

**“Practical and Experimental”: Henry Venn and the
Moderate Calvinist Tradition in the Church of England
(1747-1834)**

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Short Abstract

This thesis explores the life, ministry and legacy of the Reverend Henry Venn (1725-97), giving particular analysis to his Moderate Calvinism and its propagation in the Evangelical Revival and beyond. It contends that Venn was one of the most significant Moderate Calvinists in the Church of England in the eighteenth century. It also argues that his legacy uniquely served to resource the Evangelicals of the following century in their doctrinal beliefs, and that his principled but irenic Calvinism exemplified how regular ministry could be conducted in the Church, and facilitated the activism which typified their movement. Venn’s *The Complete Duty of Man* (1763) set the tone of the spirituality of several generations of both clergy and laity. Without him, it would be hard to give full account for growth and success of nineteenth-century evangelicalism, and for the utilitarian Calvinism which persisted in its ranks, as well as for the shaping of the Victorian moral consciousness.

The dates which begin and close this study are those of Venn’s ordination in 1747 and the publication of *The Life and a Selection of the Letters of Henry Venn* in 1834. The second, nearly forty years after his death, allows for an assessment of his legacy, and of how his memory and ministry were commandeered for Evangelicals facing their own challenges.

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Long Abstract

Venn’s place amongst Hanoverian Moderate Calvinists has been overlooked, due to the presence of other commanding personalities and ministries. George Whitefield and William Grimshaw were the compelling communicators and indefatigable travellers in the gospel cause. John Newton was the renowned heart physician, channelling the Calvinism of his upbringing in Dissent and applying Scripture and its doctrines to the heart through pulpit and pen. William Romaine’s tenacious London ministry and published defences of the faith proved that Moderate Calvinism could command attention in the heart of the capital. The contributions of James Hervey and Augustus Toplady in their polemical and other writings, whilst evidencing an albeit doctrinally technical and at times High Calvinism, established them as first order leaders in the tradition. John Berridge’s promiscuous irregularity showed the often indistinctly-drawn lines between Church and Dissent.

In contrast to these men, all esteemed by Venn and most his good friends, his own ministry was for the most part less eye-catching, and ostensibly less significant. Venn’s career might be described in three stages: a slow but steady beginning, as he was searching for true evangelical light; a brilliant ascendancy, as his Moderate Calvinism was put to work in his flourishing Yorkshire parish and well-received itinerancy, chiefly through his friendship with the Countess of Huntingdon and members of her circle, and with a well-received published book; and then a long ‘tail’, settled into a lengthy tenure twelve miles

from Cambridge, and committed to providing encouragement and precept for men preparing for ordination. If large portions of Venn's nearly fifty year ministry lacked the arresting features of others', its duration and differing parish settings show how the appropriation, utilisation and then commendation of Moderate Calvinism can be appreciated. This thesis retrieves Venn's significance in his own generation, and his influence on Moderate Calvinism and evangelical life in the following century.

Venn was introduced to the Moderate Calvinism of the seventeenth century early in his career, and refashioned it to do battles with the rigorism he inherited in home and university, and also to meet the needs and opportunities afforded in his own ministry contexts. His lasting achievement, *The Complete Duty of Man*, was the acme of the tradition, demonstrating that Calvinism's central tenets, in accordance with Scripture and the Church of England's Formularies, could be used to provide both spiritual comfort and practical counsel for their adherents. The book was a publishing sensation, sealing Venn's reputation amongst Evangelicals, and providing Moderate Calvinists in the Church with a strong defence for their doctrine and piety.

The theology of the *Complete Duty* marked Venn's parochial work, and the more than thirty years of ongoing labour after its publication saw Venn committed to building up congregants and fellow clergy in these principles, as well as those training for ministry. In preparing his own son John for what would be a highly influential incumbency amongst the Clapham Sect, and in acting as mentor for the young Charles Simeon of Cambridge, Venn established an inheritance for his convictions in the Church of England, and in the evangelical activism of the nineteenth century which took its legitimacy from the impulse of the Moderate Calvinist pulpit.

Venn applied the descriptor *practical and experimental* to his friends John Berridge and Thomas Robinson with evident approval when speaking of their Moderate Calvinism.

Venn's own *Complete Duty* and later *Mistakes in Religion* are full of these sentiments, and priorities. In every way this appreciation exemplifies what Venn was trying to do in his own ministry and seeking in that of others, delineating Calvinism, settled in heart piety, and insisting on good works.

Venn's was an experimental religion. It was sensitive to the changing tenor of the age, meeting existential concerns unsatisfied by prevailing Anglican rigorism with the doctrine of justification by faith dependent upon unconditional grace, with its attendant Calvinist doctrine of the assurance of salvation. In doing so, Venn was reanimating Puritan experimental Calvinism, almost all of which was firmly within the Anglican tradition prior to 1662, and which continued there after the Restoration, albeit to a lesser degree. In all of this, Venn sought to distinguish *vital religion* (his friend Haweis' preferred phrase) from the enthusiasm of impulse-led spirituality on the one hand, and from the rationalism of a merely propositional creed on the other.

Equally, Venn taught and modelled a practical religion, calling for personal holiness and for the activism which he believed evangelical faith endorsed. His ministry opposed the charge that Calvinism produced a moribund, introspective piety. It also anticipated the growing insistence that true Christianity should be less heard in its doctrinal distinctives, and more viewed in its transformative effects.

Many looked to Venn as their great example and encourager, from Dissenters such as John Fawcett, Abraham Booth, William Moorhouse and Samuel Bottomley, to Anglicans who occupied a larger sphere, amongst them John Berridge, Thomas Haweis, John Newton and

Charles Simeon. Victorian Evangelicals turned to Venn's published letters and works for instruction, and Venn became something of a saintly figure to them.

The first two chapters of this thesis trace Venn's theological development and how he presented it in print. Chapter 1 explores how Venn came to identify with and began to articulate Moderate Calvinism. It considers his religious world, and assesses the extent to which, for Venn and for others, Calvinism was a creed of reaction against the perceived shortcomings of regnant beliefs in the Church of England. Venn's early published sermons are studied, in order to begin the analysis of where Venn's own contribution lies. Chapter 2 focuses on Venn's two key published works, through which he endeavoured to present Moderate Calvinism as both biblical orthodoxy and as an eminently practical religion. The chapter also considers how Venn sought to work out an ethic of joyful thankfulness which engaged the cultural preoccupations of his time.

Chapters 3 and 4 treat Venn's ministerial work. Chapter 3 looks at the fruitful Huddersfield incumbency, Venn's views on and practice of preaching, as well as work alongside his curates, and then assesses how his ministry responded to the contrasting parish of Yelling. Chapter 4 examines Venn's networks and attitudes to conformity and regularity. After tracing his relationships and work within the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion, and then analysing a print exchange between Venn and Joseph Priestley which highlights their contrasting views on orthodoxy and the nature of the church, the chapter analyses Venn's practice regarding parish boundaries, and thus the extent to which he was concerned to pursue and model strict conformity, and what sort of evangelical he wished himself and others to be.

Venn's later career showed him anxious to defend his Moderate Calvinism and Church, and to pass on his priorities to his successors. Chapter 5 begins with a treatment of Venn's

letter-writing, and the insights it affords into his pastoral counsel, and how he and his subsequent family editors wished to commend his religion. Venn's influence is seen most clearly on his son John and his contemporaries at Cambridge, Charles Simeon, most notably, and the theological inheritance and ministry praxes of Simeon and Venn junior are explored. Finally, the chapter investigates how, with the early nineteenth century's emphasis on practicality and where Calvinism was dropped in favour of a less doctrinal and a more biblicist emphasis, the Venn family and others curated his ministry as a model for Evangelicals striving to keep their national position against pluriform threats to it. In demonstrating that a moderated Calvinism was very much still apparent in the Church by the unsettled decade of the 1830s, conclusions are offered about Venn's legacy.

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And to the One to whom all honour is due, *Si non te, quis?*

Introduction

In the last full year of his life Henry Venn wrote to his son.¹ John Venn, now into his fourth year as the rector of Holy Trinity, Clapham, was well-used to paternal advice, and indelibly stamped by his counsel. Venn senior was grieved over the heterodoxies he saw on all sides, and by the slander aimed at evangelicals, and at Calvinists, most of all. He counselled his son to pursue holiness in line with their grand evangelical and Calvinistic tenets, remembering that sound doctrine must always be the impetus to a living faith: “the sovereign and electing grace of God, by which alone we are brought to him, bears no proportion to the continual mention that is made of the absolute necessity, beauty and excellency of a holy life and conversation, in the sight of God and man - bears no proportion, I say, to the practical part of our holy religion.”² Here was end-of-the-century Moderate Calvinism commended by one of its most articulate professors, the sovereignty of divine grace appropriated for the glory of God and for the good of sinners, with doctrine put to the service of conduct. Both Venns knew the criticisms directed at their religion, and felt keenly the impulse to respond with a vital and useful faith.

Venn was typical of a generation of Church of England clergy who, having begun their careers in the mid-eighteenth century, came to identify with and then minister evangelical and Moderate Calvinist convictions, a number of whom doing so with marked results. The burden of this thesis is that Venn’s ministerial successes, in parochial work, writing and in shaping acolytes, were achieved through his ability to set forth an evangelicalism of the Calvinistic sort which commanded loyalty through the clarity and attractiveness of its

¹ Henry Venn (ed), *The Life and a Selection from the Letters of the late Rev. Henry Venn* (London, 1836), pp. 530-32.

² Venn, *Letters*, p. 531.

message and the incentives it brought for right living. The close study which follows of Venn's beliefs and his handling of them in differing contexts demonstrates that he was alert to the strengths and perceived weaknesses of the Moderate Calvinist tradition with which he came to identify, and proved himself an able practitioner of it. Most importantly, Venn succeeded in handing it on to a younger generation of Evangelicals. Aided by the family's publication of his biography and select correspondence, Venn's legacy continued well into the nineteenth century. It resourced evangelicals within and beyond the Church of England with a spirituality essentially grounded in Calvinism, and made a significant contribution to the Christian activism of the age. To the end of his life, Venn held both to his Calvinism and also to a generous regard for evangelicals of differing persuasions.

Eighteenth century Calvinist and Arminian evangelicals exhibited commonalities which made them easily identifiable, and all are obvious in Venn's life.³ David Bebbington's taxonomy of evangelical identity remains helpful, here: mid-century evangelicals preached for conversion, and gloried in its animating power to propel them into gospel endeavour, were people of the Word, and soldiers of the Cross.⁴ Whilst these features, parsed as conversionism, activism, biblicism and crucicentricism, had rich historical precedents in Protestant Christianity, Bebbington contended that it was not until the 1730s that these four features came to mesh together in a way which can be read as distinctively

³ As with typical usage, in this thesis *evangelicals* with a lowercase 'E' pertains to all within the movement, whereas the capitalised *Evangelicals* denotes members of the clergy of that conviction.

⁴ David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London, 1993), pp. 3-4. Scholarship quickly recognised the significance of the thesis. W.R. Ward speaks of "the famous Bebbington Quadrilateral". W. R. Ward, "Evangelical Identity in the Eighteenth Century," in Donald M. Lewis (ed), *Christianity Reborn: The Global Expansion of Evangelicalism in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids, 2004), p. 11. The best departure-point for interacting with the thesis is Kenneth J. Stewart, 'Did Evangelicalism Predate the Eighteenth Century? An Examination of David Bebbington's Thesis', *Evangelical Quarterly* 77, no. 2 (2005), pp. 135-153. A narrative of mid-century evangelicalism sympathetic to Bebbington is Mark A. Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: the Age of Edwards, Whitefield and the Wesleys* (Leicester, 2004). Amongst the literature interacting with the Bebbington thesis, see Michael A.G. Haykin and Kenneth J. Stewart (eds), *The Emergence of Evangelicalism: Exploring Historical Continuities* (Nottingham, 2008).

evangelical.⁵ In a Church and society which had clear expectations of orderly conformity, men and women who shared this religion were highly visible, and thus liable to attack for their deviations from expected norms, the most widely-used censure being that of enthusiasm. This study explores how Venn held to these evangelical beliefs in their Moderate Calvinist form, and how he navigated such charges in order to present a religion with an emphasis on personal experience subject to Scripture, and in accordance the Formularies and Church attendance.

In the first phase of the evangelical revival, the 1740s, *Calvinist* meant little more than a disavowal of both latitudinarian and rigorist traditions in favour of a commitment to justification by faith alone.⁶ Due to its associations with the Puritan ascendancy, *Calvinist* was frequently a pejorative label given to any who spoke enthusiastically about the place of faith in the Christian life (Wesley was on occasion called a Calvinist during his early evangelical endeavour). Dissent had been the preserve of Calvinism in the first half of the eighteenth century. The 1738 *Cyclopædia* said that it was now chiefly confined amongst the Dissenters, “though it still subsists, a little allayed, in the ranks of the established church”.⁷ Calvinism’s reappearance in the ranks of Churchmen and its appropriation by their followers was thus a noteworthy phenomenon. Venn and those who shared his convictions styled themselves *Moderate Calvinists*. The term served to describe “an evangelical whose Calvinism was unsystematic and subordinated to the preaching of the Gospel.”⁸ For the purposes of this thesis, the adjective *Moderate* qualifying *Calvinist* is

⁵ Bebbington’s claims that evangelicalism was an enlightenment product (*Evangelicalism*, p. 74) is challenged by, amongst others, G. J. Williams, ‘Was Evangelicalism created by the Enlightenment?’ *Tyndale Bulletin*, 53.2 (2002), pp. 283-312.

⁶ The single most important work on eighteenth-century Moderate Calvinism is John Walsh, ‘Evangelicals and Predestination, 1730-1830’ (private paper, n.d.).

⁷ E. Chambers, *Cyclopædia: or, an Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences* (London, 1738), p. 278.

⁸ D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the English Evangelical Tradition* (Oxford), p. 123. Compare John Walsh, ‘The Yorkshire Evangelicals in the Eighteenth Century: with special reference to Methodism’ (Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge, 1956), p. 2, and Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, pp. 63-5.

given a capital ‘M’. This reflects the intentional qualifying of Calvinism as its adherents used it, and recognises that Moderate Calvinists were an identifiable and significant movement in the eighteenth century. *Moderate Calvinist* was a term employed by Whitefield and many others to signify that their new faith was the inheritance of the Protestant Reformation, channelled in the predestinarian tradition. Evangelicals of both Arminian and Calvinist persuasion knew the importance of Μηδὲν ἄγαν, the classical ideal of temperance extolled by the neo-Arminians of the previous century.⁹ *Moderate* was a sentiment typical of the Enlightenment age, and also signalled an aversion to the perceived enthusiastic excesses of the Commonwealth with its Calvinistic ascendancy. From its infancy, Moderate Calvinism was attuned to church and society, often at odds with them, but always ambitious to win ground.

Bruce Hindmarsh’s 1995 monograph on John Newton offers a taxonomy of English mid-eighteenth-century evangelical theology, with its four dominant positions, from Arminianism through to High Calvinism.¹⁰ The schema invites questions about the positioning of Moderate Calvinism. The “strict Calvinism” delineated there would be the closest to the position of Venn and like-minded others; and yet, “strict” would not be a label used by them, preferring as they did the descriptor of “evangelical” or “moderate”. Within this position there was, of course, theological breadth of opinion. Through analysing Venn’s early career sermons, a key mid-career publication and the correspondence of his later years, this thesis gives much-needed detail to his beliefs, and thus, to the theological distinctives of those who had a horror of moribund Hyper-Calvinism, whilst retaining the reformed distinctives of the Formularies. A commitment to particular redemption and to the imputation of Christ’s justifying righteousness, as well as

⁹ Isabel Rivers, *Reason, Grace, and Sentiment: A Study of the Language of Religion and Ethics in England, 1660–1780. Volume 1: Whichcote to Wesley* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 36-37.

¹⁰ Hindmarsh, *Newton*, pp. 124-5.

to the ubiquitous Moderate Calvinistic belief in predestination and election, show Venn to be a decided Calvinist. That he was persuaded of the vital importance of Christian catholicity, and invested so deeply in a friendship with the Arminian and decidedly anti-Calvinist John Fletcher, makes Venn an important subject for research in assessing how Moderate Calvinists handled their doctrine as well as conducted their relationships in this period.

This thesis uses the word *revival* as an important and useful shorthand for the clustering of evangelical ideas, practices and personalities in the mid and later eighteenth century, focused upon the proclamation of the gospel of free grace to affect new birth in the believer, often with attendant significant and discernible personal transformation.¹¹ Venn, the Wesleys, Whitefield and a host of Evangelicals spoke of their certainty that God was about a work of revival in their times, and subsequent Evangelicals appropriated the term as a shorthand for the labours in which they - and God himself, they assessed - were engaged.¹² As the revival movement matured, many of its proponents worked to present continuities with earlier periods of the church, in order to bolster their claims that evangelical doctrine and life had strong precedents and thus was the true religion handed down from the time of Christ and the Apostles.

Venn was primarily a man of the parish and pulpit, rather than a controversialist or a prolific author. Treatments since his death have come from those of comparable religious

¹¹ On the nature of and possible origins of the revival, see John Walsh, 'Origins of the Evangelical Revival', in G. V. Bennett and J. D. Walsh (eds), *Essays in Modern Church History in Memory of Norman Sykes* (London, 1966), pp. 132–62. For the historiography of revival, see H. D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (London, 1989), pp.158-160; Mark A. Smith, 'Purpose and Definition in British Evangelical Historiography' (Baylor University Press: Waco, TX, forthcoming). For examples of the strong reactions of auditors to what for them was the newness of evangelical preaching, see D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative: Spiritual Autobiography in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 139-142.

¹² E.g., Venn, *Letters*, p. 121; John Telford (ed), *The Letters of the Rev John Wesley* (8 vols, London, 1960) 6, p. 340.

outlook, and have mined the details of Venn's life and labours in order to resource evangelical spirituality and ministry.¹³ The accents of these studies invariably fall on Venn's pastoral acumen, preaching gifts and personal integrity and amiability. Scholarly engagement with the evangelical revival has largely been paid to the moment's more commanding personalities and ministries, around which there is a rich archival deposit and ongoing academic discussion.¹⁴ There is no published book-length academic work on Venn, and only two PhD theses have given attention to him, each with a single chapter. Kenneth Stockton's 1980 study of the Venn family, beginning with Henry and concluding with his great great grandson, John Archibald Venn of Cambridge, has considerable merits. Close work with Venn's correspondence and awareness of the personal and familial issues which shaped his life present a convincing picture of the minister. On the other hand, an *a priori* commitment to identifying contrasting personality traits in different generations of the family leads its author towards an at times unconvincing portrayal of his subjects, Venn included.¹⁵

John Walsh's 1956 PhD thesis is a rich source for students of the evangelical theology and praxis of the period. Venn is convincingly placed amongst the leading and the lesser-known personalities within the revival movement, and the study of Venn's arrival at his

¹³ William Moorhouse, 'Memoir of the late Rev. H. Venn, A.M.', *The Evangelical Magazine*, June, 1798, pp. 221-227; J.C. Ryle, *The Christian Leaders of England in the Eighteenth Century*, 4th edn (London, 1900), pp. 254-305; Henry Venn, *The Life and a selection from the Letters of the late Rev. Henry Venn* (London, 1836), pp. 2-63; John Venn, *Annals of a Clerical Family* (London, 1904), pp. 65-111. Michael Hennell, 'Henry Venn of Huddersfield', *Churchman* 068/2, 1954; Marcus Loane, *Cambridge and the Evangelical Succession* (Fearn, 2002), pp. 93-136; Wilbert Shenk, "'T'owd Trumpet": Venn of Huddersfield and Yelling', *Churchman*, 93/1 (1979), pp. 39-54; Bill Reimer, 'The Spirituality of Henry Venn', *Churchman*, 114/4, (2000), pp. 300-316.

¹⁴ Scholarly engagement with Venn includes Leonard W. Cowie, 'Venn, Henry (1724-1797)', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edition; Charles Wesley Lowry, Jr., 'Spiritual Antecedents of Anglican Evangelicalism', *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church*, 12 (1943), pp. 117-156; William Kenneth Stockton, 'The Venn Family since the Mid-Eighteenth Century' (Ph.D. thesis, Brandeis University, 1980), pp. 1-54; Walsh, 'Yorkshire Evangelicals', pp. 185-232.

¹⁵ Stockton, 'Venn Family', pp. xxv-xxvi. Stockton also misdates Venn's coming to Calvinistic beliefs, pp. 36-7.

Moderate Calvinism is particularly thorough.¹⁶ Walsh's paper, 'Evangelicals and Predestination, 1730-1830', continues the exploration of Calvinism in the Church in the period of Venn's life and in that of his immediate successors.¹⁷ Both works highlight two important matters: firstly, Moderate Calvinism's adherents were typified by a doctrinally broader Calvinism than their seventeenth-century forebears, and, secondly, the majority of the first generation of leaders were also characterised by a disavowal of some of their Calvinistic beliefs towards the end of their own century.¹⁸

Cautions must be sounded on each point. The received Stuart Calvinist tradition was anything but monolithic, containing instead a number of inflections of reformed religion, and thus claims of Moderates' departure from their heritage must be treated with care.¹⁹ National and ecclesiastical concerns, as well as theological fashions, made for differing versions and expressions of Calvinism in each century. On the second matter, that there was a loosening of doctrinal exactness by the time of Venn's death, this is demonstrably true, and is accounted for by shaping factors in church and society, ultimately with the reformed consensus being put to the service of practical religion. This thesis seeks to show that Venn did not jettison any of his Calvinism at the end of his life, and indeed commended it to others as he had received it over forty years previously.

¹⁶ Walsh, 'Yorkshire Evangelicals', pp. 189-195.

¹⁷ Walsh, 'Evangelicals and Predestination, 1730-1830' (private paper). Cf. Gareth Atkins, *Converting Britannia: Evangelicals and British Public Life, 1790-1840* (Woodbridge, 2019), pp. 15-17. That said, Walsh was mistaken in claiming that Moderate Calvinists rejected the doctrine of particular redemption, Walsh, 'Predestination', p. 49. Venn did not, and there was a spectrum of convictions on this matter amongst their number.

¹⁸ For the eschewal of a doctrinally-conscious Calvinism for a more general biblicism, see Walsh, 'Predestination', pp. 40-43. Puritan doctrines were preached by Moderate Calvinists "in dilution, simply, practically and moderated by commonsense and directitude", Walsh, 'Yorkshire Evangelicals', p.12.

¹⁹ For the variegated nature of seventeenth century Calvinism, see Jonathan D. Moore, *English Hypothetical Universalism: John Preston and the Softening of Reformed Theology* (Grand Rapids, 2009), and p. 225 fn. for further literature exploring the diversity of reformed theologies.

Even where many were less pronounced in their attachments, the contention in this thesis is that the Calvinistic tradition amongst early nineteenth-century Evangelicals was very much a living one. An evangelicalism which preached justification by grace through faith alone, the normative nature of the assurance of forgiveness, the place of works in expressing genuine faith, and the undergirding pastoral comforts of the sovereignty of God's grace ministered by the Holy Spirit, was their Calvinism. It was albeit somewhat incognito, but this was as much as most Moderates ever wanted to minister. A conciliatory tone in turn-of-the-century ministries must not be misheard for a doctrinal retreat.²⁰

This Moderate Calvinism, though often unnamed as such, was put to the service of a religion of heart and home, Church, national morals and the missionary movement. It was the fullest flowering of the tradition which Venn, Whitefield, Newton, Romaine and others had made their own. They strove to present what they believed was the truest interpretation of Scripture, and laboured to expound its pastoral assurances and practicability. Had Venn stayed in his Huddersfield incumbency, the passage of Moderate Calvinism into the nineteenth century might well have been very different. As shall be explored, what looked like almost a professional misstep for Venn, leaving a flourishing ministry in a teeming parish for the backwaters of Huntingdonshire, transpired to be an undeniable opportunity for greatly furthering the course of what he believed to be vital religion.

This thesis is the fruit of close attention to Venn's published output, of sermons, books and polemic writing, and of the study of his extensive manuscript archive of correspondence. Many contemporaneous printed works, now available in electronic form, have brought focus to questions pertaining to his ministry and theology, although parochial and diocesan archives have yielded little to giving a fuller picture of Venn.²¹ Instead, through attention

²⁰ Hindmarsh, *Newton*, pp. 166-8.

²¹ Pace Walsh, 'Yorkshire Evangelicals', pp. v-vi.

to the friendship networks which he so valued, and to contemporary preoccupations of Evangelicals and their detractors, the work which follows is a re-presentation of a highly significant and hitherto overlooked contributor to the evangelical revival.

Chapter 1: “Fired with Love Unfeigned”

This chapter traces Venn’s arrival at evangelical faith, and his embrace of the views he and his peers styled *Moderate Calvinism*. As will be demonstrated, notions of justifying grace apart from human endeavour and a concomitant assurance of salvation were viewed with great suspicion, and often decried as *enthusiastic*, with enemies within and beyond the Church. Keenly aware of his cultural and ecclesiastical context, Venn sought to take a course which he believed showed the reasonableness of his new religion and its scriptural warrant, and, whilst safeguarding its supernatural origins and life, was not vulnerable to the charge of enthusiasm. By the close of this chapter the dissertation is ready to explore in more depth how Venn sought to propagate his views more widely in print, and to what effect.

1.1 Concise Biography

Henry Venn was born on 2nd March, 1725, the third of eight children. Venn’s father Richard was the fourth in an unbroken clerical line. As Rector of St. Antholin’s, Watling Street, Venn senior was a noted preacher of redoubtable opinions on orthodoxy and subscription, opposed to Deists and Dissenters, as well as to the enthusiasm of the early Methodists, being the first of the London clergy to ban George Whitefield from his pulpit.¹ An autocratic home ruled by an intense but reputedly loving father inevitably stamped the character of his son, and family anecdotes were preserved which detailed the young boy’s strong spirit.² Schooling in London and Bristol followed, during which course Venn lost his father, and then in June 1742 at

¹ Venn, *Annals*, pp. 65-66.

² Venn, *Annals*, p. 50.

seventeen he proceeded to St John's College, Cambridge, transferring to Jesus College three months later after the award of a Rustat Scholarship (for the sons of deceased Anglican clergymen).

Venn flourished at Cambridge, winning a scholarship in 1747, a popular friend amongst his peers, and excelling at cricket. He was ordained deacon on the 14th June of the same year, and priested in 1749, with a curacy in Barton, just after his taking up a fellowship at Queens' College. A year later, Venn left Cambridge to become the curate to the Rev. Adam Langley of St. Matthew's, Friday Street, London, and of West Horsley, near Guildford in Surrey, where he remained for four years (serving in London in the summer and devoting the rest of the year to West Horsley). As he had in Barton, Venn undertook the work of parochial ministry conscientiously in West Horsley, distributing tracts and visiting in the parish. His efforts brought him popularity, and an increase of communicants from twelve to sixty.³

In 1754 Venn became the curate of Clapham, fulfilling that role alongside three London Lectureships, including one at his father's old church.⁴ He stayed five years in this growing and increasingly well-heeled village, the preferred district of bankers and businessmen. The Clapham years sealed the direction of Venn's life, from which he never deviated. The seminal influences on Venn in Clapham were the relationships he developed, the Moderate Calvinism he embraced, and the path he chose to steer in the variegated evangelical world of which he was now a part. The wealthy and successful businessman John Thornton, an early (and lifelong) friend, was converted to evangelicalism through Martin Madan or through Venn himself, soon after Venn came to Clapham,⁵ and later the Venn and Thornton families would enjoy each other's company as members of what was later called the "Clapham Sect".

³ Venn, *Annals*, p. 73.

⁴ The others being St Alban's, Wood Street and St Swithun's, London Stone.

⁵ Josiah Bull, *Memorials of the Reverend William Bull* (London, 1865), p. 250.

Venn met Eling Bishop in 1752, and they were married in 1757. With the apparent continual absence of the Rector, Sir James Stonhouse, Venn was left to forge his own direction for the parish. This included a round of preaching six sermons a week, there and in the City, and set the tone for the activism which marked his career.

Venn's new evangelical preaching brought him ridicule, and opposition. Of his Clapham parishioners Venn said "to such the doctrine of the Gospel preached with zeal and boldness was very offensive. Of this there was soon proof sufficient."⁶ Antipathy to Venn (and, at times, to his wife) sealed his decision to seek a living of his own, doubtless spurred by the need for financial security as a new father. He was offered Huddersfield in the West Riding of Yorkshire by the Earl of Dartmouth, and was instituted on the 12th of April, 1759.⁷

Huddersfield was a very considerable parish of 13,000 acres, ten miles east to west, and four miles north to south at its furthest point, double the size of an average Yorkshire parish (and four times larger than those in the South). The town was of around 4,000 souls, and stretches of the parish were served by chapels of ease and a succession of curates. In the first year of ministry, the modest size of his living gave Venn serious concern whether he could continue, and he considered returning to Clapham, which he had not yet formally resigned. The family was growing, Eling being pregnant with her third child (the family would be completed in 1765 by the birth of the fifth child, making a son and four daughters). There was an agony of soul-searching which only the firm resolve of Eling could assuage, who insisted that the Lord would provide for the work of his calling. With no previous evangelical incumbent, although with the presence of a few Methodists, the parish was very quickly convulsed by a religious

⁶ University of Birmingham Cadbury Research Archive, Church Missionary Society Papers, Venn MSS, Acc.81/F2/13. All Venn correspondence cited hereafter, unless indicated otherwise, is from this archive and is noted 'Venn MSS'.

⁷ The Earl was not himself the patron, but he approached his friend, Sir John Ramsden, whose family were effective owners of the town, and who held the advowson.

revival, Venn claiming at the end of the third year of his Huddersfield ministry that he witnessed nine hundred professions of faith.⁸

For almost twelve years Venn was a torrent of activity, working out his Moderate Calvinism in his ministry. He served double duty on Sundays, preaching to sometimes as many as three thousand congregants each week, and also took opportunities to preach for the Countess of Huntingdon, to promote the support of would-be and serving clergymen through the Elland Society, and to develop a large circle of correspondents. The Venns' children were Jane and Catherine, Frances, Nelly and John. The family circle was completed by a maid, Ann Hudson, and a cook, Ruth Clark, a childhood friend of the Milner brothers in Hull, whose lifelong service to Venn saw the family maintain her for her last decade after his death, and her memory was rewarded with an encomium.⁹ The already-busy vicarage was made the more so by the visits of parishioners. Venn used the early years of the Huddersfield ministry to complete the book he had begun in Clapham, *The Complete Duty of Man*, published in 1763.¹⁰ Recognition was instant, and it established Venn's reputation as one of the revival's gifted leaders.

The burden of his Yorkshire charge was considerable, and Venn felt it. A chest infection had put him out of action for long spells three times between 1766 and 1770. The loss of Eling to breast cancer in 1767 was shattering, and the death of his daughter Frances two years later added to his sorrow and exhaustion. Whilst Ann Hudson looked after the children, the strain of being an attentive father and an effective vicar meant that by 1770 Venn was resolved to move, and it was in Bath on a recuperative visit that the Lord Chief Baron Smythe offered

⁸ Bull, *Memorials*, p. 250.

⁹ [Henry Venn, Jr.], *The History of Ruth Clark; Or, the Single Talent Well Employed* (London, n.d., but British Museum copy dated 14th February, 1856).

¹⁰ Henry Venn, *The complete duty of man: or, a system of doctrinal and practical Christianity. To which are added forms of prayer and offices of devotion, for the various circumstances of life. Designed for the use of families* (London, 1763).

him the living of Yelling, Huntingdonshire. The Huddersfield congregation and clergy friends were dismayed on learning of Venn's intention, and tried hard to keep him there, visiting him in groups to press their case. Venn's mind was made, however, and he preached his last sermon in the town on Easter Day, 1771.

“Nothing would have prevailed upon me to leave Huddersfield, if my lungs had not received an irreparable injury...I go to Yelling a dying man.”¹¹ And maybe Venn sincerely believed he was. Grief, ill-health and exhaustion were significant factors in Venn's decision to seek a new incumbency, though this decision was most likely shaped by ongoing financial anxieties and even the rebuff of an offer of marriage by his servant Ann Hudson, with whom he had fallen deeply in love. Venn's leaving, according to his ardent admirer, the Particular Baptist John Fawcett of Hebden Bridge, was “to the regret of thousands”.¹²

Yelling was six miles south of Huntingdon and almost the same distance east of St Neots, with Cambridge further twelve miles to the east, and, as a parish of under two thousand acres with barely two hundred parishioners, was an underwhelming prospect for Venn. A little over a year into the work, their new rector could report a crowded Sunday congregation, and a renewal of health, each to his surprised delight.¹³ Venn married Katherine Smith, widowed daughter of Rev. James Ayscough, on July 15th, 1771, her fifty-four years to Venn's forty-six. Venn was hoping to last at least four years at Yelling, but in 1771 he was actually embarking on what would be a twenty five year ministry there.¹⁴ The revival fires of Yorkshire never blazed in his new parish, but Venn had seasons where he could share with

¹¹ Letters to Mrs Riland, 17th November 1770, in Venn, *Letters*, p. 165.

¹² John Fawcett, *An Account of the life, ministry, and writings of the late Rev. John Fawcett, D.D.* (London, 1818), p. 29.

¹³ Venn, *Letters*, pp. 214, 192.

¹⁴ Venn, *Letters*, p. 192.

friends his encouragement at the uptake of vital religion there, as well as his sorrow that his work did not produce more fruit.

A principled churchman, Venn closed his association with the Countess's Connexion in the early 1780s when she registered her causes as Dissenting chapels, and confined himself to parochial duties, whilst exercising a wide correspondence with others in the gospel cause, and preaching for friends in London and around the country. Through his son John's career at Cambridge Venn got to know and then mentored the young Charles Simeon, and was active in helping the next generation of clergy in the evangelical and Moderate Calvinist tradition. The last year of Venn's life was spent in John's vicarage at Holy Trinity, Clapham. This represented a coming full-circle for Venn to be in the city of his birth and his old parish, and also the continuation of the mature Moderate Calvinist deposit as it would come to find expression in the parish pulpit, and in the piety and activism of the Clapham Sect.

1.2 Justifying Faith

In early career (most likely, in 1752) Venn came to believe in the doctrine of justification by faith alone. This set him on a course shared by fellow Evangelicals, and animated a ministry of over forty years which was starkly different from the religion of his upbringing and prevailing notions of divine grace. What follows is an analysis of the dominant positions in the Church of England regarding the doctrine of justification, and an explanation of how Venn came to his belief in the unconditionality of justifying grace, which he and the Evangelicals insisted was the central doctrine of the gospel and of their Church.

Venn's father's religion reflected the "rigorist" spirituality of early Hanoverian Anglicanism, emphasising supreme attentiveness and effort on the believer's part, given the conditionality of final salvation. Rigorism was based upon the doctrine of double justification. The first justification was granted through trinitarian baptism conducted by an authorised person. That grace was improved upon by Law-keeping, and participation in the church's worship and sacramental life, in the hope of final justification at death due to the merits of Christ. The benefits of justification were thus conditional upon works. The result of this system was a strict conformity to the Law of God and commitment to sacramentalism, such as was typified by the writings of the non-juror William Law, a personal friend of Venn senior.¹⁵ The year after Richard Venn's death his widow Mary saw to the publication of a volume entitled *Tracts and Sermons on Several Occasions*, which are entirely typical of rigorism.¹⁶ The first of the five sermons, on a text from the Book of Wisdom, does not mention Christ at all.

¹⁵ For representative surveys of early Hanoverian Anglican religion, see Jeffrey S. Chamberlain, 'Moralism, Justification and the Controversy over Methodism,' *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 44(4), 1993, pp. 652-78; Rack, *Enthusiast*, pp. 24-33; Gregory F. Scholtz, 'Anglicanism in the Age of Johnson: The Doctrine of Conditional Salvation', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 22, 2 (Winter, 1988-89), pp. 182-207; Donald Greene and Gregory F. Scholtz, 'How 'Degraded' Was Eighteenth-Century Anglicanism?' *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 24, no. 1 (1990), pp. 93-111 (this work is splenetic and highly idiosyncratic, but does contain valuable historiographic observations); Mark Smith, 'The Hanoverian Parish: Towards a New Agenda', *Past & Present*, 216 (August, 2012), pp. 79-105.

¹⁶ Richard Venn, *Tracts and Sermons on Several Occasions* (London, 1740).

Where Christ's work is mentioned, as in a Christmas Day sermon, the import of it is so that the sinners may be pardoned (Venn does not say how), and the world given evidence of God's hatred of wickedness, and thus every incentive to obedience, which is where Venn's emphasis lands.¹⁷ The sermons make no mention of justification by faith alone – in fact, the words “justify” and “justification” are entirely absent. Venn never ventures an explanation of faith, and is silent on the doctrine of the new birth. Repentance makes the sinner “not unfit to receive Divine favour”, though Venn cannot say how.¹⁸ Assurance, such as it is, is the knowledge that one is intent on Law-keeping, giving grounds for confidence of avoiding God's anger at the Judgement.¹⁹ The Christian life is conformity to the Law, nothing more, nor less. In the sermon, *The Necessity of Keeping the Whole Law*, Venn warned that the Pharisees' great sin was a lack of scrupulousness regarding God's Law, not excessive-Law keeping.²⁰ God in his mercy gave a Covenant of Grace, the terms of which he makes possible for his subjects to perform.²¹ Whilst no solution (or salvation) is offered for sins committed, Venn comforts his readers, “that we may hope, through the divine assistance, to become perfect in every good word and work here and present ourselves as holy and spotless before our Father hereafter”.²²

Alongside his father's influence, Venn personally experienced rigorism through the writings of William Law, particularly his *Christian Perfection* (1726) and *Serious Call* (1729), which in his undergraduate days he read “with avidity over and over again”.²³ Venn possessed his father's copy of *Christian Perfection* which had “Ric. Venn ex dono Authoris” inscribed on

¹⁷ Venn, *Tracts*, p.17.

¹⁸ Venn, *Tracts*, p. 293.

¹⁹ Venn, *Tracts*, pp. 285-6.

²⁰ Venn, *Tracts*, p. 77.

²¹ Venn, *Tracts*, p. 79.

²² Venn, *Tracts*, p. 94.

²³ Venn MSS, Acc.81/F32.

the title page.²⁴ Wesley, one of Venn's most powerful evangelical influences in his early ministry, was also steeped in the ascetic piety of the Restoration tradition.²⁵ Its loyal sons, the Wesleys, Whitefield and Venn, all prayed, fasted, and toiled to an exhaustion of body matched by an agony of soul.

The conditional double-justification theology which undergirded Rigorism constituted a radical departure from the reformed nature of the Church's Formularies.²⁶ Whilst a small minority still contended for justification by faith alone in keeping with the Articles, it was associated with Stuart Calvinism, and thus seen by many as the dogma of regicide zeal, fraught with political, spiritual and moral dangers.²⁷ The modern claim that in the Church of England prior to the revival "the doctrine of justification by faith had well-nigh disappeared", whilst needing qualification, is substantially accurate.²⁸ Heaven was to be achieved by a churchly, sacramental and moral way of life.

²⁴ In the private possession of Mr David Hanson of Horsforth. Also suggestive of Richard's affection for Law is the fact that the Venn Family Archive also contains a letter from Law to the sister of the well-known non-juror Henry Dodwell on the unity of the church (with a note on the first page stating that it was from his own hand). Venn MSS, Acc.81/F55, Religious Papers: Letter regarding the unity of the church, 1732.

²⁵ Rivers, *Reason*, 1, p. 208. Although after the Aldersgate experience of 1738 Wesley was sharply critical of Law's teaching on justification, he published his works (often in highly edited form) and recommended them to his preachers for the course of his life. Rivers, *Reason*, 1, p. 184. For the 'holy living' tradition see Henry D. Rack, 'Religious societies and the origins of Methodism', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 38 (1987), pp. 582–95; W.M. Jacob, *Lay People and Religion in the early Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 77–90; Geordan Hammond, 'The revival of practical Christianity: the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, Samuel Wesley, and the Clerical Society Movement', in Kate Cooper & Jeremy Gregory (eds), *Revival and Resurgence in Christian History* (Studies in Church History, 44) (Woodbridge, 2008), pp. 116–27.

²⁶ Recent studies of Anglican theology which aim to challenge the prevailing assessment that solafideism and attendant Calvinism effectively disappeared from the Church include Stephen Hampton, *Anti-Arminians: The Anglican Reformed Tradition from Charles II to George I* (Oxford, 2008), and Jake Griesel, 'John Edwards of Cambridge (1637-1716): A reassessment of his position in the later Stuart Church of England' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge, 2019). It might be more accurate to say that the reformed position of the Formularies remained in the church, but was overshadowed by a prevailing soteriology which was in effect neo-Arminian. See Smith, 'Hanoverian Parish', pp. 79–105, 84–5. For a summary of the soteriology of Bishop George Bull see Alister McGrath, *Iustitia Dei, A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, 3rd edn (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 280–282.

²⁷ Grayson Carter, *Anglican Evangelicals: Protestant Secessions from the Via Media, c.1800-1850* (Oxford, 2001), p. 48.

²⁸ Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, p. 36.

Dissenting voices within the Church were still making a case for the old paths. Bishop Barlow of Lincoln strongly condemned such conditionalism as inconsistent with Scripture teaching and the Homilies, the latter giving “many evident reasons why good works can neither be necessary conditions, or *causa sine qua non*, of our justification”.²⁹ Barlow insisted that justification was wholly dependent on the imputation of Christ’s righteousness, claiming this to be the true reading of Article XI and the position held by a succession of esteemed doctors of the Church since the Reformation.³⁰ It would take the evangelical revival to bring such teaching back to the centre of English religious life, and Evangelicals were returning to such writers, as Venn later read Barlow and commended him to others.³¹ The first Evangelicals were adamant that justification by faith alone was the cardinal doctrine of the Church’s Formularies, and that, far from being the interlopers, they were the true sons of the Church.

If Rigorism captured the sensitive consciences of some of the clergy and their parishioners, majority religion was a broad road, the way of latitude, of moral effort, neither stringent nor excessive, which was reckoned to find the favour of the Almighty, who graciously accommodated to the proclivities of fallible humanity.³² With sharp antagonism to reformed orthodoxy, those who identified with Latitudinarianism in the Restoration Period were both Conformists and Dissenters. Whilst most proponents fell within the double-justificatory scheme, they asserted the power of reason, emphasised the moral life as being the core of true religion, had a positive view of humanity, contrary to the reformed emphasis on inherent moral depravity, eschewed sacerdotalism (and were uniformly anti-Catholic), pursued

²⁹ Thomas Barlow, *Two letters written by the Right Reverend Dr. Thomas Barlow...concerning justification by faith only* (London, 1701), p. 130.

³⁰ Barlow, *Two letters*, pp. 132, 134.

³¹ Venn MSS, Acc.81/C5/1, Letter to Thomas Atkinson, 29th February, 1764.

³² John Spurr, ‘“Latitudinarianism’ and the Restoration Church’, *The Historical Journal*, 1988, Vol. 31 (1), pp. 61-82.

scientific inquiry, were dismissive of theological subtlety and exactitude, and elevated the place of conscience and personal choice. Like its avowed enemy, Puritanism, Latitudinarianism was very much a posture, and an outlook, rather than a clearly identifiable set of tenets. And what was initially a term of reproach was increasingly worn as a badge of honour by those who wanted a comprehensive church and a minimalist creed, shaped by the endeavour of free inquiry.

Duty and happiness were the chief concerns of the sermons of John Tillotson, Archbishop of Canterbury, 1691-94, and all of the first Evangelicals conducted their studies and began ministry in an environment dominated by his essentially latitudinarian thought.³³ Tillotson edited the Oxford latitudinarian John Wilkins' *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion* (and married his step-daughter) and took its essential thrust in order to shape an emphasis on the life of practical faith.³⁴ Tillotson's favourite text was "his commands are not grievous" (1 John 5.3), and a leading statement on it in a much-admired and copied sermon was that "the laws of God are reasonable, that is, suitable to our nature and advantageous to our interest".³⁵ Whilst Tillotson's place in the Latitudinarian disavowal of reformed orthodoxy is undergoing a degree of revision, it is incontrovertible that he avoided many key reformation themes in order to expound a decidedly utilitarian Christian profession, acceptable to a breadth of Protestant opinion.³⁶ His religion was, in essence, reasonable (its

³³ For representative modern assessments of Tillotson, see Gerard Reedy, 'Interpreting Tillotson', *The Harvard Theological Review* 86, no. 1 (January, 1993), pp. 81–103; Peter Facer, 'John Tillotson: A Reappraisal' (MLitt. Thesis, Durham University, 2000); David A. De Silva, 'The Pattern for Preachers: Archbishop John Tillotson and the Reform of Ecclesiastical Oratory in the Seventeenth Century', *Anglican and Episcopal History*, 75, no. 3, (September 2006), pp. 368-400; Jacob M. Blosser, 'Pursuing happiness: Cultural discourse and popular religion in Anglican Virginia, 1700–1770' (Ph.D. thesis, University of South Carolina, 2006), pp. 111-149; Jacob M. Blosser, 'John Tillotson's Latitudinarian Legacy: Orthodoxy, Heterodoxy, and the Pursuit of Happiness', *Anglican and Episcopal History*, 80, no. 2 (June 2011), pp. 142–73.

³⁴ The most popular of his books, it was still being read and republished into the 1730s. Rivers, *Reason*, 1, p. 40.

³⁵ John Tillotson, *The Works of the Most Reverend Dr. John Tillotson, late Lord Archbishop of Canterbury: containing fifty four sermons and discourses, on several occasions* (London, 1701), p. 71.

³⁶ Thomas Hartley, evangelical rector of Winwick, Northamptonshire, said in 1754 that Tillotson had "warped much from the Reformation standard". Thomas Hartley, *Sermons on Various Subjects* (London, 1754), p. xxi.

precepts were plain in Scripture), achievable (human effort and the grace of God could fulfil the Law), and pleasant (it was nice). Tillotson taught that the purpose of the incarnation of Christ was so that he might “by the merit and satisfaction of his death and sufferings appease and reconcile God to man, and purchase for them the pardon of their sins upon the condition of faith and repentance and sincere obedience”.³⁷ Justifying faith, though sometimes framed to sound otherwise, was redefined subtly to add to the classical definition of faith as faith *evidencing itself* in obedience, thereby opening the way to an explicitly moralistic religion. This was the collapsing of sanctification into justification, a reversal of the distinction between the two maintained in the reformation tradition.³⁸

John Locke, Samuel Wesley, and Philip Doddridge were all admirers of Tillotson’s sermons, which, according to Gilbert Burnet, “were so well heard and liked, and so much read that all the nation proposed him as a pattern, and studied to copy after him”.³⁹ In a sermon preached at Whitehall in 1684, Tillotson declared that “the way to heaven lies plain and straight before us, consisting in simplicity of belief, and in holiness and innocency of life.”⁴⁰ What comes through in his preaching is that simple belief together with right living would not only be the duty which God required, but that they would enable the Christian to discover happiness in this life. “The practice of religion, and the doing of what we know to be our duty, is the only way to happiness.”⁴¹ Reason and Morality had kissed one another, according to the majority consensus of the learned classes, and this mutual love was claimed as the highest achievement of Christianity.

³⁷ John Tillotson, *Sermons* (14 vols, London, 1696-1704), 12, p. 214.

³⁸ See the discussion in Hampton, *Anti-Arminians*, pp. 60-63.

³⁹ M.J. Routh (ed), *Bishop Burnet's History of his own Times* (Oxford, 1833), 2, p. 135. For their popularity, see Blosser, ‘Latitudinarian Legacy’, pp. 143-6.

⁴⁰ John Tillotson, *The Works of The Most Reverend John Tillotson* (2 vols, London, 1712), 1, p. 562.

⁴¹ Tillotson, *Works*, 1, p. 414.

This creed, such as it was, was very largely what the Church taught, and the age accepted, but it was emphatically not to everyone's taste. In the Preface to Robert Dodsley's 1748 handbook on education, *The Preceptor*, Samuel Johnson summarised the impulse both of the book, and of much of the age: "When therefore the obligations of morality are taught, let the sanctions of Christianity never be forgotten; by which it will be shown, that they give strength and lustre to each other, religion will appear to be the voice of reason, and morality the will of God."⁴² Johnson, however, concluded gloomily that "No man can be sure that his obedience and repentance will obtain salvation".⁴³ In 1756 George Horne of Magdalen, Oxford, wrote icily that Tillotson "makes Christianity good for nothing but to keep societies in order the better that there should be no Christ than that it should disturb societies".⁴⁴ And when William Wilberforce later referred to his mother as "what I should call an Archbishop Tillotson Christian", he had in mind the sort of professor whose confidence was in reason and right living – hardly a Christian at all, then, to Wilberforce's mind.⁴⁵

It is unsurprising that Evangelicals who had been marked by rigorism should frame the Christian conversion they underwent with the terminology of release and wonder, and then articulate Christian discipleship as a response of gratitude, as opposed to dread obligation. Salvation was an unearned gift, received by grace alone and through faith alone, and thus obedience was now an eager offering of the self to God. The testimony of bookseller James Hutton speaks to the novelty of evangelical doctrine in his world, and his personal experience of liberation in receiving it. An intimate of Whitefield and the Wesleys, and like the brothers and Venn the son of a High Church clergyman, Hutton declared in 1738 his joy in

⁴² Robert Dodsley, *The Preceptor* (London, 1748), 1, p. xxviii.

⁴³ James Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, ed. R.W. Chapman, 3rd edn (Oxford, 1976), p. 950.

⁴⁴ M.C. Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons and Republicans*, (London, 1981), p. 98. Horne would eventually rise to the See of Norwich, proof that revelation as well as reason still had its place within the Church.

⁴⁵ Robert and Samuel Wilberforce, *The Life of William Wilberforce* (5 vols, London, 1839), 1, p. 5.

discovering justifying faith: “This was to us all something so new, unexpected, joyful, penetrating.”⁴⁶ Here was an utterly captivating experience, the possession of a few which they longed to share with others. Whilst it had its leaders with their commanding personalities, networks, financial supporters and print industry, the revival’s success also depended upon it having something distinctively different to offer, to meet the needs of its hearers and to command their allegiance.

Venn’s journey to evangelical faith was a protracted one, a struggle bearing points of comparison with those of Grimshaw, Wesley and Whitefield, Romaine, Adam, Berridge and Stillingfleet. Each was shaped by the inherited religious cast of either home or university, and after a crisis period each made a decisive break from what they concluded was the barrenness of their lives and ministries, to embrace justification by faith alone. Venn’s years in Cambridge witnessed a growing concern about his own spiritual condition which no religious exertions could satisfy. Alongside reading Law, Venn maintained rigorist priorities, keeping a diary to record religious impressions, praying his prayers, and giving careful attention to his use of time.⁴⁷ The cheerful spirit which made Venn so attractive to many changed to a careworn appearance, and he would walk the cloisters of Trinity College on an evening, ruminating on eternity.⁴⁸ He gave away his cricket bat the day before his ordination, deeming it incompatible with a clergyman’s calling.⁴⁹

Venn later looked back on his ordination vows as having been made in unbelief, according to his Huddersfield friend William Moorhouse.⁵⁰ This was the course of his life, he estimated, for five years.⁵¹ Diary-keeping brought Venn a keener awareness of his shortcomings, whilst

⁴⁶ Daniel Benham, *Memoirs of James Hutton* (London, 1856), p. 28.

⁴⁷ In 1777 Venn commended diary-keeping to his son John as a highly effective, if not entirely comfortable, pursuit. Venn, *Letters*, p. 247.

⁴⁸ Venn, *Letters*, p. 14.

⁴⁹ Venn, *Annals*, pp. 70–71.

⁵⁰ Moorhouse, ‘Memoir’, p. 222.

⁵¹ Venn MSS, Acc.81/F32.

preaching only made him even more convinced of his hopeless state.⁵² Henry Venn junior dated the great change in his grandfather as occurring in 1748, but it is most unlikely that anything which would pass the standards of mid-century evangelicals had occurred by then.⁵³ Two comments by Venn in 1771 show his assessment of his younger self: in a letter to John Newton he wrote, “twenty-three years after I set out to escape from the wrath to come” (which would make it 1748), and Venn told his friend and Huddersfield convert James Kershaw that twenty years before he was “a witness, what pains a man may take to go to heaven, and yet be quite in the dark.”⁵⁴ Reflecting on that period in 1785, he said,

Well I remember, when, in the midst of great darkness respecting the Person, the work and office of my adored Redeemer - in the midst of utter ignorance of the Law and my own total corruption - I felt this desire, strong and urgent, from day to day: and it hath never departed from me, and never will!⁵⁵

In his four year Horsley ministry Venn was still reading Law and, with the exception of Thomas Broughton, had not had contact with any of evangelical persuasion.⁵⁶ When Law’s *Spirit of Love* was published in 1752 (followed by the second part in 1754), Venn was intensely disappointed in it, noting its absence of a reliance upon the atoning work of Christ, however imperfect his own understanding of it was then.⁵⁷ From Law Venn turned to a closer

⁵² Venn, *Letters*, pp. 247, 21.

⁵³ As a sort of frontispiece for notes prepared in 1838-39, Venn includes a list of clergy from 1734 (George Whitefield) to 1775 (John Scott), listed under the title of ‘Evangelical Statistics’. In smaller handwriting above the column of dates Venn writes ‘began to pr. Evang.’. His dating of his grandfather’s profession of faith at 1748 positions him in the earlier ranks of serious clergy, nearer therefore to Romaine, Walker and Adams than to Conyers, Fletcher, and Berridge, all listed in the 1750s. The grandson was most likely seeking to emphasise the perception of Venn as a pioneer in the evangelical movement, and this date adds nothing to the question of Venn senior’s appreciation of his conversion. Venn MSS, Acc.81/F53.

⁵⁴ Venn, *Letters*, p. 188.

⁵⁵ Venn, *Letters*, p. 15.

⁵⁶ The Rev. Thomas Broughton (1712-77), secretary of the SPCK, and vicar of Wotton, Surrey, a few miles over the Downs from Venn’s parish. For a biographical treatment, see Luke Tyerman, *The Oxford Methodists: memoirs of the Rev. Messrs. Clayton, Ingham, Gambold, Hervey and Broughton, with biographical notices of others* (London, 1819).

⁵⁷ “Unable to quit his hope in a vicarious sacrifice, Mr Law loosened the shackles his former works had imposed.” Moorhouse, ‘Memoir’, p. 222. John Venn concurs, offering, apparently from his father’s own lips: “Does Mr Law thus degrade the death of Christ, which the Apostles represent as a sacrifice for sins, and to which they ascribe the highest efficacy in procuring our salvation! Then farewell such a guide!” Henceforth I call no man master!” Venn, *Letters*, p. 20. For a treatment of Law’s reception by mid-century Evangelicals and others, see Isabel Rivers, ‘William Law and Religious Revival: The Reception of *A Serious Call*.’ *Huntington Library Quarterly*, Vol. 71, No. 4 (December, 2008), pp. 633-649.

study of the Scriptures.⁵⁸ “Five years had I been in the ministry before I preached what could do anyone good”, Venn told his son in 1784.⁵⁹ If Venn were looking back to his ordination year of 1747, then this dates his conversion in 1752. He told an unknown correspondent in 1762, “I am eight years entirely persuaded that I am to be saved.”⁶⁰ The best assessment of these comments (presuming upon the accuracy of Venn’s memory) establishes 1752 as the year of decisive spiritual change, followed by a deepening awareness of the unconditionality of grace which followed it, and a measure of assurance which he could identify two years later. Venn claimed that the quest was a largely solitary one, and both he and his biographer son after him put the emphasis on his embracing gospel truth without human assistance.⁶¹ At this stage he was an Arminian in regard to his understanding of the operation of grace.⁶²

Horsley was the focus of Venn’s lonely religious exercises and soul-searching before he took a tentative grasp of evangelical faith, although helped by his future wife, Eling Bishop, who had been awakened to her spiritual state whilst preparing for her first communion as a twenty year-old.⁶³ “Much concerned we both were to gain heaven, but very ignorant of the way”, said Venn. “We began our engagement as two Pilgrims seeking a better country”.⁶⁴ Eling noticed that her future husband’s zeal was outpacing hers, and, taken aback by changes in Venn in 1754, she told him, “I fancy I see you grown a different man from what you were when I first knew you and yet you seem to think it necessary to deny yourself even the least trifling amusement...”, and feared that he was becoming an “enthusiast”.⁶⁵ Eling was right to discern the signs of a radically different faith in Venn. Their course at Clapham and

⁵⁸ Venn, *Letters*, pp. 20, 21.

⁵⁹ Venn MSS, Acc.81/C1/11, Letter to John Venn, 10th February, 1784.

⁶⁰ Walsh, ‘Yorkshire Evangelicals’, p. 190.

⁶¹ Venn MSS, Acc.81/F32; Venn, *Letters*, p. 21.

⁶² Moorhouse, ‘Memoir’, p. 222.

⁶³ Venn said that she had been brought up with ‘barren religion, full of bitter wrath against all the Dissenters of the Church of England.’ Venn MSS, Acc.81/F2.

⁶⁴ Venn MSS, Acc.81/F2/.

⁶⁵ Venn MSS, Acc.81/C17/6, Eling Bishop to Henry Venn, 16th May, 1754.

beyond would teach them how to live out such convictions whilst trying to avoid unwanted associations of enthusiasm. Ultimately, they came to see themselves as the inheritors of the Church's true faith, nothing more.

The turnaround from his father's religion now complete, Venn's subsequent evangelical career was an endeavour to replace the tenets of the rigorism he inherited and pursued in his early ministry. In 1759 a seven page pamphlet appeared, addressed to the clergy of London. This was a response to a two page letter sent to the same three months earlier, and the pamphlet was printed with the letter as an appendix.⁶⁶ Although anonymous, the piece was ascribed to Venn.⁶⁷ Verification of authorship is impossible, but the tone and import of the pamphlet is highly consistent with those of *The Select Sermons* of the same year, and bear the zeal of the convert, and the ire of a man feeling the sting of opprobrium for his religion. Venn (assuming it is) quotes Articles IX-XIII on the fallen nature of man, and his inability to please God apart from faith, whilst acceptable works are uniquely the fruit of true faith.⁶⁸ Claiming parishioners as his mouthpiece, he points out how the pulpit in many churches directly contradicts the reading desk, with parishioners forced to seek preachers who would affirm the Articles, and insist on the impossibility of securing divine favour apart from regeneration, and the need for the Holy Spirit in the life of faith.⁶⁹ No evidence remains about the reception of the pamphlet, but it was typical of the indignation of Evangelicals at their parents' religion. For Venn it was something of a manifesto, declaring his newfound commitment to true orthodoxy as the only hope of ruined humanity, in keeping with his Church and the gospel of justification by grace alone through faith.

⁶⁶ [Henry Venn], *To the Reverend Clergy, who have taken upon them the cure of souls in the diocese of London, the humble remonstrance of some of their parishioners: occasioned by a certain paper, secretly handed about, called, An humble address to their (as yet uninfected) parishioners, to the beneficed clergy of the diocese of London, inserted by way of appendix* (n.p. London, 1759).

⁶⁷ The pamphlet is catalogued as of being likely Venn's authorship. Methodist Printed Collections, John Rylands Research Institute and Library (Wesley College, Bristol), University of Manchester. BD/WCB/IC/CB6/6.6.

⁶⁸ [Venn], *Reverend Clergy*, p. 4.

⁶⁹ [Venn], *Reverend Clergy*, pp. 5-7.

Venn and fellow Evangelicals now had ammunition against the moralism and the rigorism they had renounced, and a zeal to proclaim their faith as the true deposit of the Church. A decade after the pamphlet, Venn wrote that

“the Christianity generally preached and professed, is an insipid and unaffecting thing, nay absurd to the last degree, in requiring men to give up the natural sources of their pleasure, and to wage war with their inbred lusts, at the command of an unknown God without any promise or sense of a present pardon, or any certainty of future glory; at the same time making the poor defective performances of man, the great object he is to look at.”⁷⁰

The key words here are those which would be been disavowed by the propagators of his received religion: *without...any certainty, without any promise or sense of a present pardon, poor defective performances*. His own father’s rigorist religion was clearly in view.

Evangelicals were convinced that their faith exclusively offered certainty in the place of anxiety or speculation, and grounded itself on the confidence the believer might claim by faith in the finished work of Christ.

The Evangelicals thus presented the doctrine of justification by faith alone through grace alone, Luther’s *articulus aut stantis aut cadentis ecclesiae*, with triumph as the answer to the problems of the religion they had inherited, and gave no quarter where enemies were discerned. Whitefield was representative of early evangelical attacks on the religion Tillotson represented, and on the man himself, declaring in 1740 that he was compelled to “say again, as I have done before, that Archbishop Tillotson knew no more about true Christianity than Mahomet”.⁷¹ Whitefield took it upon himself to correct the Bishop of London, quoting back his teaching on conditional justification and admonishing him, that “had your Lordship

⁷⁰ Henry Venn, *Man a Condemned Prisoner, and Christ the stronghold to save him* (London, 1769), p. 26.

⁷¹ George Whitefield, *Three Letters from the Rev. G. Whitefield: viz. to a Friend in London, concerning Archbishop Tillotson* (Philadelphia, 1740), p. 2 (my italics). Whilst he never moved on his hostility to Tillotson’s religion, Whitefield later came to regret his *ad hominem* attacks. George Whitefield, *The Works of the Reverend George Whitefield, M.A.* (London, 1771), 4, p. 235.

insisted on your Clergy's preaching up good works as a necessary fruit and consequence, instead of a necessary condition of our being justified, your Lordship would have used your Authority aright.”⁷² Grimshaw responded at length to one of his chief detractors in 1749, asserting that justification by faith was the plain teaching of Scripture and of the Church, citing numerous New Testament texts and several of the Homilies to drive home his point.⁷³ Grimshaw was in no doubt that God “raised up the Methodists on purpose...to restore the church to her purity, and revive her Homilies and Articles, etc, out of the dust, and to purge her of that epidemical vice and wickedness which, as is everywhere observable, where the free-will heresy prevaieth, has most shamefully abounded.”⁷⁴ Evangelicals sought to oppose vice, and also to provide a sure ground for their hearers to live out their faith, confident that through it they would obtain salvation. Venn was now confident that his preaching of justification would bring succour to the heart as well as motivation for godly living. In his embrace of Calvinism he would come to have more assistance for his opposition to his old religion, as well as resources for the pastoral task in front of him.

⁷² George Whitefield, *The Bishop of London's pastoral letter answer'd by the Reverend Mr. George Whitefield* (London, 1739), p. 32.

⁷³ William Grimshaw, *An Answer to a sermon lately published against the Methodists, by George White* (Preston, 1749) pp. 19-30.

⁷⁴ Grimshaw, *Answer*, p. 16. Reference to free-will here is of course not to internecine Methodist-Evangelical debates, but to Grimshaw's perception that the Church had abandoned the sovereignty of God's grace in its insistence on the value of good works for salvation.

1.3. *Sermons on the Following Subjects* (1759): Venn's Declaration of Arrival

Venn published his *Sermons on the Following Subjects* in his final year of his London ministry, and dedicated them to the “Gentlemen of Clapham”, declaring himself “greatly obliged by the very many civilities and marks of friendship.”⁷⁵ Such comments masked the fact that these had not been uniformly happy years for the Venns, and the doctrines contained in the volume had been the cause of animosity towards them both. At this time Venn was likely conscious of other debts of friendship, to Samuel Walker and Thomas Haweis, and it may have been due to them that he secured the publishing services of Edward Dilly and John Townsend.⁷⁶ Although the market for sermon publication had significantly decreased from its high in the 1720s, the impulses and controversies of the revival brought new opportunities for preachers and publishers.⁷⁷ It is quite likely that Venn developed these sermons for the press in order to position himself in the coterie of gospel preachers who had an eye to the reviving of the capital and nation.

In 1762 Haweis published *Evangelical Principles and Practice*.⁷⁸ Like Venn's, the sermons were a line drawn under a tumultuous five year ministry from which he was dismissed due to his avowedly evangelical preaching, and were an attempt “to obviate the manifold misconceptions and misrepresentations which the author of them has lain under”, containing, he asserted, “all the grand points of Christianity.”⁷⁹ Venn had preached for Haweis in Oxford, and the pair might well have shared their aspirations to publish their sermons.⁸⁰ Both volumes

⁷⁵ Henry Venn, *Sermons on the Following Subjects*, 2nd edn (London, 1759), dedication page.

⁷⁶ Moorhouse, ‘Memoir’, p. 222. The Dillys published numerous Church of England Evangelicals in the mid-century, among them, Walker and Haweis. For all of the breadth of writers they worked with, the Dillys studiously avoided John Wesley, though published his detractors. Isabel Rivers, *Vanity Fair and the Celestial City: Dissenting, Methodist, and Evangelical Literary Culture in England 1720-1800* (Oxford, 2018), p. 25.

⁷⁷ For probable factors in this decline, see Jennifer Farooq, *Preaching in Eighteenth-Century London* (Woodbridge, 2013), pp. 57-64.

⁷⁸ Thomas Haweis, *Evangelical Principles and Practice: being fourteen sermons, preached in the parish-church of St Mary Magdalen in Oxford* (London, 1762).

⁷⁹ Haweis, *Principles*, p. 2. For Haweis' dismissal, see Reynolds, *Evangelicals*, pp. 32-33.

⁸⁰ Reynolds, *Evangelicals*, p. 28.

contain fourteen sermons framed in two halves: the plight of humanity before the Word of God, followed by the grace of salvation as offered in Christ, to be received by faith and pursued in obedience to the Law in evangelical holiness, in a happy state, both in this life, and in the world to come. Differences are obvious (Haweis, for example, devotes much more time to the Law, and puts greater emphasis on the grace to be received through the Lord's Supper), but these two works show a close overlapping of Moderate Calvinist convictions seeking vindication as the essence of true Church of England orthodoxy.

The *Sermons* represent Venn's views on core theological issues and on the nature of Christian ministry, neither of which he substantially deviated from for the rest of his life. Possibly, they were originally delivered with the zeal of the new convert which mitigated against the homiletical culture of politeness in Georgian England, and marked Venn as exhibiting enthusiasm, that "bugbear of decent and ordinary Anglicans".⁸¹ In truth, it is impossible to be confident about the extent to which the printed sermon matched the tone and even language of pulpit delivery.⁸² Venn was known for his extempore preaching at London, and then for the striking, animated style of his delivery in Huddersfield.⁸³ The *Sermons* are eloquent, logical and somewhat formal pieces, lacking the vivid illustrations of Whitefield, or the searching questions of Wesley or of Samuel Walker.⁸⁴ Nonetheless, there are flashes of fire in their substance, and they clearly show what Venn felt was new in his preaching, and was bound to bring both opposition as well as allegiances. His new-found attachment to the doctrines of the inability of the human will, justification by faith, including the then-current controversy over imputed righteousness, the new birth and sanctification, all framed with the

⁸¹ Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, p. 275. For the cultural context of mid-century preaching, see John P. Goring, 'Anglicanism, Enthusiasm and Quixotism: Preaching and Politeness in Mid-Eighteenth Century Literature', *Literature & Theology*, Vol.15, No.4 (2001), pp. 326-41, esp. p. 329.

⁸² For a discussion the transmission of the sermon from pulpit endeavour to print, see Keith Francis, William Gibson et al. (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of the British Sermon, 1689–1901* (Oxford, 2012), p. 116.

⁸³ Venn, *Letters*, pp. 367, 48.

⁸⁴ Francis & Gibson, *British Sermon*, pp. 121-2.

expectation that salvation could be personally known and enjoyed, gave Venn an urgency and pointedness in his work.

Venn arrived at Clapham a new believer in and minister of justification by faith alone. He joined the ranks of evangelical leaders committed to preaching this doctrine, and so it is unsurprising that the subject is treated in the opening sermon of the series, and in the collection's longest (the eleventh). The first sermon, *Salvation by the Cross of Christ, a Doctrine of Offence in All Ages*, explores the penal nature of Christ's suffering, and the single remedy of faith alone for the plight of humanity. Venn identifies the many detractors of his solafideism, and declares that the Gospel is foolishness to the proud and self-reliant, and only the power of God in Christ can and will save. The merits of Christ are received through his substitutionary, atoning work.⁸⁵ God is both the just and the justifier, reckoning the faith of the penitent sinner in the propitiatory work of Christ as his righteousness.⁸⁶ Justification by faith alone is the key, though opposed by the world, the visible church, and by those whose reliance is in their "qualities".⁸⁷ This sermon is clearly Venn's dialogue with his earlier theology.

In the eleventh sermon Venn focused on the hotly-contested interpretation of the work of Christ in justifying sinners through the imputation of his righteousness. By mid-century, imputation had become a significant fault-line between the Calvinist and Arminian wings of the revival.⁸⁸ Imputation, the declarative act of God in which Christ's satisfaction of the Law

⁸⁵ Venn, *Sermons*, p. 3.

⁸⁶ Venn, *Sermons*, pp. 6, 18-19.

⁸⁷ Venn, *Sermons*, p. 9.

⁸⁸ The doctrine was a feature among some early century divines: Chamberlain, 'Moralism', pp. 656-7. Nor was this simply an English preoccupation. In 1756 the Scot John Witherspoon published his short *Essay on the Connection Between the Doctrine of Justification by the Imputed Righteousness of Christ, and Holiness of Life* (Edinburgh, 1756). This popular work was re-published in 1764 along with his new piece, *A Treatise on Regeneration*. Each went through many reprints well into the following century, including an 1830 edition with an introduction by William Wilberforce, which shows that the issue was deemed by many to be central to the nature of saving faith.

of God in his passive and active obedience is reckoned to the believer's account through the response of faith, was the *sine qua non* of justification for men such as Whitefield, Hervey, Rowland and Richard Hill, and for Venn. In his *Theron and Aspasio*, which was at the centre of the imputation debate, Hervey said "Justification is an act of God's Almighty grace; whereby he acquits his people from guilt, and accounts them righteous, for the sake of Christ's righteousness, which was wrought out for them, and he imputed to them," and in a footnote counsels his reader to wait for a fuller explanation of why justification is more than the pardon of sins.⁸⁹ Hervey had Wesley in his sights, who, in the minutes of the 1744 Conference, had declared that justification meant "to be pardoned and received into God's favour," adding that "we do not find it expressly in Scripture that God imputes the righteousness of Christ to any."⁹⁰ For Wesley, such a view made justification a conceit, where the believer is claimed to wear a righteousness which he does not in fact possess. In the fifth of the *Standard Sermons, On Justification by Faith*, Wesley asserted, "Least of all does justification imply, that God is deceived in those whom he justifies; that he thinks them to be what in fact they are not; that he accounts them to be otherwise than they are."⁹¹ Above all, Wesley's animosity towards the doctrine and its champions was due to his view that Hervey's distinguishing the active and passive obedience of Christ was an artificial one, distracting the worshipper from the Cross, and leading to antinomianism:⁹² "the nice, metaphysical doctrine...leads not to repentance, but to licentiousness."⁹³

This is the concern which Venn addressed in the sermon, *Personal Obedience and Imputed Righteousness not to be Seperated* [sic], an attempt to expound imputation as the grounds for

⁸⁹ James Hervey, *Theron and Aspasio, or, A Series of Dialogues and Letters on the Most Interesting and Important Subjects* (3 vols, London, 1755), 1 p. 49.

⁹⁰ John Wesley, *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley* (10 vols, New York, 1826), 5, p. 49.

⁹¹ Albert C. Outler (ed), *The Works of John Wesley, 1, Sermons 1, 1-33* (Nashville, 1984), p. 188.

⁹² John Wesley, *A Treatise on Justification: extracted from Mr. John Goodwin* (Bristol, 1765), p. 27.

⁹³ John Wesley, *The Miscellaneous Works of the Rev. John Wesley* (10 vols, New York, 1827) 10, p. 190.

