

Loving Jesus

Kimberly Bracken Long

Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia

As a loyal and faithful cradle Presbyterian, I do not know very much about loving Jesus. I praise the ineffable God and fall down in wonder before the creative, creating power of the cosmos. I pray for the empowering, guiding, comforting Spirit and give myself over to that Spirit's movement. I bow in humility and gratitude before the crucified Christ and sing for joy before the risen Christ. But I don't really know what to do with Jesus.

Certainly I tell stories of Jesus – the miracles he performed, the wisdom he taught, the gospel he preached, how he blessed and healed and ate with the most unlikely people. I profess to believe that when two or three are gathered, he is there. I affirm that he is revealed to us in the proclamation of Scripture and the breaking of bread. Only rarely, though, do I pray to Jesus, or imagine him walking beside me.

Yet I am aware that other Christians do, in fact, consort with Jesus. For some he is companion and friend, comforter and encourager, deliverer from the chains that bind, in this life and the next. But, if I am truthful, I am not on intimate terms with Jesus, even though I do think and sing about Christ. I imagine that among Presbyterians, I am not alone.

Yet I have discovered Presbyterian sisters and brothers, my ancestors in the faith, who knew quite well what it meant to love Jesus, even to be in love with Jesus. I have found preachers who understood themselves as the ones who would woo believers to union with Christ, preachers who would draw on biblical poetry and imagery to entice both male and female brides of Christ to enjoy sweet consummation with their Lord at the Eucharistic table.

These Jesus-loving Presbyterians gathered during week-long events that culminated in a celebration of the Lord's Supper. Dubbed "holy fairs" by their detractors, these occasions originated in Scotland and Ulster in the seventeenth century and were later brought to America by Scots-Irish immigrants. The events drew large crowds who gathered in the countryside for a week of preaching, worship, intense self-examination, preparation for communion, and – finally – a communion service on Sunday morning followed by a Monday service of thanksgiving. Precursors to American camp meetings, these events attracted people from far and wide – both committed Presbyterian Christians who participated in a cycle of repentance and renewal, and all manner of folks who came for the festival atmosphere that was full of decidedly non-spiritual merry-making. During the week, believers would attend services and listen to preachers who urged them to careful self-examination. Elders and ministers would visit those who hoped to participate in the Sunday communion, questioning them on their understanding of right doctrine and the moral state of their lives. If the church officers were satisfied that the believer was properly prepared for the sacrament, they would issue a small, metal token that would admit the communicant to the table. All through the days preceding the communion service, then, believers took part in a rigorous program of worship, repentance, and prayer in preparation for their meeting Christ at the table. When Sunday morning arrived, the preachers who had,

in good Reformed fashion, convicted their hearers of their sinful natures and their need for repentance, now waxed poetic. Christ the bridegroom awaited his bride!

James McGready – The Great Revival

One such preacher was James McGready (1763-1817). A little more than 200 years ago, this tall, craggy, inelegant Presbyterian minister felt the call to preach on the American frontier and settled in Logan County, Kentucky. He served three small churches there, congregations that would soon become caught up in one of the most turbulent periods of American revivalism. Of Scots-Irish descent, McGready was heir to the practice of observing sacramental seasons and the preaching that marked them, preaching that was full of marital metaphors and language from the Song of Songs. On one particular Sunday, he compared the conversion of the sinner to “the time of the soul’s espousal to Christ”:

The word espousal is expressive of marriage and all the accompanying circumstances and solemnities. Here it is applied to the union of the soul to Christ in conversion, and with propriety too, inasmuch as the marriage covenant and the mutual love peculiar to the married state, are frequently used in scripture to represent that union and its happy consequences—the Lord Jesus being called by the endearing epithet of bridegroom, and the believing soul the bride or spouse. Saith the Spirit to the soul, “Thy maker is thine husband: the Lord of hosts is his name.” The figure is very appropriate and expressive. For,

1st. As the proposals of marriage are made by the bridegroom and not the bride, so Christ first proposes the spiritual union to the soul.

