THE LEGACY OF J. ERNEST RATTENBURY

PAUL WESLEY CHILCOTE

At my baptism, I received as a present from my grandfather, The Bible, the Book of Common Prayer, and the Methodist Hymn Book, joined together in one magnificently bound volume, which has always been to me, the symbol and the substance of my Methodist heritage.¹

Nothing could better characterize the life and thought of the Rev. Dr. J. Ernest Rattenbury than this simple anecdote recalling his entrance into the community of faith and the beginning of his pilgrimage in Christ. Rattenbury devoted his life and ministry to the realization of a balanced and vibrant form of the Christian faith, epitomized by the unity of his “magnificently bound volume,” and expressed in terms of the dynamic interrelation of sacramental grace and evangelical experience. In a word, he sought to emulate the “evangelical-catholicism” of the Wesleys and their spiritual descendants. His legacy is, therefore, the legacy of Methodism at its best. During a lifetime which encompassed nearly a century, and throughout his ministry of seventy years, J. Ernest Rattenbury bore a constant and fruitful witness in Methodism to the essential interdependence of what may be called the “catholic” and the “evangelical” aspects of the Christian faith.

Rattenbury was born in Stanningley in 1870, the grandson, son, and later brother and uncle of Methodist ministers. Educated at Woodhouse Grove School and trained at Didsbury College, he entered the ministry in 1893. The greater part of his pastoral career was spent in the Midlands and in London. He devoted eighteen years to the development of the West London Mission and was the guiding force behind the consequent erection of Kingsway Hall. His work as one of the leading missioners and preachers in England during those years led to his election in 1914 as a member of the Legal Hundred, the official legislative body for Wesleyan Methodism from the death of Wesley to Methodist reunion in 1932. His participation in the Methodist Episcopal Quadrennial Conference of 1930, his invitation to the Quillian Lectureship at Emory University in 1932, and his prophetic leadership of the National Free Church Council as its President in 1936 all illustrate his broad vision of and steadfast commitment to the church universal and the reunification of that body which he considered to be a

primary desideratum of the twentieth century.² For all Methodists he coveted the full inheritance of catholicity, uniting all Christians in the Body of Christ. In the espousal of his goal Rattenbury never feared being called an “impractical idealist.” As his pastoral ministry had been committed to these ends, so too, his long retirement of twenty-eight years—from 1935 until his death in 1963—was characterized by an indefatigable devotion to what he believed was the true tradition of the Wesleys.

Every generation has a variety of pilgrims. Some are evangelists and some sacramentalists, some are scholars and some pastors, some are writers and some prophets, and some combine all in one person. Rattenbury was a churchman in whom these gifts found unique and powerful expression. His legacy is what he inherited from his progenitors and what he in turn passed on to his progeny. Such a legacy is a blessing if it is used with prudence. But Goethe’s advice is noteworthy:

Whatever you inherit from the past
   By usage does become a noble prize.
But when neglected, never will it last.
   Your spirit, to creation, must arise.
   (11. 682-685)

The legacy of Rattenbury the missioner and evangelist, Wesley scholar and evangelical apologist, sacramentalist and ascetic theologian deserves such attention.

Missioner and Evangelist

“Methodism,” Rattenbury prophesied, “must evangelize or perish.” This phrase, borrowed from the evangelist Charles Ensor Walters and transformed by Rattenbury into a powerful slogan of Methodism in the 1930’s, typifies his passionate evangelism which was grounded in the imperatives of the Gospel and realized in the radical social activities he believed they necessarily entailed. A. E. Whitham, a contemporary and

²Paradoxically, Rattenbury’s longing for unity in the church led to his controversial opposition to plans for the reunion of the Primitive, United, and Wesleyan branches of Methodism, a position determined in large measure by his sense of a clearer kinship between many Wesleyans and Anglicans than with either of the junior Methodist churches. In 1917 he had been a leading figure in the unofficial Wesleyan-Anglican discussions held at Kingsway Hall. His primary fear was that the various schemes for Methodist reunification proposed over the course of the decade between 1918 and 1928 would prove to be a hindrance to the wider ecumenical schemes he had envisaged. His opposition to the “Tentative Scheme” of 1920, his involvement in the organization of Wesleyan opposition into “The Other Side,” his contributions to the major revision of the doctrinal and sacramental clauses of the “Scheme,” and his subsequent decision concerning the necessity of compromise leading to his acceptance of “A Policy of Three Stages” which effected the consequent union of 1932, are well documented in Robert Currie’s Methodism Divided: A Study in the Sociology of Ecumenicalism (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), pp. 248-289. See also Rattenbury’s Christian Union and Methodist Fusion (London: The Epworth Press, n.d.).
colleague, bears witness to this striking feature of his ministry in these characteristic words of approbation:

Those who have heard him speak in Conference from time to time or are familiar with his writings, and all who have met him, talked with him, discussed anything with him, know that he is first the evangelist—the man to whom is committed the gospel of the warmed heart, in the direct succession of Hugh Price Hughes, and in truest descent from John Wesley.9

Along with such notable figures as J. Scott Lidgett and J. B. Paton, Rattenbury was gravely concerned by the growing indifference of the working classes to the Church and affirmed the social redemptive mission of the Free Churches in particular, trying many experiments through which that mission might be fulfilled. His achievements as a missioner were exemplary. Following a year on supply in the Conference he was appointed to Leicester during which time he founded the Mission at Belgrave Hall and opened the Clarendon Park Church. At Nottingham he was the first missioner to take over the Albert Hall for Methodism. It was during a protracted period with the West London Mission, where he preached first in the Lyceum Theater and later opened the new Kingsway Hall, that he gained national recognition as a leading missioner when the influence of the Free Churches was at its height.