Christian living. Already attuned to the external dangers to as well as tensions within the evangelical movement, in asserting that belief in imputation was no detractor from righteous conduct, Venn was trying to cool a hot-tempered debate. Venn most likely encountered and embraced this teaching through reading Hervey, and would have thoroughly concurred with Whitefield's treatment of it in his sermon *The Lord our Righteousness*.⁹⁴ Romaine, another of his Oxford friends, preached before the university on the 20th March, 1757, saying that "Christ's righteousness can be made ours only by imputation. As our sins were actually imputed to him, so his righteousness is actually imputed to us."⁹⁵ The explicit articulation of the two-fold obedience of Christ was a staple of many post-Reformation reformed confessions and English Puritans, and the doctrine of imputation is present in the Church's *Homily of Salvation*; but having quoted from the Church's 11th Article and accompanying *Homily on Justification*, Romaine was subsequently excluded from preaching again to the University.⁹⁶

In the eleventh sermon Venn affirms the central necessity of imputation. To his mind there was no alternative other than trusting in a righteousness of one's own, spurred by pride and Satan and opposing clearly-revealed truth.⁹⁷ Venn puts more effort into exploring and warning against the danger of taking sides belligerently in the debate than he does in expounding his own position in great detail. Nonetheless, imputation for Venn was in effect justification *in toto*. Throughout the sermon he refers to *imputed righteousness* when *righteousness* itself would convey just the same sense.⁹⁸ A decade later, he was still saying the same. In his 1769 sermon, *Man a Condemned Prisoner*, Venn insisted on the imputation of Christ's active and passive obedience for the salvation of the sinner, the point on which

⁹⁴ George Whitefield, *The Lord our Righteousness, A Sermon* (Boston, 1742).

⁹⁵ William Romaine, *The Whole Works of the Late Reverend William Romaine, A.M* (London, 1837), p. 789.

⁹⁶ For imputation in Owen, see John Owen, *Works* (London, 1826), 3, pp. 204-5.

⁹⁷ Venn, *Sermons*, p. 286.

⁹⁸ For example, Venn, *Sermons*, pp. 282, 285, 286.

Wesley was so derisory in his engagement with Hervey.⁹⁹ Christ obeyed the Law and thus fulfilled all righteousness, and then atoned for all wrong-doing in shedding his blood vicariously.¹⁰⁰ It is because of his federal headship as the Second Adam and his being the divine Lord that Christ is able to impute his righteousness to all believers.¹⁰¹ This classically Calvinistic formulation most likely suggests that Venn was a close reader of Hervey, and likely an eager student of the tradition he had adopted.

The doctrine of the Cross, the nature of faith and the necessity of obedience for the believer were the key points for the Evangelicals, and their energies went into demonstrating how the doctrines interlocked. The younger Venn and others from a rigorist background had been taught by Allestree's *The Whole Duty of Man* and the writings of Law that the awakened soul must seek power for obedience to God's demands, not the unconditional salvation through faith alone in Christ, according to the old Calvinistic or the new evangelical schema.¹⁰² In the *Sermons* Venn explores the nature of evangelical faith, and sets forth a vision for the obedience of the believer which is far removed from moralism, and also clear of the charge of antinomianism.

Much of Venn's treatment of faith is found in Sermon IV. Faith is not mere assent to Scripture teaching, but the "confident trust and abiding dependence of the heart on the Gospel."¹⁰³ This emphasis on the response of heart and will to the propositions of Scripture was a classically reformed and Puritan formulation, and was the key characteristic of Venn's

⁹⁹ Henry Venn, *Man a Condemned Prisoner, and Christ the Stronghold to save him: being the Substance of a sermon Preached at the assizes held at Kingston, in Surry; before The Hon. Sir Sidney Stafford Smythe, one of the Barons of his Majesty's Court of Exchequer, on Thursday March 16, 1769* (London, 1769).

¹⁰⁰ Venn, *Condemned*, p. 11.

¹⁰¹ Venn, *Condemned*, pp. 12-13.

¹⁰² The title of Chapter 10 - "The necessity of divine grace obligeth all Christians to a constant purity and holiness of conversation" - is indicative of how Law repeatedly speaks of grace. William Law, *A Practical Treatise on Christian Perfection* (London, 1726), p. 319. Allestree's comment about grace, that "we must be especially careful to husband and improve it", typifies its functional nature in the believer's life in *The Whole Duty*. [Allestree], *The Whole Duty*, p. 170.

¹⁰³ Venn, *Sermons*, p. 88, cf. p. 164.

treatment in *The Complete Duty*, on which he got to work shortly after publishing the *Sermons*.¹⁰⁴ After exploring Hebrews 11.1 and 13 and Hebrews 3.14, Venn concludes that gospel faith is the “immoveable persuasion that the grace, righteousness and salvation revealed therein are the greatest realities.”¹⁰⁵ It is God’s gift, received in response to prayer for it.¹⁰⁶ Faith is evidenced by strong confidence in God, and a joyful posture in the earthly life.¹⁰⁷ In Sermon IX, Venn insists that with the gift of forgiveness to the penitent sinner, “he may be assured he is actually received into a state of grace and favour”.¹⁰⁸

Arrayed in this faith, the believer can be utterly confident of his safety.¹⁰⁹ But how so? The topic of assurance needed exceptionally careful handling, as it had associations with both historic and current excesses of both enthusiasm and indolence. “The presumptuous doctrine of the assurance of pardon, present and future, and the certainty of salvation...does naturally fill the head with spiritual pride, and induces a false and fatal security, to the neglect of future endeavours,” warned the Welsh cleric Theophilus Evans seven years before.¹¹⁰ Venn proceeds with caution. He maintains that assurance is offered to all in Christ through the promises of the Scriptures, and, far from encouraging enthusiasm, it actually guards against it.¹¹¹ Nonetheless, Venn does not suggest that assurance and faith are exactly coterminous. Faith for him is the confident and conscious possession of the promises of God in Christ, discovered in the Scriptures.¹¹² The Holy Spirit brings the promises of Scripture to the heart

¹⁰⁴ John Owen, greatly esteemed by Venn, defined faith as “a gracious resting upon the free promises of God in Jesus Christ for mercy, with a firm persuasion of heart that God is a reconciled Father to us in the Son of his love.” Owen, *Works*, 5, p. 28. Compare this with Venn: “Faith in Jesus is determined precisely to mean the reliance of the heart on him for help and deliverance.” Venn, *Complete Duty*, p. 81.

¹⁰⁵ Venn, *Sermons*, p. 95.

¹⁰⁶ Venn, *Sermons*, p. 96.

¹⁰⁷ Venn, *Sermons*, pp. 96-7.

¹⁰⁸ Venn, *Sermons*, pp. 235.

¹⁰⁹ Venn, *Sermons*, p. 101.

¹¹⁰ Theophilus Evans, *The History of Modern Enthusiasm, from the Reformation to the Present Times* (London, 1752), p. 77.

¹¹¹ Venn, *Sermons*, p. 239, cf. p. 329.

¹¹² Venn, *Sermons*, pp. 238-9.

of the believer, and thereby imparts an assurance of God's forgiveness and love.¹¹³ Thus, assurance is a part of true Christianity, but always and exclusively as the result of the objective promises of the Bible.

The clearest evidence of true faith is not in its appropriation, but in a life of obedience resulting from it. Obedience is "the distinguishing mark, whereby the disciples of Christ are known."¹¹⁴ Whilst Venn acknowledges the necessity of the Spirit's work, Law-keeping for the regenerate is consistently framed as led by the impulse of gratitude to the love of Christ.¹¹⁵ Furthermore, certainty of salvation, far from creating indifference to Law-keeping, produces the opposite, and is "an incentive to increasing obedience and true holiness of heart and life, powerful above every other."¹¹⁶ In Sermon VI, Venn deals with Arminian objections that a confidence of salvation could well lead to an indolent profession, a perennial objection to evangelical preaching in general, and to Moderate Calvinist ministry in particular.¹¹⁷ By stressing the dependent nature of faith, Venn portrays a believer who is stirred up with love for the Saviour he moment by moment looks to, with the obedience of self-denial flowing from this faith.¹¹⁸ Obedience is glad, and shaped by the constraining love of Christ.¹¹⁹

In the memoir of his father, son John noted with evident approval that in his Huddersfield ministry Venn was charged with preaching faith at the expense of insisting on works, and yet the lives of his converts were "so strict and exemplary that they were accused of carrying holiness to an excessive length."¹²⁰ Venn insisted on the primacy of the Law, as both the

¹¹³ Venn, *Sermons*, p. 320.

¹¹⁴ Venn, *Sermons*, p. 20.

¹¹⁵ For instance, see Venn, *Sermons*, p. 25.

¹¹⁶ Venn, *Sermons*, p. 239.

¹¹⁷ Haweis' twelfth sermon, *The Necessity of Personal Holiness*, concludes that justifying grace is accompanied by the grace of humility and zeal, each furnishing the believer's heart for a consecrated life, without which there is no salvation. Haweis, *Principles*, pp. 281-2.

¹¹⁸ Venn, *Sermons*, p. 161.

¹¹⁹ The same theme of holiness due to constraint is in Venn, *Sermons*, p. 301.

¹²⁰ Venn, *Letters*, p. 27.

schoolmaster to lead the wounded soul to his Saviour, and as the way by which the convert must honour his Lord. The Law as the rule of life for the believer was a standard Puritan position.¹²¹ So intrinsic was obedience to authentic Christian faith that Ezekiel Hopkins, Restoration-era Bishop of Derry, could say, “our obedience to the Law is the only sound evidence that we can have for our right to the promises of the Gospel.”¹²² With that Venn concurred: “where personal obedience is neglected to the last, there can be no salvation”, since this is a blasphemous denial of the work of the Holy Spirit.¹²³ This was a strong emphasis of the Moderates, and one which distinguished them from what they would have regarded as the aridity of Hyper-Calvinism.¹²⁴ In the penultimate sermon of the series, *On the Judgement of the Last Day*, Venn asserts the necessity of good works for those in the Book of Life. Such Law-keeping is “the Golden Medium...between Pharisaic boasting...and the more Satanical doctrine of the antinomians, which sets the moral Law at defiance, and blasphemes Christ.”¹²⁵ Those, he says, who have adorned their gospel faith with good works may be assured of a rich reward.¹²⁶

Venn was well aware of Wesley’s and others’ claims that the doctrine of imputed righteousness led to antinomian tendencies.¹²⁷ Far from conceding that a trust in Christ’s imputed righteousness obviated the need for holiness - “a monstrous perversion of the atonement”¹²⁸ - Venn insisted that it “eminently secures to God the highest veneration of his

¹²¹ Ernest F. Kevan, *The Grace of Law: A Study in Puritan Theology* (Ligonier, 1993).

¹²² Ezekiel Hopkins, *The Works of Ezekiel Hopkins*, ed. Charles W. Quick (3 vols, Morgan, PA, 1993), 1, pp. 537-38.

¹²³ Venn, *Sermons*, pp. 296, 292.

¹²⁴ In concluding the first sermon, Venn insisted that “the doctrine...of Christ crucified in all its parts ever be the chief subject of our sermons, and every moral duty be enforced, as connected with it.” Venn, *Sermons*, p. 27. Compare an echo of Venn’s phrasing in the ninth sermon: whilst putting all of his trust in the active obedience and penal suffering of Christ, the believer will “strongly maintain the absolute necessity of living in the constant performance of every moral duty”. Venn, *Sermons*, p. 304. Hyper-Calvinism was a Dissenting far more than an Anglican phenomenon. See Peter Toon, *The Emergence of Hyper-Calvinism in English Nonconformity, 1689-1765* (Eugene, 2011), esp. chapters 3-5; Hindmarsh, *Newton*, pp. 119-211.

¹²⁵ Venn, *Sermons*, pp. 360-1.

¹²⁶ Venn, *Sermons*, pp. 361-2.

¹²⁷ John Telford (ed), *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley* (8 vols, London, 1960), 3, p. 386.

¹²⁸ Venn, *Sermons*, p. 289.

Law, impresses the mind with the strongest abhorrence of sin, and furnishes it with the noblest motives for the highest gratitude and love.”¹²⁹ One notes the vehemence of Venn’s language, aware as he was that this was a controversial area. To claim salvation without knowing the compulsion to obey the Law of God is a blasphemy against the Holy Ghost, “which render his operations unnecessary.”¹³⁰ Venn explains that the Scriptures not only show the false hopes of an obedience without reliance upon Christ’s righteousness, but demonstrate the “necessary union” between imputed righteousness and obedience. Texts from the Epistles are martialled to argue that the one is frequently mentioned immediately alongside the other, and both are commanded, Venn concluding that “you will find that very Redeemer requiring Obedience, as much as Faith”.¹³¹ Additionally, Venn says that many verses insist on obedience as the sum of the Christian life, whereas numerous others say nothing of obedience, but put all the emphasis on faith in Christ.¹³² The effect of which is to underline that both are essential for salvation.

The reader is struck by the lack of emphasis given to the church’s life and sacraments. Baptism is mentioned just twice in the sermons, necessary for all, as “a declaration of natural and acquired guilt,” and thereby a sign of the need for justification (and not a declaration of first justification, as in the conditional schema).¹³³ When the Lord’s Supper is mentioned (on two occasions), it is in the context of challenging the complacency of professors who trust in receiving it.¹³⁴ It would be wrong, though, to assess these comments and the few mentions of the liturgy as evidencing Venn’s low esteem of his church. He had no desire to build a case

¹²⁹ Venn, *Sermons*, p. 291.

¹³⁰ Venn, *Sermons*, p. 293.

¹³¹ Venn, *Sermons*, p. 300.

¹³² Venn, *Sermons*, p. 302.

¹³³ Venn, *Sermons*, p. 102.

¹³⁴ Venn, *Sermons*, pp. 74, 334.

for his church, and, equally, no wish to disparage it. His discovery was the nature of free grace, and this message shaped his preaching and its priorities.

Venn knew that the preaching of solafideism was an unpopular novelty to most, with Roman Catholics and “multitudes amongst the Reformed” putting their confidence before God in morality, instead.¹³⁵ The first and last sermons in the volume address this problem. Venn declares that opposition to this doctrine in the Church was owing to its being seen as an enemy of morality and good works, “as if there was no method of securing the practice of universal holiness,”¹³⁶ but Venn insists that through this preaching righteousness is established.¹³⁷

The *Sermons* represent Venn’s discovery of evangelical religion and ministry, and his settling into its Moderate Calvinist expression. They show Venn’s indebtedness to those who shaped his thinking in the Clapham years, and his positioning of his own views within the breadth of those of other early revival leaders. The *Sermons* were the seedbed of all of Venn’s subsequent ministry, and their doctrines are apparent in unchanged form in *The Complete Duty* (which was begun even before the *Sermons* were published) and in subsequent printed works. Whilst Venn was discouraged at the lack of fruit of his Clapham years, he might claim John Thornton as a convert, and the philanthropy of the man considered by his peers to be the wealthiest man in Europe would resource evangelical activity as the century progressed.¹³⁸

John Venn would preach substantially the same doctrines fifty years later in the same parish,

¹³⁵ Venn, *Sermons*, pp. 7-8. The sense of “Reformed” here is Protestant, ie the inheritors of the Reformation, rather than specifically Calvinists.

¹³⁶ Venn, *Sermons*, p. 10. In his novel *Humphry Clinker* (1771), Smollett has a character in London promise a loved one a gift of “a sarment upon the nothingness of good works, which was preached in the Tabernacle.” Smollett is referring to Whitefield or a devotee of his at Moorfields, and most likely capturing the often misheard - or easily slandered – doctrine of justification by faith alone. Tobias Smollett, *Humphry Clinker*, ed. Angus Ross, (London, 1967), p. 188.

¹³⁷ Venn, *Sermons*, p. 26.

¹³⁸ For Thornton, see Roshan Allpress, ‘Making philanthropists: entrepreneurs, evangelicals and the growth of philanthropy in the British world, 1756–1840’ (D.Phil. thesis, University of Oxford, 2015), pp. 81-141.

and they would be ministered to the men and their families who came to be known as the Clapham Sect. The new doctrines of Venn's pulpit would become the staples of much of Victorian religion.

In this collection Venn is presenting what might be called *experimental religion*. Careful as he was to safeguard himself against the subjectivism of the enthusiast, Venn challenged his parishioners to enter into an experience of what he considered transformative, authentic Christianity, true faith as a settled persuasion of the truth of the gospel, accompanied by joy and thankfulness: "Faith which bringeth salvation, hath much of the affections engaged in it," and is "a cheerful determination of the will".¹³⁹ Such an experience is offered to all: "you are commanded to take the experiment."¹⁴⁰ Believers are said to "taste continually the exalted pleasures which result from doing the will of God".¹⁴¹ This is Venn's heart religion framed by what he saw in the Church's reformed Articles. For those who follow him, Venn can assure them that, "fired with active gratitude, and love unfeigned, your soul will magnify the Lord by every expression of dutiful subjection, and your soul will rejoice in God your Saviour."¹⁴² Four years later the publication of *The Complete Duty of Man* would see Moderate Calvinism's clearest expression as an eminently *practical* religion, the expression, Venn hoped, of the joyful, assured believer.

¹³⁹ Venn, *Sermons*, p. 90. Cf. pp. 91-2, where conversion is couched all in terms of experience.

¹⁴⁰ Venn, *Sermons*, p. 131.

¹⁴¹ Venn, *Sermons*, p. 331, cf. pp. 22, 376.

¹⁴² Venn, *Sermons*, p. 215.

1.4 Venn and Moderate Calvinism

Mid-way through Venn's tenure in Clapham he became a Calvinist, and for the rest of his life identified as what was called a *Moderate Calvinist*. What follows is an exploration of the origins, shape and import of the movement Venn came to associate with, that of Moderate Calvinism, and how he himself came into its fold.

Few if any called Moderate Calvinists were conscious disciples of the Calvin, nor was there any reason why they would be acquainted with the writings of the reformer first-hand, or even fully in agreement with the majority of his doctrine. Whitefield had read none of Calvin's writings by 1740.¹⁴³ It is questionable whether any of his generation, Venn included, had done so as they came to Calvinistic position and they had little personal desire to be identified with Calvin himself. After all, amongst their Stuart forebears, *Calvinist* often meant little more than an aversion to Arminian doctrine or to its adherents, whether those given the title styled themselves Calvinists or not. Some of the Reformed disavowed that label as they felt too closely aligned with one Reformer and the specifics of his beliefs, preferring instead to identify with the broader streams of reformed faith and piety, Continental and English.¹⁴⁴

The Hanoverian Moderate Calvinists were evangelicals united in a commitment to single predestination as taught in Article XVII of the Church of England. Eschewing speculation about the doctrine, they sought to minister it in the spirit of the Article, "full of sweet, pleasant, and unspeakable comfort to godly persons".¹⁴⁵ Much talk of predestination was bound to invite unwelcome associations with erstwhile Puritans or with contemporary Dissent, neither of which was wanted. Venn was typical of the Moderates, in that whilst he was convinced of his Calvinism, he felt little need to advertise or even to contend for it,

¹⁴³ George Whitefield, Preface to *Sermons on Various Important Subjects* (Boston, 1741).

¹⁴⁴ Griesel, 'John Edwards', p. 153.

¹⁴⁵ *The Book of Common Prayer* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, n.d.), p. 618.

beyond the realms of what he believed was pastoral necessity. For all of the comforts its professors claimed to enjoy in believing it, Calvinism appeared all too deterministic in an age which set a high value on reason and freedom. Also, a Calvinist clergyman ran the risk of bringing unnecessary conflict into a parish, even of being seen to be nurturing an *ecclesiola in ecclesia*, of like-minded saints within the parish, which was, in theory, itself a true church of Christ.¹⁴⁶

Venn's journey to identifying with Calvinism as his own religion was typical of a number of his generation. Mid-century Calvinism was often a young man's faith, and rebellion, marking him out from his parents' religion, and often prepared for it by the hardships of seeking certainty of salvation. Personal dissatisfaction with inherited piety (either via gradual or crisis-related experiences) led these men to embrace the proffered certainties of sovereign grace experienced through justification, and gave impetus for true piety and assertive ministry. Whitefield spoke of his religion as "a thorough, real, inward change of nature, wrought in us by the powerful operations of the Holy Spirit, conveyed to and nourished in our hearts, by a constant use of all of the means of grace, evidenced by a good life, and bringing forth the fruits of the Spirit."¹⁴⁷ This was for Whitefield religion from above, vitally present in the believer, and outwardly evidenced in good works.

Whilst Venn became an evangelical in Horsley, it was in Clapham that he became a Calvinist. The dating of Venn's arrival at Moderate Calvinist convictions is difficult. The Independent William Moorhouse of Huddersfield, whose new chapel received much of Venn's old congregation on his departure, traced Venn's struggle from the "darkness" of

¹⁴⁶ See Grayson Carter, *Anglican Evangelicals: Protestant Secessions from the Via Media, c.1800-1850* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 39-40.

¹⁴⁷ George Whitefield, *The Benefits of an Early Piety. A sermon preached at Bow-Church, London, before the Religious Societies, At One of their Quarterly Meetings, on Wednesday, September 28, 1737* (London, 1737), p. 6.

Law's religion, through the Arminianism of Wesleyan universal redemption and free will, to what Moorhouse saw as the full Calvinian light of humanity's natural inability and particular redemption.¹⁴⁸

With his move to the capital, Venn's interest in the Oxford Evangelicals, surely piqued through Thomas Broughton, led to key friendships. Venn gained entrance into the Countess of Huntingdon's circles in 1754, and thus to a coterie of friends for the course of his life. In the same year he began correspondence with John Wesley, even asking for advice about a new ministry position before Clapham became available, and two years later he attended Wesley's conference at Bristol.¹⁴⁹ Both Wesleys visited the Venns in 1756.¹⁵⁰ In 1755 Whitefield preached twice in Clapham Church and was thereafter a regular preaching guest in John Thornton's house, preaching again for Venn in the next two years.¹⁵¹ Venn's parishioners must have been startled to see their curate's new company, and to hear Venn's new sermons (though no record survives of their reactions). In 1756 Venn was introduced to Risdon Darracott, Independent minister in Cornwall and then Somerset, friend of Samuel Walker of Truro and favourite pupil of Philip Doddridge.¹⁵² In Darracott he found an evangelical of Dissenting convictions, a new thing for him. Darracott was possibly the means of Venn's introduction to Walker, who would later visit his Clapham home.

At some point Venn began a lifelong friendship with Haweis, protégé of Walker, and later curate of the Rev. Joseph Jane at St Mary Magdalene, Oxford, (1757-62). Moorhouse's biography avoids mentioning Haweis by name (presumably aware that he was unpopular in

¹⁴⁸ Moorhouse, 'Memoir's, pp. 221-3.

¹⁴⁹ Edwin Sidney, *The Life and Ministry of the Rev. Samuel Walker, B.A., Formerly of Truro, Cornwall* (London, 1838), p. 228.

¹⁵⁰ Kenneth G.C. Newport & Gareth Lloyd, (eds), *The Letters of Charles Wesley: A Critical Edition, with Introduction and Notes: Volume 1 (1728-1756)*, (Oxford, 2013), p. 413.

¹⁵¹ George Whitefield, *A Select Collection of Letters of the Late Reverend George Whitefield*, (3 vols., , 1772), 3.194, 227.

¹⁵² Doddridge called Darracott "his crown of rejoicing". J. Bennet, *The Star of the West: being the Memoirs of the Life of R. Darracott* (Brookfield, 1829), p. 91.

many parts of the evangelical constituency at the close of the century) but makes it abundantly obvious whom he means.¹⁵³ He ascribed Venn's journey into Calvinism to the influence of Haweis.¹⁵⁴ Venn told Moorhouse how he tried to outmanoeuvre Haweis' predestinarianism in their Clapham conversations - "Allow me...to be more than a stone" – but Venn searched the Scriptures, and changed his mind.¹⁵⁵

Not, it appears, before a pointed intervention from the Countess of Huntingdon herself. A great admirer and supporter of Venn - "my dear fellow pilgrim" is a frequent form of address in a key 1757 letter¹⁵⁶ - after Venn's preaching tour in Gloucestershire with Whitefield, Madan and others, she felt that whatever gospel light he had at this stage, it was all too dim: "cling not to such beggarly elements, such filthy rags mere cobwebs of Pharisical pride, but look to him who hath wrought out a perfect righteousness for his people". Venn seems to have been moving towards a Calvinistic position before the Countess's expostulation. A collapse of health in 1756 (quite likely, the result of overwork and nervous strain), further refined his beliefs.¹⁵⁷ Walker, who had preached for Venn in 1758, was relieved to report to Thomas Adam that Venn "was still of late a sort of dependent on J. Wesley, now brought to believe for himself".¹⁵⁸ By this time, Walker had been opposing Wesley's tenets for five years, and so must have been delighted at Venn's declaration.¹⁵⁹

Where Venn was now treading, Eling was close behind. Her letters to her then-fiancé reveal a highly anxious disposition, which probably added to her distress as she wrestled with the doctrines of election and assurance.¹⁶⁰ Eling's struggles were probably intensified by her

¹⁵³ Moorhouse speaks of "a friend from Oxford, whom he had pressed to spend some time with him", and then describes him as a convert of Walker, and a Calvinist. Moorhouse, 'Memoir', p. 222.

¹⁵⁴ Moorhouse, 'Memoir', p. 223.

¹⁵⁵ Moorhouse, 'Memoir', p. 222.

¹⁵⁶ Venn MSS, Acc.81/C16/1, Letter from the Countess of Huntingdon to Henry Venn, 2nd February. 1757.

¹⁵⁷ Venn, *Letters*, p. 25.

¹⁵⁸ Sidney, *Walker*, p. 435.

¹⁵⁹ Davies, *Cornish Evangelicals*, pp. 71ff; also, pp. 88-129.

¹⁶⁰ An example of this is a letter from Eling, Venn MSS, Acc.81/C16A/11, 17th September, 1755.

keeping company at that time with the Wesleys and other Methodists whilst moving away from their Arminianism, but she entered their marriage a Calvinist, and kept her fiery (and not always popular) character and her strong beliefs until her death.

The Venn's appropriation of Calvinism in a mixed evangelical coterie taught him the value of commonality, and doubtless sharpened Venn's appreciation of how to handle his new beliefs without risking unnecessary antagonism. This skill would serve him well in his relationship with Wesley and his followers in the early years of the Huddersfield ministry. Venn's temperament was attuned to the sensibilities of others, and he never relished conflict (unlike some fellow evangelicals). In fact, in 1756 Venn confided to Eling that since coming amongst evangelicals he was "repelled" by the strife he observed amongst them, be that the preoccupation with election amongst the followers of Whitefield, or the infatuation with perfectionism. It would have been enough, he said, to drive him from all Christian company, had he not been constrained by a personal experience of grace.¹⁶¹ There would, of course, be many more exacting situations ahead for them both.

Venn carefully distinguished his Calvinism from High Calvinism, which "stops up every avenue: sin, the Law, holiness, experience, are all nothing. Predestination cancels the necessity of any change, and dispenses at once with all duty."¹⁶² Whilst this was never a significant problem in the Church, Venn would have been well aware of predestinarian quarrels in Dissent, and knew that it offered an easy caricature of Calvinism to its detractors, and was the subject of attacks from Wesley and his followers. When he later declared to James Stillingfleet in 1772, "as to Calvinism, you know I am moderate", Venn was not distancing himself from the tenets of the reformed faith, but safeguarding what was for him a biblical and balanced theological system from an extreme one, and also most likely signalling

¹⁶¹ Venn MSS, Acc.81/C16A/8, Letter to Eling Venn, 24th July, 1756.

¹⁶² Venn, *Letters*, p. 34.

a desire to live out those convictions.¹⁶³ In this regard, as in many, Venn and Newton were of one mind, and each equally cautious about handling their beliefs: As Newton reportedly declared, “Calvinism should be diffused through our ministry as sugar is in tea; it should be tasted everywhere though prominent nowhere.”¹⁶⁴ This emphasis on moderation was, of course, a particularly eighteenth century one.

Venn’s Calvinistic ministry was the commending of an interpretation of core Scriptural teaching which brought sense and comfort to the pains of human experience. John Venn’s assessment of his father was that he came to Calvinist convictions “from a practical sense of his own unworthiness.”¹⁶⁵ Bruised by encounters with Haweis, Whitefield and the Countess, and probably chastened by opposition to and disinterest in his parochial ministry, Venn would have identified with his friend William Romaine’s earlier youthful attachment to Arminianism, and likely agreed with Romaine’s dismissal of it: “sweet food to a proud heart”.¹⁶⁶ Like the many who made the journey into Moderate Calvinism mid-century, Venn’s new convictions were less an assent to naked theological propositions, and more the making sense of the trials of experience and of God’s saving grace, whilst seeing other friends profess a different reading of saving grace.¹⁶⁷ Bunyan’s confession about his early ministry is apparent in Venn’s, too: “I preached what I felt, what I smartingly did feel”.¹⁶⁸

Many identified with the same laboured path to such beliefs. Newton, evangelical Calvinist *par excellence*, sagely commented after his twenty years of Calvinist faith, “I believe that most persons who are alive to God sooner or later meet with some pinches in their experience

¹⁶³ Venn, *Letters*, p. 33.

¹⁶⁴ John H. Pratt (ed), *The Thought of the Evangelical leaders: notes of the discussions of the Eclectic Society, London during the years 1798-1814* (London, 1856), p. 281. Compare Newton’s comment in Richard Cecil (ed), *The Works of Rev. John Newton in Six Volumes* (London, 1824), 6, pp.245-6.

¹⁶⁵ Venn, *Letters*, p. 32.

¹⁶⁶ William Romaine, *The Whole Works of the Late Reverend William Romaine, A.M.*, (London, 1837), p. 716.

¹⁶⁷ Venn, *Sermons*, pp. 215, 275.

¹⁶⁸ H. Stebbing (ed), *The Entire Works of John Bunyan* (4 vols, London, 1859), 1, p. 36.

which constrain them to flee to those doctrines for relief, which perhaps they had formerly dreaded, if not abhorred...In this way I was made a Calvinist myself.”¹⁶⁹ Speaking of election, Berridge of Everton said in 1768 “a furnace is the proper school to learn this doctrine in, and there I learnt it...as I learnt to loathe myself, I learnt to prize this grace.”¹⁷⁰ Converted seven years after his ordination in 1745, Romaine framed his experience of saving grace as “very deep discoveries of my own legal heart”, and of the resisting of the Spirit due to his pride, making for slow and painful progress.¹⁷¹ Calvinism was the terminus of distressed souls and deeply-reflective minds, and thereby became the locus of heart religion which typified the Moderate Calvinist impulse.¹⁷²

After their own inward struggles in coming to this position, the Moderate Calvinists had to get used to being singled out as objects of hostility.¹⁷³ For a clergy and laity conditioned for a century to see neo-Arminianism as eminently reasonable and Calvinism as patently wrong, such antipathy was inevitable. That Calvinism in its moderate form grew to be a force in the Church was testimony to the skills of its adherents in ministering a religion which was, in Newton’s phrase, “consonant to scripture, reason (when enlightened), and experience”.¹⁷⁴ The Moderate Calvinists were inheritors, not innovators. It has long been asserted that the Church and universities of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries were expunged of their once ubiquitous Calvinism after the Restoration.¹⁷⁵ The Great Ejection purged the

¹⁶⁹ Newton, *Works*, 6, p. 279.

¹⁷⁰ John Berridge, *The Christian World Unmasked: Come, Peep and Pray* (London, 1773), pp. 179-80.

¹⁷¹ Romaine, *Whole Works*, p. 716.

¹⁷² James Bean, *Zeal without Innovation* (London, 1808), pp. 61-62.

¹⁷³ E.g., John Berridge, *The Works of the Rev. John Berridge, with an Enlarged Memoir of His Life*, ed. Richard Whittingham (London, 1838), p. 332.

¹⁷⁴ John Newton, *The Works of the Rev. John Newton* (London, 1824), 6, p. 278. The phrase “according to Scripture, reason and experience” was a favourite of Wesley, and so it seems likely that in using it, Newton was doubly underlining his Calvinistic convictions. Rivers, *Reason*, 1, p. 233.

¹⁷⁵ For a brief historiographical survey of this issue, see Hampton, *Anti-Arminians*, pp. 3-5. For modern assumptions about the disappearance of Calvinism, see Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, p. 36; John Walsh, Colin Haydon and Stephen Taylor (eds), *The Church of England, c.1689-c.1833: from Toleration to Tractarianism* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 43.

Church of the majority of its reformed clergy, but they were by no means expelled *in toto*, and their theology, though pushed to the margins, did not quite fully disappear.¹⁷⁶ Such readings of the post-Restoration landscape include an enlightenment objection to reformation doctrine, and a preference for imposing a retrospective “Anglican” identity on the Church.¹⁷⁷ A Whig interpretation of the early eighteenth century emphasised the broad Arminian consensus of the Church, overlooking its Calvinist adherents in favour of recasting their tenets as typical of Dissenting religion, rather than the Church’s.¹⁷⁸ Moderate Calvinists in the revival would glory in discovering antecedents in their Church, and repurposed received Puritan works for their own service.

In the last quarter of the seventeenth century prominent Calvinists held key positions at Oxford, and were vociferous in propagating their theology.¹⁷⁹ Undeniably, Restoration-era Cambridge had an Arminian hegemony, typified by the outlook of Whiston and Tillotson, and preoccupied by latitudinarian efforts to keep a Christian profession whilst showing guarded openness to John Locke.¹⁸⁰ And yet, Calvinism was an ongoing feature of Venn’s university from the Restoration and well into his century.¹⁸¹ Tillotson’s biographer Thomas Birch noted the efforts of staunch Calvinist John Edwards (1637-1716) to effect a measure of recovery for Calvinism after its “near extinction” there.¹⁸² Edwards, sometime fellow of St John’s College and highly popular preacher at Trinity and Holy Sepulchre churches, could look to the works of a number of churchmen and theologians who held to a recognisably

¹⁷⁶ Noll, *Evangelicalism*, p. 34.

¹⁷⁷ Diarmaid MacCulloch, ‘The Myth of the English Reformation’, *Journal of British Studies*, xxx (1991), pp. 25-28.

¹⁷⁸ For the problems of assessing the presence of Calvinism at Cambridge and elsewhere due to the predilections of old as well as modern historiographies, see Griesel, ‘John Edwards’, pp. 150-4.

¹⁷⁹ Hampton, *Anti-Arminians*, pp. 10-11.

¹⁸⁰ For recent studies in the abiding presence of Calvinism in the Church and Universities, see Hampton, *Anti-Arminians*; Wallace, *English Calvinism*; Griesel, ‘John Edwards’.

¹⁸¹ Griesel, ‘John Edwards’, 8-9.

¹⁸² John Tillotson, *The Works of the Most Reverend Dr John Tillotson* (3 vols, J. & R. Tonson, et al.: London, 1752), 1, p. c.

reformed soteriology, among them Pearson, Wilkes, Lightfoot, Reynolds and Barlow, all of whom held positions in the universities. Whilst Edwards and others who shared his Calvinism knew that their views were unwelcome amongst many at Cambridge, they contended for the views which they believed were the essential doctrines of their Church. The Devon minister Thomas Long insisted back in 1672 that it is “all one to be a moderate Calvinist and a sober conformist”,¹⁸³ and there was a generation at both universities and in parochial ministry who were prepared, with varying anti-Arminian tempers, to assert the same, even when their beliefs appeared to many to be almost a new religion.¹⁸⁴

The pastoral emphasis especially was the thread which connected Moderate Calvinists to the Puritan tradition.¹⁸⁵ The caricature of Stuart Puritanism as one of gloomy and learned ministers, entombed in ideas and debates, preaching doctrinaire sermons over the uncomprehending heads and indifferent hearts of their congregants, is unconvincing, given the evangelistic and pastoral impulse which vivified much of the Puritan movement.¹⁸⁶ Works of that school were also popular on the Continent.¹⁸⁷ Much of the more usable Puritanism, synonymous with so-called *Moderate Presbyterianism*, valued a less precisionist dogmatic theology, and cherished the virtue of moderation in the promotion of heart piety.¹⁸⁸ Venn’s generation of Moderate Calvinists discovered there a rich seam of devotional and practical writings which they found to be spiritually nourishing as well as useful for ministry.

¹⁸³ Thomas Long, *Calvinus Redivivus; or, Conformity to the Church of England, in Doctrine, Government, and Worship, Persuaded by Mr Calvin* (London, 1672), p. 13.

¹⁸⁴ For a survey of Calvinistic contenders, see Griesel, ‘John Edwards’, pp. 121-44.

¹⁸⁵ For links between Puritanism and Eighteenth Century Moderate Calvinism see Haykin & Stewart (eds), *Emergence*, pp. 252–77.

¹⁸⁶ The Elizabethan Cambridge Puritan Richard Greenham set as his objective “to stir up the heart, and to quicken affections to embrace true godliness”. Henry Holland, ‘Preface to the Reader’, in Richard Greenham, *The Works of the Reverend and Faithfull Servant of Christ, M. Richard Greenham* (Ralph Jacson: London, 1599). One needs only to read a selection of sermons by the Devon Puritan Minister John Flavel to see that his priorities and tone are at odds with this easy caricature of Puritanism. Lewis Allen (ed), *All Things Made New: John Flavel for the Christian Life* (Edinburgh, 2017).

¹⁸⁷ Walsh, Haydon & Taylor (eds), *Church of England*, pp. 287-91.

¹⁸⁸ See Field, ‘*Rigide Calvinisme*’, pp. 18-19; Rivers, *Reason*, 1, pp. 168-70. Moderate Presbyterianism could well admit more speculative and even less doctrinally orthodox tendencies, but its basic direction was towards a practical piety.

Puritan zeal typified by the labours of Baxter, Alleine and Flavel became the matrix for ministerial endeavour. University men were training generations of would-be pastors (Sibbes and Preston in Cambridge, Owen and Goodwin in Oxford), and Bunyan gave himself to writing for ordinary people. Antipathy towards the Puritans was precisely because adherents were so busily involved in church and society, not the reverse.

Typical of Moderate Calvinists, Venn was always anxious to be submissive to Scripture, rather than to a doctrinal system, and for others to be taught by Scripture, too. Even as a young adherent to Calvinism in 1763, he stood apart from proselytising zeal for the cause: “I hate opinions, and would not give a pin’s point to have anyone believe as I do, til the Scriptures, by the Spirit’s teaching open his understanding.”¹⁸⁹ Venn’s temperament was marked with an antipathy to controversy and division.¹⁹⁰

Venn wanted to frame a creed and piety which avoided the aridity of the higher sort of Calvinists, whilst commending the experimental godliness of the devoted life, and being manifestly the religion of Scripture and in harmony with reason. He needed to convince his parishioners that their Church held the deposit of their faith in its Formularies, and that their faith was best nurtured and expressed in regular parochial living, away from the dangers of enthusiasm. Though reviled by its opponents, and sometimes held with ambivalence even by its professors, it is legitimate to regard Moderate Calvinism as a thread which connected the Stuart to the Victorian Church. The post-Interregnum Calvinism, with its emphasis on moderation – committed to the primacy of Scripture, evangelistically assertive, pastorally utilitarian – provided the impulse for ministry and piety in Venn’s lifetime. Venn was a vital part of this thread. His parochial work, writing and investment in young and would-be clergy

¹⁸⁹ Venn, *Letters*, p. 31.

¹⁹⁰ Venn, *Letters*, p. 263.

evidence his conviction that Moderate Calvinism was the truest Christianity for the greatest good.

Just as Whitefield identified the cardinal Protestant article of justification by faith alone as “the good old doctrine of the Church of England,” he and other Calvinists had no difficulty in claiming that the reformed reading of the Church’s Articles was the right one.¹⁹¹ In Dissent, Calvinism could be a creed of protest, a continuation (intentional or otherwise) of the strife of the previous century. In contrast, Venn and fellow Church of England Calvinists believed they were propagating the faith of the Prayer Book and Articles. As the Hanoverian century wore on, and the Arminian-Calvinist fissure of the revival persisted, Calvinists could look to their heritage within their own church to show that they were conformists in spirit and in theology. They held to an activist creed, proffered as the plain reading of Scripture, leaning on the doctrinal emphases of St Paul. They preached original sin, the inability of the will, and justification by faith alone in Christ’s substitutionary death. They ministered the Apostle’s pastoral assurances of divine foreknowledge, predestination (to life; reprobation was disavowed, or simply not mentioned by the vast majority), prevenient grace and final perseverance.¹⁹² Such beliefs were markedly different from dominant views in the first part of the century, and the retrieval of what had hitherto been a marginal position within the Church would prove a deeply significant one.

Supremely, Venn sought to pursue whatever he believed the Bible taught, and to match his doctrines with its own emphases. In 1772 he said to his old curate Matthew Powley:

¹⁹¹ Whitefield, *Short Account* (London, 1740).

¹⁹² Volumes of published sermons show what Moderate Calvinists believed, and also to what ends they used their theology. A Comparison of Venn’s *Select Sermons* and Haweis’ *Evangelical Principles and Practice* with *Whitefield’s Sermons on Various Important Subjects* and Romaine’s published occasional sermons of the 1740s demonstrates that Moderate Calvinists put primary emphasis on evangelisation, coupled with which was the insistence on good works for the professing.

“As to Calvinism, you know I was always moderate - those who exalt the Lord Jesus Christ as all their salvation and abase man, I rejoice in; and would not have them advance further, till they see more of the plan of sovereign grace, so connected with what is indubitable, that they cannot refuse their assent...I used to please myself with the imagination 15 years since, that by prayer for the Holy Ghost and reading diligently the lively oracles, I should be able to understand all scriptures and give it all one clear consistent meaning. That it is perfectly consistent, I am very sure. But it is so not to any mortal apprehension here.”¹⁹³

Here is much that was characteristic of both Venn and of his fellow Moderate Calvinists: the priority of free grace in salvation working in the experience of fallen man, coupled with a confidence in the Scriptures and recognition of their apparent internal tensions. Notably, it was his Calvinistic position which gave Venn a generosity towards others who were in earnest about the Christian life. Divine mercy and the mystery of God’s ways leading to the abasement of the sinner were thus always to the fore in his ministry. Venn framed a piety dependent upon Calvinistic conceptions of the restoration of man through free grace, but also using the moralising tradition for his purposes. Venn’s ministry had the utilitarian emphasis of the moralists, but it commended Christianity as an assured and grateful response to God’s saving work in Christ, confident in the prospect of joys to come. Unconditional justifying and assuring grace alone “is the Christian’s vast obligation to gratitude...this is the cord which binds his heart in devotedness to his God”, offering a significant apologetic impetus for Moderate Calvinism.¹⁹⁴

At the mid-way point of his two parish ministries Venn confessed that “twenty-five years ago, I was certain that I should be able to reconcile the Word of God in all its parts...Now, I wait for the light of eternity, and the perfection of holiness, in order that I might know

¹⁹³ Venn MSS, Acc.81/C12/5, Letter to Matthew Powley, 19th February, 1772.

¹⁹⁴ Venn, *Mistakes*, pp. 28-9. Evangelicals were promoting the affectional dimensions of their religion through the remainder of the century. In 1792 John Berridge wrote *Cheerful piety; or, religion without gloom. Exemplified in select letters, written on the most interesting truths of Christianity* (London, 1794). Readers discover this collection of letters to be rather gloomy introspectives. Cheerful, they are not; the choice of title may at least show awareness of what the reading public were looking for in their religion.

anything, as I ought to know it.”¹⁹⁵ This should not be read as an admission of doubt, or as a recanting of his earlier views, but a seasoned confession of the mysteries and tensions of faith, and the corruption of human nature. A year before his death, writing to his son John, Venn could speak of “the sovereign and electing grace of God, by which alone we are brought to him”, and at the same time commanded John to allow controversies about grace to make him “search the Scriptures, and study them, and *them only* - more devoutly, *more constantly*, in full assurance that, in doing so, you shall be led into all truth.”¹⁹⁶ Moderate Calvinists were always most confident when commending the Bible rather than any Reformed creeds as the source of their convictions, whether in doctrinal debate or personal piety.

¹⁹⁵ The letter is dated 12th August, 1766. This is certainly an editor’s mistake, and it can be fixed as having been written a decade later, which makes satisfactory sense of the details about Venn’s location and family and ministry circumstances. Venn, *Letters*, p. 232.

¹⁹⁶ Venn, *Letters*, p. 531. Italics original. Compare Venn’s advice to his daughter Catherine after his comments about her hearing Wesley preach in 1789: “never give absolute credit to what you hear from the pulpit, which is not proved by plain Scripture”. *Letters*, p. 474.

1.5 An Acceptable Enthusiasm?

In embracing evangelicalism Venn was sure that he had found a new religion, a satisfying heart piety, with the strong doctrinal roots of justification by faith and an assurance of salvation producing a confident expectation of glory, and stimulating holy and joyful living. How to minister this message without it being written off as *enthusiasm* was Venn's and his friends' greatest challenge.

One undoubted factor in both the preaching and reception of Moderate Calvinism, and in the later shaping of its reputation, was the expression of emotions. Ministry for them now was a forging of doctrinal and biblical content with a display of passions pertinent to their message. Emotions had a favoured heritage in the Protestant tradition, be they John Bradford's frequent tears over his sin, the fiery preaching of his contemporary, John Hooper, both Marian martyrs, or the fervour of many Puritan ministries, committed, as the Westminster Directory for the Public Worship of God instructed them, "to endeavour to perform it in such a manner, that his auditors may feel the Word of God to be quick and powerful".¹⁹⁷ Emotion spoke of the earnestness of the herald, and also modelled his sought-after response. When he wept, they were expected to do the same. Venn, for all of the careful crafting of his family biographers, was, as the study of his preaching will aim to demonstrate in Chapter Three, a man of strong and often public emotions and deeply arresting pulpit manner who frequently alarmed his hearers. The "T'owd Trumpet" (Venn's Huddersfield moniker), attracted the slur of enthusiasm for his style and substance in his Yorkshire parish, nor did he escape it in his move south. An enthusiast he was, but one constrained by his sense of rectitude, and by the best interests of his religion.

¹⁹⁷ *A Directory for the Publique Worship of God* (M.B. & A.M. for the Company of Stationers: London, 1646), p. 15.

Enthusiast was a universal term of reproach in eighteenth-century England, and an often-used censure of evangelical life and ministry.¹⁹⁸ Enthusiasts were deemed the modern representatives of Civil War excess, responsible for oppression and regicide, and print campaigns began in the middle of the seventeenth century which grew bolder in their anti-Puritan invective post-Restoration.¹⁹⁹ David Hume traced a fanatical spirit further back to the Reformation (though he conceded that the Royal Supremacy and spirit of toleration in the following century had some merits in the promotion of reason).²⁰⁰ Ever since, the term was applied to various moving targets in the religious world, be they Anabaptists, Presbyterians, Roman Catholics, Quakers, Moravians or Methodists. Dissenters were especially liable to the charge of being enthusiasts. Even before the outbreak of Methodist fervour, Anglican pulpits sounded warnings against “outrageous enthusiasm of some hereticks of old, and schismaticks in our latter ages”,²⁰¹ and the term became a cudgel with which to beat any supposed opposition which might threaten Church, orthodoxy, or the ordered structure of the home and society.²⁰²

Wherever evangelicalism went, with its extra-parochial and open-air preaching, extempore prayer and displays of emotional outburst from preachers and hearers, the accusation of *enthusiasm* followed. *Methodism* was a convenient catch-all term for the religion its

¹⁹⁸ For a sample of the secondary literature on eighteenth-century Enthusiasm and its precursors, see Albert M. Lyles, *Methodism Mocked: The Satiric Reaction to Methodism in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1960); M. Heyd, “*Be Sober and Reasonable*”: *The Critique of Enthusiasm in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Leiden, 1995); Paul Goring, ‘Anglicanism, Enthusiasm and Quixotism: Preaching and Politeness in Mid-Eighteenth Century Literature’. *Literature and Theology*, vol. 15, no. 4, 2001, pp. 326–41; Ronald Paulson, *Hogarth’s Harlot: Sacred Parody in Enlightenment England* (Baltimore, 2003); Simon Lewis, ‘Early anti-methodism as an aspect of theological controversy in England, c.1738-c.1770’ (D.Phil. thesis, University of Oxford, 2017).

¹⁹⁹ Theophilus Evans, *The History of Modern Enthusiasm, from the Reformation to the Present Times* (London, 1752), p. 8; cf. p. 14. Thomas Green made an easy progression from Cromwell’s confidence in direct guidance to the claims of Mahomet and those of pagan poets. Thomas Green, *A Dissertation on Enthusiasm* (London, 1755), pp. 46-8. For anti-Puritan polemics, see Dewey D. Wallace, Jr., *Shapers of English Calvinism, 1660-1714: Variety, Persistence, and Transformation* (Oxford, 2011), pp. 39-43.

²⁰⁰ Rivers, *Reason, Grace, and Sentiment: A Study of the Language of Religion and Ethics in England, 1660–1780. Volume 2: Shaftesbury to Hume* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 317-19.

²⁰¹ Farooq, *Preaching*, p. 167.

²⁰² Farooq, *Preaching*, pp. 164-70.

detractors attacked.²⁰³ The Rev. William Bowman of Dewsbury was an early and fierce critic of nascent Methodism in his parish in 1740, condemning its leaders' claims to inspiration and perfectionism, and warning of the inevitability of schismatic behaviour, anti-clericalism and social unrest, should their efforts continue unchecked.²⁰⁴ "No particular profession of Christianity that ever appeared in the world had fewer marks of the genuine religion of the gospel than this novel and ridiculous Enthusiasm", he complained.²⁰⁵ Thomas Green in Leicestershire met Methodist claims of instantaneous conversion accompanied by strong emotion as being the work of God with his conviction that they were, rather, "the effects of enthusiasm, or natural disorders and indispositions of the body".²⁰⁶

The censure of enthusiasm was made against any sort of religion which claimed personal revelation from the Divine, aside from the deposit of Scripture and out of line with the Church's discipline and the expectations of decorous living. "The vain belief of private revelation; a warm confidence of divine favour or communication", was Samuel Johnson's definition, the Doctor adding darkly, "but rises from the conceits of a warm or overweening brain."²⁰⁷ "A pretence to extraordinary revelation has always been the criterion of an enthusiastic head", complained the elderly Welsh cleric Theophilus Evans in 1752, troubled as he was by local preachers.²⁰⁸ The charge had dogged Whitefield, the Wesleys and their followers since the late 1730s, and caused the evangelical leaders no small amount of chagrin.

²⁰³ Rack, *Enthusiast*, 271ff; Ryan Danker, *Wesley and the Anglicans: Political Division in Early Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove, IL, 2016), pp. 31-2.

²⁰⁴ William Bowman, *The Imposture of Methodism Displayed in a Letter to the Inhabitants of Dewsbury* (London, 1740), 42. For anxieties about anti-social behaviour in the name of religion, be that the disavowal of accumulating goods, or the inversion of male-female order, see John Walsh, 'John Wesley and the Community of Goods', in Keith Robbins (ed), *Protestant Evangelicalism: Britain, Ireland, Germany and America, c.1750-c.1950: Essays in Honour of W. R. Ward* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 25-50.

²⁰⁵ Bowman, *Imposture*, p. 4.

²⁰⁶ Green, *Enthusiasm* (London, 1755), pp. 112.

²⁰⁷ Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language* (London, 1755-56), n.p. The definition follows closely that of Locke: John Locke, *Works* (9 vols, London, 1794), 2, p. 274.

²⁰⁸ Theophilus Evans, *The History of Modern Enthusiasm* (London, 1752), p. v.

Hostility sometimes came from senior members of the clergy. The Bishop of London, Edmund Gibson, a veteran campaigner against Methodism since 1739, twelve years later drew strong connecting lines between nascent Methodism and Civil War excess, seeing enthusiasm as “a strong persuasion in the minds of persons that they were guided in an extraordinary manner by immediate impressions and impulses of the Spirit of God.”²⁰⁹

Further ire came from Bishops Lavington of Exeter and Warburton of Gloucester in attacking Methodist activity, Lavington connecting Methodists not just with Roman Catholics but with Montanists, too, to Whitefield’s fury, who attempted a rebuttal.²¹⁰ As the revival continued, so did anxieties about the convictions of those who would undergo ordination, and enthusiasm was at the centre of the St Edmund Hall trial of 1768.²¹¹ Equally, evangelicals of different sorts could level the charge at one another in order to besmirch those who differed from them.²¹²

Enthusiasm was an easy target for preachers, broadsheet writers, pamphleteers, and for artists and novelists, too. In the early years of the revival, William Hogarth produced his anticlerical *The Sleeping Congregation* (1736), with a congregation dozing under the sound of the parson (the unintended consequence of his sermon on the text “I will give you rest”). At the height of Methodist fervour in London, *Enthusiasm Delineated* (1761) saw Hogarth’s ire raised to a pitch matched by the fevered preaching of Whitefield (wig flying off to reveal a tonsured head), holding a credulous and even fainting gathering of the lower sorts under his spell. Decorum had gone, credulity and madness were now the stuff of pulpit and pew, and

²⁰⁹ Edmund Gibson, *Five pastoral letters to the people of his diocese* (London, 1751), p. 296.

²¹⁰ George Lavington, *Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists Compared* (3 vols, London, 1749); William Warburton, *The Doctrine of Grace* (London, 1763); George Whitefield, *Remarks on a Pamphlet entitled The Enthusiasm of Methodist and Papists Compared* (London 1749).

²¹¹ For the trial, see Danker, *Wesley*, pp. 191-210. For two early examples of the rebuttal of the charge of enthusiasm, see George Whitefield, *Some remarks upon a late charge against enthusiasm* (Boston, 1745), William Grimshaw, *An Answer to a Sermon lately published against the Methodists* (Preston, 1749). Inevitably, each insisted that his convictions were in line both with Scripture and with the Church.

²¹² Eg, Richard Hill, *A lash at enthusiasm, in a dialogue founded upon real facts between Mrs. Clinker and Miss Martha Steady* (Shrewsbury, 1774).

enthusiasm had more than a whiff of Dissent and Popery.²¹³ Unsurprisingly, Hogarth would not leave such a suggestive and important theme alone. *Credulity, Superstition and Fanaticism* of the following year was an even more savage reworking of *Enthusiasm Delineated*, with an explicit triangulation of Methodism, madness and immorality. A volume of Wesley's sermons sits under a thermometer, with 'Madness' calibrated at its top and bottom, signs of the occult reflect a contemporary furore over alleged ghostly apparitions (which Wesley and Whitefield had been shown to be too ready to believe), whilst a Muslim looks on at the window as the 'rabbit impostress' Mary Tofts issues her next litter.²¹⁴ Reactions to the print were inevitably sharply divided, but Hogarth's point was made, and Evangelicals who wanted to win and keep the confidence of their hearers needed to heed it.

Alongside acerbic criticism of Methodists and Evangelicals came the more gently mocking. Richard Graves, a contemporary of Whitefield at Pembroke College, Oxford, aimed more for the latter when he published a satiric treatment of Methodism, *The Spiritual Quixote: or, the summer's ramble of Mr Geoffrey Wildgoose* (1772).²¹⁵ Its protagonist falls out with the parson and his religion, the effect of reading his Nonconformist grandmother's Puritan writings (full of strong doctrine and sharp anticlericalism), which "filled his head with such a farraginous medley of opinions as almost turned his brain" and led him on a course of enthusiasm and itinerancy.²¹⁶ Never portrayed as a wicked man, Wildgoose was zealous and principled, but naïve, credulous and, ultimately, risible. And so, by implication, might be the many men and women, and especially preachers, who trod the same Methodist journey.

²¹³ See Jenny Uglow, *Hogarth* (New York, 1997), pp.187-8, 648-651.

²¹⁴ For a brief analysis of the picture and contemporary reactions to it, see Uglow, *Hogarth*, pp. 652-4.

²¹⁵ [Richard Graves], *The Spiritual Quixote: or, the summer's ramble of Mr Geoffrey Wildgoose* (3 vols, London, 1774).

²¹⁶ [Richard Graves], *Spiritual Quixote*, 1, p. 15.

The onus was on Venn and the revival's leaders to fend off its critics and mockers. They needed to safeguard the movement from behaviour which might be deemed enthusiastic, but not so as to divest it of its vital piety. Looking on from Dissent, Isaac Watts, who laid great emphasis on the interior life of the believer, and who himself taught the extraordinary operations of the Holy Spirit,²¹⁷ was extremely uncomfortable with what he saw as the Wesley brothers' "preaching up the necessity of sensible feelings of our regeneration", and was troubled by their emphasis on "inward feelings of all-converting grace".²¹⁸ His concern was not without justification. Wesley complained testily that "Whatever is spoke of the religion of the heart, and of inward workings of the Spirit of God, must appear enthusiasm to those who have not felt them."²¹⁹ Yet, as the revival claimed it converts, and its critics, Wesley tempered his views, and became acutely aware of how damaging accusations of enthusiasm were to his followers, having witnessed the havoc it at times wrought amongst them. He wrote and preached against it, and moved to expel society members who made wild spiritual claims.²²⁰ "Trust not in visions or dreams; in sudden impressions, or strong impulses of any kind," was a typical admonition.²²¹ Wesley warned that enthusiasm was at best the unruly child of pride, and at worst a mental disorder, as far as could be from the desired rational behaviour of a true Christian.²²²

Here was the rub for Evangelicals such as Venn. They preached for conversion, seeking to bring their hearers to spiritual crisis and to true faith. They believed that assurance of forgiveness was available to the penitent believer, and spoke about new birth and the way of holiness, which included, in different measures, the influence of the Holy Spirit in the

²¹⁷ Isaac Watts, 'The Extraordinary Witness of the Spirit', in *Evangelical Discourses on Several Subjects* (London, 1747), pp. 227-78. For a discussion, see Rivers, *Reason*, 1, pp. 197-9.

²¹⁸ Graham Beynon, *Isaac Watts* (London, 2018), p. 90.

²¹⁹ Nehemiah Curnock (ed), *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.* (8 vols, London, 1938), 2, p. 319.

²²⁰ Outler, *Works*, 2, p. 52.

²²¹ Wesley, *Works*, 5, p. 478.

²²² Wesley, *Works*, 11, pp. 429-31.

convert's life. The movement's leaders had the challenging task of encouraging right faith and righteous living amongst converts, as close to the letter of the Scriptures they so esteemed, whilst not alienating their as-yet unpersuaded hearers.

For Venn, evangelical religion must have its expression, even if it should risk being decried as enthusiasm. The 1759 *Sermons* are punctuated by his awareness of the counter-cultural nature of the faith he was commending, and by counsel about wise and sober living for its professors.²²³ In the same year Venn also separately published the sermon, *The Variance between Real and Nominal Christians considered, and the cause of it explained*.²²⁴ He acknowledged that conversion brings a new will and affections, resulting in an entire change of habits, which draw the censure of others, and their disapprobation.²²⁵ Venn counselled a modest way of life, careful not to arouse the ire of unsympathetic family members, and warned his readers of enthusiasm, “which is sure to make a powerful assault to get possession of your mind, as soon as true Christianity is entertained.”²²⁶ Venn censured excessive subjectivism, under the false opinion that it is the Spirit's guidance, since it brings “the greatest danger of being swallowed up by vanity, and of treating the written word itself but as a dead letter, in comparison to your own light, and inward suggestions.”²²⁷ Venn told his Yorkshire friend James Kershaw in a 1767 letter that when believers were charged with enthusiasm they should take comfort in knowing that the Bible “always describes this life to be a very singular, strange, and absurd one, in the eyes of men,” and that the opprobrium of “mad” could be applied to the child of the world equally as to the child of God, depending on one's perspective.²²⁸

²²³ For examples, Venn, *Sermons*, pp. 21-2, 163, 296.

²²⁴ Henry Venn, *The Variance between Real and Nominal Christians considered, and the cause of it explained on Matt x. 35, 36* (London, 1759).

²²⁵ Venn, *Variance*, pp. 6-9.

²²⁶ Venn, *Variance*, p. 22.

²²⁷ Venn, *Variance*, pp. 23-24.

²²⁸ Venn, *Letters*, p. 132.

In mid-career Venn felt that the same warnings were still pertinent. When he published *Mistakes in Religion Exposed* in 1774, Venn was writing in a context where evangelicalism had been convulsed by (and mocked over) the Minutes controversy, and to a nation on the eve of the American Revolutionary War. Sober religion was the order of the day. “To keep clear of real enthusiasm is highly necessary, because it leads to the greatest mischiefs, by pleading private impulses and revelations, to warrant practices, principles, or actions, contrary to Scripture.”²²⁹ Nonetheless, Venn pointed out that enthusiasm was an easy slur from the enemies of Christ when confronted with godly zeal.²³⁰ He insisted that there is a right enthusiasm, a wholehearted allegiance to Christ which cannot remain private, but which must be in the open, and stand firm against the world and its sneers.²³¹ “Abhor as much a fawning upon Christ from year to year in your closet, calling Him there your Lord and God, and then coming out to consult the world, how far they will allow you to obey his plain commands, without saying you are a Methodist.”²³² Reproach was the price of loyalty to the Master.

In essence, Venn and the Evangelicals’ challenge was to repudiate formalism and moralism, whilst carving channels in which to express and contain vital religion for their hearers – and to direct them in them. They needed to encourage appropriate lay religion whilst keeping the reins of clerical control, to safeguard doctrine and order in line with the Formularies, and in addition avoid unhelpful antagonism towards evangelical Dissent. Church authorities were a perpetual problem, to be entreated if necessary, and always endured. Venn’s career, through writing and in parochial work, was a testament to that endeavour. The Moderate Calvinism that he embraced he believed to be the surest guide to keeping a warm heart, and a cool head.

²²⁹ Henry Venn, *Mistakes in Religion Exposed: An Essay on the Prophecy of Zacharias* (New York, 1810), p. 192.

²³⁰ Venn, *Mistakes*, p. 88, cf. p. 158.

²³¹ Venn, *Mistakes*, p. 82.

²³² Venn, *Mistakes*, p. 89.

Chapter 2: The Doctrine of the Christian Life

2.1 *The Complete Duty*: Moderated Calvinism

Writing to John Thornton's sister in 1760, Venn declared that "the most plausible way that I know, and by far the most successful, of supplanting the Gospel, is by a pretended or real zeal for the practice of moral duties."¹ He complained of the two volumes of Laurence Sterne's sermons he had just read that "excepting a phrase or two, they might be preached in a synagogue or a mosque without offence."² How could Venn strike a lasting blow against the moralism of the pulpit and of polite society? His answer came in *The Complete Duty of Man*, which was begun in his Clapham days, and was eventually published in 1763.³ *The Complete Duty* was essentially a primer to help readers come to a settled conviction of their salvation through receiving their justification through faith in the finished work of Christ, and to assist them in living a righteous life in view of it. Whilst Venn never indulged himself with the ear-tingling harangues of a Whitefield on the religion of their Church, *The Complete Duty* was an explicit challenge to *The Whole Duty of Man*, published anonymously in 1658 but widely thought to be the work of the High Churchman Richard Allestree.⁴ The differences were not down to style or tone, but to the fundamentally opposing views about the essentials of Christian faith and life, and prevailing views of double conditional justification.⁵

¹ Venn, *Letters*, p. 80.

² Venn, *Letters*, p. 81.

³ The obvious similarity of titles, whilst surely intentional, was bound to confuse. In its advertisement for *The Complete Duty*, Lloyd's Evening Post for 25th November, 1763, whilst delicately asserting the superiority of Venn's work, encouraged the would-be purchaser to look for Venn's name on the title page, "as no other Duty of Man has ever had the name of the author prefixed to it."

⁴ [Richard Allestree], *The Practice of Christian Graces. Or The Whole Duty of Man Laid down in a Plaine and Familiar Way for the Use of All, but Especially the Meanest Reader* (London, 1658).

⁵ *The Complete Duty* has received little modern scholarly attention, but brief treatments are Rivers, *Vanity Fair*, pp. 272-4; Hindmarsh, *Spirit*, pp. 215-17.

Venn was convinced that his Moderate Calvinism was the true deposit of the Scriptures, in harmony with the Formularies, and well able to break the hardened consciences of moralistic parishioners, as well as to bind up the wounds of those convicted of the inadequacies of their observances. Members of Venn's circles were aware of his efforts to produce the book, Thomas Adam sharing his high hopes that this effort would unite doctrine and godly living convincingly, so as to do away with the moralism of *The Whole Duty*.⁶ The result was a manifesto for evangelical and Moderate Calvinistic Anglican piety, explicitly grounded on justification by faith alone, and intent on showing itself in good works in keeping the Law. Its popularity more than justified the pains Venn took over it.

In the summer of 1760 Venn told a friend that he that he hoped to have his book completed early the following year.⁷ The demands of a large parish gripped by religious fervour, as well as those of a growing family, meant that completion was delayed. Venn was thirty eight, and four years into his Huddersfield ministry, when the book was published in 1763. *The Complete Duty* is a manual for a practical and experimental heart religion. Here it stands in the tradition of spiritual primers such as Augustine's *Enchiridion*, A Kempis's *Imitation*, and Luther's practical writings. The Puritan era saw a rash of affordable editions of works intended to foster piety amongst ordinary Christians, with Lewis Bayly's *Practice of Piety* (1611), Arthur Dent's *Plain Man's Pathway to Heaven* (25 editions by 1640), and the practical works of Alleine and Baxter all served to shape a Protestant and broadly reformed spirituality in their readership. In Venn's own century, Philip Doddridge and Isaac Watts made their own contributions to a largely Dissenting readership. Watts produced three volumes of his edited sermons, designed to be read in

⁶ Rivers, *Vanity Fair*, p. 272, fn. Adam did, however, acknowledge that there was value in *The Whole Duty*, *The Works of the Rev. Thomas Adam* (3 vols, London, 1822), 1, pp. xxvi-xvii. Samuel Walker, having learned that Venn had given Adam sight of the pre-publication book, and being a little underwhelmed by Venn's published sermons, looked to Adam to give helpful feedback to Venn. Sidney, *Walker*, pp. 516-7.

⁷ Venn, *Letters*, p. 80.

households on Sunday evenings.⁸ The published volumes were not cheap, though, and Watts encouraged his friend Doddridge to write a handbook of the Christian faith, giving advice and direction on style so as to ensure its accessibility to the uneducated.⁹ *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul* was published in 1745, and was an instant success (itself dependent upon Richard Baxter and other Puritan writers).¹⁰ Navigating his way towards a settled theological position, Venn was enriched after the mid-1750s by a friendship with Doddridge's favourite pupil, the West Country Independent Risten Darracott, and there is every possibility that Venn would have therefore read *The Rise and Progress*.¹¹

Undoubtedly, Venn's own early formation was influenced by the spiritual works of the Rigorists, as has been evidenced. As with others finding their way in their evangelical faith, Venn came to repudiate Law and this tradition.¹² To appreciate the conditioning influences on the Evangelicals it is necessary to return to Stuart devotional writing, and especially to the *Whole Duty*. The book was one of a number written in reaction to the mid-seventeenth century Calvinist ascendancy by men who were opposed to it for religious and political reasons, some of whom, like Allestree, had suffered privation from the Parliamentary cause. In a clear departure from Calvinist preaching and publishing, the works of Jeremy Taylor, Henry Hammond and Allestree were characterised by a strong emphasis on practical piety.¹³ Each avoided treating predestination, election, justification

⁸ Isaac Watts, *Sermons on Various Subjects, Divine and Moral ... Design'd for the Use of Christian Families, as well as for the Hours of Devout Retirement*, (3 vols, London, 1729).

⁹ Rivers, *Reason*, 1, p. 184.

¹⁰ Philip Doddridge, *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul* (London, 1745). For Doddridge's indebtedness to Baxter's Practical Works and to the Puritan tradition, see Robert Strivens, 'The Thought of Philip Doddridge in the Context of Early Eighteenth-Century Dissent' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Saint Andrews, 2012), pp. 141-4.

¹¹ Certainly, he was giving out copies to his Yelling parishioners in the 1780s. Venn, *Letters*, pp. 399-400.

¹² For a précis of evangelical objections to Law, see Charles Wesley Lowry, Jr., 'Spiritual Antecedents of Anglican Evangelicalism', *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church*, 12 (1943), p. 136.

¹³ Henry Hammond, *A Practical Catechism* (London, 1644), *Of the Reasonableness of Christian Religion* (London, 1650), Jeremy Taylor, *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Living* (London, 1650).

and regeneration, and focused instead on the Christian life as the duties given by God to man which he would discover the power to perform, if his heart were framed by faith. In doing so, they were reshaping the Christian life, and even the faith, from reformed presentations of them. Little wonder that the evangelicals who read these books came to be so hostile towards them.

The Whole Duty is essentially a treatise on dutiful self-control in the service of God and neighbour. In the preface, Allestree surveys the three-fold office of Christ, the import of which is that “we set ourselves heartily to the obeying of every precept of Christ, not going on wilfully in any one sin”.¹⁴ At the conclusion of the treatise, just before the prayers, Allestree quotes Luke 10.38, “Do this and thou shalt live”, and comments,

“surely it is no impossible task to perform this in such a measure, as God will graciously accept, that is in sincerity, though not in perfection, for God is not that austere master...he requires nothing of us, which he is not ready by his grace to enable us to perform; if we be not wanting to ourselves, either in asking it by prayer, or in using it by diligence.”¹⁵

This is the emphasis which would be so effectively promulgated through Tillotson, the majority religion of the Church which commended the way to heaven as one of reasonable service. Venn’s steadfast attachment to the corruption of sinners and their need for atonement and new birth firmly resisted these views.

Arranged under seventeen Sundays, the frontispiece states that the book was intended to be read three times per year. There are 187 pages in the 1658 edition, approximately three-fifths the length of *The Complete Duty*, eighteen of them being private devotions at the close of the book. The subject matter shows why the eighteenth-century Evangelicals were so opposed to it. A preface asserts the soul’s immortality, the work of Christ for it, and

¹⁴ [Allestree], Preface to *The Whole Duty*.

¹⁵ [Allestree], *Whole Duty*, p. 382.

thus the need to care for it (and so, to read the book). Then the first three Sundays are given to considering humanity's duty to God, submission to him, and correct attitudes to the Lord's Supper. The remainder are devoted to dutiful living, pursuing temperance (food, drink and sleep), mortification of heart sins (pride and envy), avoiding gross and outward sins (theft, murder), and discharging one's duty in the home and in society. Allestree made many striking appeals to the reader, and sounded the imperative of duty, but his disregard for the theology of his church, and particularly his omission of the quintessentially Protestant doctrine of justification by faith alone, meant that opposition to, and, even attempts to usurp it, were inevitable.

The Whole Duty exercised a considerable power over many in Venn's generation. It was the work to which Howell Harris ascribed his conversion, and others acknowledged the influence the book had made on them.¹⁶ Many, however, came to detest it, and, like Berridge, said so, due to its lack of clarity on the doctrine of justification by faith alone.¹⁷ Whitefield attacked the book in a letter to a friend in 1740, claiming that its author lacked heart as well as head-knowledge of Christ, making his work as dangerous as Tillotson's for the nation.¹⁸ Whitefield complained to the Bishop of London in 1744 that the book "lays no foundation by justifying faith at all, and therefore may be more properly termed Half the Duty of Man".¹⁹ Cowper dismissed it as "a repository of self-righteous and pharisaical lumber".²⁰ Men as different as David Hume, Samuel Johnson and Charles Simeon were all exposed to *The Whole Duty* in their boyhoods, and had nothing good to say about it.²¹ The

¹⁶ Howell Harris, *A Brief Account of the Life of Howell Harris* (Trevecka, 1791), pp. 13-14; Hindmarsh, *Spirit*, p. 184.

¹⁷ Berridge, *Works*, p. 334.

¹⁸ George Whitefield, *A Letter from the Rev. Mr. Whitefield from Georgia to a friend in London showing the fundamental error of a book entitled The Whole Duty of Man* (Charles-Town, 1740).

¹⁹ Whitefield, *Works*, 4, p. 155.

