

Anti-Methodist satire in the eighteenth century presented contradictory images of Methodist sexual morality. On the one hand, Methodist preachers were often accused of sexual immorality in an attempt to stigmatise the movement as a whole.¹ The love-feast in particular fuelled rumours of wild orgies presided over by lecherous preachers. Paradoxically, Methodists were also widely regarded as an ascetic group, morbidly obsessed with celibacy. The true picture was less colourful, though early Methodists were certainly encouraged to value the single life as a superior means of devotion to Christian service.

In *Thoughts on Marriage and a Single Life* (1743) John Wesley adopted a Pauline stance: 'If thou art bound unto a wife, seek not to be loosed. But if thou art loosed from a wife, seek not a wife.'² In Wesley's eyes, the single life allowed men and women to pursue Christian perfection without distraction, but those already married when they became Christians were to enjoy a normal married life. Later, in *Thoughts on a Single Life* (1748), Wesley softened his attitude towards marriage and family life. Celibacy was still preferable in order to serve God without the interruption of 'a thousand nameless domestic trials which are found, sooner or later, in every family'.³ However, he was no longer so insistent that the intimacies of marriage and family life were injurious to the pursuit of Christian perfection.

For many years Wesley remained single because he believed he could be more 'useful' in that state, though it seems he proposed marriage on at least one occasion. But at the age of 48 he suddenly decided he would be 'more useful in a married state', whereupon he promptly embarked upon a disastrous marriage with Mary Vazeille.⁴ *A Thought upon Marriage* (1785) is written from the perspective of a man already past the age of 80 with a failed marriage behind him. At this stage in his life, Wesley believed that the youthful search for happiness in marriage was an unconscious substitute for the pursuit of a closer relationship with God.

In reality, Methodist discipline made marriage no easy undertaking, especially for itinerant preachers. On his own admission, Wesley bore little sympathy for the needs of married preachers: 'I cannot understand how a Methodist preacher can answer it to God to preach one sermon or travel one day less in a married state than in a single state.'⁵ Nor was it only itinerant preachers that wrestled with the competing demands of marriage and Methodism. Concern for their spiritual life and availability for Christian endeavour caused many devout Methodists to agonise before committing themselves in marriage. Women in particular were concerned lest their duty to obey an unsympathetic husband should inhibit their devotion to God. Nevertheless, many Methodists successfully combined their religious obligations with a happy marriage and family life. Thus the form of the marriage rite was not without interest to the early Methodist people.⁶

The 'Form of Solemnisation of Matrimony' in the *Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America* (1784) is an abridgement of the 1662 Prayer Book service inspired partly by Puritan concerns and partly by John Wesley's own theological principles. Puritans had long called for the giving of rings to be omitted from the solemnisation of marriage on the grounds that it constituted a sacramental form. In line with the Puritan 'exceptions', Wesley dropped all references to the giving of rings, though he hardly needed encouragement since he agreed with the Reformers that marriage was not a sacrament: 'matrimony doth no more confer grace, than washing the feet, or using the sign of the cross'.⁷

There was also the Lord's Supper to consider. The solemnisation of marriage in the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* takes place in the body of the Church. Then, during the singing of Psalm 128, the couple process to the altar-table where they kneel for the prayers, which are followed by an optional sermon or exhortation. The final rubric states: 'It is convenient that the new-married persons should receive the Holy Communion at the time of their Marriage, or at the first opportunity after their Marriage.' Provision for the Eucharist, which was prescribed in the 1549 and 1552 Prayer Books, echoes the nuptial Mass in the Sarum rite.

Whereas it had been Cranmer's strong desire to retain the nuptial Mass, the Puritans had long argued that it was inappropriate to include Holy Communion in the marriage service because most of the people present would either be unsuitable participants or else ill prepared to receive the sacrament with due reverence. The relaxation in the 1662 Prayer Book of the requirement for the solemnisation of marriage to include the Eucharist was partly in response to Puritan pressure. Consistent with Puritan views on the solemnisation of marriage, Wesley omitted the final rubric, thereby dropping the nuptial Mass, though he may have been influenced by contemporary practice in the Church of England and practicalities relating to the situation in North America. In the eighteenth century the Lord's Supper was rarely administered in the context of the marriage service in the Church of England. By dropping the nuptial Mass, Wesley may have felt he was simply reflecting the actual state of affairs. At the same time, the architecture of early Methodist buildings in America hardly lent itself to the traditional procession from nave to altar.