Rattenbury’s words concerning the social implications of the Gospel, and his deeds which almost always spoke louder, often reflect the sentiments of the great Wesleyan minister, Hugh Price Hughes, in whose footsteps he consciously trod. Like Hughes before him, Rattenbury was concerned about the historical context within which the Gospel must find renewed expression and the individual circumstances upon which it must inevitably impinge. The sentiments which he voiced in his earliest publication, *Six Sermons on Social Subjects*, resound as a continuing refrain throughout his lengthy ministry and in his prolific writings:

An increased knowledge of the conditions under which men are living to-day has convinced the preacher that evangelical preaching is incomplete which is not concerned with social conditions as well as social results...a merely social message mutilates the gospel, the gospel is also mutilated if it be nothing but a mere individual message.4

---


This theme Rattenbury further elaborated in an important essay entitled “Methodist Evangelism” which appeared in a mid-war anthology examining *Methodism in the Modern World* and appealed directly to Methodists, at the time when the separate Methodist bodies were about to unite:

> With the sound of a trumpet, we must preach the whole gospel of personal salvation and social service, and, whatever it means, have no fear of giving actual expression to love of the neighbour. It is imperative that social service should not be substituted for evangelical religion, as it sometimes has been, but be shown to be one of its integral characteristics...the gospel of salvation must be preached not only as a gospel of personal redemption, but also of social reconstruction, if we are to reach this age, and if, indeed, we are to preach the whole gospel of the New Testament.⁴

In this essay he also enumerated the components which he believed were necessary to any form of evangelism true to the Gospel of Christ.⁵ It must declare, first of all, a dogmatic message—a gospel or genuine good news—which he elsewhere describes as a dynamic gospel. Secondly, it must declare this gospel as experienced, and witnessed by its experiencers. Thirdly it must be declared by people who stake their lives and comfort on its truth. Finally, it must be declared in language and thought-forms intelligible to the people.

Rattenbury took practical steps to implement the social teachings of the Gospel through his involvement in organizations and movements within Methodism which shared this common vision. Primary among these was the so-called Forward Movement which published its views in a house organ, *The Methodist Times*. One of the early biographers of Hughes describes the situation of the Free Churches around the turn of the century:

> The Methodist Church, in common with the other Churches, was paying a fearful penalty for its disregard of that first condition of life—adaptation to environment. It

⁴Rattenbury, “Methodist Evangelism,” pp. 190-191. Rattenbury’s interpretation of the message of the New Testament led to his espousal of socialism as the most Christ-like social system. His views on this subject came to a head in relation to his ecumenical involvement and the Southport Assembly of 1908. As E. K. H. Jordon reports in his examination of *Free Church Unity*: “This Southport Assembly, however, will best be remembered for the magnificent defence of Socialism delivered by the Rev. J. Ernest Rattenbury. He defined Socialism as a great human movement with a passion for the masses worthy of the greatest religious zeal. He claimed that the churches should be one with Socialism in its abhorrence of modern conditions; in its view of individual life as more important than property; and in its effort to reconstruct society in terms at any rate nearer to the Kingdom of God than the prevailing ones. Socialism needs Christianity, said Rattenbury, and Christianity can use Socialism. He rightly condemned the vulgar and furious attacks which accused Socialism of immoral and atheistic foundations, as worthy only of a gutter press” (London: Lutterworth Press, 1956), p. 155. These views he had enunciated in a preliminary way in his *Six Sermons on Social Subjects*. As Robert Currie has observed: “Inside Wesleyanism, Rattenbury was suspect, before the war as a Christian Socialist, after it as a ritualist” (*Methodism Divided*, p. 251).

⁵Ibid., pp. 184-190.
was being fossilised by a rigid conservatism. In London, Manchester, Liverpool, Birmingham, Leeds, Hull and elsewhere there were huge chapels, once crowded, but then nearly empty because the services and methods of work had not been adapted to their new environment. 7

The primary goal of the Forward Movement, therefore, was the development of city missions in order to revitalize the increasingly moribund church. Rattenbury, the octogenarian, reflecting on his many years of evangelistic work within Methodism, claimed that "no feature in the religious life of England at the turn of the century...was more important than the building of the great Central Halls of Methodism in the principal centres of population." 8 "The whole Forward Movement of Methodism," he had stressed at the outset of his ministry, "emphasizes the duty of public service, and even their critics tell us that modern city missions are 'a city set upon a hill, which cannot be hid.'" 9 Rattenbury served on the editorial board of The Methodist Times, rival to the official Methodist Recorder, from 1918 until 1922, and, as we have already seen, his own "city set upon a hill" was the great Kingsway Hall of the West London Mission which subsequently became one of the chief centers of evangelism in England.