²⁰ Robert Southey, *The Life of William Cowper* (8 vols, London, 1854), 1, p. 81.

²¹ Hume later wrote on it. See Alison McIntyre, 'Fruitless Remorses: Hume's Critique of the Penitential Project of The Whole Duty of Man'. *Hume Studies* 40 (2) (2014), pp. 143-167; James Boswell, *Life of*

importance of the book was undeniable, as were its dangers, in the eyes of evangelicals.

Venn took his opportunity.

With *The Whole Duty* in his sights, Venn gets to work, declaring that “it is evident that the great thing is wanting in that celebrated treatise, towards obtaining the end for which it was written: since Christ the lawgiver will always speak in vain, unless Christ the Saviour first be known.”²² The Preface is a careful disavowal of each alternative to saving faith: works, sincerity, faith and works, a first and then second justification – none satisfies a holy God. Faith alone satisfies, which is not a work, but an “unfeigned humble submission to the righteousness of God, as accounted or given to us, and that not of debt but of grace.”²³ Such faith, although often weak and imperfect, is saving because its grounds are in the Saviour and his work, and not in the sinner and his own efforts. As Venn asked later in the book, “What can the Law demand of you, either as an exemption from suffering its penalty, or as a title to eternal life, which this vicarious obedience and sacrifice of God manifest in the flesh, has not abundantly provided on behalf of all true believers?”²⁴

The purpose of *The Complete Duty* was not to recast evangelical piety into a different shape, shorn of the obligation of the Law, but to set out the place of the Law in the life of faith. The Christian is obligated to God, then to one’s neighbour, and then to oneself. The whole life of the children of God is one of faith in Christ as the perfect Law-keeper, and empowered by the Spirit to keep the Law. “They only are conscious of the exercises of repentance and faith, love and hope, and of every grace in which the renovation of the mind after the image of God consists: they only experience pleasure in communion with

Johnson, ed. R.W. Chapman (Oxford, 1976), p. 50; William Carus, *Memoirs of the life of Charles Simeon: with a selection from his writings and correspondence* (London, 1847), pp. 6, 19.

²² Venn, *Duty*, p. xxxiii.

²³ Venn, *Duty*, p. xxx.

²⁴ Venn, *Duty*, p. 103.

God.”²⁵ Venn was opposed to both High Church legalism, and also to the excessive reliance on experience rather than on Scripture, commonly equated with the Methodists.²⁶ His purpose in the book was to promulgate a Bible-centred and decidedly churchly piety, undergirded by a generous Calvinism, eminently practical for its adherents in their daily callings.

The original fourteen chapter format of *The Complete Duty* was retained in the second edition of 1765, but for the third its publisher decided to rework it into fifty-two chapters for Sunday reading.²⁷ The book was, after all, “designed for the use of families”, so presumably it was reasoned that households could profit from hearing it read weekly.²⁸ That version was reduced to forty chapters by John Venn in the 1798 fifth edition, the year after his father’s death, and the style and tone of the original were also reverted to. The chapters were grouped under fourteen headings (being those of the first version), which remained the definitive edition.

The preface, retained almost verbatim in the fifth edition (1798), is a robust ten page introduction, setting out the necessity of grace alone as the grounds both of Christian certainty and of holy living. Venn takes issue with the spirituality of his day, citing opposing trends rather than naming opponents, to vindicate the evangelical doctrine of justification by faith alone. The Law of God, given to Adam and violated by him in the Garden, was republished at Sinai, declaring all guilty in their failure to keep it, and bringing universal condemnation on humanity.²⁹ All therefore need a Saviour from a violated Law, and dependence upon the vicarious righteousness of Jesus Christ is “the

²⁵ Venn, *Duty*, p. 328.

²⁶ Venn, *Duty*, p. 92.

²⁷ Information about the progress of the book’s editions is found in the *Advertisement* in Henry Venn, *The Complete Duty...A New Edition, carefully revised and corrected with a Memoir of the Author* (London, n.d.), pp. iii-iv. See also, Rivers, *Vanity Fair*, pp. 272-3.

²⁸ Venn, *Duty*, titlepage.

²⁹ Venn, *Duty*, p. xxviii.

precious faith of the Gospel by which the soul is justified before God.”³⁰ If such faith is truly saving, then its alternatives – works, sincerity, faith and works – must all be condemned, and are. God’s justice is fixed, and none is a satisfactory response to the sinner’s plight. Nor is faith simply the entry-point into a life which is conducted according to works: “the just shall live by faith; its utility is to be experienced not once, but always.”³¹ The guns in this opening salvo are discharged against the moralism and rigorism which framed Venn’s own early spiritual endeavour, and characterised the prevailing ministries of the first half of his century. Whilst the rigorist tradition made holiness and works the condition of salvation rather than its ground, Venn’s Moderate Calvinism in *The Complete Duty* is marked out by the unconditionality of saving faith, coupled with the necessity of obedience.

Like Allestree, the book begins with a treatment of the soul and then of God (I-II). In deliberate contrast to him, Venn then explores the sinner’s state before a holy God, and the Law as God’s declared way that humanity comes to discover its need of God’s mercy (III-IV). By insisting on total depravity and the first of the traditional three-fold use of the Law, Venn employed a reformed framework to serve his practical Christianity. Whilst not explicitly stated, these subjects effectively form the first part of the work. In the second part the reader is instructed that necessary mercy is discovered through the exercise of faith in Christ, a faith which is wrought by the Holy Spirit (V-VII), and evidenced in true repentance (VIII). The heart-transformation of the believer results in ‘Dispositions’, which are first heavenwards, and then directed towards fellow men (divided into two chapters in the fifth edition). The third and final section is characterised by a focus on practical Christian living, exploring the duties of respective household members (IX-X), and the

³⁰ Venn, *Duty*, p. xxviii.

³¹ Venn, *Duty*, p. xxx.

responsibilities of self-denial, prayer and Scripture reading (XI-XIII). The ordering of Venn's material (in the fifth edition) makes for fourteen relatively equally-spaced sections. The shortest, on the Soul, is thirteen pages, whilst the longest, on Dispositions, is fifty-one pages. The treatment of Faith is forty-one pages. The book closes with a twenty-nine page essay on Christian Joy.

The impression is of a work which aims to win and then nurture converts to the doctrine of justification by faith alone, to teach them to pursue the sanctified life in home, church and society, and comfort them by the assurances of Moderate Calvinism. The book's concluding section on joy is not an appendage, but is expressly designed to show that the faith Venn is commending finds its expression in a piety which is both satisfying to the believer, and attractive to the church and to the world. This subject was crucially important to Venn, particularly in the context of his religious and cultural worlds, and will be given its own separate treatment later in this chapter.

The short introductory section on the soul establishes the importance of what follows. God created humans soul as well as body, and as such humanity was "a sinless, immortal transcript of himself".³² The soul, though ruined and corrupted by sin, is of inestimable value. Venn then introduces the themes which will occupy him through the work: the Son of God alone is able to deal with the plight of the lost soul through his incarnation, Law-keeping and vicarious sin-bearing death, and the Spirit sent by Father and Son is alone able to bring understanding to the sinner of these spiritual mysteries. Belief in Scripture's teaching is therefore indispensable.³³

³² Venn, *Duty*, p. 3.

³³ Venn, *Duty*, p. 7.

Next, Venn differentiates God's natural and his moral perfections. To reflect on the latter, especially on the holiness of God, being "the harmony of all of the attributes of God", is to discover a God of favour and mercy, but ultimately one who will condemn as well as deliver. Aiming at the latitude of Tillotson and others, Venn presents God's attributes in order "to confute the dangerous opinion of those who vainly suppose the Deity to be all mercy."³⁴ Far from it, "the dreadful execution of God's wrath upon all the world puts the holiness of his nature beyond dispute."³⁵ The reader is then challenged to search his own view of God, to see if it conforms to the one presented in Scripture.³⁶

Venn's aim is for the conviction of sin in the light of God's perfections. Chapter V explores the peril of humanity, blind to the reality of God and lost in "his forgetfulness, contempt, nay, even hatred of his Creator."³⁷ The sinner will not bring to God the honour he deserves, and spurns the peace and joy offered to him. This contempt of God "is a crime infinitely heinous", and "by this conduct man foams out his own shame."³⁸ In treating this further (VI), Venn's method is first to offer demonstrable proofs, and then to turn to Scripture to add its own charges to reveal sin and guilt.³⁹ Why all of this effort? Because "it is only upon the doctrine of the entire corruption of human nature that the propriety of the capital and peculiar doctrines of the bible rests."⁴⁰ Original sin needs its appointed Redeemer.

Now lost in voluntary blindness, man needs "a complete standard of good and evil".⁴¹

What is this standard, though? The law of conscience is insufficient for the sin-darkened

³⁴ Venn, *Duty*, p. 26.

³⁵ Venn, *Duty*, p. 26.

³⁶ Venn, *Duty*, p. 35.

³⁷ Venn, *Duty*, p. 37.

³⁸ Venn, *Duty*, p. 44.

³⁹ Venn, *Duty*, p. 51.

⁴⁰ Venn, *Duty*, p. 52.

⁴¹ Venn, *Duty*, p. 58.

mind, nor is any law based upon human philosophy adequate for disclosing the demands of God. Most likely, Venn here is disavowing the optimistic project of Bishop Butler to establish the law of conscience as an adequate guide for morality.⁴² It was one thing to appeal to the conscience of the awakened sinner, or even of the sinning professor, as, for example, Haweis did in writing to a backslidden Methodist in 1754, but it would not do to suggest that the sin-darkened conscience could accurately comprehend the mind of God.⁴³ Equally, Venn was being true to the scheme of Moderate Calvinism. Man must be confronted with the perfect standards of God in the Law. “Till this is known, the gospel cannot be understood, nor the grace of God be duly received.”⁴⁴ That Law is chiefly expressed in the Decalogue. Through a brief exposition of the Commandments Venn unfolds the duty of the sinful but justified Christian to God and to his neighbour, according to each table of the Law, empowered by the Holy Spirit, to the praise of God in Christ. This is now his duty.

Two further chapters (VIII and IX) demonstrate that the only correct appreciation of the Law is one which shows that nothing can save man from God’s righteous judgement. With an eye on Allestree’s and equally Tillotson’s optimism, Venn denies that “sincerity of intention only” could ever satisfy the Law, and asks, “were we to suppose that God could overlook one transgression of his Law, we should naturally, and I think must justly conclude, that he would overlook more; and where then shall we stop?”⁴⁵ Rather, the Law “acts like an engine of irresistible force, to sweep away from us every refuge of lies, in which man would vainly seek a deceitful security”, and in the image of St Paul, “is

⁴² Hindmarsh, *Spirit*, p. 216.

⁴³ John Rylands University Library of Manchester, Methodist Archive and Research Centre, Lamplough Collection, MS Letter, Thomas Haweis to an unnamed recipient, 12th August, 1754.

⁴⁴ Venn, *Duty*, p. 54.

⁴⁵ Venn, *Duty*, p. 63, cf. Venn, *Condemned*, p. 5.

intended to act as a schoolmaster to lead us to Christ.”⁴⁶ Such a perfect Law is given to lead the guilty to Christ and his righteousness alone.⁴⁷ Whilst being ignorant of the Law the sinner fails to know himself and how God is to be obeyed, and he will continue in his lost state by thinking that he can please God in his efforts. Furthermore, an ongoing ignorance amongst the converted will lead to a false view of their own perfection.⁴⁸ Rather, a right use of the Law brings self-abasement.⁴⁹ This is all of a piece with Venn’s declaration in the following decade, that “the Law, by laying judgement to the line and righteousness to the plummet, sweeps away the refuge of lies under which sinners of every sort take shelter.”⁵⁰

Chapter X is an opening statement on the faith which sinners must exercise, and the next four chapters explore such faith. Far from being speculative or perfunctory, Venn defines faith as “the reliance of the heart on him for help and deliverance.”⁵¹ Examples are gathered from the Gospels in which individuals come to Christ with faith, and conversely, others are given where lack of faith is censured. Faith is in essence a response to the conviction of sin and judgement: “to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ is, under the heart-conviction of such guilt, and in abhorrence of it, to depend on his blood as the propitiation which God himself hath set forth for our sin.”⁵² Although using the word nearly 250 times in the book, Venn never defines the word “heart”, although its sustained use shows it approximated to the “inner man” of the Apostle Paul.⁵³ As with his treatment of it in the *Sermons*, Venn’s preferred descriptor for faith is *dependence*, and such dependence involves a life-long confidence in Christ for justification and preservation: “to believe in

⁴⁶ Venn, *Duty*, pp. 64-5.

⁴⁷ Venn, *Duty*, p. 70.

⁴⁸ Venn, *Duty*, p. 76.

⁴⁹ Venn, *Duty*, p. 77.

⁵⁰ Venn, *Mistakes*, p. 44.

⁵¹ Venn, *Duty*, p. 81.

⁵² Venn, *Duty*, p. 84.

⁵³ E.g., Romans 7.22.

Christ therefore comprehends a firm dependence that you shall abundantly experience both his power and his love, when every human help and comfort fail, and present objects are no more.”⁵⁴

In the following chapter Venn takes aim at the false turns of religious activity in his day, moving from rationalist notions of faith through to excessive enthusiasm. Regarding the first, there is the presumptuousness of faith which mistakes knowledge about Christ for saving reliance upon him. Faith without reformation of life is also bogus, as is a misplaced confidence in “national religion, be what it may”.⁵⁵ From this formal adherence Venn moves to the opposite danger, namely, faith “whereby his soul is enlightened, and the forgiveness of sins made self-evident by the force of inward feeling alone.”⁵⁶ Venn is treading a careful line here. He told Grimshaw’s Haworth congregation in the same year as *The Complete Duty’s* publication that conversion could bring an immediate heart-change to the believer,⁵⁷ and yet, whilst God is pleased to grant such convictions, Venn cautions against the danger of thinking that faith must of necessity involve a felt assurance of forgiveness.⁵⁸ One wonders how many of these mistakes Venn identifies were features of his own spiritual pilgrimage. Authentic faith for Venn certainly had its experiential dimensions, since peace and comforts characterise the believer. Granted, these fluctuate, but “dependence upon Jesus for present help and deliverance will prove, from its success, an abiding source of comfort and assurance to the mind.”⁵⁹ Venn presses home the imperative of such a conscious resting on Christ. Neither an assent to Christ’s trustworthiness, nor even a general recognition of his atoning death is sufficient, and “is to

⁵⁴ Venn, *Duty*, p. 86.

⁵⁵ Venn, *Duty*, p. 90.

⁵⁶ Venn, *Duty*, p. 91.

⁵⁷ Venn, *Christ the Joy of the Christian’s Life and Death His Gain* (Leeds, 1763), p. 5.

⁵⁸ Venn, *Duty*, p. 182.

⁵⁹ Venn, *Duty*, p. 95.

glorify him very little, in comparison to maintaining an uninterrupted dependence upon him.”⁶⁰

Chapters XII-XIV are a concise exploration of Christ’s achievements and ongoing ministry for the redeemed. Christ died a vicarious death after keeping the Law perfectly, and removing its curse from believers.⁶¹ Paying the obligations of the Law leads to the question, “is not this ransom then a solid ground for peace to the broken in heart?”⁶² Christ is the sin-bearer in his work on earth, intercessor and instructor for his people in his heavenly session, and “complete deliverer, through his Spirit, from the tyranny of our sinful tempers”.⁶³ These pages offer a standard, reformed treatment with a practical and hortatory emphasis, essentially a Goodwin, a Watson or a Flavel of the previous century, reshaped for contemporary concerns.

Venn’s pneumatology is equally conventional. “A true knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, and of salvation by him, must be the production of the Holy Ghost as much at this very hour, as when the apostles first planted churches in the name of Jesus.”⁶⁴ The Holy Spirit works through the Word of God to bring illumination, conviction of sin, and then applies the gospel to the believer. Venn stops short of exploring the doctrine of regeneration in these two chapters. Instead, he traces the nature of the Spirit’s work, which is above all “secret, and discernible only by its fruits”.⁶⁵ Secret though powerful, and operating in correspondence to the truth of God’s Word, the Spirit may work in differing degrees in different persons, as he is grieved or honoured in each.

⁶⁰ Venn, *Duty*, p. 98.

⁶¹ Venn, *Duty*, p. 101.

⁶² Venn, *Duty*, p. 104.

⁶³ Venn, *Duty*, p. 115.

⁶⁴ Venn, *Duty*, p. 133, cf. p. 137.

⁶⁵ Venn, *Duty*, p. 139.

The Spirit's activities, however, may be misunderstood and even opposed by rationalists and enthusiasts alike. The first, Venn says, decry the Spirit's workings as "the chimera of a heated brain, and the reverie of enthusiasts", and submit to cold and unbelieving rationalism, whilst the latter are "wild visionaries, who falsely lay claim to the Spirit's influence, to sanction their nonsense, cover their pride, or screen their villainy or lewdness".⁶⁶ Venn seeks the middle ground. Experience itself is not suspect, though there is every reason to be sceptical of the claims of some. To doubt all, however, is to reject the testimony of the Scriptures, and might be its own evidence of unbelief.⁶⁷

Three chapters closing this section focus on the nature of and need for repentance. So transformative is true repentance that the Christian life, far from being one of subjective impulse, involves a turning away from the natural inclination to defy God, to a holy longing for life lived in conformity to the Law.⁶⁸ The true believer "thinks no joy equal to that of pure obedience", and embarks on a life-long course of repentance, "a continued war against all the defilement of sin, til death sounds the retreat".⁶⁹ *The Complete Duty* is just that, therefore, a manual teaching Spirit-wrought repentance leading to the duty of obeying the Law in the power of its giver and redeemer, Jesus Christ. This is experimental religion.

Published while Venn was still in his later thirties, and only six or so years into his Calvinistic convictions, *The Complete Duty* avoids any partisan dogmatic tone. There are no references to election or to predestination. Along with almost all Moderate Calvinists, Venn was well aware that much talk of predestination gave grist to Antinomians and Arminians, and might blunt the sharp call to evangelical repentance.⁷⁰ Neither is explicit

⁶⁶ Venn, *Duty*, p. 141.

⁶⁷ Venn, *Duty*, p. 143.

⁶⁸ Venn, *Duty*, p. 149.

⁶⁹ Venn, *Duty*, pp. 150, 153.

⁷⁰ Walsh, 'Yorkshire Evangelicals', p. 35.

criticism made of theological positions or church parties (though the reader would detect clear warnings against latitudinarianism, moralism and perfectionism). Central to Venn's project was the establishing of an experiential religion undergirded by the promises of grace, and focused on the doctrine of justification by faith alone, which was both attractive and persuasive. Venn knew that the way to win a hearing for his own tenets was not to argue for them point by point, but to cast a vision for an assured faith and activist piety. *The Complete Duty* sets forth a deliberately low-key and peaceable Calvinism, absent in name, though present in form.

The Complete Duty now pivots towards the application of all that Venn has laid out. "The doctrines of grace, like an affectionate tutor, form men to obedience."⁷¹ Such doctrines, Venn continues, "make every duty we owe to our Creator appear rational and easy. They give us a heart, a hand and sufficient ability to exercise ourselves unto universal godliness." One might detect a Tillotsonian ring to this declaration. Maybe speaking to those who might find such piety attractive, Venn insists that evangelical doctrine was needed for the transformation of the redeemed sinner for a life of conformity to the will of God.

Lest such life be viewed as one of drudgery, the believer's obedience is framed by distinctively new attitudes towards God (the "Disposition of a Christian" - Venn selects ten, XXI-XXII). Love for God is the Christian's duty, but equally, is his delight. The Christian "loves the invisible God with as much sincerity of affection as the covetous love their possessions, or the sensualist the joys of voluptuousness."⁷² The section is charged with experiential and affectionate language. The believer "cries with vehemence", lives "in

⁷¹ Venn, *Duty*, p. 163.

⁷² Venn, *Duty*, p. 174.

the constant exercise of a devout spirit”, it is “his hunger and thirst to receive out of the fulness there is in Christ”, and God’s Word and his people “will be objects of his pleasure and delight”.⁷³ In a short compass, then, Venn has started to build a personal heart religion upon the foundations of the propositional faith of the Bible. Truth leads to the affections, which give personal and public evidence. This may not be to the tastes of the respectable, nor would it satisfy the claims of the enthusiasts, but Venn is delineating “the genuine character of a Christian, even if it were not to be found in one of a million, nor in one of a nation.”⁷⁴

Three chapters set forth seven cardinal virtues of the believer towards others, in the world and in the church. Masters, stewards, servants, the poor and the wealthy, the magistrate, the head of a family, a man wronged by an unpaid debt: all are charged to work out their faith in expressions of self-denying and God-honouring behaviour. All efforts will prove to shape the “crowning attainment of a real Christian”, namely, humility.⁷⁵ As pains are taken to deny self and prefer others, the Christian believer becomes “an inestimable blessing to all in connection with him”.⁷⁶

The *Dispositions* forms a lengthy section, divided into two halves in the 1798 edition. The direction Venn takes at Chapter XXII suggests a third section of the book, as counsel for Christian living becomes increasingly specific and applied. Specific graces are identified and urged on the reader as necessary for gospel living (XXIII-XXV). Venn addresses different members of society, focusing on the household, and addressing (in Pauline order) husbands and fathers and then wives and mothers in their respective roles, including

⁷³ Venn, *Duty*, pp. 175, 178.

⁷⁴ Venn, *Duty*, p. 182.

⁷⁵ Venn, *Duty*, p. 209.

⁷⁶ Venn, *Duty*, p. 212.

parenting, and then their children themselves. Stillingfleet of Hotham told Venn's grandson in 1824 that Venn was the most uxorious man he had ever known, and Venn's letters frequently speak of his delight in his children.⁷⁷ His marital counsel is that couples, "though irreproachable in their own consciences on point of conjugal fidelity, are still greatly guilty if they live in indifference, or slight regard, to each other."⁷⁸ The husband's tender and attentive love models that of his Saviour to his church, "so that the authority lodged in the husband, by being managed with propriety, instead of proving a galling yoke to the wife, shall be found a real source of greater ease and happiness to both."⁷⁹ As he provides for the support of the home, and she manages it, God's order is observed.

Chapters XXVII and XXVIII set out counsels for parenting. Children are to be trained to be useful citizens, and industry is to be taught and modelled by parents, who must make provision for a trade for their offspring. Above all, their salvation must be laboured for, in training them in the Word of God, showing Christian precept, prayer, and keeping them from the dangers of the world. Parents must use all opportunities to teach children the character of God in his holiness and goodness, and the transience of life, allowing them to see the effects of sin in some, and grace in others, even grace in those who are dying.⁸⁰ Children and servants are enjoined in the following chapter to be respectful and loyal, and masters must relate to their servants "as candidates equally with themselves for his eternal kingdom".⁸¹ Venn's aim in this guidance is to promote godly households, which example

⁷⁷ Venn MSS, Acc.81/F13. For Venn's affection for his own children, e.g., Venn, *Letters*, pp. 350-351, 468. "Children" is one of Venn's preferred descriptors of believers.

⁷⁸ Venn, *Duty*, p. 214.

⁷⁹ Venn, *Duty*, p. 220.

⁸⁰ Venn's son recorded with approval how his widowed father took his children one night to the garret of a dying man, to witness his faith in Christ. Venn, *Letters*, pp. 39-40.

⁸¹ Venn, *Duty*, p. 246.

the power of grace to others.⁸² This theme was taken up in a number of household manuals, explored below, pp. 229-232.

Teaching a practical Christianity which avoids reproach from its detractors, Venn sets out nine areas in which the self must be denied (XXX-XXXIII). He begins with three areas of temptation where failure is most obvious - temperance, lewdness and covetousness.⁸³ “You must either turn apostate from the Christian faith, renouncing every hope of finding mercy from God; or you mortify your members which are upon the earth.”⁸⁴ A strict self-watch is entirely in keeping with faith.⁸⁵ From this point Venn moves further into the interior life, probing the dangers of excessive enjoyment of the things of the world, love of the praise of men, and fear of shame for the sake of Christ.⁸⁶ The fear of suffering for God and his truth must be faced and overcome. The Christian will only manage to stand firm by submitting reason to the revealed truth of the Bible. The ninth and final area of self-denial is that of rejecting one’s own imagined righteousness in order to rely on that of Christ. “How is it possible we can honour the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, as God would have it honoured, if we imagine our goodness can absolve us from guilt?”⁸⁷ This last and most painful discipline, therefore, the renunciation of right-standing through self-effort before God, leads the believer back to the essence of faith as Venn teaches it, the conscious dependence upon the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Significantly, in his high standards of holy living Venn does not give ground to a rigorist position, but insists that Law-keeping is the true expression of faith.

⁸² Venn, *Duty*, p. 248.

⁸³ Venn was no plaster saint. He confided to his fiancée his temptation “to talk Bawdy...when...with some of the deer children of God”. Venn MSS. C/17/4, Letter to Eling Bishop, 29th July, 1756.

⁸⁴ Venn, *Duty*, p. 260.

⁸⁵ Venn, *Duty*, p. 263.

⁸⁶ Venn, *Duty*, p. 277.

⁸⁷ Venn, *Duty*, p. 282.

If true Christianity is a calling to such rigorous self-denial, how can any hope to make progress in it? Venn answers that grace is received “by way of distinction called Devotional Duties.”⁸⁸ In treating the nature, necessity and requisites of prayer (XXIV-XXVI) the believer is presented as contrite for his sins but confident in a merciful Heavenly Father, resolved to prayerfulness and personal Scripture reading.⁸⁹ One surprisingly brief chapter is all that Venn gives to his subject, offering four rules for reading. Venn is less intent on giving specific directives and more on encouraging careful and active Bible reading. The believer is to meditate on Scripture, ideally on small portions, in order to heed its message and feel its power. “It is our duty to labour and pray, that we may have the lively signatures of Scripture impressed in all our sentiments, breathing in all our desires, realized in all our conduct; so that all may see, and we ourselves most delightfully prove, that the word of the Lord is pure, converting our souls.”⁹⁰

In his last substantial letter to his son John on New Year’s Day, 1797, Venn encouraged him to stand firm in his course of preaching a practical faith, emphasising the constraints of faith. “Every prophet and every Apostle insists as much upon the fruits of faith as upon faith itself, and the glory of Christ’s person.”⁹¹ Venn declared that he invited the reproach of those claiming their sinless perfection, as well as that of Antinomians, but this was the price of adherence to Scripture, in which his son must persevere. To that end, *The Complete Duty* is a work which avoids all but the most necessary controversy and polemics. Whilst not always irenic – Venn wants to discomfort those who rely on human effort for salvation, or who believe that faith alone is sufficient in God’s sight,

⁸⁸ Venn, *Duty*, pp. 285-6.

⁸⁹ Venn, *Duty*, p. 310.

⁹⁰ Venn, *Duty*, p. 317.

⁹¹ Venn, *Letters*, pp. 530-1.

unaccompanied by the evidences of faith - he strives to present the reader with the core matters of faith and basic Christian living. Venn's instincts were catholic and pacific.⁹²

Venn would have neither suffered his conscience to compromise what he saw as biblical truth, nor violated it in order to disenfranchise sincere believers who held differing convictions.

Given its intended purpose, *The Complete Duty* is not a comprehensive treatment of Christian doctrine, and certainly not even of all the opinions precious to mid-century Moderate Calvinists. Alongside refraining from mentioning predestination or election, Venn is silent on the extent of the atonement. The security of the believer is more implied than emphasised. Nor is the work particularly saturated in biblical texts. Venn builds his arguments often by force of reason and logical sequence, and marshals Scripture references in order to strengthen his case. In places Venn adopts a conversational tone redolent of Doddridge's *Rise and Progress*. He never loses sight of the needs of his readers, nor his desire to see them joyful in Christ, secure in the doctrines of grace. Above all, Venn's burden is to show that justification by faith alone made for distinctive living: "Faith is not understood, much less possessed, if it is not attended with more sincerity, and productive of more holiness, more grace in the heart, and more gracious affections of all kinds, than could possibly be attained in any other way".⁹³ Through this, Venn paved the way for his end of century successors to insist on the primacy of sola fideism in ways which appeared to disparage other Calvinistic distinctives, and also which facilitated wider evangelical co-operation. In that sense, *The Complete Duty* is "perhaps the chief eighteenth century monument to the practicality of Moderate Calvinism".⁹⁴

⁹² Venn took great pleasure in his friendship with the Arminian John Fletcher, Venn, *Letters*, p. 233.

⁹³ Venn, *Duty*, p. xxxi.

⁹⁴ Walsh, 'Yorkshire Evangelicals', p. 184.

The Complete Duty was very warmly commended in *The Critical Review* of December, 1763, as “the performance of a sober, serious Christian divine”.⁹⁵ The reviewer did little more than offer preferred selections of the text, as well as make the unconvincing claim that the book was a good complement to *The Whole Duty*, each serving as they did the very different needs of their respective times.⁹⁶ Almost inevitably, given his love of High Church piety and pique at Venn’s Calvinism, John Wesley wrote disparagingly of Venn’s book after the Minutes controversy, and defended *The Whole Duty*.⁹⁷ His criticism, however, did little to overshadow *The Complete Duty*’s influence. Fawcett’s son John thought that Venn’s book “greatly contributed to the diffusion of Divine Truth through every part of the kingdom”, helping to put the *Whole Duty* into further obsolescence.⁹⁸ Charles Jerram, one of a party which visited the elderly Venn in 1795, declared it

“a standard work which will go down to future generations as memorial of his sound divinity, of his talent in powerful and impressive writing, of his dexterity in stripping off the mask of self-deceivers, of his skill in meeting every case of an awakened conscience, of his tact and tenderness in applying the consolations of the Gospel to those that are mourning under a sense of sin, and of his ability to direct every inquirer after salvation “in the good and right way.””⁹⁹

Venn’s son and grandson eagerly collected stories of the book’s impact on individuals in his father’s memoirs, from around the country, the Continent and America, and assured readers of many more.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁵ Tobias Smollett (ed), *The Critical Review* (London, 1763), 16, p. 455.

⁹⁶ Smollett (ed), *Critical Review*, p. 455.

⁹⁷ Charles Wesley Lowry, Jr., ‘Spiritual Antecedents of Anglican Evangelicalism’, *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church*, 12, 1943, p. 145.

⁹⁸ Fawcett, *Account*, p. 27.

⁹⁹ Charles Jerram, *The Memoirs and a Selection from the Letters of the Late Rev. Charles Jerram*, M.A. (London, 1855), p. 100.

¹⁰⁰ Venn, *Life*, pp. 34-8.

The book had gone through twenty editions before 1841, helped on its way to ongoing popularity by the editing and republication in 1798 by Venn's son.¹⁰¹ Leslie Stephen, nurtured in the piety of the Clapham Sect (John Venn was Stephen's childhood rector), declared that "for three generations it was the accepted manual of the sect and a trusted exposition of their characteristic theology," and his brother Fitzjames said that "'the *Complete Duty of Man*' has ever since rivalled, if it has not surpassed, the fame and acceptance of 'the *Whole Duty of Man*', and is still one of those books of which the benefit is never unfelt, of which the love never abates, and of which the republication is never long intermitted."¹⁰² Intermission, however, did overcome the book. Literary tastes moved on. Ryle thought Venn's prose style put it beyond the tastes of readers a century later, in contrast to his letters.¹⁰³

Much of Venn's ministry influence was subtle and not overt, and this is true of *The Complete Duty*. Without it, though, one struggles to give an account for the sensibilities and priorities of the Clapham Sect and indeed, of the Victorian conscience.¹⁰⁴ Here is the promotion of activist religion, paternalism in the home matched with the obligations outside it, with the duties of the privileged towards the less better-off, and integrity and charity expected of all. Evangelicals such as Hannah More and William Wilberforce considered it *de rigueur* towards the end of century to challenge public and private mores, and to work in decidedly practical terms for the advance of their Christianity. When Thomas Gisborne devoted many hundred pages to lecturing the upper ranks of English society on their duties, he could work with assumptions that clergy could appeal to such

¹⁰¹ Rivers, *Reason*, 1, p. 272.

¹⁰² Leslie Stephen, *The Life of Sir James Fitzjames Stephen* (London, 1895), 34; James Stephen, *Essays in Ecclesiastical Biography*, 4th edn (2 vols, London, 1860), 2, pp. 166-167.

¹⁰³ Ryle, *Leaders*, p. 289.

¹⁰⁴ For the origins and course of conduct manuals, see Ian Bradley, *The Call to Seriousness. The Evangelical Impact on the Victorians* (Oxford, 2006) pp. 149-155. Jane De Gay, *Virginia Woolf and Christian Culture* (Edinburgh, 2018), pp. 19-51.

orders and expect a hearing.¹⁰⁵ The Victorian age, where religion was expected to shape the home no less than the workplace, was rooted in a consciousness shaped by *The Complete Duty*. A question beyond the limits of this study presents itself, however, and that is the extent to which subsequent morality manuals assumed rather than taught conversion, and thus contributed to the malaise of faith, but not of action, within the nation and Empire.¹⁰⁶ Venn could make no assumptions of his readers' sympathies, but led them into his own convictions. If High Calvinists focused on the atoning work of Christ at the expense of the need for the sanctified life for the believer, the inheritors of Venn's tradition possibly exhibited the opposite tendency. The genius of *The Complete Duty* was its synthesis of practical and experimental religion, the binding of energies which others would struggle to keep together.

¹⁰⁵ Thomas Gisborne, *An Enquiry Into the Duties of Men in the Higher and Middle Classes of Society in Great Britain* (London, 1795).

¹⁰⁶ "This close pairing of theological treatise and conduct manual, the interweaving of doctrinal and practical, meant that the social and cultural prescriptions would endure even after the agnosticism of later generations had dismantled the scaffolding of faith." De Gay, *Woolf*, p. 19.

2.2 *Mistakes in Religion: Practical, Calvinistic Christianity*

Venn wrote *Mistakes in Religion* in mid-career.¹⁰⁷ He had recovered his energies after the workload and personal grief which signalled the end of the Huddersfield ministry, and the less frenetic pace of life in Yelling allowed Venn to devote time to a relatively substantial piece of writing (299 pages in the original edition), first published in 1774. Drawing, Venn says, from experience gathered in twenty years of ministry in London and Huddersfield, he writes to expose the errors of moralists, formalists and antinomians, and to instil a dread of them.¹⁰⁸ Venn claims the need to do so because he has not seen such a work elsewhere, and seeks to prosecute only a “*very few* mistakes, such as all earnest Christians ... will agree are pernicious.”¹⁰⁹ The task is serious: there are no small mistakes when it comes to Christian doctrine, and so “love to God and man requires that errors of a pernicious nature always be exposed with warmth both from the pulpit and press.”¹¹⁰

To Venn’s mind, pernicious errors of both doctrine and conduct abounded. The 1760s and early 70s were a time of upheaval and infighting within and beyond the evangelical cause.¹¹¹ A radical heterodoxy was asserting itself, troublesome in Dissent for long decades, but now threatening the Established Church, as rationalism, Arianism and its corresponding Anti-Trinitarianism were causing fierce disputes. The burgeoning Methodist movement was now certain to stay, and Britons needed convincing that it would prove a blessing rather than curse to Church, king and nation. Perfectionism, the St Edmund Hall expulsions at Oxford in 1768, and the establishment of the Countess of Huntingdon’s Trevecca College in the same year each sharpened questions about identity and intention.

¹⁰⁷ Henry Venn, *Mistakes in Religion Exposed* (London, 1774). The edition used here is the 1810 one. Venn shared the germ of the idea for the book early in 1772 with his Slaithwaite curate, Matthew Powley, Venn MSS, Acc.81/C12/5, Letter to Matthew Powley, 19th February, 1772.

¹⁰⁸ Venn, *Mistakes*, p. xiii-xiv.

¹⁰⁹ Venn, *Mistakes*, p. xiv. Italics original.

¹¹⁰ Venn, *Mistakes*, p. xvi-xvii.

¹¹¹ Rack, *Enthusiast*, pp. 450-470.

The publication of the Methodist Minutes of 1770 brought agitations to a climax, causing an irreparable division between Wesley and his followers and some Evangelicals.¹¹²

Internationally, tensions with the American colonies ignited Enlightenment questions about freedom and rights on both sides of the Atlantic. The evangelical cause could never return to being simply an impulse of the heart and pulpit, a market-place religion enjoying the albeit precarious privilege of limited Anglican patronage, and relative lack of interference from church authorities; evangelicals now needed to fight for an exact faith, clear on what its articles and piety taught, and to fix their place in church, state and culture.¹¹³ Venn's *Mistakes* was written in large part to position himself and his convictions within these events, and in doing so, to reassert his vision of Christian faith and living in the light of Moderate Calvinism.

Defending these tenets from the familiar charge that they caused civic unrest or personal declension, Venn portrays an activist faith which avoids the accusation of enthusiasm, but nonetheless is distinctive from moralism or mere church conformity. In short, here is a vision of the committed Christian life founded upon the biblically verifiable doctrines of grace, consistent with that set forth in *The Complete Duty*. *Mistakes* is an essay on the prophecy of Zechariah, from Luke 2. 67-79, and is divided into twenty-nine chapters of differing length. Venn explores his text from various angles in order to set forth a robust religion of supernatural grace, founded on the authority of Scripture and entirely consistent with the Formularies.. The themes of *The Complete Duty* are all present, and laid out within the first third of the book (I-XIV). Venn insists on the fundamental creed established through the words of Zechariah: the divine Saviour Jesus Christ was made

¹¹² Danker, *Wesley*, p. 189.

¹¹³ Carter, *Evangelicals*, p. 32.

flesh in order to redeem ruined humanity through his vicarious death; he calls sinners to put their faith in him, to spurn the world and take up their cross.¹¹⁴

Venn deplored Christians embracing sound doctrine but not displaying its life-bringing power. “We are very prone to turning the doctrines of grace into poison”, Venn lamented to his old Huddersfield friend Thomas Atkinson, in 1792.¹¹⁵ He knew from experience that it was feasible for Christians to be sound in doctrine but deficient in practical godliness, and believed that disagreements did not always need to be aired.¹¹⁶ *Mistakes* is Venn’s attempt to contend for practical religion without falling into the trap of being contentious.

In the first section Venn gives a ‘first pass’ to many themes dealt with in more detail later on. Humanity is lost in sin, captive to it, and liable to judgement. This is our universal condition. Deny it, and “you will take offence at the name of Redeemer.”¹¹⁷ Those who reject Scripture teaching find themselves actually opposing the Christ who came for the helpless, and seeking false solace in their morality.¹¹⁸ As Venn later declares, part of our fallenness is our proud refusal to deny that we are fallen.¹¹⁹

In Chapter V (“On the mistake of preaching Morals principally”) Venn argues that teaching morals without Christ makes people think they are virtuous, and will inevitably turn them against each aspect of the Christian faith.¹²⁰ This high view of humanity, with its resulting low view of Christ, he believed, is the reason for the increase of Deism, which can only be combatted by the preaching of Christ in the place of pretended human

¹¹⁴ Venn calls Zechariah’s prophecy “a system of divinity”. Venn, *Mistakes*, pp. x-xi.

¹¹⁵ Venn, *Letters*, p. 502.

¹¹⁶ Venn, *Letters*, p. 263. Berridge shared this conviction. Nigel R. Pibworth, *The Letters of John Berridge of Everton. A Singular Spirituality* (Kitchener, Ont., 2015), p. 206.

¹¹⁷ Venn, *Mistakes*, p. 6.

¹¹⁸ Venn, *Mistakes*, p. 7.

¹¹⁹ Venn, *Mistakes*, p. 96.

¹²⁰ Venn, *Mistakes*, p. 26.

virtue.¹²¹ The antidote for all who discover their need of salvation is Christ the *horn of salvation* spoken of by Zechariah. Granted, Venn says, this message is very confusing for those who think that a peaceful, prosperous life is the sum total of their desires; but God's Word and Spirit are sent to recover them from this delusion, since "they shew us where we are, what we are, and what we want."¹²² To receive his salvation, sinners must believe in an alien righteousness, namely, Christ's, as did all the Patriarchs, Prophets and Apostles. This is, as Venn says, "the obnoxious doctrine" of imputation.¹²³ Reading scripture explanations of the righteousness of the believer otherwise is "torturing the text": the active obedience of Christ qualifies him to be the vicarious sin-bearer of his people, who receive all of his merits through union with him in the covenant of redemption.¹²⁴ This is a classic reformed soteriology, put to the service of holy living.

The only way to shake people from their complacency and to bring them to the Saviour is through the correct preaching of the Law (VIII). Without Law preaching there is no appreciation of sin, obedience or redemption,¹²⁵ nor is there true piety: Christian living must be ordered by the Law (afterall, the foolish excesses of new converts can bring unnecessary opposition¹²⁶). A true profession of faith, however, must not stay a private concern, but must be borne into the world, whatever opposition it faces.¹²⁷ The Christ who empowers his people to stand against the world also delivers them from the love of the world (XIV).

The close of Chapter XIV provides a natural break. Venn has established humanity's need of Zechariah's prophesied Saviour, and has explained that God's Law prepares them to

¹²¹ Venn, *Mistakes*, p. 27-8.

¹²² Venn, *Mistakes*, p. 30.

¹²³ Venn, *Mistakes*, p. 38.

¹²⁴ Venn, *Mistakes*, p. 39.

¹²⁵ Venn, *Mistakes*, p. 46.

¹²⁶ Venn, *Mistakes*, p. 84.

¹²⁷ Venn, *Mistakes*, p. 89.

come to him in repentance and faith, confident that his death on the Cross is their redemption-price, as well as their commission to follow him. In the remaining two-thirds of *Mistakes* Venn explores these issues in greater detail, adding depth and application, to establish his readers as fruitful disciples of Moderate Calvinism, and committed adherents of the Church.

Mistakes sets forth a theology which is robustly covenantal. With other Moderate Calvinists, Venn greatly appreciated the Scottish late Puritan Thomas Boston's *Human Nature in its Fourfold State*, which most likely shaped his own federal theology.¹²⁸ As Boston did, Venn asserts in Chapter XIX the twin federal headships of Adam and of Christ, with their respective reigns of death and life. Adam's sin brought misery and the sentence of death to all humanity: "this one offence, big with all hateful qualities, instantly wrought a disastrous change in man's condition".¹²⁹ Believers in Christ "know their Redeemer is the mighty God – and that part of the everlasting covenant between the Father and Him ensure their victory over the grave."¹³⁰

The covenant made with Abraham is the sure foundation on earth for the work of redemption in Christ, and confidence in God's promised grace means that believers can meet all adversities with hope and courage.¹³¹ Believers can serve God with confidence precisely because of such security.¹³² These certainties potentially risk the abuse of grace. Chapters XXII and XXIII concern the believer's assurance and security. Assurance, a doctrine believed in a happier age, is now, "with other considerable parts of revelation,

¹²⁸ Venn told Stillingfleet of the converting influence of Boston's book in an extended family he knew in 1773. "The prophets of the Lord, like Elisha after death, are the instruments of bringing dead souls to life". Venn MSS, Acc.81/C/14/4, Letter to James Stillingfleet, 11th August, 1774.

¹²⁹ Venn, *Mistakes*, p. 122.

¹³⁰ Venn, *Mistakes*, p. 126.

¹³¹ Venn, *Mistakes*, p. 147.

¹³² "To serve him as they do, full of reverence, yet free from slavish fears, or painful suspicions, is the privilege of his people." Venn, *Mistakes*, p. 150.

fallen into contempt and treated with derision.”¹³³ Venn stood against some evangelicals in the revival in maintaining that assurance of salvation is not the possession of every believer;¹³⁴ however, he claims that no true child of God is completely bereft of peace, and of a true knowledge of God’s fatherly love.¹³⁵ In fact, of the latter he says it is unthinkable that the Father would not want to make his child aware of his love through the ministry of the Spirit.¹³⁶ The alternative to such a scenario results in an anxious state, the very opposite of the life of confident hope and joy.¹³⁷ Furthermore, Venn maintains, rather than secure believers being casual in the exercise of their faith, it is those who feel that heaven is within the grasp of their own efforts who may well lapse into presumptuousness.¹³⁸ Contrary to its High Church detractors, and to Wesley, assurance of salvation for Venn promotes holiness of living.

The Covenant of Grace is also sadly abused (XXIV): “where the doctrines of grace are taught, Satan has no other resource to uphold his tottering throne, than that of beguiling men to imagine the everlasting Covenant will afford protection, if not to Antinomian rebellion, yet to carelessness, formality and sloth.”¹³⁹ The man who makes claims to his salvation without obedience is deceived, as the very purpose of God through his covenant is “to save his people in a way of holiness.”¹⁴⁰ The Covenant was opened “for the benefit

¹³³ Venn, *Mistakes*, p. 152.

¹³⁴ Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, pp. 43-50, esp. p. 45. Bebbington’s view detects the influence of Lockean and Enlightenment epistemology on evangelical views of assurance, especially on those of Jonathan Edwards, setting a high priority on the individual’s sense of being saved. This analysis has been challenged by subsequent scholarship; Haykin has shown that Edwards’ convictions developed to become closer to those of mainline English Puritans, and Williams has argued that Wesley taught that assurance had to be discerned rather than assumed by the believer. Haykin & Stewart (eds), *Emergence*, pp. 55-7, 349-56. Bebbington made concessions to these points, *Emergence*, p. 422.

¹³⁵ Venn, *Mistakes*, p. 164.

¹³⁶ Venn, *Mistakes*, p. 152.

¹³⁷ Venn, *Mistakes*, p. 158.

¹³⁸ Venn, *Mistakes*, p. 162.

¹³⁹ Venn, *Mistakes*, p. 176.

¹⁴⁰ Venn, *Mistakes*, pp. 177-8. Compare, “All dependence, therefore, upon the covenant and oath for any other purpose or view than to serve the Lord with full assurance of success, is a barefaced perversion of the express design for which both were revealed.” p. 178.

of brave soldiers, to make them continue such, not to screen one scoundrel coward.”¹⁴¹

God promises peace and love; but each are diminished in the sinner’s heart if he professes faith but continues in sin.¹⁴² The covenant admitted no mercy for the graceless professor. Given the recent Calvinist-Arminian invective following the Minutes controversy, it was all the more expedient for Venn and his fellow Moderates to underline the necessity of the believer’s good works.

The same furore accounts for the sparing references to predestination and to election.

There are just nine references to “elect” or “election” in the work, three to predestination, and one to God choosing sinners to salvation. Venn was a moderate in his sensibilities as well as in his Calvinistic theology. He had no wish to enflame the anger which had marked exchanges between Arminians and Calvinists. Venn says that predestination is, essentially, God’s salvation of men for the life of holiness,¹⁴³ and that the Bible’s predestinarian passages especially teach the need for professors to pursue holiness, and “personal obedience is constantly declared to be the distinguishing mark of God.”¹⁴⁴ This is the strongest contrast to Wesley, who never deviated from this conviction that “this uncomfortable doctrine directly tends to destroy our zeal for good works”.¹⁴⁵ With its other detractors in mind, the Hyper-Calvinists, Venn warns that the worse misunderstanding of the doctrine is to claim to embrace it, but have no interest in personal obedience.¹⁴⁶

The work closes with a lengthy chapter, which is effectively a recapitulation of the book’s message, Chapter XXIX, *On the Connection between Christian Doctrine and Good Works*.

¹⁴¹ Venn, *Mistakes*, pp. 178-9.

¹⁴² Venn, *Mistakes*, pp. 181-2; cf. p.190.

¹⁴³ Venn, *Mistakes*, p. 191. The indolence of some professing Christians claiming grace is the target of the sometimes misquoted statement of Venn, that “predestination cancels the necessity of any change, and dispenses at once with all duty”, Venn, *Letters*, p. 34. Venn was not disavowing a belief in predestination, but rather recovering the doctrine from the errors of some who professed it.

¹⁴⁴ Venn, *Mistakes*, p. 185.

¹⁴⁵ John Wesley, *Free Grace*, 4th edn (London, 1754), p. 11.

¹⁴⁶ Venn, *Mistakes*, p. 192.

Misguided people claim, Venn says, that the real business of religion is doing good, and that the doctrines of Scripture are “far above common comprehension; for which reason they ought not to be the topic of instruction from the pulpit.”¹⁴⁷ Venn roundly challenges this claim: the main import of the Bible is precisely these things, and it is in the neglect of preaching and understanding them that the false notion arises that “good works may be well produced, independent of Christian doctrine, and are sufficient to salvation.”¹⁴⁸ Christ himself taught the depravity of man and need for new birth.¹⁴⁹ Post-ascension apostolic ministry emphasises the doctrines of faith more so than the practice of good works, and both Romans, and Hebrews are “a system of divinity relating to Christ and his church, with an application of the whole to practice.”¹⁵⁰ This is a striking line of argument for Venn to take. Anxious as he is in *Mistakes* to argue for an active obedience to the Law of God whilst avoiding rash enthusiasm, he insists that sound doctrine must be pre-eminent in the believer’s mind to impress on him his utter reliance on grace.

The believer must be instructed that he depends on Christ as much for sanctification as he does for justification. Preaching the whole counsel of God will achieve that. If, however, one is taught his need of justifying grace only, and not his radical ongoing reliance upon Christ for holy living, he will lapse into a delusion about the value of his good works.¹⁵¹ Venn’s target was the default moralist position of much Anglican sermonising, with its commitment to a double justification structure, and thus he claims that a Moderate Calvinist framework of saving and enabling grace gives incentive and power for godly living, and that without the excesses of unbiblical enthusiasm.

¹⁴⁷ Venn, *Mistakes*, p. 253.

¹⁴⁸ Venn, *Mistakes*, p. 254.

¹⁴⁹ Venn, *Mistakes*, pp. 255-6.

¹⁵⁰ Venn, *Mistakes*, pp. 258-9.

¹⁵¹ Venn, *Mistakes*, p. 264.

In *Mistakes* as well as in his other key published works, Venn maintains the doctrine of total depravity, and marshals three arguments in order to underline it: the holiness of God as revealed in Scripture, the teaching of Christ, and his vicarious work.¹⁵² Until these things are appreciated, sinful humanity will always be deceived by a pride that moral efforts might actually deserve God's favour. And, as the demands of the Law are preached without the need for prior repentance, the only outcome will be self-delusion on the part of the hearers.¹⁵³ Finally, Venn answers those who see the focus on preaching the doctrines of Christianity as leading to a false assurance of salvation, and a low view of good works, replying that it entails the setting forth the truths essential to all truly Christian understanding and obedience.¹⁵⁴

Venn positions Moderate Calvinism in *Mistakes* as the only coherent theological system to produce holiness. Contrasting with Wesley's increasing impatience with doctrinal precision, *Mistakes* insists that true Christianity is unashamedly doctrinal in content. The Moderate Calvinism of Venn's generation was decidedly utilitarian, and its tenets were often more implied than expounded in their ministries. Doctrine which was not evangelistically useful or pastorally practicable was not so much disputed as simply ignored. Though a latecomer to evangelical religion, and never a particularly decided Calvinist, Venn's friend Joseph Milner declared "I do not know any opinions separate from their practical uses that are worth contending for", and in doing so he spoke for many of the Moderates.¹⁵⁵ None wanted to draw comparisons with the Puritan movement, with all of the freight of its difficult associations.¹⁵⁶ It is therefore significant that Venn chose to

¹⁵² Venn, *Mistakes*, pp. 263-70.

¹⁵³ Venn, *Mistakes*, p. 277.

¹⁵⁴ Venn, *Mistakes*, p. 288.

¹⁵⁵ Isaac Milner (ed), *The Works of the late Rev. Joseph Milner* (8 vols, London, 1820), 6, p. 174.

¹⁵⁶ Carter, *Evangelicals*, p. 48.

pen a work so replete in Calvinistic emphases at such a fraught period in his evangelical world, all further confirming just how eminently useful he reckoned his beliefs to be.

Assessing the aftermath of the Minutes Controversy, Rack says that “the Revival softened the hard edges of Calvinism.” He also detects “the decline of the Calvinist tradition.”¹⁵⁷

The first statement is true only in certain respects, and the second needs heavy qualification, but each is helpful in placing Venn and *Mistakes* in Calvinist and wider circles. In some ways, the edge of the Calvinism of Shirley, the Hills, Haweis and Toplady was actually sharpened and put to more dividing effect in contention with Arminian Methodists. Like Venn, these men did not embark on ministry as conscious inheritors of a tradition, but came to employ doctrines of the Calvinist deposit as they served their purposes. Controversies compelled them to study the tradition and schooled them in it.¹⁵⁸

Some were known for an ardent identification with the reformed tradition, such as Toplady, with his use of Zanchius and belligerence against Arminians. The supposed “hard edges” of Calvinism in the eighteenth century were almost exclusively to be found in the Dissenting and Hyper-Calvinist tradition, itself rarely visited by the activist religion of the Evangelicals. Those who maintained Calvinist tenets in the Moderate tradition largely continued in them after the Minutes Controversy as they had before, little revising their creed. In the changing national situation from the 1770s it was expedient for Evangelicals politically as well as religiously to be seen to work as loyal servants of their church.¹⁵⁹

Like *The Complete Duty*, *Mistakes* is the framing of his Church’s faith and piety, showing a nation and its church the reasonableness of its religion.

¹⁵⁷ Rack, *Enthusiast*, p. 460.

¹⁵⁸ See Ryle’s comment to the same effect, Ryle, *Leaders*, p. 363.

¹⁵⁹ Carter, *Evangelicals*, p. 23.

Venn believed that it was wholehearted response to the Scriptures which alone promoted vital godliness. In an extended section on morality in Chapter XV, Venn investigates the false claims of those who offer good living *per se* as a cure to society's evils. The target here seems to be those of higher office in society, charged to govern it. Venn warns that trying to make people moral, with no recourse to the grace of God in Christ, will only lead to society becoming more wicked, and people living as the very enemies of God, without fear of love for God.¹⁶⁰ "Moralists, by affecting to know no duty beyond justice and benevolence, have erased from the mind of all who regard them, a sense of God's government over us - they teach us to imagine that faith and devotion belong only to weak bigots."¹⁶¹ Pour contempt on devotional duties, Venn, says, and society collapses. Why is this? Because devotional duties "are the very foundation on which all restraints of conscience respecting God are established."¹⁶² Devotional duties – "watchfulness, prayer, and persevering self-denial" - are painted as being in stark and unpopular contrast to the convictions of "happier days, when our whole duty may be done without any combat, mortification, vigilance or labour."¹⁶³ "Whole duty" of course most likely references the famous book. Morality, however commendable and decent it may appear, was actually both an easy path, and a dangerous one, Venn argued. A moral but Christless life is the greatest mistake religion can make.

Here, in the middle of the book, then, is the essence of Venn's contention, the aim of promoting true heart religion to the nation, for its reformation. No morality can take its place, and affect any good, which is a great charge against those who espouse it, since "many who call themselves Christians should be fatally deceived to conclude, strict

¹⁶⁰ Venn, *Mistakes*, p. 194.

¹⁶¹ Venn, *Mistakes*, p. 198.

¹⁶² Venn, *Mistakes*, pp. 197-8.

¹⁶³ Venn, *Mistakes*, p. 118

integrity, and warm benevolence, the whole duty of man.”¹⁶⁴ Conversion is imperative. In that insistence Venn had not deviated twenty-five years on from his first published sermons, and continued to promote Moderate Calvinism. That he should do so with such doctrinal specificity demonstrates how little Venn had moved from the beliefs he had come to in Clapham, and how much he felt they were needed, as a safeguard for vital religion.

The book received little discernible attention by the reviewers. One hostile reaction condemned the book as partisan and negative in tone, with Venn overreaching in his attempts to restate what the universal church had always believed.¹⁶⁵ Adam commended it to a friend, but it confirmed Venn in his own mind as ‘too much of a Calvinist’.¹⁶⁶

Stillingfleet felt that the Calvinism of the *Mistakes* led to too narrow a definition of the people of God.¹⁶⁷ Changing times evidently led to a predilection for a less sharply-drawn Calvinism.

Mistakes’ most significant impact was quite possibly on the mind of William Wilberforce. Whilst there is no evidence that the title was in Wilberforce’s possession, the Member of Parliament for Yorkshire was a resident of John Venn’s Clapham parish, and under his pastoral care. Henry wrote to his son in 1794, mentioning Wilberforce and charging John to make sure that the pair “quicken and excite each other to do much in the service of Christ.”¹⁶⁸ Wilberforce had just begun writing his *Practical View*, which would come to

¹⁶⁴ Venn, *Mistakes*, p. 200.

¹⁶⁵ “Mr Venn tells us that the sole design of these pages is to prove the baneful influence of notions contrary to the doctrine believed by the *universal* church in every age. It will be difficult for him, we apprehend, to fix on a period in which the universal church were entirely agreed in points of doctrine. However, while he is endeavouring to point out mistakes in religion, we are persuaded that he has candour enough to allow that it is possible he may sometimes be mistaken himself, and that too, perhaps, in some favourite points, which still remain of a doubtful kind, whatever human names, authorities and sanctions may be brought for their support.” *The Universal Catalogue for the year 1774* (London, 1774) 3, p. 514. Italics original.

¹⁶⁶ Thomas Adam, *An Exposition of the Four Gospels* (2 vols, London, 1837), 1, p. 98.

¹⁶⁷ Venn MSS, Acc.81/C/14/3, Letter to John Venn, 11th February, 1774.

¹⁶⁸ Venn, *Letters*, p. 527.

publication three years later.¹⁶⁹ It is hardly conceivable that John would not have commended his father's book to Wilberforce, along with *The Complete Duty*. Moreover, Wilberforce's rector was his own father's close disciple, and contended for much the same tenets as those in the *Mistakes*. Whilst the 1790s and following decades saw a number of works from Evangelicals pressing a moral consciousness and activism upon church and nation, *Practical View* was a runaway success, and was distinct in offering the broadest view of the sins and proffered recovery of national life. Significantly, for this thesis' interests, in the *Practical View* were all of the themes central to *Mistakes*: "the deep pessimism about human nature, the dualistic distinction between the religion of the heart and the cold formalism of 'nominal' Christianity, and the sweeping condemnations of the idleness of polite society, its trivial amusements, and its Sabbath breaking."¹⁷⁰ This could be Venn; and in a sense, it certainly was, whether read in published form or commended by one shaped by John Venn's ministry. The "handbook of the Evangelicals", *A Practical View* went through five editions in its first year, and was a sensation in the late eighteenth century and well into the following one, a powerful tidal surge contributing to the "high water mark" of evangelical influence in the Church.¹⁷¹ One wonders at the transmission of ideas, then, from *The Complete Duty*, through *Mistakes in Religion*, to *A Practical View*. As the nineteenth century began, those of Venn's religion had a well-trying and tested stock of convictions to bring to their nation.

¹⁶⁹ William Wilberforce, *A Practical View of the prevailing religious system of professed Christians in the higher and middle classes... contrasted with Real Christianity* (London, 1797).

¹⁷⁰ Anne Stott, *Wilberforce: Family and Friends* (Oxford, 2012), p. 104.

¹⁷¹ Mark Smith, 'Henry Ryder and the Bath CMS: Evangelical and High Church Controversy in the Later Hanoverian Church', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 62(4) (2011), p. 727. For the initial impact of the work, see John Wolffe, 'William Wilberforce's *Practical View* (1797) and its Reception', *Studies in Church History*, 44 (2008), pp. 178-9. Daniel Wilson, future Bishop of Calcutta, in the preface to the sixth edition reckoned that "never, perhaps, did any volume by a layman on a religious subject, produce a deeper or more sudden effect". Wilberforce, *Practical View*, pp. xvii.

2.3 The Grateful Heart: Joy and Thankfulness as the Ethic of Moderate Calvinism

Eighteenth-century evangelical religion found a distinct point of contact with one of its contemporary cultural preoccupations, namely, the pursuit of happiness. Both the American and French Revolutions framed the quest for human happiness as a central telos.¹⁷² Mary Wollstonecraft was sure that the French struggle was “a glorious chance to obtain more virtue and happiness than hitherto *blessed* our globe”.¹⁷³ Of course, it would be quite wrong to see eudaimonism as a new quest, the pursuit of the *philosophes* without any Christian precedent. Stuart religion, particularly of the reformed variety, regularly mined this subject in order to edify its adherents.¹⁷⁴ Whilst the search for happiness in this life, in disregard to any supposed life to come, was a distinctively Enlightenment preoccupation, Evangelicals served their parishioners and readerships with a fortifying vision of the delights of heaven, along with exhortations to seek religious joy in this one. Newton hymned that “solid joy and lasting treasures, none but Zion’s children know”.¹⁷⁵ Venn, Newton and many others took the challenge to show that heart religion of the Calvinistic sort was the true source of happiness.

The language of the *heart* in the religious world of the eighteenth century must be distinguished from the later associations of Romanticism.¹⁷⁶ Practitioners of Hanoverian religion knew that talk of the heart meant an inward (though not necessarily introspective)

¹⁷² Ritchie Robertson, *The Enlightenment: The Pursuit of Happiness, 1680-1790* (London, 2020), p. 707.

¹⁷³ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men, in a letter to the Right Honourable Edmund Burke* (London, 1790), pp. 119-20.

¹⁷⁴ Robert Asty, *A Treatise of Rejoicing in the Lord Jesus Christ in All Cases and Conditions* (London, 1683); Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Saints’ Happiness, together with the several steps leading thereunto* (London, 1660); Thomas Brooks, *The Crown and Glory of Christianity; or, Holiness the Only Way to Happiness* (London, 1662).

¹⁷⁵ John Newton, *Olney Hymns: in three parts*, 5th edn (Glasgow, 1853), p. 119.

¹⁷⁶ John Coffey (ed), *Heart Religion: Evangelical Piety in England & Ireland, 1690–1850* (Oxford, 2016), esp. pp. 138-156; Phyllis Mack, *Heart Religion in the British Enlightenment: Gender and Emotion in Early Methodism* (Cambridge, 2008). The book is more of an exploration of the display of emotion rather than the affectionate piety of its subjects.

piety, with no necessary associations of passion. The heart was the seat of the will and the understanding, not simply the fount of the emotions. It had already entered the consciousness of the English two centuries before Venn, through Cranmer's Prayer Book.¹⁷⁷ In speaking of the heart, the true self before God, "unto whom all hearts be open, all desires known", Evangelicals were appropriating a shared term, even as they themselves were mining the volumes of Puritan writings which instructed believers to "Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life".¹⁷⁸ Hannah More's title for her 1811 work, *Practical Piety: or the Influence of the Religion of the Heart on the Conduct of Life*,¹⁷⁹ showed her conviction that heart religion and holy activism were indivisible. Grace which had renewed the heart must and would renew behaviour, and for Venn, a joyful heart produced the best action of all.

Writing in 1767 to James Kershaw of Halifax, whose Socinianism had yielded to orthodox faith under his preaching, Venn outlined the Christian life, sensitive to the sneers of old friends that the newly-converted Kershaw had capitulated to "enthusiasm".¹⁸⁰ The letter is equally Venn's own manifesto of heart religion seeking the good of others. He explained that admiration of God, contention against sin, usefulness to all and delight in devotional exercises all form the life of a Christian.¹⁸¹ This is a "science which is all practical, all transforming".¹⁸² Conversion is, amongst other things, "a present enjoyment, the earnest

¹⁷⁷ Brian Cummings (ed), *The Book of Common Prayer: The Texts of 1549, 1559, and 1662*, (Oxford, 2011), *passim*.

¹⁷⁸ Proverbs 4.23. Two Puritan works on this Bible verse which are representative of heart religion and counsel are: John Flavel, *A Saint Indeed or, The Great Work of a Christian, opened and pressed, from Prov. 4.23*, in *Works* (6 vols, London, 1820), 5, pp. 417-509; Andrew Gray, *Three Sermons concerning the way how a Christian ought to keep his Heart*, in *Works* (Aberdeen, 1839), pp. 257-284. For an analysis of them, see Lewis Allen "Keeping the Heart': Lessons from Two Puritan Pastors", in *Ecclesia Reformanda*, 2.1 (Lowestoft, 2010), pp. 62-77. Whitefield was a keen reader of Flavel.

¹⁷⁹ Hannah More, *Practical Piety: or the Influence of the Religion of the Heart on the Conduct of Life* (London, 1811).

¹⁸⁰ Venn, *Life*, p. 131.

¹⁸¹ Venn, *Life*, pp. 131-2.

¹⁸² Venn, *Life*, p. 132.

and pledge of heavenly felicity.”¹⁸³ Furthermore, Venn was confident that his Calvinistic views of justification and assurance provided the grounds on which the ethic of gratitude, expressed through activism and marked by joy, could be established.¹⁸⁴

Evangelicals were concerned with how to teach their congregations to live well and happily in this life, in anticipation of the happiness of the world to come. That they had so much to say in this area shows the impact of their doctrine of justification by faith alone, as the precursors to right living in the church were not auspicious. There are nineteen references to *joy* in *The Whole Duty*. Strikingly, none of them refers to the joy the Christian may expect to encounter in this life in the course of faith; each points to the experience of the person he is called to serve, or to his own experience in the life to come. There are slightly fewer instances of the word *happy*, referring either to the deluded happiness of the impenitent in this life, or to the believer’s happiness in the world to come. Changing philosophical and cultural views of the self, sentiment and the place of religion meant that the treatment of the distinctively Christian emotional life would be an eighteenth-century preoccupation.¹⁸⁵

According to John Locke, the moral quest, in which all are seeking happiness, had an expressly religious telos: “in order to behave in a way that will lead us to the greatest and truest happiness, we must come to judge the remote and future good, the “unspeakable,” “infinite,” and “eternal” joys of heaven to be our greatest and thus most pleasurable good”.¹⁸⁶ Locke spoke often of the rewards and punishments of the life to come, but not in an intelligibly Christian way, and certainly did not venture into the Calvinistic and then

¹⁸³ Venn, *Life*, p. 131, cf. pp. 83-84.

¹⁸⁴ Venn, *Letters*, pp. 132-3.

¹⁸⁵ Rivers, *Reason*, 1. p. 2, *passim*.

¹⁸⁶ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter Nidditch (Oxford, 1975) pp. 37–38.

evangelical piety of communion with God, or the loss of it, in the hereafter.¹⁸⁷ The power of virtuous living for the sincere would “open their eyes upon the endless, unspeakable joys of another life, and their hearts will find something solid and powerful to move them” – but Locke offered nothing solid.¹⁸⁸ The contention of evangelicals would later be that without a clear picture of the world to come, or instruction about the achievability of communion with God in Christ in this one, such teaching was void of the very power it claimed to have.

The symbiosis of happiness and holiness was a marked feature of both Rigorist and Latitudinarian religion, especially the latter.¹⁸⁹ The moral reformer Josiah Woodward, with customary firmness, declared that he wanted young men

“delighting in the praises of God as their chief joy and celebrating the exercises of our Holy Religion with such relish and delight as gives a seasonable demonstration to this Epicurean Age that there are vaster pleasures to be reaped from the blessed entertainments of religion than from the utmost indulgence of sensual vanities”.¹⁹⁰

Tillotson said that “the practice of religion, and the doing of what we know to be our duty, is the only way to happiness.”¹⁹¹ So, for one to live for God, and to live pleasantly, he needed to do the duty God required of him. “Holiness is an essential and principal ingredient of Happiness.”¹⁹² The doubting and occasionally despairing Samuel Johnson was on the same track when he wrote “our Maker has created us to receive and share happiness in the life and for ever”.¹⁹³ A century after Tillotson, the tradition had been

¹⁸⁷ For example, God possesses “Goodness and wisdom to direct our actions to that which is best: and he has the power to enforce it by rewards and punishments, of infinite weight and duration, in another Life.” Locke, *Essay*, p. 352.

¹⁸⁸ John Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity, as deliver’d in the Scriptures* (London, 1736), p. 247.

¹⁸⁹ Rivers, *Reason*, 1, pp. 82-4, 87-8.

¹⁹⁰ Josiah Woodward, *The Young-Man’s Monitor: Shewing the Great Happiness of Early Piety: And the Dreadful Consequence of Indulging Youthful Lusts*, 2nd edn (London, 1718), Epistle to the Reader.

¹⁹¹ Tillotson, *Works*, 1, p. 414. Cf. *Works*, 2, p. 349.

¹⁹² Tillotson, *Works*, 1, pp. 665, 666.

¹⁹³ Samuel Johnson, Preface to Robert Dodsley, *The Preceptor* (London, 1748), pp. xxvi-xxvii.

preserved by William Paley, who defined virtue as “the doing good to mankind, in obedience to the will of God, and for the sake of everlasting happiness.”¹⁹⁴

The paths of amiable duty were to find their most compelling expression in a book which became something of a sensation in the eighteenth century, and would deeply influence piety and ministry in widely differing sections of the church. *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*, an expanded version of what was originally a private letter on Christian living, was published by the Latitudinarian Gilbert Burnet in 1677.¹⁹⁵ Its author Henry Scougal (his name was appended only in 1726 after much popularity and several reprints), was an Episcopalian minister and professor of King’s College, Aberdeen, and a friend of Burnet, who warmly commended Scougal’s heart religion, unencumbered by the Calvinism of his heritage. In the preface Burnet says, “It is and can be nothing else but a design to make us like God both in the inward temper of our minds, and in our whole outward deportment and conversation. For this end did Christ both live and dye.”¹⁹⁶ Whilst later editions would be fiercely criticised by Scots Calvinists, the fire which the book kindled in evangelicals south of the border – the Wesleys, Whitefield, Watts and Doddridge were all admirers - is all the more remarkable in what they heard of its message, and in what they overlooked, or never saw at all in it.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁴ William Paley, *The Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy, in Two Volumes* (Exshaw, White, etc.: Dublin, 1785), 1, p. 47.

¹⁹⁵ [Henry Scougal], *The Life of God in the Soul of Man. Or, the nature and excellency of the Christian religion; with the method of attaining the happiness it proposes. And an account of the beginnings and advances of a spiritual life. In two letters written to persons of honour, with a Preface by Gilbert Burnet* (London, 1677). For a treatment of the reception and use of, see Ruth Savage (ed), *Philosophy and Religion in Enlightenment Britain: New Case Studies* (Oxford, 2012), pp. 30-53, and also Rivers, *Vanity Fair*, pp. 156-63.

¹⁹⁶ [Scougal], *The Life of God* (preface, n.p.).

¹⁹⁷ For compatriot criticism, see Rivers, *Vanity Fair*, pp. 158-9.

Scougal explained that real religion is not all orthodox opinion, external actions, or fervent enthusiasm; rather, “I know not how the nature of religion can be more fully expressed than by calling it *a divine life*.”¹⁹⁸ The believer was to live out this conviction, since “the worth and excellency of a soul is to be measured by the object of its love.”¹⁹⁹ This was to be expressed in practical, charitable living: “the root of the divine life is faith; the chief branches are love to God, charity to man, purity, and humility”.²⁰⁰ Such a life-course was akin to the Latitudinarian quest for practical living, but with a good measure of vital religion.

The Life of God was a staple of the early Oxford Methodists.²⁰¹ Although the book had been a feature of the early eighteenth century (the SPCK had purchased a thousand copies in 1706²⁰²), it was with the Evangelicals that it made significant impact. Writing a few months after his Aldersgate experience, John Wesley said of Scougal’s religion that “he no longer judges it to be an outward thing, to consist either in doing no harm, in doing good, or in using the ordinances of God. He sees it is the life of God in the soul; the image of God fresh stamped on the heart; an entire renewal of the mind in every temper and thought, after the likeness of him that created it.”²⁰³ Charles Wesley gave a copy to Whitefield, and it proved decisive in the latter’s conversion, convicting him of his failed attempts at achieving salvation, after which he himself enthusiastically gave copies to his friends.²⁰⁴ Its success in widely differing religious contexts was most likely due to the absence of doctrinal distinctives, with the resulting emphasis on the life of communion

¹⁹⁸ [Scougal], *The Life of God*, p. 5 (italics original).

¹⁹⁹ [Scougal], *The Life of God*, p. 31.

²⁰⁰ [Scougal], *The Life of God*, 19.

