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“Sacramental Glory”: The Lord’s Supper and the Power of the Holy Spirit in the Hymnody of Charles Wesley

In 1678 a Puritan preacher by the name of John Howe (1630-1705) preached a series of sermons in London based on Ezekiel 39:29 in which he dealt with the subject of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. In one of these sermons he told his audience:

When the Spirit shall be poured forth plentifully I believe you will hear much other kind of sermons, or they will, who shall live to such a time, than you are wont to do now-a-days …It is plain, too sadly plain, there is a great retraction of the Spirit of God even from us; we not know how to speak living sense [i.e. felt reality] unto souls, how to get within you; our words die in our mouths, or drop and die between you and us. We even faint, when we speak; long experienced unsuccesfulness makes us despond; we speak not as persons that hope to prevail …When such an effusion of the Spirit shall be as is here signified…[ministers] shall know how to speak to better purpose, with more compassion and sense, with more seriousness, with more authority and allurement, than we now find we can.¹

The effusion of the Spirit for which Howe, and others of his generation longed, did occur, but not in their lifetime. It was not until the 1730s and 1740s that remarkable scenes accompanied the preaching of the Gospel throughout the length and breadth of the British Isles, and preachers were enabled to preach, to quote Howe, “with more compassion and sense, with more seriousness, with more authority and allurement” than preachers in general had known for many a year. Howel Harris (1714-1773), the Welsh evangelist who left an indelible mark on Welsh Evangelicalism and who has been called “the greatest Welshman of the eighteenth century,” gave fellow evangelist George Whitefield (1714-1770) what can be regarded as a classic description of this period of revival when he told him in a letter that he wrote in 1743:

The outpouring of the Blessed Spirit is now so plentiful and common, that I think it was our deliberate observation that not one sent by Him opens his mouth without some remarkable showers. He comes either as a Spirit of wisdom to enlighten the soul, to teach and build up, and set out the works of light and darkness, or else a Spirit of tenderness and love, sweetly melting the souls like the dew, and watering the graces; or as the Spirit of hot burning zeal, setting their hearts in a flame, so that their eyes sparkle with fire, love, and joy; or also such a Spirit of uncommon power that the heavens seem to be rent, and hell to tremble.3

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From Harris’ point of view, this revival was ultimately a sovereign work of God the Holy Spirit, one that could not be manufactured or conjured up, let alone controlled. It was the Spirit who had raised up various preachers, anointed their preaching and so blessed their labours that significant numbers had been converted and numerous sectors of British society had begun to be reoriented and reshaped.

Among these preachers was Charles Wesley (1707-1788), the somewhat overlooked younger brother of John Wesley (1703-1791). One gets a vivid sense of the spiritual power that often attended his preaching in this eyewitness account by Joseph Williams (d.1755), Dissenter and merchant from Kidderminster, who happened to be on hand when Wesley preached in a Bristol brickyard in early October 1739. Not familiar with the area of Bristol where Wesley was preaching, Williams got a guide to take him to the brickyard. There Williams found Wesley “surrounded by…more than a thousand People.” After praying for about fifteen minutes, the Methodist preacher spoke, Williams related, for

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about an Hour in such a manner as I have scarce ever heard any man preach: i.e. though I had heard many a finer Sermon, according to the common Taste, or Acceptation, of Sermons, yet, I think, I never heard any man discover such evident Signs of a vehement Desire, or labour so earnestly, to convince his Hearers that they were all by Nature in a sinful, lost, undone, damnable State; that, notwithstanding, there was a possibility of their Salvation, thro’ Faith in Christ; that for this End our Sins were imputed to him, or he was made Sin for us, tho he knew no Sin, i.e. had no Sin of his own, & this in order that his Righteousness might be imputed, as it certainly will, to as many as believe on him; and that none are excepted, but such as refuse to come to him as lost, perishing, yea as damned Sinners, & trust in him alone, i.e. in his meritorious Righteousness, & atoning Sacrifice, for Pardon, & Salvation; that this is the method Infinite Wisdom hath chosen for reconciling the Word unto himself, & that whosoever believeth in him shall certainly receive Remission of Sins, & an Inheritance among them that are sanctified. All this he backed with many Texts of Scripture, which he explained & illustrated, & then by a Variety of the most forcible Motives, Arguments and Expostulations, did he invite, allure, quicken & labour, if it were possible, to compel all, and every of his Hearers, to believe in Christ for Salvation.5

Now, reading an account like this or other similar narratives it would be easy to believe that the “place” where the Spirit’s power was most readily expected during this era was in the preaching of the Word. And this certainly would be in line with the Puritan and Reformation roots of the revival. But Wesley himself would also point us to another place,

namely, in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. As he rebuked some who denied that the Supper was a place where the Spirit was especially active:

Ah tell us no more  
The Spirit and Power  
Of Jesus our God  
Is not to be found in this Life-giving Food!  

