expedient they should be instructed about church membership, and then, in the context of belonging to the church, they may enjoy the privilege of full communion. I kept one teenage boy in Leeds waiting for over a year, because he asked this question just after it was too late to join the annual confirmation class at Lidgett Park; but the waiting made his first communion very special, and fifteen years later he is still a most faithful and regular Methodist communicant. Unfortunately, many of us are guilty of offering what

Dietrich Bonhöffer called ‘cheap grace’ when we indiscriminately invite all and sundry to Holy Communion. John Lawson, in his book *A Thousand Tongues*, just published (1987) by the Paternoster Press, puts this point very clearly:

Although an enquiring person can with a good conscience attend Christian worship, prayer and fellowship, and listen to Christian preaching, without the implication that he or she is a committed Christian, to come to the Lord’s Table without a sincere commitment of Christian discipleship is a spiritually false and harmful step...’ (p 170)

However, we know that there are in the fellowship of the Church disciples of very varying degree of spiritual growth. There are many in the Church who have a sincere desire to follow Christ as their Lord and Saviour, and who in this sense are church members ‘in good standing,’ who yet have not come to the gift of evangelical saving faith, or to a conscious personal experience of Christ. They are in fact incompletely ‘converted.’ Folk in this condition can rightly be communicants, and at the Lord’s Table may come to a full personal experience of Christ. In this sense Wesley can describe the Lord’s Supper as a ‘converting ordinance’ (*Journal*, June 27-28, 1740).

4 My Testimony

My love for the Catholic and Evangelical in Methodism is largely due to my own spiritual experience before entering the Methodist ministry. When I was given up for dead at the age of eight days, my Wesleyan parents sent for the Revd G Henry Lester, who hurriedly baptized me in the bedroom. The cold water revived me, and here I am 64 years later! (I am thankful that my parents were not Baptists!) When I was six years old I narrowly escaped death thanks to skilful physicians, but I remember our minister, the Revd Arthur W Barr, praying at my bedside, and blessing me with the sign of the cross. He always used ‘manual acts’ in the consecration prayer at Holy Communion – I watched with my eyes wide open, while most of the devout Wesleyans held themselves in what the Revd Prof E Gordon Rupp described as ‘the hair-washing position’!

During convalescence my reading included my grandfather’s copy of *Public Prayers and Services – for the use of the people called Methodists as adopted by the Conference of 1882*, which had a lasting effect on me. At our chapel we were familiar with the offices of Holy Communion and the Baptism of Infants, but not the rest of the Methodist liturgy.

The family took me to St Anne’s on Sea to recuperate during the summer of 1929, and the ecstatic highlight of the holiday was, for me, the singing of the *Te Deum* at the morning service in The Drive Chapel. It did not surprise me, therefore, to find out thirty years later that the *Te Deum* was the favourite hymn of six-year old children in my Jamaican circuit. (Admittedly this was partly due to the fact that they were of pre-school age in that country, and that, as the *Te Deum* was sung nearly every Sunday morning, they knew it off by heart and could heartily join in the singing of it.)

I shall always be grateful to my Methodist parents who made chapel on Sunday morning *the* priority, the most important activity with which to begin the week, wherever we were, at home or on holiday. I sympathized with Roman Catholics I met later in Central America who expressed the same priority in their own ethos, saying ‘Mass matters most.’

As a child it never occurred to me that there could be any alternative programme on

Sunday morning apart from divine worship in chapel. On a July Sunday in 1939, just before the war, I heard evangelist Roy Hession preach on Revelation 3.20 – ‘Behold I stand at the door and knock; if any man hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to him and will sup with him and he with me’ (KJV). At the altar-call I responded with two of my friends. After that experience, all the ritual of Methodism, the hymns of Wesley, the daily Bible readings, which I had loved from my childhood, came to life. It was like switching from black and white to colour television.

During active service with the Fleet Air Arm, I made a vow, in the middle of an air-raid over Japanese-occupied Sumatra, that if the Lord brought me safely through I would give the rest of my life to his service. Looking back, that seems almost blasphemous and selfish – but I have kept the vow so far, thank God. I was able to take my examinations as a candidate for the ministry in the Philippines, with a Royal Navy chaplain as my invigilator. After demobilization I studied at Wesley House, Cambridge, where the Revd Professor E Gordon Rupp introduced me to the Methodist Sacramental Fellowship, while at Wesley Church the Revd Ronald V Spivey demonstrated by his pastoral care and sacramental practice what a Catholic Methodist minister could be. At the same time I took an active part in CICCUCU – the Cambridge Inter-Collegiate Christian Union, devoted to evangelizing undergraduates – and MethSoc, the Cambridge University Methodist Society, with 36 groups of about a dozen each, meeting weekly during term for Christian fellowship and study.

5 Why not call the communion table an altar?

My war-time service in the Royal Navy took me more than once to the USA where, to my delight, I discovered the great Methodist Church of that country (with more than twenty times the membership of British Methodism). American Methodism does not share the inhibitions of a British non-conformist sect. It is unashamedly triumphalist.