2nd. In marriage the bridegroom and bride give themselves cheerfully to each other, and are no more twain, but one flesh; so in the spiritual covenant, Christ and the believing soul, are so closely united, that the believer becomes one body and one spirit with Christ, and as our Lord expresses it, he is one with Christ, and he is one with the Father. The union is strong. The soul is so completely identified with Christ, that it is declared, “That neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate” it from him.

3rd. As the bridegroom and bride become one, in marriage, he is bound for all debts or demands against the bride; and she at the same time is jointly possessed and legally entitled to share in the wealth and property of the bridegroom.¹

McGready goes on to extol the virtues of the bridegroom using language of the Song of Songs: “The bridegroom is beauty itself. . . . He is fairer than the sons of men—the ‘rose of Sharon and the lilly of the valley.’ He ‘is white and ruddy, the chiefest among ten thousand’—he is altogether lovely.”² In comparison, the soul of the believer is filthy and depraved. And yet, proclaimed McGready, again drawing on the Song of Songs, “This is the day of the soul’s espousal to Christ, when with praise, gratitude, and wonder it falls before the Eternal All, and in language of ravished delight, exclaims, Oh Jesus, thou art sufficient. ‘Whom have I in heaven but thee?

And there is none upon the earth that I desire besides thee.”³

Gilbert Tennent – The First Great Awakening

If it is startling to hear such love poetry falling from the lips of a rough-and-ready frontier preacher, it is even more surprising to discover that McGready’s speech is a mere shadow of that of his forebears. A generation or so before McGready preached at sacramental revivals in Kentucky, Gilbert Tennent (1703-1764) was preaching in the frontier land of New Jersey. Like McGready, Tennent was of Scots-Irish descent, was well-schooled in Reformed theology, and had been caught up in the fervor of revivalism, believing that Christians needed not only to understand doctrine but also to have an experience of divine grace. Tennent was known as a fiery preacher, especially in his early days; after one preaching tour with George Whitefield, the well-known evangelist called his Presbyterian companion “a son of thunder [who] does not fear the faces of men.”⁴

Tennent was also heir to the Scots-Irish sacramental revivals, and he followed the pattern scrupulously, preaching sermons of preparation and expounding on the need for repentance. Yet, like McGready, his preaching would turn poetic on communion Sundays, erupting with even more vivid use of marital metaphors and sensual poetic language to describe the relationship between Christ and the believer. At times Tennent would compare himself to the servant of Abraham who was sent to Laban’s household in order to find a wife for Isaac. After recalling the biblical story for his hearers, he exclaims,

Christian friends and dear Brethren, my Errand to you this Day from the Great God the Father of Jesus, resembles that of Eliezer of Damascus, Abraham’s Servant, who was sent to woo a Wife for his Masters Son: Brethren I come a wooing in the Name and Behalf of Christ my great Master the King’s Son. My Business with you to day is to persuade you to be speedily and sincerely espoused to the Lamb of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. . . . Abraham’s Servant had good Success, the God of his Master prosper’d his Way; Rebeca readily consented and said I will go, ver. 58. O that there may be found here some Rebeca, Lydia, or Zacheus, who is willing to consent to Day to a Marriage with the Lord Jesus.⁵

In another sermon titled “The Espousals,” he once again plays the role of the servant, this time drawing on language from the Song of Songs when he cries, Jesus “is the perfection of beauty, the chiefest among ten thousand” (Canticles 5:10);⁶ he is “the Beauty and Delight of the Heavens, the Darling of the blessed God, the inestimable Pearl of Price, the Rose of Sharon, the Lilly of the Vallies [2:1] All Nature faints before this transcendent Beauty, and yields nothing to represent his Excellency fully.”⁷

Tennent makes even more vivid use of the Song of Songs when he describes the believer as the female lover in the Song, who is overcome by Christ. “O the ravishing Beauty, and surprising Glory of this blessed Love. . . .No wonder the Saints of the Church Militant are melted into Love and Ravishment, while they behold, by an Eye of Faith, the amiable Glory and burning Radiancy, of this immerited, incomprehensible, and effectual Affection!” cries Tennent.⁸ He extols the “ravishing Charms of his