²⁰¹ D. Butler, *Henry Scougal and the Oxford Methodists* (Edinburgh, 1899). Butler’s assessment that the book was crucial in the birth of Oxford Methodism deserves reflection.

²⁰² Savage (ed), *Philosophy*, p. 38.

²⁰³ John Wesley, *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley* (10 vols, New York, 1826), 1, p. 184.

²⁰⁴ George Whitefield, *A Short Account of God’s dealings with the Reverend Mr. George Whitefield...From his infancy, to the time of his entering into holy orders* (London, 1740), pp. 27–32; George Whitefield, *Eighteen Sermons* (New Brunswick, 1802), pp. 290-1.

with God – a sort of à Kempis among the evangelicals, and neither explicitly Calvinistic, nor decidedly Arminian, but fitting in with the common evangelical emphasis on experimental religion, both in terms of feeling and practice. The tone of *The Life of God* also most likely contributed to its success, the affectional dimension of Christian living piquing interest in its challenge to readers to discover a similar religion - practical, experimental, and unencumbered by the complexities of doctrine, but holding out the prospect of joy: “Good God! what a mighty felicity is this to which we are called! How graciously hast thou joined our duty and happiness together, and prescribed that for our work, the performance whereof is a great reward?”²⁰⁵

The evangelical Dissenters wrestled with the place of the affections in Christian living. Both Watts and Doddridge lamented the loss of verve within Dissent, and worked to address it.²⁰⁶ “Religion never was designed to make our pleasure less,”²⁰⁷ hymned Watts in 1707, and put it to his congregation, “Religion has nothing in it of a gloomy nature; for how can that be gloomy which leads to everlasting pleasures?”²⁰⁸ Renewed emotion was the signifier of the new birth for Doddridge, too, and for real sanctification to be in evidence it must be marked by “a gratitude, that captivates the soul into a willing obedience, and engages you to yield yourselves as living sacrifices to God”.²⁰⁹ Matthew Henry wrote an entire discourse exploring the believer’s charge to be joyful. Ultimately, Henry explained that such joy was grounded upon the finished work of Christ, and was a

²⁰⁵ [Scougal], *The Life of God*, p. 38.

²⁰⁶ Philip Doddridge’s first work, published anonymously, was *Free Thoughts on the Most Probable Means of Reviving the Dissenting Interest. Occasion’d by the Late Enquiry into the Causes of Its Decay. Address’d to the Author of That Enquiry. By a Minister in the Country* (London, 1730). The following year saw the publication of Isaac Watts’ *An Humble Attempt toward the Revival of Practical Religion among Christians, and particularly the Protestant Dissenters, by a Serious Address to Ministers and People, in some Occasional Discourses* (London, 1731). Each book was a response to the attempts of Strickland Gough who sought to situate Dissent in a rationalistic and culturally amenable way.

²⁰⁷ Isaac Watts, *Come we that love the Lord*, in *Hymns and Spiritual Songs, Book II* (London, 1707), p. 105.

²⁰⁸ Isaac Watts, *Sermons on Various Subjects, Divine and Moral...Design’d for the Use of Christian Families, as well as for the Hours of Devout Retirement* (3 vols, London, 1729), 1, p. 188.

²⁰⁹ Philip Doddridge, *Sermons to Young Persons, on the Following Subjects* (London, 1735), p. 58.

reality worked by the Spirit of God.²¹⁰ The New England preacher and *de facto* theologian of the revival, Jonathan Edwards, whose writings Venn and his cohort read eagerly, made it a core thesis that “True religion in great part consists in holy affections....to love for Christ and joy in him”, and argued that “the Scriptures speak of holy joy as a great part of religion.”²¹¹

A keen student of these men, Venn likewise sought to articulate the place of joy in his new convictions in his Clapham ministry. By marked contrast to the rigorist tradition he inherited, Venn taught his parishioners that love for God is the Christian’s duty, but equally, it is his delight. He “loves the invisible God with as much sincerity of affection as the covetous love their possessions, or the sensualist the joys of voluptuousness.”²¹² The Kingdom of heaven on earth is experienced as “abundant manifestations of the grace of God, such as holy delights, and joy.”²¹³ The Christian has his “heart glowing with warmth of gratitude to God for such exceeding great and precious promises”.²¹⁴ Heart religion is built upon the foundations of the propositional faith of the Bible. Truth shapes the affections, which give personal and public evidence. This for Venn is authentic Christianity, “even if it were not to be found in one of a million, nor in one of a nation.”²¹⁵

Two of the fourteen sermons in the 1759 collection explore the joy of the redeemed, in the context of judgment and eternity. Venn’s purpose in Sermon XII, *Christian Happiness*, an exposition of the Benediction of 2 Corinthians 12.13, is to show that the believer’s trust in Christ’s gracious penal sacrifice brings him to experience peace as the demonstration of God’s love. This is the “comfortable persuasion of the soul...obtained by the illumination

²¹⁰ Matthew Henry, *The Pleasantness of a Religious Life, Opened and Proved; And Recommended to the Consideration of all, Particularly of Young People* (London, 1761), pp. 64, 86, 153.

²¹¹ Jonathan Edwards, *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* (Boston, 1746), pp. 7, 12.

²¹² Venn, *Sermons*, p. 174.

²¹³ Venn, *Sermons*, p. 338.

²¹⁴ Venn, *Sermons*, p. 270.

²¹⁵ Venn, *Sermons*, p. 182.

and abiding influence of the Holy Ghost.”²¹⁶ And the Church’s teaching, too: the same Spirit who brings awareness of this love, “as our Catechism teaches, sanctifies all the elect people of God.”²¹⁷ Distinguishing mere moralism from the imperative of moral righteousness established by grace, Venn begins to set duty in the context of a happiness secured by Christ’s sacrifice, and brought to the believer’s consciousness by the Holy Spirit. Competing with worldly happiness, the Christian’s experience outshines it: it is “the most flaming blasphemy to imagine beauty or wine, or riches or honour, or all the variety of pleasure the whole world can furnish, is worthy to be compared with such blessed communion.”²¹⁸ Rather, “You can never honour God more than by expecting all he has to give, by seeking fellowship with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ through the Spirit, which shall make your joy to be full.”²¹⁹ Where Woodward’s rigorism and Venn’s evangelicalism appear to touch, they are differentiated by the latter’s insistence on the new birth through faith, out of which come not only duty, but joy.

In the final sermon, *Of the Nature of the Heavenly Happiness*, Venn declares that heaven is the place where happiness is truly known, coming as it does from God, the “incomprehensibly blessed, and the only Fountain of Happiness to his Creatures.”²²⁰ Heaven is the end of the struggle against self-will, and the place of God’s service.²²¹ Only there the glorified saint will perfectly worship, and know perfect joy. Where Tillotson saw the light of the well-lived life one day expiring into the uncertainties of the hereafter, Venn commends heaven as the place of the certain perfection of the believer’s earthly joy in Christ.

²¹⁶ Venn, *Sermons*, pp. 319-20.

²¹⁷ Venn, *Sermons*, p. 324.

²¹⁸ Venn, *Sermons*, p. 333.

²¹⁹ Venn, *Sermons*, p. 341.

²²⁰ Venn, *Sermons*, p. 372.

²²¹ E.g., Venn, *Sermons*, pp. 375, 383.

The same emphases, unsurprisingly, came in the ministry of Venn's friends. In the preface of the 1762 *Principles and Practices* Haweis stressed that his intention was to endorse the doctrines of his Church, refute Socinians, and confound those of the rationalist school.²²² Haweis declares his longing that preacher and reader could face the last day together "with joy and not with sorrow." The gospel "is all the foundation of my happiness; it must be so too of yours, if you would be ever happy."²²³ In sermons XII and XIII Haweis develops his teaching that true holiness is primarily that of the heart, worked out in the Christian's life before the happiness of the life of come, where both perfectly converge.²²⁴ Whilst such ideas would not be out of place in a rigorist tract, it is their setting in the evangelical doctrine of justification by faith alone, accompanied by assurance of salvation, which recast them and bring a powerful incentive to action.

Haweis' final sermon, *The Blessedness of the Righteousness*, is a worked contrast between the respective happiness of unbeliever and believer. The former's hopes for it crumble, while the latter's grow. His soul is fixed on Christ, "enjoying the present sense of the divine favour, and happy in the assured hope of the glory, honour and immortality prepared for him in heaven."²²⁵ Here again is a holiness code with points of contact with the rigorists also but distinctively different, as it is the expression of faith characterised by certainty of divine acceptance through grace.

In 1764 Romaine, another of Venn's close London friends, published his *Treatise upon the Life of Faith*.²²⁶ The spirituality of Romaine was markedly different from both its rigorist

²²² Of the last sort he says, "The maintainers of the doctrine of the rectitude of human nature, and the freedom of man's choice to good as to evil, will find these proud imaginations attacked, he [sic] hopes laid low to the ground, even in the dust, by the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God." Haweis, *Principles*, p. iv.

²²³ Haweis, *Principles*, p. 171.

²²⁴ Haweis, *Principles*, pp. 232-3, 275.

²²⁵ Haweis, *Principles*, p. 320.

²²⁶ William Romaine, *A Treatise upon the Life of Faith* (London, 1764).

antecedents and equally from its Wesleyan contemporaries. The believer is eternally secure due to his vital union with Jesus Christ, and fitted for the Christian life. “Happy” is the descriptor of the believer thirty-two times, and comes for him in various forms, whether it is knowing his union with Christ grounded on the covenant of redemption, experiencing the delivering power of Christ in times of temptation, rejoicing in growth in grace, even in loss and suffering in communion with Christ, and supremely discovering happiness through contemplating the certainties of heaven won by grace.²²⁷ “The vital union between Christ and the believer is manifested and made known in the heart, and therein it is cemented and established.”²²⁸ This could be Scougal, of course, though Romaine, Venn and others arrived at such a position as devotees of Moderate Calvinism.

It was in *The Complete Duty* that Venn worked out the place of gratitude and joy in the most detail. The new life of the believer is framed by distinctive new attitudes towards God (the “Disposition of a Christian” - Venn selects ten (XXI-XXII). The final three chapters treat Christian happiness and joy (XXXVIII-XL). Venn challenges any conception that whole-hearted Christian living necessitates gloom and withdrawal, his perceived end-game of rigorist spirituality, or is only predicated upon the hope of future rewards or the threat of future punishment: “A falsehood this is, which is at once full of impiety and mischief.”²²⁹ Men must be taught to discover the sources of the pleasures of “the obedient children of God” (notice how the doctrines of adoption and Law-keeping are referenced here, with no quarter for antinomianism offered).²³⁰ The knowledge of the Triune God, the awareness of his blessings, especially of his peace, the wonder of adopting love and the experience of the Holy Spirit’s operations - all combine to secure this

²²⁷ Romaine, *Faith*, pp. 6, 90, 145, 176-7, 187, 191.

²²⁸ Romaine, *Faith*, pp. 39-40.

²²⁹ Venn, *Duty*, p. 319.

²³⁰ Venn, *Duty*, p. 319.

happiness.²³¹ The Spirit works repentance and faith, and gives believers great joy, even in their trials. This is the realm of experience, which Venn insists must be expected by all who follow Christ: “is it not reasonable then to conclude that the eternal Father may make as sensible a difference between believers and hypocrites, as we do between our duteous children, who deserve and want encouragement from us, and stubborn ones who must be kept under a frown?”²³² Such delight is emphatically not the empty boast of the enthusiast: Venn makes his argument for the place of such experience in the Christian’s life, so that “it may convince us that the experience of these delights, too often exploded as delusion, will appear, upon closer examination, to be perfectly rational.”²³³ And, lest any still quibble that this is too great an enthusiasm, Venn closes his section on joy with the promises of the Old Testament and of Christ of such experiences.

The section is thus a careful delineation of Moderate Calvinism. The Christian is a child of God, subject to the work of the Spirit who brings deepening knowledge of God, which registers in the emotions and ultimately brings forth obedience. Venn thereby asserts the primacy of the understanding, but, rather than the Christian life being one of mere intellectual endeavour, he places the emotions in their vital place, whilst being rightly informed by knowledge. Whole-hearted obedience stems from the well-stocked mind and is an overflowing of a joyous heart. The pious Christian is happily consumed by the obedience of faith, praying, “Take all the powers of my soul and body; possess and employ them only in thy work and to thy glory.”²³⁴

Joy becomes the leading preoccupation as Venn frames the challenge of the gospel to his readers in the concluding section. Far from religion being the gloomy preoccupation of

²³¹ These are the four sources of the believer’s true happiness, outlined in pp. 320-328.

²³² Venn, *Duty*, p. 331.

²³³ Venn, *Duty*, p. 335

²³⁴ Venn, *Duty*, p. 327.

some, better avoided by the young or the otherwise happy, Venn challenges those preoccupied by transient pleasure, insisting that far greater delights are found in knowing the Triune God. Having set the place of joy within Christianity, Venn develops his case that the Christian can and should experience it as a gift of God (XXXIX). Drawing on the doctrine of adoption, Venn declares that the Father is well able to impress an experience of his delight upon his children, outweighing even the best earthly pleasures, and insisting “that it is not in the least degree enthusiastic to conclude that the faithful in Christ Jesus may have peculiar gratifications of their own.”²³⁵ Scripture certainties and the response of faith charge the believer’s heart, not the impulses of fleshly fervour.

And promises mean certainties, for the Christian. Chapter XL is a defence of the claim that such joy as the first Christians experienced is God’s continuing gift of his church. “The history of the church attests that there have been such in all ages.”²³⁶ Significantly, Venn sees the imparting of joy not so much for the believer’s personal assurance, but as strengthening their desire to serve Christ.²³⁷ The presence of joy in believers brings challenge to the complacent, to examine if their profession is genuine. Likewise, the gift is present for all, to urge “deluded sinners” from wine and women to the “fountain of joy which makes glad the whole church of God in heaven and earth”.²³⁸ For Venn it is axiomatic that true Christianity is the coming of Spirit-wrought joy, which can outshine the glooms of the formalist, and conquer the lust of the profane. This is holy enthusiasm, the very opposite of the antinomian impulse, and gives glory to God.

In the same publication year Venn was exploring the usefulness of joy as a pastoral tool elsewhere. Tasked with preaching the funeral sermon of Grimshaw of Haworth, Venn

²³⁵ Venn, *Duty*, p. 335.

²³⁶ Venn, *Duty*, p. 341.

²³⁷ Venn, *Duty*, p. 343.

²³⁸ Venn, *Duty*, pp. 346-7.

selected a text inscribed on the sounding board over Grimshaw's pulpit, and much loved by his evangelical constituency for funeral preaching, "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Philippians 1.21), and used it as the prism through which to display ministry and discipleship.²³⁹ Venn maintains that Grimshaw exemplified the Apostle's ardour in his devoted service, and matched it with his joy in his Saviour, a joy of which his public ministry had ample evidence.²⁴⁰ In Grimshaw's costly but deeply joyful endeavour "his work was wages of itself, as much as he desired".²⁴¹ From a survey of his heart and life, Venn takes the congregation to the scene of their pastor's greatest labour and triumph, his deathbed (Venn had visited Grimshaw in his last days), where Venn claimed he said himself to be "as happy as I can be on earth, and as sure of glory as if I was in it."²⁴² In an appended sketch of Grimshaw's life, Venn insists that the believer's is a supremely happy life, one begun here – "happier at present than that of any other person whatsoever" – and thereby making him "meet for the triumphant happiness of the heavenly state."²⁴³ Venn was harnessing the attractational power of the blessed life as an apologetic for Moderate Calvinism.

That Venn should close *The Complete Duty* with a lengthy section on joy is thus perfectly intelligible.²⁴⁴ Venn had boldly reworked the Tillotsonian view for his evangelical project. Tillotson envisaged Christianity as the endeavour which would bring joy to this life through right living.²⁴⁵ By contrast, Venn and other Moderate Calvinists taught that

²³⁹ Venn, *Christ the Joy*.

²⁴⁰ Venn, *Christ the Joy*, p. 12.

²⁴¹ Venn, *Christ the Joy*, p. 14.

²⁴² Venn, *Christ the Joy*, p. 18. Venn includes a footnote asserting that certainty of salvation is normative for believers.

²⁴³ Venn, *Christ the Joy*, pp. 25-6.

²⁴⁴ Hindmarsh says that this section "comes as something of a surprise", Hindmarsh, *Spirit*, p. 217. This is to miss the whole drive of *The Complete Duty*, where for Venn joy in this world and confidence of joy in the world to come is the supreme expression of saving grace.

²⁴⁵ One assessment is that over three-quarters of Tillotson's sermons are given to exploring the good life through the exercise of Christian duties. Jacob M. Blosser, 'Pursuing Happiness', p. 125, fn.

justification by faith alone would bring a confident hope of heaven, a world all of joy, the taste of which could be enjoyed in this life by the Spirit's operation. Whereas heaven for Tillotson was a shadowy place, beyond comprehension, for Venn it was a reality to be eagerly anticipated, and a future destination which must charge the believer with joyful anticipation. More than that, if heaven represented the place of fullest joy, then the believer's life now must be animated by the same values. If Tillotson were aiming at a utilitarian faith, Venn asserted no less practical a Christianity, though one to his mind built on altogether surer foundations. Joy was the most powerful apologetic for the doctrines of justification by faith alone and the assurance of forgiveness.

Venn's legacy was gathered up by the next generation. Venn told Stillingfleet approvingly that his beloved Simeon was visiting his parishioners with "I am come to enquire after your welfare. Are you happy?"²⁴⁶ Simeon regularly urged his hearers to seek the experience of joy through faith.²⁴⁷ John Venn commended his father's personal religion as one of "hope and peace and joy", in sharp contrast to the rigorism which had failed him.²⁴⁸ Eling Venn's alleged last words, taken down by his husband for the encomium, were "O! the joy! the delight!"²⁴⁹ At Venn's demise, son John said that his doctor told him that his excitement at the thought of death would actually delay it, after which "his happy spirit was released, and entered into the long-anticipated joy of his Lord".²⁵⁰ These deathbed scenes were worthy of any Methodist, and, as Venn's inheritors well knew, were a powerful means of declaring that the terminus of life was also that of evangelical and Calvinistic religion.

²⁴⁶ Carus, *Memoirs*, p. 27.

²⁴⁷ Carus, *Memoirs*, pp. 306, 616, 755.

²⁴⁸ Venn, *Letters*, p. 22.

²⁴⁹ Venn MSS, Acc.81/F2.

²⁵⁰ Venn, *Letters*, p. 70.

2.4 Venn amongst the Calvinists

To recognise the significance of Venn in the revival necessitates an appreciation of how he conducted a Calvinist ministry with his amiability and popularity, and his habit of blending strong emotion with tact and deep realism. A man of undoubted intellect and conviction, and indisputable ability in his clerical profession, Venn was attractive to many he encountered through life, at ease with strangers and with those hostile to his gospel, popular in his Cambridge undergraduate days and no less in his later years close to the same city.²⁵¹ For Newton he was a model, for Whitefield, an ally, a hero and inspiration for the sons of the clothiers of his Yorkshire parish, a number of whom Venn helped into ministry. He was a favourite of the Countess of Huntingdon, deeply admired by Cowper, and a match for John Wesley. Venn kept long friendships with former curates, and was an instructor of the men of Cambridge. In an age of society and conviviality, Venn could be called a clubbable Calvinist, eager to share his deep beliefs amongst friends, and to commend them to others. At the same time, a generous spirit and concern for the progress of a broader evangelicalism within his church kept him an intimate of John Fletcher, and keen to harness the temper of young devotees to his Calvinism. Venn gave what was for him the highest accolade to one of the next generation's leaders, his younger friend Robinson of Leicester, when he said, "He is always doing good — wise, learned, zealous, yet very judicious — sound in moderate Calvinism, yet truly practical and experimental."²⁵² That was the sort of man he himself aimed to be. The next two chapters of this dissertation will be a close study of how Venn conducted his ministry undergirded by these beliefs.

²⁵¹ Venn, *Letters*, pp. 11-12; cf. Venn MSS, Acc.81/C11, Letter to Miss Wheeler, November, 1766; Acc.81/F 60/1, Reminiscences of Mr. Venn's daughter, Eling Elliott, 1820.

²⁵² Venn, *Letters*, p. 316.

Chapter 3: Ministering the Gospel

3.1 “The Grand Scene of his Labours”: Huddersfield

This chapter analyses Venn’s ministries in each of his Huddersfield and Yelling parishes, in his preaching and the routine dealings with parishioners, and shared work with his curates. It attempts to suggest reasons why the first was a success, and then perhaps why the second was not. The contention here is that Venn’s Huddersfield ministry flourished because he fulfilled three requirements which together formed a plausibility structure by which parishioners might give credence to his ministry.¹

In his preaching (treated below, pp. 135-149, as a separate study) Venn was able to meet existential needs with his gospel message. The preaching of justification by faith and the possibility of knowing the forgiveness of sins, with its attendant sense of joy and assemblage of new affections, constituted a ministry which combined authority and invitation, without recent precedent in the parish church. Secondly, alongside pulpit ministry came a readiness to involve himself in the lives of the members of his flock. Venn loved to identify a practical strain in the ministries of others, and it was in fulfilling all of his parochial duties that he effectively commended his convictions. A willingness to undergo inconvenience for the sake of others, to visit the sick or the truculent, to be hospitable - all gave powerful affirmation to a message of grace. The minister in the pulpit might be heard, but a minister seen close-up engaging with parishioners’ needs gave them opportunity to see the faith at work, and thus further commended it to them. Finally, there was the character of Venn himself, where principle and precept met with personal

¹ Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, 1969), p. 45.

bonhomie and generosity of spirit. In a parish relatively free of religious alternatives, an account can be shaped which explains much of Huddersfield's receptiveness to Venn's evangelicalism, whilst also explaining the relative disappointment of his Yelling ministry.

Venn's almost twelve years in Huddersfield were a spectacular success. The crowded church and churchyard on Sundays, the vicar exhorting his attentive congregation to faith in Christ (both regularly displaying deep emotion), the lines of anxious inquirers at the vicarage during the week seeking spiritual counsel, the eager curates assisting Venn, the stream of young men helping in local reformation and a number offering themselves for ordination or for training for Dissenting ministry, and the aged saints reflecting decades later on those days of wonder; all were features of the Venn and Huddersfield story enshrined in the subsequent consciousness of the eighteenth century revival.² They became part of its portrayal, alongside the scenes of Wesley and his Kingswood and Newcastle miners, and Cornish tanners, or of Whitefield at Kennington Common. History and hagiography did sometimes find points of convergence, as Venn's ministry had all the necessary features of the heroic, and the undeniable impact of his religion on the parish and its surrounds deserves examination.

Areas where evangelical religion got a purchase mid-century were usually populous (by pre-industrial standards), and where the local economy was focused on a small number of enterprises. The parish of Huddersfield was no exception, with a great number of scattered communities all looking to a developing town for their commercial needs, and Venn had the good fortune to be settled at the centre of it. The town and its surrounds were dominated by wool textile production, with over three-quarters of males entered in the registers of St. Peter's parish church in the year Venn began his ministry declaring

² For example, Ryle, *Leaders*, pp. 254-305.

themselves to be clothiers.³ In the 1750s population in the West Riding was growing, providing a workforce for the trade which, due to poor tillage and the relative isolation of the Pennine chain, had few alternatives for employment.⁴ Cheap land, an abundance of soft water, and an available workforce, centred on a domestic system with a lack of trade regulation, all combined to make weaving the main occupation. Family members worked together, the clothier would employ an apprentice or two, and a journeyman might complete the workforce. Very few families completely forsook some degree of tillage, and even those who did were required to suspend their work in order give long days to harvesting each July and August. This home-based industriousness made a great impression on Defoe in his 1726 tour.⁵ And trade needed transport. In mid-century the historic north-south axis of the country was being supplemented (and, for some communities, such as those of the West Riding, surpassed) by the east-west axis between the growing ports of Liverpool and Hull, which had exported the vast majority of West Riding woollen products since Tudor times.⁶ With the completion of road and canal networks, this access would seal Huddersfield's success. The town was beginning to grow, and to assert itself amongst local rivals.

Venn's ministry spanned a crucial period at the start of Huddersfield's economic development. Clothiers came to sell their wares from the town's environs, from the Holme and Colne valleys, and from the seven mile valley of Saddleworth, thereby significantly adding to the town's emerging wealth.⁷ The Ramsdens, effective owners of the town, were

³ West Yorkshire Archive Service, Wakefield, Huddersfield St Peter, parish records, D32.

⁴ Derek Gregory, *Regional Transformation and the Industrial Revolution: A Geography of the Yorkshire Woollen Industry* (Basingstoke, 1982), p. 50.

⁵ Daniel Defoe, *A Tour through the Whole Island of Britain* (2 vols, London, 1974), 2, p. 195.

⁶ Dennis Whomsley, 'Market Forces and Urban Growth: the influence of the Ramsden family on the growth of Huddersfield, 1716-1853'. *Journal of Regional and Local Studies*, Vol. 4, no.2, Autumn 1984, p. 28.

⁷ John Aikin, *A Description of the Country from Thirty to Forty Miles Round Manchester, orig. pub. 1795* (Newton Abbott, 1968), pp. 552, 558. By 1795 Huddersfield comprised "a large share of the cloathing trade of Yorkshire, particularly the finer articles of it". Aikin, *Description*, p. 554.

determined to do all they could to facilitate trade and maximise profit, with no fewer than five turnpike roads built before or during Venn's time (canals serving trade were not completed until just after his departure).⁸ The Cloth Hall was built in 1766, complete with clock tower and cupola, as Sir John sought to catch up with developments in Wakefield and in Leeds.⁹ St Peter's was the only other building of any size in a town which was still little more than one main street, but one criss-crossed by lanes with inns and shops, some of them adjacent to lands enclosed for grazing, tenting and growing crops.¹⁰ Opposite the church was the vicarage.

From his house Venn saw a town which was very much the sum of its parts, a parish which literally came to him from miles around as they passed under his windows to meet and do business. This put evangelical ministry at an enormous advantage. Commerce brought opportunities to gather, to listen to and to discuss all manner of ideas, including those concerning religion. The traders who came with their wares might well return home to share news and opinions with others, in homes and hamlets which Venn and his curates might be unable to visit themselves regularly, or at all. Burgeoning trade also brought with it anxieties and challenges for which religion might well bring some comforts. Venn had much to do, and an evident relish to give himself to his work.

Venn's letters give us many of his views on ministry, and allow a basic reconstruction of his ministerial priorities. Venn served double-duty on Sundays and held a midweek evening service when it was desired, catechised and prepared candidates for confirmation, administered the sacraments, conducted burials, preached and visited in different parts of

⁸ Whomsley, 'Market Forces', p. 33.

⁹ Although its plans were queried by local clothiers who identified impracticalities and ensured a necessary redesign at the building stage. Roy Brook, *The Story of Huddersfield* (London, 1968), p. 53.

¹⁰ Edward J. Law, *18th Century Huddersfield: The Day-books of John Turner, 1732-1773* (Huddersfield, 1985), p. 15.

his parish, and held personal interviews in his own house, distributed tracts and pamphlets, and administered poor relief. Beyond that, and in contrast to Grimshaw, Newton and Berridge, there is scant evidence of how Venn actually instructed his flock and managed parochial affairs, organised converts and delegated work. For the Huddersfield ministry, the recollections of parishioners and several others (including those of Venn's close friend, Stillingfleet) gathered by grandson Henry in his 1824 visit are highly valuable.¹¹

The relative stability of many of the household weaving operations might well have made receptive environments for clergy visits.¹² Visiting in a vast parish was demanding and time-consuming, and, with the growth of the town during Venn's tenure, and with the help of curates serving outlying chapelries, it was natural for him to focus on preaching and dealing with inquirers in a town-centre ministry. Venn told the Countess of Huntingdon in 1763 that he preached to three thousand weekly, and visited those who did not attend church.¹³ Quite likely, Venn left the visitation of swathes of the parish to his curates, given the sheer impracticalities of covering such a large and populous area, with isolated cottages and hamlets accessible only by poorly-maintained tracks.¹⁴

John Venn said of his father that "in the week, he stately visited the different hamlets in his extensive parish; and, collecting some of the inhabitants at a private house, he addressed them with a kindness and earnestness which moved every heart."¹⁵ Venn was, however, uncomfortable with what he felt was his possibly unwanted intrusion into working families. Thomas Atkinson, aware that his vicar was not comprehensive in his

¹¹ Venn MSS, Acc.81/F13. Venn's notes are unpaginated; page notes which follow track the pages of the document in the natural order.

¹² See the discussion in Carolyn Steedman, *Master and Servant: Love and Labour in the English Industrial Age* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 34-5.

¹³ Cheshunt College Archive (hereafter abbreviated to CCA), F1/1391, Letter to the Countess of Huntingdon, 29th August, 1763.

¹⁴ Lindley Moor, three miles to the north-west, is at 900 feet, and Pole Moor, a little over five miles from the town west-north-west, is at 1200 feet.

¹⁵ Venn, *Letters*, p. 27.

visiting, received Venn's rather defensive explanation for it in a letter of September, 1766. Rather than making indiscriminate forays into the parish, he said, "I act I judge entirely according to my Master's will, in giving myself to reading, to doctrine, to meditation, and as to my strength (which is but small) will bear to visiting the sick." Several thousand souls, even with help, would be too much for most clergymen, but Venn claimed another rationale:

"where there is a taste, sensing most of the things of God, I go oftener, but when one person only is to speak, and no answer comes from the company, to prove how pleasing the great topic of discourse is, I plainly see it my duty not to visit. For ministers of the gospel have other and better employment of their time, than to wait and watch for any particular family, in order to say something that God may please to bless."¹⁶

Perhaps it was personal discomfort at the possible awkwardness and even opposition the vicar might experience which made him disinclined. More probably, Venn reckoned that such time-consuming work was not strategic, and in later life he shared his conviction that he should have mobilised others to share in the work of the parish, including visiting the poor.¹⁷

Venn's plan was to rely on pulpit ministry to awaken hearers, and then to occasion fruitful conversations. "When I come into the pulpit, it is after study, prayers and cries of the people. I speak as plain, and enter into all the cases of the congregation as minutely as I am able. If after this there is a love for the truth, all my hearers know what delight it is to me, to convene with them and exhort them in private."¹⁸ Stillingfleet said that the awakening was "chiefly through the preaching and afterwards through convening with people who came to his house. He did not visit much amongst the poor", seeing them instead in large

¹⁶ Venn MSS, Acc.81/C5/2, Letter to Thomas Atkinson, 22nd September, 1766.

¹⁷ "On many accounts, private Christians are fitted to exhort, and instruct and reprove, those of their own age and condition." Venn, *Letters*, p. 593.

¹⁸ Venn MSS, Acc.81/C5/1, Letter to Thomas Atkinson, 29th February, 1764.

numbers at the vicarage.¹⁹ Venn's housemaid, Ruth Clark, herself converted under a sermon of Stillingfleet, found herself in the thick of the action. The oldest daughter, Eling, recalled in later life to her brother John:

“I used to hear Ruth (the maid) come running across the long passage; the door would open and she would say, “A man wants to speak to you about his soul.” “Tell him to come in,” my father would say. I remember the look of many of them to this day, with channels upon their black cheeks, where the tears were running. “Oh, Sir,” they would begin at once to say with eagerness, “I have never slept since last Thursday night. Oh, Sir, your sermon.” “Well, I am thankful to hear it,” my father would say. “There, my dears, shake hands with that good man and go.” “Are these your children?” “Yes; pray for them,” my father would say. Then, when we were gone, my father would pray with them, and speak to them in the most solemn manner. This would happen three or four times in the morning. “There was quite a troop of t' young beginners,” as Ruth used to say.”²⁰

Evangelical religion was to be the business of the homes of the people, as well as of their pastor. Weekly meetings of awakened souls were held across the parish. Of those which are known, two were to the west of the town at Longwood and Lockwood, one in the town centre, another at Berry Brow to the south, and one at Hopton, a village some miles to the east (in fact, in the neighbouring parish).²¹ These appear to be apart from clerical control, though encouraged by Venn and sometimes attended by his curate John Riland. “Private meetings...prayer meetings and experience meetings”, was Stillingfleet's reckoning of them.²² This situation needed delicate handling by the two clergymen: too close an association with the groups might look like the approval of conventicles, or overt sympathy with Methodist practices, whilst no association with them might be read as indifference, or result in gatherings falling into heterodoxy or heteropraxy.²³ Furthermore, without gathering converts and encouraging personal piety, the convictions they had begun

¹⁹ Venn MSS, Acc.81/F13, p. 10.

²⁰ Venn, *Annals*, p. 82.

²¹ Venn MSS, Acc.81/F13, p. 10.

²² Venn MSS, Acc.81/F13, p. 11.

²³ Venn MSS, Acc.81/F13, p. 20. The Conventicle Acts (from 1664) precluded meetings for worship in private houses of more than five people, except for what was prescribed in the Book of Common Prayer.

with might too easily dissipate.²⁴ Reading and expounding a text and drawing doctrine from it was regarded under canon law as preaching, and so to do that as clergymen would put Venn and his curates in breach of their vows.²⁵ Moreover, keeping tabs on those meetings ensured a degree of pastoral control, however lightly held. The generation of clergy serving parishes after Venn's departure from Yorkshire was exercised by this challenge. Whilst wanting to promote vital religion, they did not want to offer a platform to the unstable and ignorant, or, least of all, to give them a taste for the ways of Methodism or Dissent.²⁶ Venn spoke of this issue with the undergraduates whose interview with him in 1796 was recorded in detail.²⁷ If Moderate Calvinism were to succeed in hearts and homes, its preachers needed to develop followers who could profitably share their experiences of it with one another.

Venn estimated that he witnessed nine hundred professions of faith in a three year period in Huddersfield.²⁸ Not content with conversions only, he insisted that such faith must bring moral change in the locality. A letter to his former parishioners urged them to show their sincerity by "proving the soundness of your faith by your works".²⁹ Venn impressed the duty of Sabbath-keeping (a mainstay of much eighteenth-century preaching, evangelical and otherwise).³⁰ Much exercised by work activities undertaken on Sundays, including butchers preparing their meat for the Monday, Venn induced his church wardens and several of the most respectable and influential inhabitants to patrol the town, and to urge

²⁴ In 1763 Wesley lamented that despite twenty years of preaching in Pembrokeshire, there were "no regular societies, no discipline, no order or connection; and the consequence is, that nine in ten of the once awakened are now faster asleep than ever." Curnock, *John Wesley Journal*, 5, p. 26

²⁵ Methodists sought to circumvent this by distinguishing between preaching and exhorting (the latter was done by the unordained, and by women).

²⁶ See the discussion in Walsh, 'Yorkshire Evangelicals', pp. 256-8.

²⁷ Venn MSS, Acc.81/F32.

²⁸ Bull, *Memorials* (London, 1865), p. 250.

²⁹ Venn MSS, Acc.81/7/8, *To my Friends in Christ at Huddersfield*, Printed Pamphlet, 1772.

³⁰ Henry Venn, *An earnest and pressing call, to keep holy the Lord's day. Addressed equally to the rich and poor of his flock with suitable directions, to be observed for that purpose* (Leeds, 1760).

them to refrain from it on that day.³¹ Success was achieved, his grandson learned from Venn's convert Samuel Bottomley, not by legal threat, as the vicar originally intended, but by the effects of his gospel ministry.³² These are further indicators of the efforts Venn made in order to ensure that experimental religion was eminently practical, as well.

Venn sought to practice what he urged upon other clergymen. In Huddersfield he and his wife met poverty in the parish with a resolve to do good. Riland, who lived with the Venns from 1765, penned a biographical sketch of Eling after her death in November, 1767.³³ In the sharpest grief in losing his wife, Venn also wrote a similar-sized pamphlet, describing her character, spiritual journey and habits, and extolling her virtues.³⁴ "A very elegant and sensible lady, though not popular", was the opinion of one of grandson Henry's interlocutors.³⁵ That Venn and his colleague so quickly produced overlapping pamphlets after Eling's death suggests that they felt the need to rehabilitate his wife's reputation (all the more so since the quarrel between herself and another curate, John Richardson, which dragged in Venn was widely known), and with that, parochial esteem for evangelical religion.³⁶ Their sketches of Eling as an indefatigable lover of good works aimed at confirming the practicableness of Moderate Calvinism. Riland likened Eling to Dorcas of the apostolic company, and presented an assiduous wife and household manager, highly competent in providing for her family, and prioritising the needs of others, making clothes for those in need (drawing on the seamstress training of her spinster days in Teddington),

³¹ Venn MSS, Acc.81/F13, pp. 18, 37; Venn, *Annals*, p. 81.

³² Venn MSS, Acc.81/F13, p. 18. For a hint of the transformation of parish life, see Cockin, *Memoirs of the Rev. Joseph Cockin: late minister of the Gospel, at Halifax, including accounts of some of his friends* (Idle, 1829), p. 65.

³³ Venn MSS, Acc.81/F1,14, John Riland, *A Sketch of the Character of Eling Venn*.

³⁴ Venn MSS, Acc.81/F2, Henry Venn, *The Life and Character of Mira*. Riland's and Venn's pamphlets have very considerable similarity of topics and emphases, suggesting that they conferred about what they would write.

³⁵ Venn MSS, Acc.81/F13, p. 51. Stillingfleet thought that Venn had effectively surrendered to her imperiousness. Venn MSS, Acc.81/F13, p. 9.

³⁶ Venn MSS, Acc.81/F13, p. 10.

ordering in more food than the family needed so as to provide for others, and even accompanying Riland on his rounds amongst the poor.³⁷ In Venn's own pamphlet, such practical generosity was near the summit of his praise for his late wife - "the bee itself was scarcely more a stranger to idleness than Mira" (Venn's pet-name for Eling)³⁸ – and her care for the poor was carried through despite the financial limitations of Venn's stipend.³⁹ Not that her husband was opposed to her generosity, or reluctant in his own beneficence: an elderly parishioner, the taylor John Edwards, claimed to grandson Henry that Eling sometimes searched her husband's pockets as he went out visiting lest he should be giving away too much of their resources to the needy of the parish.⁴⁰

"He was easily imposed upon, and went beyond his power", was Edwards' recollection. Another interviewee concurred, saying that "he relieved many who had been undeserving objects", thus hinting at a softer and possible naïve side to Venn.⁴¹ After all, Wesley commended the most radical of generosity to whoever was – or even, appeared to be - in need.⁴² One Mr Midwood said that Venn, in eschewing gifts for himself and serving others, "was a very liberal man. He cared no more for money than I do for dirt."⁴³ There does appear a thread of principled generosity in Venn's poor relief which might have been reflected in some surprising provision through the vestry. In the twelve months of May 1769 to April of the following year, in addition to weekly payments, chimney sweeping and mending of shoes were paid for, and various items supplied, including tongs, a poker,

³⁷ Venn MSS, Acc.81/F1, 14, *Sketch*, pp. 14-15.

³⁸ Venn MSS, Acc.81/F2, Venn, *Mira*, p. 32.

³⁹ Venn MSS, Acc.81/F2, Venn, *Mira*, p. 34.

⁴⁰ Venn MSS, Acc.81/F13, p. 27.

⁴¹ Venn MSS, Acc.81/F13, p. 46.

⁴² Keith Robbins (ed), *Protestant Evangelicalism: Britain, Ireland, Germany and America, c.1750-c.1950: Essays in Honour of W. R. Ward* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 35-42.

⁴³ Venn MSS, Acc.81/F13, pp. 45-6.

a pair of breeches and stays, and even tobacco and gin.⁴⁴ Those in need were marked up on the register as ‘poor’ or ‘very poor’, and often received something from Venn when they came to pay their dues.⁴⁵

With the exception of making the acquaintance of Risden Darracott, Venn appears to have had very little contact with Dissent before his move to Huddersfield, nor did he meet much of it in the town itself. A group of Particular Baptists established themselves three miles north west of the town at the hamlet of Salendine Nook at the end of the previous century.⁴⁶ In the 1764 Returns Venn noted the presence of one Independent meeting-house, though there is no surviving evidence that he had any dealings with its members or pastor.⁴⁷ There was an Independent chapel in the parish of Mirfield at Hopton, assisted by the energies of the congregation at Heckmondwike, a further four miles beyond Hopton in the Spenn Valley. In 1754 the Rev. James Scott began his ministry there, and when the Academy was established in 1756 where he served as tutor, training men for the ministry in a four year course. The Academy became something of a local sensation, and Scott had to fix an annual open day in order to prevent a continual stream of visitors. At his death in 1783 it is reckoned that sixty-two of the sixty-seven students known to have been trained by Scott had entered the Independent ministry. Scott and Venn became great friends, and after Venn’s removal some parishioners began to attend his ministry.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ John Wilson Barrett, ‘The Idle, Immoral and Profligate Poor: The condition of the poor and the ‘taint of pauperism’ in Huddersfield between 1834 and 1874, with particular reference to the ‘undeserving poor’ (Ph.D. thesis, University of Huddersfield, 2012), p. 42.

⁴⁵ Venn, *Annals*, p. 112.

⁴⁶ Percy Stock, *Foundations: the History of Salendine Nook Baptist Chapel* (Halifax, 1933), pp. 66-77.

⁴⁷ Cressida Annesley & Philippa Hoskin (eds), *Drummond’s Visitation Returns 1764, Volume II: Yorkshire Parishes H-R* (University of York: York, 1998), p. 55. Judith Jago’s note that Venn assisted Independents with their new chapel in 1764 muddles Venn’s principled churchmanship at that time with his support for those who left his successor’s ministry to establish an Independent meeting following his own departure in 1771. Judith Jago, *Aspects of the Georgian Church. Visitation Studies of the Diocese of York, 1761-1776* (London, 1997), p. 21.

⁴⁸ Venn MSS, Acc.81/F13.

Rather than just an influencer, Venn was sometimes more active in his encouragement of Dissenters. Samuel Bottomley served fifty-seven years in Independency in Scarborough.⁴⁹ Born in Almondbury in 1751, he became a child devotee of Venn, hiding between the pews after morning worship in the parish church so as to enjoy good seating at the evening service, and came to Venn's attention in his mid-teens, "an attentive and often weeping auditor".⁵⁰ Befriending Bottomley, whom Riland had catechised, Venn was involved in buying him out of his apprenticeship, and secured a place for him at Scott's Academy, efforts for which Bottomley showed a life-long gratitude.⁵¹

Venn was clearly a magnet for the young in the town and its vicinity, and a compulsive encourager of others. One of grandson Henry's 1824 interviewees traced her spiritual beginnings to Venn giving her Doddridge's *Rise and Progress*, whilst another kept into old age a copy of Lewis's Catechism, a gift of her vicar.⁵² Dealing with so many in material need, and seeing a spiritual hunger amongst some of the less well-off, possibly sharpened Venn's awareness of their usefulness for gospel work. A unpublished copy of the Particular Baptist stocking-weaver and pastor Abraham Booth's *The Reign of Grace* was brought to Venn's attention, and he journeyed to Sutton-in-Ashfield in Nottinghamshire to meet its author.⁵³ Venn wrote a preface to the work (published in April 1768), extolling the author's "genius", and hoping that public recognition of such would secure him a strategic pastorate, and a life-long friendship ensued.⁵⁴ Another Particular Baptist, John Fawcett of Hebden Bridge, who treasured his own friendship with Venn, knew of at least thirteen men who entered the ministry via Venn's direct encouragement, the majority of them

⁴⁹ John Cole, *A Biographical Account of the Late Rev. Samuel Bottomley, of Scarborough* (Scarborough, 1831).

⁵⁰ Venn MSS, Acc.81/F13, p. 8.

⁵¹ Cole, *Account*, p. 3, Cockin, *Memoirs*, p. 46, Venn MSS, Acc.81/F13, p. 9.

⁵² Venn MSS, Acc.81/F13, pp. 43-4. Venn was still handing out *Rise and Progress* in Yelling in 1784. Venn, *Letters*, p. 407.

⁵³ Abraham Booth, *The Reign of Grace, from its Rise to its Consummation* (Leeds, 1768).

⁵⁴ Fawcett, *Account*, p. 28. Venn MSS, Acc.81/C11, Letter to Mrs Medhurst, 9th February, 1769.

Independents trained at Heckmondwike.⁵⁵ A modern estimate is that twenty two of Venn's men became dissenting ministers owing to lack of means to progress to the Anglican ministry.⁵⁶

Any encouragement of Dissent of course put Venn in a delicate situation, his later biographers, even more so. John Venn wrote twice in as many pages that Venn deeply regretted his encouragement of members of his old congregation to establish Highfields Chapel when Venn's successor was hostile to evangelicalism.⁵⁷ He did this, John assured his readers, "somewhat early in his career", though this is an unconvincing assessment of a forty-five year old, ordained twenty-four years previously. Venn had an esteem for those he reckoned true believers, regardless of church convictions, and was entirely pragmatic about them. Warning his friend John Houghton in 1776 not to dispute with troublesome local Baptists ("debate is the work of the flesh"), Venn claimed that "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 were indeed 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."⁵⁸ Almost all of the Particular Baptists at Salendine Nook made the journey to the parish church, where their congregation was reduced to a handful of worshippers by the time Venn left Huddersfield, at which point many disgruntled parishioners made their way to the same chapel rather than hear his successor.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Fawcett, *Account*, p. 29.

⁵⁶ Kenneth Hylson-Smith, *Evangelicals in the Church of England, 1754-1984* (Edinburgh, 1988), p. 47. For connections and mutual influences between Baptists and Anglicans, see Anthony R. Cross, *Useful Learning: Neglected Means of Grace in the Reception of the Evangelical Revival among English Particular Baptists* (Eugene, 2017), pp. 137-139, and fn.

⁵⁷ Venn, *Annals*, pp. 95, 96.

⁵⁸ Venn, *Letters*, p. 264.

⁵⁹ Venn MSS, Acc.81/F13, p. 25.

For all of his ‘heroic’ labours, Venn was a man with his human susceptibilities. After Eling’s death, he soon fell in love with Ann Hudson. A clutch of letters to Hudson, usually addressed to “my beloved Priscy”, or “M.B.P.”, have a self-consciously paternal tone, often mixed with a self-deprecating humour. The letters are copies, with sections possibly removed by Ann’s daughter before they were shared with the Venns, but the reader can detect a degree of infatuation. One sent to a friend suggests that Venn made a proposal of marriage to Ann, only to be turned down.⁶⁰ Instead, Ann chose John Riland, and Venn officiated at their wedding on the 25th August, 1768, baptising their daughter Priscilla the following summer. Venn laboured on after their departure to Warwickshire, relinquishing his romantic love for Ann, but not his friendship, and their letters give clear insights into Venn’s thinking regarding the closing of his Huddersfield ministry.

On the 10th November 1770 Venn wrote from Bath to Ann.⁶¹ Now Mrs Riland, his letter is valuable, in that it brings together the various strands of his reasoning about a change of parish. Venn refers several times to his ill-health, and declares that “my lungs are so weak I shall not attempt to do the duty without an Assistant”. In fact, having said that he had already petitioned for Riland to be his successor at Huddersfield, he suggests that, if that were unsuccessful, that he and Riland could continue their ministry together at Yelling.⁶²

Then there was the easing of Venn’s financial worries. Yelling meant an income of more than £200 per annum (double his Huddersfield salary), so that “I shall not in the manner I have, need the large supplies from the bounty of others”. This stated pressure of money troubles accords with the declaration of Joseph Cockin, recorded in the *Annals*, that “his income from the vicarage was not adequate to a third part of these demands, and the

⁶⁰ Venn MSS, Acc.81/C13/27.

⁶¹ Venn MSS, Acc.81/C13/18, Letter to Ann Riland, 10th November, 1770.

⁶² This surprising declaration was actually repeated when Venn wrote to Ann a week later from London.

deficiency was supplied by the benefactions of Lord Dartmouth, Mr John Thornton, and opulent friends.”⁶³

Financial concerns, the demands of a large parish and growing ministry, serious health worries, the exhaustion of bereavement of a wife and a child, whilst bringing up four young children - and possibly crowning them, disappointment in love - all clearly shaped Venn’s decision to seek a new sphere. One former parishioner told grandson Henry that Venn had become weary of keeping together a parish where the urge to secede was present in many, an interesting comment, but without corroboration.⁶⁴ The various reasons all indicate that Venn was an exhausted man, though not everyone was persuaded that the move was necessary. Groups of parishioners came to the vicarage, entreating him to stay, and it was suggested that he could perform the most minimal duties, aided by a curate, or two, if he desired it.⁶⁵ Venn was touched by their love, but unpersuaded, and not a little bruised when entreaty was mixed with criticism, confiding to James Kershaw in May 1771 that “my dear friends in London are much afraid my Yorkshire friends should have been severe in censuring me.”⁶⁶ On the 30th March, 1771 (Easter Day), Venn preached his final sermon on Colossians 3.11 in the parish church, though he had not preached there that year due to illness.⁶⁷

If Venn felt misunderstood by those whom he had come to love, he was comforted in his second marriage. Katherine Smith, daughter of Rev. James Ayscough, was a widow, and she and Venn married on 15th July, 1771, her fifty-four years to Venn’s forty-six. Thus he began his Yelling ministry with her at his side in what was evidently a very happy union.

⁶³ Venn, *Annals*, p. 87. In the same passage, Cockin claimed to have garnered this information from Venn’s friend James Kershaw of Halifax.

⁶⁴ Venn MSS, Acc.81/F13, p. 12.

⁶⁵ Venn MSS, Acc.81/F13, p. 11.

⁶⁶ Venn, *Letters*, p. 173.

⁶⁷ Venn, *Annals*, p. 96.

Venn confided to Mrs Riland that he was hoping to last at least four years at Yelling, but in 1771 he was actually embarking on what would be a twenty five year ministry there.⁶⁸

Though Venn's leaving Huddersfield was, as Fawcett, said, "to the regret of thousands",⁶⁹ many elsewhere would come to benefit from his change of ministry.

In several respects, the revival of religion in the 1760s in Huddersfield and its surrounds shared points of contact with other areas with a majority occupation, such as the colliers of Newcastle, Bristol and South Wales, the tin-miners and smallholders of Cornwall, and comparable communities in the Pennine Chain, such as the West Riding's Haworth and Birstall.⁷⁰ Large parishes where the Church had had minimal purchase, and where landlord control was often harder to bring to bear, meant that local people were left to make do for themselves, and therefore were possibly more open to the ideas and the opportunism of the revival's leaders.⁷¹ That anyone should take an apparently self-sacrificing concern for these communities evidently made a deep impression.

The manner and temperament of Venn were a definite draw, especially for the young.

Venn's bravery was recalled by a seventy-eight year old Mr Midwood to grandson Henry, and how he won over initial scoffers and opponents, and secured such popularity that those hostile to him were in time greatly outnumbered.⁷² Such gifts of course did not guarantee success. A seventy-four year old remembered "the pains he took with us, but it was all lost upon some of us", fearing that she and many had neglected Venn's ministry, including his warnings.⁷³ Nonetheless, his harvest was likely in large part the yield of his assiduous labours. A year into his Yorkshire ministry Venn preached the visitation sermon at

⁶⁸ Venn, *Letters*, p. 192.

⁶⁹ Fawcett, *Account*, p. 28.

⁷⁰ Danker, *Wesley*, pp. 133-137.

⁷¹ See the discussion in Rack, *Enthusiast*, pp. 172-3.

⁷² Venn MSS, Acc.81/F13, p. 19.

⁷³ Venn MSS, Acc.81/F13, p. 45.

Wakefield.⁷⁴ The sermon is a straightforward appeal to fellow clergy to pursue high standards of integrity and labour in conscientiously discharging their parochial duties.

Mindful of the scorn of unbelievers, Venn, said, he must eschew ambition, indolence and distraction in order to give himself fully to the parish:

“He must constantly labour out of the pulpit, as well as in it, on common days as well as on Sundays, to enlighten the ignorant, quicken the slothful, and make the presumptuous tremble. Love, gentleness, and meekness in his own behaviour must enforce his exhortations to his flock, to do all that possibly lieth in them, to live peaceably together. . . .He must convince his people that his whole heart's desire is, that they may obtain the salvation of God, and that he watches to improve all his acquaintance and discourse with them to this great end.”⁷⁵

The argument in relation to Venn's pastoral ministry so far is that he was endowed with an attractive personality, deep convictions and an activist nature, all of which authenticated his message of evangelical religion which brought personal solace and hope. How Venn achieved that in the pulpit, and how he worked with curates to the same ends, are the next two topics of inquiry, before an assessment of the Yelling ministry, and of Venn's lesser impact there.

⁷⁴ Henry Venn, *The Duty of a Parish Priest, a sermon [on Col. iv. 17] preach'd at a Visitation of the Clergy held at Wakefield, July 2, 1760* (Leeds, 1760).

⁷⁵ Venn, *Duty*, p. 9.

3.2 “The Commendation of His Excellency”: the Ministry of Preaching

The Hanoverian age was one of consumption, and religion was also subjected to the tastes of consumers.⁷⁶ Venn and the Moderate Calvinists were religious entrepreneurs, sensitive to the spirit of the age, and eager to exploit it. They had grown up in an age where the dominant notes of the pulpit, learned and logical as they were, tended to the speculative or to the merely optimistic.⁷⁷ Such ministry might tackle existential questions about death, hope and peace, and offer comfort, but was lampooned as woefully inadequate by those Evangelicals who shook it off.⁷⁸ “Generally dry, methodical and unaffecting”, complained Goldsmith in 1760 about the sermons he heard; “delivered with the most insipid calmness, [...] should the peaceful preacher lift his head over the cushion, which alone he seems to address, he might discover his audience [...] actually sleeping over his methodical and laboured composition.”⁷⁹ Evangelical ministry, by contrast, and particularly Moderate Calvinism, sought to awaken, aiming to discomfort before it brought relief to its adherents. It was preached by men who sought to match their pulpit words with parochial endeavour and sanctity of life. Preaching was an emotive and affectional event, the commendation of heart religion built on the foundations of unconditional grace. Such a Christianity needed to be proclaimed by men who could clearly model the assurances and life which their convictions laid claim to. Newton said of William Grimshaw, “he commanded their attention with earnestness and authority as one who was well assured of the truth and importance of his message”, and Whitefield was commended by Goldsmith for emulation

⁷⁶ Roy Porter, *Enlightenment: Britain and the Creation of the Modern World* (London, 2000), p. 268, and fn; Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People. England, 1727-1783* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 2-5; Robertson, *Enlightenment*, pp. 545-8.

⁷⁷ James Downey, *The Eighteenth Century Pulpit* (Oxford, 1969), p. 10.

⁷⁸ Evangelical scorn of latitudinarian and rigorist religion is treated in Chapter 1 of this dissertation.

⁷⁹ Cited in Paul Goring, ‘Anglicanism, Enthusiasm and Quixotism: Preaching and Politeness in Mid-Eighteenth Century Literature’, *Literature and Theology*, vol. 15, no. 4 (2001), p. 329.

by fellow preachers along the same lines.⁸⁰ A particular characteristic of evangelical ministry was the inseparability of the herald and his message. This section explores the manner, context and substance of Venn's and Moderate Calvinistic preaching, and seeks to assess how both were needed if the gospel message were to win a hearing.

Although fines for non-attendance were seldom enforced, the data of parochial returns suggests that a significant proportion of communities attended Sunday worship, even in the enormous parishes of Huddersfield and neighbouring Almondbury.⁸¹ The churchyard was a place for the whole parish to meet and discuss news and business, and even religion, and the church service a context in which social norms were underscored. The sermon was the centrepiece of public worship, particularly so in an age where Holy Communion was required to be held on just three or four occasions a year.⁸² The clergyman was expected to give his efforts to preparing and delivering something designed to interest and edify his hearers. As theirs was a preaching movement, this was to the Moderate Calvinists a great opportunity.

For Venn, preaching was “eminently the channel with which God has chosen to convey his grace to the children of men”, and “the noblest office entrusted to men – the office of preaching the Gospel, and watching over their souls, in love to them and to God their Maker.”⁸³ Indeed, it was “one great end of the Christian ministry, which is to expound Scripture”, and a ministry of the highest order, where sinner served the Almighty in conscious dependence.⁸⁴ Of course, the preacher was not above error, and after hearing

⁸⁰ Newton, *Letters*, p. 55. Oliver Goldsmith, *The Miscellaneous Works of Oliver Goldsmith, M.B.* (Edinburgh, 1792), p. 130.

⁸¹ See the 1764 returns of neighbouring Almondbury: Annesley & Hoskin (eds), *Returns 1764: Volume I*, pp. 15-17. For the problems of assessing church attendance, see Jacob, *Lay People*, pp. 52-5.

⁸² Walsh, Haydon & Taylor (eds), *The Church of England*, p. 98.

⁸³ Venn, *Mistakes*, p. 239; Letter to John Venn, 11th November 1777, Venn, *Letters*, p. 244.

⁸⁴ Venn, *Mistakes*, p. 287. Venn had a practice of writing at the head of his pulpit notes two declarations in Greek, “Glory to God in the highest”, and “God have mercy upon me, a sinner”. Venn, *Letters*, p. 368.

Wesley in 1789, Venn advised his daughter Catherine, “never give absolute credit to what you hear from the pulpit, which is not proved by plain Scripture.”⁸⁵ With this danger in view, his son John was exhorted to give himself continually to the study of the Scriptures.⁸⁶ The sermon was the summit of the preacher’s personal devotion to Christ, “the commendation of his excellency”.⁸⁷

Venn knew that printed sermons would serve his ministry long after their oral deliveries. Alongside the fourteen sermons which make up Venn’s published *Select Sermons* of 1759, ten others are extant in individually-published form. Venn closed his ministry at Clapham with three additional printed sermons on standard evangelical preoccupations, one warning of the dangers of Roman Catholicism, another insisting in the necessity of conversion for salvation, and a third on the priority of keeping the Lord’s Day (published in 1760 in Leeds, but likely a sermon first delivered in Clapham).⁸⁸ Two sermons were preached at visitations twenty-five years apart, the one already noted, delivered in 1760 at Wakefield and espousing conventional views on ministry, though with a typically evangelical earnestness, and another in 1785 at Yelling, defending the deity of Christ.⁸⁹ Venn’s Yorkshire ministry brought new friendships, and in 1763 he preached at William Grimshaw’s funeral.⁹⁰ In 1770 he was called upon to preach a memorial sermon at Bath

⁸⁵ Venn, *Letters*, p. 474.

⁸⁶ Venn, *Letters*, p. 531.

⁸⁷ Venn, *Letters*, p. 552.

⁸⁸ Henry Venn, *The perfect Contrast; or the entire opposition of Popery to the Religion of Jesus ... A sermon on James iii., 17, preached at Clapham, etc* (London, 1758); Henry Venn, *The Variance between Real and Nominal Christians considered and the cause of it explained on Matt x 35 36* (London, 1759); Henry Venn, *An earnest and pressing call, to keep holy the Lord’s day. Addressed equally to the rich and poor of his flock with suitable directions, to be observed for that purpose* (Leeds, 1760). It is interesting to speculate whether this sermon is the unidentified sermon, *Persuasive to observe the Lord’s Day*, published and distributed widely by the Society for the Promoting Religious Knowledge amongst the Poor (of which Venn was an early subscriber) in 1760. For an introduction to the Society, see Isabel Rivers. ‘The First Evangelical Tract Society’, *The Historical Journal*, 50 (1) (2007), pp. 1-22.

⁸⁹ Henry Venn, *Plain proofs of the deity of Christ, and of the benefit inseparable from believing it, with a true heart, and of the pernicious consequences of denying it* (London, 1785).

⁹⁰ Venn, *Christ the Joy*.

for Whitefield.⁹¹ Links with friends and former curates around the country were carefully maintained (such as Riland in Warwickshire). London was a constant source of opportunities,⁹² with an Assize sermon published in 1769,⁹³ and a charity sermon a decade later.⁹⁴ Venn preached regularly at Surrey Chapel for Rowland Hill until 1789, from where a 1786 sermon found its way into print.⁹⁵ Additional to these single sermons it is highly likely that Venn's *The Complete Duty* and *Mistakes in Religion Exposed* were the reworkings of parochial pulpit ministry, but that cannot be definitively proved.

Reading sermons or hearing them read in their homes was never a substitute for parishioners attending, but might still do some good, and even, could ignite a localised gospel movement.⁹⁶ Publishers did all they could to encourage this profitable habit. Over four hundred booksellers in London alone in the eighteenth century have been identified as dealing in sermon publishing.⁹⁷ Provincial newspapers flourished from the early 1700s, invariably with moral and religious content, often engaging with the religious polemics of the time, and listing published sermons.⁹⁸ The poorest cottages might contain chapbook sermons, and the finest gentleman's library must have, as Samuel Johnson insisted, volumes of sermons.⁹⁹ Anglican clergy obviously dominated the sermon market. Of the almost fifteen thousand sermons listed in 1753 as published between 1660 and 1750, nearly ninety-five percent were preached by Anglicans, the remainder by Dissenters.¹⁰⁰

⁹¹ Henry Venn, *A Token of Respect to the Memory of the Rev. G. Whitefield, being the substance of a sermon [on Isai. viii. 18], preached on his death, at...Bath, etc.* (London, 1770).

⁹² In 1789 Venn was engaged to preach eight Sundays in the capital. Venn, *Letters*, p. 473.

⁹³ Henry Venn, *Man a Condemned Prisoner* (London, 1769).

⁹⁴ Henry Venn, *The Good and Righteous King. A Discourse...[on Isaiah xxxii. 1-4]...published with some variations and additions by an attentive auditor* (London, 1786).

⁹⁵ Henry Venn, *The Conversion of Sinners the Greatest Charity* (London, 1779).

⁹⁶ For example, Thomas Kidd, *George Whitefield, America's Spiritual Founding Father* (New Haven, 2014), p. 154. For Coxe Feary, whose reading of sermons to his neighbours began a work in his village of Bluntisham, later aided by Venn, see Smyth, *Simeon*, p. 282.

⁹⁷ Farooq, *Preaching*, p. 76.

⁹⁸ Jacob, *Lay People*, pp. 108-9.

⁹⁹ Boswell, *Johnson*, p. 1145.

¹⁰⁰ Jacob, *Lay People*, p. 65.

Printed sermons, however, were not preached sermons, and rarely were they even longhand pulpit notes, being instead distinct literary compositions. The carefully constructed paragraphs of Venn's published offerings give little hint at the tone of their delivery ("there seems no more life or fire in them than there is in an empty stove in July", lamented Ryle¹⁰¹), but the doctrines they espouse go no small way to reconstructing what must have been the burden of his message, and, the rhetorical touches do suggest something of the effect Venn sought to achieve.

It was not sufficient in Venn's eyes merely to deliver sermons; careful preparation for the task was essential if hearers were to profit. Advising his son John at the threshold of his own ministry, Venn declared,

"Our ministry is hindered, because so very few preachers of Christ are pains-taking men, to read much, and to think much, in order to be full men in the pulpit; which, joined with prayers, gives a relish to people's minds when they hear us; whereas it is very different, when either reading or thinking is neglected."¹⁰²

Venn's demanding parochial ministry must have laid at times enormous pressure on his sermon preparation, but thorough preparatory work for the pulpit was, for him, of the highest order. Venn confessed to disappointment in others and shame at himself on occasions in the matter of insufficient preparation.¹⁰³ He might have had in mind John Newton, who was compelled to defend what amounted at times to scant preparation for sermons in busy seasons, and who also received censure from Richard Cecil in undervaluing the importance of thorough work before preaching.¹⁰⁴ What might have been acceptable for the busy itinerant was deemed a mark of deficiency when it came to the

¹⁰¹ Ryle, *Leaders*, p. 287; Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul. Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (Oxford, 2016), p. 198.

¹⁰² Venn, *Letters*, p. 460.

¹⁰³ Venn, *Letters*, p. 367.

¹⁰⁴ Newton, *Works*, 1, pp. 93-4.

settled clergyman. And as Evangelicals were determined to expound scripture and not just read the sermons of others, their work was cut out.

With no surviving sermon manuscripts, it is impossible to discover if Venn had a consistent method in preparation or in using notes for the pulpit. John Venn's biography states that his father used short notes in the Huddersfield ministry ("ample room was left to indulge the feelings of compassion, of tenderness, and of love, with which his heart overflowed towards his people"). In 1786 Venn could record, "read my sermon", suggesting reliance on a fuller manuscript.¹⁰⁵ He certainly advised preachers learning their craft to work on developing full notes in the early years.¹⁰⁶ Haweis and Burnett were carefully trained by Walker of Truro in extempore preaching prior to their Oxford careers, though Haweis usually prepared full notes for his sermons.¹⁰⁷ And preaching was performance. As with all performances, artistry was honed through the self-discipline of preparation and delivery. Comments in the 1780s show that Venn was aiming to preach for an hour or less, a longer sermon than the average of the age but by no means excessively lengthy.¹⁰⁸ Newton strove for the same, whilst Grimshaw was often nearer two hours in his Haworth pulpit (one wonders whether he might have paused for breath, and for a hymn).¹⁰⁹

Venn preached for conversion, and commended the same to others, telling a London congregation in 1778 that "sorrowing pity for perishing sinners, and joy in seeking their salvation, is the most striking excellency in the brightest characters, and unquestioningly proves that we, who act under the influence of this most loving spirit, are born of God."¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁵ Venn, *Letters*, pp. 27, 430. As he was preaching for Simeon in Cambridge on that occasion, Venn perhaps took extra care by preparing a full set of pulpit notes.

¹⁰⁶ Venn, *Life*, p. 365.

¹⁰⁷ Wood, 'The Life and Work of Thomas Haweis, 1734-1800' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1951), pp. 51-2.

¹⁰⁸ Venn, *Letters*, pp. 313, 416; Jeremy Gregory (ed), *The Oxford History of Anglicanism, Volume II: Establishment and Empire, 1662-1829* (Oxford, 2017), p. 279.

¹⁰⁹ Newton, *Works*, 2, p. 163; Cecil, *Life of John Newton*, p. 96.

¹¹⁰ Venn, *The Conversion of Sinners*, p. 25.

The text of Venn's first sermons in both Huddersfield and Yelling, "Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they might be saved" (Romans 10.1), set the tone for a ministry of evangelism, complemented by rigorous Bible instruction. Writing to his son John at the commencement of his Little Dunham ministry in 1783, Venn urged him to "consider yourself as a Missionary, sent to teach and preach Jesus Christ", a descriptor unusual for any settled clergyman of the time, save for the Evangelicals.¹¹¹ As with his reformed forebears in the Church, and in common with contemporary Evangelical Arminians, Venn's evangelistic sermons explored the plight of humanity as revealed by the Law, the work of Christ in the sinner's stead, and the warrant of faith.

Venn took full advantage of the context of a 1769 Assize sermon preached at Kingston-upon-Thames as the dramatic convergence of the authority of the church and state, and the justice of God and man,¹¹² to liken his hearers to those arraigned before them: "we are all called by the reproachful name of prisoners."¹¹³ Just as the condemned prisoner is made wretched by his awareness of his sin and fate, before he is dragged away to face its punishment, so all men find themselves in the same situation. The world is but a "spacious prison" where all are guilty in God's sight, and under the Law.¹¹⁴ Quoting the declaration of Romans 3.19 ("all are under the law...and all the world may become guilty before God"), Venn declared that all in the courtroom are equally guilty of sin like any prisoner due to the Law.¹¹⁵ His unfolding of the Law and its terrors took only one third of his sermon, with the majority of Venn's efforts given to expounding the free grace available

¹¹¹ Venn, *Letters*, p. 364.

¹¹² Harry Potter, *Hanging in Judgement: Religion and the Death Penalty in England* (London, 1993), pp. 161-2. The setting and the sermon itself are explored in Hindmarsh, *Spirit*, pp. 199-203.

¹¹³ Venn, *Condemned*, p. 2.

¹¹⁴ Venn, *Condemned*, p. 4.

¹¹⁵ Venn, *Condemned*, p. 9.

through Christ's vicarious Law-keeping and atonement, "a gift never refused to any rebel, who turns to the Lord".¹¹⁶

Scant evidence is available to show whether Venn preached consecutive expositions of sections and books of the Bible, or single and unrelated texts. Evidence shows that he selected verses appropriate to unique occasions, the Sunday after Eling's burial, preaching Numbers 23.10, and six years earlier (extraordinarily, to modern sensibilities), taking 2 Samuel 17.23 for the funeral of a parishioner who took her life by hanging.¹¹⁷ Above all, Venn knew as well as any clergyman of a different tradition that the pulpit must meet his parishioners in their condition: "the best service you can do to men is to dwell only on *plain and practical subjects*."¹¹⁸ He said that he simplified his preaching on discovering the lack of education amongst his parishioners on arriving in Yelling, adding the colour of stories to his pulpit work.¹¹⁹ "They prick up their ears when I am proving that a shepherd or his boy, though he cannot read a word, is not at all further removed from the knowledge and delightful enjoyment of God, than a scholar or a gentleman: they seem struck with the glad tidings."¹²⁰ It is equally possible that they were struck with the preacher himself.

The well-known assertion that the revival must be understood as "essentially a history of personalities, rather than of opinions"¹²¹ has much to commend itself in this regard, as the success of the Moderate Calvinist cause was seen in the convergence of fervently-held opinions preached through commanding and committed individuals. Evangelical preaching was synonymous with a display of passion. In his pre-evangelical days, William Cadogan of Reading and Chelsea insisted to his clerk, "if I myself were to throw about my arms,

¹¹⁶ Venn, *Condemned*, p. 17.

¹¹⁷ Venn used the contrasting texts, the "righteous death" of the former, and the suicide of the latter. Venn MSS, Acc.81/F13, p. 11. Law, *Day-books*, p. 30.

¹¹⁸ Venn, *Mistakes*, p. 233. Italics original.

¹¹⁹ Venn, *Letters*, p. 188.

¹²⁰ Venn, *Letters*, p. 189.

¹²¹ Charles Smyth, *Simeon and Church Order* (Cambridge, 1940), p. 6.

and make a great noise, I could be popular, too.”¹²² Whitefield did more than throw his arms about: his open-air preaching was full of dramatic content, whether constructing imagined dialogue between biblical characters (racy, narrative passages from Scripture were a favourite), donning an imaginary black cap for passing the death-sentence on condemned sinners, or lying on his back, roaring in the pains of child-birth.¹²³ Samuel Johnson, perhaps the most quintessentially Tillotsonian of his age, gave grudging praise to the talents of Whitefield, though his inveterate snobbery relegated their effectiveness to work amongst the lower orders and concluded that “he did not draw attention by doing better than others, but by doing what was strange.”¹²⁴ Goldsmith commended the verve of Methodist preaching, and claimed that it exposed the lamentable defects of politer clergy. Sense they made have had, but Goldsmith detected a lack of spirit.¹²⁵

No wonder, then, that the crowds came. A burgeoning London, city of clubs, newspapers and coffee-houses, found a renewed appetite for the theatre, sharpened by entrepreneurial owners and managers, and the public’s attitudes towards it were changing.¹²⁶ Theatre imitated life, and many wanted to learn from it.

Whitefield was an habitual and sharp critic of the theatre, who saw the power of the stage, and coveted it.¹²⁷ Puritan and later Rigorist antecedents were plentiful, but Whitefield’s hostility verged on the pathological, seemingly going out of his way to single out players

¹²² Richard Cecil, *Memoirs of John Bacon...also of the Hon. and Rev. Wm. Bromley Cadogan* (London, 1822), p. liii.

¹²³ For Whitefield’s preaching see Stout, *Dramatist*, especially pp. 234-248; Kidd, *Whitefield*, pp. 154-6.

¹²⁴ Boswell, *Johnson*, p. 1037. Whitefield’s popularity, Johnson asserted, was “chiefly owing to the peculiarity of his manner. He would be followed by crowds were he to wear a night-cap in the pulpit, or were he to preach from a tree.” Boswell, *Johnson*, p. 409.

¹²⁵ Goldsmith, *Works*, pp. 130-1.

