
Calvinistic Methodist Worship

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A study of Calvinistic Methodist Worship is a study of the legacy of George Whitefield in England and of his contemporaries, Daniel Rowland, Howell Harris and William Williams, in Wales. The mere mention of their names suggests the priority of preaching and hymn-singing as an expression of faith and experience. The buildings which these men and their successors erected, in time, to perpetuate and prosper Gospel labours, reflected their central aims in the worship of God: simplicity, spirituality, and freedom, always within an ordered and awe-inspiring framework worthy of the God whom they served.

The simplicity of their worship stemmed from an aversion to all things that distracted from God's glory: ornate buildings, intricate ceremonial, and sophisticated garments. Spirituality was furthered by an emphasis on verbal rather than visible communication of truth, since God is Spirit, and also by spontaneous, heart-sourced prayers rather than set forms which, although they could be useful, are frequently made for artificial rather than real involvement. Extempore prayers and vigorous preaching, God-centred hymns as well as metrical psalms gave expression to their exercise of that freedom which they believed to be warranted by Scripture.

Whitefield is famed for his preaching, totalling 18,000 sermons during his 34 years ministry.¹ On the day before he died, he preached what many considered his best sermon, which lasted two hours in spite of his physical weakness. In it he confessed, "My body fails, my spirit expands. How willingly would I live to preach Christ! But I die to be with Him!"² It was his preaching that God owed to the conversion of so many people. The same could be said of Rowland and Harris. Their itinerating, their field-preaching, and their preaching in churches all stemmed from an inner constraint. As it was the minister's duty "to preach (and woe be to them if they do not preach the gospel, for a necessity is laid upon them!)", so it laid a great responsibility on people "to attend on so great a means of their salvation ... this spiritual manna, this angel's food." They were convinced that "preaching is an ordinance of God, a means appointed by Jesus Christ himself, for promoting his kingdom amongst men."³

For Whitefield, then, preaching had prior claim over considerations of decorum or ecclesiastical regulations, a fact borne out by his obvious delight in open-air preaching: "I went ... to Kingswood [Bristol] ... My bowels have long since yearned toward the poor colliers, who are very numerous, and as sheep having no shepherd. After dinner, therefore, I went upon a mount, and spake to as many people as came unto me. They were upwards of two hundred. Blessed be God that I have now broken the ice! I believe I was never more acceptable to my Master than when I was standing to teach those hearers in the open fields. Some may censure me; but if I thus pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ."⁴

Nevertheless, for the early Calvinistic Methodists, Anglicanism still retained their allegiance and respect: all the men mentioned above remained within Anglicanism. For the whole of the eighteenth century, Calvinistic Methodism used the Book of Common

Prayer forms of worship while developing its own emphases. English Calvinistic Methodism emerged in 1783 in the form of The Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion, whose chapels continued to use The Prayer Book after the Countess's death in 1791.⁵ A similar situation prevailed in Wales, and Thomas Charles could say in 1813, "I always use the prayers of the Church in publicly administering the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, and in our Chapels, the Bible, with the Prayer Book bound with it, is in general on all our Calvinistic Methodist Worship pulpits."⁶ But theirs was an Anglicanism with a difference. The Methodists passionately believed in the Puritan legacy of preaching as a converting ordinance.

The Puritans passionately believed in the primacy of preaching. In *The Second Admonition to Parliament* in 1573, Thomas Cartwright pleaded for every parish to have a preaching pastor, and for the setting up of "prophesyings" in which ministers should exercise themselves in the interpretation of Scripture. It was not the word read, but preached which was God's chief means of salvation. Cartwright put it this way: "As the fire stirred giveth more heat, so the Word, as it were, blown by preaching, flameth more in the hearers, than when it is read."⁷ A sense of urgency as well as of importance is found in John Penry's *Treatise containing the aequity of an humble supplication ... in the behalfe of the Countrey of Wales, that some order may be taken for the preaching of the Gospell among those people*, 1587: "We desire that the tyranny of Sathan, who exerciseth a regency in the hearts of all them (amongst whom God's truth hath not been taught) may be overthrown by the powerful arm of God the word preached, who can save our souls."⁸ William Perkins takes up this strain in his 1606 *The Art of Prophesying*, "Through preaching those who hear are called into the state of grace, and preserved in it ... (1 Thess. 2:13,14 ... Rom 1:16 ... 10:4) the call to the ministry ... is clearly a commission to go and deliver people from the power of hell, to redeem them to be God's children, and to make them the heirs of heaven."