More surprising than the disappearance of the nuptial Mass is Wesley's omission of the optional sermon and the alternative exhortation on 'the duties of man and wife' based on Ephesians 5 and Colossians. Even the extremely plain marriage service in the *Westminster Directory* contains an exhortation that the couple are to perform their 'conjugal duties' faithfully towards each other and enjoy 'a thankful, sober, and holy use of all Conjugal comforts; praying much with, and for, one another; watching over, and provoking each other to love and good works, and to live together as the heirs of the Grace of life.'⁸

By omitting the sermon and exhortation, Wesley demonstrates his independence from Puritanism in theological and liturgical matters. Although sympathetic to Puritan ideals, he was not slavishly committed to following their liturgical agenda. Not every Puritan 'exception' found its way into Wesley's Abridgement, and neither were his amendments to the marriage service inspired exclusively by Puritan concerns. For instance, the Puritans called for the description of marriage as an 'excellent mystery' to be dropped from the collect because it implied that the solemnisation of marriage was a sacrament.⁹ Wesley, however, kept the reference because he was convinced that the estate of marriage was indeed a divine mystery.

One other significant alteration to the marriage rite confirms that Wesley was his own judge of what was appropriate in the solemnisation of matrimony. By dropping the traditional ceremony of giving away the bride, he made a small but significant gesture towards the equality of the sexes, though he retained the woman's vow to obey her husband. Puritans raised no objection to giving away the bride, nor did Protestant marriage rites provide a precedent for omitting the ceremony. According to Martin Bucer, giving away the bride in marriage was 'admirably suitable for Christian people'.¹⁰ In this instance at least, Wesley should be given credit for an attitude towards women that was relatively enlightened by the standards of the day.

A number of minor adjustments in the rubrics of the marriage service reflect the different jurisdiction in North America, though curiously Wesley retained the calling of the banns, a means of verifying the eligibility of the parties which may have been effective in settled English parishes but was unworkable in North America. At the same time, he could not resist improving the marriage service by making a small number of editorial changes to smooth the text. In all other respects, Wesley retained the form of the marriage service in the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*.¹¹

As was generally the case with his Abridgement, Wesley's intention in revising the marriage service was to ensure that the Prayer Book continued to meet the liturgical needs of a rising generation of Methodists in North America and Britain. However, lacking a grasp of the popular attachment to traditional elements of the marriage service, Wesley based his reforms on intellectual arguments rather than pastoral insights. At least in Britain, Wesley's marriage service proved out of tune with the needs of the people. In a short space of time Methodists in Britain reversed his most significant reforms, restoring both the giving away of the bride and the giving of rings. In the end, the voice of the Methodist people triumphed over the Puritan liturgical agenda.

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The second edition of the *Sunday Service* (1786) intended for use in Britain reproduced Wesley's 1784 marriage service without amendment. Yet it is most unlikely that this service was ever used in England since Lord Hardwicke's Marriage Act of 1753 required marriages to be solemnised in the Church of England. It was not until 1836 that the solemnisation of marriage was finally permitted in Nonconformist places of worship in the presence of a registrar.

At first, Wesleyan Methodism was reluctant to take advantage of the new regulations. The Conference of 1837 declined a memorial from Wesleyans in Bedford seeking guidance in licensing chapels for marriages.¹² The Wesleyan leadership expected that Methodists would continue to be married in their parish church by an Anglican priest. In response to repeated calls for chapels to be licensed for the solemnisation of marriages Jabez Bunting insisted that 'The Plan of Pacification was a matter of concession, not an everyday occurrence.'¹³ In other words, he did not consider it part of the normal function of Methodist ministers to conduct marriages.

Bunting's pronouncement did little to stem the tide of dissatisfaction at the continuing prohibition of marriages in Wesleyan chapels. In 1840 voices of protest were again heard in the Wesleyan Conference. If the Methodist people could not be married in their own chapels, it would be said that their preachers were not proper ministers.¹⁴ To avoid a showdown, the Conference declined either to sanction or prevent chapels applying for a licence to solemnise marriages. Interpreting this as tacit permission to proceed, a growing number of chapels went ahead and obtained licences. Bowing to the inevitable, the Conference in 1845 gave a cautious welcome to the solemnisation of marriages in Methodist chapels, promising regulations within twelve months but insisting all the same that no Wesleyan minister should feel compelled to conduct weddings.¹⁵ In the event the promised regulations never materialised, and early doubts about the solemnisation of marriage in Wesleyan chapels swiftly evaporated. As a result, one of the last remaining ties between Methodism and the Church of England was finally severed.