Wesley Scholar and Evangelical Apologist

Essentially Rattenbury was a Wesleyan, and his writings on the Wesleys established him as a recognized authority in this sphere. Above all else, he was concerned to rediscover the vitality of the Wesleyan Revival, to demonstrate the centrality of evangelical experience in the lives of the Wesley brothers and their common message, while shattering the stereotypes which, by his day, had surrounded and distorted their rich legacy. The four major volumes he devoted to this particular undertaking, Wesley's Legacy to the World, 10 The Conversion of the Wesleys, 11 and his two monumental studies of Wesleyan hymnology, 12 have made possible

9 Rattenbury, Wesley and Social Service, p. 19.
10 J. Ernest Rattenbury, Wesley's Legacy to the World: Six Studies in the Permanent Values of the Evangelical Revival (London: The Epworth Press, 1928). This work was completed toward the end of his active ministry and consisted of lectures which were originally delivered in April and May 1928 at Emory University in the form of the Quillian Lectures on the Permanent Values of the Evangelical Revival. Rattenbury esteemed it a high honor to have been the first English Methodist minister elected to the Lectureship.
12 J. Ernest Rattenbury, The Evangelical Doctrines of Charles Wesley's Hymns (London: The Epworth Press, 1941). This volume, originally delivered as the Fernley-Hartley Lecture of 1941, constitutes an examination of the whole of Charles Wesley's verse (over 7,000 hymns)
the much needed correction of the one-sided 19th century presentation of the Wesleys and their religious revival. But Rattenbury was not concerned so much with the experience of the Wesleys as an isolated phenomenon of the human spirit, let alone the originative event of his own theological tradition, as he was with the essential place of the Wesleys in the "evangelical succession" of Christian faith. The Wesleys were great and their revival of permanent value, not only because of the many unique contributions they had to make, but primarily because of the "enpersonalized faith" they held in common with St. Paul, Augustine, Luther, and their spiritual kindred—"the great penitent souls of the world who in despair have cried to God for help." 18

Rattenbury sought to demonstrate the inextricable relationship between religious vitality and personal encounter with God through Jesus Christ in his Quillian Lectures, subsequently published as *Wesley's Legacy to the World*:

The originality of Wesley is that he experimented with reality, and found it by coming into contact with God. He discovered by means of his experience the stuff of which his teaching and conduct are the fruits. . . . What is needed in religion first of all is valid experience of God. Nothing else can make Christian teaching vital. 14

Once this experience was a living reality in Wesley's life, the evangelical revival burst into an inextinguishable blaze. Defending the validity of this experience against the onslaught of contemporary psychological theory, Rattenbury described this critical turning point in the Wesleys' lives and the implicit reason for their great success:

The conversion experience was the experience of a discovery. It was not mere subjectivity. It was an experience of objective spiritual realities shared by two men. It was not created out of their inner consciousness; neither was it the result of introspection.

It was a communicable experience, which they communicated to others, who made a like discovery. 16

from the doctrinal point of view and undertakes a critical, psychological, and chronological discussion of Charles Wesley's life-long spiritual struggle. In a review of this book in the *London Quarterly*, Bernard L. Manning, the great hymnologist, expresses his approbation: "The book bristles with memorable sentences, picturesque, caustic, penetrating, brooding, but there is not an ungenerous, a bitter or a partisan word. Most of all the book is to be revered for its expression of saving evangelical truth. Dr. Rattenbury has so steeped himself in the thought and expression of his master, Charles Wesley, that no insignificant flame of the authentic fire burns here. Dr. Rattenbury by descent and by office, stands in the greatest of all traditions and he has never preached Christ more truly than in this noble and learned book." J. Ernest Rattenbury, *The Eucharistic Hymns of John and Charles Wesley* (London: The Epworth Press, 1948). One of Rattenbury's crowning achievements, this work will be discussed in more detail in another place. Both of these works established Rattenbury, along side of Henry Bett, Bernard Manning, R. N. Flew, and Frank Baker, as one of the greatest students of the Wesley's hymns in the twentieth century.


18Ibid., p. 80.
As abhorrent to Rattenbury as contemporary revisionist programs were in their reinterpretation of the Wesleys' "evangelical conversion," he maintained with equal conviction that the event required defense against simplistic reductionism within the pale of Methodism itself. In *The Conversion of the Wesleys*, he further elaborated his conception of this determinative event. The Wesleys had suffered, he maintained, as much as most great men from the partisan estimates of both friends and foes, and from the tendency of most disciples to make their leaders in their own image.

By the time of the bi-centenary of the Aldersgate experience in 1938, Wesley's interpreters could be divided roughly into two distinct camps. One school insisted that Wesley's essential affinities were with the subjective pietists. While his "evangelical conversion" necessitated the rejection of his earlier beliefs and practices (especially ecclesiastical and sacramental), his conservatism prevented him from completely jettisoning the vestiges of Anglicanism. The other school claimed that Wesleys as High Churchmen and generally belittled or radically reinterpreted the importance of the Aldersgate Street experience, emphasizing Wesley's later strictures on Calvin and Luther. No man was better qualified to intervene in this controversy than Rattenbury, and the product of his labors represents nothing less than a judicial summary of the contemporary Wesley literature.

