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The Spirituality of Henry Venn

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Between 1735 and the early 1740s an impulse of religious revival took place in the English speaking Protestant world. In England this impulse centred in the Church of England and most significantly in the conversions and subsequent itinerant ministries of two Anglican clergymen, George Whitefield and John Wesley. That the awakening needed to centre in the Church of England in order to become a mass movement was obvious to John Wesley, who out of ingrained loyalty as well as pragmatism, sought to keep his movement within the Church of England.¹

Because of subsequent church history, it is easy for one to lose sight of the fact that at this time the Church of England had an all-pervasive influence on English society. Even as late as 1770, out of a population of seven million in England and Wales, only half a million were Nonconformists.² There is a general consent among historians of the Revival that there was a religious malaise in the 1730s and 1740s, which made the English situation ripe for religious awakening.³ However, it is possible, from another angle, to see vitality and strength in an eighteenth century Orthodox Anglican Church which was able to send out the branches of Evangelicalism and Methodism.⁴ Both movements drew heavily on High Church piety and devotional practices, albeit infusing a new sense of what it meant to be a Christian with a new sense of immediate forgiveness and assurance of personal salvation. Evangelical leaders such as Wesley and Whitefield were able to gain an entry point into High Church religious societies. Wesley's message proved attractive to many High

1 John Walsh "Methodism" and the Origins of English-Speaking Evangelicalism' in Mark Noll, George Rawlyk and David Bebbington (edd) *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, the British Isles, and Beyond, 1700-1900* (New York: Oxford 1994) p 28

2 Jonathan Clark *English Society 1688-1832* (Cambridge: CUP 1985) p 89

3 See for example John Walsh 'Methodism' pp 20-21

4 Jonathan Clark *English Society 1688-1832* p 235. One need not totally subscribe to Clark's stasis views to see a measure of truth in his thesis. The High Church tradition had a devotion to Christ embedded in it which one could argue contributed to the Awakening. For a critique of Clark see Jeremy Gregory 'The Eighteenth Century Reformation: the Pastoral Task of Anglican Clergy After 1689' in John Walsh, Colin Haydon and Stephen Taylor (edd) *The Church of England, c 1689-1833* (Cambridge: CUP 1993) p 68.

Church Arminians, while Whitefield attracted many Reformed Anglicans.⁵

There is much evidence of a healthy Anglican pastoralia in the eighteenth century and that the traditional Anglican formulas were central to the lives of most people well into the century.⁶ Latitudinarianism has tended to be seen as the dominant mode of eighteenth century Anglicanism but this remains a debatable premise and the Latitudinarian tradition remains an understudied area.⁷ It was into such a context that Evangelicalism grew slowly and incrementally with the occasional burst of spectacular awakening. Certainly Methodist itinerant ministers played a key role in the movement, but equally important was the role played by converted Anglican parish clergymen. This pastoral work was key in mediating the message of the Protestant Reformation to everyday people in the parishes, with an emphasis placed on personal conversion and the Cross.

One such converted clergyman was Henry Venn, who was ordained priest in 1749, and served until his death in 1797. His almost 600 pages of published letters afford a significant glimpse of eighteenth century Anglican Evangelical pastoralia and spirituality.⁸ The present essay will examine his letters and seek to define Venn's spirituality in the context of eighteenth century British Evangelicalism. Attention will be given to Venn's theology, his views on death and hardship, family life, the disciplines of the spiritual life, and spiritual growth. It is in the sum of his views on these topics that one sees Venn's concept of the Spiritual Life.

