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The Holy Communion in the Evangelical Tradition

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I

IN his sermon on "The Dignity of Public Worship", preached at Wynburg, Cape of Good Hope, on Wednesday, September 5th, 1832, Daniel Wilson, Bishop of Calcutta, said: "The adoration and worship of Almighty God is the employment of heaven; the adoration and worship of Almighty God is the highest and noblest privilege of the Church on earth". Such a statement may appear strange from one of the outstanding Evangelicals of the last century, yet similar statements can be found in the writings and sermons of many of the Evangelical fathers. The fact that they were deeply concerned about the conduct of worship and that they did everything in their power to give the service of Holy Communion a central place in their ministry has not always been appreciated. The contemporary emphasis by many Evangelicals on this service is not an innovation but a return to the practice of the early Evangelicals, to whose teaching and example it was mainly due that the service was rescued from the neglect it had suffered in the eighteenth century. This point must be stressed, for while authorities have described the movement associated with the Wesleys as "Eucharistic as well as Evangelical", the parallel movement within the Church of England has been criticised for its neglect of the Sacraments. So sympathetic an observer as Overton wrote: "they made no attempt to carry out the Church system in all its details, and above all, they placed, to say the least of it, those two Sacraments, which the Church expressly teaches . . . 'as generally necessary to salvation', on a far lower level than any unprejudiced student of the Prayer Book could possibly do". Brilioth, too, writes that the Evangelical Movement subordinated "the altar still more to the pulpit", and traces the revival of sacramental religion to the Oxford Movement. Evangelicals also have been unaware of their legacy, and as recently as 1944 a contributor in *The Liberal Evangelical* wrote: "At the commencement, at all events, it was profoundly uninterested both in doctrine and liturgical worship . . . its standards of worship were the accepted standards of the day, the bleak, ugly, bare Hanoverian standards". Such statements betray a lack of real knowledge of the facts. A study of the primary sources reveals that the revival of the service of Holy Communion was not due merely to Tractarian activities but was mainly the result of Evangelical witness and practice. The Evangelical Movement was marked by a revival of sacramental worship, and it is high time that prevailing misconceptions were removed.

Their achievements must be assessed not by present-day standards but against the background of Church life in the eighteenth century. It is common knowledge that the Holy Communion service was neglected during that time, the usual practice being to have celebrations

only at the major festivals. When the Evangelicals introduced their monthly Communion services they were pioneers. In 1741 Dr. Secker, Bishop of Oxford, pleaded with his clergy to persuade their people to attend this service more frequently: "One thing might be done at present in all your parishes, as God be thanked it is in most of them; a Sacrament might easily be interposed in that long interval between Whitsuntide and Christmas".¹ In 1800 Bishop Horsley in his *Second Charge*, said: "Four celebrations in the year are the very fewest that ought to be allowed in the very smallest parishes. It were to be wished that it were in all more frequent". And it was in the same year that Bishop Tomline complained that there were only six communicants at St. Paul's Cathedral on Easter Day.² Dr. Norman Sykes points out that of the 836 parishes represented in the returns to Herring's visitation articles at York in 1743, only 72 had monthly celebrations, 363 had quarterly sacraments, and 208 had even fewer.³ The *Journal* of Charles Wesley suggests that the large numbers who frequented the Lord's Table were not always welcomed by some of the parochial clergy. On September 28th, 1739, he records, "The clergy murmur aloud at the number of communicants and threaten to repel them". In an entry of October 13th of the same year he writes that a clergyman "complained heavily of the multitude of our communicants, and produced the canon against strangers". The introduction of a monthly celebration was, therefore, a step forward, a bridge between the eighteenth century and the middle nineteenth century when weekly celebrations were slowly becoming the accepted practice of parochial life.

II

A consideration of some of the available evidence justifies the claim that the Evangelical Revival within the Church produced a revival of sacramental life, and that where there was an Evangelical minister there was built up a worshipping community, and the Lord's Supper was given a central place in the life of the parish. They did everything they could to encourage their congregations to worship at this service, and they were deeply concerned about its neglect. Thomas Haweis, Rector of Aldwinckle from 1764 to 1820, wrote: "The decay of vital and spiritual religion is evident in nothing more than the general neglect of these holy mysteries"⁴; and such sentiments can be found in the writings of many other leaders. Thomas Robinson the devoted incumbent of St. Mary's Leicester, said to his congregation: "It is lamentable to observe how much this holy sacrament is despised; a sad proof that we have little of true godliness among us"⁵; and Hugh McNeil, Dean of Ripon, in a sermon when he was Vicar of St. Jude's Liverpool, said that slackness in attendance was "a deplorable neglect of our holy religion."⁶ Edward Bickersteth, secretary of the C.M.S.