The Conference decision allowing Wesleyan Methodists to be married in their own chapels prompted an immediate revision of the marriage service. In 1846 a new edition of the *Sunday Service* appeared containing significant amendments to Wesley's Abridgement. Out went the banns,

David M. Chapman, *Born in Song: Methodist Worship in Britain* (Church in the Market Place Publications, 2006), Chapter 8 'The Solemnisation of Christian Marriage' pp. 197-217.

which were in any case a redundant hangover from the Church of England, to be replaced by a sworn declaration within the marriage service, as required by the 1836 Marriage Act for all ceremonies in registered dissenting chapels. In the opening address Augustine's second reason for marriage (that it was a remedy for sin) now vanished, probably as a result of contemporary social mores that prohibited public references to sex.

The giving of rings was re-introduced, probably as the result of pressure from the grassroots for a ceremony that was a traditional and popular feature of the marriage service in the Church of England. The rubrics require the ring to be placed on 'the book' (the minister's copy of the service book) before it is given to the man to put on the woman's finger. However, to avoid any hint that marriage is a sacrament, there is no prayer of blessing over the ring. Instead of using the Prayer Book form, the ring is given with the words: 'With this ring, a token and pledge of the vow and covenant now made betwixt me and thee, I wed thee.'

Despite the reappearance of the rings, another traditional feature of the wedding service was not restored. The ceremony of giving away the bride in marriage does not appear in the 1846 edition of the *Sunday Service* nor in any of its successors. However, in 1862 the shorter book of offices introduced the ceremony of giving away the bride, again as a result of popular demand among ordinary Methodists, who were no less attached to this traditional feature of the Church of England marriage service than they were to the giving of rings. The discrepancy between the *Sunday Service* and the shorter book of offices is difficult to explain since there are no records extant to provide an insight into the editorial process, though it illustrates the independence between the two books.

'The Form for the Solemnisation of Marriage' in the *Wesleyan Book of Public Prayers and Services for the Use of the People called Methodists* (1882) was based on the most recent edition of the *Sunday Service* into which was inserted the ceremony of giving away the bride. There were also a few minor amendments as recommended by the revision committee. For example, the collect after the marriage was given a stronger Christological content, and the exemplary married couple was changed from Abraham and Sarah to Zechariah and Elizabeth.

Apart from the ceremony of giving away the bride, the most significant change introduced by the revision committee occurs in the opening address, which is based on the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* via Wesley's *Sunday Service*. This address includes Augustine's three reasons for marriage. Since these have already been mentioned and because they will feature again, it is helpful to reproduce the relevant passage from the Prayer Book. According to Augustine, as stated in the *Book of Common Prayer*, marriage was instituted for these reasons:

First, it was ordained for the procreation of children, to be brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord, and to the praise of his holy Name.

Secondly, it was ordained for a remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication; that such persons as have not the gift of continency might marry, and keep themselves undefiled members of Christ's body.

Thirdly, it was ordained for the mutual society, help, and comfort that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity.

As has already been mentioned, the second reason disappeared from the *Sunday Service* in 1846. In deference to nineteenth century sensibilities concerning public references to human sexuality, the revision committee further decided to remove the reference to procreation in the first.

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The non-Wesleyan branches of Methodism developed their own forms of marriage service in response to pastoral needs among their members, who were no more willing than the Wesleyans to be married in the Church of England. For the most part these non-Wesleyan marriage rites are independent of the Prayer Book tradition, though some traditional features were retained.

‘The Solemnisation of Matrimony’ in the 1860 Primitive Methodist service book bears little resemblance to the *Sunday Service*. The opening exhortation is entirely different and makes no reference to Augustine’s reasons for marriage. Yet the affirmations end with an indirect reference to the sexual union of marriage, using the language of the Authorised Version of the Bible (Genesis 2.24; Mark 10.7): ‘Wilt thou have this woman to be thy wedded Wife, to live together after God’s ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony? Wilt thou love, honour and comfort her in sickness and in health, and cleave to her only, as long as you both shall live?’

The ring is given without accompanying prayer or ceremony. The man gives it directly to the woman with the words ‘I give thee this ring as a token of my love and fidelity.’ She receives it with the words ‘I accept it as such at thine hand, and will wear it as a pledge of our mutual love.’ Then, since the couple have been joined in ‘holy wedlock’, the minister pronounces them husband and wife, though without using the Prayer Book’s Matthean formula as retained in the *Sunday Service* and the 1882 Wesleyan revision: ‘Those whom God hath joined together, let no man put asunder’ (Matthew 19.6). Ultra-Protestants balked at what they interpreted as a priestly pronouncement, even though Cranmer moved the Matthean formula from its position in the Sarum rite immediately after the giving of the rings to a point after the prayer of blessing precisely in order to avoid such an interpretation.

