

The Evangelical Fathers and the Liturgy.

(With particular reference to Holy Communion.)

BY THE REV. E. J. G. ROGERS, B.A.

THE effects of the Evangelical Revival on the life of the Anglican Church cannot be over-estimated. It came with cleansing fire, and not only transformed the social life of our nation, but revitalized the spiritual atmosphere of the Church: the Evangelical clergy "brought a vitality and enthusiasm that was still lacking in its other sections."¹ Yet most historians, while anxious to praise its achievements, criticize the movement for its lack of definite Churchmanship. This criticism may be true of subsequent generations of Evangelicals, but it certainly cannot be levelled at the first three generations of Evangelical Fathers, and it is quite wrong to say of them that "they converted individuals but failed to revive the Church."² Overton, in his popular account of "The Evangelical Revival in the Eighteenth Century," says that 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than any unprejudiced student of the Prayer Book could possibly do."³ It is the general supposition that the pulpit superseded the holy table. The purpose of this essay is to examine some of the evidence of these years and to show the attitude of the Evangelical Fathers to the Liturgy, particularly revealing the value they placed on the Holy Communion Service. The surprising feature is the amount of evidence at our disposal and not, as we might expect, a number of isolated examples.

I.

We need spend little time considering the teaching of John Wesley, for many writers have dealt with his attitude to the Sacraments, and it has been estimated that he communicated once every four or five days throughout his life.⁴ We may recall his pre-conversion sermon, "The Duty of Constant Communion," in which he says, "No man can have any pretence to Christian piety who does not receive it, not once a month, but as often as he can." This sermon was republished in 1788 with the following head-note: "The following discourse was written about five and fifty years ago for the use of my pupils at Oxford. I have added very little but retrenched much; as I then used more words than I do now. But I thank God, I have not yet seen cause to alter my sentiments in any point which is therein written." The core of his movement was the Bands, small groups of people who gathered for prayer and for confession of their sins one to another, and their first rule was that each member should be at "Church and at the Lord's Table every week."

Readers of Charles Wesley's Journals* will remember how, throughout, there is an emphasis on the need for the people to be regular in their attendance at the Communion Service, and one of his main concerns is to keep the Societies faithful to their membership of the Church. He writes on October 29th, 1756, from Manchester to his brethren at Leeds, "Continue in the old ship. Jesus hath a favour for our Church; and is wonderfully visiting and reviving his work in her. . . . Let nothing hinder your going constantly to Church and Sacrament."⁵ He was continually in conflict with persons like Bell, Bray, Oxley, Simpson, and the Moravian Mohler, who were influencing people to break away from the Church and the ordinances, and we read in his Journal on Sunday, April 20th, 1740, "Whosoever denies the ordinances to be commands, shall be expelled the Society."

The truth is that wherever there was an Evangelical ministry there was built up a worshipping community, and the Communion Service was given a central place in the life of the parish. Charles Wesley makes this revealing comment: "Fri., September 28th, 1739. The clergy murmur aloud at the number of communicants, and threaten to repel them."

The outstanding instance was at Haworth, where Grimshaw wielded such a powerful ministry. Here it was nothing for them to have a thousand communicants at a time. George Whitefield, in a letter written from Newcastle, September 29th, 1749, says: "I preached . . . thrice at Haworth. At his Church, I believe, we had above a thousand communicants, and, in the churchyard, about 6,000 hearers."⁶ This can be substantiated by accounts from both the Wesleys' Journals. 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."⁷ And Grimshaw summed up what many of the early Evangelicals believed when he wrote, "I believe the Church of England to be the soundest, purest, most apostolical Christian Church in the world."⁸

What was true of Haworth applied to other parts of England: Dr. Conyers at Helmsley, in the North-East Riding, had at one time eighteen hundred communicants.⁹ John Venn, at St. Peter's, Hereford, writes 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.¹⁰ Daniel Wilson, when Vicar of St. John's, Bedford Row, London, had an average of three to four hundred communicants, "so greatly was the service protracted, that though the elements were administered to a whole rail of communicants at a time, a few minutes only intervened between the conclusion of the morning and commencement of the afternoon service."¹¹ Later, when he was Vicar of Islington, he had to introduce an early service at 8 a.m. because of the number of communicants. John Fletcher, of Madeley, was instituted to his living on October 4th, 1760; three months later, in a letter, he is able to report, "The number of communicants is increased from thirty to above a hundred; and a few seem to seek grace in the means."¹²

* The writer has not made use of the Sacramental hymns of the Wesleys as he feels that they would require a separate essay.