Rattenbury appreciated the "evangelical element" in Wesley's conversion and argued cogently that May 24, 1738 was an "epoch-making date" in his career. Though there were other landmarks which determined the course and character of Wesley's life, this day, he maintained, "is equally a terminus ad quem and a terminus a quo. He reached a goal and found a starting point." He affords a trenchant criticism of views propounded by three classes of interpreters, namely, Roman Catholics, humanists, and psychologists. He takes issue with M. Piette (*La Réaction de John Wesley dans l'Évolution du Protestantisme*) who dismissed Aldersgate as a more or less evanescent gust of feeling and stressed instead the critical reorientation of Wesley's life in 1725. Umphrey Lee in *John Wesley and Modern Religion* afforded, in his view, an inadequate humanistic interpretation of the event as a mystical elevation of a good man to a higher platform. By leaving out the action of God upon His instrument, Sidney Dimond (*Psychology of the Methodist Revival*) did not so much explain Wesley's experience as explain it away. Countering these claims, Rattenbury succinctly states his own conception regarding the culminating event of May 24, "The dogma of Justification by Faith had become his experience. He did not only believe in faith, but he himself had received the gift of faith." A new and liberating dimension of faith, the

---

17Ibid., p. 82.
Methodist History

seeds of which had been sown many years before, now became the vital center of Wesley's life. He discovered by means of his experience that the substance of faith ("propositional faith"), to which he had adhered with pharisaical compulsion as a young man, is in its proper sense the fruit of a "living faith" (the act of faith) by which the believer is united with God. While both aspects of faith are essentially interrelated and necessary co-implicates for the fullest realization of the new life in Christ through the Holy Spirit, it was this gift of a "living faith" working by love that characterized his life after 1738.

"The redemptive doctrines of the Evangelical Revival," Rattenbury once wrote, "were spread abroad more effectively by the hymns of Charles Wesley than by any other medium." In estimating the importance of May 1738, therefore, Rattenbury made valuable use of Charles' hymns, not only as the most vital expression of John's teaching, but the most authentic commentary upon his own personal deliverance. Moreover, his volume on The Evangelical Doctrines of Charles Wesley's Hymns, published only three years after the bi-centenary, afforded corroborative evidence and support for the theories elaborated in the earlier volume. 19

Along with Charles Wesley's classic hymn, "O for a thousand tongues to sing," written to celebrate the first anniversary of his conversion, "three hymns which really in different fashions express the content of the great experience may be called preeminently 'the conversion hymns.' " These are:

Where shall my wondering soul begin?
And can it be that I should gain?
Come, O thou traveller unknown.

No hymn of Charles Wesley, however, as Rattenbury never tired of repeating, better summarizes his evangelical theology as confirmed and realized through his experience as the last mentioned hymn, "Wrestling Jacob." He observed that in this hymn:

... experimenter, poet, and theologian combined to produce great religious literature. He evangelized the ancient narrative and wove the story of Jacob at Peniel into his hymn to illustrate his own fierce struggle for the vision of God. Experiences of other wrestlers, Paul and Luther, no doubt influenced his interpretation. 21

18 J. Ernest Rattenbury, "No Limit to the Love that Wesley Sang: Dr. J. E. Rattenbury on the Redemption Hymns," The Methodist Recorder, date unknown.
19 Rattenbury originally envisaged three volumes on Charles Wesley's hymns and their impact upon and relation to the Evangelical Revival. The first would examine Charles Wesley, the man, as portrayed by his verse; the second would comprise the Fernley-Hartley Lecture of 1941 on the evangelical doctrines; and the final volume would afford a detailed exposition of his ecclesiastical and sacramental views. The pressures of the war years necessitated the confinement of the first two proposals in the volume presently under discussion, and the third proposal appeared under the title, Eucharistic Hymns.
21 Rattenbury, Evangelical Doctrines, p. 96.
It is by weakness only—here is the evangelical paradox—that he can prevail in the struggle, and victory finally comes as God in Christ reveals his own nature to the wrestling but despairing soul:

‘Tis Love! ‘tis Love! Thou diest for me;
I hear Thy whisper in my heart;
The morning breaks, the shadows flee;
Pure UNIVERSAL LOVE THOU ART;
To me, to all Thy Mercies move;
Thy nature, and Thy name is Love.

The experienced love of God is the central truth of the Wesleyan experience and doctrine.

In addition to this, Rattenbury found in Charles Wesley’s account of his own experience a key to understanding the profound significance of the event:

“I now found myself at peace with God and rejoiced in hope of loving Christ.” It meant deliverance from sin, absolution, reconciliation, and assurance of forgiveness—in a word, a liberation from the legal tyranny which had so harassed him, but it also meant “hope,” the phrase sounds strange, of “loving Christ.” An understanding of the significance of these words gives us the only key which can interpret hundreds of the hymns of Charles Wesley. He had been delivered from the prison of the law of sin and death to become the prisoner of hope.22

John Wesley’s better-known account of his own conversion and the personalization of faith it so dramatically emphasizes—“I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance is given me that he has taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death”—is echoed and matched in Charles’ graphic picture of deliverance, in the experience of la coup de grâce:

Long my imprisoned spirit lay,
Fast bound in sin and nature’s night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray—
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.