Grace”⁹ and declares that “the love of Christ is sweet and soul-ravishing,” then quotes Canticles 1:2 (“Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, for thy love is better than wine.”) and 4:9 (“Thou hast ravished my heart, my sister, my spouse; thou hast ravished my heart with one of thine eyes, with one chain of thy neck.”).¹⁰ When the saints recognize “the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God” [cf. Romans 11:33] in the person of Jesus Christ, they “cry out with ravishment.”¹¹ When the moment comes to approach the table, Tennent is clear about how believers should make their way, reminding them of the wounds their “adorable Jesus” endured, “wounds which are Scars of Honour, Signatures of Victory, and Arguments of Love and Endearment!” Then he extols the beauty of their savior and describes the response of the faithful communicant:

Surely his Garments smell of Myrrh, Aloes, and Cassia, out of the Ivory Palaces: Now let the everlasting Doors of your Souls open to embrace your Lord; now let your Bowels move for him: now let your Hands drop with Myrrh, with sweet-smelling Myrrh, upon the Handles of the Lock! [cf. Song of Songs 5:4-5] While the King sits at his Table, let your Spikenard send forth the Smell thereof; seeing the Marriage of the Lamb is come, O let the Spouse make herself ready to embrace him. Amen. Even so come Lord Jesus. Amen. Amen.¹²

Tennent makes such bold use of marital and sensual language to discuss the relationship between the believer and Christ that he calls it “conjugal love.” “Nothing will satisfy him but the nearest relation. It is the espousing of the soul to himself that he aims at, that he may manifest the dearest embraces, the sweetest intimacy.”¹³

One can see how believers, hearing such preaching from ministers who incite them to enjoy the marriage embraces of Jesus, might erupt in ecstatic utterances. The language of wooing and espousal, the evocative descriptions of the beauty of Christ, the exhortations to “let your Spikenard incessantly diffuse to all around you, its aromatic, delightful, and useful Fragrance, and your hearts glow with unremitting, pious, and noble Ardors”¹⁴ all combine to lead worshipers into emotionally charged and demonstrative celebrations of the Lord’s Supper. Yet these sacramental revivals were not simply occasions for frenzied spectacle; they were the practices of obedient believers whose theology and sense of personal and communal discipline were solidly Reformed.

John Willison and the Scots-Irish Inheritance

Both Tennent and McGready were the beneficiaries of a tradition that began at least a century before Tennent’s ministry. Sacramental occasions were celebrated in Scotland since at least the 1620s, and had become an established practice among Presbyterians by the end of the seventeenth century. (The most famous Scottish revival, which American historians compare to the Cane Ridge revival, took place in Cambuslang in 1742.) The Scottish Presbyterians who took part in sacramental revivals were steeped in devotional literature – sermons, catechisms, meditations, and songs – that prepared them for the communion seasons. The most prolific author of this literature was John Willison (1680-1750), a minister in Dundee, Scotland, who published a *Sacramental Directory*, *Sacramental Meditations and Advices*, a

Sacramental Catechism, and a wealth of sermons. Even a brief perusal of Willison's writings reveals the wellspring from which Tennent's and McGready's language poured. While Willison is a devotee of Calvin's theology, he also prays for revival in Scotland, and is heavily involved in sacramental seasons. For Willison, even the material for self-examination that is used to prepare for communion is full of sensual imagery, drawn especially from the psalms and the Song of Songs. The would-be communicant, he suggests, should ask him or herself these questions:

Have I been brought to see my absolute need of Christ to save me from sin and wrath? . . . Have I seen such beauty, and tasted such sweetness in Christ, that he is truly precious to me, and altogether lovely in my esteem, so that I would gladly part with all things for him? . . . Are my desires his, to long and pant for his presence? My love his, to embrace him?¹⁵

Later, when approaching the table, Willison recommends that the communicant pray a prayer such as this:

O give me a heart to consent willingly to the bargain, and say, My beloved is mine, and I am his. Lord, help me cheerfully to say *Amen* to the covenant, and all the articles of it, that I was reviewing and renewing yesternight: O let the marriage-knot this day be cast, that sin or Satan, death or hell, may never be able to loose again: let him this day *Kiss me with the kisses of his mouth*: O for sweet communion and fellowship with him at his own table: Lord, shew me a token for good, set me as a seal upon thine arm; manifest thy self to me, as thou dost not to the world.¹⁶