¹ Secker's Eight Charges, 63.

² Abbey and Overton, *The English Church in the 18th Century*, Vol. 2, p. 479.

³ Sykes, *Church and State in England in the 18th Century*, p. 251.

⁴ Haweis, *The Communicant's Spiritual Companion, etc.*, 1818, p. 1.

⁵ Robinson, T., *The Parochial Minister's Address to all those Persons under his care who are of a proper age to be confirmed by the Bishop*, London, 1817, 8th Editn., p. 24.

⁶ McNeil, *Seventeen Sermons*, London, 1839, p. 345.

from 1816 to 1831, and later Rector of Watton, 1831-1850, one of the most able leaders of the Anglican Church in the nineteenth century, uses stronger language: "if you are living in the neglect of this ordinance, you greatly resemble those who first rejected the Gospel."¹ And it was Bickersteth who wrote: "Let us remember that every additional communicant gained to attend the Lord's Supper in a right spirit, who before altogether neglected it, or attended it only formally, is another inroad on the Kingdom of darkness, sin, and misery."² Again, Daniel Wilson in one of *The Bishop's Tracts* wrote: "The oftener they go, the better it will be with them, if they go with a sincere desire to be made better."³ Thomas Adam, the vicar of Wintringham, in his exposition of the Catechism said: "Brethren! how shall I express my concern for your negligence in this matter, or find words to reprove it? If this is not darkness in the midst of the Gospel light, ignorance of Christ, and a spiritual deadness in a country, what is?"⁴ It would be possible to give many more quotations expressing concern for the neglect of the service from many other Evangelical leaders. Their teaching bore fruit, and the large numbers who attended the Lord's Supper in their parish churches is the best commentary on the value they placed upon the sacramental life of the Christian.

In London the first Evangelical incumbent was William Romaine, who became Vicar of St. Andrew-in-the-Wardrobe with St. Anne, Blackfriars, in 1764. Here on his first Good Friday he had five hundred communicants, and three hundred on Easter Day. He instituted a weekly celebration,⁵ and it was one of the first churches in the country to have such a service. Another Evangelical who celebrated each week was Thomas Scott, the commentator. He moved to London in 1785 to be the morning preacher at the Lock Chapel. A letter, written by a friend of the family, illustrates the part this service played in Scott's parochial ministry. On alternate Sundays he rose at 4 a.m.; "he then set forth to meet a congregation at a Church in Lothbury, about three and a half miles off;—I rather think the only church in London attended so early as six o'clock in the morning. I think he had from two to three hundred auditors, and administered the sacrament each time."⁶ On the other Sundays he celebrated at the Lock Chapel. From 1802 to 1821 he was Vicar of Aston Sandford, near Bledlow. Scott describes the village as "one of the smallest in the kingdom: two farmhouses, a few labourers' cottages and the newly erected, parsonage, containing together about seventy inhabitants"; yet Daniel Wilson records that he had more than a hundred communicants at his church. Cadogan had so many attending his celebrations at St. Luke's Chelsea, "that if he pronounced the prescribed words to each of them, the length of time required, not only produced weariness, but many could not return to the Afternoon Service. He therefore

¹ Bickersteth, *A Treatise on the Lord's Supper*, London, 1835, 9th Edtn., p. 76.

² *Ibid.*, p. 129.

³ Wilson, D., *The Lord's Supper, the Medicines of the Soul*, London, 1858, p. 15.

⁴ Adam T., *Practical Lectures on the Church Catechism*, 1822, Vol. 2, p. 385.

⁵ Cadogan, *The Life of the Rev. W. Romaine, etc.*, London, 1796, p. 82.

⁶ Scott, *Life of Thomas Scott*, London, 1825, p. 235.

proposed to the Bishop administering the elements to more than one at a time, which the Bishop, under such circumstances, judged proper." ¹ John Venn, at St. Peter's, Hereford, had similar experiences, and wrote to his Bishop to ask permission to say the words of administration to a group instead of individuals, for on one occasion the service lasted from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. ! ²