Wesley, according to Rattenbury, was an emancipated, but by no means a finished man after 1738. It was only inevitable that his practical and ethical temper would increasingly recoil from what he called “Luther’s crazy Solifidianism.” Wesley, as Rattenbury was quick to emphasize, was even more concerned about salvation from the power of sin than from the guilt and penalty of it. He did not allow the experience of his conversion to plunge him into individualistic, let alone antinomian excesses. He refused to countenance the common, and false, antitheses between personal and institutional, individual and social, evangelical and sacramental religion. Rattenbury’s rediscovery and republication of this essentially Wesleyan dynamic is one of the great contributions he has made to the understanding of Wesley and his legacy.

22Ibid., p. 249.
Sacramentalist and Liturgical Theologian

Throughout his lengthy ministry and subsequent retirement, Rattenbury was devoted indefatigably to the recovery of Wesleyan sacramental theology and became one of the few great liturgical theologians within modern Methodism. There is no question that his greatest and most significant contribution came in this sphere, and the consequent impact of his pioneering work upon the Methodist tradition (in both its English and American forms) has yet to be fully appreciated and acknowledged. It was profound. Raymond J. Billington, in his historical/theological analysis of *The Liturgical Movement and Methodism*, has recognized Rattenbury’s achievement in breaking down the 19th century stereotype of Wesley as the great evangelist as opposed to sacramentarian. “Since Methodist Union,” he observes, “there has been an attempt to redress this imbalance. Credit for this must go chiefly to a strong opponent of the union, Dr. J. E. Rattenbury.”23 Similarly, Rattenbury must be credited for the whole effort to rediscover the centrality of the Eucharist in Methodist worship.

His conception of the integrity of worship and his evaluation of the contemporary situation are encapsulated in this protracted statement, the basic dynamics of which we have previously encountered in his writings:

When a false antithesis becomes a popular slogan it is difficult to arrest its malignant influence—and no better illustration can be found than the oft-repeated catchwords: Altar or pulpit—Sacrarium or Gospel. Over-emphasis may be given to a truth, and over-protest against that over-emphasis may perhaps be condoned; but truths and emphases are different things, and, however much certain groups of Christians may have unduly stressed the Sacraments, it is entirely objectionable to proclaim the Gospel as if it excluded sacraments.24

The point that Rattenbury stressed repeatedly in his writings is that there is no contradiction between sacramental grace and evangelical experience. Either is deficient without the complementarity of the other. For the fullest realization and experience of the Christian faith, therefore, the two poles of this “false antithesis” must be dynamically interrelated. Rattenbury discovered this essential balance in the thought and practice of the Wesleys and republished it for modern Methodism.

At the Methodist Church Congress held in the Central Hall, Bristol, in October 1929, a preliminary conference to Methodist Reunion in 1932, Rattenbury forcefully reiterated the importance of this legacy:

At the very commencement of the Evangelical Revival, when the fires of evangelical experience were burning most brightly, the evangelical character of the Eucharist was emphasized by the Great Evangelist. This emphasis was never absent from the Wesleys’ teaching, as is shown by the republication of John’s sermon on “Constant


The primary discovery which Rattenbury made, essentially novel in his time but universally accepted today as historical fact, was that the revival of the eighteenth century was Eucharistic as well as Evangelical. "A new emphasis on Eucharistic worship," he wrote with great confidence, "would issue not in a dead ritualism but in a living evangelism and a commanding sense of constraining love." 26

When Methodist Union came in 1932, it became clear to Rattenbury and a number of kindred spirits that something had to be done to preserve the Wesleys' sacramental emphasis in the newly united church. To this end, under the guiding light of T. S. Gregory, the Methodist Sacramental Fellowship was formed and held its inaugural conference at Penrhos College in August 1935, electing Alfred E. Whitham its first President. Three years later Rattenbury accepted the mantle of leadership, valiantly defended the Fellowship during the storms of ill-informed criticism prior to 1939, and from 1938 until 1950, when the Rev. Donald (later Lord) Soper was elected its third President, afforded his unique talents and irenic spirit to the development of the organization.

Soon after its foundation the Fellowship was accused, quite wrongly, of two offences against the Methodist Church. On the one hand it was said that the Fellowship might lead to future divisions within British Methodism. On the other hand the Fellowship was regarded as a movement toward Rome and viewed, therefore, with the same suspicion as sacramental renewal movements had been in the previous century. At the Methodist Conference of 1938, however, Rattenbury virtually ended the opposition by a brilliant and moving speech which set out the true aims and authentic practices of the Fellowship. The three-fold purposes of the Fellowship remain essentially the same to this day:

To reaffirm the Catholic Faith based upon the apostolic testimony of Holy Scripture, witnessed to in the Nicene Creed and professed by the Church down the ages.

To restore to Methodism the sacramental worship of the Universal Church and in particular the centrality of the Eucharist—as set forth in the lifelong practice and teaching of the Wesleys.

To work and pray for the restoration of Catholic unity in Christ's Church. 27

25Ibid., p. 83.