Twenty years later, on a journey via the USA to my mission station in Jamaica, I picked up from a Methodist church bookstall a manual entitled *Methodist Altars*. It was intended for the use of members of the Methodist Altar Guilds, which in many churches look after the furnishing and care of the sanctuary and altar. The manual explains Christian symbols, liturgical colours, the church calendar, sacraments, wedding and flower arrangements, and the training of acolytes. Nearly all the Methodist churches I know in the USA have robed choirs and robed ministers wearing stoles in the liturgical colours. A Creed is recited at every public service, and candles are alight on the altar, which is usually draped in the appropriate liturgical colour, with Christian symbols richly embroidered on the frontal.

At Trinity Methodist Church, Nassau, in the Bahamas, twenty-five years ago, although still in an overseas district of British Methodism we were very much influenced by the American Methodists in nearby Florida. We had pulpit falls and altar frontals to match the minister’s stole, following the sequence of liturgical colours. After my return to England, as I continued to wear stoles according to the season, some critics accused me of being a trendsetter. The colourful trend in British Methodist chapels was boosted rather, I think, by the Anglican-Methodist conversations of the sixties, and the merger of Handsworth Methodist Theological College with the Anglican Queen’s College in Birmingham. But American Methodist influences are increasingly being felt in Britain, as more ministers visit America under the pastoral exchange system.

Many of us in British Methodism, like Dr Donald English, are not accustomed to

calling the communion table an ‘altar.’ In *Action and Ideas in Mission*, published by the Methodist Church Home Mission Division in 1986, Dr English wrote an article, ‘Renewing the Altar-Call.’ As Reformed Protestants we have adapted the view that altars were for sacrifices, that the death of Jesus on our behalf was a sacrifice offered ‘once and for all.’ But John Wesley had no hesitation in referring to the Lord’s Table as an altar. He published for the first Methodists *A Companion for the Altar*, extracted from Thomas à Kempis (and reprinted in 1936 by the MSF). The most popular collection of hymns by John and Charles Wesley was *Hymns on the Lord’s Supper* with a preface extracted from Dr Daniel Brevint (re-issued by the MSF in 1936 and reprinted in 1951); where Wesley refers to the altar upon which the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper is celebrated (cf section II para 5; section III para 5; section VII paras 6, 11 and 12; section VIII para 4).

Referring to this collection of eucharistic hymns with its interesting preface, the Revd W F Flemington preached a University Sermon in Cambridge in 1945, in which he said:

The governing idea alike of the treatise, as of the hymns, is this conception of the Holy Communion as the commemoration of a sacrifice. The ‘full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice’ was offered by Christ once for all, but it is the Christian’s duty and joy to commemorate that sacrifice and thus to ‘set forth,’ to ‘proclaim’ the Lord’s death.

And again:

At every celebration of the Holy Communion we join with the whole Church of Christ in presenting before God that full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice.

With solemn faith we offer up,
And spread before thy glorious eyes,
That only ground of all our hope,
That precious, bleeding sacrifice,
Which brings thy grace on sinners down,
And perfects all our souls in one. (Charles Wesley HP 554)

Again says Mr Flemington:

if the Evangelical continues to insist that Christ is not localized in the elements, but rather present in the whole action of the service he, no less confidently than the Catholic, affirms the doctrine of the Real Presence.

As an Evangelical I firmly believe in what Question 44 in both Methodist Catechisms of 1952 and 1986 calls ‘the priesthood of all believers.’ A priest seeks to bring God to men, and to bring men to God. All the faithful share in this task of ‘bridge-building.’ In Central America there is an extraordinary ant called the ‘hui-hui.’ They march like an army and stop at no obstacle. They will even make a path straight through the manse! At a stream side, dozens of them will climb on a long stalk of grass and bend it over to bridge the stream, a feat of engineering reinforced and widened by dozens more workers. No single ant could do this. The bridge is built by the many ants instinctively cooperating. One of the principal names of the Pope of Rome is ‘Pontifex Maximus’ (literal translation – ‘greatest bridge-builder’). While all Christians share in the priestly office of bridge-building, the Minister does so in a more intense way through his training, ordination, study and experience. He is a Priest as well as a Prophet and a Pastor.

The Court of Ecclesiastical Causes in the Church of England recently heard an appeal from the Rector and Churchwarden of Saint Stephen Walbrook, one of Wren's finest London churches. Under the Anglican Holy Table Measure the new altar, sculptured by Sir Henry Moore, was rejected, and likened by the Georgian group to a 'giant piece of Camembert on a cheeseboard.' The Bishop of Chichester made clear that a doctrine of the Eucharistic sacrifice can lawfully be held in the Church of England, and consequently that the Holy Table can lawfully and properly be called an altar. The Court was unanimous in declaring that the altar be permitted to remain.

Like John Wesley, I am happy to refer to the Lord's Table as an altar. When I have preached an evangelistic sermon I am happy to refer to the 'appeal' for converts to bear their witness openly as an altar-call.