The same thing was happening in Wales, where the Revival began twenty years before the conversion of John Wesley, under the ministry of Griffith Jones, of Llanddowror. Through his preaching, Howell Davies, the curate of Llysyfran, was converted, and though the Bishop of St. David dismissed him, he accepted invitations to preach in other Pembrokeshire churches. Many flocked to the Communion services, and "on some occasions crowds stood outside waiting their turn, and the church had to be filled twice or thrice before all received the sacrament."¹³ The most remarkable scenes were witnessed at the parish church of Llangeitho, where Daniel Rowlands ministered. He was one of the greatest preachers of the century, and on Sacrament Sundays people came from all over the south-west of the Principality, and it was "no uncommon thing for him to have fifteen hundred, or two thousand, or even two thousand five hundred communicants."¹⁴ The writer has met people who remember their grandparents telling them of those wonderful times. They would set out on Friday, some on horseback, others on foot, and join in procession to Llangeitho singing the hymns of Griffith Jones and William Williams Pantycelyn. They were a veritable procession of pilgrims, not making the journey to Canterbury, to pay veneration to the relics of a saint, but to partake of the Living Bread and to drink "the royal wine of heaven" from the Elizabethan chalice of Llangeitho Church.

II.

We might quote from the writings of some of the Fathers where the central place of the Holy Communion Service in the life of the Church is stressed. There is a remarkable passage in one of Joseph Milner's sermons, "Confidence in Prayer," where he is answering the question 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 Spirit, the water, and the blood,' which, in my judgment, mean 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 only to answer their meaning by heartily receiving what they speak to us, and we have eternal life itself."¹⁵ This quotation enables us to realize the significance the sacraments held in his teaching. John Newton, too, might be quoted. He defines a believer thus: "Prayer is his breath, the Word of God his food, and the ordinances more precious to him than the light of the sun."¹⁶ Thomas Robinson, the devoted Vicar of St. Mary's, Leicester, in his *Scripture Characters*, commentating on our Lord's going to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, goes out of his way to stress the importance of the ordinances. "Are we not under indispensable obligations to wait upon God in the

public means which He hath appointed? Let us learn from Jesus, then, to pay an exact and practical regard to all the sacred ordinances";¹⁷ or again, "He was constant in His attendance upon all instituted means: and His example teaches us not to slight or neglect the ordinances."¹⁸ Thomas Scott, in his Commentary on St. Matthew xxvi. 26-9, says of the Believer and the Lord's Supper: "It is his duty and privilege to come to it, as often as he has opportunity"; and on the words, "Ye do shew the Lord's death till He come," he adds, "This expressly shews it to be every Christian's duty, to attend on this ordinance."

Edward Bickersteth's *A Treatise on the Lord's Supper* had a deep influence on his generation. Originally published in 1822, it had reached a ninth edition by 1835, while his *Companion to the Holy Communion* had by this date reached its fifth edition. Again, Daniel Wilson's Tract on *The Lord's Supper*, first issued in 1816, had by 1860 exhausted more than twenty editions. These figures give some indication of the way in which their teaching was spreading into countless homes. Bickersteth's teaching is very definite, and he describes the ordinance as a "precious instrument whereby Christ, the bread and drink of life, is really conveyed to us, and received by us through faith."¹⁹ And he emphasizes—"if you are living in the neglect of this ordinance, you greatly resemble those who first rejected the Gospel."²⁰

III.

It may surprise us to realize the importance with which these early Evangelicals stressed the sacramental life. But some of them had had their deepest experience of Christ through this means of grace. Many are familiar with John Wesley's account of his mother receiving the assurance of forgiveness as a new and living experience when her son Hal pronounced the words of administration in giving her the cup. Simeon's conversion, too, dated from that memorable Communion Service at King's Chapel on Easter Day, April 4th, 1779; and in his Private Memoir he says that "at the Lord's Table in our Chapel I had the sweetest access to God through my blessed Saviour."²¹ It was at the Lord's Supper that Bishop Daniel Wilson first heard the call to the mission field. In a letter to Mr. Vardy, October 4th, 1779, he tells of his first communion. "Never did I enjoy so much the presence of my dear Redeemer as I have since that time. . . . Yesterday and to-day have been, I think, the happiest days I ever remember. . . . and I have even wished, if it were the Lord's will, to go as a missionary to heathen lands."²² Thirty-five years later he was to land in India as Bishop of Calcutta. Howell Harris, another of the outstanding leaders, found forgiveness in this same service, at Talgarth Church on Whit-Sunday, May 25th, 1735. Charles Wesley, in his Journal, dated May 8th, 1740, gives this account of Harris: "He declared his experience before our society. . . . Never man spake, in my hearing, as this man spake. What a nursing-father has God sent us! . . . These words broke out like thunder, 'I now find a commission from God to invite all poor sinners, justified or unjustified, to His altar; and I would not, for ten thousand worlds, be the man that