27A. Stewart Denyer and Donald G. Rogers, "The Methodist Sacramental Fellowship: What it IS, What it DOES, What it STANDS FOR," M.S.F. Pamphlet, Easter 1975. Rattenbury's Conference speech of 1938 was published under the title "In Defence of the Methodist Sacramental Fellowship, at the Conference of the Methodist Church at Hull, 1938. The Speech of... J. E. Rattenbury, with Notes" (Southport: Printed by W. W. Taylor, 1938). The sister organization of the M.S.F. in the United States, the Order of St. Luke, is a sacramental and liturgical fellowship within the United Methodist Church and is devoted to the same principles.
It was to the M.S.F. that Rattenbury dedicated what is perhaps his most important book, *The Eucharistic Hymns of John and Charles Wesley*, where for the first time in many years the 166 hymns were printed in full with a rich exposition of their catholicity.

This important volume represents the first really serious study of any part of Wesleyan sacramental theology and still remains one of the major contributions to this neglected area of research. With regard to Rattenbury’s monumental study, Bishop Ole E. Borgen claims with not a little regret:

> For the first time Methodism is presented with a critical-analytical treatment of the greatest treasure of sacramental hymnody that any church ever possessed, a treasure Methodism has largely chosen to ignore.  

In this long-awaited examination of the Wesleys’ hymns, Rattenbury shows himself to be the Wesleyan, *par excellence*. The subject is treated in three parts, the first examining the Wesley’s concept of the Christian Sacrament; the second exploring their doctrine of sacrifice as developed both explicitly and implicitly in the hymns; and the last affording an unabridged republication of the Wesleys’ 1745 edition of “Hymns on the Lord’s Supper,” to which is appended Wesley’s full Preface, extracted from Dr. Brevint’s “The Christian Sacrament and Sacrifice.”

Rattenbury begins his discussion of the Wesleyan sacramental theory by reiterating his major thesis, namely, that the Holy Communion was the central devotion of the Evangelical Revival. “The Great Evangelical Revivalists,” he claims, “knew that Evangelism could only be grounded on worship, and that the central act of Christian worship is at the Table of the Lord.” He contends that Wesley’s doctrine could never have been that of a “bare memorialist,” for the simple reason that Christ was living, “still bearing upon His hands and feet glorious scars.” He describes their conception of the Eucharist as a “Protestant Crucifix” in which, echoing the Language of Brevint, the main intention of Christ

> ... was not the bare *remembrance* of His passion, but over and above, to invite us to His sacrifice, not as done and gone many years since, but, as to grace and mercy, still lasting, still new, still the same as when it was first offered for us.”

---

28 Ole E. Borgen, *John Wesley on the Sacraments: A Theological Study* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1972), p. 17. It is a bitter commentary on modern Methodism that both Rattenbury’s volume and this magnificent study are out of print. *Eucharistic Hymns* is nearly a collector’s item in this country and can be found only in a number of select libraries. The loss is offset somewhat by the beautifully produced book entitled *The Richest Legacy: The Eucharistic Hymns of John and Charles Wesley* by the Rev. Jack Burton which prints 112 of the original 166 hymns in a modernized edition, adding 8 others by Charles and 2 translations by John Wesley which assume heightened significance in a eucharistic context.


30 Ibid., p. 21.

31 Ibid., p. 25.
The Legacy of J. Ernest Rattenbury

The Sacrament is a symbol and instrument, not only re-presenting what Christ did, but effecting what it re-presents. With regard to the presence of Christ in the Sacrament, Rattenbury claims that "an examination of the hymns will result quite frequently in the discovery of allusions to the 'real Presence' of Christ, but it is always to a personal Presence." The language which the Wesleys employ seems to revolve around concepts of relationship.

While he held that the Elements were not only symbols but actual instruments, even material channels by which the justifying and sanctifying grace of God was communicated to believing men, he believed that the power of Christ—the "virtue" as Calvin called it—was always exercised by the living personal Christ Himself.

Rattenbury, finally, explicates Wesley's conception of the sacrament as a pledge of heaven, utilizing the category of "realized eschatology" imported from Biblical scholarship. "Wesley," he exclaims, "realized that eternal life is present as well as future; that the Communion of Saints between those who are here and those who are gone before is a fact."

The figure of the united family and unbroken army to which death is but a narrow ditch easily bridged, brings home with even greater force the oneness of the two sections—Militant and Triumphant—of the Church of Christ.

In the second major section of this study, Rattenbury affords a lucid articulation of Wesley's doctrine of sacrifice as it relates to the Eucharist. The sacrificial metaphors applied by the Wesleys to the Lord's Supper are those which are employed most frequently by the writers of Hebrews and Revelation, namely, the slaughtered Lamb who was also the Great High Priest. This Priest/Victim imagery, according to Rattenbury, "brings out with unequivocal force Wesley's sense of the continuing sacrifice of Christ in heaven which is basal to all Eucharistic worship."

The earthly symbol is the expression of this heavenly sacrifice:

It must never be forgotten that the symbols in Holy Communion are operative symbols: the sign itself, in some sense communicating the end that it signifies. The real meaning of the symbolism is, that just as the Priest-Victim pleads the cause of the sinful man for whom He died in heaven, so on earth by means of the bread and wine, the tokens of His love, we plead the death of Christ. . . . The sacrifice on which God is asked to look is not our own but the one oblation for the sins of the whole world—His beloved Son's.