Born in 1724, Venn was the son of Richard Venn, a High Church clergyman from a family who formed an unbroken line of clergy extending back to the Reformation. Richard was described by his grandson, John Venn, as 'exemplary and learned' and 'very zealous for the interests of the Church of England' while exhibiting 'great liberality towards the poor'.⁹ These qualities

5 John Walsh 'Methodism' p 28

6 W M Jacob *Lay People and Religion in the Early Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: CUP 1996) pp 6-9. See also John Walsh and Stephen Taylor, 'Introduction: the Church and Anglicanism in the "Long" Eighteenth Century' in John Walsh, Colin Haydon, Stephen Taylor (edd) *The Church of England c 1689-1833* pp 1-64

7 John Walsh and Stephen Taylor 'Introduction' pp 35-36

8 Henry Venn (ed) *The Letters of Henry Venn: With a Memoir by John Venn* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth 1993). This work was originally published in 1836 as *The Life and a Selection From the Letters of the Late Rev. Henry Venn, MA.*

9 Henry Venn *The Letters of Henry Venn* pp 4-5

were to be mirrored in the life of Richard's son, Henry. In 1742 Henry entered Cambridge and was immediately accepted into a circle of friends who had been acquainted with his father and older brother. Within this circle Henry thrived and became highly popular. He was known as one who had 'a never-failing fund of high spirits, a natural hilarity and gaiety of manner, an engaging sweetness of temper, and a memory stored with anecdotes, which he related in a manner peculiarly interesting'.¹⁰

From all appearances Venn was a morally upright churchgoer during his Cambridge years, who saw his religious duty as one of self-denial. Even though he was one of the University's top players, he abandoned cricket upon ordination in order to be more spiritually disciplined. Most evenings he would walk around the cloisters of Trinity College, during the tolling of the nine o'clock bell, and meditate on death, judgment, heaven and hell. He read William Law and followed Law's instructions to keep a spiritual diary, keep frequent fasts, and to take meditative walks. He served a six-month curacy near Cambridge before assuming simultaneously the curacy of livings in London and Surrey. He proved to be a zealous and popular curate in West Horsley, Surrey, as the number of communicants increased from twelve to sixty.¹¹

While curate in West Horsley Venn came to question aspects of William Law's theology and to concentrate more exclusively on reading Scripture. He sought more deeply, through prayer and meditation, to draw closer to God and yet was still disappointed. In the midst of this disappointment, he discovered, through reading Scripture, the 'particular provision that is made for fallen and sinful man in the Gospel of our blessed Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ'.¹² It appears that Venn had arrived at this vital religion of the heart on his own, independently of contact with other Evangelicals, sometime during 1752-53.¹³

In 1754 Venn became curate of Clapham, Surrey where he served for five years. During the week he held lectureships at three churches so that in a given week he was preaching six sermons. Clapham was his introduction to

10 Henry Venn *The Letters of Henry Venn* p 11

11 John Venn in Henry Venn *The Letters of Henry Venn* pp 12-17

12 Henry Venn *The Letters of Henry Venn* p 21

13 Henry Venn *The Letters of Henry Venn* p 24; Wilbert Shenk, "'T'owd Trumpet": Venn of Huddersfield and Yelling' in *Churchman* Vol 93 No 1 (1979) p 41

the Evangelical network, and it was here that he became a close friend with John Thornton, Thomas Haweis, George Whitefield, and Lady Huntingdon.¹⁴ That an emphasis on morality was still present in Venn's preaching can be gleaned from a letter to him from Lady Huntingdon in which she urges him to, 'Cling not to such beggarly elements, such filthy rags [inward holiness of our own], mere cobwebs of Pharisaical pride...my dear friend, no longer let false doctrine disgrace your pulpit'.¹⁵

The year 1757 marked Venn's marriage to the daughter of a clergyman who was quite suited to him.¹⁶ Sometime during this year Whitefield wrote Lady Huntingdon:

The worthy Venn is valiant for the truth, a son of thunder. He labours abundantly, and his ministry has been owned of the Lord to the conversion of sinners. Thanks be to God for such an instrument to strengthen our hands.¹⁷

Whitefield went on in the letter to commend Lady Huntingdon for her tutelage of Venn. Venn had arrived at a full-orbed evangelical theology.