Nowhere is that legacy more clearly epitomised than in a work of William Bradshaw (1571-1618), *Englishe Puritanisme, containing the maine opinions of the rigidest sort of those that are called Puritanes in the realm of England*: "They hold that the highest and supreme office and authority of the Pastor, is to preach the Gospel solemnly and publicly to the congregation, by interpreting the written Word of God, and applying the same by exhortation and reproof unto them. They hold that this was the greatest work that Christ and His apostles did."⁹ Such convictions led Parliament to issue in 1641 *An Order Made by the House of Commons for the Establishing of Preaching Lecturers, Through the Kingdom of England and Wales* which claimed that "[Preaching] is even the very way to bring people into a state of salvation; it is the way to save their souls, Rom 1:13-14. Preaching is the declaring of the will of the Lord God, what His pleasure is, to have done by others; as also what Himself will do, and that by the voice of the minister, who comes to the people of God, as an ambassador, to publish and spread abroad the mind and message of God touching man's duty, and salvation, and to instruct the Church of God."¹⁰ The Westminster Assembly expressed this in their 1645 *Directory for the Public Worship of God*: "Preaching of the Word, being the power of God unto salvation, and one of the greatest and most excellent works belonging to the ministry of the Gospel, should be so performed, that the workman need not be ashamed, but may save himself, and those that hear him."

A recent biography of the Countess of Huntingdon notes that “It was the sermon, closely followed by the hymn-singing, which attracted people to the Connexion chapels.”¹¹ An account of the Countess of Huntingdon’s chapel at Brighton in the late nineteenth century bears this out:

... they were evangelicals primarily, and not sacramentalists, preachers not priests. So the pulpit became the centre-piece of their churches. Though the communion-table was still in the old place in the centre of the “East” end wall, the pulpit was placed in front of it in the middle of the church and the “curate” read prayers from the desk below. The service was read with great care and expression and the choir sang at the proper times, but the sermon was the chief thing and, for this, the preacher put on a special black gown, very noble and voluminous ... They had “the Communion” once a month ... For the rest it was a kind of combination of Congregationalism (for the congregation was autonomous and elected and paid for its own ministers) and “Low” Church of England.¹²

For the Welsh Calvinistic Methodists, Thomas Charles, in his *Geiriadur Ysgrhythrol* (Scripture Dictionary), makes the claim that “preaching the Gospel by men sent by God is the chief means which God has appointed to save men’s souls, by spreading knowledge of the Saviour among sinners.”¹³ In all their activities, the Welsh Calvinistic Methodists reflected this conviction. In 1783, Charles reported one such occasion thus: “There were at the Association about twenty clergymen, and between sixty and eighty lay-preachers, though not all in the connexion ... You may suppose how glad I was to hear once more the old grey-headed Elijah [Daniel Rowland] proclaiming the deep things of God with a pathos, perspicuity, and energy peculiar to himself. I heard him twice, and three clergymen besides, and also several lay-preachers, endowed with excellent gifts. Preaching began on Saturday, and lasted till Wednesday morning.”¹⁴ This abundance of preaching which characterised the denomination at least until the end of the nineteenth century is illustrated by the fact that at one of their Association meetings in the Rhondda Valley from 9th to the 12th of October 1899, a total of 51 sermons were preached within the churches of the area.¹⁵

While this emphasis on preaching was dominant, it has to be said that it was preaching of a certain kind that the Calvinistic Methodists desired. They looked for the power of the Holy Spirit to make preaching effective. Here is a description of Daniel Rowland’s preaching by the Baptist, Christmas Evans: “Methinks I see him now, entering in his black gown through a little door from the outside of the pulpit, and making his appearance in it thus on a sudden to the immense congregation ... It was the general practice for some minister to read and pray before Rowland made his appearance in the pulpit. He then frequently gave out with a clear and audible voice that stanza in Psalm 27:4 to be sung ... Then D. Rowland would stand up and read his text ...”¹⁶ Prayer before the sermon was an acknowledgement of the need for divine unction. The Westminster Directory puts it this way, suggesting that the prayer before the sermon should ask “... that God would in a special manner furnish his servant now called to dispense the bread of life unto his household with wisdom, fidelity, zeal, and utterance, that he may divide the Word of God aright, to every one his portion, in evidence and demonstration of the Spirit and power; and that the Lord would circumscribe the ears and hearts of the hearers, to hear, love, and receive with meekness the ingrafted word, which is able to save their souls; make them as good ground to receive in the good seed of the word, and strengthen them against the temptations of