Some of the greatest scenes were witnessed at Haworth, where Grimshaw was Vicar from 1742 to 1763. When he began his ministry there were twelve communicants ; in 1749 there were three to four hundred in winter and over a thousand in the summer. Whitefield was a frequent visitor to Haworth and in a letter written from Newcastle, September 29th, 1749, he wrote : " I preached . . . thrice at Haworth. At his Church, I believe we had above a thousand communicants ". Of Whitefield's visit in 1753 Grimshaw records : " In my Church he assisted me in administering the Lord's Supper to as many people as supped away thirty-five bottles of wine within a gill. It was a high day indeed, a Sabbath of Sabbaths ". ³ When the Archbishop of York was asked to investigate complaints about Grimshaw and to take action to prevent his itinerant preaching, he replied, " We cannot find fault with Mr. Grimshaw when he is instrumental in bringing so many to the Lord's Table ". ⁴ In other places in the North the same thing happened. Dr. Conyers at Hemsley, in the North-East Riding, had at one time eighteen hundred communicants. ⁵ At Hunslet, Crook, the curate, had large numbers who frequented this service, and Charles Wesley records in his *Journal*, September 26th, 1756, " There were hundreds of communicants, mostly of Mr. Crook's awakening ". At Hull, Milner inherited a weekly celebration. In the North-west the outstanding Evangelical was Hugh Stowell, the Rector of Christ Church, Salford, a church built for him by his friends. After he had been there twenty-one years the communicants had increased from 180 to more than 500. ⁶ At Christ Church, Macclesfield, David Simpson's monthly celebrations averaged 600 communicants, ⁷ and actually on Good Friday, 1782, the number who attended were 1,300, and on Easter Day of the same year they numbered 800. ⁸

What was true of the North applied to other parts of the country. John Fletcher, the Saint of the Revival, was instituted to the living of Madeley on Oct. 4th, 1760 ; three months later the communicants had increased from 30 to 100. ⁹ Jones of Creaton had an average of 85, ¹⁰ which meant that almost the whole of the adult population of the village communicated. Walker of Truro and Hervey of Weston-Favel organised the keener members of their congregations into societies, and Hervey for his societies adopted Walker's rules which

¹ Cecil, *Memoirs of W. B. Cadogan*, Vol. I, Cecil's Works, p. 229.

² Venn, *Annals of a Clerical Family*, 1904, p. 202.

³ Cragg, *Grimshaw of Haworth*, p. 46.

⁴ Hardy, *Life of Grimshaw*, p. 232.

⁵ Hulbert, *Annals of the Church in Slaithwaite*, 1864, p. 67.

⁶ Marsden, *Memoirs of Hugh Stowell*, 1868, p. 283.

⁷ Hunt, *David Simpson and the Evangelical Revival*, 1927, p. 240.

⁸ Johnson, *Memoirs of the Rev. David Simpson*, Macclesfield, 1782, p. 25.

⁹ Macdonald, *Life of Fletcher*, p. 203.

¹⁰ Owen, *Memoirs of Jones of Creaton*, p. 85.

stipulated "that none be members but such as attend the sacrament monthly".¹ In Cornwall, Thomas Mitchell of Vergan, one of the earliest Evangelical incumbents in the country, had 80 regular attenders in his thinly populated parish.² Henry Venn was one of the first incumbents to introduce hymn singing into the service and he records in his diary, "Everyone sang. It was like Heaven on earth"; and he expresses his thankfulness that many more were attending. "My prayers have been warmly presented, that the Name of the Lord Jesus might be magnified, and that many might eat the Flesh of the Son of Man, and drink His Blood, to eternal life."³ Wherever Daniel Wilson ministered, the Lord's Supper was given a central place in the life of the parish. At St. John's, Bedford Row, where he succeeded Cecil, the average numbers were between 300 and 400. At Islington the same thing happened, and in 1828 he introduced a Communion service at 8 a.m., in addition to his usual weekly celebrations. This was the only way he could cope with his numbers. In 1750 Charles Simeon attended service at Holy Trinity, Cambridge, at which there were only two communicants. Thirty years later at one of the last services he conducted in that same Church the number exceeded 500. That change epitomises the contribution that the early Evangelicals made to the worshipping life of the Church.

III

Outside England there is a similar story. In South-west Wales there was a new awakening to the privilege and duty of sharing in this Sacrament. The leader here was Griffith Jones of Llanddowror, whose Circulating Schools revolutionised the life of the country. Jones held that one of the purposes of his schools was "to prepare the Ignorant to become devout *Communicants*, to celebrate with Reverence, Understanding and Sincerity, the most *excellent* and *highest* Ordinance that ever was ordained in the *Church of Christ upon Earth*."⁴

The outstanding leader was Daniel Rowlands, who became Curate of Llangeitho, Cardiganshire, in 1735, where he remained until he was ejected in 1763. His ejection was one of the most unfortunate episodes in the history of the Church of Wales, for he was a staunch and loyal Churchman. The great service at Llangeitho was the monthly Communion service held on the first Sunday in the month, when over 2,000 people communicated, and often Rowlands had as many as eight clergymen assisting him. In 1746 Dr. Williams of Kidderminster records in his diary that he had met Rowlands at Trefecca, and "Mr. Rowlands informed me that he had three thousand communicants".⁵ His ministry is one of the romances of the Church of God. People came to his church from all over south-west Wales; they would set out from the neighbouring districts on Friday or Saturday, some on horseback, others on foot, and join in procession singing the hymns of Griffith Jones and William Williams of Pantycelyn.