In 1759 Venn, who had a world of opportunity before him, made a 'loser' of a move to Huddersfield, in Yorkshire which was a centre for the manufacturing of woollens. Most of the people of the parish were farmers and weavers. The living paid only one hundred pounds per annum (less than he earned at Clapham), but Venn felt he would be useful to God there. The parish consisted of about 1400 families. After a visit to Huddersfield in 1757, Wesley wrote in his journal:

A wilder people I never saw in England. The men, women, and children filled the streets as we rode along, and appeared just ready to devour us. They were however, tolerably quiet while I preached; only a few pieces of

14 J C Ryle *Christian Leaders of England in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Thynne 1902) p 265

15 *Ibid* p 265

16 There is evidence from James Stillingfleet that Henry was somewhat of a 'hen-pecked' husband but still all the evidence points to a happy marriage with both deeply in love with each other. See Michael Hennell *John Venn and the Clapham Sect* (London: Lutterworth Press 1958) pp 24-25

17 J C Ryle *Christian Leaders* pp 24-25

dirt were thrown; and the bellman came in the middle of the sermon, but was stopped by the gentleman of the town.¹⁸

The classic eighteenth century model of Anglican pastoral care emphasized the role of the clergy 'not as priestly mediators between God and man dispensing the sacraments, but as pastoral educators, spiritual and moral teachers and guides'.¹⁹ Clergy sought to dispel ignorance through catechizing, charity and Sunday schools, private exhortation, and most importantly, the sermon. Venn followed this model but with the key difference, in common with other evangelicals, being the stress on the need for conversion and a religion of the heart.²⁰ He started weekday services in the hamlets, delivered sermons on the Prayer Book, catechized, but placed his main efforts on the Sunday sermons.²¹ Within a short time the Huddersfield church was filled to overflowing. In one three year period Venn estimated that there were 900 conversions.²² Unlike the other evangelical Anglican parish ministers, Venn preached to literally thousands within his parish. In 1763 his work, *The Complete Duty of Man*, was published. This work, which was largely completed prior to his arrival at Huddersfield and at the beginning of his evangelicalism, does not represent the later full-bodied spirituality as seen in his letters.

After his wife died in 1767 leaving him with five children, Venn suffered from poor health, and in 1771 he removed himself to become Rector of Yelling, a small parish twelve miles from Cambridge. Here he remarried, and with a reduced preaching role, he was able to mentor a significant group of Cambridge students including Charles Simeon, who considered Venn his spiritual father. Venn remained in Yelling until moving to Clapham six months prior to his death in 1797.

Venn's grandson, the 19th century missionary thinker Henry Venn, collected over 1000 of his letters and published edited versions of over 200 of them in 1836 together with a memoir by his son, John. The letters cover the forty

18 L E Elliott-Binns *The Early Evangelicals: A Religious and Social Study* (London: Lutterworth Press 1953) n 322

19 John Walsh and Stephen Taylor 'The Church and Anglicanism' p 14

20 *Ibid* p 14

21 L E Elliott-Binns *The Early Evangelicals* p 323

22 W J Clyde Ervine 'Henry Venn' in Donald M Lewis (ed) *The Blackwell Dictionary of Evangelical Biography* Vol 2 (Oxford: Blackwell 1995) p 1137

years of his clerical career as well as a broad range of subjects. They include letters written to family members, parishioners, and well-known Evangelicals. The eighteenth century familiar letter generally can be placed somewhere between the subjectivity of a confessional and the objectivity of a literary essay. It tended to be written with an eye towards it being shared.²³ This generally seems to hold true for Venn's letters. They are quite formally structured while remaining personal. They are invariably spiritual although this may be somewhat due to the editorial process.²⁴ They exude a deep spirituality and an unwavering love for God.