¹²⁶ For the rise and place of the theatre in early Hanoverian England, see Jeremy Black, *Eighteenth Century Britain, 1688-1793* (Basingstoke, 2008), pp. 172-3. H.T. Dickinson (ed), *A Companion to Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford, 2006), pp. 335-7. For the changing image of the theatre during the period, see Robertson, *Enlightenment*, pp. 490, 501-2.

¹²⁷ Stout, *Dramatist*, pp. 238-242.

in his sermons. In his mind, the theatre had become a serious rival to the church, and outbreaks of mutual hostility were frequent and fervent. The performance of the gospel was central to its power, in evangelical religion, whilst demanding the preacher's utmost sincerity.

Men like Grimshaw, Whitefield and Berridge were deeply idiosyncratic, one-offs whose style was near-impossible to imitate, but whose impact raised the expectations of hearers and fellow preachers as to what preaching should aspire to be.¹²⁸ But a passionate pulpit manner, natural or constructed, should not be thought of as the *sine qua non* of Hanoverian evangelical ministry, nor seen as the deciding factor in a well-attended ministry. In New England, Jonathan Edwards was tied to his notes (to his own frustration) and lacking in any animation, and Walker regretted that he never mastered *ex tempore* preaching.¹²⁹ Cadogan was transformed by evangelical convictions five years into his ministry, and his church was always full, but his preaching style and voice were laboured and unattractive, to the dismay of contemporaries. What Cadogan lacked as an orator, though, he compensated for in his evident sincerity.¹³⁰ Earnestness took various forms, and the preacher's challenge was to match his pulpit tone to engage the attention of his congregation.

Where did Venn stand? He insisted that preaching be transformative, "to win the alienated heart to delight in God, and regulate the whole man according to his will."¹³¹ In order to achieve this, Venn knew that pulpit ministry must work on the affections, and must come

¹²⁸ Thomas Scott said – or lamented – in 1798, "Many would have Whitefield's spirit if they could catch it." Pratt, *Thought*, p. 18.

¹²⁹ Stout, *New England Soul*, p. 226. His lack of emotion could, at times, stand in great contrast to the congregation's. George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards, A Life* (New Haven, 2003), pp. 220-1. Wood 'Haweis', p. 51.

¹³⁰ Smyth, *Simeon*, p. 227; see Pratt, *Thought*, p. 91. For Cecil's estimation of Cadogan's ministry see Cecil, *Memoirs*, pp. 176-7.

¹³¹ Venn, *Mistakes*, p. 265.

from a demonstrably affected preacher. There is no record that Venn ever drew the unfavourable attention given to the extremes of Grimshaw, or the accusations of impropriety aimed at Whitefield, but the notes taken by Venn's grandson offer a picture by his grandfather's then-elderly hearers as being a highly animated preacher.¹³² "He struck upon the passions like no other man", said one interviewee. "When he got warm with his subject, he looked as if he would jump out of his pulpit. He made many weep. I've cried mony a bit".¹³³ Stillingfleet recalled that Venn's preaching was "alarming and affectionate, from the heart to the heart."¹³⁴

These recollections from individuals of events almost sixty years distant might well be subject to embellishment, but the strains experienced by Venn, and the assessments by others, suggest that his pulpit ministry was marked by animation and intensity. The demands of frequent preaching in Huddersfield were a significant factor in his lengthy break from the parish for much of 1766. This was most likely the resurfacing of the chest complaint which took Venn out of the Clapham pulpit ten years before, and each must have been exacerbated by preaching, and possibly by the extra physical strain of a particularly vigorous delivery. Venn spent a silent last quarter of 1770, trying to recover from the same complaint, and at this point concluded that he had to step aside from his demanding charge, referring to his ill-health as the main reason for his resignation three times in as many letters to Ann Riland in that period.¹³⁵ The lessons stayed with Venn, in

¹³² For a synopsis of the opprobrium levelled against Whitefield, see Stout, *Dramatist*, pp. 234-248; Kidd, *Whitefield*, pp. 230-32.

¹³³ Venn MSS, Acc.81/F43, Diary, pp.31-32.

¹³⁴ Venn, *Letters*, p. 48. Venn MSS, Acc.81/F13, pp. 10-12. For an account of a Grimshaw sermon, with the Law-grace schema attended by homiletical verve, see William Wood Stamp, *Historical Notices of Wesleyan Methodism in Bradford and its Vicinity* (Huddersfield, 1841), p.117.

¹³⁵ Venn MSS, Acc.81/C13/17, C13/18; Venn, *Letters*, p. 165.

1775 telling Stillingfleet that he was trying to “deliver myself with calmness and thus keep up my strength which was going fast before I began to curb my natural intensity.”¹³⁶

In a tantalising aside in a 1780 letter, Venn noted that in his return visit to Huddersfield that year he preached with “no vociferation”.¹³⁷ Is he saying that his style departed from the Yelling ministry of the previous decade, or that he did not return to the style characteristic of the Huddersfield years? Most likely, with a significantly larger church building to fill in his Yorkshire parish, holding a bigger congregation where distractions and disturbances would have been more likely, his preaching needed to be particularly animated and compelling, and loud, and as a younger man he gave his energies to it. Certainly, vociferation had not entirely left Venn after his move south. At a gathering of the Eclectics in 1799 the sculptor John Bacon listed Venn amongst a dozen or so of the better-known evangelical preachers, and commended his preaching as “some tone, but remarkably fiery: current: realising: heavenly: rapturous: holy: quickening.”¹³⁸ The only other preacher achieving any comparable estimation for his animation was Romaine, though Bacon conceded that his delivery sometimes amounted to “bawling”.¹³⁹ If Venn were fiery, it was most likely a controlled animus, in keeping with his enthusiastic personality, whilst alert to the danger of association with enthusiasm.

In Venn’s century the rediscovery of the doctrine of justification by faith, together with the Moderate Calvinist insistence that assurance of salvation was achievable (and even, normative) for the believer, brought a quickening to the pulpit and pew. Whitefield preached three times for Venn in Clapham, and at least the same number of times in Huddersfield, and they were co-belligerents in the Countess of Huntingdon’s cause.

¹³⁶ Venn MSS, Acc.81/C/14/1, Letter to James Stillingfleet, 4th July, 1775.

¹³⁷ Venn, *Letters*, p. 344.

¹³⁸ Pratt, *Thought*, p. 91.

¹³⁹ Pratt, *Thought*, p. 90.

Weeping was habitual in Whitefield's ministry, and on one occasion Venn and Martin Madan had to step in mid-sermon to help their affected friend when preaching in the churchyard in Cheltenham.¹⁴⁰ The spirituality of mid-century professions of faith was synonymous with strong emotion, and, consciously or otherwise, its preachers were providing a plausibility structure for their own convictions and for those who might come to share them. Tears were a feature of many a congregation in Huddersfield, the crowded church yard "like a fair" and church with "not a pin's space" inside, must have intensified the emotions of the assembled hearers.¹⁴¹ When Venn's anxious enquirers came to the vicarage, daughter Eling remembered their weeping as well as their words.¹⁴² "He was most powerful in unfolding the terrors of the law", Henry junior was told in 1824 by a parishioner. "When doing so, he had a stern look, that would make you tremble: then he would turn off to the offers of grace, and begin to smile, and go on entreating till his eyes filled with tears."¹⁴³ Venn, confessed another, "makes me tremble all over".¹⁴⁴

This was, above all, the Moderate Calvinist preaching experience, for preacher and hearer alike, an engagement through the matrix of Law and Grace, with warning followed by invitation, smiles following strong admonition. Here was catharsis, the problem stated, the solution offered, and the listener entreated to discover the relief modelled by the preacher. The fear and favour of the Lord were set out unequivocally. Salvation, Venn said, brought new professors "from madness to reason, from folly to wisdom, from Satan to God".¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁰ Whitefield's assistant Cornelius Winter said of him, "I hardly ever knew him go through a sermon without weeping", Stout, *Dramatist*, p. 41. CCA, F1/1428, Henry Venn to the Countess of Huntingdon, 14th May 1768. For Whitefield's approval of his hearers' tears, see George Whitefield, *The Works of the Rev. George Whitefield* (6 vols, London, 1772), 5, pp. 47, 371.

¹⁴¹ Venn MSS, Acc.81/F13, p. 25. Venn MSS, Acc.81/F13, p. 42.

¹⁴² Venn, *Annals*, p. 82.

¹⁴³ Venn, *Life*, p. 43. Law-Gospel preaching became easily identifiable as an Evangelical and Methodist staple. [Graves], *Spiritual Quixote*, 1, p. 129.

¹⁴⁴ Venn MSS, Acc.81/F13, p. 10.

¹⁴⁵ Venn, *Conversion*, p. 22.

That preachers could commend it, and believers claim to experience it, gave the movement its greatest potency.

The resurgence of high emotion in the pulpit was obviously synonymous with the excesses of enthusiasm, and was suspected and ridiculed accordingly, for example, in Hogarth's *Enthusiasm Delineated* (1761).¹⁴⁶ Hogarth was one of a legion of writers, engravers and social commentators who were confident that the fervour of evangelical preachers rose from baser impulses, of greed and insincerity. Evidence suggests that, as the century wore on, English opinions of emotional outbursts were changing, not least due to their associations with revolution, and ultimately with a very French revolutionary zeal.¹⁴⁷

English manners, and religion, were better kept moderate. Nonetheless, evangelical emotion had its place, alongside pulpit eloquence. One of his parishioners said that Venn was “sometimes the most eloquent man I ever heard, yet it was all natural, nothing studied or artificial. He aimed at awakening the people”.¹⁴⁸ Far from eschewing emotion, Simeon urged John Venn to see himself “an Ambassador of the Most High God, sent to intreat sinners, with floods of tears, to be reconciled to Him”.¹⁴⁹ In an Eclectic Society Meeting in 1799, Cecil reported that John Venn had asked a friend “Don't you think *sincerity* binding on us?”¹⁵⁰ The evangelical clergyman of the next century needed to give himself to a ministry which was earnest, grave, and undoubtedly sincere, whilst not losing the fervour of the religion of his forebears, or the attention of his hearers – not least, to the growing presence of Methodist lay preaching and Dissenters. Emotion could, of course, be spurious, and transient. The memoir of Venn recorded one of Henry junior's interviewees

¹⁴⁶ For a discussion of this, see Uglow, *Hogarth*, pp. 648-54.

¹⁴⁷ Thomas Dixon, ‘Enthusiasm Delineated: Weeping as a religious activity in Eighteenth-Century Britain.’ *Litteraria pragensia* vol. 22, 43 (2013), pp. 11-14.

¹⁴⁸ Venn MSS, Acc.81/F43, Diary, p. 11.

¹⁴⁹ Carus, *Memoirs*, pp. 713-14.

¹⁵⁰ Pratt, *Thought*, p. 113 (*italics original*).

saying that “the most wicked and ill-conditioned men went to hear him and fell like slaked lime”, but the memoir omitted his addendum: “though they weren’t converted”.¹⁵¹ Venn’s objective was not outward emotion, but conviction of sin, itself ultimately a gift “which is from on high, and cometh down from above”.¹⁵²

What was distinctive, and persuasive, about the preaching of Venn and the Moderate Calvinists? Core theological tenets occupied preaching and writing - the declaration of the Law, the sufficiency of Christ’s atonement, the insistence on new birth through faith, the place of works and instruction in Christian living and the achievability of assurance of salvation, all undergirded by a declaration of sovereign grace. Calvinism was back in the Church, and its preachers insisted that its message gave heart-succour as well as incentive and direction for holy living. Substance was matched by style; not the literary and dryly propositional one of the Latitudinarian tradition so distrusted by the Evangelicals, but by no less a style, that of a discernible earnestness of delivery. What Venn and others did was novel, as Venn’s teenage Huddersfield convert Bottomley pointed out to Venn’s grandson. A new message, and a new manner, made for an at times overwhelming experience for its auditors, as Bottomley well knew.¹⁵³ The success Venn achieved amongst West Riding clothiers gave him a wealth of insights into how to propagate Calvinistic experimental religion, and convinced him of its practicability, amongst the labourers of Yelling and no less in the colleges of Cambridge.

¹⁵¹ Venn, *Letters*, p. 43; Venn MSS, Acc.81/F13, p. 27.

¹⁵² Venn, *Letters*, p. 369.

¹⁵³ Venn MSS, Acc.81/F13, pp. 8-10.

3.3 The Partnership of the Gospel

Venn's religious and professional formation in Clapham was significantly shaped by two factors, the importance of working friendships, and the perils of overwork. Together, they secured him in his evangelical Calvinism, and in his conviction that gospel endeavour was better when shared. Effectively left to his own devices in the absence of the vicar at both West Horsley and Clapham, now in the vast and populous parish of Huddersfield, Venn employed a succession of five curates in order to cover routine parochial work amongst his thirteen chapelries, propagate his Moderate Calvinism, and continue a legacy for their own incumbencies. That he kept at bay the energies of Dissent and Methodism, and that each curate went on to pursue ministries of like mind and intent, suggest that Venn was successful as a leader of this cohort.¹⁵⁴ Like their employer, however, none went on to incumbencies where their Yorkshire successes were replicated on anything like a comparable scale.

The first of the five was the Rev. George Burnett, who arrived a few months after Venn in 1759.¹⁵⁵ As a fifteen year old he left his native Aberdeen for Truro in order to help his godfather, George Conon, who taught at the grammar school there and who was instrumental in his and Samuel Walker's conversions. Walker had the highest regard for Burnett, making considerable efforts to train him for ministry, including instructing him and his fellow disciple Thomas Haweis in preaching.¹⁵⁶ Burnett spent a year at Christ Church, Oxford, having already studied at Aberdeen University.¹⁵⁷ A friend of Haweis and

¹⁵⁴ This collegiality in the parish was noted by Moorhouse: "There with the assistance of curates of a like spirit with himself, he laboured with singular blessing and success, and multitudes were witnesses of the power with which he spake, being turned from darkness unto light, and from the power of Satan unto God." Moorhouse, 'Memoir', p. 224.

¹⁵⁵ For Burnett, see Davies, *Cornish Evangelicals*, pp. 178-184.

¹⁵⁶ Wood, 'Thomas Haweis', pp. 24-5.

¹⁵⁷ It is uncertain whether he ever graduated. Walsh, 'Yorkshire Evangelicals', p. 236, fn.

Walker, Venn must have relished the prospect of adding Burnett to his own circle, and after a struggle to receive ordination, Burnett was settled in Huddersfield, most likely due to the involvement of Lord Dartmouth, who was soon speaking in glowing terms of the curate and his vicar.¹⁵⁸ In 1747 Grimshaw was asking Wesley to send Cornishmen north (which he did), but a dozen years later, Burnett's experience at the side of Walker would be invaluable to Venn as they faced the incursions of Wesleyans in the parish.¹⁵⁹ After serving a ten month curacy at Slaithwaite in 1761, followed by a year in Kent in order to revive his health, to Venn's relief Burnett came back to Yorkshire, remaining until his death in 1793 at Elland. Venn held him in high regard, telling Lord Dartmouth at the start of their ministry how Burnett was "a man made to reprove the lightness of my mind, and to discern, and bold to admonish...his joining me will further much the prosperity of my soul."¹⁶⁰ Burnett was a close friend of Eling, and when she died, Venn turned to Burnett to conduct her funeral.

Following Burnett came John Richardson, a Westmorland man and graduate of the Queen's College, Oxford. There he was a friend of Haweis and leading light in a circle which included another Queen's man Matthew Powley, who would go on to be another Venn curate.¹⁶¹ Richardson served with Venn between 1762 and 65. As noted already, he and Eling had a momentous disagreement over Richardson's preferred choice of a wife, causing a rift so great that Venn was compelled to take sides, and in loyalty to Eling became alienated from his curate for a considerable time.¹⁶² In 1763 Richardson also

¹⁵⁸ Dartmouth shared his high esteem of Burnett in a letter to Samuel Walker (17th May, 1760): "He and his fellow labourer, Mr. Venn, are, I believe, as useful ministers as any that adorn our church; may they long be made a blessing to their parish and kingdom." Sidney, *Walker*, pp. 509-510.

¹⁵⁹ William Myles, *The Life and Writings of the Late Reverend William Grimshaw, A.B* (London, 1813), p. 168.

¹⁶⁰ Sidney, *Walker*, pp. 276ff.

¹⁶¹ Matthew Powley, *The blessedness of dying in the Lord: a sermon preached in Haworth church, May 23, 1791. Occasioned by the death of the Rev. John Richardson, M. A., Late Minister of that Church* (Leeds, 1791), p. 15.

¹⁶² Venn MSS, Acc.81/F13, p. 10.

undertook the cure of Haworth (residing initially in Huddersfield), and it is highly likely that Venn was involved in ensuring that his colleague went to Grimshaw's old parish in order to secure evangelical succession.

The chapelry of Slaithwaite, some five miles to the west of the town, was served by significant and quite contrasting ministries, in the form of the Revs John Murgatroyd and Samuel Furley. The chapelry had been the base for the Rev. Robert Meeke's long and conscientious labours earlier in the century (1685-1724), much of it committed to his diary.¹⁶³ Murgatroyd was assistant to the Rev. Edward Rishton, incumbent of Almondbury since 1726, and who was decidedly hostile to evangelicalism.¹⁶⁴ School-master in Slaithwaite from 1738-89, as an uncommonly assiduous teacher, Murgatroyd trained the sons (and even the daughters) of local clothiers in the rudiments of the classical languages, and officiated at services in the village and at other local chapelries.¹⁶⁵ Venn befriended him, remarking in 1768 that his hearers found Murgatroyd a decidedly poor preacher, but he evidently felt compassion towards him, and on a couple of occasions before leaving Huddersfield Venn urged John Riland, later his curate at Slaithwaite, to employ Murgatroyd.¹⁶⁶ Disappointed in 1780 in his attempt to secure the curacy of Marsden, the next village in the valley, Murgatroyd regularly preached at Slaithwaite for the Rev. Thomas Wilson in the later 1780s, and through his friendship came to align himself more with Wilson's evangelical views.¹⁶⁷ Murgatroyd was proof of a desire to do good to all,

¹⁶³ Kirklees Collection, KX367, WYK1247, Clergyman Robert Meeke of Slaithwaite Diary, transcript (1689-1740).

¹⁶⁴ Charles Augustus Hulbert, *Annals of the church in Slaithwaite (near Huddersfield), West-Riding of Yorkshire, from 1593 to 1864: in five lectures, with a continuation and notes* (London, 1864), p. 236.

¹⁶⁵ D.P.F. Sykes, *The History of the Colne Valley* (Slaithwaite, 1906), p. 147. For a treatment of Murgatroyd's teaching endeavours, see Carolyn Steedman, *Master and Servant: Love and Labour in the English Industrial Age* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 110-130. For his catechising and pastoral visitation, see Steedman, *Master and Servant*, pp. 98-99.

¹⁶⁶ Venn MSS, Acc.18/C13/4; Venn MSS, Acc.81/C13/16.

¹⁶⁷ Steedman, *Master and Servant*, pp. 105-6.

though equally, proof that evangelical conviction and strong personality were the best vehicles to bring about religious transformation.

Confident, and combative, Samuel Furley (spelled *Furly* in the St. Peter's parochial registers) was an obvious contrast to Murgatroyd, and with his evangelicalism and a gift of *ex tempore* preaching, his and Venn's ministries must have been mutually affirming. Furley went up to Queens' College, Cambridge, from his Essex Grammar School in 1753, where he met Venn.¹⁶⁸ The undergraduate came to the attention of John Wesley, and the pair had intermittent correspondence on aspects of ministry, not that Furley ever became an acolyte.¹⁶⁹ After a short time in which he assisted Romaine in London and in Suffolk, Furley served a curacy for a year with the Rev. Henry Crook of Kippax before following on from Burnett at Slaithwaite in 1762. He remained there for five years, and quickly grew a congregation at the chapel, in which a new gallery was erected in 1765.¹⁷⁰ With the progress of evangelical religion, Furley also met the suspicions of some in the parish about this ostensibly novel message with the publication of a letter in 1764, in which insisted that his were the views of the Homilies and the Reformers.¹⁷¹ Other troubles faced Furley, though, not least the objections of Rishton. In the 1764 visitation returns Rishton spoke of Methodist "teachers without number", and the rector, who was too old, infirm or indifferent to understand evangelical beliefs, grumbled that Furley's lectures were "conventicles", which technically they may have been.¹⁷² This fraught relationship included Furley pinning letters on the rectory gate, and Rishton bringing a charge against

¹⁶⁸ Seymour, *Life*, 2, p. 2

¹⁶⁹ Telford (ed), *Letters*, 4, pp. 252-8.

¹⁷⁰ Sykes, *Colne Valley*, p. 148.

¹⁷¹ Samuel Furley, "A Minister's Letter to his Parishioners, in answer to some serious questions" (20th October, 1764), cited in Hulbert, *Annals*, p. 73.

¹⁷² Annesley & Hoskin (eds), *Returns 1764: Volume I*, p. 15.

him to the Archbishop (which was not upheld).¹⁷³ Venn carefully avoided this quarrel, and Furley continued his curacy with success, later regretting that he left when he did.¹⁷⁴

Two particular favourite curates of Venn were the Revs. Matthew Powley and John Riland. Powley was from Westmorland, and after the shaping of the formidable Richard Yates, almost sixty years the headmaster of the Grammar School at Appleby, like Richardson he proceeded to the Queen's College, Oxford (where it was claimed half of the undergraduates were Yates' prodigies¹⁷⁵). There Powley developed evangelical views under Haweis' influence, and was obstructed in his academic progress due to his association with him.¹⁷⁶ This controversy brought him to the attention of Venn, who resolved to find him a local appointment.¹⁷⁷ Powley was ordained by the Bishop of Lincoln in 1764, and it must have been during his three year curacy at Wadenhoe, Northants, that he became friendly with Newton, twenty five miles away at Olney, through whom he met and married (in 1774) Susanna Unwin.

Nominated by Venn, Powley held the curacy of Slaithwaite from 1767-1777, also serving as domestic chaplain to the Countess of Buchan in 1768.¹⁷⁸ Venn knew it was a long shot, but had reached out to Newton in 1765 to see if he was interested in Slaithwaite ("if Mr. Newton would choose it, of all the men in the world I should prefer him").¹⁷⁹ Powley was appointed, to Furley's delight, and his evangelical ministry was a seamless progression from his own.¹⁸⁰ Murgatroyd noted that Powley's ministry began on the 22nd April, 1767, with a sermon on the classic gospel text, 1 Corinthians 2.2, in which he "determined not to

¹⁷³ Hulbert, *Annals*, pp. 74-5.

¹⁷⁴ Hulbert, *Annals*, p.75.

¹⁷⁵ Robert Southey (ed), *The Works of William Cowper* (15 vols, London, 1836), 7, p. 277.

¹⁷⁶ Reynolds, *Evangelicals*, p. 30.

¹⁷⁷ Hulbert, *Annals*, pp. 93-94.

¹⁷⁸ Powley resigned the perpetual curacy in 1785.

¹⁷⁹ Bull, *Newton*, p. 153.

¹⁸⁰ Hulbert, *Annals*, p. 76.

know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified".¹⁸¹ Venn clearly enjoyed their relationship, and wrote relaxed letters to him from his preaching ventures with the Countess of Huntingdon and her circles, sharing news and opinions of the ministry he was involved in, and asking for prayer.¹⁸² One 1771 letter in the archive has a section carefully torn out, suggestive that Venn was sharing news deemed too sensitive for other eyes.¹⁸³ When Venn wanted to petition Lady Ramsden in the same year for greater understanding of her tenants who had left the parish church in order to hear a gospel minister, it was to Powley he wrote with a suggested plan of action.¹⁸⁴

Whereas Venn was at complete ease with Powley, he had to tread a more careful path with John Riland. Riland also matriculated at Queen's College, Oxford, serving a curacy in Sutton Coldfield from 1759 before arriving in Huddersfield six years later, and having published two sermons testifying to his evangelistic zeal.¹⁸⁵ The Huddersfield ministry was one of friendship and shared endeavour with Venn, but two events put great strain on his relationship with his vicar. Firstly, there was the situation of his marriage to Ann Hudson after Venn's infatuation with her. And then, Venn was strongly reproached by Riland over his decision to leave Huddersfield, and he petitioned Venn to change his mind, warning that his departure would leave the church with every possibility of a non-evangelical succession.¹⁸⁶ Venn made representation to the patron Lord Ramsden for Riland as his

¹⁸¹ Hulbert, *Annals*, p. 100.

¹⁸² E.g., Venn MSS, Acc.81/C13/2, Letter to Matthew Powley, 4th November, 1769. Powley was also appreciated by the Countess and in her chapels.

¹⁸³ Venn MSS, Acc.81/C13/4, Letter to Matthew Powley, 7th October, 1771.

¹⁸⁴ Venn MSS, Acc.81/C13/3, Letter to Matthew Powley, 3rd August, 1771.

¹⁸⁵ John Riland, *Ignorance the destruction of God's people; and the Ways and Means to prevent it. Being the substance of two discourses* (Birmingham, 1764). Riland (or his publisher) completed the edition with several Prayer Book prayers, and a hymn from each of Watts, Doddridge and Wesley.

¹⁸⁶ Venn, *Letters*, p. 44. In one of his many letters to Mrs Riland, dated 27th November, 1770, Venn wrote, with probable anxiety, "I do not love him the less for his letter, nor do I believe that his affection for me is diminished". Venn, *Letters*, p. 167.

successor, but to no avail.¹⁸⁷ The lack of surviving correspondence between Riland and Venn (in contrast to the cache of copied letters from her old vicar to Ann) may point to an ongoing mutual wariness. Riland later adopted for a season his cousin Madan's views on polygamy, before dropping them in 1780, to Venn's enormous relief, and possibly in part through the intervention of Powley.¹⁸⁸

There is no surviving correspondence giving any hints as to how Venn trained his men, but Venn must have been aware of and appreciated the relative maturity with which his colleagues arrived in the parish. Unlike Venn's inherited Yelling curate Isaac Nicholson, all were already evangelical, and Calvinistic. Given the size of the parish and scale of pastoral needs, it is likely that curates were left largely to make their own way in winning parishioners' confidence, with the hope of winning their souls. Nonetheless, Venn's evident relish for clerical company and his appetite for pastoral ministry would find expression in meetings which became the pattern for evangelical collegiality.

Venn first gathered gospel clergy to his vicarage in 1767, establishing what was known later as the Elland Society.¹⁸⁹ Samuel Walker's Clerical Club was likely the first such group, beginning in 1750, and quite possibly Venn leaned on Walker's trainee Burnett for his advice on the running of his meetings.¹⁹⁰ The group's quarterly meetings were for mutual edification, with the study of the Greek New Testament, encouragement and prayer, but when Venn's successor was unsympathetic to such gatherings the society moved to Elland in 1772, where it was organised by Burnett. In that year it was decided to focus energies on funding potential ordinands to go up to Oxford or Cambridge, which

¹⁸⁷ Venn, *Letters*, p. 165; Venn MSS, Acc.81/C13 /21, Letter to Ann Riland, 6th April, 1771; C13/23, Letter to Ann Riland, 4th May, 1771; C/13/24, Letter to Ann Riland, 7th May, 1771.

¹⁸⁸ Venn, *Letters*, p. 107; Venn MSS, Acc.81/C12/5, Letter to Matthew Powley, 23rd December, 1780.

¹⁸⁹ John Walsh & Stephen Taylor (eds), *The Papers of the Elland Society, 1769–1828* (Woodbridge, forthcoming).

¹⁹⁰ Venn MSS, Acc.81/F1, Diary; Davies, *Cornish Evangelicals*, p.164.

later saw the involvement of John Thornton, Wilberforce and other grantees. Similar meetings were soon springing up in Yorkshire (at York and Hotham), and in towns and villages in England where there was an energetic Evangelical who could organise and rally fellow ministers, including Riland at Birmingham.¹⁹¹ John Venn's Little Dunham meeting began in 1792, based on the rules of the Hotham Society, and his father, unable to be with them, wrote to the attenders, saying that he was "with you in spirit", and urged them to invest in heart religion and in works of practical piety.¹⁹²

In 1775 Venn remarked to Ann Riland that "curates are like wives - a great comfort, or a great cross".¹⁹³ He was clearly resolved to find and receive the comfort he sought, and to continue friendships with his curates long after their ministries had taken them elsewhere. Richardson paid Venn a visit when the latter returned to Huddersfield in 1780.¹⁹⁴ In 1782 Venn asked Thomas Atkinson to give his regards to Burnett and Powley.¹⁹⁵ He kept up correspondence with Powley well into the same decade, and the two men had a tearful meeting in 1792.¹⁹⁶ Venn enjoyed trips to Warwickshire to see the Rilands, and one of his daughters spent time with Ann learning domestic skills.¹⁹⁷

After two years in Cleckheaton, Powley moved a few miles further east and became the vicar of Dewsbury in 1777 at Dartmouth's instigation, continuing there until his death in 1806.¹⁹⁸ Wesleyanism had long enjoyed numerical strength in the area, and Powley was moved to write a treatise against perfectionism following a sermon of John Fletcher in the

¹⁹¹ For such clerical societies, see Hennell, *John Venn*, pp. 276-9. For Riland, see p. 84.

¹⁹² Venn, *Letters*, p. 505.

¹⁹³ Venn, *Letters*, p. 224.

¹⁹⁴ Venn, *Letters*, p. 314.

¹⁹⁵ Venn MSS, Acc.81/C5/5, Letter to Thomas Atkinson, 18th September, 1782.

¹⁹⁶ Venn, *Letters*, p. 513.

¹⁹⁷ Venn, *Letters*, pp. 232, 374.

¹⁹⁸ Hulbert, *Annals*, pp. 86-96. Hulbert claims reliance on the recollections of the then current vicar of Dewsbury and the memoirs of Powley's successor. Hulbert, *Annals*, p. 91.

area in 1781, but through Newton's dissuasion it was never published.¹⁹⁹ Lacking Venn's attractive personality, Powley never commanded the love of his parish to the same degree, although the news received just before his death that his Dewsbury parishioners chose his own preferred candidate as his successor gave Powley great comfort.²⁰⁰

Riland knew happier times in his incumbency. The perpetual curate of St Mary's, Birmingham from 1774, he returned to Sutton Coldfield in 1790 as rector, and held both positions until 1810, before resigning the former and giving the last twelve years of his life exclusively to the one ministry. Venn rejoiced in his old curate's reports of progress in his Birmingham parish in 1775, and was glad to be asked for advice on curates.²⁰¹ After a visit to Warwickshire in 1783 Venn declared Riland one with whom "I am one in heart", and commended his labours (which included catechising and house to house visitation) in glowing terms, and would have been delighted in the warm recollection of his Huddersfield ministry which grandson Henry found in his 1824 visit.²⁰²

Burnett laboured in Elland until his death in 1793, "a venerable and pious man", according to Charles Jerram, beneficiary of the Elland Society which Burnett ran.²⁰³ A paragraph obituary in the *Evangelical Magazine* praised him as being resolute in good works and conscientious in a ministry of preaching, catechising and pastoral care.²⁰⁴ Early opposition in time gave way to a fruitful yield.²⁰⁵ Burnett was as strong a Calvinist as he was a churchman, the first conviction receiving the disapproval of Stillingfleet, and the second,

¹⁹⁹ James King and Charles Ryskamp (eds), *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper, Vol. 2: Letters, 1782-1786* (Oxford, 2014), p. 59 and fn.

²⁰⁰ Hulbert, *Annals*, p. 95.

²⁰¹ Venn, *Letters*, p. 224.

²⁰² Venn, *Letters*, pp. 376, 45. Venn MSS, Acc.81/C14/11, Letter to James Stillingfleet, 16th February, 1783.

²⁰³ Jerram, *Memoirs*, p. 59.

²⁰⁴ *The Evangelical Magazine* (London, 1793), p. 83.

²⁰⁵ Venn, *Letters*, p. 93; Elland Society Minutes, 19th March 1782, in Walsh, 'Yorkshire Evangelicals', p. 238, fn.

the disappointment of his obituary writer.²⁰⁶ If, though, Burnett were to secure the parish in a town with a proliferation of Methodists and the presence of Particular Baptists, such churchmanship was perhaps understandable.

Richardson could in no way replicate Grimshaw's ministry in Haworth. He laboured there until his death in 1791, but counted his congregation at a little over one hundred, in sad contrast to the more than a thousand worshippers in the great days of his predecessor.²⁰⁷ Whereas Grimshaw's personality could command loyalty, the proliferation of dissenting causes which had sprung up locally (thanks in part to Grimshaw's efforts), proved too appealing to them. Three years into Richardson's ministry, Wesley was similarly grieved at the dissolution of this once-great congregation, and not a little piqued that their minister was no friend to irregularity.²⁰⁸ In his funeral sermon, Powley portrayed Richardson as conscientiously attentive to the poor and assiduous in praying and preaching, and put his emphasis on the faith of the late pastor in his final sufferings, before warning the parishioners of the dangers of their continuing in an impenitent state.²⁰⁹ Clearly, Powley felt they had grown used to a gospel ministry, but not truly benefitted from it.

At the opposite end of the country, Furley had a similar experience, giving himself to a twenty-seven year ministry in Roche, Cornwall, closed in by Methodists on all sides. An awakening preacher ("more a son of thunder than of consolation", according to his obituary), Furley's ministry drew hearers from beyond the parish for a time due to its novelty, but they soon melted away, leaving him deeply vexed by his apparent lack of

²⁰⁶ For Burnett's Calvinism, see Venn MSS, Acc.81/F13. The author of the *Evangelical Magazine* obituary for Burnett may well have been Haweis, and his preference for cooperation amongst Calvinists across denominational lines would anger the Venn family greatly when it was attributed to Henry four years later.

²⁰⁷ J. W. Laycock, *Methodist Heroes in the Great Haworth Round* (Keighley, 1909), p. 276.

²⁰⁸ Laycock, *Methodist Heroes*, p. 276. Richardson said in 1786 that he was not responsible for their fractious relationship in earlier years, and had Wesley preach in the church that April, p. 341.

²⁰⁹ Powley, *The Blessedness of Dying in the Lord: a sermon preached in Haworth church, May 23, 1791* (Leeds, 1791), pp. 15-21.

success, but labouring on right until the end of his slow demise though a painful cancer, and his obituary writer chose his final suffering as the primary focus for the edification of his readers.²¹⁰

Each of the five curates moved on from Venn's tutelage and gave good account of themselves in their respective ministries. They embraced trials like their old employer, but, like Venn in Yelling, discovered that the Huddersfield years were quite exceptional ones which none would experience again. Yorkshire was recognised in the 1760s (and before) as a good place to pursue evangelical ministry. Lord Dartmouth remarked in 1762, "How is that county blessed with faithful labourers," and the following year Newton, who was so appreciate of Venn, was seeking a curacy there.²¹¹ Faithful labourers there were, though, as has been seen, three of the curates who stayed in the county found the same struggles which Venn himself discovered in Yelling. Each of the five preached the same gospel, but the fruits of ministry had much to do with the temperament of people and parson alike, and could not be won by ministerial attentiveness, alone. Equally, the presence of competing religious alternatives was a significant determinant for the outcomes of ministry. The first generation of Evangelicals, who by turns sought to persuade or to encourage gospel endeavour beyond its discipline, handed over parishes to their successors where their message had lost its novelty, and where competing ministries brought alternatives to parishioners.

It is striking that all of the obituaries of Venn's old curates had to focus on their subjects' fortitude and constancy in the face of hardship, rather than exulting in the fruits of their

²¹⁰ *The Evangelical Magazine* (London, 1797), pp. 265-9. Furley's illness and death occupies fully three-quarters of the obituary.

²¹¹ Sidney, *Life of Sir Richard Hill* (London, 1839), p. 185; John Newton, *The Christian Correspondent; or a series of Religious Letters* (Hull, 1790), p. 18. For Fletcher's love of Yorkshire, see Melville Horne (ed), *The Letters of the Rev. John Fletcher* (New York, 1849), p. 233.

labours. Gains were hard-won. If success could be ascribed to Venn's curates, and to Venn as their mentor, it might be found in the models they left, of persevering ministries, which safeguarded the Church as the natural place of evangelical religion. Whilst revival fire would not blaze in their parochial labours, each curate typified what John Venn could so warmly commend to the readers of the father's *Letters*, "more gradual and quiet, but progressive, course" of Anglican renewal, for which Venn would have been credited.²¹²

²¹² Venn, *Letters*, p. xvi. Questions of Venn's influence are explored in Chapter 5, *passim*.

3.4 Heart and Home: Parochial work at Yelling

The success of the Yorkshire ministry is all the more interesting when compared with Venn's tenure at Yelling. Huddersfield was, in the words of John Venn, "the grand scene of his labours in the Church".²¹³ The Yelling incumbency was just over twice as long, but not anything like his previous success. John Venn gave his father's quarter-century there barely two pages in the memoir which prefixed the *Letters*, and grandson Henry did not reckon a visit worth his efforts. Under Venn the congregation, to all appearances, settled into an awakening ministry which might have aroused them, but never fully woke them up. A spiritual equivalent of the Huntingdonshire clay seemed to stick to all that the new rector hoped to achieve. Twelve years passed before Venn could claim one convert who died in the assurance of faith (a poor woman, "the first and indeed only one, of this village, who has died in the triumph of faith, since I came here"), and subsequent letters make no mention of others who followed her (though there may have been living converts).²¹⁴ Venn enjoyed the fruits of ministry in Huddersfield, but Yelling was the testing ground of his own persevering faith. This section explores how Venn went about his ministerial work, tracing his efforts to commend his evangelicalism by practical assistance of his parishioners, and using the rectory to that end. The contention here is that, even more than in Huddersfield, the smaller parish placed considerable demands on Venn's abilities, most likely channelled through work beyond the pulpit, and that success was hard-won, and arguably only achieved by the arrival of a curate at the end of the incumbency.

Yelling was a stark contrast to Huddersfield in every respect, at under 2,000 acres (a small parish, even by the standards of the south of England) and with just two hundred souls.

²¹³ Venn, *Letters*, p. 26.

²¹⁴ Venn MSS, Acc.81/C16/39, Letter to Charles Simeon, 24th June, 1783.

The village was six miles south of Huntingdon and almost the same distance east of St Neots, with Cambridge twelve miles to the east.²¹⁵ It was situated between two key roads, the nearer Old North Road, two miles to the east, and the mail-carrying Great North Road, five miles west of Yelling which superseded it. A handful of larger farm houses, the rectory and the eleventh century church of Holy Cross stood on the High Street, and a scattering of other dwellings accounted for the population of less than two hundred. It was “a small village embedded in the clay, no resident gentlemen, a few farmers and dull agricultural labourers”.²¹⁶ Venn had replaced moors with mire, the bustle of town and populous hinterland with a slow and uneventful parish.

Arriving in August 1771, Venn wrote to Stillingfleet, then curate of Bierley, declaring “What a change, from thousands to a company of a hundred! From a people generally enlightened, and many converted, to one yet sitting in darkness, and ignorant of the first principles of the Gospel! ...A painful change indeed! Yet unavoidable.”²¹⁷ Yelling held few obvious attractions to an activist clergyman, used to crowds flocking to his church. Equally, the challenges of a small parish were in significant respects greater than those of a large one, for Venn and for fellow Evangelicals. The administration of poor relief, settling of neighbour grievances, and the often commanding presence of the landlord, brought particular pressures on clergy in smaller parishes, whereas larger ones meant that there were often more providers of relief and education, removing pressure from the clergy, as well as more parishioners to preach to, who could in turn commend the evangelical message to others.

²¹⁵ William Page, Granville Proby & S. Inskip Ladds (eds), *A History of the County of Huntingdon: Volume 2* (London, 1932), p. 379. Venn, *Annals*, p. 100.

²¹⁶ Venn, *Annals*, p. 97.

²¹⁷ Venn, *Letters*, p. 182. Venn also remarked “My audience is many degrees, in point of education and of condition, below my congregation at Huddersfield”. Venn, *Letters*, p. 188.

Unless he wanted to preach as promiscuously as John Berridge, which, as his ministry continued, he did not, Venn at Yelling was a man with both memories and hopes, but with a drastically reduced sphere of operations.²¹⁸ He directed his energies into his correspondence, visiting friends and preaching for them, and shaping a distinct family piety. Berridge told Thornton in 1781 of his delight in “the gracious behaviour of the whole family...a little household of faith”, and Venn’s domestic life would be a model of evangelical community set before the readers of the 1834 *Letters*.²¹⁹ Venn also invested in his son John’s education, as well as that of some other boys he tutored, and then the Cambridge gownsmen who sought him out, Simeon at their head. The lively piety and sociable religion of this period found in the *Letters* captivate the reader’s attention, and in doing so, maybe deliberately, mask the fact that the days of a full parish church, seekers after truth and making insurmountable demands on Venn’s time, were all but over.

Doubtless, Venn’s beginnings suggested that a spiritual harvest might be forthcoming, should his health allow it. Three weeks after an attentive congregation listened to Venn’s first sermon (on Romans 10.1, as preached twelve years earlier at his Huddersfield installation) he excitedly told Ann Riland of stirrings under his preaching, of “amazement, attention, conviction, tears, and a vast increase of hearers, for a country so desert as this is, where a hundred is more than a thousand in your place of habitation.”²²⁰ Venn explained to James Kershaw that he had committed to preaching the simplest sermons possible, mindful of his farmers and shepherd boys, and that he was doing so to a steadily-increasing congregation.²²¹ Venn was finding an unexpected return of his energies for the work, too, telling Ann Riland that the strength he was praying for four years before he left

²¹⁸ The regularity question is discussed below, pp. 209-220.

²¹⁹ Berridge, *Works*, p. 414.

²²⁰ Venn, *Letters*, p. 186.

²²¹ Venn, *Letters*, pp. 188-9.

Huddersfield had returned to him, unequalled, he claimed, in twenty years of ministry.²²² He had released his curate, the Rev. Isaac Nicholson, as he had health enough to undertake the work alone.²²³ In truth, that may well have been a relief. Whilst Berridge reckoned that Nicholson was popular in the parish (he had been there since 1762), Venn confided to Powley, “poor man, he has no idea of his office, though very civil and good-natured”.²²⁴ Fourteen months into the work, he told Powley that “the church is talked of all over the country, for the largeness of the congregation. I speak not to more than two hundred, sometimes three hundred: there are many of them at a distance of eight or ten miles.”²²⁵ This was clearly a significant convulsion in a quiet corner of the kingdom, one which is otherwise undocumented. Venn was not naïve about the work ahead: “Pray for me, and for my people”, he asked of Powley, just four months later, “this is, I think, the most dark and ignorant of any place I ever was in.”²²⁶ Even though at the end of 1773 Venn could speak of a fourfold increase in his congregation, there is no hint that he ever allowed himself to believe that the successes of early months of his ministry were necessarily the firstfruits of a greater harvest.²²⁷ With the arguable exception of Fletcher’s Madeley (a unique context with its mining industry), and Berridge’s Everton, with its minister’s itinerant preaching which drew in many outsiders, the revival was a phenomenon of larger parishes. Venn settled into his relative obscurity, and kept an active daily routine.²²⁸ Farming kept parishioners preoccupied, and they were likely hard to gather together from their work for

²²² Venn, *Letters*, p. 192.

²²³ Venn had his son John as curate for six months from September 1782, and as his health flagged, employed Maurice Evans from 1791-96.

²²⁴ Berridge, Letter to Lady Huntingdon, 8th June, 1771 in Pibworth, *Letters*, p. 171. Venn MSS, Acc.81/C12/5, Letter to Matthew Powley, 19th February, 1772. Venn told Ann Riland in 1775 that he had buried Nicholson’s wife, who had “became a most earnest, though trembling, seeker of her Lord” in the first year of his Yelling ministry. Venn, *Letters*, p. 225.

²²⁵ Venn, *Letters*, p. 199.

²²⁶ Venn MSS, Acc.81/C12/5, Letter to Matthew Powley, 19th February, 1772.

²²⁷ Venn, *Letters*, pp. 204-5.

²²⁸ Venn, *Letters*, pp. 211-12.

even brief instruction, should Venn have wished. Like his peers, Venn set great value on the training of the young, employing a school teacher with the assistance of Lady Mary Fitzgerald in 1778 in order to lay the foundations of early piety,²²⁹ particularly through catechesis, for which he had written his own exposition of the church's catechism at Huddersfield, and distributed others.²³⁰ Venn and his friends saw in catechising the young in the parish an opportunity for a form of *preparatio evangelica*, after which efforts fruit in gospel preaching might be better expected.²³¹

Moderate Calvinism was an eminently practical religion, in Venn's mind, and he commended to others attention to the poor, delighting to see it in family members and fellow clergy.²³² He told his son John's clerical society, meeting for the first time in Norfolk, that they were "not only appointed to instruct, and preach unto them words whereby they may be saved, but to be at much pains to supply their wants."²³³ Failure to do so, he told Simeon in 1783, would incur "a terrible day of account" for the ungenerous.²³⁴ Venn rejoiced in Riland's generosity and attentiveness to the needy in the same year, and in 1784 he encouraged daughter Eling to give herself to the poor during her stay at Little Dunham.²³⁵ The servant of God was to be instant in doing good, not just in teaching it. This was certainly true for the rector of Yelling.

²²⁹ Instruction of the young, Venn said, "forms a consciousness of good and evil, and prevents like a sovereign medicine, a disease from raging, though it extinguish it not". Venn MSS, Acc.81/C8, Letter to Lady Mary Fitzgerald, 31st January, 1778.

²³⁰ Venn, *Letters*, pp. 51, 47. Venn catechised children in Huddersfield, too. Venn MSS, Acc.81/F13, p. 46. This instruction was sometimes with pecuniary rewards, Venn MSS, Acc.81/F13, p. 53.

²³¹ For Moderate Calvinist catechesis, see Walsh, 'Yorkshire Evangelicals', pp. 259-60. Venn gave Bottomley to Riland to catechise, once he had demonstrated spiritual conviction. Venn MSS, Acc.81/F13, p. 8.

²³² For eighteenth century clerical attitudes towards and the practice of poor relief, see Arthur Russell, *The Clerical Profession* (London, 1980), pp. 169-183.

²³³ Venn, *Letters*, p. 505.

²³⁴ Cambridge, Ridley Hall Archives, Simeon Papers, Henry Venn to Simeon, 6th July, 1783.

²³⁵ Venn, *Letters*, pp. 376, 399.

Venn taught the poor at his first curacy in Barton, and then in his house at West Horsley.²³⁶ The Huddersfield years were ones of intense busyness for Venn, which precluded more letter-writing which might have afforded insights into his parochial work. Ministry to the poor received more attention in the Yelling correspondence, but it is debatable whether this signals a shift in Venn's thinking and praxis. Most of his extant letters were written whilst at Yelling (a little over twice the length of the Huddersfield ministry), with a significantly smaller parish and fewer pressing family responsibilities, and where poor relief could well commend an evangelicalism which seemed underappreciated. Salient comments on poor relief are also often in Venn's closing years, when he was largely out of the pulpit, allowing a greater attentiveness to those in material need – all the more so then, as Yelling was enduring some years of acute hardship which he was tasked to face.

Using their homes was not the exclusive preserve of evangelical clergy. George Herbert had counselled that the clergyman's house and family were to be “a copy and model for his parish”, and to labour diligently “so that his family is a school of religion, and they all account, that to teach the ignorant is the greatest alms”.²³⁷ Samuel and Susannah Wesley ran meetings in their vicarage, and Parson Woodforde regularly had the poor at his kitchen table (the better-off he entertained in his dining room).²³⁸ For the Evangelicals, it was an opportunity to minister their religion in a more personal setting, where they could look for and nurture signs of grace. It was also the sphere in which wives and older daughters might commend the household's religion to those in need. Simeon reckoned “Ministresses, half ministers” were “often the more important and useful half in your husband's parishes”, and they were welcomed at the Cambridge Clerical Club.²³⁹ The second Mrs Venn appears to

²³⁶ Venn, *Letters*, p. 17.

²³⁷ [], *The Clergyman's Instructor; Or, a Collection of Tracts on the Ministerial Duties* (Oxford, 1807), p. 50.

²³⁸ Jacob, *Clerical Profession*, p. 214.

²³⁹ Jacob, *Clerical Profession*, p. 146.

have been of an altogether quieter temperament than Eling, and was possibly less active alongside her husband, but daughter Jane was busily engaged in meeting practical needs (Berridge reckoning her an excellent clergy wife in the making²⁴⁰).

Venn told Jane in 1784 that “a parsonage should be a place of refuge - a house of mercy. The very sight of it should be pleasing to the poor and desolate.”²⁴¹ The only reference we have of people coming to the vicarage in Huddersfield (from daughter Eling) was of individuals in spiritual conflict, seeking Venn’s counsel.²⁴² At Yelling, Venn said that it was normal for twenty and sometimes more from the parish to join the family in the rectory for evening prayers, and the house used for additional meetings on Sundays, which Venn told Stillingfleet in 1775 were highly effective, with parishioners seeking salvation.²⁴³ Sunday evening worship was conducted at Yelling there in the worst winter months, with over fifty parishioners in the kitchen in Venn’s first winter, a significant proportion of the parish, as he noted.²⁴⁴ Crooke and Stillingfleet, Fletcher and many others did likewise. Grimshaw kept the same practice on Sunday evenings, after serving double-duty, though his kitchen services were for the sake of those poor who claimed that their shabby clothes made them too embarrassed to appear at church.²⁴⁵ Jane, unmarried and living at home, was evidently skilled at staying aware of the needs of the parish, and ensuring that the poor kept coming to the rectory.²⁴⁶ With no local doctor available to parishioners, Jane was competent in basic medicine, even treating a serious leg injury of the family servant Ruth in 1795.²⁴⁷ Mr Daw, a physician and friend of Venn even prior to

²⁴⁰ Berridge, *Works*, p. 414.

²⁴¹ Venn, *Letters*, p. 392.

²⁴² Venn, *Annals*, p. 82.

²⁴³ Venn, *Letters*, pp. 212, 452. Venn MSS, Acc.81/C14/6, Letter to James Stillingfleet, 17th February, 1775.

²⁴⁴ Venn, *Annals*, pp. 99-100.

²⁴⁵ Venn, *Life of Grimshaw*, p. 33.

²⁴⁶ Venn, *Letters*, p. 58. Reflecting in 1805 on Venn family life at Yelling, Simeon remarked to her brother of Jane’s “tender love to the poor”, Carus, *Memoirs*, p. 207.

²⁴⁷ Venn, *Annals*, p. 109.

the Yorkshire ministry, spent six weeks at the end of 1775 and the start of the following year serving the poor in the parish with medicine and practical relief.²⁴⁸ Like Wesley, Venn loved to give medical advice.²⁴⁹

There is nothing exceptional about Venn's poor relief. Besides the clerical duty of helping the poor, "charity was part of the social and communal fabric, emphasising the responsibility of the better-off for the less well-off."²⁵⁰ At Yelling, Venn was the only man of education and with connections to the wealth of others, so such assistance to the poor would only be expected. Cadogan had similar priorities in Reading, albeit able to supply more, as a man of means.²⁵¹ Newton drew on a £200 annual fund from John Thornton during his Olney years from which he made gifts to the needy.²⁵² Back in Yorkshire, George Burnett was giving to the poor out of his "ample fortune", as his obituary claimed, probably from a legacy received from his uncle George Conon's estate, also noted by Venn.²⁵³ Venn kept up friendships with two Huddersfield merchants to whom he was deeply grateful for their gifts to the Yelling poor in his later ministry. He thanked John Houghton for the arrival of cloth in 1789,²⁵⁴ and Thomas Atkinson, whose generosity Venn appreciated through the years, which was all the more valued at the close of 1793, when Venn declared that crop failure that year was the worst he had ever known in the parish, and said "I have become a solicitor to the poor."²⁵⁵ Two years later, Venn was buying in mutton and cheese in large quantities, evidently satisfied at his and Jane's

²⁴⁸ Venn, *Letters*, p. 222

²⁴⁹ Stockton, 'Venn Family', p. 49.

²⁵⁰ Jacob, *Lay People*, p.156.

²⁵¹ Richard Cecil, 'Memoirs of the Hon. and Rev. W.B. Cadogan', *The Evangelical Magazine* (London, 1798), 6, pp. 11-13, Smyth, *Simeon*, pp. 225-6.

²⁵² John Newton, *The Life of John Newton / Written by Himself; with Continuation by...R. Cecil...; to Which Are Added the Olney Hymns ...[by J.N. and W. Cowper]* (s.n.: Edinburgh, 1853). p. 102. One assumes that Venn might have had a similar arrangement with Thornton.

²⁵³ *The Evangelical Magazine* (London, 1792), p. 83. Venn MSS, Acc.81/C/14/1, Letter to James Stillingfleet, 4th July, 1775.

²⁵⁴ Venn MSS, Acc.81/C/5/7, Letter to Thomas Atkinson, 19th December, 1789.

²⁵⁵ Venn MSS, Acc.81/C/5/12. Compare C/5/9, 5/11, 5/13.

abilities to make those provisions stretch, and also ensured that the poor had coal as well as clothing.²⁵⁶

If treatments of administering poor relief are largely absent from modern and contemporary biographies of Evangelicals, it is likely that their subjects (and biographers) took this part of their role as a given, and not as something noteworthy. It is inconceivable that Venn and others overlooked the great opportunities for bringing spiritual influence to those so served (Newton's giving won hearts, it was noted²⁵⁷). Venn well knew that charity could be received, but not necessarily the gospel message which motivated it. The distinct challenge Venn faced was to draw his hearers to embrace his convictions, when such a profession could cause real conflict in their households and in the wider parish. It was thus essential that parishioners viewed their incumbent as friend, rather than as troubler of the fabric of local life, and those who believed his message must see him as potential supporter through the vicissitudes of their new-found faith and life.

Venn's disappointment with his parish was at times acute. Exhilarated by a three month autumn tour of Yorkshire in 1780, Venn arrived back in Yelling with a bump. Reflecting on his Christmas Day service, he told his old curate Powley that communicants did not exceed 70 out of a congregation of 120, making him long for a more populous parish, but reckoning that he did not have the bodily strength for a larger work.²⁵⁸ Berridge was also finding the going hard in Everton, confiding in Newton in 1782 his concerns about a decline in the congregation, not least due to the inadequacies of his new curate, Richard Whittingham, and worrying that old converts were going to glory, with few coming to

²⁵⁶ Venn, *Annals*, p. 108.

²⁵⁷ Hindmarsh, *Newton*, p. 205.

²⁵⁸ Venn MSS, Acc.81/C12/9, Letter to Matthew Powley, 23rd December, 1780. Venn acknowledged in the letter that he broke off and returned to writing it, hence the comments about Christmas day, despite its date.

faith after them.²⁵⁹ The following year Venn shared with his nephew Edward the pressure he felt in watching over his flock in the hope of seeing signs of longed-for grace.²⁶⁰ He referred to a book he was working on, on the Parable of the Sower (which never proceeded to publication), suggestive that the vicissitudes of ministerial success were much on his mind. Still, the previous Sunday's full congregation was to Venn "a token, that my teaching has not been altogether without fruit." Referring to two recent strokes, Venn confided to Stillingfleet in the spring of 1784, that "I feel my strength decaying. I can do little. I see little fruit of my preaching, though I prepare by prayer and study, and follow the preaching with prayer."²⁶¹ He struggled on through the decade, confessing bodily and spiritual weakness, but able to tell John Houghton in 1789 that he was encouraged by the size of his congregation, and shared Ruth's estimation that the hearty singing reminded her of Huddersfield.²⁶²

Berridge and Venn were well aware of the advancement of age and its impact on their ministries. "They teach me what to expect", Newton said, after visiting both men in 1791.²⁶³ It might not be overstatement to suggest that both parishes were saved from a serious decline by the ministries of their curates. Ill-health caused Venn to give up active ministry in 1792, the year after the arrival of his curate, Maurice Evans.²⁶⁴ Evans worked alongside Venn until his employer's departure, and spent the next fifteen years in the neighbouring parish of Eltisle before returning to labour in his native Wales. Evans provided the energy and enthusiasm which naturally eclipsed those of his employer. The

²⁵⁹ The full letter is in Pibworth, *Letters*, pp. 320-323. As Berridge's editor these unflattering comments were left out of the published letter. Berridge, *Works*, p. 419. Whittingham evidently improved, he and Berridge becoming close friends, and Berridge was very sad when he eventually moved on at the end of the decade. Berridge, *Works*, p. 429.

²⁶⁰ Venn MSS, Acc.81/C4/18, Letter to Edward Venn, 24th April, 1783.

²⁶¹ Venn MSS, Acc.81/C/14/11, Letter to James Stillingfleet, 20th April, 1784.

²⁶² Venn, *Letters*, p. 468.

²⁶³ Bull, *John Newton*, p. 310.

²⁶⁴ Edward Thomas Vaughan, *Some Account of the Reverend Thomas Robinson, M.A.* (London, 1816), p. 253.

Rev. Thomas Jones of Great Creaton, Northants, for whom Venn preached and a close friend of his compatriot Evans, declared him “a charming soul, a bundle of sweet dispositions.”²⁶⁵ Venn was similarly delighted with Evans, telling his daughter Eling two weeks after his arrival in the parish, “He is modest and humble, and bears an excellent character. The people are much taken with him.”²⁶⁶ Venn mentioned to Atkinson in November 1793 that he had not led worship nor preached for several months, but had full confidence in his curate.²⁶⁷ Another note of Venn’s commendation casts a vital light upon the situation at Yelling, when Jones told Thomas Charles of Bala that on a visit to him “he spoke in raptures of our countryman, Evans, his curate; and since then Evans wrote to me: and from both I learn but there is a very great work going on where the great Venn laboured almost in vain for 20 years.”²⁶⁸

This last detail is highly significant. It might be that the Yelling ministry was actually as disappointing to Venn as he feared it might be at his installation. John Venn reckoned that Evans was successful in awakening those who “had lapsed into indifference”, though without conceding that his father’s two decades in Yelling prior to Evans’s arrival were anything but fruitful.²⁶⁹ Robinson of Leicester appeared to concur with Charles, when he said that Venn “never appeared to gain acceptance from the rude rustics amongst whom he sojourned”.²⁷⁰ It should be remembered that ill-health kept Venn out of his duties during much of Evans’s work, so perhaps it is inevitable that parishioners should gravitate to the

²⁶⁵ John Owen, *Memoir of the Rev. Thomas Jones, late of Creaton, Northamptonshire* (London, 1851), p. 114.

²⁶⁶ Venn, *Letters*, p. 500. Venn was similarly delighted with Evans, leaving him £10 in his will. Venn MSS, Acc.81/T9. In 1805 Simeon told Charles Grant that Evans was “a Boanerges...who labours with great diligence and acceptance.” Cambridge, Ridley Hall Archives, Simeon Papers, Simeon to Charles Grant, n.d. [October 1805].

²⁶⁷ Venn MSS, Acc.81/C5/8, Letter to Thomas Atkinson, 23rd November, 1791. “after that period, [Venn] seldom officiated, even in his own small and retired church.” Venn, *Letters*, p. 57.

²⁶⁸ Owen, *Memoir*, p. 92, fn. Owen was unsure whether the letter was 1792 or 93.

²⁶⁹ Venn, *Letters*, p. 520.

²⁷⁰ Vaughan, *Account*, p. 253.

curate, a man after Venn's own heart in convictions and the pursuit of ministry, a fresh voice in contrast to the one they knew so well, and a man with youth and energy on his side.²⁷¹ Quite probably, parishioners would have known Venn's delight in Evans, which would have been a helpful endorsement of the latter's success there.²⁷² A good measure of popularity was crucial for the preacher, if his message were to be heeded. This Venn secured at Huddersfield.²⁷³ Infirmity at Yelling and perhaps too much familiarity with their rector caused that favour to wane amongst the parishioners, but their affections were kindled towards Evans. That Evans got traction where Venn had struggled is a reminder of the importance of personal influence in the success or otherwise of Moderate Calvinism at a local level.

Preaching Scripture and its doctrines was never enough, as their propagation was wholly dependent upon the power of the minister to draw and hold his hearers, in pulpit no less than in pastoral labours. Venn's generation clearly had success due to the novelty of both their message and the manner in which they preached it. The crowding of Huddersfield church on Venn's arrival to see this London émigré was matched by the bewilderment of Yelling community at the start of his ministry there. The challenge for Venn and others came in how to regulate the novelty and energy of their message in the often frustratingly slow rhythms of parish life and quotidian preoccupations of their parishioners. The evangelical ministry of preaching justification by faith needed its justifiers. Attentive relief of the poor, the opening of their homes, and the encouragement of gatherings in those of others, went a considerable way to commending Moderate Calvinism as a compassionate

²⁷¹ Thomas Jones reported to his friend Thomas Charles in 1827, "we have had the Rev Maurice Evans here lately for a fortnight, and he quite electrified the people with his energetic mode of preaching." Owen, *Memoir*, p. 94, fn.

²⁷² "'Honest Evans", said he, "carries all before him." His family were a little jealous of this unexpected preference; but he rebuked them : "Carry me to hear him," said he; "God honours him and I will honour him. Have you ever studied that text, Brother? (John iii. 30.) 'He must increase, but I must decrease ?' 'A man can receive nothing, except it be given him from heaven.'" Vaughan, *Account*, p. 253.

²⁷³ Venn MSS, Acc.81/F13, p. 19.

and practical faith. Venn's labours via these means gave every reason for his spiritual descendants in the following century to pursue an expansive vision for societal engagement in the cause of the gospel.

Chapter 4: Moderate Calvinism for the Church

4.1 Camaraderie and Conflict in Evangelical Endeavour: the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion

Venn's love of the company of likeminded evangelicals, and his natural aversion to the rancour which sometimes marked their circles, were most clearly seen in his relationship with Lady Selina Hastings and her Connexion.¹ As the progress of the Connexion was characterised by the encouragement of itinerant preaching and an increasingly tight grouping of Calvinists, Venn was becoming more committed to a catholic-spirited evangelicalism in the Established Church. The Connexion was formed in order to promote the revival, particularly out of the Countess's perception that the Church was insufficient for the evangelistic task facing it. In fact, by the end of Venn's career, evangelical clergy were swelling in number, and well-situated in the times of national uncertainty to commend their understanding of the gospel in the Church. Beginning with an assessment of Venn and the Connexion, this chapter explores his loyalties as his career progressed, and demonstrates how he came to embody a conforming ministry, in contrast to the Connexion's objectives, a ministry which, as Chapter 5 demonstrates, Venn commended effectively to the next generation.

¹ For the Countess and her Connexion, see Edwin Welch (ed), *Two Calvinistic Methodist Chapels, 1743-1811: The London Tabernacle and Spa Fields Chapel* (London, 1975); Dorothy Brown, 'Evangelicals and Education in Eighteenth-Century Britain: A Study of Trevecca College, 1768-1792' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1992); Boyd Stanley Schlenther, *Queen of the Methodists* (Durham, 1997); Alan Harding, *The Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion: A Sect in Action in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford, 2003); David Ceri Jones, Boyd Stanley Schlenther & Eryn Mant White, *The Elect Methodists. Calvinistic Methodism in England and Wales, 1735-1811* (Cardiff, 2016). The work of A.C.H. Seymour is still valuable, provided one is alert to some chronological inaccuracies, and an ideologically defensive stance towards the Countess. A.C.H. Seymour, *The Life and Times of Selina, Countess of Huntingdon*, (2 vols, London, 1840).

The attention of historians has been drawn to less naturally self-effacing and irenic men than Venn who were close to the Countess, and the fleeting references made to Venn in the treatments of the Connexion give the impression that he was something of a bit-player. There is no evidence that Venn was ever an official chaplain, nor occupied any role to the Countess beyond that of a trusted friend and willing helper, although her Victorian biographer Seymour claimed that Venn was one of a small number (amongst them, John Wesley) who worked on a plan for examining potential candidates for her college.² The Countess's esteem of Venn and his frequent involvement and positive reception at her preaching centres suggest a relatively significant role, however. Venn was a valued servant of Lady Selina and of her own Moderate Calvinism, and a friend who, after Whitefield's death, was almost alone a constant encourager through their years of association. Meeting Venn for the first time after his arrival at Clapham in 1754, the Countess drew him into her circle.³ Whitefield, her firm favourite, and through whom she became a Calvinist herself, preached for Venn in 1756 (the year when Venn was incapacitated due to illness for eight months), and in the following year. He wrote to the Countess, commending Venn and seeing his potential for their great cause: "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".⁴ The Countess was able to assess his gifts on a preaching tour in the West of England with Whitefield, but, not entirely satisfied with Venn's grasp of the gospel, she wrote a rebuke and an exhortation.⁵ The letter must have smarted, but it seemed timely, and effective, and the Countess took him as one of her own. She held Venn in high regard, and in deep

² Seymour, *Life*, 2, p. 81.

³ Seymour, *Life*, 1, p. 219.

⁴ Seymour, *Life*, 1, p. 225.

⁵ As noted above, p. 47; Seymour, *Life*, 1, p. 225.

affection, and he relished opportunities to minister in her London home and with her preachers across the county.

Eight letters from Venn to the Countess are extant (all copies of originals), two written in 1763, the remainder, between 1767 and 1770.⁶ Most likely a fraction of the original exchanges (given how both were keen letter-writers), the letters give the impression that, although the Countess was the commander of her preachers and others she felt were to do her bidding, her relationship with Venn was one of friendship and mutual encouragement. The Countess was a child of an unhappy marriage, and a widow after an ostensibly happy one of her own. She found scant comfort in her familial relationships, as two children died in childhood, two were hostile to her faith, and a daughter who shared her religion died in her twenties, and so was likely very eager for solace and affirmation in her friendships. In February 1757 Lady Selina wrote a lengthy letter (of thirteen pages) to Venn in the warmest terms, and the Countess seemed to delight in the role of something like an older sister, encouraging Venn in his faith and ministry.⁷ Walter Shirley, the Countess's cousin and later a key figure in her projects, was converted through Venn.⁸ Venn was doubtless flattered and delighted to be her trusted friend. He revelled in her high esteem of his preaching, and felt able to share with her the strains of his own difficulties.⁹ When Lady Huntingdon's daughter died, Venn wrote a letter of solace.¹⁰ When he lost his wife Eling in 1767, it was to the Countess that Venn poured out his heart in agonised grief. Acknowledging her response to his grief ("the very tender sympathy you show for me"), Venn wrote in greater length and depth of feeling about his bereavement to her than to any

⁶ Cheshunt College Archive, Series 1, F1/1390, F1/1391, F1/1400, F1/1407, F1/1411, F1/1428, F1/1481, F1/93.

⁷ Venn MSS, Acc.81/C16/A/1.

⁸ Seymour, *Life*, 2, p. 155n.

⁹ CCA, F1/1391, Letter to the Countess of Huntingdon, 29th August, 1763.

¹⁰ CCA, F1/1390, Letter to the Countess of Huntingdon, 31st May, 1763.

other correspondent in the extant letters.¹¹ They were companions in loss, as well as comrades in labour. The relationship of general and foot-soldier was most likely easy due to Venn knowing his rank and, as a beneficed clergyman, not being in essential need of the Countess's privileges. He was thus spared her more astringent letters. Equally, Venn's natural charm, as well as his experience of dealing with Wesley and others, meant that he was able to handle the Countess's mercurial temperament and at times histrionic behaviour.

Venn gave himself to the Countess's service whenever he could make himself available from the demands of family and of parochial duties. The enjoyment of being part of a far wider parish of sorts, and in an extended family of preachers and hearers, must have been a great tonic to one who experienced stress and bodily fatigue in his normal life's round. In 1758 Venn was preaching in her London home and conducting prayer meetings there against threat of French invasion.¹² The following year he travelled with the Countess to Brighton and to Everton, where he preached for Berridge.¹³ The 1760s was a decade of regular preaching tours, most of which were in the south, where the Countess undertook to build chapels as preaching-stations for her favoured chaplains, initially in fashionable towns and cities, where she deemed gospel witness to be inadequate. Venn preached for the Countess in Brighton in 1760, and travelled back to Yorkshire with her.¹⁴ In 1763 they were both in Tunbridge Wells.¹⁵ He shared ministry with Romaine and Whitefield at the opening of the Chapel in Bath in 1765.¹⁶ Away from his Huddersfield parish due to a chest infection for six months the next year, Venn made himself useful on the Countess's

¹¹ CCA, F1/1407, Letter to the Countess of Huntingdon, Bath, 15th October, 1767.

¹² Seymour, *Life*, 1, pp. 228, 396-7.

¹³ Seymour, *Life*, 1, pp. 399-400.

¹⁴ Seymour, *Life*, 1, p. 281.

¹⁵ Seymour, *Life*, 1, pp. 314, 319, 2.124.

¹⁶ Seymour, *Life*, 1, p. 477, fn.

business in Brighton with Fletcher, at Bath with Romaine, and in Bristol and at Trevecca with Howell Harris.¹⁷ April and May saw Venn at Bath once more, and he returned in December, sharing his encouragements about his ministry with the Countess.¹⁸

Venn spent extended time at Lady Selina's home in the capital in 1769, ministering alongside the Wesleys and Romaine.¹⁹ He claimed to have preached there twenty times in the spring alongside Romaine and Whitefield, before closing out the decade with Sunday preaching in Bath, sharing the pulpit with Shirley, for whose preaching Venn had the highest esteem, and enjoying the company of the Countess (she "does me good every time I see her").²⁰ He sang her praises to his friends, declaring to Ann Riland in the October of 1769 that "not a day, not an hour passes, without someone or other reaping the benefit of her alms, her gracious counsel, her fervent love and cordial prayers."²¹ In another letter a couple of weeks later, Venn told James Kershaw that "in Lady Huntingdon I see a star of the first magnitude in the firmament of the church", and that her life was to him, as it should be to others, an exemplar, "that we may be active and eminent in the life of grace".²² In the August of 1770 Venn was in Bristol preaching with friends, many of whom rallied to the Countess's call as the Calvinist-Arminian conflict reached crisis. From there they travelled to Trevecca for numerous public services marking the college's second anniversary, where Venn's ministry was appreciated.²³ He also saw the Countess on her northern travels. They were together (with Romaine and Whitefield) at Wesley's conference in Leeds in 1762, and five years later the Countess stayed in Huddersfield,

¹⁷ Bull, 153; Venn, *Letters*, pp. 122, 123, 168.

¹⁸ Acc.81/C13/1, Letter to Ann Riland, 2nd April, 1767; CCA, F1/1400, Letter to the Countess of Huntingdon, Bath, 12th May 1767; CCA, F1/1411, Letter to the Countess of Huntingdon, Bath, 18th December, 1767.

¹⁹ Seymour, *Life*, 2, p. 197, Venn, *Letters*, p. 153.

²⁰ Venn, *Letters*, p. 158. Venn MSS, Acc.81/C13/2, Letter to Matthew Powley, 4th November, 1769.

²¹ Venn MSS, Acc.81/C13/10, Letter to Ann Riland, 28th October, 1769.

²² Venn, *Letters*, pp. 159, 160.

²³ Seymour, *Life*, 2, pp. 107-8.

during which time Venn was involved in an evangelistic enterprise in Kippax (the home of the Countess's nieces) with Fletcher, Whitefield and others.²⁴ Venn said that he wished to accompany her to Scotland, the final destination of her trip, but claimed regret that poor health made it impossible.²⁵ Balancing the demands of parish work and his duties as a father to now motherless children, Venn was still looking for ways to serve the Countess, he suggested, at Tunbridge Wells or Brighton.²⁶ In November of that year he preached at her Bath chapel to commemorate the death of Whitefield.²⁷ As he began his Yelling ministry, Venn assured the Countess that “when I can be of any use in furthering your plans for the salvation of souls and the glory of Christ, I am your obedient servant to command.”²⁸

Association with Lady Huntingdon brought succour along with their service to her preachers, and her patronage could be a safety-net for those who struggled to find a living.²⁹ Although the Connexion had no main conferences, nor formal ways of encouraging co-operation between its chaplains and preachers, it did offer them friendships, the prestige of association with its noble leaders, and the personal fillip of addressing eager hearers rather than their usual (and sometimes truculent) parishioners. There was also access to patrons and to their material advantages. It was through her friendship network that Venn was offered the position of chaplain to the Earl of Buchan in December, 1767.³⁰ Likewise, it was at Bath in November, 1770, when convalescing from illness that Venn was offered Yelling by Lord Chief Baron Smythe, Chancellor of the Exchequer.³¹ Her Ladyship's salons and chapels were likely the first environs where many

²⁴ Seymour, *Life*, 1, pp. 281, 291.