should keep any from it. There I first found Him myself. That is the place of meeting.'"

IV.

Not only were these men lovers of the Communion Service, they were great admirers of the Book of Common Prayer. It is surprising to discover some of them preaching sermons on the Liturgy. In 1811 Simeon was Select Preacher at Cambridge, and he chose as his subject for the four sermons, "On the Excellence of the Liturgy." John Venn, of Clapham, records in his diary, July 5th, 1805, "Course of lectures on the Liturgy." At Bristol the Evangelical witness was maintained by Thomas Tregenna Biddulph, and among his published works are *Sermons on the Liturgy* and *The Forms of the Church opposed to Formality*. Among Joseph Milner's "Practical Sermons" is one entitled "The Communion Office of the Church of England considered"; and there is the remarkable sermon of Basil Woodd, "The Excellence of the Liturgy," preached in the Parish Church of St. Mary, Aylesbury, at the visitation of the Archdeacon of Buckingham, on June 27th, 1810. Those men loved the rites of the Church partly because they were so scriptural in character. Woodd, in his sermon, expressed what many of them felt: "It is our privilege also to possess an established form of worship, strictly corresponding with the doctrines of the Holy Scriptures, glowing with the devotional spirit which they breathe, and enforcing the practical purity, which they enjoin."²³ Hugh Stowell, the Vicar of Christ Church, Salford, recalling the amount of Scripture in the services of the Church, says they "give to her worship a scriptural character, a richness of holy unction, which, to my mind, invest her with a transcendent loveliness."²⁴ Certainly none loved the Prayer Book more than these devoted sons of the Church. Stowell describes it as "the most beautiful of earthly forms of prayer and worship."²⁵ Biddulph writes: "Blessed be God for the Liturgy of the Church of England!"²⁶ Simeon is continually praising the liturgy: "Such is the spirit which it breathes throughout, that if only a small measure of its piety existed in all the different congregations in which it is used, we should be as holy and as happy a people, as even the Jews were in the most distinguished periods of their history."²⁷ Abner Brown records how on one occasion Simeon expressed the sentiment that "the finest sight short of heaven would be a whole congregation using the prayers of the Liturgy in the true spirit of them."²⁸ These men loved the Anglican Liturgy, for "from our very birth even to the grave, our Church omits nothing that can tend to the edification of its members"²⁹; and, "in short, it is not possible to read the Liturgy with candour, and not to see that the welfare of our souls is the one object of the whole."³⁰

Their devotion to the Church and the Book of Common Prayer is further evidenced by the work of "The Prayer Book and Homily Society," which appears to have been supported mainly by Evangelicals. The Society was formed in 1812, and not only did it publish Prayer Books and Homilies in English, but translated them into various languages; so that Stowell, at one of the Society's annual meetings, quotes a speech by Mr. Yate: "He said that the translation of the

Liturgy, next to the translation of the Scriptures, had been most effectual in converting the savages of New Zealand to the state in which they now are." 31 At another annual meeting, when appealing for subscriptions to send the Prayer Book to China, he said: "Oh, let them have the Prayer Book circulated with the Gospel! Having kindled, by God's grace, through His Word, the spirit of devotion, give them the altar on which they may offer up the incense of their hearts to God." 32 In the October number of *The Christian Observer*, 1824, a letter is quoted to the Society from a correspondent in Turkey, which reveals some of the far-reaching effects of providing Prayer Books in the vernacular. "The English Prayer Books are very acceptable indeed to the sailors who come to our chapel. . . . I find that those to whom I give books never fail to attend Divine Service when they again return to this port."

V.