■ The Theology of Henry Venn

At the heart of Venn's theology is the Gospel message of the 'wonderful love of an Incarnate God, to miserable, hell-deserving criminals'.²⁵ It is the recognition of the helplessness of sinful mankind that drove him from the leftover Arminianism of his High Church days to the moderate Calvinism of his mature Evangelicalism. Salvation must entirely be the result of the work of God. In a letter to the Rev. James Stillingfleet in 1774 he wrote, 'I have always been too much on the side of free grace for many Arminians – too much on the side of experimental religion for many Calvinists'.²⁶ Venn's Calvinism was not derived from theological works but rather from Scripture, by the Holy Spirit. He made no attempt to reconcile the difficulties that the doctrine posed. He firmly rejected a 'High Calvinism' which made use of the category of 'predestination'. Predestination, he argued, 'cancels the necessity of any change, and dispenses at once with all duty'.²⁷

Although acknowledging his moderate Calvinism, he did not generally wish to label other evangelicals. He found debates over Arminian and Calvinist doctrines to be distasteful and of the 'enemy'. God's truth can only be derived

23 D Bruce Hindmarsh *John Newton and the Evangelical Anglican Tradition: Between the Conversion of Wesley and Wilberforce* (Oxford: OUP 1996) pp 32-33, 240-46

24 On occasion Venn will include incidental details such as his mention to his son that he is writing 'in a coffee-house, among Jamaica captains, and in a great din' (Henry Venn *The Letters of Henry Venn* p 517)

25 Henry Venn *The Letters of Henry Venn* p 132

26 Henry Venn *The Letters of Henry Venn* pp 207-8. There is evidence from Stillingfleet that Venn's wife, Eling, was 'far too Calvinistic' and it was not until after her death in 1771 that Venn moderated his views. See Michael Hennell *John Venn* pp 23-24

27 Henry Venn *The Letters of Henry Venn* p 33-34

from working for God and saving souls.²⁸ Nevertheless he was not averse to strongly criticizing John Wesley's views on the subject of perfection.²⁹

Generally Venn was unsympathetic to university professors of religion. He broadly categorizes them as 'lamentably selfish', squandering their learning and teaching abilities when instead they could be 'pleading the glorious cause of God against the world'.³⁰ He deplores those who display great zeal for Christian doctrines of the faith but fail to put them into practice. Certainly the Bible teaches the great saving doctrines, but as 'means of engaging our hope, establishing our faith, spiritualizing our affections, conquering the world, and making us long for the coming of the Lord'.³¹ For Venn all theology must be *lived* theology.

Throughout his life Venn remained a solid Churchman. Early in his days at Huddersfield he clashed with Wesley because some of Wesley's preachers were actively preaching within Venn's parish boundaries. As a result Venn did not always make Wesley welcome in the Huddersfield church.³² Venn was devoted to the Anglican liturgy, which is illustrated by his declaration in a letter of the superiority 'of the Liturgy to every mode of worship, not only amongst the Dissenters, but that had ever been in the Church of Christ, as far as I had knowledge'.³³

Of the Baptists he once wrote that, 'they are a restless set of people, unhinging and disturbing the minds of unlearned persons, by continually stunning them with the sound, "*If thou believest, thou mayest be baptized*". That this statement goes against his irenic principles is evident when he goes on to state that, 'I would not have said so much, but I very well know the spirit of the Anabaptists, and therefore guard you'.³⁴ Although he may caution a fellow Anglican about Dissent, Venn was strictly against entering

28 Henry Venn *The Letters of Henry Venn* p 354 in a letter to Rev James Stillingfleet 1782

29 Henry Venn *The Letters of Henry Venn* p 474 in a letter to Catherine Venn 1789

30 Henry Venn *The Letters of Henry Venn* p 321 in a letter to John Venn 1781

31 Henry Venn *The Letters of Henry Venn* pp 552-53 in a letter to John Brasier 1777

32 Michael Hennell *John Venn* p 23

33 Henry Venn *The Letters of Henry Venn* p 175 in an undated letter to Rev Mr Powley from what appears to be the 1770s after Venn had left Huddersfield and most of his parish had broken off to set up a chapel which did not follow the Liturgy.