Unless the minister chooses to deliver an address, he proceeds to read an exhortation, adapted from the Prayer Book (and omitted by John Wesley), about the duty of husbands and wives according to the New Testament. The service continues in extempore prayer. Sounding an unusually emphatic note, the final rubric insists that the minister ‘must conclude with the usual Benediction’.

Possibly as a result of increasing social aspirations among Primitive Methodists, ‘The Solemnisation of Matrimony’ in the 1890 Primitive Methodist service book is closer in form and content to Wesley’s Abridgement. The opening exhortation is adapted from the *Sunday Service*, though the reasons for marriage are now said to be first ‘mutual society, help, and comfort’ and secondly ‘that children might enjoy the blessings and privileges of family life’. The reversal in the order of Augustine’s reasons for marriage echoes Martin Bucer’s response to Cranmer’s 1549 marriage rite:

The address which stands at the beginning of this order is excellently godly and holy: nevertheless at about the end of it three causes for matrimony are enumerated, that is children, a remedy, and mutual help, and I should prefer that what is placed third among the causes for marriage might be in the first place, because it is first.¹⁶

Presumably in response to popular demand among Primitive Methodists the bride is given away. In a further sign of an increasing desire for ceremony the ring is laid upon the minister’s service book before being placed on the woman’s finger with the Wesleyan formula: ‘With this Ring, a token and pledge of the Vow and Covenant now made between me and thee, I thee wed.’

The United Methodist Free Churches were less radical than the Primitive Methodists in their handling of Wesley's Abridgement. Since the 'Form for the Solemnisation of Matrimony' in the revised service book differs only slightly from the earlier service, it is convenient to consider the two together. The opening address in the first service is considerably condensed from the *Sunday Service* and omits Augustine's reasons for marriage. The revised service reproduces the opening address from the *Sunday Service*, albeit without Augustine's reasons for marriage. The suggested Scripture passages are the same in both services.¹⁷ The vows, again identical in both services, are slightly adapted from the *Sunday Service*.

Unusually the rubrics prescribe the ceremony of giving away the bride, suggesting that by 1870 the custom was universal among Methodists. The revised form of the service contains an innovation in the ceremony of giving away the bride which later became a standard feature of Methodist marriage rites. In response to the traditional question posed in the Prayer Book marriage service: 'Who giveth this woman to be married to this man?' the father or friend replies, 'I do.'¹⁸

The giving of the ring differs from the Wesleyan form. The man places the ring directly on the woman's finger with the words 'I give thee this ring as a memorial of our union, and as a pledge of my love and fidelity.' The woman may respond 'As such I now receive it.' The pronouncement of the marriage is followed immediately by the Matthean formula, a reversal of the order in the Prayer Book, but still a surprising inclusion in view of its priestly overtones.

At this juncture the revised service includes a choice of hymns followed by a prayer for the newly married couple.¹⁹ It also prescribes 'a few words of kindly counsel' and an exhortation that offers a relatively enlightened interpretation of the main Scripture passage, Ephesians 5.23-28:

Seek to dwell together in love, in honour preferring one another. Let there be no assumption of undue authority on the part of either. In times of perplexity, be mutual counsellors; in affliction, the bearers of each other's sorrow; in prosperity the sharers of each other's joy. Bear ye one another's burdens, and be tender towards each other's infirmities.

The service continues with optional blessings from Wesley's Abridgement plus the Prayer Book Scripture sentences adapted so that they now refer to the newly married couple. The service concludes with extempore prayer and the Benediction from 2 Corinthians 13.13.

'An Order for the Solemnisation of Matrimony' in the *Book of Services for the Use of the Bible Christian Church* (1903) reflects social changes in Britain at the turn of the twentieth century. The opening address, adapted from the *Sunday Service*, asserts the divine institution of marriage in the time of man's purity and innocence 'for the comfort and help of man, and that families might be trained up in obedience and love, wisdom and piety'. Augustine's reasons for marriage have thus been watered down to the point where they are barely recognisable as such. Genesis 2.18-24 is cited as the divine authority for marriage. The Scriptures are said to describe the marriage covenant as 'a type of the spiritual union between the Lord and the Church'. The optional giving away of the bride follows the form in the revised United Methodist Free Churches' marriage service and includes the response from the bride's father.