Satan, the cares of the world, the hardness of their own hearts, and whatever else may hinder their profitable and saving hearing ...” In his *Reformed Pastor*, Richard Baxter makes the same point: “All our work must be done spiritually, as by men possessed of the Holy Ghost. There is in some men’s preaching a spiritual strain, which spiritual hearers can discern and relish ... Our whole work must be carried on under a deep sense of our own insufficiency, and of our entire dependence on Christ. We must go for light, and life, and strength to him who sends us on the work.”¹⁷

Behind this insistence on divine aid in preaching lay doctrinal convictions. Regeneration is a spiritual resurrection, bringing the sinner out of the grave of sin into the life of righteousness. Sanctification is a work carried on by God’s Spirit and God’s truth. God’s voice in preaching is as Christ’s voice at the tomb of Lazarus to bring him back to life, or as Ezekiel’s prophesying to the wind to bring about the transformation of a valley of dry bones into a mighty army. The Welsh Methodist, William Williams, used his poetic genius to portray real Gospel preaching:

Though learning has great value, I see this every day,
That only the experienced will preach the gospel way;
The Spirit makes a preacher, and heaven’s choicest sound
Is heard and felt with power, when heaven’s gales abound.¹⁸

Feeling was his life and power,
The breeze of heaven his hidden strength;
Without the Spirit’s gentle breath
His vessel could not move one length;
No wooden oar did he possess,
But God’s sweet breeze alone did bring
The saints with triumph and with joy
Into the land of endless spring.¹⁹

Even preaching was not a means of grace apart from the sovereign bestowal of life from God. He must give “testimony to the word of His grace” and grant “signs and wonders to be done by their hands” (Acts 14:3).

When such preaching bore fruit, “Society” or “Fellowship” meetings and Methodist organisation made increasing demands on the leaders. In Wales, buildings were erected for separate gatherings of such societies, while the members attended the parish church for the Sacraments. The Trust Deeds of these buildings affirmed their character and purpose: “a Meeting-House or place of religious or divine Worship for the use of the said Protestants called Methodists and wherein such Teachers or Ministers only are to be admitted as shall preach and embrace the Doctrine of Salvation contained in the Ninth, Tenth, Eleventh, Twelfth, Thirteenth, Fifteenth, Seventeenth and Eighteenth Articles of the Church of England.”²⁰ “Chapel or Meeting House to be used for the worship of Almighty God by a Congregation of Protestant Dissenters commonly called Calvinistic Methodists, holding or professing to hold the Doctrinal Articles of the Church of England as Calvinistically interpreted or understood.”²¹

The Welsh Calvinistic Methodists became a separate body in 1811 when they ordained men to the ministry. In their Confession of Faith, which appeared in 1823, Article 37 deals with “the Ordinances of the Gospel”: “Christ, the head of the church, has instituted ordinances, means of grace, and an order of worship, to be used in the

church by all his people, – in private, in the family, and in the congregation. Through these ordinances, God gives grace, and nourishes and increases the grace given. They are the ordinances of preaching, reading and hearing the word, prayer, praise, mutual instruction, conversation, the exercise of every part of church discipline, and the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. These ordinances are to be observed especially on the Lord’s day (that is, the first day of the week), which was sanctified to be wholly spent in the service of God. They are to be observed at other times also. No specific rules have been given respecting the length of the service, the manner of conducting it, and every matter of detail; but the church is to judge and act according to the general rules: “Let all things be done with charity, unto edification, decently, and in order.” This latter reference, 1 Cor 14:26,40, also appears on the title page of the 1645 Westminster Assembly’s Directory for the Public Worship of God. From that time onwards, while there was some latitude in the length and conduct of worship, in practice the public service followed a pattern of hymn-singing, Scripture reading, preaching and prayer which was identifiably nonconformist.

Hymn-singing had been a feature of Calvinistic Methodist worship from early days. George Whitefield had published in 1753 a hymn book with the title, *Hymns for Social Worship, collected from various Authors, and more particularly designed for the use of the Tabernacle congregation in London*. It included 170 hymns, some by the Wesley brothers and others, but the majority were by Isaac Watts, and before the end of the century some 36 editions had appeared. Whitefield’s preface addresses the “Courteous reader” thus: “If thou art acquainted with the divine life, I need not inform thee that, although all the acts and exercises of devotion are sweet and delightful, yet we never resemble the blessed worshippers above more than when we are joining together in public devotions, and, with hearts and lips unfeigned, singing praises to Him who sitteth upon the throne for ever. Consequently, hymns, composed for such a purpose, ought to abound much in thanksgiving, and to be of such a nature, that all who attend may join in them, without being obliged to sing lies, or not sing at all.”²²

As for the Countess of Huntingdon’s Connexion, there were so many editions of its hymn book from 1765 onwards “that it is impossible to compile a complete list.”²³ The Preface to *The Countess of Huntingdon’s Connexion Hymn Book* of 1854 claims that “such a work will be to many a congregation a rich means of grace ... May the Holy Spirit enable all who shall adopt these anxiously-selected strains of devotion to employ them with melody in their hearts to the Lord. So shall our praises in the church below become an earnest of those purer and more rapturous hallelujahs wherewith we shall at last, through infinite mercy, and the blood of the everlasting covenant, surround ‘the throne of God and the Lamb’.”