But how exactly does Wesley consider the bread and the wine—this “Food”—to be “Life-giving”? Or to ask this question from a pneumatological angle: What exactly is the Spirit doing in the Lord’s Supper?

**Three patterns of Eucharistic piety**

Broadly speaking, there were three traditions of Protestant eucharistic piety that preceded Wesley’s answers to these questions, all of which had emerged at the time of Reformation, and Wesley’s answers to these questions should be considered apart from this background of thought about the Lord’s Supper. All of the Reformers clearly rejected the Roman Catholic answer to these questions, namely, transubstantiation, but they were unable to find a common answer to these questions that

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6 John Wesley and Charles Wesley, *Hymns on the Lord’s Supper* (Bristol, 1745), Hymn XCII, stanza 1 (p.78). This hymnal is henceforth cited simply as *Hymns on the Lord’s Supper.*
satisfied them all. For Martin Luther (1483-1546), after the prayer for the Holy Spirit to consecrate the elements of bread and wine, the Christ’s body and blood are present “in, with and under” the bread and the wine. Contrary to the Roman dogma of transubstantiation, the bread remains bread and the wine remains wine. Yet, through the Spirit’s power, they also actually contain Christ’s body after the prayer of consecration.

The Swiss German-speaking Reformer Huldreich Zwingli (1484-1531), on the other hand, regarded the bread and the wine as mainly signs of what God has accomplished through the death of Christ and the Supper therefore as chiefly a memorial. The Spirit used the elements to enable the participant at the Table to remember with gratitude, devotion and affection what Christ had done for him or her in his death. In recent discussions of Zwingli’s perspective on the Lord’s Supper it is often maintained that Zwingli was not really a Zwinglian, that is, he saw more in the Lord’s Supper than simply a memorial.\footnote{See Derek R. Moore-Crispin, “‘The Real Absence’: Ulrich Zwingli’s View of the Lord’s Supper” in \textit{Union and Communion, 1529-1979} (London: The Westminster Conference, 1979), pp.22-34.} Be this as it may, a tradition did take its start from those aspects of his thought that stressed primarily the memorial nature of the Lord’s Supper.
Finally, there was the view of John Calvin (1509-1564), which sought to find a mediating position between the Lutheran and Zwinglian perspectives on the presence of Christ at the Table and the work of the Holy Spirit in that regard. In Calvin’s perspective on the nature of the Lord’s Supper, the bread and wine are signs and guarantees of a present reality. To the one who eats the bread and drinks the wine with faith there is conveyed what they symbolize, namely Christ. The channel, as it were, through which Christ is conveyed to the believer is none other than the Holy Spirit. The Spirit acts as a kind of link or bridge between believers and the ascended Christ. Christ is received by believers in the Supper, “not because Christ inheres the elements, but because the Holy Spirit binds believers” to him. But without faith, only the bare elements are received.

Where then does Charles Wesley stand with regard to these various traditions? More specifically, how does he conceive of the Spirit’s activity at the Table and the presence of Christ during the celebration of the Lord’s Supper? In answering these questions, my primary resource

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will be John and Charles Wesley’s *Hymns on the Lord’s Supper*, which was published in 1745 on the printing press of a Bristol printer, Felix Farley. This collection of 166 hymns would be reprinted a number of times over the next forty or so years, with a ninth edition appearing two years before Charles Wesley’s death in 1786. In the first edition, that of 1745, the brothers also included a lengthy edited extract from a work by Daniel Brevint (1616-95), *The Christian Sacrament and Sacrifice* (1673). Brevint, whose grandfather Cosme Brevint (1520-1605) had trained for the ministry under Calvin at Geneva, came originally from the Isle of Jersey and was therefore bilingual. After study at the Huguenot seminary of Saumur in France as well as at Jesus College, Oxford, he served Huguenot churches in France and Anglican ones in England, his last charge being the Deanship of Lincoln.10 It is generally believed that John Wesley edited this extract and Charles Wesley authored the hymns. It is noteworthy that a twentieth-century student of Wesley’s hymnody, J. Ernest Rattenbury, can state that none of Wesley’s hymn collections is “as rich and deep as the hymns on the Lord’s Supper.”11