One indication of the changing status and role of women in society is that the woman no longer has to promise to obey her husband. The words 'obey and serve him' are placed in parentheses in the intentions, whereas the same words were prescribed in the 1897 edition of the

service book.²⁰ In the vows the words ‘and obey’ are similarly placed in parentheses. For some reason the words ‘and thereto I plight my troth’ are omitted. The giving of the ring follows the form used in the United Methodist Free Churches. Not only is the Matthean formula retained, but it also precedes the declaration of the marriage. However, it is prefixed with the words ‘The Lord has said’ so as to emphasise that there is no priestly joining together in marriage.

In a throwback to the Sarum rite, the Aaronic blessing follows the declaration of the marriage. The choice of Ephesians 5.22-24 or 5.25-28 as the Scripture passage is unexpected, given that the woman’s vow of obedience is omitted. An optional address is followed by a choice of hymns from the Bible Christian hymnbook.²¹ The service continues with extempore prayer or an optional prayer of intercession freely adapted from the *Sunday Service*. One of the petitions, in parentheses, is omitted ‘when it is known that the newly-married pair do not make any Christian profession’. In such cases it would not be appropriate to pray: ‘Help them to honour their Christian profession by a holy and exemplary character and conduct, and to adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things, holding forth the word of life.’

The presence of a rubric of this kind in the Bible Christian service book reveals significant changes in the ethos of Methodism during the nineteenth century. By the beginning of the twentieth century even the Bible Christians had developed from a renewal movement for the dedicated minority into a Protestant denomination that was sometimes called upon to conduct rites of passages for those whose lives gave little indication of commitment to the Christian life.

The ‘Matrimony Service’ in the *Book of Services for the Use of the United Methodist Church* (1913) combines elements from the rites of the United Methodist Free Churches and the Bible Christians. The opening address reflects the reasons for marriage as contained in the Bible Christian service. Giving away the bride is optional, and she does not promise to obey her husband. The ring is given with the words: ‘I give thee this ring as the token and memorial that I have taken thee to be my lawful wedded wife.’ There is no mention of the ring being placed on the minister’s service book. The Matthean pronouncement follows the declaration of the marriage, after which the minister reads the Aaronic blessing and a selection of Bible passages.²² The minister ‘briefly addresses the newly-married persons’ or alternatively reads an exhortation on marriage, which contains this practical advice:

Do not regard your love as something which can henceforth be left to take care of itself. Make it your endeavour to cultivate it, so that it may grow truer and stronger with the passing years.... Do not exact too much the one of the other; make allowance for your different temperaments and dispositions; and be ready to put the most generous interpretation upon each other’s words and deeds.

The United Methodist marriage rite was the last such service to be produced by the separated branches of British Methodism. Altogether, it reflects a more egalitarian understanding of marriage, in keeping with the changing nature of British society in the early years of the twentieth century.

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Methodist Union in 1932 provided an opportunity for a thorough revision of the marriage service to produce a form that was acceptable to all parties. As things turned out, ‘The Order of Service for the Solemnisation of Matrimony’ in the *Book of Offices* (1936) bears a closer resemblance to the Wesleyan form than to any of the non-Wesleyan rites.

David M. Chapman, *Born in Song: Methodist Worship in Britain* (Church in the Market Place Publications, 2006), Chapter 8 ‘The Solemnisation of Christian Marriage’ pp. 197-217.

The 1936 marriage service begins with a prayer beseeching God's grace upon the couple to enable them to make and keep their vows. The exhortation is a slightly amended version of that found in the Wesleyan *Book of Public Prayers and Services* (1882), though the reasons for marriage are stated in reverse order. Marriage is now said to be first 'ordained for the mutual society, help, and comfort' of the couple and only then 'ordained that children might be brought up in the knowledge and love of God'. A shorter alternative exhortation refers to the couple's 'mutual honour and forbearance' but makes no mention of bringing up children, presumably out of pastoral concern for marriages that were unlikely to result in the birth of a child.

The editors continued the trend of recognising the equality of the sexes. Thus giving away the bride is optional, and the woman no longer promises to obey her husband. Otherwise, the form of the assent, vows and giving of the ring closely follows the Wesleyan *Book of Public Prayers and Services* with a few minor amendments. For instance, marriage is now said to be 'according to God's law' rather than a 'holy ordinance', and instead of 'plighting' their troth, the couple now 'give' it. The Matthean pronouncement follows the declaration of the marriage. A short blessing comes from the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*, as does the optional reading of Psalm 67. The prescribed Bible passage is 1 Corinthians 13.4-8, 13, which is followed by an optional address. For the first time in a Methodist marriage rite, the rubrics provide for the service to conclude with the Lord's Supper.