34 Henry Venn *The Letters of Henry Venn* p 258 in a letter to John Brasier 1777

into 'dispute' with dissenters. He sums up his pan-evangelical, 'Middle Way' ecumenism as follows:

No man in the world more heartily loves our worship than myself, nor has stronger objections against Dissenters; yet never in my life did I desire to bring one Dissenter to church. If he indeed were alive to God in Christ Jesus, I could praise God for him; and love him not one whit the less, though he did not worship with me in the same form.³⁵

Death and Hardship

Modern life is far removed from the world of eighteenth century England. The implications of a harsh world for spirituality are enormous and a Western Christian at the end of the 20th century, must constantly remind oneself of the world of previous times. The stench in the towns of eighteenth century England would for us be unbearable; the houses of the poor were crowded hovels, and basements were occupied by people and animals; beggars and disease were ubiquitous.³⁶ J H Plumb describes this reality in the context of his discussion of Methodism:

In every class there is the same taut neurotic quality – the fantastic gambling and drinking, the riots, brutality and violence, and everywhere and always the constant sense of death.³⁷

The spectre of death stalked the land. During the 1720s and 1730s life expectancy fell wiping out population gains that had taken place in the seventeenth century. Rural areas were also affected. Average life expectancy at birth was from thirty-five to forty years, while in the poor quarters of London it was ten years lower.³⁸

It was in such a setting that the evangelical message of forgiveness of sins and a joyful assurance of salvation made such an impact. Venn in his letters constantly writes of death with a triumphant ending. Life for Venn is supported by slender 'strings' which can break at any time. One can only be

35 Henry Venn *The Letters of Henry Venn* p 258 in a letter to John Houghton 1778

36 See J H Plumb *England in the Eighteenth Century* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1963) pp 12-13

37 *Ibid* p 95

38 W M Jacob *Lay People and Religion in the Early Eighteenth Century* pp 103-4

sustained by a delight in God.³⁹ It was this delight which sustained Venn over the course of a lifetime in which both his wives and a sixteen year old daughter died.

Through suffering Christians are conformed to 'their suffering, crucified God'. Venn writes, 'A sword went through my heart, when my blessed wife was lying in the scorching fever, and I then felt what it cost to redeem my soul'.⁴⁰ Death can be used by God for his purposes, which is illustrated by the following rather matter-of-fact reporting:

Wakefield has been visited, though now not so much, with a fever, little better than a Plague. It has carried off, in six weeks, one hundred and sixty souls. It has alarmed the whole neighbourhood, and, I hope, will be made profitable to many souls. Lord, prepare us, that, if a fierce disease is to remove us, sudden death may be sudden glory!⁴¹

Perhaps the most poignant portrayal of death from Venn's life is a story related by his son John. It is quoted in its entirety for its bracing effect on the twentieth century, Western believer.

At another time he informed them [Venn's children] that in the evening he would take them to one of the most interesting sights in the world. They were anxious to know what it was; but he deferred gratifying their curiosity till he had brought them to the scene itself. He led them to a miserable hovel, whose ruinous walls and broken windows bespoke an extreme degree of poverty and want. 'Now,' said he, 'my dear children, can any one, that lives in such a wretched habitation as this, be happy? Yet this is not all: a poor man lies upon a miserable strawbed within it, dying of disease, at the age of only nineteen, consumed with constant fever, and afflicted with nine painful ulcers.' 'How wretched a situation!' they all exclaimed. He then led them into the cottage, and, addressing the poor dying young man, said, 'Abraham Mirkwood, I have brought my children here, to shew them that it is possible to be happy in a state of disease and poverty and want; and now, tell them if it is not so'. The dying youth, with a sweet smile of benevolence and piety, immediately replied,

39 Henry Venn *The Letters of Henry Venn* pp 83-84 in a letter to Mrs Knipe 1760

40 Henry Venn *The Letters of Henry Venn* p 142 in a letter to Mrs Medburst 1667

41 Henry Venn *The Letters of Henry Venn* p 88 in a letter to Mrs Knipe 1761

‘Oh yes, Sir! I would not change my state with that of the richest person on earth, which was destitute of those views which I possess. Blessed be God! I have a good hope through Christ, of being admitted into those blessed regions where Lazarus now dwells, having long forgotten all his sorrows and miseries. Sir, this is nothing to bear, whilst the presence of God cheers my soul, and whilst I have access to Him, by constant prayer, through faith in Jesus...’⁴²

One can question the reconstruction of the dialogue, wonder about the suitability of this kind of experience for children, or wish for a more nuanced ‘Theology of Suffering’, yet there is in this scene a compelling Christian view of life which stands in sharp contrast to that of modernity. Above all, the evangelical spirituality of the eighteenth century teaches us that there is much more to life than this world.