Furthermore, when anticipating communion with Christ, he says,

The flame of love to God should break out in the most lively and active manner: Now your spikenard should send forth the smell thereof; now the sweet odour of your graces should fill all the house.¹⁷ Filled with desire to see Christ, the soul looks to him and says, in the words of the Cantic, "Make haste, my beloved, be thou like a Roe, or a young Hart on the mountains of spices, Make no tarrying, O my God; O when wilt thou come to me?"¹⁸

The recollections of a worshiper at the revival in Cambuslang implies those women and men who read devotional material in preparation for communion appropriated this vivid biblical language as their own. One Catherine Cameron recalled:

I was so ravished with the Love of Christ that night that I could sleep little, and all next Morning and day, I was in the same frame; and saying as the Spouse of Christ, My Beloved is Mine & I am his, My beloved is white and ruddy, the Chief among 10,000, yea, Altogether lovely: and all the rest of that week, I continued rejoicing in the near views of the Sacrament in that Place, hoping I would then get my Interest in Christ and my Marriage Covenant with him sealed there.¹⁹

It seems, then, that the language of pastors became the language of parishioners as well.

For these Scots-Irish Presbyterians – and for the Americans who would follow them in observing sacramental seasons – the Eucharistic table is akin to the marriage bed. In fact, Willison describes communion with Christ in words that clearly echo those of wedding vows:

Therefore I do, with all my heart, accept of him as my Lord and Husband: Lord, I make choice of thee, and all that is thine; for richer, for poorer; for better, for worse; for well, for woe; for prosperity, for adversity: I make choice of thee for all times and conditions, to love, honour, and obey thee, above all. I renounce all other lords of lovers, and will have none but Christ: I renounce my own will, and take thy will for my law. . . . I take thy Spirit for my guide, thy word for my rule, thy glory for my scope, thy testimonies for my counsellors, thy promises for my encouragement, thy Sabbaths for my delight, thy people for my companions: Lord Jesus, I take thee for my life, holiness for my way, and heaven for my home. And as I accept of thee, and all that is thine; so I give up myself to thee, and all that is mine, soul and body, with all my faculties and affections, senses, and members, to be thy agents and instruments; with all my enjoyments to be employed for thy use and service.²⁰

This experience of Christ in communion was understood as not only the culmination of a long spiritual journey of repentance and renewal, but also as the foretaste of the final consummation which will be enjoyed in heaven.

The Legacy of the Holy Fairs

As a twenty-first-century Christian, I am amazed at this remarkable piece of Presbyterian history. I would like to claim the understanding of union with Christ that these Scots-Irish forebears did – that union is not only a theological concept, but also an experience, a mystery that evokes awe and joy. What would it mean for present-day Reformed believers in North America to seek such an emotionally-charged union with Christ without relinquishing theological rigor?

At the same time, I am suspicious of any liturgical movement that seeks a particular “experience.” Had I been alive during the New Side/Old Side debates, I can imagine that I would have been one of those who insisted on theological integrity and looked askance at those out-of-control worshipers who took part in the holy fairs – just as I am now sometimes suspicious of movements that focus on the emotional outpourings of worshipers in response to particular sorts of music or preaching. Maybe it is just not possible to have both. And yet – there is this one glimpse into Christian history where it seems that worshipers did, indeed, have both – both theological integrity and a fervent spirituality.

The story is complex, and analysis must not be facile. (For a more nuanced treatment of this subject, see my book *The Eucharistic Theology of the American Holy Fairs*, Westminster/John Knox, 2011.) But perhaps, in a time and place where the church is changing rapidly, where worship is taking more diverse forms than at any other time in Christian history, it is worth remembering the story of the holy fairs

and wondering together what we might learn from it about loving Jesus passionately with one's whole being.

Notes

1 James McGready, *The Posthumour Works of the Reverend and Pious Jamcs M'Gready, Late Minister of the Gospel in Henderson, KY.*, edited by the Reverend James Smith (Nashville: J. Smith's Steam Press, 1837), 440-441.