²⁵ Venn MSS, Acc.81/F1/1400, Letter to the Countess of Huntingdon, 12th May, 1767.

²⁶ CCA, F1/93, Letter to the Countess of Huntingdon, 20th May, 1770.

²⁷ Venn, *A Token*.

²⁸ Ryle, *Leaders*, p. 280.

²⁹ Schlenter, *Queen*, p. 72, n.31.

³⁰ CCA, F1/1411, Letter to the Countess of Huntingdon, 18th December, 1767.

³¹ Venn received a personal legacy from Lady Smythe in her will, as did his children. Seymour, *Life*, 2, p. 36.

within the evangelical cause learned the power of networks and the potential of the wealthy for its promulgation.

The St Edmund's Hall affair at Oxford in 1768 was a crisis which the Countess was determined to utilise to the full as she busied herself towards establishing the college at Trevecca.³² The university authorities had little interest in the exact doctrinal convictions of the students regarding the nature of grace and salvation, but every concern that "methodistical behaviour" did not plague the university, as these undergraduates engaged in preaching and proselytising. They were, in the words of their chief prosecutor, Higson, "enthusiasts who talked of inspiration, regeneration and drawing nigh to God".³³ The Calvinistic *The Gospel Magazine* of the same year named Venn as one of the "reputed Methodists" with whom the students kept company.³⁴ Others took the opportunity to present this as a trial of Calvinism within the Church. Richard Hill was quick to go to print with his views about the furore, insisting that the issue was essentially that of the true reformed faith of their Church ("the Church of England is certainly calvinistical"³⁵), although not all of the six undergraduates who suffered expulsion shared Hill's religion.³⁶ Dr Nowell, Principal of St Edmund Hall, rejected this claim in a pamphlet of own, but the affair became an opportunity for Calvinists (chiefly, the Hills, Whitefield and Toplady) to challenge publicly the undergraduates' superiors, and to set forth their own vision of orthodox doctrine and piety. Upon their expulsions, two of the students, Matthews and

³² For narrative and assessment of the trial and expulsions, see Danker, *Wesley*, pp.187-210; Reynolds, *Evangelicals*, pp. 58-76.

³³ Seymour, *Life*, 1, p. 423; Harding, *Countess*, p. 241.

³⁴ Harding, *Countess*, p. 242.

³⁵ Richard Hill, *Pietas Oxoniensis* (London, 1768), p. 82.

³⁶ Rack's contention that all of the undergraduates were Calvinists is inaccurate (Rack, *Enthusiast*, pp. 105, 453). Most likely, James Matthews, an associate of John Fletcher, was an Arminian, and it is not possible to situate Joseph Shipman's theology.

Shipman, were taken into the care and employ of the Countess, though not even she could circumvent the apparent lack of gifting of the first and the early death of the second.³⁷

Whilst he was committed to his Calvinism, Venn was not a party man, with a duty to be loyal to fellow-Calvinists. His Connexion involvement and witness to the furore of Arminian-Calvinist invective, latent in the 1750s but peaking in the early 1770s, must have troubled the sensitive Venn greatly, and perhaps heightened his disdain for partisanship. Her admirers praised the Countess's indefatigable zeal and her sincere generosity, but her instinct to dictate and control (perhaps natural to a member of the nobility) was such that few felt able to stand up to her, Berridge being a notable exception.³⁸ More troubling, her personal rivalry with and then loathing of John Wesley and Arminians made it at times hard for even Venn and her closest admirers to discern whose kingdom was uppermost in her designs. Wesley and the Countess shared an autocratic temperament, though neither showing great awareness of it in their own lives, and strove to command the ranks of their preachers. Due to the absence of Whitefield in America and then his death there in 1770, the Countess became the effective leader of the Calvinistic Methodists, and the general in its battles.

To her credit, the Countess had worked to keep unity between the different wings of the evangelical movement in the previous twenty five years, but following the publication of the explicitly anti-Calvinist 1770 Minutes her mood darkened considerably.³⁹ She banned Wesley from preaching in her chapels (the previous year he had preached at the college's first anniversary).⁴⁰ Wesley, never crediting that the Countess might have principled

³⁷ Danker, *Wesley*, pp. 201-2. Matthews went on to have a productive career in publishing evangelical literature.

³⁸ Berridge spoke to the Countess of her "scorpion letters". John Berridge to Lady Huntingdon, 26th December, 1767, in Pibworth, *Letters*, p. 125. For his aversion to flattery, see Berridge, *Works*, p. 447.

³⁹ Harding, *Countess*, p. 233, and fn.

⁴⁰ Schlenter, *Queen*, pp. 104-117.

objections to his views, read her reaction as a wounded pride, springing from a desire to be in control, as he explained to Joseph Benson, master at Trevecca.⁴¹ Wesley's two cherished friends both resigned, Benson in 1770 and Fletcher the following year, after being informed by the Countess that all who sided with Wesley must leave the college.⁴² Fletcher well knew that his dismissal was due to his Arminianism, and told Charles Wesley in May 1771 that only a Calvinist successor would suit the college's and the Countess's temperament.⁴³ He was, of course, right. With these key expulsions, the Countess narrowed her vision of bringing an exclusively Calvinistic ministry to the nation through her Connexion, seeking to expunge all traces of Wesleyan opinions from her students.⁴⁴

The relative collegiality across the Arminian-Calvinistic divide of the early Connexion years was deeply formative for Venn, and his ongoing relationship with Fletcher showed his belief that the revival was not a solely Calvinistic enterprise. Whatever his views on the Countess's treatment of the Vicar of Madeley, Venn kept them to himself. Fletcher is first mentioned in the *Letters* in 1766 as a treasured friend through gospel endeavour under the banner of the Countess, and Venn always wrote of his godly example with great enthusiasm (Berridge was another Calvinist who esteemed and worked with Fletcher). The friendship survived the turmoil of the sixties and seventies. In 1777 Venn told Stillingfleet that he had enjoyed six weeks with "the extraordinary and very excellent Mr. Fletcher", marvelling at his sanctity of life, pressing him closely on doctrinal questions, and then asserting that he "desired his love, by me, to all his Calvinistic brethren; and begged their

⁴¹ Tyerman, *Oxford Methodists*, p. 74.

⁴² Tyerman, *Oxford Methodists*, p. 89.

⁴³ John Fletcher to Charles Wesley, 26th May, 1771. Peter Forsaith (ed), 'Unexampled Labours'. *Letters of the Revd John Fletcher to leaders in the Evangelical Revival* (Peterborough, 2008), pp. 275-6.

⁴⁴ Schlenther, *Queen*, pp. 76, 106.

pardon for the asperity with which he had written.”⁴⁵ Two years later, Venn could include Fletcher in his otherwise Calvinist pantheon of living and departed saints.⁴⁶ Venn declared him in 1783 to be “a genius, and a man of fire - all on the stretch to do good - not to lose a day, not an hour.”⁴⁷ Talking to Cambridge undergraduates in 1795, Venn launched into anecdotes about the saintliness of Wesley’s nominated successor, and remarked, “a luminary, did I say? Nay, a sun.”⁴⁸ The daggers drawn in the early 1770s were, to Venn’s mind, best put away.

Along with a number of his clerical friends, including Newton and Berridge, Venn significantly decreased his Connexion-related activities in the 1770s, and busied himself in his parish. Had he and others not done so, the future of Moderate Calvinism not only in the Connexion but also in the Established Church might well have been very different. If they had felt any scepticism about the Connexion, their sentiments must have felt justified after 1782, with the Countess’s withdrawal of the London Spa Fields Chapel and of the entire Connexion from the Church of England, effectively making it a dissenting sect. Lady Selina believed – or claimed to believe - that her chapels would be a bulwark against the heterodoxy which was appearing in Dissent at this time.⁴⁹ To a certain extent they were; but their status beyond the Church of England understandably saw them lumped with all Dissenters, with the ignominy which that brought. Inevitably, the Countess had to see to the ordinations of the ministers, for her most ardent supporters a triumphant endgame, but the final breach to many others.⁵⁰ This signalled the departure of other clergy, including Romaine, Jesse, Berridge and Townsend. Venn, along with Romaine, had already quietly

⁴⁵ Venn MSS, Acc.81/C14/8, Letter to James Stillingfleet, 31st October, 1777.

⁴⁶ Venn, *Letters*, p. 277.

⁴⁷ Venn, *Life*, p. 376, cf. p. 450. In a letter of 1787 to Lady Mary Fitzgerald Venn is fulsome in his praise of Fletcher as an exemplar of Christian integrity and ministerial zeal. Venn, *Letters*, pp. 582-4.

⁴⁸ Venn MSS, Acc.81/F32, p. 3.

⁴⁹ Schleiter, *Queen*, p. 103.

⁵⁰ Harding, *Countess*, pp. 333-4.

closed his formal association with the Countess's work. Nor was her memory always welcome, when the Evangelicals wrote accounts of their mighty men. When Cadogan of Reading wrote his biography of Romaine in 1796, he omitted all references to Romaine's friendship with the Countess and ministry on her behalf (an omission, however, which Haweis corrected when he wrote his biography the following year).⁵¹

For almost all Church of England Moderate Calvinists who saw the Church with its Formularies as their rightful home, secession was unconscionable. The Connexion might have been a powerful phalanx to help secure gains in the Church, but its endorsement of irregularity and then its secession turned it into a disruptive and partisan element.

Itinerancy, the be-all for the Countess, had spurred the founding of Trevecca College, and was strongly affirmed in Article XIX of the 1790 Plan of Association.⁵² Itinerancy was the apogee of entrepreneurial evangelicalism, but was not always what either preachers or congregations were happy with. A decade after Venn's death the Connexion might command the attention, at Haweis' estimate, of 100,000 adherents, but its chapels' reliance upon itinerants laid a continual strain on the system.⁵³ Moreover, a conforming spirit in the 1790s due to national and overseas threats made Evangelicals all the keener to identify with the Church. With evangelicalism gaining more ground in the Church, Venn's decision to pursue an almost exclusively regular ministry in order to preserve the gospel in the parish appeared to have been vindicated. For two decades the association had given him friendships, relief from the burdens of parish ministry and insight into patronage and gospel propagation, but ended in Venn deciding for regularity and believing that in his

⁵¹ William Bromley Cadogan, *The Life of the Rev. William Romaine, M.A.* (T. Bensley: London, 1796).

⁵² CCA, D3/2, "Plan of an Association for Uniting and Perpetuating the Connection of the Right Honourable the Countess Dowager of Huntingdon".

⁵³ Thomas Haweis, *An Impartial and Succinct History of the Revival and Progress of the Church of Christ* (3 vols, London, 1800), 2, p. 418.

small parochial world he might best pursue and model the work of the evangelical incumbent.

4.2 Polemics and Apologetics in Church and Nation

Venn's concern to build a robust evangelical constituency in his church as a bulwark against heterodoxy is evident from the days of the Clapham curacy. Towards the close of his Huddersfield incumbency, he became aware of the publication of a work by the Dissenting Leeds Minister Joseph Priestley, which presented a need and an opportunity for Venn to demonstrate where his loyalties lay, and to commend his religion, itself hardly a mainstream Anglican one, as being the true faith of the Church of England. Priestley's short book, *A Free Address to Protestant Dissenters on the Subject of the Lord's Supper*, probed at the true meaning of the Supper, and asked questions about those who were to receive it.⁵⁴ Priestley sought to recast the nature of the Supper, the status of reformation doctrine, as well as the nature of the Christian church and the shape of orthodoxy itself, not least in the work of Christ on the Cross. Horrified at its contents, Venn replied the next year with his *A Free and full examination of the Rev. Dr. Priestley's Free Address on the Lord's Supper*.⁵⁵ Engaging with the details of Priestley's work, the *Examination* was a robust defence of Protestant orthodoxy, leaning on the reformed exposition of the Articles and Scripture. This in turn was met a few months later by Priestley's response, *Considerations on Differences of Opinion between Christians, with a letter to the Rev. Henry Venn, in answer to his Full and Free Examination*.⁵⁶ The totality of this exchange, though not lengthy or even receiving much attention from other religious commentators at the time, casts much-needed light on political, intellectual and theological tensions of the

⁵⁴ Joseph Priestley, *A Free Address to Protestant Dissenters on the Subject of the Lord's Supper* (London, 1768).

⁵⁵ Henry Venn, *A Free and Full Examination of the Rev. Dr. Priestley's Free Address on the Lord's Supper* (London, 1769).

⁵⁶ Joseph Priestley, *Considerations on Differences of Opinion between Christians, with a letter to the Rev. Henry Venn, in answer to his Full and Free Examination* (London, 1769).

period, as well as on Venn's convictions and aspirations.⁵⁷

The battle for the souls of Church and nation meant that the primary concern for Venn and Moderate Calvinists was to position themselves primarily as churchmen loyal to her teaching. In 1770, preaching on the occasion of Whitefield's death, Venn presented the revival and its principal doctrines as retrieval: "his doctrine was the doctrine of the Reformers, of the Apostles, and of Christ."⁵⁸ And the doctrine of their Church, too. Grimshaw had answered his tormentor Gilbert White in this manner in 1749 (and pushed back with the same reasoning against the incursions of Wesley's men in his parish a decade later). The efforts of Moderate Calvinists to this end would intensify towards the end of the 1700s in the face of hostility towards evangelical religion and suspicion about its place in national life at a time of anxiety about revolution.

Much of the sharpness of the debate in which Priestley and Venn engaged concerned the nature of scripture revelation, the place of reason in its interpretation and the status of the reformation tradition as its hermeneutic. Reason was, of course, Priestley's watchword, and the exchange between the two men reads much like a rerun of the Calvinist-Latitudinarian antagonism of the seventeenth century.⁵⁹ If the debates of Puritan souls were concerned with "how can I be sure of my salvation?", Latitudinarian inheritors later in the eighteenth century were asking "who or what is this God in the Bible, and what even is 'salvation'?"

⁵⁷ One monthly catalogue merely acknowledged it as the exchange of two men whose views were already known, each of whom would regard the other as a "free enquirer" and a "fanatic", respectively. R. Griffiths (ed), *The Monthly Review, Volume XLI* (London, 1769), p. 225.

⁵⁸ Venn, *A Token*, p. 12.

⁵⁹ For an astute introduction to later seventeenth-century Latitudinarianism, and the recalibration of Calvinist convictions, see Field, "*Rigide Calvinisme*". The first usage of the word *Latitude* – entirely pejorative – goes back to 1650s Cambridge. Spurr, "Latitudinarianism", p. 63.

Born to Presbyterian parents in Birstall, near Leeds, who ensured that he was word-perfect in the Shorter Catechism by the age of four, Priestley was raised in a house which was a gathering-place for Dissenters of all stripes.⁶⁰ He would almost certainly have heard John Wesley preach in his childhood, and he claimed he was “much confirmed as I well could be in the principles of Calvinism, all the books that came in my way having that tendency.”⁶¹ Priestley would oppose his religious heritage with vigour. He and Venn were men of vastly differing backgrounds and outlooks. The one, a university man, grave yet popular amongst his hearers, fixed in his beliefs and unmoved by theological and intellectual trends away from it, and committed to the national church; the other, an auto-didact, given to a light-hearted temperament though not an easy builder of congregational loyalty, in every sense a radical and free thinker, an acerbic writer, a convinced Radical Dissenter and an opponent of the Church of England in its beliefs and social power. Whilst neither was exactly mainstream in Church and Dissent, the controversy they entered into encapsulates the different futures of Hanoverian Protestantism, either in keeping with old verities, or in marching towards an entire recasting of the faith, if faith, at all.

Priestley was in some senses an obvious target for evangelical polemic, as he was gathering a reputation as a *bête noir*, a vociferous critic of Protestant orthodoxy and the Church of England and a proponent of political radicalism. His views were so wide of Venn’s convictions and, to Venn’s mind, so obviously both wrong and mischievous – and likely to gather support – that engagement with them was an act of valour, and one which might well redound to serving the evangelical cause. Priestley

⁶⁰ The standard biographical works on Priestley are Isabel Rivers & David L. Wykes (eds), *Joseph Priestley: Scientist, Philosopher and Theologian* (Oxford, 2008); Robert E. Schofield, *The Enlightenment of Joseph Priestley: A Study of His Life and Work from 1733 to 1773* (Pennsylvania, 1997), and Robert E. Schofield, *The Enlightened Joseph Priestley: A Study of His Life and Work from 1773 to 1804* (Pennsylvania, 2004).

⁶¹ Rivers & Wykes (eds), *Priestley*, p. 23.

had long taken leave of such circles, of course, and Venn's essay presented itself as the foil against which he could show the inadequacies of the Church and its creed.

The aim of the *Address* is two-fold. Firstly, Priestley wants his readers to divest the Lord's Supper of its (to his mind) mystical and superstitious accretions, and to see it as a simple declaration of Christian profession. Seven times in the work Priestley decries "superstition" as the besetting problem of Christians' attitudes towards the Supper.⁶² Once freed from vestiges of Popery and Paganism, Christians of all Protestant denominations will be at liberty to enjoy the Supper together. Worshippers will be unconstrained by theological debates over the Supper's alleged import, and not hampered by the moral questions of fitness to participate, whilst still maintaining "real, vital religion".⁶³ Once they can do that, they will branch out in a spirit of free inquiry on other matters of the faith, which is Priestley's second priority. The Lord's Supper is a subject for discussion, as "it affords a striking instance of the very great stress which the generality of serious Christians may lay upon an opinion, or a practice, which has clearly no manner of foundation in the gospel itself, but is most evidently a corruption of it."⁶⁴ The *Address* was a significant declaration of his increasing departure from Protestant orthodoxy, one on which its author was confident he could lead others with him, and towards the freedom of inquiry denied in the legacy of the Reformers.⁶⁵

Priestley concedes that he is not advancing much that is new on the subject of the Supper, nor anything substantially different from Bishop Hoadly's treatment of it.⁶⁶ In

⁶² Joseph Priestley, *A Free Address to Protestant Dissenters on the Subject of the Lord's Supper* (London, 1768), pp. iii, 27, 31, 53, 54, 55, 60.

⁶³ Priestley, *Address*, p. 59.

⁶⁴ Priestley, *Address*, p. xi.

⁶⁵ Priestley, *Address*, p. iv.

⁶⁶ Joseph Priestley, *Address*, p. xiii. Benjamin Hoadly, *A Plain Account of the nature and end of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper* (London, 1735).

fact, the *Address* reads much like a précis of Hoadly's work, who expounded a simple memorialism, eschewed the developments of the ancient church's Supper practice and theology, and taught that the Supper was a meeting-place of all who identified as Christians. Essentially, the Supper is the act in which one declares oneself a Christian, which means recognising Christ as a "teacher sent from God."⁶⁷ To refrain from it due to a sense of insufficient sanctity is superstition, and any examination of oneself is the duty of the individual, not of the minister or congregation.⁶⁸ The result of all the Dissenting tradition of scrutinising would-be Supper participants beforehand, Priestley maintained, was often large congregations, but with few communicants.⁶⁹ (Certainly, high attendance but low reception was a feature of Church communion services in many parts of the country.⁷⁰)

The *Address* aims at the twin targets of Church and mainstream Dissent, for which the subject of the Lord's Supper was the most convenient vehicle. Priestley urges Dissenters to pursue free inquiry more seriously, "having subscribed to no articles of faith."⁷¹ Such a casual assertion was designed to appeal to the free-thinking wing of Dissent, whilst ignoring those for whom subscription was part of vital faith. Priestley wanted to garner support for an altogether new project: his vision was of faith as inquiry, Christ as example, and free-thought as opposed to state-controlled religion. By the time of the *Address*, his political and moral philosophy was likewise following the same liberalising tendencies and in the same year Priestley published a considerably longer work (225 pages), *An Essay on the first principles of*

⁶⁷ Priestley, *Address*, pp. 30, 32.

⁶⁸ Priestley, *Address*, p. 31; Walsh, Haydon, & Taylor (eds), *The Church of England*, p. 95.

⁶⁹ Priestley, *Address*, p. 55. Additionally, Priestley despaired at the reformed doctrine of the spiritual presence of Christ in the Supper, leading him to declare that "an undue regard for this institution is the greatest stronghold of superstition now remaining among Dissenters." p. 60.

⁷⁰ Jacob, *Lay People*, pp. 58-60.

⁷¹ Priestley, *Address*, p. 12.

Government; and on the nature of political, civil and religious liberty.⁷² Priestley argued that “all these systems of uniformity, in political or religious institutions, are the highest injustice to posterity.”⁷³ This sentiment was Lockean in style, but pushed to a far greater measure. The same year saw the publication of *Considerations on Church Authority*, in which Priestley boldly challenged the clergy “that read and think at all, whether they believe one third of the thirty-nine articles.”⁷⁴ Priestley accurately diagnosed the unbelief apparent under the guise of a Latitudinarian spirit in the Church, but could not foresee the coming fight to safeguard the church as a theological and social bastion. The Feathers Tavern Petition failed in 1772, and in the ensuing decade preferment was enjoyed by the solidly orthodox, whilst those of dubious beliefs were overlooked, and some left for Radical Dissent.⁷⁵ The subsequent Revolutions of America and France only served to deepen the convictions of many that the Church of England must continue as the stronghold of religious and social conservatism. Back in 1769, then, Venn must have been aware that in taking aim at Priestley he was raising the alarm to fellow Churchmen about the danger of heterodoxy in their own church, and demonstrating his consonance with orthodoxy.

Venn’s engagement with Priestley shows how high Venn felt the stakes were in the latter’s assault on the core tenets of Christianity and the reformation interpretation of them. Almost half of Venn’s *A Free and full Examination* treats Priestley’s preface, in which he shows the implications of the *Address*, as they relate to questions of truth, authority, and the nature of salvation itself, and thus demonstrates why he is writing his response. Venn underlines that this is not a conflict of Church and Dissent, but of

⁷² Joseph Priestley, *An Essay on the First Principles of Government; and on the Nature of Political, Civil and Religious Liberty* (Dublin, 1768).

⁷³ Priestley, *Essay*, p. 204.

⁷⁴ Joseph Priestley, *Considerations on Church Authority* (London, 1769).

⁷⁵ Walsh, Haydon, & Taylor (eds), *The Church of England*, p. 230.

error and truth.⁷⁶ In criticising the Reformers, Venn declares that Priestley is signalling hostility to the authority of the Scriptures to which they submitted: “the only purpose they laboured to accomplish was to restore the Scriptures to the throne.”⁷⁷ In essence, he is remonstrating for one form of biblicism against another: Priestley’s is arguably more redolent of the Radical Reformation’s handling of the Bible, devoid of material hermeneutical control, whereas Venn’s own is glossed by the magisterial tradition.

The methods and presuppositions of the “free enquirers” are in marked contrast to the Reformers, Venn maintains, both in their aversion to Scriptural authority, and also in their treatment of the main topics of revelation - sin, the Law of God, and salvation, in favour of humanity’s innate goodness and love of virtue.⁷⁸ “Free enquirers keep out of sight what revelation makes capital; and by urging an earth-born feeble system of their own, in due time, for a barefaced revolt from the authority of all revealed religion.”⁷⁹ Without Scripture, Venn says that free enquiry is nothing more than an “attempt to establish a religion in which there is no atonement, no redeemer, no mediator.”⁸⁰ The situation Priestley finds himself in, Venn later claims, is close to that of a “Mahometan”, who says that the gospel has been adulterated by its followers.⁸¹ The heart of Venn’s objection to Priestley is that he is an advocate for free inquiry at the expense of recognising the supreme authority of Scripture.⁸² Venn brands him a Deist in no uncertain terms, guilty of denying the fallenness of the creature, and the

⁷⁶ Venn, *Examination*, p. 2.

⁷⁷ Venn, *Examination*, p. 5.

⁷⁸ Venn, *Examination*, p. 11.

⁷⁹ Venn, *Examination*, p. 12.

⁸⁰ Venn, *Examination*, p. 14.

⁸¹ Venn, *Examination*, p. 39.

⁸² “No sooner are these things denied, than the Scripture not only ceases to bear the impress of inspiration, but even sinks below the writings of a man of sense.” Venn, *Examination*, p. 22.

deity, miracles and work of Christ.⁸³ Venn is unconvinced by Priestley's claims in his *Discourse* to want a mild and conciliatory approach to Deists; rather, Priestley's approach to dialogue brands him amongst the very "infidels" he professes to be challenging, and no life acceptable to God can be achieved without a wholehearted acceptance of the teaching of Christ: "the doctrines produce the practice".⁸⁴

With the framework for all of Venn's objections drawn, the *Strictures* are completed in the details of the work. Venn maintains that it is not enough for Priestley to recite the words of institution, as they lack any meaning apart from the New Testament's own explanation of them.⁸⁵ Besides, Priestley is entirely silent on what Christ achieved on the cross. In his own words of institution, Jesus is either giving a new covenant through his blood, or lying, and thus Christians who fail to discern such a covenant sacrifice are in the same situation as the Corinthians.⁸⁶ Priestley may say that eating and drinking together as Christians is a fit emblem of their joy, but was a conceit, says, Venn, covering the real meaning of the supper. If the Supper commemorates a substitutionary sacrifice which is needed by sinners, then far from it being taken by all professing Christians (Priestley's position), those in attendance must examine themselves to determine whether they are trusting in the work of Christ.⁸⁷ At a time when his Church was still influenced by the Calvinistic receptionist position, Venn signals here that the right recipients are solafideists.

Venn states that the contention between the two men concerns the truth of revelation and the reality of salvation, in contradistinction to rational inquiry and the

⁸³ Venn, *Examination*, p. 25, cf. pp. 20, 33. For a comparable attack on Deists in the same year, see Venn, *Condemned Prisoner*, pp. 26-7.

⁸⁴ Venn, *Examination*, p. 33.

⁸⁵ Venn, *Examination*, pp. 42-3.

⁸⁶ Venn, *Examination*, p. 49.

⁸⁷ Venn, *Examination*, p. 54, cf. p. 64.

appeasement of a troubled conscience. The majesty and mercy of God for Venn are revealed and submitted to through the revelation of Scripture, whereas Priestley's alternative is useless, and designed to overthrow it - "a scheme which, like the marble-hearted Pharisee in the parable, looks upon the wounded, yet leaves it to others to pour oil and wine into their wounds."⁸⁸ At this point Venn makes much of the claim that it is the gospel which transforms the worst of sinners and bring peace of conscience, something which no amount of rational deduction can ever achieve.⁸⁹ Here Venn feels on his strongest ground, challenging Priestley to publish "what method you take to promote a spirit of love and of power and of a sound mind in those who are constantly perplexed with a sense of their miserable deficiencies and manifold corruptions."⁹⁰ Venn's is a ministry of definite doctrines for practical heart-religion.

At the fore in the exchange was the issue of subscription to the Church's Articles, a subject which would be publicly debated and personally agonised over by numerous church men throughout the 1700s. Samuel Clarke, himself an Arian, continued the protests of William Chillingworth from the previous century as he claimed that subscription was valid and desirable only in as far as the individual was persuaded of the scriptural basis of the Articles, and that they accorded with one's conscience.⁹¹ Another Arian, William Whiston, for whom Clarke's views were too conservative, found that many had no truck with such proposals, and in 1710 he lost his professorship at Cambridge for his heterodoxy. Hoadly wrestled with the question of

⁸⁸ Venn, *Examination*, p. 76.

⁸⁹ Venn, *Examination*, p. 79-80.

⁹⁰ Venn, *Examination*, p. 86. Compare Venn's accusation that Priestley's system, resting on the goodness of mankind, has nothing to offer the troubled soul. When trouble comes "it excites murmurings and often impious accusations against God." p. 81. And again, "You would leave us with no more foundation for faith to rest on, than there is for a solid body in the vacant air." p. 73.

⁹¹ Samuel Clarke, *The Scripture Doctrine of the Trinity* (London, 1712).

how much anyone could and should be able to assent to all of the Articles, and urged that “every man be allowed to think, speak, and write, freely; and then the errors will combat one another, and leave truth unhurt.”⁹²

Dissenters were not perceived to be an acute problem to the Church at the time of the Priestley-Venn exchange. Their numbers had not significantly increased, and the uneasy compromise of occasional conformity – grumbled at in church and chapel – was a comprehension of sorts in national civic life. Half a century before, the Jacobite threat meant that Dissenters needed careful handling and wooing, as far as was possible. After the manner of John Tillotson and Edward Stillingfleet, some, including Hoadly, had courted Dissent and even reunion. Hoadly was one voice arguing for a relaxing of subscription to the Articles and of the sacramental test.⁹³ Arguments around subscription continued through the century, either as a way of unifying Protestantism, or, as was the case with Benjamin Blackburne in 1766, as offering comprehension to those whose theological convictions could not be accommodated within the strictures of the Articles.⁹⁴ Blackburne’s clamour was silenced by the defeat of the Feathers Tavern Petition, and after that Dissent would have to continue knowing and keeping its place.

Priestley’s response to Venn was swift, that year producing *Considerations on Differences of Opinion between Christians, with a letter to the Rev. Henry Venn, in answer to his Full and Free Examination*.⁹⁵ Quite possibly the speed of reply had

⁹² Cited in Walsh, Haydon & Taylor (eds), *The Church of England*, p. 215.

⁹³ Benjamin Hoadly, *The Reasonableness of Conformity to the Church of England Represented to the Dissenting Ministers* (London, 1703).

⁹⁴ Francis Blackburne, *The Confessional, or, a full and free inquiry into the right, utility, and success of establishing confessions of faith and doctrine in Protestant Churches* (London, 1766). The first edition was published anonymously.

⁹⁵ Joseph Priestley, *Considerations on Differences of Opinion between Christians, with a letter to the Rev. Henry Venn, in answer to his Full and Free Examination* (London, 1769).

little to do with any sense of his being unduly troubled by the *Strictures* (Priestley could write at amazing pace).⁹⁶ Beyond that, though, he could well have felt that he had the better of the argument, and was keen to use Venn's charges in order to develop and emphasise his original points. In all likelihood, Priestley must have long accepted that his views would be firmly rebuffed by Churchmen, and evangelical ones, especially. He had the respect of those who mattered to him, especially in the world of science, and as the year 1768 was filled with the publication of five books and essays spanning all of his religious, educational, political and scientific interests, the Vicar of Huddersfield's reactions would be been of small account to him. Priestley remarked to a friend that "the first of my controversial treatises was written here in reply to some angry remarks on my Discourse on the Lord's Supper, by Mr. Venn, a clergyman in the neighbourhood."⁹⁷ Priestley was rarely personally discomfited by those who challenged his beliefs, whilst he often resorted to the controversialist's trope of being surprised by the emotion he claimed to detect from his interlocutor, as here, as if to underline his own alleged reasonableness.

The *Considerations* were written, Priestley declared, to address the "gross misrepresentations" of Venn and others, and contain three sections of differing length.⁹⁸ The first treats Venn's Calvinism, and makes objections to his understanding of Priestley's work. The second section explores the wider questions Venn raises about Priestley's religion, and the final one sets forth his estimate of true religion. Priestley did not want to engage with the details of Venn's questions about his faith, claiming that Venn had overlooked the full intent of some of his statements, and

⁹⁶ Priestley "entered each controversy with a cheerful conviction that he was right." Schofield, *Enlightenment*, p. 181.

⁹⁷ John Towill Rutt, *Life and Correspondence of Joseph Priestley, LL.D., F.R.S., &c.* (London, 1831), p. 73.

⁹⁸ Priestley, *Considerations*, p. 1.

avoiding some of his more pointed objections, for instance, on the subject of Christ's vicarious death, Priestley said, "I took it for granted that my readers knew what Christ has done and suffered"⁹⁹. Of note here is Priestley's targeting of Venn's Calvinism, unnamed but obviously in focus, with its portrayal of God through the doctrines of original sin, reprobation, election and final perseverance. His objections were typical, and pointedly made, objecting to the amiability of a predestining God, querying that such doctrines lead anyone to a humble life, and insisting that "the Antinomian is the only consistent absolute Predestinarian" (a standard critique of Evangelicals, including from High Churchmen).¹⁰⁰ Moderate Calvinists, not least Venn, in their disavowal of a stronger Calvinism, betray their ill-ease with their own system.¹⁰¹ Professors should content themselves with a close reading of Scripture, and avoid controversial books (as Priestley says is his own habit). Even following the Reformers is culpable, and maybe suggest a party spirit.¹⁰² Again, here is Priestley's claim that Venn was not in fact a biblicist, but an apologist for a tradition, through which he receives his interpretation, rather than interrogating the text directly himself.

Venn declined Priestley's lengthy challenge to reply on specific points, and no record is found in the Venn MSS of further engagement.¹⁰³ Venn's own personal and ministerial circumstances most likely precluded it, as the grieving widower was dealing with consumption and with the exhausting demands of constant preaching, and the following year decided that his Huddersfield ministry was over. In addition to

⁹⁹ Priestley, *Considerations*, p. 43.

¹⁰⁰ Priestley, *Considerations*, p. 22.

¹⁰¹ Priestley, *Considerations*, p. 23. Field, "Rigide Calvinisme", pp. 26-9, 148-54. The Anglican Divine George Bull struggled to make sense of how solafideism did not lead to antinomianism, and in 1675 posited that justification was in fact the reward of faith; works must precede justification, and any notion that works were performed out of gratitude - Venn's own position, and the majority conviction of the Reformed since Dort - he dismissed as antinomian. See Allison, *Moralism*, pp. 162-3.

¹⁰² Priestley, *Considerations*, p. 29.

¹⁰³ Priestley notes this absence of reply, Rutt, *Life*, p. 73.

his own situation, Venn likely believed that no riposte was necessary, as the exchange had been adequate to display Priestley's views in their truest colours, from which he clearly had no intention to back down. Although Priestley's lengthiest religious work was still being worked up for publication, the eight hundred page *Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion*, he was teaching its contents to his Leeds congregation, and at times reeling from the odium which his ministry attracted.¹⁰⁴ The following summer Priestley confided to his closest friend, the Rev. Theophilus Lindsey, "I hope I have quite done with controversy."¹⁰⁵

Controversy, however, was not done with Priestley. The following year he published an expressly anti-Calvinistic tract, to which was appended the trial notes of a Staffordshire Unitarian, Thomas Elwall, who had been arraigned in 1726 on blasphemy charges and subsequently acquitted.¹⁰⁶ Although initially published anonymously, his doubly-bold move showed exactly Priestley's development, as increasingly fierce in his hostility to Calvinism, and also candid in his insistence that rationalists, however daring, should have equal part in national life, political and religious. The riots which later erupted during Priestley's Birmingham ministry, with crowds attacking and looting his house in 1791, showed that the national mood was decidedly conservative when faced with the challenges of a creed and a radical political outlook which seemed to threaten the fabric of a society looking anxiously to the convulsions across the Channel in France.

¹⁰⁴ Joseph Priestley, *Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion* (London, 1772-4).

¹⁰⁵ Rutt, *Life*, p. 117.

¹⁰⁶ Joseph Priestley, *An appeal to the serious and candid professors of Christianity* (Leeds, 1770). Five thousand copies were sold in the months after publication, and thirty thousand by 1787. Priestley claimed to have written it in order to challenge the increase of Methodism in Leeds. Rutt, *Life*, p. 74.

Dissenters were increasingly aware of two divergent futures at the time of the Priestley-Venn exchange. Encouraged by the revival in the Church of England, evangelical Dissent was reminded of the viability of a Calvinistic creed in winning new converts and establishing an activist piety freed from Puritan introspection. Its congregations were being likewise often served by men who had been unable to train for Anglican ministry. This was particularly true of Venn's ministry, with an estimated twenty-two men presenting themselves for Independent ministry during his Huddersfield incumbency after the Church was closed to them.¹⁰⁷

The other route for Dissenters was towards increasingly radical inquiry, and for some the terminus of Unitarianism. Many of the Academies in mid-century had adopted Arian and even Socinian convictions, and turned their students in the same direction.¹⁰⁸ Once ministering in their own congregations, though, not a few heterodox pastors discovered the inveterate habit of Independency to form new congregations, turning their backs on the new minister and establishing churches with undershepherds who adhered to a more palatable creed.¹⁰⁹ Some even returned to the Church, a fact noticed by Theophilus Lindsey.¹¹⁰ Whilst Unitarianism would grow in the British Isles, one major bulwark against it came in the establishing of Academies in later-century, many of them non-denominational, which taught Moderate Calvinism.¹¹¹ One, the Newport Pagnell Evangelical Institution (1783), was financed

¹⁰⁷ Kenneth Hylson-Smith, *Evangelicals*, p. 47. For the impact of Dissenters in the Huddersfield region converted through Venn's ministry, see James G. Miall, *Congregationalism in Yorkshire* (London, 1868) pp. 150, 232.

¹⁰⁸ Michael R. Watts, *The Dissenters: from the Reformation to the French Revolution* (2 vols, Oxford, 1998), 1, pp. 465-7.

¹⁰⁹ Watts, *Dissenters*, 1, pp. 467-9.

¹¹⁰ Wykes & Rivers (eds), *Priestley*, p. 171, fn. Seven years before, Lindsey had seceded from the Church and founded a Unitarian congregation in London.

¹¹¹ Deryck W. Lovegrove, *Established Church, Sectarian People: Itinerancy and the transformation of English Dissent, 1780-1830* (Cambridge, 1988) pp. 68-73.

by Venn's patron John Thornton to the sum of £200p.a.¹¹² Such initiatives would be the forerunners of the age of shared evangelical endeavour, in which Dissent would strive for a recognition alongside the Established Church. In the Church itself, Venn's Moderate Calvinism came to the fore in the same period as a challenge to the Rationalists. Endorsed by its profile in sectors of the revival, it so closely resembled the faith of the Articles, the source of "the unrepealed standards of our national faith", as Toplady declared in 1769, that its utility demanded recognition, albeit grudgingly in some quarters.¹¹³ These were the Articles which were now being discussed in the nation and preached by Evangelicals, as Venn had done in Huddersfield.¹¹⁴ In a way which Venn could not have foreseen, his taking up arms against Priestley exemplified the fight of theological and even social conservatism against a potentially destabilising radicalism. Unrecognised at the time, this was one small contribution towards showing that Moderate Calvinists were willing servants of the political as well as the religious life of the country.¹¹⁵

¹¹² Lovegrove, *Established Church*, p. 64.

¹¹³ Cited in B.W. Young, *Religion and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century England: Theological Debate from Locke to Burke* (Oxford, 1998), p. 77.

¹¹⁴ Walsh, Haydon & Taylor (eds), *The Church of England*, p. 230.

¹¹⁵ Compare the assertion that "Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism would also temporarily replace religious liberalism as the main sources of Anglican apologetic following the reaction which developed in devout circles in the wake of the French Revolution." Young, *Religion and Enlightenment*, p. 79.

4.3 Respecting the Parish

Along with nearly every other Moderate Calvinist member of the clergy, Venn was a convinced churchman. Whilst they had numerous scruples over the nature of the true church, the impositions of hostile bishops, the taking of the sacrament by the unregenerate and the burial liturgy, they persevered in office out of the belief that the Established Church contained the gospel deposit, and that their incumbencies provided every opportunity to conduct their ministry amongst parishioners who needed it.¹¹⁶ Venn's two pastoral charges brought significant and different challenges as he strove to promulgate the gospel. Firstly, at Huddersfield there was the presence of Wesleyans with their perfectionism and separatist impulse to deal with. Then in Yelling, with numerous preaching opportunities beyond the bounds of the modest parish, there was the question of irregular ministry to be addressed. Venn's success in the first most likely points to his gifts for tact and acumen, and led to his safeguarding his Yorkshire ministry against Methodist incursion. The difficult decisions he made over irregularity in Huntingdonshire set a course for others who looked to Venn the leader, and helped to build a confident, convictional evangelicalism in the Church, though one in which tensions would struggle for resolution.

Venn's predecessor Daubuz recorded the presence of Methodists in his Huddersfield parish at the 1743 visitation, and their first itinerants were most likely from Birstall in the Spenn Valley, where Methodism was particularly active.¹¹⁷ The labours of the Rev. Benjamin Ingham and the stonemason John Nelson in Birstall gave the movement a high profile locally, and when Wesley visited there in May 1742 he commented that "the whole

¹¹⁶ For a summary of the tensions relating to church loyalty, see Carter, *Evangelicals*, pp. 8-12.

¹¹⁷ Huddersfield was in the Birstall circuit until 1760. Birstall in the 1740s was "the centre of Methodist activity in the county". James Gordon Terry, 'The Causes and Effects of Divisions within Methodism in Bradford, 1796-1857' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Huddersfield, 1999), p. 55. Archbishop Herring's 1743 Returns for Bradford recorded attendance at Dissenting meetings at figures which were double the national average, as well as the growing and contentious presence of Methodism. Terry, 'Divisions', pp. 56-57.

town wore a new face” due to Nelson’s preaching.¹¹⁸ Much of the region had been thoroughly infiltrated by Methodists long before Venn arrived; that their numbers did not increase in Huddersfield during Venn’s incumbency suggests that he got the measure of Wesley, and of his own parish.

Two years before Venn’s installation John Wesley rode to Huddersfield.¹¹⁹ And, as one grows accustomed to hearing from Wesley, the people were wild, the opposition was real, and the appetites of the locals to devour him as sharp as anywhere else he visited. It would be tempting to dismiss such comments as the colourful exaggeration of the preacher - Wesley had a knack for meeting people ready to eat him up, which of course greatly served his narrative - but hungry, ragged and often rough they certainly were.¹²⁰ A memory of the hazards he had faced, as well as the subsequent progress of his preachers in the parish, might well have given Wesley a certain proprietorial attitude towards evangelical work there. Nonetheless, significant Yorkshire friends of Venn came to the conclusion that partnership with Wesley and his followers was simply too problematic. Henry Crooke of Leeds was preaching strongly against Wesley’s men in 1755.¹²¹ William Grimshaw of Haworth, Wesley’s greatest Methodist general in the North, had been greatly troubled by the perfectionism of Wesley and many of his followers, and was exercised about lay presidency at the Lord’s Table and the licencing of preaching houses, all of which he was sure were bound to increase, unless checked. In a fiery letter to Charles, dated 31st March, 1760, he shared his dismay at the decision to licence preachers and preaching houses, declaring that “Dissenters the Methodists will all shortly be; it cannot, I am fully satisfied, be prevented.” With this conviction Grimshaw said, “I disclaim all

¹¹⁸ W. Reginald Ward & Richard P. Heitzenrater (eds), *The Works of John Wesley*, 19, p. 266, fn.

¹¹⁹ John Wesley, *The Journals of the Rev. John Wesley* (4 vols, London, 1903), 2, p. 386, entry for 9th May, 1757. His experiences were the same two years later. Wesley, *Journals*, 2, p. 436.

¹²⁰ Wesley, *Journals*, 3, p. 69.

¹²¹ Danker, *Wesley*, p. 144.

further or future connection with the Methodists.”¹²² He would live and die an unequivocal servant of the Church of England. Beginning his new ministry just over fifteen miles south of Haworth, Venn would have felt the weight of this decision.

Wesley was well aware that these high-profile objectors as well as the ever-shifting tectonics of gospel endeavour needed great care on his part. Although he had dispensed wisdom to Venn as he began evangelical ministry (Venn had been a conspicuous clerical presence in the Bristol Conference of 1752), Wesley needed to move circumspectly with the new vicar of Huddersfield in discussions about Methodist incursions. Venn was well-connected to other Evangelicals, many of them fellow Moderate Calvinists, and disagreement with him might bring more opposition against Wesley and the cause. This vast parish, situated between the Methodist centres of Birstall and Haworth, with those at Leeds and Bradford close by and on the developing trade axis west-east, could be a significant jewel in the Methodist crown. The arrival of an energetic Evangelical, in contrast to the previous incumbent, and also a Moderate Calvinist, now made that aspiration now less likely.

For his part, Venn knew that it was quite possible to go the gospel way without Wesley’s blessing. Their friendship was breached by Venn’s assumption of Calvinist beliefs several years before, and Venn was one of a number of clergy who felt a debt of gratitude to Wesley, but no obligation to repay it on the grandee’s own terms. Whitefield, Madan and Haweis each in turn loosened their ties with Wesley, as did Berridge. Grimshaw wrote to the Wesleys in the early 1760s, warning about the damaging local effects of perfectionist doctrine, and pleading for a renewed emphasis on scriptural holiness.¹²³ Nor did Venn discover more reasons to be hopeful about the cause: writing to a friend a letter dated 18th

¹²² Laycock, *Methodist Heroes*, p. 210.

¹²³ Laycock, *Methodist Heroes*, p. 204.

March, 1763, Venn noted that Whitefield visited en route to Scotland. “The account he gives of the delusion, visions and prophecies amongst Mr Wesley’s people in London is indeed quite deplorable.”¹²⁴ The same issue turned other Evangelicals against Wesley, to his dismay. Newton’s relationship with Wesley had effectively ceased by the mid-1760s, and in the same period Thomas Adam was exchanging increasingly fraught (and fruitless) letters with Wesley.¹²⁵

Walker of Truro worried that his cherished protégé Burnett and his new employer Venn would have to handle the presence of Methodism in Huddersfield very carefully, and that an engagement with Wesley over his preachers was inevitable. “It will be a nice matter neither to quarrel nor join with them. They are in our parts hot, and must be treated with much forbearance”, Walker confided to Adam of Wintringham.¹²⁶ A strict conformist, Walker had pursued correspondence with both Wesleys on the subject of lay preachers since 1755. Charles was the fraught go-between between his brother and Walker, instinctively loyal to John, but holding all of the latter’s concern about them (he told the Countess in 1752 that he feared God’s work might be destroyed by lay preachers¹²⁷). Two years before Walker had tried to encourage Wesley to allow evangelical clergy to lead the work of the Societies in Cornwall, but to no avail.¹²⁸ By this point he had little trust in the man. Where he had failed, however, Venn was distinctly successful in his new living.

Venn and Wesley’s first Yorkshire meeting was in Bradford on the 15th July, 1761.

Writing of it, Wesley claimed that Methodist preachers arrived in Huddersfield “several years before”, and that their work was established “carrying their lives in their hands and

¹²⁴ Venn, *Annals*, p. 106.

¹²⁵ For Newton, see Hindmarsh, *Newton*, p. 120. For Adam, see Danker, *Wesley*, pp. 159-60.

¹²⁶ Davies, *Cornish Evangelicals*, p. 183.

¹²⁷ For the issue of lay preaching, and Walker’s expressions of concern, see Danker, *Wesley*, pp. 139-47.

¹²⁸ Telford (ed), *Letters*, pp. 221-6; Davies, *Cornish Evangelicals*, p. 124.

with great difficulty”.¹²⁹ He conceded the positive presence of Venn in the parish, whose ministry Wesley’s people attended, then asserting that Methodist preaching there was “to supply what they do not find in his preaching”, and claimed that their ministry was needed to serve those awakened under it.¹³⁰ After all, Wesley reasoned, it was begun before Venn’s arrival, so why should it not continue? One can speculate on what it was “they did not find” in Venn’s preaching; the obvious conjecture is perfectionism, an area where antipathy to Methodists was most strong in the early 1760s, especially from an array of Moderate Calvinists. When the conversation was resumed, Wesley claimed happiness on each side, stating that preachers would limit themselves to a monthly visit to their societies, and Wesley was evidently relieved at this solution.¹³¹ Such was the momentum of the revival, and the popularity of Venn, Wesley must have felt that there was little need – or hope – for his men to try and prioritise work there. Huddersfield Methodists had most likely either been fully absorbed into Venn’s parochial ministry, or had travelled beyond the parish to meet with others of like-mind.

There are no extant letters about these matters from Venn, nor references about them made to others. Besides this being a period of exceptional busyness, in which his letters were far fewer than after the move to Yelling, Venn might well have been reluctant to tangle further with or share his views on such a powerful public figure as Wesley, even amongst trusted friends. Besides, parish ministry was an avowed success, and so it was unlikely that Venn needed to pay overmuch attention to the issues. Wesley sensed that the balance of power was against him, and shared his pique at Venn in a letter dated the 22nd June, 1763, defending his ministry (including against exaggerated slurs about perfectionism, from

¹²⁹ Telford (ed), *Letters*, 4, p. 160.

¹³⁰ Wesley, *Works*, 4, p. 204

¹³¹ Telford, *Letters*, 4, p. 161. “I am come to a full explanation with that good man Mr. V——. Lord, if I must dispute, let it be with the children of the devil! Let me be at peace with thy children!” Diary entry for 20th July 1761. Ward & Heitzenrater (eds), *Works*, 21, p. 336.

Burnett), and his personal integrity in dealing with Venn to date. Wesley quoted a passage of a letter in which Venn expressed anger at unnamed preachers venturing into the parish, and offered to suspend his preachers from Huddersfield for a year, though this ultimately did not close the distance between the two.¹³²

Wesley's and Venn's uncomfortable relationship was typical of a large number of others Wesley tried to navigate with Evangelicals. A representation of a dozen of them at the 1764 Conference in Bristol asked his preachers to refrain from visiting parishes served by awakened clergy.¹³³ This Wesley could not promise, and Venn's parish was visited by itinerants, allegedly without Wesley's knowledge, and eliciting Riland's house to house visiting to dissuade the people from attending them.¹³⁴ Small wonder that Wesley's efforts in the same year to promote evangelical union (of good will and camaraderie, rather than of doctrine) met with embarrassing indifference.¹³⁵ Fletcher confided to Charles that his brother's support of lay preachers and the purchasing of buildings for them had raised the ire of the very clergy he now wanted to gather, such that, as he said, "Je ne crois pas que plusieurs d'entre le Clergé consentent à une union".¹³⁶ It would appear that Wesley had not sufficiently appreciated the hostility towards him for his parochial incursions, perfectionism and anti-Calvinism.

Wesley preached for Venn in Huddersfield in July the following year, Wesley noting that "the church was pretty well filled, considering the very short warning", possibly hinting that Venn took some persuading to accommodate Wesley, or maybe this was a reality for Saturday morning preaching.¹³⁷ The following August Wesley preached midweek to a

¹³² Telford, *Letters*, 4, p. 215.

¹³³ John Pawson, *An affectionate address to the members of the Methodist Societies* (1795), p. 11. Danker, *Wesley*, pp. 152-3.

¹³⁴ Pawson, *Affectionate Address*, p. 11.

¹³⁵ For the text of the letter, Telford (ed), *Letters*, 4, pp. 235-9.

¹³⁶ Letter dated 22nd August, 1764. Forsaith (ed), *'Unexamined Labours'*, p. 196.

¹³⁷ John Emory, *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley* (7 vols, New York, 1840), 4, p. 185.

“numerous congregation”.¹³⁸ The recollection of one of Venn’s elderly parishioners, if it is reliable, casts a different light on the later visits, as he reported to Henry junior in 1824 that the relationship between Venn and Wesley had broken down with the result that the latter was no longer welcome in the pulpit, and on a visit to the town preached on the steps of the church to the congregation leaving the service.¹³⁹ Clearly, someone was not remembering – or telling – the whole truth.

The Drummond Returns of 1764 suggest that Venn was holding Methodism at bay in the parish, with “a few Methodists” who had no meeting house.¹⁴⁰ Of course, clergy used the returns to their ends as far as possible, either smoothing over problems or accentuating them, according to their preference. The elderly Edward Rishton, irascible incumbent of neighbouring Almondbury, noted that Methodists were “pretty numerous in the remoter parts of this parish...a vagrant sect”. Hostile to Methodists, Rishton would inevitably find them beyond his church, and report the problem they were.¹⁴¹ Other local returns highlight the challenges faced by clergy. Ten miles distant, Bradford held astonishing numbers of Dissenters and Methodists, fully 497 of the 1811 families living in the part of the parish immediately served by the parochial church.¹⁴² The same size as Huddersfield, with a little over 1500 families, Halifax held an even split of Methodists and Dissenters, totalling one third of its parishioners.¹⁴³ Venn and fellow evangelical clergy tried as best they could to keep parishioners in their pews, away from the influences of Methodist itinerants and their meetings, concerned about emotionalism, perfectionism and anti-clericalism. That he held the command of the parish and worked a truce of sorts with Wesley was a credit to Venn’s

¹³⁸ Emory, *Works*, 4, p. 217.

¹³⁹ Venn MSS, Acc.81/F13. No reference in *Journals* corroborates this claim.

¹⁴⁰ Annesley & Hoskin, *Returns Vol. II*, p. 55.

¹⁴¹ Annesley & Hoskin, *Returns, Vol. I*, p. 15.

¹⁴² Annesley & Hoskin, *Returns, Vol. I*, p. 76.

¹⁴³ Annesley & Hoskin, *Returns, Vol. I*, p. 2.

diplomacy and leadership skills. Venn learned early in his career the ability to appropriate the language and spirituality intelligible to lay Methodism whilst safeguarding what to him was its rightful place in the life of the Church.

The challenge facing evangelical clergy was how to maintain church order whilst not curtailing the progress of vital religion. This, and not doctrine, would ultimately be the break between Methodists and Evangelicals.¹⁴⁴ Venn had dealt with the issue at close quarters in Huddersfield. How he would promote the gospel without weakening the church's discipline was the question of the Yelling ministry.

Central to the issue was the question of regular-irregular parochial ministry.¹⁴⁵ At Huddersfield Venn was responsible for a vast and populous parish, and out and out irregularity was neither expedient nor even desirable, given the abundant opportunities his situation provided, and their demands upon him. The stark change of scene in his move to Yelling refocused the regularity question. Was there actually enough work to do for the conscientious rector within the bounds of a small parish of agricultural labours? And did the gospel not constrain its heralds to take its message far and wide, even to the door of neighbouring clerical *dumb dogs* who were failing their parishioners? When explored alongside the ministry of his friend Berridge in Everton, Venn in Yelling presents a study in the scruples and strategies of likeminded men.¹⁴⁶ Whilst both were convinced of the

¹⁴⁴ Smyth, *Simeon*, p. 255.

¹⁴⁵ For the irregularity question in the first decades of Evangelical activity, see Andrew Atherstone, *Evangelical Mission and Anglican Church Order: Charles Simeon Reconsidered* (London, 2009), pp. 11-18; Hindmarsh, *Newton*, pp. 205-217; Mark A. Smith, 'Forging Britain's Gospel era', *Christian History and Biography* lxxxi (2004), pp. 30-33; Smyth, *Simeon*, pp. 250-312. A summary of the issues and attitudes amongst Evangelicals is found in C. G. Brown, 'Itinerancy and Loyalty: A Study in Eighteenth Century Evangelicalism', in *Journal of Religious History* (June 1971), pp. 232-245, esp. 237.

¹⁴⁶ For Berridge, see J. S. Reynolds, "Berridge, John (1717-1793)", in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online ed., Lawrence Goldman (ed), Oxford, 2004.

need to serve expediency, they ultimately answered the irregularity question in opposite ways.

Berridge and Venn represented two Moderate Calvinist streams in the Church of England. Berridge paid scant regard to its forms, canons and even, to aspects of its doctrine, whilst professing indifference and sometimes doubt about its future, seeing the Church as convenient for gospel ministry, but nothing more.¹⁴⁷ Venn did not share that view (at least, he never expressed it), and worked for continuity of evangelical life in the Church. Berridge styled himself “an itinerant servant of Jesus Christ” on his epitaph, but Venn feared that such behaviour from her servants would lead to the death of the Church. By contrast, as much as he felt able to, Venn strove for canonical obedience, anxious to safeguard the deposit of her faith and ministry. He had seen his Huddersfield work devastated by an unfit successor, his loyal parishioners opting for Dissent, and many of them later filling the pews of Methodist Chapels at the end of the century. All of this gave Venn extra incentive to keep his new flock secure under his settled ministry.

The differing paths Venn and Berridge took came out of much overlapping ministerial experience and a deep understanding of one another. They were friends from Cambridge days and one-time fellows of their respective colleges. Both professed evangelical conversion some years into their ministries, and had shared in gospel endeavour in the Countess's Connexion for over a decade before they became neighbours ten miles apart. After just a few months in Yelling Venn wrote to Stillingfleet, commending Berridge who had preached at the Wednesday meeting.¹⁴⁸ Berridge suffered from frequent bouts of asthma, and had turned from his Arminianism to Calvinist beliefs three years previous

¹⁴⁷ Pibworth, *Letters*, pp. 335-6.

¹⁴⁸ Venn, *Letters*, p. 191.

following prolonged illness.¹⁴⁹ Venn found him climbing out of a bout of severe ill-health, and told Stillingfleet, “summer differs not more than winter than this dead man from what he was ten years ago”, but he was “a true Calvinist; not hot in doctrine, not wise above what is written, but practical and experimental.”¹⁵⁰

Venn had found a true ally, and was glad to have him, healthy or otherwise, ministering monthly in his own pulpit.¹⁵¹ In 1773 Berridge was returning the favour, and the pair shared friendship and ministry, later adding the young Charles Simeon to their weekly supper dates.¹⁵² In terms of personality and ministry style, whilst each showed playful and highly emotional traits, Venn was the scion of order, tact and care, the paterfamilias whose role would develop in his Huntingdonshire parish to be an encourager of undergraduates and fellow members of the clergy, as well as parish minister. By contrast, Berridge was without the constraints of family life, and without many other fetters on his eccentricities and anti-authoritarian impulse. He positively revelled in a caustic and dismissive humour, and wore as badges of honour the reproaches of enemies and the expressed concerns of well-wishers. Frequently incautious, rebellious and disposed to a radical generosity in using his own funds to serve the propagation of the gospel, he was the most promiscuous irregular of Venn’s Moderate Calvinist friends. Beveridge’s letters fizz with hostility towards those clergy who sought regularity and security, and made their ministries normative for others. For all of Berridge’s humility and self-deprecating humour, he managed to find fault with almost everything: bishops, regular clergy, the Church’s catechism, curates, marriage, married curates, even rousing Venn on occasion to private

¹⁴⁹ Berridge, *Works*, pp. 14-15.

¹⁵⁰ Venn, *Letters*, p. 91.

¹⁵¹ Venn, *Letters*, p. 206.

¹⁵² Venn, *Letters*, p. 206. Berridge, *Works*, p. 15; A.W. Brown, *Recollections of the Conversation parties of the Rev. Charles Simeon* (London, 1863), p. 201.

fury at his *sententiae*.¹⁵³ This temperament put Berridge out of sorts with his Church, and his idiosyncratic ministry – respecer of none save those he believed were obedient to Christ alone – further alienated him from its majority.

Berridge was crossing parish boundaries to preach within a few months of his installation in 1757 and conversion at the age of forty, enraging the local squire and his bishop, and causing Berridge to think of himself as “a stigmatized pilgrim”.¹⁵⁴ Burning the sermons of his unregenerate days, and, too busy anyway to write fresh ones in his new undertakings, Berridge preached *ex tempore*, pouring emotion into pitched appeals for salvation.¹⁵⁵ His new converts from the parish and beyond were gathered to the vicarage for instruction, Berridge giving no care for being labelled a Methodist.¹⁵⁶ Scenes of extraordinary fervour accompanied the preacher, in crowded houses and field gatherings of over a thousand hearers, with fainting, ecstatic laughter and inevitable, sometimes violent, opposition throughout the area and right up to Grantchester, a mile from Cambridge, to the acute embarrassment and anger of the Fellows of Clare College, patrons of his living.¹⁵⁷

Word soon reached the Countess of Huntingdon, and Romaine and Madan were dispatched, Venn, also, on their return commending Berridge to her Ladyship, who promptly brought him into her ranks of preachers.¹⁵⁸ Although Berridge suffered exhaustion and depression after several months of these exertions, the course of his life’s ministry was set. Ten years later he wrote to the Countess with an obvious relish for the

¹⁵³ Venn MSS, Acc.81/C13/32, Letter to Mrs. Ann Riland, 11th September, 1771. For typical censures of clergy and Church, see Berridge, *Works*, pp. 250, 425.

¹⁵⁴ J. Sutcliff, ‘An Interview with the Late Mr. Berridge’, *Evangelical Magazine* (1794), pp. 73-6; Letter to Rowland Hill, 31st October, 1770, *Congregational Magazine* (1841), p. 601. Berridge was delivered from further harassment by the intervention of Pitt’s nephew, Thomas. Berridge, *Works*, p. 75.

¹⁵⁵ Berridge, *Works*, pp. 45-49 (an account taken from John Wesley’s Journal) is typical of Berridge’s ministry.

¹⁵⁶ John Walsh, letter dated 25th August, 1758, in *Arminian Magazine* (1780), p. 105.

¹⁵⁷ Berridge, *Works*, p. 391.

¹⁵⁸ Seymour, *Life*, 1, pp. 399-400.

course he had chosen, including the reproaches he had suffered in it: “whipped severely for fighting out of my proper regiment, and for rambling out of the bounds of my rambles”.¹⁵⁹

Almost immediately after his conversion Berridge invested his time, energies and money into preaching wherever he found opportunity, encouraging others to do the same, a work which stretched across four counties by the time of Venn’s early Yelling ministry.¹⁶⁰

Farmers’ barns were “threshing floors for Jesus”, or even “cathedrals”, and his preaching stations were “shops”, with Berridge their “riding pedlar”.¹⁶¹ Newton used similarly commercial language in describing his efforts to engage auditors, and the two men were typical of an age in which all things were being commodified, the gospel included.¹⁶²

The justification for irregularity was as straightforward to Berridge as it was to Wesley, Whitefield and others: souls needed saving. The parson stood between the souls of the people and their eternal destruction, and must do all in his power to snatch them from it.

Just as with John Wesley, it was no concern to Berridge whether they were of his parish or not, and where true ministers were lacking, itinerancy was all the more pressing.¹⁶³

Furthermore, he claimed that if the Church did not preach the gospel, then others would steal away parishioners to Dissent, whichever parish they lived in.¹⁶⁴ For Berridge, the service of the gospel trumped that of the Church, and thus demanded irregularity, crossing parochial boundaries in obedience to the great commandment to preach the good news to every creature. In claiming the priority of working for the salvation of all in all places, he was of one mind with Whitefield and Wesley, who had worked through their convictions

¹⁵⁹ Letter to Lady Huntingdon, 26th December, 1767. Berridge, *Works*, p. 502.

¹⁶⁰ Letter to John Thornton, 10th August, 1774, in Pibworth, *Letters*, p. 230.

¹⁶¹ Berridge, *Works*, pp. 367, 394, 455.

¹⁶² Hindmarsh, *Newton*, pp. 193-4.

¹⁶³ “In plain terms, wherever I see one or a thousand men running into hell ... I will stop them if I can: as a minister of Christ, I will beseech them in His name to turn back and be reconciled to God. Were I to do otherwise, were I to let any soul drop into the pit whom I might have saved from everlasting burnings, I am not satisfied God would accept my plea, ‘Lord, he was not of my parish’”. John Wesley to ‘John Smith’, Dublin, 22nd March, 1748, in Telford (ed), *Letters*, 2, p. 137; Berridge, *Works*, p. 417.

¹⁶⁴ Pibworth, *Letters*, pp. 269-70.

in the face of opposition in the late 1730s and the 1740s. They reasoned that preaching in an incumbent's church, in a house or even in the open air, was the imperative of the message, which all must hear, or perish in ignorance.¹⁶⁵ Berridge's itinerancy took him out of the parish between Monday and Friday or Saturday each week, and his returns sometimes made for remedial pastoral work, as parishioners bickered and fought in their vicar's absence.¹⁶⁶ He believed in the place of societies to guard the flame lit by preaching.¹⁶⁷ Furthermore, for Berridge, the seal of God's favour was unquestionably on such actions, as crowds gathered to hear preaching, many shared their experiences with each other, and were ostensibly gathered into the kingdom. A host of Evangelicals would wrestle with the same convictions, some like Newton resorting to casuistry or sheer expediency in selecting times and places for their irregularity.¹⁶⁸ Authorities were more often wearied rather than enraged by irregularity, unless it involved a major clash of personalities, and irregulars mostly survived episcopal skirmishes. The Conventicle Act was still the lawful response to these misdemeanours, but it was a sanction more often threatened than enforced.¹⁶⁹

This fighting talk, and its foreign battles, conflicted Venn and many Evangelicals greatly. They had no wish to see gains won for their Church squandered through rash behaviour, not least through ministry which made them and their message vulnerable to derision. As Venn began his Yelling ministry the name *Methodist* was of course still attached to awakened clergy. Nearly three decades after the acerbic and alarmist satire of Foote and

¹⁶⁵ Rack, *Enthusiast*, pp. 208-9.

¹⁶⁶ Wesley, after early visits to the parish, thought little of the work at Everton, and reckoned that those who professed conversion were neglected by their vicar and lacked any spiritual maturity. Wesley, *Journals*, 5, pp. 471-2.

¹⁶⁷ Pibworth, *Letters*, p. 70.

¹⁶⁸ Hindmarsh, *Newton*, pp. 215-17.

¹⁶⁹ Wesley D. Balda, 'Ecclesiastics and Enthusiasts: The Evangelical Emergence in England 1760-1800', *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* 49, no. 3 (1980), pp. 224-6.

Fielding, the attentions of Graves and Smollett in, respectively, *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (1771) and *The Spiritual Quixote, or The Summer's Ramble of Geoffry Wildgoose* (1773), were more gently mocking.¹⁷⁰ Although the American Revolutionary Wars and then anxieties about France would later arouse patriotism, and a new paranoia about dissent of any form, evangelical zeal in the early 1770s was perhaps seen more as foolish than fearsome. To the essentially sober Venn, this was an unwelcome attention which the gospel's cause could well do without. He strove to constrain zeal by near-conformity.

Without a diary, and even with the assistance of surviving letters, Venn's movements in the parish and its vicinity cannot be closely reconstructed to serve an analysis of his ministry in this regard. Evidence suggests that travels beyond Venn's parochial jurisdiction were so infrequent that his ministry hardly did justice to the epithet of *semi-regular*, though the excursions he made at periods of the Yelling ministry mean that he was, one might say, *marginally-irregular*.

It is in fact Berridge's letters which suggest a difference between Venn's earlier and later Yelling ministry, with a closer regularity giving way to a more relaxed attitude to extra-parochial preaching. When Berridge told Thornton in August 1774 that he was "recruiting for Mr Venn at Godmanchester", he was referencing his own irregular preaching there, to awaken parishioners' interest in Venn's.¹⁷¹ But Venn was not joining his friend in the barns and fields; instead, Berridge was beating the bush, and driving the birds towards Venn's guns, who was preaching in the parish church there. The vicar of Everton clearly chaffed at Venn's choice not to join in the same work, and in lamenting "our dread of

¹⁷⁰ Both novels "signal a shift in tone from earlier, more satiric representations of Methodism by their laughable but usable "heart religion."" Misty G. Anderson, *Imagining Methodism in Eighteenth-Century Britain: Enthusiasm, Belief, and the Borders of the Self* (Baltimore, 2012), p. 202.

¹⁷¹ Berridge, *Works*, p. 394.

irregularity”, was referring to Venn, who he hoped would throw off his cautions and join Berridge’s practice, sure that some out-of-parish preaching would swell the Yelling flock.¹⁷² For Berridge it was an easy justification: “he only whistles the sheep to a better pasture, and meddles neither with flesh nor fleece”, as he told Thornton.¹⁷³ But what work Venn did beyond his bounds, he conducted in the pulpit, not in Berridge’s hoped-for barns. In 1775 Venn told Stillingfleet that he was preaching on alternate fortnights at Godmanchester and St Neots.¹⁷⁴ Eight years later he was persisting in ministry at St Neots. Though his hearers still had not professed faith, their appreciation was marked progress from when Berridge ventured there in 1765 and was met with volleys of rotten eggs.¹⁷⁵ Whilst Berridge was clearly on one of his gospel rambles in the neighbourhood, Venn was preaching in the church pulpit, which he and his son John shared for ten Sundays (the people subsequently wanted John as their curate, but an offer had already been made to someone else).¹⁷⁶ The following year he assured Simeon that he would be welcome to preach at an evening service there.¹⁷⁷ Here was perhaps the apogee of Venn’s work, ensuring that the paths were made straight for gospel clergy, even while Berridge and other committed irregulars were giving up on that course as too slow, and too optimistic about the church they had little hope for.¹⁷⁸

Clearly, Venn had responded to Berridge’s probing about joining him in irregularity. On a return trip to Huddersfield in 1780 Venn preached in a house in Mold Green, most likely to re-connect easily with loyal former parishioners rather than to continue a confirmed habit,

¹⁷² Berridge, *Works*, p. 385.

¹⁷³ Berridge, *Works*, p. 394.

¹⁷⁴ Venn MSS, Acc.81/C/14/1, Letter to James Stillingfleet, 4th July, 1775.

¹⁷⁵ Venn MSS, Acc.81/C/14/10, Letter to James Stillingfleet, 1st February, 1783.

¹⁷⁶ Venn MSS, Acc.81/C5/6, Letter to Thomas Atkinson, 28th January, 1783.

¹⁷⁷ Cambridge, Ridley Hall Archives, Simeon Papers, Henry Venn to Simeon, 6th August, 1784.

¹⁷⁸ Berridge professed deep pessimism about its future, even predicting immanent collapse. Letter to Lady Huntingdon, 26th April, 1777, Berridge, *Works*, p. 515.

and much less to aim a blow at his successor's authority.¹⁷⁹ The following year Venn told his Huddersfield friend Thomas Atkinson that he had recently preached in a barn at Potton.¹⁸⁰ In 1785 Berridge was writing again to Thornton, commenting that

“the Archdeacon of Yelling...is doubtless become a vagabond preacher as well as myself, a right gospel hawker and pedlar but seems desirous of having the trade to himself. Through mercy he is grown as scandalous as I could wish him yet be”,

and rejoicing in success in preaching in Bluntisham.¹⁸¹ This is likely a reference to Venn's assisting a Bluntisham farmer, Coxe Feary.¹⁸² As a young man, Feary regularly walked a dozen miles to sit under Venn's ministry, and then gathered around himself villagers to whom he read the sermons of Whitefield, and who in turn followed Feary to hear Venn in Yelling. In time he established a congregational church there (which later became Baptist), at which, with definite irregularity, Venn preached in 1785.¹⁸³

Venn's love of continuity and concern for church order, in contrast to Berridge's cheerful eschewing of convention as well as of canon law, most likely accounts for their differing attitudes towards their old university. When the shepherd-turned-pastor of the Duxford Baptist Church (founded by Berridge) Mr Payne called him “the Apostle of Cambridge”, he was surveying the sizeable number of dissenting causes revived or established by Berridge in the environs of the city. His influence on the university, however, was minimal. The preaching at Grantchester came to the attention of the university authorities, and Berridge gave sufficiently good account of himself over several Sundays at Great St Mary's in 1758 for his sermons to be published without complaint.¹⁸⁴ Only Rowland Hill (matric. 1764) came under Berridge's influence, considerably so, as Hill was fashioned to

¹⁷⁹ Venn MSS, Acc.81/F5, Diary, p. 48.

¹⁸⁰ Venn MSS, Acc.81/C5/4, Letter to Thomas Atkinson, 6th March, 1781.

¹⁸¹ Berridge, *Works*, p. 445.

¹⁸² Smyth, *Simeon*, p. 282.

¹⁸³ John Audley, *Memoirs of Mr. Coxe Feary, First Pastor of the Baptist Church at Bluntisham, in Huntingdonshire* (Cambridge, 1823), p. 23.