'The Marriage Service' in the *Methodist Service Book* (1975) appeared at a time of rapid liturgical and social change. Marriage rites usually remain static over a considerable period because of a natural desire for traditional words at key moments in life. However, the revised Roman Catholic marriage rite had appeared in 1969, the result of a process of revision inaugurated by the Second Vatican Council. During the same period, the Church of England was similarly experimenting with revised marriage liturgies. The 1975 Methodist rite was influenced by these parallel liturgical developments as well as by social trends in Britain.

That the General Directions in the 1975 marriage service legislate for 'Inter-Faith Marriages' is a sign of the increasing diversity of British society by the late twentieth century. Recognising that there were elements in the service which the non-Christian partner would not be able to say in 'good conscience', the editors suggested that the Trinitarian formula could be omitted in the prayers and blessings. Provision of a separate 'Service for the Blessing of a Marriage previously solemnised' is a further indication of changing social patterns.

The structure of the 1975 rite is a departure from the Prayer Book tradition, and in a number of places the language and ideas are brought up to date. The Declaration of Purpose gives the primary reason for marriage as 'mutual companionship, helpfulness and care'. The procreative purpose of marriage is indirectly mentioned in the assertion that marriage, 'when blessed with the gift of children, is God's chosen way for the continuance of mankind'. Two new features, the collect for purity and the Confession set a penitential tone before the Ministry of the Word. Having the lessons and sermon before the vows was a controversial departure from Cranmer's order, though the rubrics allow the Ministry of the Word to be deferred until after the pronouncement of the marriage.²³

The Vows begin with a short prayer that the Holy Spirit will help the bride and groom to make and keep their promises. The ceremony of giving away the bride is optional. The intentions and vows are based on those in the 1936 rite, except that among the intentions the couple no longer

promise to ‘comfort’ one another, and Cranmer’s phraseology is rendered into contemporary language. Thus ‘keep thee only unto her/him’ becomes ‘be faithful to her/him’. Likewise, the couple ‘pledge’ to be married rather than give their ‘troth’.

The Giving of the Ring(s) follows the vows. For the first time in a Methodist rite there is a prayer of blessing over the rings, which are placed on the minister’s service book: ‘Bless, Lord, the giving of this ring (*these rings*), that he who gives it and she who wears it (*they who wear them*) may ever be faithful one to the other, and continue together in love, as long as they both shall live.’ By making the *giving* of the ring(s), rather than the rings themselves, the object of God’s blessing, the editors avoided what might otherwise have been interpreted as a sacramental form, though the distinction is rather subtle. The rings are given with a new formula: ‘With this ring (*these rings*) we pledge ourselves to each other, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.’

The Pronouncement of the Marriage includes the Matthean formula followed by an attenuated version of the Prayer Book blessing. The Intercessions resemble those in the revised Roman rite – a further sign of ecumenical convergence under the influence of the Liturgical movement. The rubrics provide for the Lord’s Supper. Otherwise the service continues with the Thanksgiving based on the Jewish Seven Benedictions. The Blessing takes the form of the Benediction in 2 Corinthians 13.13.

What is perhaps most remarkable about the 1975 service is its consistent use of contemporary language (except in the legal declarations), especially ‘you’ instead of ‘thee’. Overall, very little of Cranmer’s language is retained. Of course, Methodism was not alone in jettisoning either Cranmer’s form or his language. The Church of England’s *Alternative Service Book 1980* adopted similar changes in the face of vehement protests from traditionalists. So far as Methodism is concerned, despite stiff opposition in the drafting stages, the 1975 marriage service became widely used, proving itself to be in tune with the pastoral needs of Methodists.

‘The Marriage Service’ in the *Methodist Worship Book* (1999) basically follows the 1975 order whilst introducing a number of innovations that reflect a more contemporary outlook on human relations and Christian marriage. For example, one new provision in particular stresses the equality of the sexes. The bride is no longer given in marriage but has the option to be ‘presented’, as has the groom. In certain circumstances there may be pastoral reasons why it is desirable for families to demonstrate their consent to a marriage by presenting the parties in this way. Another new feature is the introduction of a promise by the congregation before the couple make their vows. The minister says: ‘I ask you, the families and friends of A and C: Will you do all in your power to support and encourage them in their marriage?’ The congregation respond: ‘With God’s help we will.’

