



What have the sermons of John Wesley ever done for us? The Duty of Constant Communion

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In this article the difficulties of using Wesley's sermon 'The Duty of Constant Communion' in our contemporary context are first sketched. His context is then outlined, and his answers to those objecting to constant communion are found surprisingly relevant to those who now, for one reason or another, prefer not to receive. His reasons for encouraging constant communion are then noted: (1) the appeal to duty is grounded in love; (2) communion is food for body and soul; (3) the sacrament is divine gift; (4) it is confirmation of God's grace. Wesley's approach is fundamentally practical.

BODY AND SOUL • COMMUNION • DUTY • FEELINGS • FOOD AND DRINK • GRACE • HOLINESS • MERCY • OBEDIENCE • WORTHINESS

What have the sermons of John Wesley ever done for us? You might well ask that question when it comes to the sermon on 'The Duty of Constant Communion', not least because the main argument focuses on *obedience* to the Lord's *commandment*. In a culture so suspicious of authorities and a society where everyone wants to 'do their own thing' this would hardly seem to have much attraction. Even if we become a bit more historically sophisticated and take account of the age when John Wesley composed this piece, we might find ourselves wondering whether such an appeal to obedience and duty fits with Wesley's own emphasis on justification by faith and God's grace, as indeed some readers did in his own day. A second reason for possible scepticism lies in its emphasis on the individual – it is largely about 'my soul', the question of its unworthiness, the matter of its eternal salvation, rather than the communion and fellowship of believers with Christ and each other. This seems unhelpful at a time when many of us feel we need to confront the excessive individualism of our day, as well as surprising given the way in which John and Charles Wesley themselves focused on fellowship. Nor do we find most people terribly concerned about their 'souls' these days – ours is a time for the 'whole person'. Before we dismiss this sermon completely, however, let's have another look.

The remarkable thing with this sermon is that it was published as late as 1787 but, to quote Wesley's own preface, it 'was written about five-and-fifty years ago for the use of my pupils at Oxford'. Wesley states that he has cut it, since 'I then used more words than I do now', but affirms that 'I have not seen case to alter my sentiments in any point which is there delivered.' Now, it is hardly surprising that obedience to commandments was the main focus in the Oxford days, the time of the Holy Club, when the tag 'Methodist' was applied to the Wesleys because of their intense works of mercy and piety. What is significant is Wesley's revival of this text so many years later. It is a reminder that in his eyes the point of 'conversion', the point of coming to faith, the point of responding to the gospel was precisely so that obedience to God's commandments might become possible, not as works done in one's own strength, but as marks of the transformation of lives by increasing conformity to Christ through the power of the indwelling Spirit. So this sermon bears witness to the continuity in John Wesley's thought and concerns, a continuity which significantly attests the fundamental balance in his theology. This is not the first time that I've observed the way in which John Wesley holds together aspects of Christianity which have in the past pulled the Church apart, the most notable being the tension between 'faith and works'. The great Wesley scholar Albert Outler notes that for Wesley 'the Lord's Supper is the paradigm of *all* "the means of grace" – the chief

actual means of actual grace and, as such, literally indispensable in the Christian life'.¹

In the years of the revival, however, Wesley faced many who insisted that faith was enough and that they got more out of Methodist preaching services than dull liturgies in the parish church. Others thought it was dangerous to receive communion unworthily. Much of the sermon deals with such objections. The older Wesley calls up the young Wesley to confront imbalance among followers fervent for 'the Word rightly preached' and careless of 'the sacraments duly administered'.²

So this sermon belongs to its time, and like all Wesley's sermons its language and argumentative structure hardly appeal to the modern reader. But look harder and maybe we do need to hear some of what he says even now. Let's begin with some of his answers to 'common objections against constantly receiving the Lord's supper'.

1. There are people in congregations today who think they are not good enough to receive communion. In Wesley's day the most common excuse was

I am 'unworthy'; and 'he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself' (I Cor. 11.27–29). Therefore I dare not communicate, lest I should eat and drink my own damnation.

So, asks Wesley, are you unworthy to receive any of God's mercies, whether pardon for sins, or deliverance from death? And what do you mean by the idea of suggesting you're unworthy to obey God? Typically Wesley takes us back to the text: it doesn't say anything about '*being unworthy* to eat and drink'; it speaks of '*eating and drinking unworthily*', which is quite different. Furthermore, the context in 1 Corinthians tells us that what that means is 'taking the holy sacrament in such a rude and disorderly way that one was "hungry and another drunken"'. He shames the reader into admitting they're not likely to do that, not least because it's not about '*you*' as such – '*you may as well say, "I dare not communicate for fear the church should fall", as "for fear I should eat and drink unworthily."*' In other words, the unworthy conduct of the holy sacrament is the responsibility of the whole community, not just the individual but the whole Body of Christ. At least at this point the predominant focus on the individual noted earlier has shifted. In fact, Wesley insists, you are more likely to bring damnation on yourself by not eating and drinking at

all than by doing it unworthily: 'What advice is this: "Commit a new act of disobedience and God will more easily forgive the past?"' Wesley has a good line in irony!