The Spiritual life of the Family

Central to eighteenth century English society was the family which was arranged in a patriarchal configuration. Families were actually three societies being husband and wife, parents and children, and master and servant. The wife was both subordinate and partner in that she ran the household.⁴³

The picture of the Venn family appears to be that of a reasonably happy one. Henry and his wife Eling (whom he nicknamed Mira) were certainly devoted to each other.⁴⁴ In 1759 he wrote to Mira that, ‘it gives me great pleasure to find you love me so tenderly’. However the love of a man and wife must always be subordinated to love of God so as not to cause ‘an idolatrous love to one another’.⁴⁵ Later in life he quotes Isaac Milner, ‘Many ministers of the Gospel are sadly hindered by their wives...and cry, “Oh! Spare yourself!”’⁴⁶ Henry Venn was a joyful, exuberant person and this evidently rubbed off on his household. Frequent visitors from all over England added spice to family

42 Henry Venn *The Letters of Henry Venn* pp 39-40

43 Peter Laslett *The World We Have Lost England Before the Industrial Age* (New York: Scribner’s 1965) p 2. See also Jonathan Clark *English Society 1688-1832* pp 67-75

44 It appears that Venn’s marriage to his second wife, Katherine, was equally happy. See Michael Hennell *John Venn* pp 26-27

45 Henry Venn *The Letters of Henry Venn* p 73

46 Henry Venn *The Letters of Henry Venn* p 475 in a letter to Miss King 1789

life. Venn rejected a counterfeit Christianity where ‘Religious people are heavy and moping, and cast down, principally because they are idle and selfish’.⁴⁷

A child is of ‘inestimable worth’ but even from the beginning is depraved. At first the child is ‘little more than an animal’ and for a number of years is ‘incapable of being treated as spiritual’. The parent is called very early in the life of the child ‘to oppose and subdue self-will – the plague of man – the disease of fiends – the enemy of God!’ This results in a ‘meek, obedient child’ who ultimately is a willing Christian.⁴⁸ Daily family worship is a key ingredient in the religious education of the child in Venn’s estimation and he advocated it being held in both morning and evening.⁴⁹ He constantly strode to prevent family worship from ‘degenerating into a form’ but still was ashamed when people held his family up as a model in this regard. In response he writes, ‘indeed, we are a company of poor, distempered, and defiled creatures, under the healing hand of Jesus!’⁵⁰

In response to a mother who writes for advice regarding an older, rebellious son Venn responds that she should not try to ‘restrain him from balls, cards, etc’. Christianity must not be presented as a duty but as the ‘best pleasure’ which ‘rejoices the heart more than wine’ and ‘renders tasteless...vain amusements’.⁵¹ Unlike some other prominent evangelicals, many of Venn’s children and grandchildren maintained their evangelical convictions. These included a number of clergymen, son John, grandsons Henry Venn, Edward Bishop Elliot, Henry Venn Elliot, and great grandson Charles John Elliot. His granddaughter Charlotte Elliot wrote the hymn ‘Just as I am’. Henry would have been quick to disclaim any of the credit but instead would have given thanks to God and said something such as, ‘I can only wonder that such grace should ever be conferred on one who has sinned, and does sin, every breath he draws’.⁵²

The Spiritual Disciplines

In Venn’s writing there is no disjunction between Christian devotion and Christian activity. The activity must be present in one’s life and it must flow