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One final aspect regarding the historical context behind this hymnal needs to be noted. During the 1740s the Wesleys found themselves engaged in a controversy with men and women who had hitherto played important roles in the revival in which the Wesley brothers were increasingly central figures, namely the English Moravians. The controversy had to do with the role of the ordinances in the believer’s life and would come to be called the Stillness Controversy. Some of the English Moravians were convinced that the means of grace, such as the Lord’s Supper, were “a thing of mere indifference” and not at all vital to the Christian life. Some went so far as to say that any comfort drawn from the Lord’s Supper, for example, came not from the Holy Spirit, but from the devil! Motivating their thinking was a fear that the ordinances might become a spiritual crutch and thus a hindrance to walking in the Sprit. In a very real sense, the Wesley’s collection of Eucharistic hymns was a direct response to this controversy. Consider, for instance, this hymn:

…If now I do not feel
The Streams of Living Water flow
Shall I forsake the Well?

Because He hides his Face, 
Shall I no longer stay, 
But leave the Channels of his Grace, 
And cast the Means away?

Get Thee behind me Fiend, 
On Others try thy Skill, 
Here let thy hellish Whispers end, 
To thee I say Be still!

Jesus hath spoke the Word, 
His Will my Reason is, 
_Do this_ in Memory of thy Lord, 
Jesus hath said, _Do this_!

He bids me eat the Bread, 
He bids me drink the Wine, 
No other Motive, Lord, I need 
No other Word than Thine.\(^\text{14}\)

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“Sacramental Glory”

Of all the various means of grace given by God to his people to further their growth in godliness, Charles Wesley considered the Lord’s Supper to be the chief:

Fasting He doth, and Hearing bless, 
And Prayer can much avail, 
Good Vessels all to draw the Grace
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\(^{14}\) _Hymns on the Lord’s Supper_, Hymn LXXXVI, stanzas 1-5 (pp.73-4).
Out of Salvation’s Well.

But none like this Mysterious Rite
Which dying Mercy gave
Can draw forth all his promis’d Might
And all his Will to save.

This is the richest Legacy
Thou hast on Man bestow’d,
Here chiefly, Lord, we feed on Thee,
And drink thy precious Blood.\(^{15}\)

And in one of the longer hymns in this collection—it has ten stanzas—Wesley compares the “Gospel-Ordinances” to “Stars in Jesu’s Church” to help “steer the Pilgrim’s Course aright.”\(^{16}\) Then Wesley stresses:

\(^{15}\) *Hymns on the Lord’s Supper*, Hymn XLII, stanzas 2-4 (p.31). I owe the reference to this hymn to Ole E. Bergen, *John Wesley on the Sacraments. A Theological Study* (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press of Zondervan Publishing House, 1985), p.15. This study by Bergen has been tremendously helpful in the following portion of this paper. See also *Hymns on the Lord’s Supper*, Hymn LIV, stanza 4 (p.39):

“The Prayer, the Fast, the Word conveys,
When mixt with Faith, thy Life to me,
In all the Channels of thy Grace,
I still have Fellowship with Thee,
But chiefly here my Soul is fed
With fullness of Immortal Bread.

Communion closer far I feel,
And deeper drink th’ Atoning Blood,
The Joy is more unspeakable…”

\(^{16}\) *Hymns on the Lord’s Supper*, Hymn LXII, stanzas 3, 5 (p.46).
But first of the Celestial Train
Benignest to the Sons of Men,
The *Sacramental Glory* shines,
And answers all our God’s designs.\(^\text{17}\)

It is, therefore, not at all surprising that Wesley regarded the Table as more than memorial. That it is a memorial Wesley is not slow to point out in this hymn loosely based on the Paraclete passages in the Farewell Discourse of John 14-16:

> Come, Thou everlasting Spirit,
   Bring to every thankful Mind
All the Saviour’s dying Merit
   All his Suffering for Mankind:
…

> Come, Thou Witness of his Dying,
   Come, Remembrancer Divine,
Let us feel thy Power applying
   Christ to every Soul and mine… \(^\text{18}\)

But it is not simply a place to remember—“’Tis not a dead external sign”\(^\text{19}\)—for Wesley fully expected to meet Christ at the Table.