2. Wesley next confronts those who are afraid of not being able to live up to the commitment implied in sharing in communion – again that is not just an eighteenth-century excuse. He begins by pointing out that that is not an objection to constant communion but to taking communion at all – it makes no difference to the question whether to take communion once a year or once a day. 'If we are not to receive the Lord's Supper till we are worthy of it, it is certain we ought never to receive it,' to quote a sentence from the earlier version of this sermon; in other words, this excuse is effectively the equivalent of renouncing Christianity. Nor does he have much sympathy for those who plead they're too busy to prepare themselves properly. It's good to examine yourself and repent, he says, but if you're committed to following Christ, you are already prepared to obey his command and approach the Lord's table. Behind these arguments is Wesley's fundamental point that God's grace is all-sufficient, but ineffective if we do not respond to the command of God and receive communion as a mercy.
3. Wesley then turns to another still pertinent point: if you make communion a humdrum habit, 'it abates our reverence for the sacrament'. In other words, it's better to make it a rare, special occasion, and then we might appreciate it more. Wesley soon dismisses the idea that novelty is better than proper religious reverence.
4. As for those who say they've tried constant communion and received no benefit, he admits their point deserves particular consideration, as many well-meaning persons feel this. For us his comments are especially relevant, since so much of our culture is about 'felt need' and 'choice' – feelings rather than discipline. In reply, he begins with a return to God's command, 'Do this in remembrance of me': 'This, therefore, we are to do because he commands, whether we find present benefit thereby or not.' I guess that may not cut much ice with people today who want 'felt' religious experience, but we might take note of the way he then develops the idea of hidden benefit, benefit sooner or later, as we are insensibly strengthened and made more fit for the service of God. He then urges proper preparation and trust in God, and 'the oftener you come to the Lord's table, the greater benefit you will find there.'

So the way John Wesley tackles objections to constant communion could still have something to say to the many today with rather vague attachment to the faith, a sense of their own inadequacy, or shyness to join in for a variety of reasons. What about his positive arguments, offered in Part I of this sermon? We may pick out four key themes, all of which might potentially stir us.

1. Let's begin with that problematic emphasis on obedience and duty. Wesley begins by insisting that it is 'a plain command of Christ' and adds, 'They are ... his dying words to all his followers.' That last statement surely puts the emphasis on command in a different light: it is an appeal to love – to respond and do what the one who so loved us as to die for us asked of us as he went to the Cross.
2. It is food for body and soul: 'As our bodies are strengthened by bread and wine, so are our souls by these tokens of the body and blood of Christ. This is the food of our souls: this gives strength to perform our duty, and leads on to perfection.' I guess that is still what many of us seek and find. We might want to explore rather further than does Wesley the significance of the fact that this spiritual food is embodied in the material form of the very necessities of our bodily existence, namely ordinary food and drink; and we might want to reflect on the social and physical nature of the life within which we seek holiness and perfection – in other words we might seek to be more explicit than Wesley about the integration of soul and body, and the sacramental feeding of the whole person for living the everyday life of earthy creatures in the way God intends and enables. But Wesley does provide the initial impetus for that kind of development.
3. So the sacrament is a divine gift – for partaking does have benefits – indeed, the benefits 'are so great ... namely, the forgiveness of our past sins, the present strengthening and refreshing of our souls.' Wesley emphasises this again in his responses to objections: it is 'a mercy from God to man [humankind]'; for God

knew there was but one way for man to be happy like himself, namely by being like him in holiness. As he knew we could do nothing towards this of ourselves, he has given us certain means of obtaining help. One of these is the Lord's Supper, which, of his infinite mercy, he hath given for this every end: that through this means we may be assisted to attain those blessings which he hath prepared for us; that we may obtain holiness on earth and everlasting glory in heaven.

4. Emphasis on God's grace and mercy is recurrent throughout, and surely remains crucial for us: 'The grace of God given herein confirms to us the pardon of our sins, and enables us to leave them.' Not that we are ever free from temptation. So if we are conscious of failure, 'what surer way have we of procuring pardon from him than the "showing forth the Lord's death" (I Cor. 11.16), and beseeching him, for the sake of his Son's suffering, to blot out all our sins?' Facing the objectors, John Wesley rubs this point home:

why do you not accept of his mercy as often as ever you can? ... considering this as a command of God, he that does not communicate as often as he can has no piety; considering it as a mercy, he that does not communicate as often as he can has no wisdom.

So despite Wesley's wordiness, old-fashioned language and predominant focus on obedience and duty, there are emphases in this sermon that we would do well to capture and rephrase in the idiom of our own time. We may also be encouraged by Wesley's thoroughly practical approach. Not for him, or for us, controversies about what is really going on in communion, whether the bread and wine literally become Christ's body and blood or are 'only symbolic'. Here we find a simple assumption that Christ is present, that God's mercy and grace is freely available, that the sacrament is effective when the Church obeys Christ's command, so that participants receive the benefits of Christ's salvation through the remembrance of his death, share together communion in his life and holiness, and find their everyday, concrete, bodily lives gradually brought more and more into conformity with Christ.

Notes

1. Albert C. Outler, Introduction to 'The Duty of Constant Communion' in his compendium, *John Wesley*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1964, p. 333.
2. Outler, Introduction, p. 334.