¹ Hervey's *Works*, Berwick, 1815, Vol. 2, p. 232.

² Davies, *The Early Cornish Evangelicals*, p. 22.

³ Russell, *A Short History of the Evangelical Movement*, p. 18.

⁴ *Welsh Piety*, London, 1759, p. 3.

⁵ *Morgan Ministerial Records: a Brief account of the Great Progress of Religion, under the Ministry of the Rev. D. Rowlands, of Llangeitho*, London, 1840, p. 85.

In Pembrokeshire the same scenes were witnessed under the ministry of Howell Davies, a pupil and former curate of Griffith Jones. For twenty years, until his death in 1770, he served in New Chapel, Woodstock, Maunton and St. Daniel, the two latter being chapels-of-ease in the rectory of Narberth. In each of these four chapels he celebrated the Lord's Supper every month.¹ Very seldom were the numbers fewer than two thousand, and often the churches had to be emptied to make room for a second and third congregation so that all could partake of the Sacrament. David Jones, for more than forty years rector of Llangan, had the same enthusiasm amongst his congregation. An eye-witness gives this account of the monthly Communion Service: "The surrounding country presented a . . . novel appearance. Multitudes upon multitudes were moving towards (the church) . . . in great seriousness and silence . . . some on horseback and some on foot. . . . The large yard at Llangan vicarage was soon filled with horses, then the hedges were lined for a great distance with the many horses that were coming up in thick succession, being tied to them".² As the church was so full Jones used to walk from the chancel to the aisles administering as he moved along, taking one side as he went down and the other as he returned.

These are instances of outstanding leaders, and it is well to take note of what was happening in other parishes under Evangelical ministers. The curate of Gelligare, Glamorgan, wrote to Griffith Jones, in a letter dated July 16th, 1741: "We have now a Monthly Communion about us here in several Parish Churches, where, within a very few years past, it could hardly be administered as often as thrice a year, for want of Persons to receive it: But (thanks be to God) I hear there are *Six Score* Monthly Communicants in one of these Parishes at present, viz., *Eglwys Helen*: where not long since they wanted a *convenient* Number to minister the blessed Sacrament on one of those solemn Feasts in the Year. Am also informed that the Communicants increase monthly at *Bedwas*, *Mynydd yflwyn*, and *Bedwellty*, in Monmouthshire and in several other Parishes distant from me."³

Two further pieces of evidence justify the claim that these early Evangelicals were men who valued and stressed the sacramental worship of the Church. The first is a letter from Laurence Coughlan to John Wesley written in 1761. Coughlan, who was at one time one of Wesley's itinerants and was later ordained by the Bishop of London and sent by the S.P.G. to Newfoundland, wrote: "We have the Sacrament once a month, and have about two hundred communicants."⁴ The other is an appreciation of the work of David Brown, one of Simeon's "young men", working in India, by Sir John Kay: "He lived to see the streets opposite to our churches blocked up with

¹ *Enwogion y Ffydd, neu, Hanes Crefydd y Genedl Gymreig*, London, p. 210.

² Morgan, *Ministerial Records: a Brief Account of the Great Progress of Religion under the Ministry of the Rev. D. Jones, Llangan*, London, 1841, p. 180/8.

³ *Welsh Piety*, London, 1742, p. 77. See the writer's article "Pre-Tractarian Revival", *Theology*, September, 1950.