B The Philosophical Gulf

In 1985 Dr Oliver Barclay, secretary to the Research Scientists Christian Fellowship, wrote a paper for Evangelicals entitled 'Bishop Jenkins, Mr Cupitt and all that,' which was an attempt to bridge the philosophical gap in Christian thinking. On one side of this gulf there is a popular form of Existentialism, which so stresses inner experience that it denies the importance, or even the possibility, of doctrinal statements. The problem is not *what* you believe, but '*believing*' itself. E.g. When some modern theologians acknowledge the 'resurrection' but consider the empty tomb to be irrelevant, it appears that they hold that the early Church had certain experiences which gradually convinced a growing number of people that Jesus was not finished!

Along with these views there is a widespread antipathy to the Supernatural and the Miraculous. E.g. The Virgin Birth and the physical Resurrection of Christ are probably 'no more than parables,' and yet you can still have an existential sort of 'believing' in a nebulous 'person' – an experience of belief virtually without anything but emotional and some ethical content.

These ideas are part of the popular culture of our time, when children at school are encouraged to question everything and to accept no tradition.

On the other side of the gulf are the majority of those who belong to the Methodist Sacramental Fellowship, the Methodist Renewal Group and Headway, i.e. the Catholics, Charismatics and Evangelicals among us, who have much more in common than many Methodists realize. E.g.

- 1 Reverence for the Bible and the historic Creeds (without insisting on any one interpretation), c.f. part 3 of the Pledge of the Methodist Sacramental Fellowship, 'to submit humbly to the Faith of the Church as contained in Holy Scripture and expressed in the Nicene Creed.'
- 2 The practice of regular methodical prayer.
- 3 Regular attendance at public worship.
- 4 Pious devotion to Jesus.
- 5 Recognition of the value of memorizing passages of Scripture, Creeds and Collects.
- 6 Love for God with *heart* and *soul* and *strength* as well as with the mind.

7 Redeeming the Routine

After the Resurrection Our Lord gave his disciples the great commission, ‘Go, then to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples’ (Matthew 28.19 GNB). This commission has always been foremost in my mind since that first great confirmation class in Belize. The priority in my ministry is to use every opportunity for bringing people into active church membership.

Many of our ministers make jokes about ‘four-wheeled’ Christians who never come to chapel except in a ‘pram’ for baptism, a limousine for the wedding and a hearse for the funeral. But I have politely used rites of passage as evangelical opportunities with astonishing results. E.g. A shy lapsed member whom I vividly remember approaching me about the baptism of his first child was so astonished on the day of the christening at our lively Sunday morning congregation that he started attending every Sunday, and before I left the circuit, he had been restored to membership, had become the secretary of the World Service and Mission Committee, and then Junior Church Superintendent.

In Yorkshire, where a large proportion of the population has chapel connections, a minister is frequently surprised by couples, hitherto unknown, requesting chapel weddings. During marriage preparation I have often recruited candidates for confirmation and have, on occasion, I must confess, unintentionally proselytized some divorced Anglicans!

There are two occasions, writes the Blessed Apostle Paul to Timothy, when the Gospel should be preached – ‘in season and out of season’ (2 Timothy 4.2). At funerals there is often a large attendance of non-churchgoers – a glorious opportunity for offering Christ. One Women’s Work secretary I know came into the church because of a funeral sermon, and did her six years duty most efficiently. Many devoted Christians of my acquaintance have come into the committed membership of the Methodist Church, not only through Cliff College campaigns and evangelistic missions, but also through youth club discussion groups and parades for uniformed organizations.

Two casual attenders, an architect and an electrical engineer, who were co-opted on to the chapel property committee because of their professional skills, were drawn into Christian fellowship, and within three years they had requested full membership of the church. One young man in my congregation in Leeds was converted in the confirmation class, when I was trying to explain the way of salvation. At the first of each series of confirmation classes each year in each chapel, I ask each candidate privately to answer a questionnaire – full name, address, telephone number, date of birth, date and place of baptism, occupation, family pattern, name of dog if any (most important to ensure safe visiting later), and a short essay on the reason for joining the class. It is like having a personal interview with each person. Through these questionnaires I have been involved in ritual absolution, exorcism, laying on of hands for the sick, and have learned of wonderful spiritual experiences from those who have come to Christ through a supernatural revelation, or vision, or struggle, never mentioned to anyone before for fear of ridicule. Using as much ceremony as is possible within the Methodist ethos, I always try for Christ’s sake to make public worship and ‘rites of passage’ *special occasions*. For example, in Baptism I always pour three shellsful of water on the candidate, whether infant or adult, and give the lighted candle (section 17) to the father or sponsor of the infant. At weddings, I always wrap the hands of the couple in my stole at the words, ‘Those whom God has joined together let no man put asunder,’ and pronounce a blessing with the sign of the cross.

I hope and pray that the report on liturgical dress being presented at Conference will help all our ministers to uphold the dignity of the pulpit, to respect the faithful who come to them for special ceremonies, and above all to honour Christ, the King of kings and Lord of lords.

Within the framework of the quarterly plan and the diary of church councils, committees and meetings, the circuit ministry is a series of unforeseen interruptions which are the real work of a minister. 'The trivial round, the common task' is transformed as it furnishes all kinds of evangelical and sacramental opportunities, for service to God and man. I can't wait to get back to my circuit!