One other criticism of Overton's may be noted. He makes the accusation that Evangelicals neglected the Church's Year. It would be possible to quote from Charles Wesley's Journal to refute this charge. "Tues., December 26th, 1738. We had the Sacrament this and the four following days. . . . The whole week was a festival indeed; a joyful season." Here, too, is a quotation from Daniel Wilson's Journal, January 7th, 1827. "We have had a delightful Sunday. Our Epiphany Sermon in the morning was from Isaiah lvii. 19. A crowded church . . . Communicants 238." It was the Evangelicals who were the first to provide hymn books for their congregations. A notable one was published by Basil Woodd, with its special hymns for every Sunday in the year, "adapted to the Epistle and Gospel of the day." Venn produced one for Clapham Church, containing hymns for the "principal festivals of the Church of England." We might quote an extract from Woodd's sermon: "The Church of England has not only provided for the preservation of the grand outlines of Christian Truth in her ordinary Service, but likewise in the general arrangement of the Holy Days. . . . Thus the spirit of devotion is enlivened, refreshed and strengthened by repeated exhibitions of the grand truths of our most Holy Religion, occasionally interspersed with the lives of the holy Apostles, to whose arduous labours we are indebted for the promulgation of the everlasting Gospel." 33

It is clear that these early Evangelicals were faithful sons of the Church, and they did all in their power to make their congregations value the rich heritage of worship bequeathed to them by the Reformers. We need only cite some words of Daniel Wilson, recently quoted by Canon M. A. C. Warren, yet words which can stand repetition: "For myself, I will teach my child all the great facts and verities of the Christian religion: and with these I will connect an enlightened but devoted adherence to the edifying rites of our episcopal Church. I will present my child at the font of baptism. I will teach him to ratify in his own person, in the rite of Confirmation, the vows then made. I will lead him to the altar of our Eucharistic sacrifice. I will train him to the observation of the Sabbath, and the celebration of the public worship of God in the sublime devotions of our Liturgy." 34

- 1 G. M. Trevelyan, "English Social History," p. 510.
- 2 C.P.S. Clarke, "Short History of the Christian Church," p. 434.
- 3 Overton, "The Evangelical Revival in the Eighteenth Century", p. 151.
- 4 See the valuable essay by T. H. Barratt, "London Quarterly Review," June, 1923.
- 5 Journals of Charles Wesley, October 29th, 1756.
- 6 Tyerman, "Life of George Whitefield," Vol. 2, p. 234.
- 7 Hardy, "Life of Grimshaw," p. 232.
- 8 Ibid, p. 174.
- 9 Hulbert, "Annals of the Church in Slaithwaite," 1864, p. 67.
- 10 J. Venn, "Annals of a Clerical Family," 1904, p. 202.
- 11 Bateman, "The Life of Daniel Wilson," 1860, p. 183.
- 12 F. W. Macdonald, "Fletcher of Madely," 1885, p. 62.
- 13 J. S. Simpson, "The Revival of Religion in England in the Eighteenth Century," p. 148.
- 14 Ryle, "The Christian Leaders of the Last Century," p. 186.
- 15 Milner, "Practical Sermons," Vol. 2 (1814), p. 401.
- 16 Newton, "Cardiphonia," 1910, p. 16.
- 17 Robinson, "Scripture Characters," 1793, Vol. 3, p. 77.
- 18 Ibid, p. 193.
- 19 E. Bickersteth, "A Treatise on the Lord's Supper," London, 1835, p. 120.
- 20 Ibid, p. 76.
- 21 Carus, "Memoirs of the Life of the Rev. Charles Simeon," p. 9.
- 22 Bateman, Op. cit. p. 29.
- 23 Woodd, "The Excellence of the Liturgy," London, 1810, p. 4.
- 24 Stowell, "The Defence of the National Church and her Formularies," 1865, p. 75.
- 25 Ibid, p. 51.
- 26 Biddulph, "Substance of a course of Lectures delivered in the Parish Church of St. Werburgh, Bristol," 1810, p. 5.
- 27 Simeon, "The Excellence of the Liturgy," Cambridge, 1812, p. 83.
- 28 Abner Wm. Brown, "Recollections of Simeon's Conversations," p. 61.
- 29 Simeon, Op. cit. p. 60.
- 30 Ibid, p. 62.
- 31 Stowell, Op. cit. p. 7.
- 32 Ibid, p. 62.
- 33 Woodd, Op. cit. p. 27.
- 34 Bateman, Op. cit. Vol. I, p. 157.