The opening section of the service is entitled the Preparation. After a prayer of confession from the 1975 rite, the minister addresses the couple with an exhortation about the nature of Christian marriage. ‘It is the will of God that, in marriage, husband and wife should experience a life-long unity of heart, body and mind; comfort and companionship; enrichment and encouragement; tenderness and trust.’ The procreation of children is mentioned only indirectly in terms of their nurture within the context of marriage and family life. For the first time in a Methodist rite, members of the congregation are not asked to declare any impediment to the marriage. The precise form of the legal declarations and contracting words reflects changes in the law of England and Wales since 1975. The intentions immediately following the legal declarations restore the reference to ‘comfort’: ‘Will your love her/him, comfort and honour her/him, be her/his

companion through all the joys and sorrows of life, and be faithful to her/him as long as you both shall live?' As in the 1975 rite, the Ministry of the Word precedes the exchange of vows, though the rubrics provide for this to follow the pronouncement of the marriage.

The Marriage follows the form in the 1975 rite, except that there are alternative forms for the contracting words as permitted under English law. Instead of 'pledging' their promise, the parties now make it their 'solemn vow'. The preceding prayer for the Holy Spirit is taken from the 1975 rite, except that the address 'O God' is replaced with the less blunt 'Gracious God'.

It is in the giving of the ring(s) that we encounter the most significant theological change in the marriage service. The rings are placed on the minister's service book, and a prayer of blessing is said over them: 'Eternal God, bless these rings that they may be symbols of the love and trust between A and C.' The partners give each other a ring with an optional form of words also found in the marriage rite in the *Alternative Service Book 1980*: 'I give you this ring as a sign of our marriage. With my body I honour you, all that I am I give to you, and all that I have I share with you, within the love of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.'²⁴ The reference to 'honour' rather than 'worship' fulfils a Puritan demand made at the Savoy Conference of 1661.²⁵

The editors of the *Methodist Worship Book* were well aware of the potential controversy surrounding a prayer of blessing over the rings. At the very least, such a prayer introduces an ambiguity concerning the sacramental status of marriage. The most obvious interpretation of a prayer of blessing over the rings is that the solemnisation of marriage is now regarded as sacramental, an impression reinforced by the reference to the rings as 'symbols' of the marriage.

The role of the minister in the service is also consistent with a sacramental interpretation of marriage. Whereas Protestant marriage rites emphasise that the minister is primarily a witness to the exchange of vows, here the minister appears to assume a priestly role of joining the couple together. He or she blesses the rings and joins the couple's hands together at the vows. Moreover, the Matthean pronouncement occurs immediately after the giving of the rings, as in the Prayer Book.

The sense that the minister is exercising a priestly role is reinforced by an optional ceremony accompanying the Matthean pronouncement: 'The minister may wrap her/his stole around, and/or place her/his hand on their joined hands.' This ceremony became fashionable among Anglo-Catholics in the early years of the twentieth century. Though usually described as an ancient practice, it is in fact a French ceremony originating in the sixteenth century and is far from universally accepted, even in Anglo-Catholic circles.²⁶ Its presence in a Methodist marriage rite is difficult to explain other than as a contemporary example of socially aspiring Methodists embracing the liturgical customs of others.

After the Prayers the rubrics contain an order for an optional service of Holy Communion. In a fitting gesture, the rubrics suggest that the husband and wife bring the bread and wine to the communion table – a modern slant on the traditional walk to the altar. While only a minority of couples may want to receive Holy Communion during their wedding, the option to celebrate the Eucharist preserves an historic link with the nuptial Mass and Cranmer's 1549 *Book of Common Prayer*. Whether or not the marriage service includes the Lord's Supper, it concludes with the Aaronic blessing, thus restoring another feature of the Sarum rite.

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Our survey of the marriage service in Methodism has shown how John Wesley and his successors in the various branches of Methodism adapted both the form and content of the Prayer Book rite, sometimes in quite radical ways, to suit their particular denominational ethos. On the whole, reform of the marriage service in Methodism has been driven by pastoral needs, especially with regard to the changing understanding of the status and role of women in society. There has also been a marked tendency to increase the accompanying ceremonial by restoring traditional features of the Church of England marriage service. Whilst Methodists recognise only baptism and the Lord's Supper as sacraments, this latest Methodist marriage rite is closer to a sacramental form than any previous wedding liturgy.