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\(^{17}\) *Hymns on the Lord’s Supper*, Hymn LXII, stanza 6 (p.46). Italics original.

\(^{18}\) *Hymns on the Lord’s Supper*, Hymn XVI, stanzas 1-2 (p.13).

\(^{19}\) *Hymns on the Lord’s Supper*, Hymn LV, stanza 1 (p.39). See also *Hymns on the Lord’s Supper*, Hymn LXXXIX, stanza 1 (p.76).
We come with Confidence to find
Thy special Presence here.\(^{20}\)

And as he prayed in these two hymns:

To every faithful Soul appear,
And shew thy Real Presence here.\(^{21}\)

Jesu, dear, redeeming Lord,
Magnify thy dying Word,
In thine Ordinance appear,
Come, and meet thy Followers here.\(^{22}\)

And urged communicants:

Sinner with Awe draw near,
And find thy Saviour here,
In his Ordinances still,
Touch his Sacramental Cloaths…\(^{23}\)

\(^{20}\) *Hymns on the Lord’s Supper*, Hymn LXXI, stanza 1 (p.69). See also *Hymns on the Lord’s Supper*, Hymn LXXXIX, stanza 3 (p.76).

\(^{21}\) *Hymns on the Lord’s Supper*, Hymn CXVI, stanza 5 (p.99). See also *Hymns on the Lord’s Supper*, Hymn LXVI, stanza 2 (p.48):

“…do Thou my Heart prepare,
To find thy real Presence there."

\(^{22}\) *Hymns on the Lord’s Supper*, Hymn XXXIII, stanza 1 (pp.24-5).

\(^{23}\) *Hymns on the Lord’s Supper*, Hymn XXXIX, stanza 1 (p.29).
On the other hand, it is vital to recognize, as Ole Bergen has shown in his study *John Wesley on the Sacraments*, that for neither of the Wesleys is Christ’s presence at the Table a physical presence. Bergen refers us to this hymn to make his point:

…Christ the Crucified appear,  
Come in thy Appointed Ways,  
Come, and meet, and bless us here.

No local Deity  
We worship, Lord, in Thee:  
Free thy Grace and unconfin’d,  
Yet it here doth freest move;  
In the Means thy Love enjoin’d  
Look we for thy richest Love.  

Bergen rightly points out that the phrase “No local Deity” is meant to guard against a corporeal understanding of the presence of Christ. Wesley “refuses to accept any local presence of Christ in the elements.”

Similarly, Wesley can state in the hymn that compares the ordinances to stars, that while “with Joy” believers feel the “Sacred Power”

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communicated by the elements at the Table, they “neither Stars nor Means adore.”

Wesley is thus neither a Zwinglian nor a Lutheran in his understanding of the presence of Christ at the Table. Is he then a Calvinist in his understanding of the Table? It certainly seems so.

“Come, Holy Ghost”

In line with the Calvinist understanding of the presence of Christ at the Table, Wesley can say:

Come Holy Ghost, set to thy Seal,
Thine inward Witness give,
To all our waiting Souls reveal
The Death by which we live.

And:

Come, Holy Ghost, thine Influence shed,
And realize the Sign,
Thy Life infuse into the Bread,
Thy Power into the Wine.

Or again:

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27 *Hymns on the Lord’s Supper*, Hymn LXII, stanza 8 (p.46).
28 *Hymns on the Lord’s Supper*, Hymn VII, stanza 1 (p.6).
29 *Hymns on the Lord’s Supper*, Hymn LXXI, stanza 1 (p.51).
Come in thy Spirit down,
Thine Institution crown,
Lamb of God as slain appear,
Life of all Believers Thou,
Let us now perceive Thee near,
Come Thou Hope of Glory now.  

In Wesley’s thinking, the Spirit’s work vis-à-vis the Supper especially relates to his giving to believers a sense of the forgiveness of their sins as they partake of the bread and the wine. Wesley’s linguistic description of this work of the Spirit is drawn from the Pauline description of the Spirit as a seal in the believer’s life. Thus Wesley prays:

The Spirit’s Attesting Seal impart,
And speak to every Sinner’s Heart
The Saviour died for Thee!  