Moreover, the oblation offered in the Eucharist is that of ourselves which is joined to that of Christ Himself. "The Church collectively offer-

---

32Ibid., p. 59.
33Ibid.
34Ibid., p. 63.
35Ibid., p. 75.
36Ibid., p. 109.
37Ibid., p. 121.
ing herself to God in the Eucharist,” emphasizes Rattenbury, “is actually offering to God the Body of Christ—for the Church is His Body.”

The sacrifice is corporate, made by the collective body of believers who are the priests of God, who altogether offer both symbolically and really the body of Christ to God. The collective body is not a machine of regulated parts, but a congregation of people, each with his own individuality, although in relation to the body, members of it, bound together not by organization and hierarchy, but by the spirit of love, which is the Spirit of Jesus.

The Wesleys conceived of the Sacrament as a memorial, a sign and means of grace, a pledge of heaven, and a sacrifice of the Body of Christ.

This is the richest legacy
Thou has on man bestow'd:
Here chiefly, Lord, we feed on Thee,
And drink Thy precious blood.
(Hymn 42, 4)

In his day, no writer in Methodism had produced a book on the history of worship comparable to those of Clark, Maxwell, Micklem, Dix, or Abba. An earlier work of Rattenbury’s, however, *The Vital Elements of Public Worship*, originally published in 1936, revised in 1938, and reprinted in a third edition in 1954, afforded the Methodists a knowledge of the origins and development of Christian worship. While Rattenbury encouraged Liturgical reforms and made many practical suggestions towards it (see in particular pp. 90-98, 110-113), he was much more concerned with underlying principles for balanced, ordered, and vital worship.

He abhorred the rampant excesses of subjectivism and individualism, forces which were at once antithetical to the corporate nature of worship and essentially un-Wesleyan in character. This work is primarily characterized, therefore, by a plea for the “restoration of ‘objectivity’ to Free Church and particularly Methodist worship,” in this regard Rattenbury reaffirmed the integrity of his Methodist heritage and reechoed a familiar and quintessential theme:

Wesley never will be understood by men whose thoughts are dominated by the entirely false antithesis of ‘evangelical or sacramental,’ which is one of the most misleading ‘Entweder-oders’ of our day. He was both sacramental and evangelical because he believed in both objective and subjective religious worship, and knew that an exclusive use of either one or the other meant the weakening of Christianity.

The later sections of this work, consisting of an explanatory and devotional commentary on the Order of Holy Communion, the oc-

---

38Ibid., p. 132.
39Ibid., p. 144.
40Ibid., p. 208.
42Ibid., p. 77.
togenarian afterwards developed and expanded into his final work, *Thoughts on Holy Communion*, which appeared in 1958; a fitting testimony to his life lived in “constant communion.”

Rattenbury’s explication of the Wesleyan sacramental tradition and his unique development of these Wesleyan themes were both directed toward the recovery of the full, rich, and joyous eucharistic life of early Methodism. This life of faith, Rattenbury came to see, was founded upon certain theological premises. These foundations he fully appropriated from the Wesleyan tradition and employed for the articulation of his own sacramental beliefs. At the great risk of over-simplification, these principles may be summarized in these propositions.

First, the Gospel of Christ is not only immediate, but *mediate*.

The Sacrament explains the fact that Christ comes to His own through material media as well as apart from them . . . Most of our life is lived amongst things we see and touch, but we do not need to get away from them to get to God. The Sacrament teaches us that a bit of common bread can be the medium of the divine manifestation, and, if so, what earthly thing cannot be the medium of this revelation, what cannot be a means of grace?

Earth is crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afame with God. 48

Just as God had entered human history and sanctified its every part in and through a man, Jesus of Nazareth, so too, now, that same God manifests Himself to all the faithful in bread and wine through the power of the Holy Spirit. Rattenbury not only conceived of the Sacrament as an essential co-implicate of the Incarnation, but he also perceived in the Holy Communion a reflection of the sacramental universe—a conception of first importance in the life and thought of the Wesleys.

Secondly, not only is the Sacrament a means—a medium—of individual grace; it is also an important *social symbol*. Christianity, as Rattenbury reaffirmed with John Wesley, is a social religion.

While we have undoubtedly individual relations to God, which were so forcefully expressed by the Reformers for our lasting benefit, there are some relations of life in which we are fractions not units. We are children of a family—and members of the body of Christ—the Church. 49

As a corporate act, therefore, worship demands rites, hymns, sermons, prayers, and sacraments whereby the common mind of the Body expresses itself and proclaims who and whose it is. But the Eucharist is of special significance because it functions as a “visible Word”:

The pulpit declares the Word to which the people respond, but the Eucharist properly understood, on its human side, is the act not only of the celebrant but of the Church which is the true priesthood, and is a corporate declaration of the gospel Word. 50

50Ibid.
Finally and primarily, therefore, the Lord’s Supper faithfully proclaims the Word—the Gospel of Christ. It proclaims the “Lord’s death till He come.” “What,” asked Rattenbury, “can be more profoundly evangelical? The Gospel which Paul preached, and Luther and Wesley, was the Lord’s death.”

The human witness may fail; has often failed; but as long as the Lord’s Supper is celebrated men will know that

Jesu’s blood, through earth and skies,
Mercy, free, boundless mercy! cries.