In their hymns, Calvinistic Methodists were making a statement, as well as expressing their devotion to God. It was a statement of their view of God’s majesty, and also a statement of His gracious dealings with His people. There was in them, therefore, doctrinal content as well as experimental testimony. The hymn-writer who influenced the Welsh Methodists as well as being their mouthpiece in hymnology was William Williams. His convictions about hymn-singing were definite and challenging:

I acknowledge that there are some of these first hymns, on the assurance of faith, longing to be dissolved, spiritual joy, together with triumph over enemies, which weak Christians

cannot easily sing. This happened not so much because the Lord kept my own soul in good spirits at the time, but chiefly because the Spirit had been so plentifully poured out on those godly people for whom they were written ... When I came to know myself better, and saw what an Egypt of darkness, a sea of uncleanness, a world of pride is in man, I determined to exalt the salvation which is in Christ far more, and to abase man and his gifts more. I did my utmost, whatever the nature of the hymn – complaint, plea, holy boasting, or praise, for Christ to be the centrepiece of it all ... I am constrained to give a little advice to those who give out these hymns ... Some give out verses full of assurance and delight to a congregation that denies the first and has not experienced the second. Others give out verses of complaint and questioning to a people who have been elevated to the heavenlies, and who feel life in their faith, and Satan under their feet, as if to urge people to sing about the cold of winter while the sun blazes in hottest summer.²⁴

Hymns, therefore, had a didactic ministry, conveying objective truth and providing a confessional framework for the individual believer, while at the same time fulfilling an important role in congregational worship.

For Calvinistic Methodists, hymns were not the only means of congregational participation. Their society meetings were more intimate, occasions for spiritual exercises, complementing public worship. Here, spiritual experience would be monitored and nurtured; spiritual gifts recognised and developed; and the spiritual objectives of growth, discipline, encouragement, and witness were fostered. In an early *Letter to the Religious Societies*, Whitefield spoke of their purpose in this way:

The only end which I hope you all propose by your assembling yourselves together, is the renewing of your depraved natures, and promoting the hidden life of Jesus Christ in your souls ... None but those who have experienced it, can tell the unspeakable advantage of such a union and communion of souls. I know not a better means in the world to keep hypocrisy out from amongst you. Pharisees and unbelievers will pray, read, and sing Psalms; but none, save an Israelite indeed, will endure to have his heart searched out.²⁵

These sentiments were echoed by Williams in *The Experience Meeting*: “Of all the means of grace, I know of none more profitable than the special fellowship meetings, called private societies, to correct, to edify and to encourage weak members who are ever ready to stray aside ...” He gives seven reasons for their usefulness:

First ... they are means of keeping up this same warmth and liveliness that was ours at the beginning ... second ... to unravel the various nets and hidden snares woven by Satan to catch the simple believer ... Thirdly ... forestalling contentions, suspicions, prejudices, discords, jealousies and all uncharitableness ... fourth ... that we may look after and watch over each other’s lives, lest any should fall into loose living ... fifth ... give us the opportunity of bearing one another’s burdens ... sixth ... gives us the opportunity to declare the work of God on our souls, and to praise His name for it ... lastly ... for strengthening ourselves against all our spiritual enemies, and for praying together as one man against them all.”²⁶

While the sermon was the centrepiece of worship, openness was the key to fellowship.

Nearly fifty years after the appearance of that work, the Welsh Calvinistic Methodists reaffirmed the strategic benefit of the society meetings in Article 36 of their *Confession of Faith*:

Through their union with Christ, their head, the saints are united to one another, have special communion in each other's spiritual gifts and graces, and are bound to perform such duties towards each other as conduce to their mutual profit and edification. It is the duty of those who profess godliness to maintain fellowship and communion with each other in the public worship of God, to love each other as brethren, and to do good especially unto them who are of the household of faith, by relieving, according to their ability, and several stations in life, each other's necessities.

Congregational life, then, revolved around a mixture of public preaching and private fellowship, occasions of ordered worship and intimate sharing of gifts and graces. The one exercise complemented the other, exhibiting structure and freedom, and together promoting growth and witness.

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