Or he can ask the Spirit directly:

Spirit of Faith, come down,
Thy Seal with Power set to,

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30 Hymns on the Lord’s Supper, Hymn LIII, stanza 3 (p.38).
31 See 2 Corinthians 1:22; Ephesians 1:13; 4:30.
32 Hymns on the Lord’s Supper, Hymn X, stanza 4 (p.9).
The Banquet by thy Presence crown,
And prove the Record true:

Pardon, and Grace impart:
Come quickly from above.
And witness now in every Heart
That God is perfect Love.33

It is due to the presence of the Spirit the Sealer that the bread and the
wine, though “Badge and Token,” can be called the “Sure confirming
Seal.”34 One final text in this regard throbs with the revival context in
which Wesley penned these hymns:

’Tis done; the Lord sets to his Seal.
The Prayer is heard, the Grace is given,
With joy unspeakable we feel
The Holy Ghost sent down from Heaven.
The Altar streams with sacred Blood,
And all the Temple flames with God!35

Little wonder the Wesley scholar Frank Baker has commented that “the
subsequent lowering of the spiritual temperature, even within
Methodism, made it somewhat difficult after a few generations to sing

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33 Hymns on the Lord’s Supper, Hymn LXXV, stanza 3 (p.65).
34 Hymns on the Lord’s Supper, Hymn XII, stanza 2 (p.11).
35 Hymns on the Lord’s Supper, Hymn LXXXIX, stanza 4 (p.76). See the comments of Rattenbury, Evangelical
Doctrines of Charles Wesley’s Hymns, p.221 regarding the revival context in which these hymns were penned.
many of Wesley’s greatest hymns without either hypocrisy or at least a faintly uneasy self-consciousness.”

It is the Spirit then who is the One who communicates the forgiving presence of Christ to the believer at the Table. But how he does this, Wesley rightly admits, he cannot explain. Wesley is confident that grace is indeed conveyed to the believer at the Table, though he cannot say how:

Let the wisest Mortal shew  
How we the Grace receive:  
Feeble elements bestow  
A power not theirs to give:  
Who explains the Wondrous Way?  
How thro’ these the Virtue came?  
These the Virtue did convey,  
Yet still remain the same.

Yes, “the Sign transmits the Signified,” though “the Manner be unknown”:

How the Means transmit the Power  
Here He leaves our Thought behind,

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37 Hymns on the Lord’s Supper, Hymn LVII, stanza 2 (p.41).  
38 Hymns on the Lord’s Supper, Hymn LXXI, stanza 1 (p.50).  
39 Hymns on the Lord’s Supper, Hymn LVII, stanza 4 (p.41).
And Faith inquires no more.\textsuperscript{40}

Thus the Table remains Christ’s “Mysterious Supper,”\textsuperscript{41} with its “Mysterious Bread”\textsuperscript{42} and “Mystick Wine.”\textsuperscript{43}

\textit{A concluding example}

Although Charles Wesley’s poetic genius is on display in the hymnody we have looked at, the root of these hymns lies in the hymnwriter’s personal knowledge of the “Sacramental Glory”\textsuperscript{44} of the Lord Jesus’ Supper. About four years after the appearance of the hymnal we have been considering, Charles Wesley was married to Sarah (a.k.a. Sally) Gwynne (1726-1822) on Saturday April 8, 1749, at a small chapel in the Welsh village of Llanlleonfel. Sally was the daughter of a Welsh Calvinistic Methodist, Marmaduke Gwynne (1692-1769), who had been converted in 1737 under the preaching of Howel Harris (1714-1773).\textsuperscript{45}

Charles’ entry in his \textit{Journal} about the wedding reveals his delight in his new bride, his bent for poetry, and his Eucharistic piety, for he closes the

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{40} \textit{Hymns on the Lord’s Supper}, Hymn LIX, stanza 1 (p.43).
\bibitem{41} \textit{Hymns on the Lord’s Supper}, Hymn XII, stanza 1 (p.10); \textit{Hymns on the Lord’s Supper}, Hymn CLXV, stanza 2 (p.138).
\bibitem{42} \textit{Hymns on the Lord’s Supper}, Hymn XXIX, stanza 1 (p.22).
\bibitem{43} \textit{Hymns on the Lord’s Supper}, Hymn XL, stanza 1 (p.30).
\bibitem{44} \textit{Hymns on the Lord’s Supper}, Hymn LXII, stanza 6 (p.46). Italics original.
\end{thebibliography}
entry with these words: “It was a most solemn season of love! Never had I more of the divine presence at the sacrament.”

46 Cited Tabraham, Brother Charles, 52.