¹⁸⁴ John Green, *Principles and Practices of the Methodists* (Cambridge, 1761), p. 75.

be a life-long irregular. Berridge had a horror of tender, risk-averse curates, and wanted them to be stout-hearted, fearless, and irregular, thus giving him low hopes of the calibre the university could offer him, and preferring men of the same social standing as those they sought to reach as the best evangelists.¹⁸⁵

Friendships might well suggest guilt by association regarding irregularity. Although he closed his involvement with the Countess's Connexion when her chapels were registered as dissenting places of worship in 1782, sympathy with Dissent must have remained with Venn. When Rowland Hill's Surrey Chapel opened in the same year, Venn preached each subsequent summer there until 1790.¹⁸⁶ Whilst it was probably little more than titular, Venn was a trustee of the Connexion's Dagger Lane Chapel in Hull, and quietly supported ministry beyond the Church, including a Moravian mission (with Thornton and Haweis).¹⁸⁷

But all was not conformity, for Venn. In editing his father's letters, John Venn agonised over those occasions his father preached out of his pulpit and even his parish, and ascribed them to his father's desire to act out of ardour and zeal, "rather than to listen to the cold calculations of prudence".¹⁸⁸ Grandson Henry interjected at this point in the *Life and Letters* to declare that in the Yelling years Venn "occasionally preached in neighbouring parishes, at the house, and, in some few instances in the barns of the farmers".¹⁸⁹ Canon law was broken in such instances, and Venn's descendants were obviously looking for their readers to honour his zeal rather than commend a dispassionate reason which would have refrained from meeting the needs of souls. Venn told Ann Riland that one Sunday a

¹⁸⁵ Berridge, *Works*, p. 461. For irregularity as a *desideratum* for curates, see Berridge, *Works*, p. 412.

¹⁸⁶ Seymour, *Life*, 2, pp. 321-2.

¹⁸⁷ Harding, *Countess*, p. 122; J.C.S. Mason, *The Moravian Church and the Missionary Awakening in England 1760-1800* (Woodbridge, 2001), pp. 54-5.

¹⁸⁸ Venn, *Letters*, p. 177.

¹⁸⁹ Venn, *Letters*, p. 176.

large congregation gathered to hear Simeon, on whose unexpected failure to arrive Venn preached to as many as were able to fit in his house, and also addressed those outside.¹⁹⁰ Such an innocuous-seeming practice would have fallen short of strict obedience. There are very scant references from Venn to any such activities to trouble John or Henry junior further, but both might have worried about Berridge's few mentions of them in his letters to John Thornton. One cannot be decided about whether Venn was more inclined to regularity out of regard for principle, or whether he felt that it was instead a matter of ensuring a better passage for the gospel. The latter seems more likely, given his marginal regularity, and his instinctive respect for evangelical Dissenters.

Berridge and Venn's ministries also diverged along the lines of lay involvement. The midweek gatherings in Huddersfield (see above, pp. 214-19) indicate lay leadership with a loose connection to clerical oversight, and no evidence survives suggesting anything comparable at Yelling, nor would have it been as likely in the significantly smaller parish. Berridge's approach was markedly different, as he fought his campaigns relying on a phalanx of artisans and farmers, taking every opportunity to encourage them into preaching, and then into the leadership of the causes they fostered, should they demonstrate sufficient character and success.¹⁹¹ A number of the estimated forty barns and other premises put to the service of Berridge's preaching became the meeting-houses of dissenting congregations.¹⁹² Such fraternity was expedient, since without it Berridge's preaching stations would soon be empty, and his efforts worthless. It was one thing to co-exist with Dissenters, as Grimshaw or Newton managed, but to promote and even to establish their work as Berridge did was another matter, entirely.¹⁹³ Ultimately, Berridge

¹⁹⁰ Venn, *Letters*, p. 452.

¹⁹¹ For his views on a believer's gifting and fitness to preach, see Berridge, *Works*, p. 353.

¹⁹² Smyth, *Simeon*, pp. 266-7.

¹⁹³ For Newton and Dissent, see Hindmarsh, *Newton*, pp. 217-9.

effectively declared for Dissent, whilst never leaving the Church. In writing to the Countess of Huntingdon in 1777, Berridge claimed no great love for his own church, about whose prospects he was deeply pessimistic, and said that he instead was serving the church universal.¹⁹⁴

With his raised profile as the author of *The Complete Duty*, and a successful conforming Yorkshire ministry behind him, Venn must felt the weight of the example he was setting to others in his parochial conduct, not least to the Cambridge undergraduates into whom he was now investing his energies. Huddersfield had taught him that it was well possible to keep evangelical religion in the Church. His departure had also shown him how quickly the parish could be lost to Dissent with the wrong sort of incumbent at its helm. Church gains, in Venn's mind, were not to be squandered on the uncertain ventures of Meeting Houses and the differing gifts and those who supplied them. Venn was deeply concerned to see his son established in his college and in the gospel way, and that paternal impulse easily extended to John's generation of students. A battle of sorts was set for the undergraduates, and played out over the allegiance of Simeon.

¹⁹⁴ Berridge, *Works*, p. 515.

4.4 The True Evangelical?

This chapter has sought to discern Venn's place within the revival in the second half of his career, and to appreciate his position as a conciliatory Calvinistic leader who was alert to the issues surrounding the propagation of Calvinism and the regularity question. The conclusion is that Venn maintained his doctrinal and experimental Calvinism, and sought to work it out in his ministry almost exclusively within the Established Church. On those occasions when he did deviate from that chosen path with forays into irregularity, he did so out of a sense of necessity, and gave no encouragement to others to do likewise.

Venn's regularity was typical of evangelical desire to show that their religion was pre-eminently suited to all in the parish. At the closure of his Huddersfield ministry Venn wrote to his former parishioners, reminding them of their calling to live a godly life in keeping with their profession of faith. He defined the church as "a chosen society distinguished from the world and from merely nominal Christians by the enjoyment of light and life and the spirit of grace and supplication, which the world despises and derides".¹⁹⁵ This definition, likely a conscious expansion of Article XIX's "congregation of faithful men", is redolent of Dissent and likely shows Venn's awareness that those loyal to his preaching were largely shunning the parish church there and the ministry whose perceived inadequacies angered him greatly.¹⁹⁶ Venn did not lessen his aspirations for the true church in Yelling, but with an eye to the future of the gospel cause, he eschewed the gathered church model of Dissent, and redoubled efforts in regular ministry to shepherd the whole parish towards gospel faith.

¹⁹⁵ Henry Venn, *A Letter from the Rev. Mr. Venn, Late Vicar of Huddersfield* (1772, n.p.).

¹⁹⁶ Venn MSS, Acc.81/C13/23-5, Letters to Ann Riland, May, 1771.

Venn was convinced that co-operation across the theological range of Evangelicals was essential. He was of the same instinct as his friends Whitefield, Grimshaw and Newton, who all aimed at catholicity towards those on the other side of the Calvinistic divide, where possible. Whitefield spoke for many when he declared in 1742 that “though I am a strenuous defender of the righteousness of Christ and utterly detest Arminian principles, yet I know that God gave me the Holy Ghost, before I was clear in either as to head knowledge.”¹⁹⁷ Newton, himself “a healer of breaches”, in Wesley’s words,¹⁹⁸ noted Grimshaw’s commitment to gospel endeavour with Wesley and his followers, and his disinclination to engage in doctrinal controversy where it risked shared labour, which met Calvinist chagrin.¹⁹⁹ Venn claimed similar difficulties, remarking in 1774 to Stillingfleet that “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.”²⁰⁰ As he looked to help the new generation of evangelical ministers he often warned of the dangers of disputing, preferring gospel co-operation rather than convictional belligerence, where possible.²⁰¹ When he learned from his son John in 1783 of quarrels between ministers over the doctrines of grace, he was convinced he was hearing of the Devil at work.²⁰²

After the Minutes Controversy (all too unseemly in Venn’s eyes) there was a distancing not only of Calvinists and Arminians, but also of the higher sorts of Calvinists and the

¹⁹⁷ John Gillies (ed), *The Works of George Whitefield* (6 vols, London, 1771-72), 1, p. 406. Grimshaw declared “I love my God first and best, but not enough. Next to him, I love my dear brothers Wesley, with whom I am heartily joined, and hope never to be parted in time or eternity. Next to them I love my dear brother Whitefield, and next to him all the labourers, and all that love and desire to love the blessed Jesus.” And I love mankind as well as them.” Laycock, *Methodist Heroes*, p. 244.

¹⁹⁸ *Letters of John Wesley*, 4, p. 293; Hindmarsh, *Newton*, p. 327.

¹⁹⁹ John Newton, *Memoirs of William Grimshaw* (London, 1825), pp. 74-75. Interestingly, Grimshaw’s two highly valued assistants, Will Darney and Paul Greenwood, held opposite positions on the question of the extent of the atonement.

²⁰⁰ Venn, *Letters*, pp.207-8.

²⁰¹ Venn, *Letters*, pp. 199, 239, 263, 354, 371.

²⁰² Venn, *Letters*, p. 354.

Moderates.²⁰³ There were men who took up anti-Arminian arms in the promotion of a doctrinaire Calvinism, such as Romaine, Haweis, Shirley, the Hills and Toplady, and Moderates such as Venn, Newton and Berridge, who wanted to move on from the furore and work as best as they could with co-operative Arminians. Berridge, who took part in the controversy and later regretted his involvement,²⁰⁴ was worried about the reformed religion he saw, complaining that “the old puritan spirit of devotion is not kindling and breathing among us”, and that “deep-mouthed Calvinism loves sitting and hearing much better than kneeling and praying.”²⁰⁵ The division amongst Calvinists was one of theology, obviously, but it was also one of a different outlook on ministry. A polemical stance contrasted with an irenic one, an idealist, purist impulse with a pragmatic and realistic approach. Not that friendships were always broken. Venn’s and Toplady’s continued, and Venn’s trips to London between the Minutes controversy and Toplady’s death in 1778 included preaching at his Orange Street chapel.²⁰⁶ On the other side of the evangelical divide, Venn’s friendship with John Fletcher encapsulated his outlook regarding essential beliefs, and the primacy of friendship. As his career progressed, Venn had learned how to use the opportunities afforded him as a clergyman, and appreciated the limitations of useful association with Dissent. Through the Connexion he had seen how the power of personalities, with their desire for attention, or refusal or inability to yield on the smaller points of order or to forgive and forget the shortcomings of others, might destroy the work of God.

The most obvious connecting thread in areas strongly impacted by evangelical ministry appears not to be the shared occupation or social status of the hearers, nor the prior

²⁰³ Venn, *Letters*, pp. 120, 192. For others’ recognition of its damage, see Walsh, ‘Predestination’, p. 59.

²⁰⁴ Berridge, *Works*, pp. 16-18.

²⁰⁵ Berridge, *Works*, p. 395.

²⁰⁶ Seymour, *Life*, 2, p. 70.

spiritual condition of the parish prior to the incumbent's arrival, but the incumbent himself. The man was not the message, but without the man, or a man to whom hearers could give credit, there would be no creditable message. Venn went to Huddersfield sure in the knowledge that his gospel, which others he knew in his circle had preached to such great effect in Yorkshire, could well work in his town. In Wesley there was a man at once imperious and supremely vulnerable, a man above his hearers in manner, but alongside them in his tender appeals and in his willingness to face personal hardship and danger. Fletcher had something of Wesley's living saintliness, an ascetic piety attuned to a common appeal and a transparent love of his people. Newton possessed a considerable gift of understanding his parishioners and ministering comfort to them. Whitefield was a torrent of emotion, who could choke his way through passages of his sermon and then lift his voice to plead to many thousands. Grimshaw's rough and direct manner made its mark on parishioners and numerous others in his Round, and his plainness garnered the respect of successive archbishops of York. Berridge, with all of his wildness and eccentricity, compelled a hearing through his very unpredictability and the obvious lengths and sacrifices he would undergo for the cause of the gospel. Venn was in some ways a distillation of many of these characteristics: logical, grave, authoritative and earnest in his preaching, frequently emotional, disarmingly warm, generous to a fault with his Huddersfield parishioners, and hugely popular for his ministry.

Venn's labours to promote evangelical life in his parish and Church took place during a period in which there was a growing number of likeminded incumbents. From Wesley's knowing only thirty-four "serious" clergy in 1764, Newton estimated in 1795 that there were "not fewer than four hundred" preaching the gospel in the Church, and Romaine reckoned a ten-fold increase from the fifty he could identify at the start of his ministry to

its closure, at the time when Venn was retiring.²⁰⁷ The presence of gospel clergy was making its presence known in a way unthinkable when the young Whitefield was banned from Richard Venn's pulpit. The last quarter of the century saw the earlier pioneering spirit typified in first lone and only then piecemeal shared endeavour being replaced by a collegium of leaders who sought to influence rather than antagonise the Establishment. Moderate Calvinists strongly believed that the Formularies made the Church theirs, and their indignation at being seen as anything but its right and loyal servants was frequently raised. They reacted strongly. When faced with accusations of being a Methodist in 1778, Thomas Scott asserted that the term embraced "all persons, whether clergy or laity, who preach or profess the doctrines of the Reformation, as expressed in the articles and liturgy of our Church".²⁰⁸ Reactions to the growing presence of evangelical clergy in the Church must have been the reason why Bishop Horsley warned the Hertfordshire clergy in 1783 that in attacking what they believed to be Calvinism, they might actually be going against "what belongs to our common Christianity".²⁰⁹ Its opponents were discovering that this movement was harder to shift than they might have hoped.

At the higher end of the Moderate Calvinist scale, and hardly the most emollient apologist, Toplady maintained in 1774 that "Calvinist" was a badge of loyalty to the true Church. Calvinism, he said, was "the doctrinal system, established in England, which Luther and Calvin were the honoured instruments of receiving, subsisted from the beginning in the faith of God's elect people, and in the sacred Scriptures."²¹⁰ Writing to an Independent

²⁰⁷ John Newton, *Letters and Conversational Remarks* (New York, 1811), p. 76; George Redford & John Angell James (eds), *The Autobiography of the Rev. William Jay*, (2 vols, New York, 1855), 1, pp. 252-3.

²⁰⁸ Thomas Scott, *The Force of Truth; an Authentic Narrative* (London, 1779), p. 22, fn.

²⁰⁹ Samuel Horsley, *The Charges of Samuel Horsley: Late Lord Bishop of St. Asaph* (London, 1830), p. 161. Rather embarrassingly, what Bishop Tomline had mistakenly dismissed as evangelical excess were actually utterances which Scott pointed out came from the Homilies. Quite possibly, Horsley regarded evangelicals as at least co-belligerents against a more serious enemy of outright heterodoxy.

²¹⁰ Augustus Toplady, *Historic Proof Of The Doctrinal Calvinism Of The Church of England* (London, 1774), p. i. Whilst not following him in all of the details of his Calvinism, Ryle thought the book

minister in 1784, Newton represented many when he said that the Church was expedient to gospel propagation, nothing more, and in a utilitarian age Evangelicals needed no further reasons to use their incumbencies to the best of their abilities.²¹¹ On the other hand, others, such as John Overton of York, were developing a robust apologetic for adherence to the Church, precisely on the grounds that its doctrines belonged to evangelicals, and thus meaning that all others were interlopers.²¹² Such a presentation of the Church was timely. Whilst evangelical Dissent was somewhat overshadowed by their Church equivalents, the radical Dissent (both theological and political) of the sorts of Joseph Priestley gave alarm, with real or imagined Jacobinism, the more so with the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts between 1787 and 1790. Agitation regarding Catholic emancipation, the Gordon Riots of 1780 being amongst the most significant, put into clear focus the need for a strong Protestant national church.²¹³ Dissenters were seen as troublers of England and of America.²¹⁴ The deaths of Wesley and the Countess of Huntingdon in 1791 meant that the Connexion and Methodism were now most evidently in apposition (in the eyes of some, in opposition) to the Church of England. In the same year there were more Roman Catholics in England than members of Methodist societies.²¹⁵ Many Evangelicals believed it to be entirely honourable as well as strategic to serve regular ministries in this climate, and, at the turn of the century, their decision was very largely commended.²¹⁶ The Yelling ministry, with its slow but steady course, would be the one many came to relate to as they endeavoured to commend the same gospel in and out of season.

unavailable in its arguments, and the definitive statement of the Calvinism of the Church of England. Ryle, *Leaders*, p. 380.

²¹¹ Newton, *Works*, 5, p. 8.

²¹² John Overton, *The True Churchman Ascertained* (T. Wilson & R. Spence: York, 1801), p. 397.

²¹³ Carter, *Anglican Evangelicals*, pp. 22-23; *Christian Observer* (1802), p. 162.

²¹⁴ Robert Hole, *Pulpits, Politics and Public Order in England, 1760-1832* (Cambridge, 1989), p.45.

²¹⁵ Schlenther, *Queen*, p.182, and fn.

²¹⁶ Cooper & Gregory (eds), *Revival*, pp. 166-7.

Chapter 5: Venn's Ministerial Horizons

5.1 The Pastoral Ministry of Letter-writing

This chapter explores how Venn sought to promote evangelicalism and Moderate Calvinism in the Church as his career progressed, and then analyses his impact on others, and their appropriation of the tradition. Venn believed his convictions to be entirely harmonious with the Formularies, and whilst not moderating his Calvinism, he was committed to safeguarding their careful expression in his church, shoring up gospel preaching without drawing unnecessary ire. As the Revolution in France and the loss of America brought anxieties to national life, Venn's cautions about Dissent intensified, and he concentrated on modelling a pastorally-focused parish ministry to his successors. His two most influential inheritors, son John of Clapham and Simeon of Cambridge, invested the deposit in parochial labours and established a plethora of local, national and overseas endeavours, which in turn resourced later Georgian and Victorian Evangelicals.

Both preaching and letter-writing came from the same impulse for the Evangelicals, a desire to propagate, organise and legitimise the gospel cause.¹ New as well as established professors needed instruction and encouragement in the way. In early career, Whitefield recorded a full day's preaching and interviews with individuals, after which he sat up dealing with his correspondence until three in the morning.² Letters were never additional to his work, though they were often pushed to the margins of time and energy by other pressing demands, and Whitefield's efforts and priorities were mirrored by the Wesleys,

¹ For letter-writing as an aspect of safeguarding and commending evangelicalism, see Rivers, *Vanity Fair*, ch.10; Hindmarsh, *Newton*, pp. 243-247. For Whitefield and his publisher's exploitation of his letters, see Jones, Schlenther & White, *Elect Methodists*, pp. 28-30.

² George Whitefield, *The Two First Parts of his Life, with his Journals* (London, 1756), p. 59, entry for the 25th January, 1738.

John Newton and many others. When they wrote, there was an equal appetite to read their letters. Letter writing was not only vital to the addressees, but had enormous potential to serve far a wider readership, either through private circulation or, best of all, through publication.³ Newton's letters to Haweis detailing his conversion had to be speedily assembled for publication as the *Authentic Narrative* in 1763 in order to prevent unauthorised versions, since copies were already circulating.⁴ The rapidly developing printing and publishing trade served evangelical enterprise with changes in laws on copyright and printing in early century, meaning that a mobile and growing population was offered an ever-widening choice of affordable material.⁵ The nation was increasingly connected by the transport arteries of canals and roads, and the introduction of the mail coach in 1784 meant that a letter from a provincial town sent to London would now take just two days to arrive, down from the four of a mid-century despatch.⁶ The world of Venn and the Evangelicals was, literally, opening up. This section seeks to cast light on Venn's epistolary friendship networks, and analyses how he and then the editors of the published collection used his letters to propagate his religion and perform pastoral care.

More than one thousand extant letters from Venn are in the Venn family manuscript collection, and interspersed with them are nearly one hundred from his correspondents.⁷

The archive was assembled by son John and grandson Henry, with a small number in copy (and excised) form, such as the sensitive correspondence with Ann Hudson. Three hundred

³ Varied as English reading tastes were, religion still accounted for the subject matter of over half of the century's publications. John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination* (London, 1997), pp. 171-2.

⁴ Hindmarsh, *Newton*, pp. 31-3.

⁵ See John Brewer, *Pleasures*, pp. 125-46, Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England, 1727-1783* (New York, 1989), p. 404. London nearly doubled its population in the course of the eighteenth century, to just under a million in 1801. Leeds increased nearly nine-fold, and Manchester, eleven-fold. Jeremy Gregory & John Stevenson, *The Routledge Companion to Britain in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 2007), p. 245.

⁶ Hindmarsh, *Conversion Narrative*, p. 74.

⁷ University of Birmingham, Cadbury Research Library, Church Missionary Society Papers, Venn Family MSS, Acc.81.

letters written to one of his daughters were lost in a house fire in 1779.⁸ The correspondence begins in 1756 and runs through to 1796, the year prior to his death. Inevitably, many more survive from the later 1780s to the early 1790s, when fewer parochial responsibilities allowed more time for writing, and the family's increasing sense of the importance of Venn's ministry – and potential legacy – doubtless meant that they guarded the letters with care (certainly, family members vastly outweigh other recipients). The subject matters are those one would expect of a busy clergyman who spent much of his life in the context of religious revival and at the centre of busy family life. Counsel to struggling Christians, encouragement and advice to his children, reflections on God's providential ways, comments to friends about his ministry and activities, and speculation on national events, all fill Venn's pages. Though inevitably and frequently serious, Venn sometimes used nicknames with family and closest friends, was often playful in tone, and not above making himself the butt of his humour.⁹

How candid was Venn in his letters, and how conscious was he that eyes other than his intended readers' might well see his prose? John Wesley was furious at his wife in 1759 for sharing letters without his consent.¹⁰ Whitefield, evangelical pioneer of self-disclosure and self-promotion, learned early in his career to be more circumspect in how he wrote and spoke about himself.¹¹ As Venn's career progressed, and as he saw his son's ministry taking shape in a strategic parish, pursuing his father's own emphases, Venn might well have believed that his correspondence could be handled for publication. After all,

⁸ Venn MSS, Acc.81/C/8, 9, Letter to Lady Mary Fitzgerald, 21st August, 1779.

⁹ Venn had at least three nicknames for Eling: Mira, Syphé and Eusebia. To Stillingfleet John Venn is referred to as "Telemaque", a somewhat unfortunate name, with the original Telemachus of Homer's *Odyssey* destined to struggle in the shadow of his overwhelmingly confident and heroic father, Odysseus. Venn MSS, Acc.81/C/14/10, Letter to James Stillingfleet, 1st February, 1783.

¹⁰ John Telford (ed), *John Wesley Letters*, 4, pp. 79-80. Wesley would have not enjoyed the irony that this very letter found its way into a collection.

¹¹ Jones, Schlenther & White, *Elect Methodists*, p. 89.

Newton's was eagerly received by his evangelical readership.¹² Definitive answers are, of course, impossible, but the questions nonetheless admit informed speculation.

Venn's correspondence testifies to the continuity of his Moderate Calvinist convictions. Naturally, early letters show a man working out his own positions.¹³ Age softened his tone and tempered his zeal, somewhat. Occasional rebukes to wavering believers give way to frequent calls for unity and self-control. Throughout the collections, the familiar accents of Anglican Moderate Calvinism are to the fore: heart religion fostered by Bible reading and prayer and a confidence in God's sovereignty, holiness of life, and loyalty to the Church. In those tenets later generations were presented with a careful but compelling evangelical zeal.

Letters to family members or to those in Venn's friendship circle give insights into his character as a father, and a good number were used in the volume in order to model the virtues of the evangelical home; in fact, they serve as a unique corpus in early nineteenth century domestic literature to that end, and their lack of scholarly attention is surprising.¹⁴ Venn writes of the domesticity at Yelling which he evidently enjoyed, cherishing his children and being an attentive paterfamilias.¹⁵ In fact, given that Venn's lengthy Yelling ministry was removed from the centres of evangelical action, his correspondence of that period reflects the quotidian aspects of his life, and many letters serve to showcase evangelical domesticity. For reasons unknown, he named the rectory "Doley Castle", in

¹² Newton was thrilled to tell Hannah More in 1798 that his writings were being consumed across the nation and in America, and were read in translation in various European countries. William Roberts, *Memoirs of the Life and Correspondence of Mrs Hannah More* (3 vols, London, 1835), 3, p. 48.

¹³ For example, the correspondence with Eling in the 1750s, Venn MSS, Acc.81/C17.

¹⁴ Evangelical household and family religion is treated in Bradley, *Seriousness*, ch.10, though the legacy of Venn in the priorities of Wilberforce and the Clapham Sect in this respect is missing. Rosman references the Macaulays and the Thorntons as examples of evangelical household, but omits any proper recognition of the Venns. Doreen M. Rosman, *Evangelicals and Culture* (Cambridge, 2012), pp. 70-85.

¹⁵ For his love of Yelling's "silence and solitude", see Venn MSS, Acc.81/C4/18, Letter to Edward Venn, 21st April, 1783.

which the reader is afforded glimpses of its rhythms, with their spirituality, laughter, and sometimes the dramas and tears of household life.¹⁶ Venn made rules for his children, seeking to curb the noise of an exuberant household, but he knew that the compliance of his cherished family, in their teens and twenties, was beyond both them and him.¹⁷ The rector watched over his children with close attention, burdened by their sorrows, elated at their successes, and fostering a household piety with no evidence of foisting it upon them, though each in time came to the same narrow way of faith.

Venn sometimes took in young men for tuition, and the summer stay of an Oxford undergraduate, James Harvey, resulted in his marrying Catherine in 1790.¹⁸ Mrs Venn taught domestic skills to young ladies, including to the Rilands' daughter, Priscilla, in 1785.¹⁹ Venn's letter to her mother of that year, in which he comments on her daughter's progress, also notes the piety of the family. John, visiting from Norfolk, preached to his father's great esteem, and the party received the sacrament. Others were mentioned as having stayed recently: Joseph Jowett, future Law professor at Cambridge, with father Henry, Venn's old Leeds friend, and Simeon, who preached in Venn's kitchen. Here was serious religion in the home, where the family welcomed in friends and parishioners, alike. Venn probably had no thought that he was recording these details for anyone's pleasure but their immediate recipients', and none of these letters met the subsequent publishing criteria of his grandson editor, though the volume did contain a small section of eight

¹⁶ "Doley" might be an allusion to "dole", as if he (or the parish) were subsidising the four children, all of whom stayed in the house into their twenties, and daughter Jane remained with her father until his death, and then lived with John's family. It might also be a light-hearted allusion to "doleful", which would have appealed to the genial Venn's sense of humour.

¹⁷ Venn MSS, Acc.81/C4, Letter to Edward Venn, 2nd June, 1779.

¹⁸ Venn, *Annals*, p. 110.

¹⁹ Venn MSS, Acc.81/C13, Letter to Ann Riland, 7th November, 1785.

letters to his daughters once they had left home, and in those Venn could be cast as the champion of personal and family religion.²⁰

In 1834 Venn's grandson Henry published a volume of the letters.²¹ The six volumes of Newton's writings were published fifteen years before, fully fifty percent being his letters, evidence of just how much weight he attached to his letter-writing ministry, and how much profitability his publishers reckoned that those letters would ensure.²² Son and grandson obviously took great pride in the labours of Venn senior, and the family was anxious to have his name held in honour, installing a plaque in the parish church of Huddersfield in 1837, after its refurbishment. More than that, though, they believed that he had provided a legacy which should not only be admired, but imitated.

In his preface to the volume Henry junior stated his two-fold intention: firstly, he wished to exemplify through Venn's life and ministry the sentiments of evangelicals, showing their personal religion and its outward conduct.²³ In addition, he stated his desire to show the growth of evangelical religion during the course of his grandfather's lifetime, particularly amongst the clergy. He selected six men who adopted evangelical faith in the 1740s and 50s and ministered their convictions, men who were "independent of the Methodists, and nearly contemporaneous with them, and whose labours had an immediate and remarkable influence upon the Clergy of the Church of England."²⁴ Quoting Romaine's estimate of the number of evangelical clergy by 1795, Venn's task was to give the reasons for that increase in presenting the life and ministry of his grandfather.²⁵ He aimed to craft a narrative through the letters of the impact of evangelicalism on pastor and

²⁰ Venn, *Letters*, pp. 278-296.

²¹ The fourth edition of 1836 is used in this study.

²² John Newton, *Works of the Rev. John Newton* (6 vols, London, 1808-9).

²³ Venn, *Letters*, p. viii.

²⁴ Venn, *Letters*, p. xiv. The men are Grimshaw, Romaine, Talbot, Walker, Adam and Conyers.

²⁵ Venn, *Letters*, p. xiv.

parishioners alike. A third priority becomes clear, one which is no less important to the later Venns, and that is the presentation of evangelicalism as being at the heart of the Church (not as the natural preserve of Methodists or other Dissenters), and to ensure that others would serve her by taking up a similar ministry.

The *Life and a Selection from the Letters* is divided into three parts, the first and third being of roughly equal length. The memoir which opens the book is complemented by the final part which contains six lengthier letters, each of which served to endorse Venn as an exemplary pastor, whether counselling men and women (obscure and well-known), giving instruction on rigorous study of the Hebrew Bible to a fellow clergymen, or offering cautionary advice to younger ministers. The middle part (over 220 letters and extracts in approximately 460 pages) is divided into five sections: letters from the Huddersfield years (1759-71) are followed by those from Venn's beginning at Yelling until he began corresponding with his son John (1771-7). Venn was a conscientious father and friend, and his letters to his other children and to friends around the country follow (1778-82). Many of the same correspondents are included in the next section, though almost half are directed to John, entering ministry and finding his way through the early years (1782-88). The final series (until 1796) are to family members, as Venn offers advice and shares domestic and other news.

Henry junior explains that he has selected a quarter of the letters he possessed for publication, guided by a two-fold criteria, namely, those which “possess the greatest intrinsic excellence”, and those which show the character of the godly pastor in his parish and home.²⁶ In other words, the selection was designed to showcase evangelical personal piety, ministry and domesticity, to commend the tradition to its readers. The letters

²⁶ Venn, *Letters*, p. 67, fn.

gathered in the archive are written to or make reference to former servants (Ann Riland, *née* Hudson, Ruth Clark), new professors (James Kershaw, Mr Shirley, Thomas Atkinson), old acquaintances (Mrs Knipe, sister of John Thornton, Joseph Hirst), ministry colleagues (James Stillingfleet, Thomas Robinson), gospel patrons (Lord Dartmouth, John Thornton), and supportive members of the upper reaches of English society (Lady Fitzgerald, Lady Smythe). The family circle included both married daughters and their husbands (several letters of the unmarried daughter Jane are in the CMS collection) and Venn's cousin, John Brasier. The very nature of familiar letters is that they explore commonly-held values and news whose interest is of limited interest to readers. Even those which Henry junior selected from the considerable family cache rarely rouse great interest, save for underscoring the Christian character and concerns of the paterfamilias.

Some letters were the obvious showcases of the spirituality Venn typified and passed on to others. In November 1765 he wrote to the thirty year-old Army Captain, Jonathan Scott, who had recently come to faith and was taking first steps in preaching, through associations with Romaine, Riland and Newton.²⁷ Declaring great joy in Scott's conversion, Venn solemnly warned him that the life of a Christian is one of warfare.²⁸ Venn set forth six means to help him to pursue Christ: secret prayer, bible study, public worship, preaching, the society of Christians, and solitude.²⁹ These disciplines could have come from any of the competing spiritualities of the eighteenth century. It is Venn's attendant comments which show his spiritual acumen, and thus hold value in commending the evangelical tradition. The length of the letter, combined with the wisdom its editors wished to display (the letter, the reader is informed, was published separately in different

²⁷ *The Evangelical Magazine* (London, 1808), 16, pp. 194-99.

²⁸ Venn, *Letters*, p. 535.

²⁹ Venn, *Letters*, pp. 535-47.

tracts³⁰), merited its position in an appendix of its own in the published volume. That Scott went on to have such an influential ministry, planting above twenty congregations mostly in the central and west midlands, gave the letter additional clout.³¹

Venn had an enduring love for those he left in Huddersfield, and corresponded with many of them.³² Eling's death left Venn in great distress, and dwelling on his loss with various correspondents, including Ann Riland.³³ Four letters in the collection are to John Houghton, a convert from Venn's Yorkshire ministry. The last (1789) requested a visit from Houghton and local friends, and in September 1792 Venn was anticipating with relish a visit from him and members of his old congregation.³⁴ The same energy was put into his friendship with Thomas Atkinson. Back in 1763 Venn was advising him in his first steps in Christian discipleship, and twenty years later he was thanking him for a visit to Yelling, and offering counsel for Atkinson's spiritual depression.³⁵ There were further visits, and as Atkinson's textiles business in Huddersfield grew, his largesse extended to Venn's Yelling parishioners, supplying them with blankets in a time of great hardship in the parish.³⁶

Given how warmly Venn speaks of his succession of Huddersfield curates in the letters in the archive (among them, Samuel Furley, Gilbert Burnett and Matthew Powley), it is interesting that only one letter is in the *Letters*, written to Matthew Powley of Dewsbury, in October, 1785.³⁷ It is highly unlikely that Venn did not correspond with these friends, and that they did not keep these letters, but they are nevertheless absent from the archive.

³⁰ Venn, *Letters*, p.535.

³¹ It was also one of the first publications of the new Brooks Huddersfield printing firm, who reckoned that their old vicar's work would be profitable.

³² John lamented that he could not find more of these letters, Venn, *Annals*, p. 200.

³³ Venn, *Letters*, pp. 144-50.

³⁴ Venn, *Letters*, pp. 468, 512.

³⁵ Venn, *Letters*, pp. 106, 369.

³⁶ Venn, *Letters*, p. 520.

³⁷ Venn, *Letters*, pp. 421-2.

Other lacunae more obviously indicate the family's desire to safeguard Venn as a model churchman. The only reference to Venn's good friend Rowland Hill comes from John's sad concession that it was zeal and not prudence which led his father to preach for Hill as well as in other "unconsecrated places."³⁸ The settling of Venn in Yelling affords an opportunity for his grandson to affirm his conformity, citing his love of the Liturgy and its superiority to dissenting forms of worship.³⁹ Berridge receives frequent mentions, but no letters between the men are included. The later Venns could tolerate Venn senior's affectionate references to Berridge, surely hoping that their readers saw Berridge's extra-parochial gosselling as part of his marked eccentricity, and not as signalling anything with which they or Venn himself agreed.⁴⁰

No letters are included to Lady Selina, Countess of Huntingdon. Venn family sensibilities regarding the perception of Venn as siding with Dissenters are most likely the reason for this absence. Concession is made when Venn is noted as preaching for her in 1769, and he is recorded as telling James Kershaw, "in Lady Huntingdon I see a star of the first magnitude in the firmament of the church".⁴¹ Nonetheless, in the *Annals* John A. Venn, having stated that "For many years...Mr Venn was an active helper of Lady Huntingdon", then declares with relief, "though never, I believe, one of her chaplains".⁴² The family's discomfiture at any prominence being given to her was pounced on by the Countess's biographer Seymour, an ardent admirer of Venn. Despite selecting a number of letters to Mrs Wheeler and Mrs Medhurst, Seymour pointed out that the editors of the collection studiously avoided identifying them as her nieces, doubtless afraid, he reckoned, of "the odour of Methodism", and asserting that "the worthy Venn had a soul superior to this

³⁸ Venn, *Letters*, pp. 176-7.

³⁹ Venn, *Letters*, p. 175.

⁴⁰ Venn, *Letters*, p. 462.

⁴¹ Venn, *Letters*, p. 159.

⁴² Venn, *Annals*, p. 94.

species of trimming”.⁴³ When Venn is recorded as having met with the Dissenter Benjamin Fawcett of Kidderminster in 1766, the reference is to Venn learning about revival progress in New England, and thus signals his interest in kingdom advance even beyond his own shores.⁴⁴ Some associations were evidently deemed better than others.

Although many comments in his letters are included about his deep affection for John Fletcher, no correspondence is included, nor is any with the Wesley brothers. John is referred to twice, once in passing, and once lamenting his commitment to perfectionism.⁴⁵ There is no Dartmouth correspondence, only a brief reference to Lady Dartmouth in a letter to Mrs Riland.⁴⁶ There are no letters to his dear Clapham friend John Thornton, though Venn mentioned him with deep affection after his death.⁴⁷ Five letters written to Thornton’s sister Mrs Knipe were published.⁴⁸ At the beginning of his Huddersfield ministry quite possibly Venn knew that she would be a conduit of his news for her busy brother, and that correspondence to her might lessen any perception of his soliciting Thornton’s help directly.

The largest collection in the archive (one hundred and ten letters), and the centrepiece of the published collection, is Venn’s correspondence with his son, a third of which were published, and amongst them a handful of John’s letters to his father are contained in order to give context to Venn’s own. These show most clearly the three-fold aim of the volume, to portray the piety of Venn, the progress of gospel faith in and through his son, and the worthiness of a life devoted to serving the ministry of the Church of England. The surviving letters begin in 1777, the year John started at Cambridge, his “seed-time”,⁴⁹ and

⁴³ Seymour, *Life*, p. 6.

⁴⁴ Venn, *Letters*, p. 122.

⁴⁵ Venn, *Letters*, pp. 208, 473-4.

⁴⁶ Venn, *Letters*, p. 163.

⁴⁷ Venn, *Letters*, pp. 489, 502.

⁴⁸ Venn, *Letters*, pp. 80-94.

⁴⁹ Venn, *Letters*, pp. 241, 273.

continue intermittently until 1796, at which point Venn had moved to live with John and his family. Venn spares no effort in forming his son to be a sincere and fruitful Christian, his advice ranging over friendship, diet, furniture for his rooms and study, to conscientious personal Bible study, private prayer, disciplined use of time, regular conference with a select group of likeminded men, and unceasing vigilance against worldly temptation.⁵⁰

This painstaking father was pouring himself into his son in urging him to live out the spiritual advantages in his university days which Venn himself had discovered in later life.

If modern readers might think such counsel overbearing and pressurising, grandson Henry did not fully share such misgivings, and used the correspondence to sharpen his picture of Venn as paternal spiritual director. Most revealing for the state of mind of father and son is an exchange in the autumn of 1780. Seeing the end of his time at the university approaching, John wrote on the 18th October, finally candid about how much he had been dreading for more than six months the prospect of the ministerial office, and confessing that he had in fact delayed being in touch with his father.⁵¹ Venn's reply of the 4th November is firm and persuasive, and lengthy. Written in Huddersfield during his first return to his old parish, revisiting familiar scenes must have given Venn extra verve with his son. Such feelings of dejection, he warns, might be aroused by pride more than by humility, and quite likely indicate that John has "lost sight of the compassion and faithfulness of the Redeemer".⁵² He is, his father warns, slighting the power of God, overlooking the providences which have met him thus far, and setting at naught the assessment of older, more experienced men who deem him right for ministry.⁵³ Venn senior goes further, rebuking John for having missed out on the relief he would have

⁵⁰ Eg, Letter dated 30th October, 1777, Venn, *Letters*, pp. 241-3. Compare pp. 243-8, 252-4, 255-6, 274-6.

⁵¹ Venn, *Letters*, p. 337.

⁵² Venn, *Letters*, p. 341.

⁵³ Venn, *Letters*, pp. 341-4.

known months before, had he been more honest with his father, Robinson or Berridge.⁵⁴

Venn's parting counsel is not that John should lose any sense of his inadequacy, and certainly not wallow in an exaggerated fear that he would disgrace his call, but that he should concentrate on finishing his studies, pray and not overthink the matter, and trust the counsel of his elders.⁵⁵

The family was well aware of that this letter, the longest in the published volume at almost ten pages, was lacking "the usual tenderness which characterises Mr Venn's parental letters".⁵⁶ It did, though, achieve its ends, and thus justify its inclusion. John Venn acceded to his father's correction, and readers of the *Letters* would be well aware of his successful subsequent career, every inch the successor to his father. Not all sons of evangelical homes were, of course. Henry Venn junior would have still had clear and painful memories of writing to William Wilberforce in 1819 about the indiscretions of his son at Cambridge, and advising him that college life was proving young William's ruin.⁵⁷ Many evangelicals shared the same concerns about their sons, and their daughters, and so the *Letters* shows that conscientious and firm parents could be successful in their efforts to keep their children in the narrow way. Venn loved being a father, and blended ambition and realism in his counsel both to his own children, and to fellow parents.⁵⁸

The curating of the collection inevitably shows a degree of selectivity. Venn's struggle to arrive at an assurance of salvation, references to Calvinism, the problems at Clapham, Whitefield, Wesley, the Countess's Connexion and Venn's extra-parochial work, all receive scant attention or were omitted in the biography and letters. The impression

⁵⁴ Venn, *Letters*, p. 345.

⁵⁵ Venn, *Letters*, p. 348.

⁵⁶ Venn, *Letters*, p. 348.

⁵⁷ David Newsome, *The Parting of Friends. The Wilberforces and Henry Manning* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1993), pp. 57-9.

⁵⁸ Venn, *Letters*, p. 429.

intended is that Venn was a Bible Christian, a respectable churchman, affable, a family man and an industrious parochial minister. With that commendation, his memory was enshrined and offered to the next uncertain century of Anglican mission. In 1856 Bishop Daniel Wilson of Calcutta told Venn's grandson that he was glorying in the *Letters*, and finding "nothing so wonderful as his insight into difficulties, whether in Scripture or in his ministry."⁵⁹ Over fifty years after its publication, H.C.G. Moule of Cambridge was recommending the *Letters* to clergymen.⁶⁰ Quite why Venn's life and ministry as presented in the *Letters* were deemed so worthy of the attention of nineteenth-century Evangelicals will be explored below.

⁵⁹ Josiah Bateman, *The Life of Daniel Wilson* (Boston, 1860), p. 673.

⁶⁰ *The Clergyman's Magazine* (London, August, 1887). The recommendation was made alongside works by Scott and Cecil, "a school of writers not greatly in vogue now".

5.2 The Cambridge Investment

When John Venn declared that his father's last two decades "were marked by no peculiar or striking events", he must have been mindful of the ordinariness of his parochial ministry contrasted with the strategic role he would play in shaping a generation of Cambridge undergraduates.⁶¹ In May of 1772 Venn told Ann Riland of an unidentified Cambridge clergyman who accompanied him on a trip to London (scared, Venn claimed, of being seen with him in his own town).⁶² The same letter speaks of Venn's going to Cambridge "to be of some service to the students! I go for no other purpose." Then in October Venn told Matthew Powley that "there are some excellent young men at college, who come to me from the University, as I was in hopes they would."⁶³ Venn would have remembered that he did not find there the evangelical faith he longed for as an undergraduate, as was the case with Grimshaw and Berridge. Methodist piety was not unknown at Cambridge: there had been a Methodist cell at Queens' in the 1730s and at St John's in the 1760s, but there is no evidence that the fervour of the Holy Club made an equivalent impact.⁶⁴ What follows is an attempt to trace the continuities of Venn's theology and convictions regarding ministry and the Church of England, as he sought to invest in her future incumbents, and particularly in Charles Simeon.

Who these individuals were who went out to Yelling at the start of Venn's incumbency is not known, but the numbers making the same journey grew, and held. The rector also visited Cambridge to bring friendship and counsel, and sometimes preached.⁶⁵ Joseph and Henry Jowett, Samuel Hey, William Farish, Henry Coulthurst, Thomas Thomason and

⁶¹ Venn, *Letters*, p. 54.

⁶² Venn, *Letters*, p. 194.

⁶³ Venn, *Letters*, p. 199.

⁶⁴ Peter Searby, *A History of the University of Cambridge: Volume 3, 1750–1870* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 320.

⁶⁵ Venn, *Letters*, pp. 265, 359, 452.

Thomas Robinson all looked to Venn as a model for piety and ministry, Robinson sharing with him his debt of love, and later speaking of “my great prototype, Mr. Venn.”⁶⁶ Farish, John Flavel and Charles Jerram each remembered Venn with great admiration in the course of their careers, Flavel providing a narrative of their visit to Yelling on the 1st April, 1795.⁶⁷ Jerram was so moved by the interview with Venn - “most interesting and profitable day in the whole course of our life” - that he gave ten pages to transcribing much of Flavel’s notes of it in his memoirs.⁶⁸ “They willingly acknowledge how much they owed, under God, to his judicious and animating counsel,” was John Venn’s comment.⁶⁹

For many of these serious young men, scholarship and piety were closely connected, especially at Magdalene College. The Leeds man Samuel Hey, 7th Wrangler in 1771, became Fellow and then President (and Senior Proctor in the university). When the German scholar von Uffenbach visited the college in 1710 he found the books in the library “with hardly a single exception overgrown with mould”, but Hey was to bring a stiff brush.⁷⁰ In the near-complete absence of the Master, Barton Wallopp, Hey’s Presidency turned Magdalene into a hothouse of evangelical piety.⁷¹ Henry Jowett and William Farish both held professorships there (Farish was also Vicar of St Giles, a few yards beyond his college gate, for almost forty years), and in the period 1778-1797 the three of them oversaw a sharp rise in academic standards, which included Magdalene men winning the Norrisian Prize for Divinity fifteen times in twenty three years.⁷² An interesting aside in the improving of Magdalene’s fortunes in this period is that in the year 1796-97 no fewer that twelve men sponsored by the Elland society were in residence.

⁶⁶ Vaughan, *Account*, 252. A personal letter from Robinson of the 3rd of August 1785 is typical of his affection for Venn. Venn MSS, Acc.81/C19/32.

⁶⁷ Venn MSS, Acc.81/F32.

⁶⁸ Jerram, *Memoirs*, p. 96.

⁶⁹ Venn, *Letters*, p. 55.

⁷⁰ Rosamond Bayne-Powell, *Travellers in Eighteenth Century England* (London, 1951), p. 96.

⁷¹ John Walsh, ‘The Magdalene Evangelicals’, *Church Quarterly Review*, 159 (1958), pp. 499-511.

⁷² Walsh, ‘Magdalene Evangelicals’, p. 503.

Venn's ex-curate and now vicar of Elland, George Burnett, was one of the evangelical clergy who recognised that Hey was the best man to go to in securing a place for the would-be ordinands he was handling.⁷³

Charles Simeon was the greatest inheritor of Venn's Moderate Calvinism, and the best-known evangelical clergyman of his century, with an unrivalled influence in Church and nation.⁷⁴ In the more than fifty years of his Cambridge ministry Simeon disseminated a churchly and decidedly moderated Calvinism, in which doctrine was sublimated to the plain preaching of Scripture, theological labels were disavowed, and gospel endeavour was pursued strictly within the Church. His pastoral burden was for the fourteen generations of aspiring clergymen and others in the university who would go on to be men of influence. The ambition to prepare gospel clergy for the Church and to resource them with an evangelical handling of Scripture was entirely of a piece with Venn's. The following assessment looks at continuities with and departures from Venn's own priorities.

Born the year Venn began his Huddersfield ministry, Simeon proceeded from Eton College to Cambridge, and matriculated at King's in 1779. He was converted after a three month agony of soul when faced with the necessity of receiving the sacrament in the college chapel.⁷⁵ Elected to a college fellowship in January 1782 and ordained the following May, he served as curate at St Edward's under Christopher Atkinson, and the twenty-two year old was soon filling the pews and communion rolls. Simeon estimated an

⁷³ Walsh, 'The Magdalene Evangelicals', p. 502.

⁷⁴ Biographies and assessments of Charles Simeon include; Matthew Preston, *Memoranda of Charles Simeon* (1840); Carus, *Memoirs* (London, 1847); J. Williamson, *A Brief Memoir of Charles Simeon* (London, 1848); A.W. Brown, *Recollections*; H.C.G. Moule, *Charles Simeon* (London, 1892); C.J. Morton (ed), *Charles Simeon: An Interpretation* (London, 1936); Charles Smyth, *Simeon and Church Order* (Cambridge, 1940); A. Pollard & M. Hennell (ed), *Charles Simeon: essays in commemoration of the bi-centenary of his birth (1759-1836)* (London, 1959); H. E. Hopkins, *Charles Simeon of Cambridge* (London, 1977); Marcus Loane, *Cambridge and the Evangelical Succession* (Fearn, 2007), pp. 140-71.

⁷⁵ Moule, *Simeon*, pp. 13-15.

congregation of 700 in an evening service of September that year.⁷⁶ Word of his ministry was getting beyond the city, to the delight of Berridge and Venn.⁷⁷ Venn urged his son to seek out Simeon, and on the 1st of June that year Atkinson introduced the pair, who became instant friends, meeting five times in the first week.⁷⁸ On the 13th Simeon made his way to Yelling, and, with Venn away, John took him to meet Berridge. The following month Simeon was introduced to Venn, later remarking, “in this aged minister I found a father, an instructor; and a most bright example. I shall have reason to adore my God to all eternity for the benefit of his acquaintance.”⁷⁹ In the next three months Simeon visited Yelling on six occasions, to Venn’s delight: “my soul is always the better for his visits. Oh, to flame, as he does, with zeal, and yet to be beautiful with meekness.”⁸⁰ Whilst giving instance of the early progress of Simeon’s ministry, Venn told Stillingfleet that he deemed him “calculated for great usefulness.”⁸¹ Simeon leaned heavily upon the support and the counsel of Venn, and forty years later was commending Venn to Venn’s grandson, the Rev. Edward Elliott, declaring that “in the efforts of a thousand years, I can never repay my obligations to him for all his labours of love.”⁸²

Elected to serve as vicar of Holy Trinity in the market place, Simeon began his ministry in November, 1782. The first fourteen years were marked by stiff opposition from the wardens and members of the congregation. Pews were locked, the benches which Simeon had installed at his own expense were thrown out of the church, and when evening services

⁷⁶ Venn MSS, Acc.81/C22/1, Letter from Charles Simeon to Henry Venn, 23rd September, 1782.

⁷⁷ Berridge wrote to Newton that Simeon “preaches at a church in the town which is crowded like a theatre on the first night of a new play” (17th September, 1782), Berridge, *Works*, p. 419.

⁷⁸ Loane, *Evangelical Succession*, p. 142. Simeon would say in 1813 that John Venn was “the first spiritual acquaintance that I had in the world.” Carus, *Memoirs*, p. 368.

⁷⁹ Carus, *Memoirs*, p. 23.

⁸⁰ Venn, *Letters*, p. 352.

⁸¹ Carus, *Memoirs*, p. 27.

⁸² Carus, *Memoirs*, p. 555; cf. Hopkins, *Simeon*, p. 91.

were started in Simeon's first year stones were thrown at the windows.⁸³ The church was being filled as dramatically as opposition grew. After exchanging pulpits with Simeon, in March 1786, Venn noted the young man's impact on the city, and prophesied to Rowland Hill, "O what numbers if the Lord will shall come out from Cambridge in a few years to proclaim the glad tidings!"⁸⁴ After a decade of struggle, hostility gradually eased at Holy Trinity, and the church became the centre of evangelical religion. Supplied by its Elland men, it was the "Sims" of Magdalene, as they were known, who were his keenest hearers, followed by others from Milner's Queens', which was, according to one detractor, an "abominable Simeonite den".⁸⁵

Clues are scant and deduction is needed to determine Venn's theological influence on Simeon. In 1784 Venn gave Simeon what works of John Owen he possessed, but no further references can be traced to what the men read or discussed.⁸⁶ Venn remarked to John in 1788 that he urged Simeon and his Cambridge friends to stay close to the Bible's great texts, though Simeon must have needed little encouragement to teach the basic tenets of the faith to his congregation.⁸⁷ Encouragement was most definitely mutual for the two men, with Venn experiencing local isolation due to his evangelicalism, and thus able to give and receive support from Simeon as he faced his trials.⁸⁸ Simeon observed his mentor closely, and various memoirs reflect that deep sense of indebtedness.⁸⁹ When consulting Venn on parochial matters, Simeon said that "his word would operate more forcibly with me than the words of a thousand others, because I knew him to be governed by no carnal

⁸³ Carus, *Memoirs*, p. 89. Carus believed that the evening service "conveyed at once the impression that it must be established for the advancement of true religion, or what the world calls Methodism". p. 88.

⁸⁴ Edwin Sidney, *The Life of the Rev. Rowland Hill, A.M.* (London, 1844), p. 175.

⁸⁵ "Forty years ago I had none but Magdalen men at my parties. I hope that religion in that college might be like leprosy in a house, impossible to be got out again without pulling it all to pieces." Brown, *Recollections*, p. 191.

⁸⁶ Henry Venn to Simeon, 6th August, 1784 (Cambridge, Ridley Hall Archives, Simeon Papers).

⁸⁷ Venn, *Life*, p. 463.

⁸⁸ Hopkins, *Simeon*, p. 102.

⁸⁹ Eg, Moule, *Simeon*, p. 28.

policy, but to be given up wholly unto God.”⁹⁰ The example of Venn’s humility deeply impressed itself on the younger man.⁹¹

As it was for Venn, the exposition of Scripture for Simeon was central to the clerical call, and his labours were showcased in his *Helps to Composition* (1801), two volumes of five hundred sermon outlines, and *Horae Homileticae* (1832-3), a twenty-one volume commentary on the whole Bible.⁹² Each of these works was hugely popular, and helped to establish the primacy of preaching in the evangelical tradition. The *British Critic* moderated its normal hostility to evangelicalism in its review of *Helps*, and in a cautious welcome, commended Simeon’s “fertility of mind and an exertion of application which are truly singular”, and observed that the publishing of the book by Cambridge University’s printing press showed a recognition that its import might reach beyond discerning clergy.⁹³ Simeon was a “Bible Christian”, committed to the exposition of Scripture, but wary of handling doctrinal topics in the pulpit. “Scripture is not a collection of precepts; it is a whole”, Simeon insisted, and positively revelled in the apparent contradictions of Scripture in his commitment to their exposition.⁹⁴ “If we would be content to take the Scriptures as they are, and to leave the reconciling of them unto God, by whose inspiration they were written, we should find them all admirably calculated to produce the ends for which they were designed.”⁹⁵

In this respect, Simeon was a man after Venn’s heart, and, quite probably, of Venn’s fashioning. The difference between them was that Venn pursued his expository ministry without deviating from his Calvinist inheritance and commitment. Simeon, by contrast,

⁹⁰ Carus, *Memoirs*, p. 46.

⁹¹ Venn, *Letters*, p. 55.

⁹² Charles Simeon, *Helps to Composition* (Cambridge, 1801), *Horae Homileticae* (21 vols, London, 1832-3),

⁹³ *The British Critic*, February, 1804 (London, 1804), p. 196.

⁹⁴ Brown, *Recollections*, p. 121.

⁹⁵ Simeon, *Horae Homileticae*, Vol.18, Discourse 2228.

was a man of a different age whose ministry matured in the decades of evangelical disassociation from Calvinism.⁹⁶ Venn and his fellow Moderate Calvinists of the same generation did not easily stand aside from doctrines to which they ascribed their experience of heart peace, and which defined them against Arminian rivals. For Simeon, his energies were focused on steering the course of orthodoxy and the establishment of future generations of clergymen. To serve those ends, the Moderate Calvinist tradition he had inherited was more a resource to be used than a standard to be held aloft. This was doubtless helped by Simeon's crucicentricism, and the "primary and fundamental importance" of justification by faith alone as his organising principle, which was, he held, the focus of all true evangelicals.⁹⁷ With that front and centre, was anything else needed?

Simeon's commitment to expounding the whole Scripture led to his expressing himself acerbically at times about both Calvinist and Arminian essentials. "Both of them are right in all they affirm and wrong in all they deny."⁹⁸ Such brusque dealings with the carefully worked-out positions of his Moderate Calvinist forefathers were strikingly out of step with a typical comment of Newton on his adherence to Calvinistic doctrines: "there seems to be no medium between holding them and not holding them."⁹⁹ But for Simeon, the expositor played executioner to those he believed could not, or would not, hold the apparent contradictions of the Bible. "The Calvinist wishes for some texts to be expunged from Scripture, the Arminian wishes the same as to others. They may say otherwise but they secretly do. So I wish for all the Bible to remain as it is. There is room enough in any text for me. I have felt thus for now fifty years."¹⁰⁰ With wild overstatement, one of his biographers asserted that Simeon's ministry recovered reformational doctrine, and also the

⁹⁶ Atkins, *Britannia*, pp. 16-19.

⁹⁷ Simeon, *Horae Homileticae*, 15, p. 313, cf. pp. 17, 271. Cf. Rosman, *Evangelicals*, pp. 10-12.

⁹⁸ Brown, *Recollections*, p. 267.

⁹⁹ Newton, *Works*, 6, pp. 245-6.

¹⁰⁰ Brown, *Recollections*, p. 274; cf. p. 277

Scriptural method of preaching which Puritan systematic preferences had impeded.¹⁰¹ It was, undoubtedly, a moderating position which won countless adherents. After 1800 there was virtual silence from Church of England pulpits on many of the doctrines of Reformation heritage (justification by faith being a notable exception), mirrored by the writings of Hannah More and Wilberforce, among others, until unstable times in the nation restored in some quarters an appetite for a more pungent Calvinism.¹⁰²

Whilst Simeon's attack on both positions had every appearance of commitment to the sole authority of the Bible, it also served other and obvious purposes. Arminianism was the creed of Methodists, and Dissent of the evangelical sort was almost exclusively Calvinistic. To disavow both therefore shored up Simeon's case for a decidedly biblicist Christianity, which he and fellow Evangelicals believed Anglican pulpits should hold forth. It also provided shared ground for collaborative evangelical work, such as that of the Bible Society. Simeon was ideologically strongly opposed to Dissent – "Dissent is an Evil".¹⁰³ Despite early associations with it, some of which were excised from the biographies,¹⁰⁴ Simeon chafed at its presence since he regarded himself and the clergy as the lawful givers of spiritual succour to all in the parish.¹⁰⁵ Functionally, his approach to Dissent was one of studied indifference rather than of antagonism. Simeon was happy to support the labours of the illiterate convert of Berridge, Jonny Stittle, at the Green Street Meeting in the town, and probably glad that those who wanted a definitive Calvinism contented themselves with Stittle rather than troubling their rector.¹⁰⁶ Whereas Venn and his generation had learned much from Dissent, and needed its support in their own

¹⁰¹ Preston, *Memoranda*, p. 30.

¹⁰² Walsh, 'Predestination', p. 43.

¹⁰³ Brown, *Recollections*, p. 223.

¹⁰⁴ For example, Carus omits from a 1783 letter Simeon's note that he preached in a Cambridgeshire cottage to thirty in the presence of a Dissenting minister. Carus, *Memoirs*, p. 57, cf. Venn MSS, Acc.81/C22/8, Letter to John Venn, 22nd September, 1783.

¹⁰⁵ For a summary of Simeon's views on Dissent, see Brown, *Recollections*, pp. 221-4.

¹⁰⁶ Arthur B. Gray, *Cambridge Revisited* (Cambridge, 1921), p. 98.

numerical weakness, Simeon and his own had an altogether different challenge, to advance the cause of their Church in the parish, nation and on the mission field, unencumbered by others. Ambition called for an assertive Bible ministry served by a moderate doctrinal presence. Simeon strengthened his position by repeatedly scolding those who held to either set of doctrines as subverting Scripture to a *system*.¹⁰⁷ “Calvinism is a system. God has not revealed his truth in a system. The Bible has no system as such. Lay aside system and fly to the Bible. Receive its words with simple submission and without an eye to any system. Be Bible Christians and not system Christians.”¹⁰⁸ In 1823 he reported a conversation with a woman in which “I opened to her my views of the Scripture system as far broader than either Calvin or Arminius made it; and I shewed her that brokenness of heart was the key to the whole”.¹⁰⁹

Antipathy towards systematised doctrine accounts for much of why Simeon could sound so hostile to Calvinism as well as to Arminianism, but also makes it possible to overlook the real continuity of the Moderate Calvinist tradition in Simeon, and Venn’s abiding influence in this area. Simeon was committed to the doctrines of human depravity and justification by faith alone, holding to the first so insistently that he raised the ire of the Master of Sidney Sussex, Edward Pearson, who published his attacks in 1805 and 1810, and seven years later was joined on the same point by the former chaplain of Trinity, William Sharpe.¹¹⁰ Despite on occasion giving it an unwarranted hyper-calvinist gloss,¹¹¹ Simeon *did* firmly believe in election, whilst also seeking to safeguard the moral

¹⁰⁷ For one of Simeon’s most significant censures of “systematizers in Theology”, see Simeon, *Horae Homileticae*, 1, pp. xxiii-xxiv.

¹⁰⁸ Brown, *Recollections*, p. 269. For comparable censures, see Brown, *Recollections*, pp. 211-12; Simeon, Dedication to *Horae Homileticae*; Carus, *Memoirs*, p. 283; cf. p. 566.

¹⁰⁹ Williamson, *Memoir*, p. 108.

¹¹⁰ John Gascoigne, *Cambridge in the Age of the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 256.

¹¹¹ For example, “If you admit anything like election in God’s dealings with man you cannot stop short of the absolute sovereignty of election.” Brown, *Recollections*, p. 270.

responsibility of the sinner, and denying reprobation, both of which were customary for Moderate Calvinists to do.¹¹²

The following is typical of Simeon's Calvinistic belief in prevenient grace, as he declared that the Christian

“takes his religion from the Bible; and endeavours as much as possible, to speak as that speaks...He does not hesitate to lay the whole blame of men's condemnation on their own depraved will...[and] does not scruple to state...‘that we have no power to do good works...without the grace of God by Christ preventing us that we may have a good will’...He is aware, that advocates for this or that system...will be ready to condemn his as inconsistent...[but] it is possible that the truth may lie, not exclusively in either, nor yet in a confused mixture of both, but in the proper and seasonable application of them both.”¹¹³

It was in the handling of the doctrines of grace that Simeon sounded so like his forebears, charging his disciples, “Do not bring the doctrines of predestination and election expressly forward in your sermon - that is not their use. Yet let not any sermon which you preach be without their pervading meaning.”¹¹⁴ Elsewhere, Simeon declared, “the doctrine of election is not one to preach but to use”.¹¹⁵ Calvinism was to serve pastoral ends, and with that conviction Simeon echoed his mentor Venn.

His followers clearly grasped the significance of what Simeon sought to do, in making the Church the true home of Scripture. His protégé Abner William Brown, who collected many of Simeon's key pronouncements on Calvinism in his *Recollections*, said that his mentor “urged all to take the statements of Scripture in their plain, evident meaning, just as we take other writings, without feeling ourselves bound to reconcile where God has not yet revealed the key”.¹¹⁶ If there were a key for Simeon, it was that of conformity to the

¹¹² For example, “God predestinated individuals to eternal life”, Brown, *Recollections*, p. 276, and many comparable statements in pp. 274-6. Simeon could commend the writings of Matthew Henry and Doddridge in this area. Brown, *Recollections*, pp. 271, 274.

¹¹³ Simeon, *Helps to Composition*, pp. v–vi. See Carter, *Evangelicals*, pp. 49-50.

¹¹⁴ Brown, *Recollections*, p. 278.

¹¹⁵ Brown, *Recollections*, p. 214.

¹¹⁶ Brown, *Recollections*, p. 61.

Church of England and her Formularies. Simeon asserted the supremacy of the Church against Dissent, and insisted on the evangelical reading of the Formularies as the correct one, claiming continuity with the Reformers.¹¹⁷ In that conviction he was in a line of Evangelicals of like-mind, including Venn.¹¹⁸ Simeon's sermons, published in 1812 as *The Excellency of the Liturgy*, were his testament to how Church of England belief and practice were quintessentially evangelical.¹¹⁹ Simeon, in "working for the whole Church at large, did all he could to discourage systematizing in religion."¹²⁰

Contending for an evangelical Church, Simeon knew that order was expedient, if not always completely essential. Simeon's conformity was less strict than his biographers often conceded.¹²¹ Simeon's curate and successor at Holy Trinity, William Carus had unique access to several thousand of Simeon's letters and other personal papers, and the result of his handling them in writing the *Memoirs* was to present a decidedly churchly Simeon. Mentions of irregularity were excised, and when the subject was acknowledged, it was summarily treated. Simeon's early-career irregularity was put down to a youthful zeal, something now laid aside with the wisdom of maturity. John Venn could not blame the callowness of youth for his father's extra-parochial excursions, but offered expediency as his excuse.¹²²

Berridge was dismayed at what he perceived to be Venn's control of Simeon, in 1785.

Both had begun a friendship with Simeon three years earlier, and were deeply impressed

¹¹⁷ Brown, *Recollections*, p. 60.

¹¹⁸ Gareth Atkins, "'True churchmen'? Anglican Evangelicals and History, c.1770-1850', *Theology*, 115 (2012), p. 44. Venn's views on the deposit of the Reformation in the Church are found in the exchange with Priestley, treated in Chapter Four.

¹¹⁹ Charles Simeon, *The Excellency of the Liturgy* (Cambridge, 1812). Basil Woodd, friend of Simeon, had recently published a visitation sermon entitled *The Excellence of the Liturgy* (London, 1810).

¹²⁰ Brown, *Recollections*, p. 61.

¹²¹ Atherstone, *Evangelical Mission*, pp. 16-18.

¹²² Venn, *Letters*, pp. 176-7.

by the extraordinary usefulness of the still gauche undergraduate.¹²³ Berridge explained to John Thornton that at his urging Simeon had for three weeks been preaching Sunday evenings and early Monday mornings in Bluntisham whilst Venn was in London. Writing to Venn of his activities, the reply Simeon received told him to put a stop to such actions.¹²⁴ Berridge was aghast at what he saw as rank hypocrisy: “This surely is grief of all griefs too deep even for tragedy”.¹²⁵ Having won Venn to a degree of irregularity, Berridge was dismayed that the promising young Simeon was now barred from such preaching.

One wonders what the shape and legacy of Simeon’s ministry would have been if Berridge rather than Venn had become his primary influence. Venn clearly saw the potential for investing in this highly promising young man, and stole a march over Berridge. Simeon, already a close friend of John, must have seen in Venn a father in the faith (his own father was cold towards his religion¹²⁶), and a man with the intelligence and gentleness, as well as proven ministerial record, from whom he might learn much for his Cambridge ministry, qualities which were less to the fore in the rough vicar of Everton. Berridge never quite gave up his hope that Simeon would embrace irregularity, but whilst the three of them dined weekly for many years, it was Venn and Simeon who swapped pulpits.¹²⁷ Simeon’s biographer Carus afforded a mere two mentions of Berridge, clearly deeming it expedient to suggest he had no more than a bit-part in Simeon’s development, in marked contrast to the praiseworthy rector of Yelling.¹²⁸

¹²³ Berridge, *Works*, p. 418.

¹²⁴ Berridge, *Works*, p. 414. Feary’s chronicler tactfully records a “Mr S of C” preaching in Feary’s house in 1785. Audley, *Memoirs*, p. 21.

¹²⁵ Berridge, *Works*, p. 414.

¹²⁶ Moule, *Charles Simeon* (London, 1892), p. 30.

¹²⁷ See Pibworth, *Letters*, pp. 342-3 for an example of Berridge’s persistence, and p.342, fn. For further detail, cf. Brown, *Recollections*, p. 201; Sidney, *Rowland Hill*, pp. 173-4.

¹²⁸ Carus, *Memoirs*, pp. 24, 58.

Conceding Simeon's deviations, Carus declared that he "was wont particularly to enforce upon his brethren the importance and duty of not indulging their zeal at the expense of regularity and discretion".¹²⁹ Jerram of Magdalene said the same, adding that Simeon was "the most strenuous adviser to our younger friends not to deviate from the rules of our church."¹³⁰ Of course, this was accurate; in time, however, and particularly in the hands of his biographers, Simeon was presented as the embodiment of conformity.¹³¹ Nonetheless, it was an obvious overstatement of Moule to declare that Simeon "venerated order and authority", as far as his own ministry.¹³²

Like Venn, Simeon did not believe in conformity for its own sake, but used the system only as far as it served him, and where gospel expediency demanded, action was taken. Blocked by hostile wardens from starting an evening service, Simeon hired rooms to that end. He had preached in a full kitchen at the Yelling rectory the previous year. When Venn exchanged with Simeon in 1786 he was clearly referring to this arrangement when he mentioned to Hill that "In the evening I spoke to eighty in a house".¹³³ Given how Venn had censured his young friend for his barn-preaching the year before he started these meetings, this suggests that Venn no less than Simeon believed in differing degrees of irregularity. Preaching in one's own parish, albeit out of the pulpit, gave both men fewer qualms than crossing parochial boundaries and clearly traducing canon law. Four years later, however, Venn told his son-in-law that Simeon "preaches twice a week in a large room", and that he preached there when he visited.¹³⁴ This was in fact space which Simeon rented beyond his own parish. He was acutely aware of the irregularity, but pleaded the

¹²⁹ Carus, *Memoirs*, p. 278. Carus also claimed that preaching outside one's pulpit had only recently become subject to the need for a Bishop's licence, p. 277.

¹³⁰ Jerram, *Memoirs*, p. 126.

¹³¹ "Perhaps the English Church never had a more loving and devoted son and servant." Moule, *Simeon*, p. 107.

¹³² Moule, *Simeon*, p. 261.

¹³³ Sidney, *Rowland Hill*, p. 175.

¹³⁴ Carus, *Memoirs*, p. 84.

needs of the people, and their vulnerability to being taken by Dissent if he could not provide for them, and then declared that, after opposition from Venn, he finally encouraged him in the way he had undertaken.¹³⁵ More risky was Simeon's organisation of parishioners into groups of twenty and his monthly visiting of them, since such gatherings, if begun with prayer, were effectively illegal conventicles.¹³⁶ The weekly conversation parties which gathered the men of Magdalene, Queens' and elsewhere risked the same charge. Little wonder that in the 1790s, when conformity was such a sensitive issue in the light of national insecurities, opponents such as the commentator Benjamin Flower attacked Simeon for his irregularity, and found sufficient instances of it to sustain their opposition well into the following decade.¹³⁷ The death of his brother in 1817 provided an inheritance for Simeon which he put into trust in order to purchase advowsons, where he ensured the placing of his men.¹³⁸ That facilitated the careers of many more evangelical clergy, and necessitated a closer conformity to their mentor, as good example to them. What Venn had modelled to a sometimes recalcitrant Simeon in the early 1780s, he now had every reason to put into practice for the sake of others.

Looking back on his beloved Cambridge in 1897, Leslie Stephen suggested that, whilst Oxford had its prophets, Cambridge bred no such sorts. The prophet, Stephen explained, was a man "who cast a spell over a certain number of disciples, and not only propagate ideas, but exercise a personal sway".¹³⁹ Cambridge was too preoccupied by mathematics and classical philology, he felt, and set no value on those who could inspire and motivate. Whilst it would never have dawned on Stephen that the homely Simeon of King's and

¹³⁵ Carus, *Memoirs*, pp. 45-6.

¹³⁶ Carus, *Memoirs*, pp. 139-40.

¹³⁷ For a summary, see Atherstone, *Evangelical Mission*, pp. 21-6.

¹³⁸ Carus, *Memoirs*, p. 590. See W.D. Balda, "'Spheres of Influence': Simeon's Trust and its Implications for Evangelical Patronage" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge, 1981).

¹³⁹ Leslie Stephen, 'Jowett's Life'. *The National Review*, 29 (171) (1897), p. 444.

Trinity Church might have anything of the prophet's mantle by Stephen's stated criteria, Simeon's ability to gather, command and inculcate and inspire his acolytes merits reflection. In 1811 Great St Mary's was crowded for the University sermon preached by Simeon, and when he preached there again in 1823 crowds were unable to get into the building.¹⁴⁰ All of Cambridge came to a halt at his funeral thirteen years later. He had presided over a school of prophets who consciously emulated their erstwhile master, and spoke a gospel inflected by him to church, nation and empire. If the undergraduates who found their way to Yelling were the springs of a movement of gospel propagation in Cambridge, Simeon emphatically shaped its course and gave strength and breadth to its direction. One estimate is that by the time of Simeon's death, one third of the clergy had sat under his ministry, and many could look to him as the one who gave encouragement towards ordination and secured curacies for them.¹⁴¹ The increase of Britain's international reach, and the activities of the East India Company, in particular, gave great scope for his men to be sent out into the world. Simeon was, in the truest sense, their bishop, and in their loyalty to him they took his legacy across the empire.¹⁴²

It was a legacy which must be ascribed in considerable measure to Venn himself, whose modelling of convictions and precepts were never far from Simeon's thoughts. At the start of his ministry, and on the occasion of John Venn's ordination, Simeon told Venn that he was planning to rework his father's Wakefield visitation sermon for publication.¹⁴³ Long after Venn's death, visits to Yelling stirred up deep affection, and the whole Venn family

¹⁴⁰ Moule, *Simeon*, p. 95.