47 Henry Venn *The Letters of Henry Venn* p 321 in a letter to John Venn p 321

48 Henry Venn *The Letters of Henry Venn* pp 256-57 in a letter to John Brasier 1778

49 Henry Venn *The Letters of Henry Venn* p 550 in a letter to John Brasier 1777

50 Henry Venn *The Letters of Henry Venn* p 213 in a letter to Mrs. Riland 1770s

51 Henry Venn *The Letters of Henry Venn* pp 125-26 in a letter to a London ‘widow of fortune’ no date given

52 Henry Venn *The Letters of Henry Venn* p 139 in a letter to Mrs Medhurst 1767

out of devotion. Communion with God comes only out of humbleness and recognition of one's sinfulness.⁵³ Prayer is designed by God to offset sin and it is food for the soul. Venn always advocates a 'set' time for secret prayer.⁵⁴ Venn's own prayer schedule at Yelling during the 1770s was as follows:

1. He rose from bed at 5 a.m. for prayer and reading Scripture.
2. He then taught his daughters until 8:30.
3. At 8:30 when his wife came downstairs he held family prayer which included the servants.
4. At 6:00 p.m. he prayed and meditated while walking outside or in a large room.
5. At 7.00 he led devotions for usually twenty people.
6. At 8:00 supper.
7. At 10:00 rest.⁵⁵

In addition to secret prayer Venn is a practitioner of constant prayer during the day. When prayer is difficult he advocates reading a Psalm or some of Paul's writings and then the 'Spirit of prayer' generally comes.⁵⁶

A second spiritual discipline is the reading of Scripture. He advocates a meditative, prayerful reading without too much reliance on Matthew Henry's commentary.⁵⁷ Other disciplines include fasting,⁵⁸ the keeping of a spiritual diary,⁵⁹ worship in the House of God and hearing the Word, the society of Christians and finally solitude.⁶⁰

Venn's life was full of the 'company of Christians'. His letters constantly refer to, or are written to, members of the evangelical network that he was a part of. These include William Grimshaw, William Romaine, Samuel Walker, Thomas Adam, Richard Conyers, John Berridge, Lady Huntingdon, Charles Simeon, and John Fletcher. He filled the pulpits of many of these individuals as well as visited, prayed with, and encouraged them while in turn receiving

53 Henry Venn *The Letters of Henry Venn* p 116 in a letter to 'A Friend' 1776

54 Henry Venn *The Letters of Henry Venn* p 280-81 in a letter to daughter Eling 1779

55 Henry Venn *The Letters of Henry Venn* p 211-12 in a letter to Mrs Riland 1770s

56 Henry Venn *The Letters of Henry Venn* p 550 in a letter to John Brasier 1777

57 Henry Venn *The Letters of Henry Venn* p 218 in a letter to Mrs Bishop 1774

58 Henry Venn *The Letters of Henry Venn* p 451

59 Henry Venn *The Letters of Henry Venn* pp 246-47

60 Henry Venn *The Letters of Henry Venn* pp 539-45

encouragement. At Yelling he mentored many young men from Cambridge who were seeking orders including Simeon who considered Venn his spiritual father. He also did not neglect the more common person. Many of his letters are ones of spiritual encouragement to women.

Out of these spiritual disciplines Venn led an active life. He was compassionate towards the poor and because many poor attended his services in Yelling, he adapted his sermons so that he told more stories. John Riland, Venn's curate in Huddersfield, wrote that prior to Venn going out on visitation, his wife would empty his pockets to prevent Henry from giving away to the poor what they badly needed at home.⁶¹ While Venn was an advocate of the need for solitude (or 'retirement' as he called it) he combined it with rigorous activism. In a letter written in 1762 he commented on the need for a medium between exerting oneself beyond what the body can bear and on the other side laziness and concluded that it is better to 'spend and be spent' if one's life is shortened.⁶² He is persuaded that because he possesses

treasure which is ordained to enrich to all eternity the souls of men...we do wrong to outdo our strength. As far as it will reach and last, spare not. I would – were it lawful to wish for any thing – wish for lungs of brass and flesh of iron, to rest not day or night, publishing the glad tidings, saying to sinners, Behold your God!⁶³