The majestic cadences of Cranmer's marriage service have made it one of the best-known and most popular services in the *Book of Common Prayer*, familiar even to those with only a passing knowledge of Christian worship. Traditionalists in Methodism will no doubt continue to regret its diminishing influence over Methodist marriage rites in recent years. Yet Cranmer's marriage rite was a creature of its time. From the first Christian century the Church has sought to relate its marriage rites to the prevailing culture and a developing understanding of the nature of Christian marriage. Periodic revision of the marriage liturgy is the inevitable consequence of a desire for a nuptial rite that is both faithful to the Christian doctrine of marriage and sensitive to contemporary pastoral needs. In this regard, Methodists have shown themselves particularly creative in developing marriage rites that are appropriate to the present age.

¹ For a study of anti-Methodist satire in the eighteenth century see Albert Lyles, *Methodism Mocked: The Satiric Reaction to Methodism in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Epworth, 1960). This and the following paragraph draw on Henry Rack "‘But, Lord, Let it be Betsy!’ Love and Marriage in Early Methodism", *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* 53 (2001), pp. 1-13.

² *Thoughts on Marriage and a Single Life* 2nd edition (1743), p. 11.

³ 'Thoughts on a Single Life', *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley* (London: Wesleyan Conference, 1872), Vol. 11, pp. 456-63 (p. 458).

⁴ *Journal*, 2 February 1751.

⁵ *Journal*, 27 March 1751.

⁶ 'The early Methodists placed high value on the marriage ceremony and on the suitability of the person who performed it.' Leslie F. Church, *The Early Methodist People* (London: Epworth, 1948), p. 232.

⁷ 'A Roman Catechism, faithfully drawn out of the allowed writings of the Church of Rome with a Reply thereto', *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley*, Vol. 10, pp. 86-128 (p. 127).

⁸ *The Westminster Directory being A Directory for the Publique Worship of God in the Three Kingdoms* (1645) reprinted with an introduction by Ian Breward (Bramcote: Grove Books, 1980), p. 25.

⁹ Edward Cardwell, *A History of Conferences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1840), p. 331.

¹⁰ Martin Bucer, *Censura*; trans. E.C. Whitaker, *Martin Bucer and the Book of Common Prayer* (Great Wakering: Alcuin, 1974), p. 122.

¹¹ In a number of places, but not consistently, Wesley replaces 'ye' with 'you'. In the vows, 'I plight thee my troth' becomes 'I plight thee my faith'. In the responsive prayer, after the invocation 'O Lord save thy servant and thy handmaid', Wesley changes the Prayer Book response from 'Who put their trust in thee' to 'And let them put their trust in thee'.

¹² Benjamin Gregory, *Sidelights on the Conflicts of Methodism during the second quarter of nineteenth century, 1827-1852* (London: Cassell, 1898), p. 236.

¹³ Gregory, *Sidelights on the Conflicts of Methodism*, p. 236.

¹⁴ Gregory, *Sidelights on the Conflicts of Methodism*, p. 298.

¹⁵ Gregory, *Sidelights on the Conflicts of Methodism*, p. 390.

¹⁶ Bucer, *Censura*, p. 120.

¹⁷ The readings are: Ephesians 5.1-2; 5.25-28; 5.22-24; 1 Peter 3.1-6.

¹⁸ Kenneth Stevenson, *Nuptial Blessing: A Study of Christian Marriage Rites* (London: SPCK/Alcuin, 1982), p. 160, incorrectly credits the Bible Christians with having introduced this innovation.

¹⁹ Hymn 861 or 862 from the UMFC hymnbook.

²⁰ For the 1897 Bible Christian service book see John Bowmer, 'Note on the Bible Christian Service Book', *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* 33 (1962), pp. 106-7.

²¹ Either hymn 783 or 785.

²² Mark 10.6-9; Ephesians 5.25; Ephesians 5.22-23; 1 Corinthians 13.4-8; Ephesians 5.1-2; Ephesians 6.10; Philippians 1.9-11.

²³ In fact, the rubrics permitted three forms: (1) lessons and address before the vows; (2) lessons before the vows and address following the pronouncement of the marriage; and (3) lessons and address following the pronouncement of the marriage.

²⁴ Compare this rather ornate form with the simplicity of the Roman Catholic rite of 1970: 'N., take this ring as a sign of my love and fidelity. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.' The *Methodist Worship Book* offers a more prosaic alternative: 'With these rings we pledge ourselves to each other.'

²⁵ Cf. Cardwell, *A History of Conferences*, p. 330. The Puritans believed it was inappropriate to 'worship' anyone or anything other than God.

²⁶ Stevenson, *Nuptial Blessing*, p. 237, note 43.