¹⁴¹ Walsh, Haydon & Taylor (eds), *The Church of England*, p. 44.

¹⁴¹ Mark Noll, *Rise of Evangelicalism*, p. 34.

¹⁴² "As to Simeon, if you knew what his authority and influence were, and how they extended from Cambridge to the most remote corners of England, you would allow that his real sway in the church was far greater than that of any primate." Thomas Macaulay (1844), in Hopkins, *Simeon*, p. 118; cf. Atkins, *Britannia*, pp. 215-7.

¹⁴³ Venn MSS, Acc.81/C22/2. An excerpt is in Carus, *Memoirs*, pp. 28-30.

remained in Simeon's prayers.¹⁴⁴ His affection for father and son, and then for the whole Venn family, continued through his life, and he had a special fondness for the Rev. E.B. Elliott, Venn's grandson.¹⁴⁵ Simeon deeply grieved John's death in 1813, and gave his son Henry advice for his career.¹⁴⁶ It was to this Henry Venn that Simeon said of his grandfather, that "the only end for which he lived was to make all men see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."¹⁴⁷

In 1817 Simeon's sermon titled "Practical Christianity" was published.¹⁴⁸ Here, Simeon recapitulated standard themes of the centrality of justification by faith alone, the essential nature of good works, the repudiation of antinomianism, and the call to a self-abasing perfection whilst disavowing perfectionism. Like his mentor, he urged upon his hearers an activist and self-effacing Christianity, where the practitioner is assured of his heavenly calling. And this is experimental religion: the believer hears God's commands "with the most heart-felt delight", and "feels them to be exactly suited to his necessities", and then "thankfully traces all his mercies", and "pants after holiness".¹⁴⁹ And here is holy eudaimonism: "Sin and misery are inseparable as holiness also and true happiness are. What is the language of every precept in the decalogue? It is this: 'Be holy and be happy.' Of this he is convinced."¹⁵⁰ The sum of the sermon is Venn's Moderate Calvinist legacy.

¹⁴⁴ Carus, *Memoirs*, pp. 206-8. Venn left £5 in his will for Simeon to buy a mourning ring. Venn MSS, Acc.81/T9, Letters of Administration with will of Henry Venn, Rector of Yelling, Hunts, 1797.

¹⁴⁵ "I love everyone who has a drop of Henry Venn in his veins." Brown, *Recollections*, p. 139. Simeon said of John Venn, "Here I found a man after my own heart, a man for whom I have retained the most unfeigned love to his last moments, and of whom I ever shall retain the most affectionate remembrance." Carus, *Memoirs*, p. 23.

¹⁴⁶ Moule, *Simeon*, p. 28.

¹⁴⁷ Carus, *Memoirs*, p. 713.

¹⁴⁸ Charles Simeon, *The True Test of Religion in the Soul, or, Practical Christianity Delineated* (Cambridge, 1817).

¹⁴⁹ Simeon, *True Test*, pp. 8-9, 11.

¹⁵⁰ Simeon, *True Test*, p. 11.

In 1836 the future Dean of Carlisle, Francis Close (himself a Cambridge man), exhorted his Cheltenham congregation to reflect on the advance of the gospel in Simeon's ministry, and to consider what had been witnessed in their times. He pleaded the merits of Simeon's religion to shore up the confidence of his parishioners, concluding that the impact of his subject's ministry, on clergy, church and nation, was one that "will be felt in succeeding years, and generations yet unborn will rise up and call him blessed."¹⁵¹ Evangelicalism in the Church was navigating the troubled waters of her age, stirred by Romanticism, ritualism, secessionism and social troubles in England and Ireland. That he could do so was in large measure because Venn had won Simeon to himself just over fifty years before, and mentored him in his ministry. Had it been Berridge who was victorious in the struggle for Simeon, the young man's ministry would have taken a radically different turn, and without a doubt his Church been a far less trustworthy vessel than the one to which Close would point.

¹⁵¹ Francis Close, *Occasional Sermons Preached in the Parish Church of Cheltenham* (London, 1844), 195.

5.3 John Venn, and the Legacy of Venn's Moderate Calvinism for the 19th Century

One of the challenges in tracing the continuity of Moderate Calvinism in the later Hanoverian Church of England is due to the way the term *Calvinism* was either misunderstood, or used as a label of reproach, or as an equivalent term for solafideism.¹⁵² Moderate Calvinists put their energies into keeping justification by grace through faith front and centre in preaching, writing and collaborative efforts, since this was their cardinal doctrine. When John Venn took orders in 1782 its adherents had proved themselves adept at defending their claim to be true Churchmen, and were working towards being an identifiable body in the Church. Ambitious to win further ground, and souls, Moderate Calvinists pursued a religion which they considered met the existential needs of their parishioners, was true to the Scriptures, conformed to the Articles, and which avoided the unhelpful reproach of enemies on account of the perceived rigidities of their doctrines or enthusiasm of their followers. A study of John Venn's ministry provides vital insights into how the Moderate Calvinism of his father and that generation was put to use, and whether it was disavowed or at least diminished, due to changing pressures and opportunities in church and society.

Although John Venn was only fifty-four at his premature death in 1813, his busy life, committed to a wealth of endeavours in and beyond the parish, afford clear scope for assessing the legacy of his father, and of Moderate Calvinism in John's ministry as well as in his church.¹⁵³ In his *Annals* John's grandson, John A. Venn, identified his grandfather's

¹⁵² John Walsh, 'Predestination', pp. 2, 18.

¹⁵³ For John Venn, see Hugh Pearson, "Sketch of the Character of the Late John Venn of Clapham", *Evangelical Magazine*, April, 1814, pp. 125-128; Venn MSS, Acc.81/F5, Henry Venn, *John Venn of Clapham (1759-1813): Sketch of His Early Life, 1759-1777* (1850); John Venn, *Annals of a Clerical Family* (London, 1904), pp. 112-47; Michael Hennell, *John Venn and the Clapham Sect* (London, 1958); Stockton, 'The Venn Family', pp. 55-157.

true legacy as being in his sermons, his role in the founding of the Church Missionary Society, and his ministry to the Clapham Sect.¹⁵⁴ One might add to the list his effective leadership of the Eclectic Society, and also the pioneering work in poor relief which made Clapham the exemplar of an evangelical parish in the two decades Venn laboured there.¹⁵⁵ A study of his life is beyond the focus of this dissertation, and a mid-twentieth century assessment is still perfectly serviceable.¹⁵⁶

One modern treatment portrays Venn as in the shadow of his father's personality and achievements, inclined to laziness, plagued by an anxious and depressive temperament, and having taken leave of aspects of credal orthodoxy by the time of his death.¹⁵⁷ Whilst recognising John's natural diffidence and a melancholic trait, this is an engaging but ultimately unconvincing slice of family history. It might well have been the case, as Charles Jerram thought, whilst comparing the son to the father, that John had devotion without the "burning zeal" of his father, and the constraints of Christ's love, rather than its raptures.¹⁵⁸ The breadth and depth of Venn's work, all of which demanded tenacity and conviction, combined with the high esteem from fellow members of the clergy and parishioners of his labours, piety and orthodoxy, suggest a man more like his father than

¹⁵⁴ Venn, *Annals*, p. 135.

¹⁵⁵ For a modern appraisal of Venn's ministry, see Hylson-Smith, *The Churches*, p. 226.

¹⁵⁶ Hennell, *John Venn*.

¹⁵⁷ Stockton, 'The Venn Family', makes unsubstantiated claims about John's laziness, pp. xxiv, 61-2, except for noting habitually last-minute sermon preparation, which fails to appreciate the often-common habits of clergymen, some of which were necessitated by the very opposite of being otiose (pp. 65-6). The thesis develops Hennell's, which contrasts John's habitual shyness with his father's ebullience (Hennell, *Venn*, p. 272). But one must remember that John laboured successfully for two decades in a populous parish alongside commanding personalities who were affecting international change and making considerable demands on him, whilst pioneering work of his own, all of which met their high estimation. These demands put John's character and skills under severe and prolonged test in a way his father's were not, as his hectic Yorkshire ministry was concluded in under twelve years, before the staid Yelling incumbency. One wonders how much John needed to have done in order to have achieved anything equivalent to the "dramatic successes" Anne Stott saw in his father's ministry, and what loss it was to the Claphamites that their rector was, instead, merely "conscientious". Anne Stott, *Wilberforce: Family and Friends* (Oxford, 2012), p. 53. John's capacity for sustaining work under unrelenting pressure, and in generating new work, is redolent of ministerial industry, and success.

¹⁵⁸ Jerram, *Memoirs*, p. 271.

different from him, and stamped by the same beliefs and priorities through the course of his ministry. Undoubtedly, John ministered to his parish a mild if not a moderate Calvinism, and in doing so was entirely typical of Evangelicals of his age, whilst his ministry was deemed no less exemplary than that of Venn senior.

John Venn was marked out for ministry from an early age by the aspirations of his father, to which the son seemed to acquiesce rather meekly.¹⁵⁹ Berridge was deeply fond of the boy he had known since his early adolescence, supplying him with books as Henry prepared him for Cambridge, and deeply impressed by his abilities.¹⁶⁰ Towards the close of his undergraduate career in 1781 Berridge told John Thornton that “his abilities seem equal to anything he undertakes and his modesty is pleasing to all that behold him”.¹⁶¹ The following year, when John’s hopes of a fellowship at Sidney Sussex were dashed owing to a poor performance in his examinations (likely due to nerves¹⁶²) and he began a curacy at Buckden, Huntingdonshire, Berridge commended him to Newton: “he seems intended for a polished shaft”.¹⁶³ That shaft was carefully polished by his father, and its direction established by his close attention during John’s life at home and university, and on into his first incumbency at Little Dunham, Norfolk, which he began in early 1783, serving there until 1792. In a different age John would likely have been a scientist or an engineer, such was his skill and evident delight in design and experimentation, so when he followed his father’s calling, it was with no little anxiety and even with misgiving from both.¹⁶⁴ Venn

¹⁵⁹ Hennell, *Venn*, pp. 31-33.

¹⁶⁰ Berridge, *Works*, p. 282.

¹⁶¹ Berridge, *Works*, p. 414; cf. p. 402.

¹⁶² “6th junior op; ought to have been senior op,” John Venn wrote disconsolately in his diary. Venn, *Annals*, p. 120. The promise of a fellowship at that point disappeared.

¹⁶³ Berridge, *Works*, p. 418.

¹⁶⁴ Venn, *Annals*, p. 121. John contributed to scientific periodicals during his Clapham ministry with obvious command of the subjects he wrote on, and gave his energies to the practical and medical matters of home and parishioners with relish. Hennell, *Venn*, pp. 141, 194.

senior mixed precept and encouragement with warning and rebuke in order to develop his son's convictions, from the outset of his ministry until his final year with him.¹⁶⁵

At John's Clapham induction service he preached on "The Importance and Difficulties of the Christian Ministry", with a strong accent on its difficulties.¹⁶⁶ Venn appeared at his most halting, the anxious son over whom his father worried so much. Whilst he asked for his parishioners' sympathy towards their minister's weaknesses in their future shared journey, his manifesto for ministry was exactly that of his father: the minister "has to arrest the sinner in his course of sin; to shake his stronghold of security; to make the stout-hearted tremble under the denunciation of God's judgment; to lead him so to deny himself as to sacrifice the inclinations most dear to him - to repent and become a new creature."¹⁶⁷ The sermon was greatly appreciated by Henry Thornton, and was an auspicious beginning to Venn's work.¹⁶⁸ Each son was declaring loyalty to what their illustrious fathers had come to believe and to contend for in the same parish forty years previously.

Thirty-four sermons published the year after Venn's death show an obvious continuity with his father's Moderate Calvinism:¹⁶⁹ humanity's fallenness and need of regeneration through faith in Christ's saving power,¹⁷⁰ salvation effected by the Holy Spirit,¹⁷¹ justification, and the place of good works,¹⁷² alongside straightforward treatments of the doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity.¹⁷³ Equally, there are emphases typical of the Moderate Calvinist fraternity and quintessentially those of Henry Venn: the animating

¹⁶⁵ See above, pp. 237-9. After John's installation at Clapham Venn wrote to his son, urging him to be bold, decisive, and joyful in his calling, Venn, *Letters*, p. 517.

¹⁶⁶ John Venn, *Sermons* (Boston, 1822), pp. 1-10.

¹⁶⁷ Venn, *Sermons*, p. 6.

¹⁶⁸ Hennell, *Venn*, p. 115.

¹⁶⁹ John Venn, *Sermons* (Ellerton & Henderson: London, 1814). The first 1822 American, from the third London edition, is used in this analysis.

¹⁷⁰ Venn, *Sermons*, pp. 12-13.

¹⁷¹ Venn, *Sermons*, pp. 13, 50.

¹⁷² Sermon IV, Venn, *Sermons*, pp. 35-44.

¹⁷³ Sermons VII and VIII, Venn, *Sermons*, pp. 69-94.

power of grace to produce gratitude for salvation,¹⁷⁴ the need for a loving and catholic spirit amongst true Christians,¹⁷⁵ and heaven as a world of happiness, the joys of which are to be tasted in this life.¹⁷⁶ Venn's eudaimonism here is of a piece with that which his father extolled in *The Complete Duty*. "Religion and happiness are convertible terms. They are, in fact, one and the same thing: and it is not more impossible that God should be unhappy, than that his devout servants dwelling near his throne, and "serving him day and night in his temple", should taste of misery."¹⁷⁷ The sermons never strike a dogmatic tone, except in curbing the impulses of what Venn saw elsewhere towards an unhelpful dogmatism. "Holding one doctrine in its most rigid and absolute sense they have either totally denied the other or so explained it away as to deprive it of all practical influence."¹⁷⁸ Venn set forth a religion of personal comfort and public action, predicated upon the new birth experienced through justification by faith, and marked by a humble, peaceable and joyful spirit. Compared with the sometimes strident tone of his father's 1759 *Select Sermons* and of *The Complete Duty* (much of it written at Clapham), as the recipient of this evangelical deposit, John Venn had no need to replicate such an approach. Besides that, Venn senior was finding his way in a new religious position held by a minority in a temporary post, whereas John was serving his significant incumbency, and commending the tradition amongst those familiar with it. Nonetheless, he could frame the evangelist's direct appeals to his hearers when pressing for a response,¹⁷⁹ and insisted that, for the preaching of the gospel to be effective, its herald must bring "the animated appeal to the feelings, the close application to the conscience, the tender address, as of a father to his children over whom

¹⁷⁴ Venn, *Sermons*, p. 65.

¹⁷⁵ Venn, *Sermons*, p. 62.

¹⁷⁶ Venn, *Sermons*, pp. 283, 285, 297.

¹⁷⁷ Venn, *Sermons*, p. 65.

¹⁷⁸ Venn, *Sermons*, p. 278.

¹⁷⁹ Venn, *Sermons*, pp. 52, 363-6.

he tenderly watches.”¹⁸⁰ This is to hear his own father’s voice, who stipulated the preacher’s self-giving in preparation and delivery for the good of his parishioners.¹⁸¹

The course of action Venn set himself upon came from this insistence that a clergyman was “responsible to God and to his country for the morals of his peculiar charge as far as it is in his power to influence them; and this obligation surely requires him to every endeavour in his power for their religious improvement.”¹⁸² In his induction sermon Venn triangulated national, parochial and ministerial health, and his subsequent ministry strove to promote all three. He gave assiduous attention to catechetical work and to the preparation of candidates for confirmation, and his concern for the wellbeing of children and a keen interest in education led him to promote the parish’s charity school, knowing the evangelistic usefulness of such efforts, that each child “may by education be endued with qualities friendly to the growth of Christianity”.¹⁸³

Concerned at the disproportionality of the better-off at his Clapham church, Venn introduced a third service in 1794 (a striking innovation) in order to promote the wellbeing of the poorer members of the parish, though its establishing needed delicate and protracted negotiations amidst suspicions of the rector’s supposed enthusiasm, and the possible implications of favouring the lower orders at a time of national ill-ease.¹⁸⁴ Two years later he was personally inspecting the workhouse and making recommendations for its improvement, as well as raising levels of poor relief, and preventing a smallpox epidemic through a vaccination programme in 1800.¹⁸⁵ In the previous year Venn began a Society for Bettering the Conditions of the Poor, assigning lay visitors to the parish which

¹⁸⁰ Venn, *Sermons*, p. 16. Venn was extolled at his death as a heart-felt and heavenly-minded preacher. Pratt, *Thought*, p. 28.

¹⁸¹ Venn, *Letters*, p. 460.

¹⁸² ‘Charity Schools’, *Christian Observer*, September 1804, p. 546.

¹⁸³ ‘Charity Schools’, *Christian Observer*, September 1804, p. 547.

¹⁸⁴ Hennell, *John Venn*, pp. 116-20 for a narrative of the affair.

¹⁸⁵ Hennell, *John Venn*, pp. 141-43.

had been divided for the purpose of serving what he estimated to be half of the parish in need of assistance.¹⁸⁶ The stated aim of the Society was “the real improvement and permanent happiness of the poor”, and Venn sought to supply his increasing numbers of the poor in his proto-urban parish with the tools for self-improvement, working to see “the naked...cloathed by his own industry.”¹⁸⁷

Abundant other schemes for the improvement of parochial and national life issued from the rector’s study, and from conversations with likeminded friends. Venn was one of the instigators of the Church Missionary Society in 1799, labouring to promote its concerns, and patiently working for it to be accepted by the ecclesiastical authorities whose imprimatur was vital to its success.¹⁸⁸ In the same period he essentially led the Eclectic Society, the gatherings of London evangelical clergy and like-minded others.¹⁸⁹ Whilst not equalling his father’s deep love of and confidence in social settings, Venn persevered as friend and confidant to many in and beyond the parish, and was loved as their pastor by the inner circle of the men and their families known as the Clapham Sect.¹⁹⁰ Fortified by Venn’s ministry, the Sect got to work, harnessing evangelical conviction for the work of networking, petitioning, publishing and agitating.¹⁹¹ The houses of the Common were hives of industrious planning and the execution of numerous schemes for the betterment of the human condition, in London, the nation and the empire, for Britons, and for those in

¹⁸⁶ John Venn, *Rules and Regulations of the Society for bettering the condition of the Poor*, 2nd edn (London, 1805), 3. This work was ahead of its time. See H.D. Rack, ‘Domestic Visitation: A Chapter in Early Nineteenth Century Evangelicalism’, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 24 (1973), pp. 357–76.

¹⁸⁷ Venn MSS, Acc.81/C5/12; Venn, *Rules and Regulations*, p. 30. The assessment of Hilton about the imbalance of Claphamite priorities is unconvincing, and certainly inaccurate regarding their rector’s labours. Hilton, *Atonement*, p. 208.

¹⁸⁸ For Venn’s laying forth its principles and for Pratt’s assessment of his subsequent role, see Pratt, *Thought*, pp. 97-99. Cf. pp. 103, 523-4.

¹⁸⁹ Hennell, *Venn*, p. 251.

¹⁹⁰ “Quite a first rater”, Wilberforce said to Hannah More of Venn in 1793, and in the same year wrote in his diary that Venn was “heavenly-minded, and bent on his Master’s work, affectionate to all around him, and above all to Christ’s people, as such. How low are my attainments!” Stott, *Wilberforce*, p. 54; John Stoughton, *William Wilberforce* (London, 1885), p. 138.

¹⁹¹ For an acknowledgement of Venn’s role, see Robert & Samuel Wilberforce, *Wilberforce*, 3, p. 473.

servitude to their mercantile ambitions. The theology and accent of their parish church pulpit greatly suited the instincts of those who made up the activist corps working for national reformation.¹⁹² Keeping up with the group, and even suggesting new projects to its members on top of his many other responsibilities, brought Venn bouts of exhaustion, and of enforced rest periods (during the longest in 1802-3 he was out of pulpit for fifteen months), during which time his curates came to the fore. Venn had his father's gift of making life-long friends of several of them, and John Cunningham, who came to the parish in 1809, saw in his employer a model for all clergyman.¹⁹³

Had Calvinism been dispensed with in the haste of Evangelicals to win public confidence for their concerns? The lack of overt references to the doctrines of grace in end-of-the-century evangelical sermons, and the disparaging remarks of even those in Clapham about Calvinism might suggest as much. The first generation of Calvinists in 1740s and 50s had their religion to give an account for the experience they discerned in their lives and ministries. Half a century on, and those distinctives had served that purpose. The gospel had been safeguarded from Arminian error, and its proponents had grown adept in offering the pastoral solace of assurance to believers. John Venn said that in 1795 some of the "serious" clergy were accusing even his father of being insufficiently doctrinal.¹⁹⁴

Questioned on the theology of a young minister, Henry Venn replied, "I really do not know: he is a sincere disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ; and that is of infinitely more

¹⁹² For the Clapham Sect, see J. Stephen, 'The Clapham Sect', *Edinburgh Review*, 80 (1844), pp. 295–307; J. Stephen, *Essays in Ecclesiastical Biography* (London, 1875), pp. 523–84; E. M. Howse, *Saints in Politics: The 'Clapham Sect' and the Growth of Freedom* (London, 1952); N. G. Annan, 'The Intellectual Aristocracy', in J.H. Plumb (ed), *Studies in Social History* (London, 1955), pp. 243–87; M. Hennell, *John Venn and the Clapham Sect* (London, 1958); I. Bradley, *The Call to Seriousness: The Evangelical Impact on the Victorians* (London, 1976); J. Pollock, *Wilberforce* (London, 1977); C. Tolley, *Domestic Biography: The Legacy of Evangelicalism in Four Nineteenth-Century Families* (Oxford, 1997).

¹⁹³ Hennell, *Venn*, p. 132.

¹⁹⁴ Venn MSS, Acc.81/C 21/1, John quotes his father in a letter addressed to Charles Elliott, 30th October, 1791.

importance than his being a disciple of Calvin or Arminius.”¹⁹⁵ Venn knew the camp he was in, but had no relish to take up arms for it. What he wanted of himself he was satisfied to find in others.

The tempering of age and the needs of the times showed in Venn’s friends. John Berridge’s curate Richard Whittingham identified the cooling of his vicar’s ardour for controversial works, valuing the plain and central teaching of Scripture ministered so as to build Christian unity (quite possibly, Berridge deemed his irregular ministry controversy enough).¹⁹⁶ Newton’s course was very similar. He broadened his views on the intent of the atonement, and lost his affection for the technicalities and declarations of John Owen and Jonathan Edwards, but none of his attachment to the tradition which brought undergirding and incentive to his own religion and ministry.¹⁹⁷ As pastor and author, Newton was experienced in delineating his Calvinism to the extent that it served his purposes, which were centred on propagating the Gospel. Both Richard Cecil’s and Newton’s own assessment of his ministry are pertinent here:

“His doctrine was strictly that of the church of England, urged on the consciences of men in the most practical and experimental manner. “I hope”, said he one day to me, smiling, “I hope I am upon the whole a *scriptural* preacher; for I find I am considered as an Arminian among the high Calvinists and as a Calvinist among the strenuous Arminians.”¹⁹⁸

To go beyond that, for Newton and for Venn, was to dishonour their Master.

Equally, too much talk of Calvinism in the Church could give grist for the Dissenting mill. Independent and Baptists, spurred by the example of assertive gospel preaching by the Evangelicals, and discovering by the same means how to handle their Calvinism evangelistically, all experienced significant growth around the turn of the century,

¹⁹⁵ Venn, *Letters*, pp. 32-33.

¹⁹⁶ Whittingham (ed), *Works*, pp.17-18.

¹⁹⁷ Hindmarsh, *Newton*, p. 167.

¹⁹⁸ Newton, *Works*, 1, p. 93.

particularly through itinerancy and the Sunday School movement.¹⁹⁹ Dissent's new strength made it a force to be recognised, rather than partnered with. The slurs of enthusiasm as well as political non-conformity levelled against chapel-goers were ones Evangelicals were keen to avoid. The term "Calvinist" had much of the opprobrium directed at the label "Methodist" in the early nineteenth century,²⁰⁰ and a wise parson, even if he were secure in Moderate Calvinist convictions, and able to trace them in his church's formularies, might judge that any such doctrinal talk could invite associations to the detriment of his ministry, and risk splitting his parish.²⁰¹ Whilst Evangelicals recognised the gospel essentials they shared with dissenting brethren, many took pains to keep a distance, due to changing perceptions about Dissent in the nation. Fears about Jacobite sympathies, long synonymous with Dissent, had subsided after 1760, but the loss of America triggered a new hostility towards those outside the Church, since the architects of the rebellion were in large part Dissenters. The French Revolution of the following decade brought fresh waves of anti-Jacobinism and patriotism, and with them animosity towards Dissent, and towards others thought to be harbouring dissenting opinions of any sort. In the revolution year of 1789, when Britons were debating the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts amid concern about Socinianism, Wilberforce declared that Dissent was "highly injurious to the cause of religion in the long run", and many Evangelicals shared his exasperation.²⁰² A patriotic, national church led by demonstrably patriotic clergy was

¹⁹⁹ Lovegrove, *Established Church*, pp. 152-3. For regional differences of success, see p. 38.

²⁰⁰ One fair-minded contributor to *The British Review* in 1812 showed himself well aware of the minds and habits of Calvinistic clergy and parishioners, and observed that Calvinist "in its general application as a stigma is gradually stepping into the place of the term Methodist". *The British Review and London Critical Journal* (London, 1812), 3, p. 244.

²⁰¹ Walsh, 'Predestination', p. 11.

²⁰² Robert & Samuel Wilberforce, *Wilberforce*, 1, p. 249.

the order of the day, and Evangelicals pivoted in order to fix themselves as propagators of the good, in both attempts to win the nation, and to invest in mission overseas.²⁰³

Moderate Calvinism was a sail firmly trimmed in order to catch the winds of contemporary outlook. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries Evangelicals were finding their way in a society which was increasingly uninterested in doctrinal distinction, and where utility was a highly-prized value. Back in 1769 Henry Venn had claimed that doctrine was to practice like the sun to ripening fruit, as he safeguarded the necessity of good works.²⁰⁴ From the 1790s it was apparent that Evangelicals needed to stress the utilitarian import of the Christian religion, whose “capital excellence”, as Wilberforce put it, was that “she values moral attainments at a far higher rate than intellectual acquisitions, and proposes to conduct her followers to the heights of virtue rather than of knowledge”.²⁰⁵ Like his Cambridge companion Simeon, whilst largely indifferent to theological labels, including that of “Calvinist”, John Venn never materially departed from the religion of his formation.

When he spoke in later life of how decided a Calvinist he was on leaving home, such was his training, John Venn’s recollection was of how bigoted his instincts were against Arminians, not of how much he had subsequently disavowed his father’s religion.²⁰⁶ The Calvinism which had resourced his father’s ministry, with its accent on assurance, holiness and practicality, continued in Venn’s. Whereas Henry continued in his belief in particular redemption, itself a minority position amongst Church of England Evangelicals, John was an hypothetical universalist.²⁰⁷ Henry Venn junior’s assessment of his father was that he

²⁰³ Gareth Atkins, ‘Christian heroes, providence and patriotism in wartime Britain, 1793-1815’, *Historical Journal*, 58, 2 (2015), pp. 393-414.

²⁰⁴ Venn, *Examination*, p. 33.

²⁰⁵ Wilberforce, *Practical View*, p. 227.

²⁰⁶ Walsh, ‘Yorkshire Evangelicals’, p. 42, fn.

²⁰⁷ Hennell’s discussion on Evangelical views on the extent of the atonement is muddled, and thus an unhelpful guide. Venn and the majority of his Eclectic friends all took the standard hypothetical universalist

was “pre-eminently scriptural”, and that he “had no system”, and seldom made any recourse to the Formularies in his preaching. In his Church loyalty, “he was scrupulously regular in all his ministrations, notwithstanding his hereditary associations.”²⁰⁸ The last comment surprises, suggesting that, despite the glossing of his grandfather’s irregularity in *The Life and Letters*, Henry Venn junior knew that familial reputations were slow to be forgotten. Whilst John Venn might recognise that the basic impulse of Christians must be towards unity – one of his sermons decried “odious denominations”– he saw no other good for England except through the promotion of evangelicalism in the national church.²⁰⁹ By the end of the century, in a period of great national insecurity, loyalty to Church became an obvious and exploited feature. John and his father were both intensely patriotic and concerned to keep up with news of the developing threat of Bonaparte.²¹⁰ “Those who are hostile to the British Constitution are almost always equally hostile to the Christian revelation,” declared Porteous in 1799.²¹¹

In his 1797 apologia, *A Practical View*, Wilberforce declared that “fruitless will be all attempts to sustain, much more to revive, the fainting cause of morals unless you can in some degree restore the prevalence of evangelical Christianity”, and he knew that neither doctrinal aridity nor the prejudice of church and state towards vital religion would serve its ends.²¹² When Hannah More declared that “action is the life of virtue”, she had in mind the necessity of just the same religious impulse, and wrote no less scathingly than Wilberforce

position. Hennell’s assertion that Venn therefore “turned his back on Calvinism” is unfounded, as is the claim that talk of God’s “paternal love” towards sinners is uncalvinistic. Hennell, *Venn*, p. 264.

²⁰⁸ Venn MSS, Acc.81/F48, Henry Venn, *Sketch of the Character of John Venn*.

²⁰⁹ Venn, *Sermons*, p. 62. Cf Pratt, , p. 3, for Venn’s professed low views of denominational distinctives.

²¹⁰ At the height of the crisis John would send his son Henry to Thornton’s house each evening to inquire after the latest developments. Tolley, *Domestic Biography*, p. 15. For John, Bonaparte was “Satan personified” Pratt, *Thought*, p. 331.

²¹¹ B. Porteous, *A Charge Delivered to the Clergy of the Diocese of London* (London, 1799), p. 15.

²¹² Wilberforce, *A Practical View*, p. 419. One needs also to note Hannah More’s *Thoughts on the Importance of Manners to the Great to General Society* (London, 1788).

on the emptiness of morality devoid of saving faith.²¹³ Wilberforce's cousin, Henry Thornton, who had occupied his Clapham pew under John Venn's ministry, just as his own father has sat under Venn senior's ministry there fifty years before, put his lifetime of sermon-hearing to good use when he penned his own scriptural reflections and prayers.²¹⁴ Thornton, converted in 1795 through a conviction that the gospel made sense of his experience,²¹⁵ declared that "every doctrine, every precept, every mystery even of our faith, has its practical tendency, and its proper practical use."²¹⁶ Practical and experimental religion it must be. Now, for the Venn family came the challenge of setting forth Henry's memory and ministerial labours in order to do service to this religion.

²¹³ Hannah More, *An Estimate of the Religion of the Fashionable World* (London, 1808), p. 146.

²¹⁴ Henry Thornton, *Family Prayers, and Prayers on the Ten commandments & to which is added a Family Commentary upon the Sermon on the Mount* (New York, 1849).

²¹⁵ Standish Meacham, *Henry Thornton of Clapham, 1760-1815* (Cambridge, MA, 1964), p. 15.

²¹⁶ Thornton, *Family Prayers*, p. 349.

5.4 Presenting Venn: the Family and other Annals

In 1789, and well aware that he was driving against the secularising spirit of the age, Joseph Milner declared that “the history of the Church is properly nothing else than a history of the effusions of the Spirit of God, and of the effects which they produce in the world.”²¹⁷ Half a century later, Thomas Carlyle published his lectures *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and The Heroic in History*, in which he argued that “the history of the world is but the biography of great men”.²¹⁸ Carlyle saw heroism and its cult, whilst full of attendant danger, as both inevitable and actually essential for a flourishing society. The heroic religious leader “presides over the worship of the people; is the uniter of them with the Unseen Holy. He is the spiritual captain of the people; as the prophet is their spiritual king with many captains: he guides them heavenward, by wise guidance through this earth and its work.”²¹⁹ The years between the two writers had shown clearly just how much the evangelical enterprise was dependent upon gifted and confident leaders, to lead the charge and inspire others to fall in with them. The challenge of the evangelical biographers was to frame their accounts in ways which taught that supernatural grace was ultimately responsible for the successes of the subjects, and also to trace the qualities of the men themselves, emphasising gifting and heroic virtues which made them worthy of emulation by succeeding generations.

Venn himself knew that historical biography was an effective tool for the safeguarding and promulgation of the evangelical enterprise. He had commended evangelical sainthood when he published his funeral sermon and a sketch of Grimshaw’s life in 1763, bringing

²¹⁷ J. Milner, *Essays on Several Religious Subjects* (London, 1789), p. 167. For an awareness of perceptions of this view, see p. 168.

²¹⁸ Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-worship and the Heroic in History* (London, 1840), p. 34.

²¹⁹ Carlyle, *Heroes*, p. 157.

out Grimshaw's qualities of personal integrity and self-denying labour.²²⁰ Thirteen years later, Venn published a brief memoir of the friend of his father, the high Tory Sir John Barnard (1685-1764), Member of Parliament and Lord mayor of London.²²¹ Claiming himself a member of Barnard's circle, Venn modelled Barnard as a worthy member of the Church, eschewing his Quaker upbringing for a sole trust in Christ's vicarious death, and baptised aged eighteen, after which he "continued til his death a member of the Established Church, an admirer of her Liturgy, and an Ornament to her Communion."²²² His life, of fixed moral principles, unflinching service to capital and nation, and deep personal faith, was a reproach to the spirit of the age which thought a man could live and serve with no religion.²²³ Venn's Barnard was proof that religion had been his making, and better still, Barnard was a decidedly evangelical churchman. The praising of famous men and fathers of the evangelical stamp would now occupy the energies of those who came after.

For the first generation of Evangelicals, promotion to heaven meant promotion of their legacy for those charged with keeping the faith after them. In 1807 Thomas Scott declared his affection for Newton, Berridge, Venn and their ilk in contrast to the up-coming clergy, preferring them "with all their imperfections, to these *sang-froid* young men".²²⁴ Others appeared to share the same predilection. Encomia on Venn appeared soon after his death, both from Church and from Dissent. John Fawcett greatly revered his mentor Grimshaw, and also, Venn. Due to the success Venn enjoyed in Huddersfield, Fawcett said that he "might without impropriety be termed the apostle of the extensive sphere in which he

²²⁰ Venn, *Christ the Joy*; Middleton borrowed heavily from this piece in his own treatment of Grimshaw. Middleton, *Biographia* (4 vols, London, 1816), 4, p. 403.

²²¹ Henry Venn, *Memoirs of the late Sir John Barnard, Knight, and Alderman of the City of London* (London, 1776).

²²² Venn, *Memoirs*, p. 5.

²²³ Venn, *Memoirs*, p. 15. Venn possibly published the memoir in order to promote philanthropy as synonymous with a successful public life: Roshan D. Allpress, 'Making philanthropists: entrepreneurs, evangelicals and the growth of philanthropy in the British world, 1756–1840' (D.Phil. thesis, Oxford, 2016), p. 78.

²²⁴ John Scott, *The Life of the Rev. Thomas Scott*, 4th edn (London, 1822), p. 396, emphasis original.

served.”²²⁵ Fawcett exalted in what he saw as Venn’s forceful preaching, incessant labour, and catholicity and conjectured that Huddersfield was ever-after transformed in its civic and commercial life due to Venn’s ministry.²²⁶ Samuel Bottomley mentioned Venn so frequently in his Scarborough pulpit that the town’s postmistress instantly recognised Venn’s grandson’s name when he visited.²²⁷ The challenge was set for Churchmen to ensure that Venn’s reputation was promoted without his Calvinism, sometime irregularity and evangelical zeal being used to negative effect.

The year following Venn’s death, *The Evangelical Magazine* published a biography by William Moorhouse, Pastor of Highfields Independent Chapel in Huddersfield.²²⁸ The biography presented a man of evangelical principles whose geniality and personal integrity furthered the Gospel’s progress - “as a companion he was the most agreeable man imaginable.”²²⁹ Whilst Moorhouse’s name was ascribed to it, John Venn discerned the hand of Thomas Haweis, suggested by reported conversations between Venn and his “Oxford friend” (identified as a convert of Samuel Walker) regarding free grace in the Clapham curacy, and the noting of a meeting at the end of Venn’s life with the same early companion. John confided to a friend his fury at Haweis’ involvement.²³⁰ Antipathy towards Haweis was sharp amongst conforming Evangelicals, and Henry Venn junior determined to erase him from the evangelical history he planned to write.²³¹ A promoter of Dissent by virtue of being head of the Countess of Huntingdon’s Connexion following her death in 1791, as well as an unbending Calvinist, Haweis fell out with the Milner brothers

²²⁵ Fawcett, *An Account*, p. 28.

²²⁶ Fawcett, *An Account*, pp. 26-30.

²²⁷ Venn MSS, Acc.81/F13, p. 9.

²²⁸ Moorhouse, ‘Memoir’, pp. 221-227.

²²⁹ Moorhouse, ‘Memoir’, pp. 224.

²³⁰ Walsh, ‘Yorkshire Evangelicals’, p. 230, fn.

²³¹ In his notes preparatory for an unfinished work on early Evangelicals, Henry Venn junior wrote that Haweis was so “proud”, and was “too intimate” with the woman he later married. Venn MSS, Acc.81/F53 – Notes on Early Evangelicals, p. 42. For this courtship, of which Romaine disapproved, see Wood, ‘Haweis’, pp. 149-150.

on questions of conformity, further alienating himself from the Moderate mainstream.²³²

For John Venn, Moorhouse and Haweis had presented a man too much after their own likeness. The latter was one of a number of early Evangelicals noticeably absent from Venn's published letters and the biography produced by the family.

The task of stewarding Venn's reputation was now a family concern, and filiopietism now came to the fore. John wrote the majority of his father's biography, but looked to Simeon for assistance. Simeon was distressed by "the great injury" dealt to Venn's character in the memoir which was printed with the fourth edition of *The Complete Duty* in 1798,²³³ but a fortnight after John's death in 1813, Simeon told the family that, although he wanted to give the project his attention, the lack of material on which to base his work made it far too difficult.²³⁴ This is an implausible reason, given the proliferation of letters Venn wrote, which were kept by the family, and the cache augmented by those offered up by friends amounted to over one thousand, but Simeon must have realised how fraught with danger the whole realm of biography-writing was, especially at a time when his thoughts might have been turning from Venn's to laying the foundations for his own.

In commending a godly leader of the revival, the biographers' task was relatively easy, the breadth of sources all allowing for a straightforward piece of ancestor-worship. Cowper lamented to Newton in 1791 that he had not had more opportunity to get to know Venn: "I have seen few men whom I could have loved more".²³⁵ Now the opportunity was there to bring this amiable man to many. "My talent seems to be for conversation and for

²³² Walsh, 'Joseph Milner's Evangelical Church History', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 10 (1959), p. 184 and fn.

²³³ Carus, *Memoirs*, p. xx. This is almost certainly the memoir written by Moorhouse with Haweis' involvement. As soon as the fourth edition was published it was superseded by a fifth in 1799 with no memoir.

²³⁴ Carus, *Memoirs*, pp. xix-xx.

²³⁵ John Johnson (ed), *Private Correspondence of William Cowper, Esq, With Several of His Most Intimate Friends, Volume 2* (London, 1824), p. 262.

intimacy”, declared Venn, writing to Ann Riland in October, 1769.²³⁶ Thirty-six years later, John was affirming the same, noting that his father was a conversationalist, with a gift of “improving social intercourse”.²³⁷ John’s efforts were bolstered by grandson Henry’s additions following his visit to Huddersfield. He applied the final touches to present Venn as every inch the evangelical hero, brave, even fearless, direct, a man of the Book, indefatigable, warm-hearted and gentle.²³⁸ Memories were gathered of a parish church crowded to beyond capacity for his preaching, as well as for celebrated visiting preachers, of weeping preachers and congregations, of cottage gatherings and transformed families and individuals, with a throng of young men eager to give themselves for the gospel cause. Arriving back in London after his travels, Henry Venn junior was, literally, dining out with Wilberforce on stories of his father’s Huddersfield exploits.²³⁹ The narrative attested to a Spirit-wrought movement of extraordinary days, and to a long-lasting faith enjoyed by Henry’s elderly interviewees sustained by the Word of God, long after revival fires had died away.

The Yelling years were treated in short compass, and were of interest to Henry only in as much as they provided a context for letter-writing and the nurturing of undergraduates, and for the shaping of Venn’s image as a conforming churchman, so fitting for imitation for the volume’s readers. Nonetheless, Yelling was a context for showcasing the virtues of a settling and persevering ministry, where communion with God and commitment to parishioners happily occupied a clerical life well-lived.²⁴⁰ The challenge of Venn’s

²³⁶ Venn MSS, Acc.81/C31, Letter to Ann Riland, 28th October, 1769.

²³⁷ Pratt, *Thought*, p. 365.

²³⁸ Venn, *Annals*, pp. 82-83, Venn, *Letters*, pp. 41-50.

²³⁹ “Henry Venn din’d & after dinner read us some delightful notes of testimonies to his excellent Grandfather’s usefulness & acceptance at Huddersfield which He left (Vicar) 53 Years ago – many still alive who owe their conversion to him.” William Wilberforce’s diary for 21st May, 1824. Bodleian MS. Wilberforce, d.55, p. 277.

²⁴⁰ “The moral beauty and happiness of this domestic picture cannot but forcibly strike every serious mind.” Venn, *Letters*, p. 212.

biographers was to portray a man who had the virtue of moderation, whilst not lacking spiritual zeal, who loved his home and family without being guilty of comfort-loving, and who was valiant in the gospel fight without appearing contentious. He was to be a man of prayer but no mystic, an activist without being a dangerous enthusiast, conscientious in the parish but not craven in the face of wider ministerial demands. Here was the *dux religiosus*, a worthy exemplar to those who aspired to ministry, whilst wearing a sanctity accessible to others pursuing secular callings.

In 1834 Henry Venn junior prefaced his father's memoirs of Venn, and his own collection of the letters. Venn explains how each work was produced, but his major intention was to account for the origins and impact of evangelical faith and piety in eighteenth century England, especially in the Church. Using his own grandfather's example, and also those of six well-known Anglican Evangelicals who professed faith in the decade after John Wesley's conversion, Venn saw the common thread between each that none of them was dependent upon Wesley (or Whitefield) for their faith, but rather, that each came to profess Christ through Bible reading, and each found their faith nurtured in the Church, and "had an immediate and remarkable influence upon the clergy of the Church of England."²⁴¹ Acknowledging Methodism's "more resplendent and sudden blaze" in the preceding century, Venn nonetheless wanted to distinguish and commend the "more gradual and quiet, but progressive, course" of Anglican renewal. Given that Methodist numbers in Great Britain had more than doubled between 1810 and 1830, the *Life and Letters* were the Venns' encouragement to others to stay on the establishment course.²⁴²

²⁴¹ Venn, *Letters*, p. xiv.

²⁴² David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven, 2005), p. 216.

Other Evangelical assessments of Venn put the accent firmly on Venn's personal integrity and friendliness, Anglican loyalty, and Christian catholicity.²⁴³ Venn was a man of words and warmth, a preacher who was as comfortable out of the pulpit as in it, and urgent in sharing the gospel in any context. He had Whitefield's skill in being able to range across society, whether addressing the London gentry in plush drawing-rooms, or visiting a condemned prisoner.²⁴⁴ John Venn recorded Stephen's assessment of his father with evident pride: "of one of the most uncommon of human excellencies – the possession of perfect and uninterrupted mental health... There prevailed throughout the whole man a certain sympathy which enable him to possess his soul in order, in energy, and in composure".²⁴⁵ He was an attractive man, and endeavoured to proffer a moderate Calvinism and self-effacing parochial ministry as a model for the next generation.

And yet, battles over the presentation of Venn continued. A.C.H. Seymour missed no opportunity in his history of the Countess and her Connexion to portray Venn as an irregular, preaching, he claimed, in her chapels, in private houses, in barns and in the open air, the practice of over thirty years stopped only by ill-health in 1790.²⁴⁶ Well aware of the ire this would rouse from the Venn family, Seymour accused them in so many words of lying about Venn's irregularity. Commenting on a 1767 Yorkshire preaching tour of Whitefield, Seymour said that Venn "never failed to join Mr Whitefield in the church, the chapel, the cottage, the street or the fields", and with the *Life and Letters* in his sights, adding that "This conduct has to our surprise been thought to require an apology".²⁴⁷ To this charge was added another, that the Venn family was also nefariously excluding

²⁴³ For example, Ryle, *Christian Leaders*, p. 303.

²⁴⁴ Seymour, *Life*, 2, pp. 127-8.

²⁴⁵ Venn, *Annals*, p. 105. For Stephen's full assessment of Venn, see Stephen, *Essays*, pp. 164-169.

²⁴⁶ Seymour, *Life* 1, pp. 289-92.

²⁴⁷ Seymour, *Life*, 1, p. 291.

Venn's fellow gospel-labourers from their account.²⁴⁸ Seymour had his own allegiances and grievances, and Henry moved swiftly to challenge these claims.²⁴⁹ There is no evidence that the former's efforts brought any damage to Venn's reputation. Dissent, Church and Methodism were now travelling on their distinctive tracks, and, with Romanism the nascent peril, the mid-century reader might well look to early irregularity with a romantic nostalgia for what must have appeared to be simpler and more collegial times. Nonetheless, whilst Dissent had been taught its place over the last two centuries, it was a bitter pill for Methodists to discover themselves put in subjection to Anglican supremacy. Many, Seymour believed, would do well to learn from Venn's catholic temperament.²⁵⁰

In 1836 Edwin Sidney produced his life of the Rev. Samuel Walker.²⁵¹ It was a work of comparable length to Venn's, and with the same objectives: to show the impact of a judicious and kind-hearted clergyman, and to give guidance to other clergy in "reviving a spirit of true Christian unity amongst a people awfully shaken by dissensions".²⁵² That dissension, it becomes clear, was the presence of Methodism. Several of John Wesley's letters to Walker are quoted in full, and Sidney shows his own conflicted spirit about the activities and doctrines of the Methodists in Walker's day and in his own.²⁵³ Sidney and Venn were in full agreement about the priority of extolling conformity in their treatment of

²⁴⁸ Seymour, *Life*, 1, p. 294. Compare Seymour's exasperation at the exclusion of Venn's friend Sir Richard Hill from the *Letters*, and his conclusion that, in contrast to his biographers, "the worthy Venn had a soul superior to this species of trifling. He loved all who loved his Divine Master, of whatever name or denomination". 2, p. 6, fn.

²⁴⁹ Henry Venn, Jnr., "The Rev. H. Venn on Certain Strictures of the Life of His Grandfather", *Christian Observer* N.S. 29 (May, 1840), pp. 261-66.

²⁵⁰ "Venn like the apostolic Grimshaw was eminently distinguished by a catholic spirit with respect to other denominations of professing Christians". Seymour, *Life*, 1, p. 277. cf 1, p. 294.

²⁵¹ Sidney, *Walker*.

²⁵² Sidney, *Walker*, p. 8.

²⁵³ One example of this is Sidney's treatment of Wesley's letter regarding lay preaching and the possible future of the movement, whether in or outside the Church of England, following the meeting of his preachers in Bristol on the 26th August 1756, Sidney, *Walker*, pp. 230-5. The letter, though careful and even-handed, is censured by Sidney as evidence of the trouble Wesley's men brought: "though dissent has not been proclaimed by them, they are dissenters." p. 237.

their subject matter. Equally, they were sensitive to the perceptions of Methodists and others who disagreed about the revival and its leaders. Their efforts were not unnoticed.

Both books were reviewed together in the *Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine* in January, 1836.²⁵⁴ The reviewer, whilst recognising the gifting and godliness of the men under consideration, lamented “that there is no small degree of solicitude expressed by the different sections of the Christian church for the honour of the instruments employed in the work”.²⁵⁵ For him it was axiomatic that God himself should be praised, the very thing, he observed, that the revival leaders were themselves now fully occupied with in glory. Focusing on Venn’s volume, his concern then turned to outright alarm at the way in which Henry junior asserted that Wesley’s ministry had little impact on the Church of England. Of course, the reviewer conceded, Venn must be allowed to hold his views, but not at the expense of historical accuracy.²⁵⁶ He conceded that reviewer and author alike were straying into long-standing and familiar tensions between Anglican and Methodist, but he felt it his duty to challenge the Venns’ loyalty to Church as opposed to gospel confraternity, and insisted that Methodism (“in its commencement, Methodism... meant nothing more than Christianity in its life and power”²⁵⁷) was the cause of the revival, and its impact on the Church recognised. For good measure, the reviewer sought to claim the incoherence of the “Calvinistic theory” Venn came to adopt, one Venn himself later eschewed, he claimed, by selective use of quotations.

²⁵⁴ ‘The Life and Selections from the Letters of the late Henry Venn, M.A., Author of the Complete Duty of Man, &c. The Memoir of his life drawn up by the late John Venn, M.A., Rector of Clapham, in Surrey. Edited by the Rev. Henry Venn, B.D. 8vo.’ *The Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine*; London, Vol. 15 (January, 1836), pp. 36-47.

²⁵⁵ ‘Life and Selections’, p. 37.

²⁵⁶ ‘Life and Selections’, p. 37.

²⁵⁷ ‘Life and Selections’, p. 38.

The book was a far better commercial success than had been anticipated. James Stephen had been candid with Henry junior in his misgivings about whether the religious sentiment of a previous century would be attractive to the market,²⁵⁸ but there was great rejoicing for the Venn family with good sales of the first edition.²⁵⁹ Public appetite continued, and there was sufficient demand to necessitate a seventh edition in twenty years, and a reprinting of *The Complete Duty of Man* was undertaken in 1841.

The *Life and Letters* arrived for the Christian public at an important point in the perception of evangelicalism and its leaders, and this was clearly an opportunity to reconsider one of its past greats.²⁶⁰ The previous year had seen the deaths of both Wilberforce and More, and through their efforts and those of numerous others, a practical, activist evangelicalism was now embedded in the consciousness of its adherents and detractors. Evangelical religion, which first flamed nearly a century before through the efforts of entrepreneurial leaders, was by now a sophisticated machine. Associations and societies – and their committees – were pervasive, bringing gospel endeavour and practical relief to the nation as well as to the far-off heathen. Schools nurturing the young in the faith proliferated, and evangelicals knew where to send their promising scholars in the Universities, with every possibility for those ordained of a curacy under a likeminded man to follow. Overseas, Anglican efforts were redoubled to meet the challenge of Baptist and other dissenting mission agencies, as Simeon and others secured chaplaincies for their young men through the East India Company. The evangelical kingdom was growing, at home and abroad.

Ultimately, one might conjecture that the success of the *Life and Letters* was in large part due to the fact that Venn's world and ways were so very different from that of

²⁵⁸ Stockton, 'Venn Family', pp. 306-7.

²⁵⁹ Venn MSS, C/30, Letter to Samuel Wilberforce, 13th December, 1836.

²⁶⁰ In 1832 the Religious Tract Society had published a fifteen volume collection of the lives of mostly Calvinistic leaders and lay people. Rivers, *Vanity Fair*, p. 285.

evangelicalism's later generations. Readers discovered a man of like passions to them, sensitive and kind, but a man with the touch of the hero and the saint about him, content to minister in provincial Huddersfield and then in the obscurity of Yelling, but in each place to preach the gospel as an often lone herald. This seemed such a far cry from the world of organisations, patronage and developed networks.²⁶¹ Bishop Daniel Wilson of Calcutta longed for the simplicity of the religion of his evangelical fathers, Venn amongst them.²⁶² Venn was one of those who had ploughed up the hard ground and brought forth a harvest from it, an achievement all the more attractive in a world where the marked courses of evangelical religion now seemed like heavy ruts. Venn was in the world, but not of it, and his message made an impact on that world, in contrast to the hard-going experienced by evangelicals on the eve of Victoria's reign. Charles Bridges commended Venn's *Life* as a worthy study to his readers, and quoted his letters approvingly.²⁶³ The past and its different ways of doing things exercised a strong pull on its modern children.

²⁶¹ The career of Charles Jerram (ord. 1797) is a good example of the pathways into and then guardrails for an evangelical in the Church in the first half of the nineteenth century, Atkins, *Britannia*, pp. 56-7.

²⁶² Bateman, *Life of Wilson*, p. 554.

²⁶³ Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry* 6th edn (Seeley, Burns & Seeley: London, 1844), pp. 42, 131, fn., 297, fn, 506, fn, 592.

Conclusion: Qualifying Success

This thesis has explored how Venn appropriated and ministered Moderate Calvinism, and how he commended it to the next generation of clergy. There is every likelihood that had Venn pursued irregularity at Yelling, or continued to publish, his name would have gained more attention. Whilst his decision to do neither undoubtedly reduced his impact in his day, the choice markedly resourced future Evangelicals in the pursuit of their parochial ministries in the example and counsel he gave. As has been demonstrated, Venn came to believe in justification by faith alone in early career, and, from that step into the evangelical community, found his ultimate resting-place in the consolations and motivations of Moderate Calvinism. His break with his religious past was decisive with the publication of the *Select Sermons*, and his *Complete Duty* commended a judiciously-presented Calvinism expressed in a practical piety. *Mistakes in Religion* showed that Venn had not softened his convictions, and believed that they had much to serve the evangelical community after the turbulence of the Minutes Controversy. Lest any think of Moderate Calvinism as arid or declamatory, Venn commended it as an affective religion, capable of bringing solace and joy.

“Usefulness is the very excellency of life”, Venn wrote to his daughter Catherine, on her seventeenth birthday in 1781. “No man, in the real Church of Christ, liveth unto himself. Every true Christian is a tree of righteousness, whose fruits are good and profitable unto men.”¹ He believed that the reformation deposit, focused upon the gift of justifying grace received through faith alone and enjoyed through Spirit-wrought salvation in the Calvinistic tradition, best facilitated that. Half a century after Venn’s death the same priorities were

¹ Venn, *Letters*, p. 294.

typical of Calvinists, and no wonder, given that men such as Venn had successfully chartered that course themselves.²

For Venn, the work of Christian ministry was for “the perfecting of the saints...that is, promoting their obedience, and increasing their comfort by more full discoveries of the council of God, till they enter into glory.”³ This description is replete with his Moderate Calvinistic emphases – the Christian life as growth in godliness (Venn had no qualms here with the Scriptural vocabulary of “perfecting”, and used it even after the battles between Calvinists and Arminians surrounding the Minutes controversy), the place of obedience to God’s revealed will which can and must be discovered through the work of the minister, and the place of comfort, as the divine will is understood and appropriated. This expansive vision for the cure of souls was shared by subsequent generations of Evangelicals who, like Venn, sought contentment in quotidian labours in often obscure parishes, convinced that their callings were worthy of their best efforts, and, one day, of ample heavenly reward.

It is something of an irony that the book on the Parable of the Sower, which Venn worked on over several years in the 1780s and mentioned in various letters to friends, never saw publication. After all, the parable warns of the uncertain outcomes of evangelical effort. And yet – and this heart-struggle Venn was experiencing in that period which he shared with select friends - the parable’s promises of eventual harvest were ones he needed to trust in when he frequently longed for more tokens of success in the parish. The slow and uncertain progress of gospel work in Yelling contrasted at times painfully with revival scenes in Huddersfield. Venn’s decision to pursue an almost exclusively regular ministry in his latter parish, and to instruct others to do likewise, reflected his concern for his Church and nation.

² In 1852 one of William Jay’s interlocutors reported, “Referring to the Calvinistic system, he said it was a thing to be held, not formally preached. His idea seemed to be that it should leaven the whole character of the pastor and preacher, but not be urged dogmatically.” Redford & James (eds), *Jay*, 1, p. 252.

³ Venn, *Mistakes*, p. 223. Cf. Haweis, *Principles*, pp. iv-vi.

Evangelical gains in the Church were not to be squandered on the uncertainties of Dissent, and end-of-the-century national anxieties needed the balm afforded by the parish minister.

John Venn and Charles Simeon, foremost in the line of Venn acolytes, were entrusted with all that he could teach them in order to continue evangelical work.

Though the work of grace was often slow, Venn insisted that faithful ministry would in time yield success, in God's economy.⁴ In 1783, son John was warned that patience in preaching was essential.⁵ Eleven years before, Venn had counselled Mathew Powley that "faithful experimental preaching, which is the fruit of prayer, study and divine teaching, will always be attended to, will always prosper, and in time will outgrow all opposition, or at least see its efforts become more and more feeble."⁶ If the world were, in the phrase of Calvin which Venn would doubtless have approved of, the "theatre of God's glory", it was one in which God was at times pleased to reveal that glory decidedly slowly, even in the church.⁷ Venn believed that it was worth the wait.

Whilst the diminution of the doctrinal emphases of first-generation Moderate Calvinists amongst their successors is undeniable, care must be taken not to overemphasise the differences of the fathers and their sons in this matter. Those of Venn's generation were resourcing their own souls with what they themselves believed that they had discovered in the Bible, reacting – stridently, at times – to the moralism and rigorism of their own formation, and learning how to use these new beliefs in their ministries. Those who came after them captured the essence of the doctrines, but, in a consciously utilitarian age which looked for action born out of conviction, did not tarry over their details, and certainly did not want to be associated with a creed synonymous with Dissent or strife. Nonetheless, Moderate Calvinism

⁴ Venn, *Mistakes*, pp. 227-8.

⁵ Venn, *Letters*, p. 364.

⁶ Venn, *Letters*, p. 198.

⁷ John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. J.T. McNeill (2 vols, London, 1960), 1.72.

had gone into the lifeblood of many of the pulpits of the university cities and the capital, as well as the Clapham Sect, and thus into national life.

By the last decade of Venn's life, Moderate Calvinists in the Church of England had turned from the bruising and unfruitful clashes of earlier controversies towards a more peaceable position with their hitherto opponents. Arminians were recognised (albeit, sometimes grudgingly) as true brethren, provided they were committed to the supreme authority of Scripture, justification by faith through grace alone, and the way of sanctification for the believer. Most Moderate Calvinist clergy had no relish for appearing to be doctrinaire, or agitators for contentious causes as typified by the combative Hill and the writings of Toplady, and sought a more peaceable path. Newton's "sugar-lump" Calvinism was stirred by his co-religionists into preaching, writing and pastoral labours, as they strove to be content in parochial work, seeking to work the leaven of their beliefs into parishes which could often be troubled by Methodist and Dissenting presences. Doctrine, whilst not entirely out of fashion, was sublimated before other pressing concerns.

Whilst amongst Moderate Calvinism's proponents their beliefs went incognito in their ministries, or were quietly dropped, with Venn that was certainly not the case. In 1796, in one of the last letters written to his son before his return to Clapham, Venn made a striking statement about his ministry:

"I am absolutely certain that I have preached the very doctrine that Christ and his Apostles did. The whole Word of God is equally acceptable to me; not less those parts which are the fortress of Arminians, Perfectionists, and Antinomians, than the others; so that I am, and have been for thirty-five years, in the happy state of not being tempted to wrest any Scripture, or pervert it, in order to make it favour my own tenets".⁸

⁸ Venn, *Letters*, p. 532.

This excerpt was included in *The Life and Letters* to showcase Venn's admirable consistency as a minister of the Word, and to signal some of Evangelicals' abiding enemies. Nonetheless, the quotation also shows that Venn was well aware that he was defending a Calvinistic interpretation of the Scriptures, one he had shown throughout his ministry. There was no modification, no trimming, and no repentance.

The previous year, when making a pilgrimage from the university to Yelling with two young friends, Jerram recorded Venn saying that the Scriptures were "like the members of the human body, all of them necessary, and tending to constitute the symmetry and beauty of the whole; yet some were more in use than others, and some more honourable than the rest."⁹

Simeon and his generation made much of their commitment to the whole Scripture, expounding differing texts with even hand, almost as if it were a new emphasis. Their antipathy to "systems" (shorthand for Calvinism, more than anything else) became *de rigueur*, and might give the impression that their forefathers rode to war at a moment's notice against perceived doctrinal foe. Their ministries, however, were a continuation of a no less careful Moderate Calvinist ministry in the previous century which was alert to the complexities of Scripture, one which still pervaded the mindset and labours of Venn's protégés. Venn was commending assiduous and prayerful Bible study to Henry Jowett in 1776.¹⁰ The strands of practical religion and heart piety connected the generations. Completing the threefold cord was a moderate, utilitarian Calvinism, put to the service of the first two, expressed only for its pastoral contribution.

And this was religion for Churchmen. Back in 1770, preaching on the occasion of Whitefield's death, Venn presented the revival and its principal doctrines as retrieval: "his doctrine was the doctrine of the Reformers, of the Apostles, and of Christ", and the doctrine

⁹ Jerram, *Memoirs*, p. 94.

¹⁰ Venn, *Letters*, pp. 249-51.

of their Church, too.¹¹ Cowper told his nephew in 1790 that “the Divinity of the Reformation is called Calvinism, but injuriously; it has been that of the Church of Christ in all ages; it is the Divinity of St Paul and of St Paul's Master who met him in his way to Damascus.”¹²

Haweis said that, in contrast to the Arminian and Latitudinarian presence in the Church, “all our subscriptions were strongly Calvinistic”.¹³ Toplady’s successor at *The Gospel Magazine*, Erasmus Middleton, argued in 1807 that although “Our articles have been nicknamed Calvinistic...it is to Calvin's happiness and glory that he followed these principles which should rather be called evangelic because they are derived from the Gospel itself and in fact are coeval with the system of salvation revealed from the beginning of the world.”¹⁴ In 1800 Bishop Horsley of Rochester told his clergymen that the Church must accommodate both Arminians and Calvinists, acknowledging that some of the Church’s best defenders had been decided Calvinists.¹⁵ Moderate Calvinists were untroubled by the attacks of the likes of Herbert Marsh on their theology, and when George Pretyman Tomline published against Calvinism in 1803, he found himself answered immediately and comprehensively by Thomas Scott.¹⁶ For its propagators, Calvinism was going nowhere, not least from the Church, and so its adherents had no cause to leave it, either. They had learned how to handle, propagate and now defend the tradition.

What was needed were the right men to minister such primeval truths. In 1822 the Rev. John Scott published the memoirs of his father.¹⁷ Venn knew Scott senior from his Olney ministry, a Moderate Calvinist after Venn’s own heart, declaring him “a man of right spirit, always

¹¹ Venn, *A Token*, p. 12.

¹² William Cowper, *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper, Vol. 3: Letters, 1787-91* (Oxford, 1982), p. 385.

¹³ Haweis, *Succinct History*, 3, p. 296.

¹⁴ Middleton, *Biographia Evangelica*, 4, pp. 500-1.

¹⁵ Horsley, *Charges*, p. 124.

¹⁶ Herbert Marsh, *An Inquiry into the Consequences of neglecting to give the Prayer Book with the Bible*, 4th edn (London, 1812), p. 85; Thomas Scott, *Remarks on the Refutation of Calvinism by George Tomline* (London, 1811).

¹⁷ John Scott, *The Life of the Rev. Thomas Scott*, 9th edn (London, 1836).

about his Master's business".¹⁸ John Scott concurred: "where will they find greater benevolence, greater strictness and greater exertion than have been here exhibited to them?", he asked, and argued that his father's character and habits, evangelistic preaching, and the practical intent of his ministry, were all due to his Calvinistic convictions.¹⁹ Scott extended the willingness to suffer for their beliefs to Venn, Robinson, Cecil and others, and then he turned tables on their detractors. The lives and ministries of these grandees were proof enough that their Calvinism, far from making its professors unfruitful, drove them to deeper love and service towards others, as they strove to express their beliefs which they themselves had only embraced out of a conviction that they were scriptural. Charging their opponents with a distinctly unchristian spirit, Scott then claimed that he made his point merely "to evince that Calvinists are not necessarily so far removed from all that is Christian, as some persons seem ready to suppose they must be".²⁰ This beneficiary was convinced. Calvinism had made them, and could make others, too.

"All that is Christian". Aware of its detractors, Scott claimed that Moderate Calvinism was the Christianity of the Bible. To his mind, then, Moderate Calvinism had been vindicated, even if it were an unappreciated victory. Back in the early stages of the revival, the Calvinistic resurgence was a protest movement against what its disciples believed was the corruption of the Church's doctrine. Whitefield, Venn and like-minded others insisted on prevenient grace encountered through justification by faith alone as the best reading of Scripture and of the Formularies, and preached it as providing the pastoral comforts of anxious souls, and incentives to godly living. A century later, the same was still the case.

¹⁸ Venn, *Letters*, p. 391.

¹⁹ Scott, *Life*, p. 412.

²⁰ Scott, *Life*, p. 412.

Despite antipathy to it as viewed as a doctrinal framework, and flashes of outright hostility towards its more decided professors, Calvinism remained in the Church.

By 1834 evangelicalism had made significant progress in the Church. Although its most able practitioners had barely reached the episcopal bench (Henry Ryder and Charles and John Bird Sumner being the exceptions), the “dark parishes” of the sort subjected to Berridge’s irregularity of the previous century were considerably fewer in number. One estimate puts Evangelicals as occupying an eighth of parishes in England and Wales in 1829, rising to a fifth twenty-four years later.²¹ The simplicity and the challenge of the evangelical message allowed it to move with agility across parishes and into homes and consciences. It could affect dramatic personal change, and win converts, as well as bright-eyed undergraduates eager to put themselves at its service. Evangelicals were now confident of their place in the Church, and could look to a plethora of their societies and charities aimed at mutual support and the promotion of true religion, and in the fathers of the previous century they claimed a tradition of their own with which to resource their ministries. Theirs was, to all appearances, a success.

Outsiders, however, threatened that not all was well in the constituency. Men who once looked to ministries such as Venn’s with admiration came to pursue different courses and, with them, offered their criticisms. Writing in 1863, Mark Pattison, Rector of Lincoln College, Oxford, was scathing about evangelical ministry, as intellectually lightweight, poor in the handling of Scriptures (whilst claiming sole authority to do so properly), unable to reach the masses, and finally rejected by the Church due to its “narrow bigotry”.²² J.H. Newman in his youth prized Scott and Milner for their practical and historical writings, but

²¹ Peter Toon, *Evangelical Theology, 1833-1856* (London, 1979), p. 4 and fn. Walsh suggests a ten-fold increase in fifty years by the mid-nineteenth century to a number on the region of 4,000 out of 17,000 clergy. Walsh, ‘Predestination’, p. 5.

²² Mark Pattison, *Essays* (2 vols, Oxford, 1889), 2, p. 279, cf. 2, p. 269.

recoiled from the perceived rigidities of their Calvinism, and then came to believe that the Formularies – and then Rome – were a richer source of direction and comfort.²³ Sir James Stephen, who had spent almost all of his life under the ministries of John Venn and his successor, William Dealtry, conceded to Newman that evangelical preaching had its shortcomings, but maintained that its very simplicity made it right for the fallen and childish intellects God designed it to reach.²⁴ In his reply (lengthy, courteous and firm), Newman said that he found the preaching of evangelicals crude in content and in tone: “what I shrink from is their rudeness, irreverence and almost profaneness”.²⁵ R.W. Church, like Newman and Pattison the product of an evangelical heritage and another Oxonian, reflected that the first Evangelicals (Venn was named amongst them) were men of conviction and courage, the broad appeal of their message succeeding due to the very earnestness of the messengers. Church conceded that amongst the Evangelicals of the 1820s were men “of position and weight”, who gave respectability to the movement, and some of them were gifted preachers; and yet, their inability to go beyond the first principles of repentance and faith meant that their ministries failed to bring nourishment to the very life of faith.²⁶ Church claimed that their legacy foundered in the 1820s and 1830s due to a lack of distinctive theological contribution, and, despite providing impetus for much social reform, atrophied in its obsession with mere elementary instruction and an acquiescence before the world which their forefathers worked so hard to denounce.²⁷

Unsurprisingly, Evangelicals pleased few outside their circles. In attempting to engage the masses, they had long been censured as anti-intellectual, and for their dogged allegiance to a

²³ John Henry Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (London, 1876), pp. 4-7.

²⁴ Thomas Gornall (ed), *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman* (Oxford, 1981), 5, p. 43.

²⁵ Gornall, *Newman*, 5, p. 45.

²⁶ R.W. Church, *The Oxford Movement* (London, 1900), pp. 12-13. The Scot Alexander Gerard levelled similar criticisms in 1799. Alexander Gerard, *The Pastoral Care* (London, 1799), pp. 314-315.

²⁷ Church, *Oxford Movement*, pp. 14-15.

cluster of doctrines and insistence that they were the true churchmen, drew opposition for their perceived narrowness, as some undoubtedly were.²⁸ Others aimed their criticisms at the perceived inadequacies of evangelical ministry and piety. In 1868 Arthur Marshall, convert to Rome a few years before, cast a mocking glance over his former church, criticising Evangelicals for their private interpretations of Scripture, a culpable disregard of the wider church and its history, and a lack of intellectual depth. Doomed to obscurity by their own shortcomings, “their brief season of triumph and authority had faded away, never to return”.²⁹ Calvinists fared even worse in Marshall’s estimation: using the “holiest names and truths as if they were stones with which to pelt his congregation”, they were censorious, aggressive and smug in the extreme, and deserved the hell-fire which they preached with so much relish.³⁰

The animus of evangelicalism’s critics was certainly provoked in part by the movement’s relative success which had brought the ambivalent blessing of ubiquity, and what is familiar is invariably relativised, and then reviled. Without emerging leaders of the calibre of Simeon, and with an uptake amongst the prosperous and commercially-minded classes, it was inevitable that Anglican evangelicalism would compare unfavourably with the faith of its fathers, devoid of the radicalism of its first generation, and vulnerable to accusations of shallowness and of complacency. Be that as it may, its adherents insisted that it was the true faith of the Church, and the Victorian successors of Venn and his generation vouched for the continuity of Reformational and Puritan doctrine and piety amongst them. Bishop Ryle gloried in the learning he discerned running from the Reformation to his day, thoroughly evangelical, and reflected in the Calvinistic wing of the revival.³¹ Evangelicals were “the reformers of the 18th century”.³² And zeal in expounding evangelical orthodoxy was the thing

²⁸ Anthony Symondson (ed), *The Victorian Crisis of Faith* (London, 1970), pp. 37-9.

²⁹ [Arthur Marshall], *Comedy*, p. 126.

³⁰ [Arthur Marshall], *Comedy*, p. 124.

³¹ J.C. Ryle, *Knots Untied: being Plain Statements on Disputed Points in Religion* (London, 1885), p. 9.

³² Ryle, *Leaders*, p. 20.

needed. Throughout the *Christian Leaders* Ryle presented Moderate Calvinism as the true deposit of the previous century for the Church, and made every effort to show that each leader he treated had been shaped by his Calvinistic heritage.³³ The result of all of this was, inevitably for Ryle, a strict adherence to the Formularies.³⁴ He said of Venn and Romaine, that “In themselves they were not men of extraordinary learning or intellectual power. But they revived and brought out again the real, pure doctrines of grace.”³⁵

Ultimately, Venn and the Moderate Calvinist cohort focused their energies on purity of heart – theirs, and their parishioners’ – rather than on that of the Church. Venn knew that much Christian endeavour ended in failure, and that whatever progress might be made in parochial work, opposition and setback were close by.

“All I can say is, that I teach what I do know, and testifie what I have seen, that I feel the power and preciousness, the light and life of Immanuel, and therefore wish that he was known by all who are ignorant of him, and very suspicious of his person and government.”³⁶

That was his conviction, and that for him was the way of practical and experimental religion.

³³ Examples are Ryle’s treatment of Grimshaw, Rowlands and Hervey: Ryle, *Leaders*, pp. 110, 198, 340.

³⁴ Ryle, *Leaders*, pp. 129, 143, 180, 383.

³⁵ Ryle, *Knots Untied*, p. 360.

³⁶ CCA, Series 1, F1/1400, Letter to the Countess of Huntingdon, 12th May, 1767.

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