⁴ Quoted from Tyerman's *Wesley*, in Bowmer's *The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper in Early Methodism*, p. 202.

carriages and palanquins, and to welcome hundreds of communicants to the Supper of the Lord.”¹

IV

These men took infinite care to instruct and prepare their congregations for the Lord's Supper. Many of them had services of preparation before the Sunday celebration for those who proposed to attend. Among those who made use of this system were Rowlands, Jones of Llangan, Jerram, Henry Venn; and others like Walker, Hervey and Robinson spent much of their time preparing people in groups in their homes for this service. Leigh Richmond went so far as to make people undergo a year's probation before admitting them to the Sacrament. Griffith Jones maintained that it is not “the least part of a Clergyman's Duty to confer with his People in order to prevent them from the Danger of receiving unworthily”. Some of them also wrote Tracts and Pamphlets urging their congregations to make full use of the means of grace, and giving them instruction and doctrine. Edward Bickersteth's *A Treatise on the Lord's Supper* had a deep influence on his generation. Published in 1822 it had reached a ninth edition by 1835, while his *Companion to the Lord's Supper*, issued in 1816, had by 1860 exhausted more than twenty editions. The most famous of them all was Haweis's *The Communicant's Spiritual Companion; or an Evangelical Preparation for the Lord's Supper*. First published in 1764, it passed through six editions in six years, and subsequent editions were issued in Dublin, Edinburgh, Shrewsbury and Cork. Others, too, wrote about the Lord's Supper, including Thomas Jones of Southwark, Thomas Robinson, Basil Woodd, Thomas Adam, Stillingfleet, John Scott, Romaine, Robert Hawker, Daniel Wilson, Charles Bradley and Thomas Griffith.

This evidence proves the high place the early Evangelicals gave to the Lord's Supper; some of them had had their deepest experience of Christ through this means of grace. To them it was more than a memorial service of the Lord's Passion. Bickersteth wrote: “Nowhere has a Christian a more perceptible and lively exhibition of the Gospel than in this Ordinance”.² There is a remarkable passage in one of Joseph Milner's sermons, “Confidence in Prayer,” where he is answering the question as to how we can be sure that pardon and salvation are ours as a free gift of Jesus Christ. He says that we have six evidences produced by the Apostle, “three of these evidences are in heaven, the ‘Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost’, the three persons of the Blessed Trinity, who unite in their testimony to the truth of this blessed proposition. The other three witnesses are with us on earth, the written word of God, and the two Sacraments, that of baptism and the Lord's Supper. This seems to me to be the only clear and solid interpretation of the passage that I know of. And does not the Spirit in the Word testify all over to us concerning Jesus Christ, and eternal life, as a free gift to us in Him? And what is the meaning of baptism and the Lord's Supper? Do they not both in emblem and in significance convey eternal life to us by Jesus Christ? We have

¹ Quoted Stock, *History of the C.M.S.*, Vol. I, p. 53.

² Bickersteth, op. cit., p. 118.

only to answer their meaning by heartily receiving what they speak to us, and we have eternal life itself." ¹

These men valued the Lord's Supper because they knew that our Lord used it to make Himself known to them. Thus Bickersteth : " Here we may have the nearest approaches to the divine presence that our state in this world admits " ² ; and Daniel Wilson : " There takes place at the Lord's table that union with Christ which no other means of grace is designed to convey ". ³ Howell Harris called it " the place of meeting " and Thomas Robinson wrote in his *Scripture Characters*, " It is the appointed method, in which God is pleased to strengthen, quicken, and comfort His people : and as our wants return upon us, so by a frequent attendance on this ordinance, we should seek fresh communication of grace." ⁴ Venn's Prayer before Communion sums up what many of them thought : " O let it not be a memorial, a mere ceremony ; but whilst I receive the outward and visible sign, let my soul delightfully feel the inward and spiritual grace thereby signified ; whilst my hand receives the bread and wine dispensed by the minister, let me by a true and living faith eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood." Here they knew " Christ is the Master of the feast, he sends the invitation and makes the provision. Christ is also the substance of the bread . . . Christ is also the companion of the feast ". ⁵ And it was an Evangelical, Henry Hutton, who wrote on the eve of his ordination to the priesthood in 1833, " It will be a source of gratification to me, if I am spared to administer the Holy Sacrament of the Body and Blood of our Blessed Saviour ". ⁶

The new valuation of the Lord's Supper on the part of Evangelicals as the central act of worship in church life is not an emulation of Anglo-Catholic tendencies ; it is a return to the practice of the Evangelical Fathers who in their turn were trying to interpret the spirit of the Book of Common Prayer and to follow the example of the Apostolic Church.

¹ Milner, *Practical Sermons*, 1814, Vol. 2, p. 401.

² Bickersteth, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

³ Wilson, *A Plain and Affectionate Address to Young Persons Previous to their Receiving the Lord's Supper*, London, 1845, p. 19.

⁴ Robinson, *Scripture Characters*, London, 1793, Vol. 4, p. 63.

⁵ McNeil, *op. cit.*, p. 354.

⁶ Russell, *op. cit.*, p. 20.