The Sacrament, moreover, not only proclaims a death and commemorates a redemptive sacrifice, it affords a real Presence of the Living Christ. It “offers Christ” in His fullness to all. “I bear my humble testimony, as a Methodist should,” Rattenbury confessed, “that Christ is really present at the Sacrament, because I have met Him there.” This profound relational conception of the Sacrament—grounded in evangelical experience and consummated in the appropriation of sacramental grace through which the Holy Spirit affords new and abundant life in Christ—Rattenbury discovered to be the vital center of the Wesleyan message.

**Devotional Writer and Ascetic Theologian**

In addition to the sacramental and liturgical concerns which gave rise to the Methodist Sacramental Fellowship, a great number of Methodist ministers and laypeople felt the need for a more ordered devotional life. Rattenbury’s study of the origins of the Methodist movement, the dynamics of its cherished institutions such as the class-meetings and the bands, and, in particular, the lives of John and Charles Wesley led to an early appreciation of both prayer and meditation and the centrality of these disciplines to the Christian life. This general interest in the development of the classic spiritual disciplines became a distinguishing characteristic of the M.S.F. Every member was, and still is, committed to a daily prayer discipline of his or her own choice. The M.S.F. developed its own form of the Divine Office; daily Morning and Evening Prayer, using psalms, hymns, Bible reading, canticles, and prayers within the liturgical framework. Any examination of Rattenbury’s life and work, therefore, would be greatly impoverished if it failed to provide some accounting of his contribution in this sphere.

In his earliest devotional writings Rattenbury treated subjects of traditional and perennial interest, namely, the life and teachings of Jesus,

---

47Ibid., p. 88.
48Ibid., p. 89.
the character of the Apostles, and the Lord’s Prayer. In this last mentioned work, Our Father and His Family, many of the themes we have encountered previously, the primacy of the category of relationship and the dynamic interrelation of individual and corporate or social realities in the Christian life, for instance, are adumbrated or even figure prominently in his discussion. In the area of ascetic theology, as in the other classic theological disciplines, Rattenbury, much like Wesley, exhibits a unique ability to expose and reconcile “false antitheses.” Here he demonstrates the false dichotomy between and espouses the essential interdependence of the life of contemplation and prayer, on the one hand, and the life of active service which transforms the world, on the other. Prayer must always lead to action. Rattenbury discerned this essential truth in the pattern of prayer which Jesus suggested to His disciples, and particularly in the petition for daily bread:

The social implications of this petition are tremendous. We have no right to evade them. If we are God’s children, trusting in the Father’s love, we are also God’s agents to carry out His will. The organization of society as a family would give work to all, bread to all, and dignity to all. The ideal is difficult to accomplish, but it should be the conscious objective of all who say the Lord’s prayer.

It is significant that Rattenbury’s greatest production of devotional works came in a flurry during the final full decade of his life. They are rich and learned, having behind them the accumulated wisdom of fourscore years of life within the church and indefatigable service for her Lord. As the titles indicate, these meditations revolve around the observance of the successive events of the Christian Year. In his recovery of this time-honored practice, Rattenbury stood in the vanguard of the liturgical renewal movement and sought to redress the neglect of this observance which he believed was one of the greatest instruments of Christian enrichment and instruction. He had experienced the deepening of his faith through the reliving of the great events of the Christian faith and coveted that experience for others.

Careful attention to the events of the Christian Year brings order and form in place of the haphazard and desultory, and greatly enriches the devotional life by enhancing our understanding of the deep things of our Faith.

---

52Rattenbury, Our Father, pp. 61, 63.
54Rattenbury, Throne, Cradle, and Star, Preface.
The reading and exposition of the Bible and its revelation of God through persons and The Person, and the observance of practices within the mainstream of the catholic tradition are reminiscent of the “magnificently bound volume” which Rattenbury received at his baptism. The third component of that volume and the most essential element of Rattenbury’s devotional life was the Methodist Hymn Book. He never tired of reading, studying, and inwardly digesting the great hymns of Charles Wesley. “A properly arranged devotional manual of selections from Charles Wesley,” Rattenbury once claimed, “might—and I think would—take a permanent place with Thomas à Kempis, Francis de Sales, and the like, as a devotional manual inferior to none.”

Hymns were an integral part of Rattenbury’s lifelong pilgrimage in Christ. Like Wesley, J. Ernest Rattenbury’s legacy is what he inherited from his progenitors and what he in turn has passed on to us. One facet of that legacy, a permanent testimony to his life, is the following hymn which he himself composed as a devotional preparation for the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper:

Behind the veil! behind the veil!
Our great Forerunner’s race is run!
He wore our human nature frail,
And victory, in our flesh He won,
Who for our sins did once atone,
Sits, now, triumphant on the throne.

Behind the veil! behind the veil!
Not far away, nor out of reach,
But near to all who strive and fail,
To save, to strengthen and to teach;
Tempted Himself, He conquered sin,
And bids the tempted fight and win.

Behind the veil! behind the veil!
Hope is the anchor of my soul;
Driv’n now by heavy winds, I sail
On seas where storm-tost billows roll,
But I shall weather every gale
And, anchored, rest behind the veil.