2 McGready, *Works*, 442; cf. Song of Songs 2:1; 5:10, 16.

3 McGready, *Works*, 445; Cf. Song of Songs 4:9; Psalm 73:25.

4 George Whitefield, *George Whitefield's Journals*, ed. William Wale. Reprint edition (Gainesville, FL.: Scholar's Facsimiles and Reprints, 1969), 344, quoted in J. Milton Coalter, Jr., *Tennent, Son of Thunder. A Case Study of Continental Pietism's Impact on the First Great Awakenings in the Middle Colonies* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1986), 72-73.

5 Gilbert Tennent, *The Espousals or a Passionate Perswasive to a Marriage with the Lamb of God, wherein The Sinners Misery and The Redemers Glory is Unvail'd in. A Sermon upon Gen. 24.49. Preach'd at N. Brunswick, June the 22d, 1735* (New York: Printed by J. Peter Zenger, 1735), 4-5, 6.

6 Gilbert Tennent, "1. De unquēntis tū. 2. D amore + [Christ] to," sermon manuscript, AMs, Ag. [17]57, The Gilbert Tennent manuscript collection, Henry Luce III Library, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, NJ. This manuscript has been transcribed and published in James B. Bennett, "'Love to Christ'—Gilbert Tennent, Presbyterian Reunion, and a Sacramental Sermon," *American Presbyterians* 71 (Summer 1993), 77-89. Page numbers refer to this publication. For this reference, see page 83.

7 Gilbert Tennent, "The Unsearchable Riches of Christ Considered, in Two Sermons on Ephes. iii.8. Preached at New-Brunswick in New-Jersey, before the Celebration of the Lord's-Supper; which was the first Sabbath in August, 1737. Sermon II," *Sermons on Sacramental Occasions by Divers Ministers*. (Boston: J. Draper, for D. Henchman in Cornhill, 1739), 41.

8 Gilbert Tennent, "The Unsearchable Riches of Christ," *Sermons on Sacramental Occasions by Divers Ministers*. (Boston: J. Draper, for D. Henchman in Cornhill, 1739), 42-43.

9 Tennent, "Unsearchable Riches," 12.

10 Gilbert Tennent, "De nuptiis cum Christo." Sermon manuscript (#1). AMs, [17]53. The Gilbert Tennent manuscript collection, Henry Luce III Library, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, NJ.

11 Gilbert Tennent, Untitled, undated sermon manuscript (#12). AMs, [17]53. The Gilbert Tennent manuscript collection, Henry Luce III Library, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, NJ.

12 Gilbert Tennent, *Brotherly Love recommended, by the Argument of the Love of Christ: A Sermon, Preached at Philadelphia, January 1747-8. Before the Sacramental Solemnity. With some Enlargement* (Philadelphia: Benjamin Franklin and David Hall, 1748), 35-36.

13 Tennent, "De nuptiis."

14 Gilbert Tennent, *A Persuasive to the Right Use of the Passions in Religion, Or, The Nature of religious Zeal Explain'd, its Excellency and Importance Open'd and Urg'd, in a Sermon on Revelations iii.19. Preached at Philadelphia, January 26th, 1760* (Philadelphia: Printed and Sold by W. Dunlap, 1760), 7.

15 John Willison, *A Sacramental Directory: Or, a Treatise concerning the Sanctification of a communion Sabbath. Containing Many proper directions, in order to our Preparing for, Receiving of, and right Behaving after, the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper*, Sixth edition, corrected and enlarged (Glasgow: Robert Duncan, 1769), 70-71; cf. Song of Songs 5:16, Psalm 42:1, Song of Songs 5:10.

16 Willison, *Directory*, 175; cf. Song of Songs 2:16; 1:2; 7:6.

17 Willison, *Directory*, 209; cf. Song of Songs 4:13, 14.

18 Willison, *Directory*, 214; cf. Song of Songs 2:8, 9, 17.

19 Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Holy Fairs: Scotland and the Making of American Revivalism*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001), 120.

20 Willison, *Balm of Gilead, consisting of Sermons Preached on Various Occasions. Likewise Sacramental Meditations and Advices. By the Reverend John Willison of Dundee* (Edinburgh: Printed by J. Pillans & Sons for John Bourns, 8 Greenside Street, 1819), 281.