At the end of his life he addresses his son John in a letter which reiterates his joyful commitment to service:

My dear Son,

I have just finished your precious letter. How am I called upon to cry out, 'What am I, that I should live to see my prayers for a beloved child, a son, a Gospel minister, now more than ever answered!' Usefulness is all, in Christians. I am now at the age of sixty-seven, lamenting how very little I have done for God and man compared with what I might have done, had I been active in doing good, as I ought. I could not help clapping my hands and singing, 'Hallelujah! hallelujah!' with a most joyful heart, when I had read your letter.⁶⁴

61 Michael Hennell *John Venn* p 25

62 Henry Venn *The Letters of Henry Venn* p 90

63 Henry Venn *The Letters of Henry Venn* p 183 in a letter to James Stillingfleet 1771

64 Henry Venn *The Letters of Henry Venn* p 504 1792

Spiritual Growth

Faith, according to Venn, is a venture where, like Abraham, we set out and cannot expect the help of God 'Till the exigency of the case requires it'.⁶⁵ In this venture, race, or fight we are beset by doubt even after we have experienced peace, and deadness after having experienced light. Some Christians are buffeted in these ways early in the race, others in the middle, and still others at the end. We can only overcome through faith.⁶⁶ The Christian should not be impatient for instant deliverance from ignorance in the Christian walk.⁶⁷ One day may bring happiness and the next darkness and cloudiness. Only the love of God is constant.⁶⁸

While strong believers may be assailed by doubts but not collapse under them, weaker believers in the same circumstances will faint and collapse. Growth in grace is attained through watchfulness, prayer, and denial of the self while 'looking unto Jesus'.⁶⁹ At the end of his life Venn outlines a spirituality of infirmity. After suffering a stroke he describes himself in a state of 'passive obedience'. He has come to a stage of darkness, but he is not dejected even though he cannot speak or pray. He closes his letter with the words, 'The Righteous Branch reign over you!'.⁷⁰

Reflection

In Huddersfield Venn was a rising evangelical star whose preaching and parish activities affected thousands. When he left Huddersfield for Yelling he felt he was a dying man. However, his greatest work was ahead and that was in the spiritual direction of young Cambridge students who were seeking ordination. Charles Simeon and Venn's son, John, were two who became part of the parish based Evangelical movement of the Church of England and transformed it from 'the rope of sand' that Wesley had described it as into one which was multistranded. Today there is much that the spirituality of Henry Venn can teach. All of his life was bathed in prayer and a devotional reading of Scripture. He had deep friendships and yet was not afraid of

65 Henry Venn *The Letters of Henry Venn* p 516 in a letter to John Venn 1793

66 Henry Venn *The Letters of Henry Venn* pp 197-97 in a letter to William Whitacre 1772

67 Henry Venn *The Letters of Henry Venn* p 107 in a letter to Thomas Atkinson 1763

68 Henry Venn *The Letters of Henry Venn* p 172 in a letter to James Kershaw 1771

69 Henry Venn *The Letters of Henry Venn* p 380 in a letter to Lady Smythe 1784

70 Henry Venn *The Letters of Henry Venn* pp 244-45 in a letter to Mrs John Venn 1791

solitude. Out of this deep evangelical spirituality, he led a life of intense Christian activity. Today, in an age of the self and the therapeutic, there is much to be learned from someone like Venn. While he may have been too denigrating of theology, today, in thoughtful evangelical circles, there often is a disjunction between spirituality and activism. In the modern world, with longer life expectancies and more leisure time, Venn would surely urge Christians to do more, pray and read Scripture more, and encourage one another more.

Henry Venn was caught up into a movement of God that was a far larger event than even the ringside seat he was blessed to sit in, could take in. Eighteenth century Evangelicalism brought a grander vision of God's activity in the life of the individual. This vision turned the Church outwards into what became the missionary movement of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Although there were remarkable events in the history of the movement, the bulk of the growth took place in the parish under pastors such as Venn. Thanks be to God for Henry Venn!

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