

Worship Resources for the Charles Wesley Tercentenary



“Bless Thee,
That I E’er
Was Born”

Karen B. Westerfield Tucker

In 1778, at the age of 71, Charles Wesley wrote with gratitude a “Birth-day Hymn” on the occasion of his own anniversary:

God, in whom I move, and live,
God who givst me still to be,
Thankful I thy gifts receive,
In the streams the Fountain see,
See my natal day return,
Bless Thee, that I e’er was born.

In the slippery paths of youth
Led by all-preventing grace,
Govern’d by the word of truth,
Jesus, I thy hand confess,
Wonderful in guardian power,
Thee with all my soul adore.

O beget my soul again,
God of reconciling love,
That in a sublimer strain,
Rival of the quires above,
I my Father may proclaim,
Shout my present Saviour’s Name.

With me let thy Spirit dwell,
Let him in my heart reside,
Teach, and sanctify, and seal,
To that heavenly country guide,
Then I shall behold thy face,
Then I shall for ever praise.¹

In this birthday commemoration, as in so many hymns written by Charles, we see how worship and devotion are presented as the centerpiece of the Christian’s life. Here Charles names thanksgiving, confession, adoration, proclamation, future expectation, and praise, all accomplished within a trinitarian framework. As we celebrate the tercentenary of Charles Wesley’s birth, it is thus appropriate for us to give thanks to God in the gathered assembly for the thousands of hymns and poems this “sweet singer” has bequeathed that may assist worship in our own day.

The hymns and poems of Charles Wesley constitute the principal source for marking the tercentenary. The Index of Composers, Authors, and Sources in *The United Methodist Hymnal* identifies the texts authored by Charles (922) as well as selected tunes from the “Foundery Collection” (916) and from *Sacred Harmony* (920) that were published by the Wesley brothers for use by the Methodists. The tune “Gopsal” was written specifically by *Messiah* composer G. F. Handel for the Wesley text, “Rejoice, the Lord is King” (#716). Congregations might consider expanding their Wesley-hymn repertoire by learning an unfamiliar hymn during each month of 2007 and using the *Companion to The United Methodist Hymnal*² to provide background information on that hymn in the bulletin or church newsletter. In addition to singing the hymns in worship, the Wesley hymn fragments found as responses to canticles or psalms (#74; 761, 767, 781, 821, 859) could be used as choral calls to worship, prayer responses, the repeated part of a litany, or as benediction responses.

The Charles Wesley hymns in *The United Methodist Hymnal* cover a wide range of themes, but represent a very small portion of Charles’s total hymnic output. A late nineteenth-century (and

expanded) edition of the Wesleys' composite hymnal—*A Collection of Hymns for the People called Methodists* (1780)³—is available online at either <http://www.ccel.org/w/wesley/hymn/jw.html> or at <https://gbgm-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/hymns/hcredit.html>; the first 539 hymns (before the Supplement) approximate what was found in the 1780 *Collection* and fill out the themes addressed in our current hymnal. Another internet source with 234 Wesley hymn texts is http://www.cyberhymnal.org/bio/w/e/s/wesley_c.htm. Appropriate tunes may be chosen by reference to the Metrical Index in the *Hymnal* (926-931). The Wesleys also produced smaller collections of hymns to mark the seasons of the Christian calendar, a few representatives of which were included in the 1780 *Collection*: “Hymns for the Nativity of Our Lord” (1745); “Hymns for Our Lord’s Resurrection” (1746); “Hymns for Ascension-Day” (1746); “Hymns of Petition and Thanksgiving for the Promise of the Father, or Hymns for Whit-Sunday” (1746); and “Hymns on the Great Festivals, and Other Occasions” (1746). These collections are available in facsimile edition through the Charles Wesley Society (Archives and History Center, Drew University, Madison, New Jersey 07940) and would be a valuable source for clustering Wesley hymns around certain seasons of the church year. Because the Wesley texts are in the public domain, copyright licenses are not required for their reproduction. More formal hymn festivals on the church year and on other themes using Charles Wesley texts are available by request from the Hymn Society in the United States and Canada (contact hymnsoc@bu.edu).

Under the leadership of staff for GBGMusik at the General Board of Global Ministries, an international group of musicians is setting Charles Wesley texts to new sounds, among them Chinese melodies, Caribbean calypso, Brazilian dance beats, and Western “pop” styles. Collected in the *Global Praise* series and thematic volumes such as *Songs for the Poor* and *Songs for the World*, this music allows for a new hearing of the Charles Wesley texts and has been welcomed as congregational song and as special music for both praise bands and “traditional” choirs. These materials are available from the General Board of Global Ministries (475 Riverside Drive, New York, NY 10115), and a blanket agreement from www.onelicense.net secures permission for music copyrighted by GBGMusik.

The hymns may also inspire other worship resources for use in the corporate setting. Hymn texts may be used as prayers in their original form, in paraphrase, or as a source for a new composition. For example, “Come, Divine Interpreter” (#594), either the first stanza alone or both stanzas, could be used as a prayer for illumination. The hymn “Come, Holy Ghost, Our Hearts Inspire” (#603) is the basis of this freely-composed prayer for illumination in collect form:

Come, Holy Ghost,
unlock the truth,
inspire our hearts,
and bring light upon our needy spirits,
that we may know and attest
to the depth of love divine. Amen.⁴

Members of the congregation—including youth—could be invited to put into prayer form their favorite Wesley hymn.

A more elaborate construction based upon Charles Wesley hymns is a Eucharistic prayer that was composed for the open-

ing celebration of the Lord’s Supper at the quinquennial meeting of the World Methodist Council and Conference held in Brighton, England, in July 2001.⁵ Phrases from twenty-two hymns, most of them originating in the *Hymns on the Lord’s Supper* (1745), were used to create this text that is trinitarian in perspective, rehearses salvation history, and follows the “West Syrian/Antiochene pattern” that is the basis of the Great Thanksgiving prayers used in *The United Methodist Book of Worship*. The slightly archaic flavor to the text distances it (though not too far) from the everyday, and the elevated diction helps to enact the “sursum corda” of the worshipers. The responses may be sung to appropriately metered tunes.

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your heart, lift up your voice.

We lift them up to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

*Meet and right it is to sing,
In every time and place,
Glory to our heavenly King,
The God of truth and grace.*

Maker of all, in whom we live, and move, and are,
we praise you for your creating love.
We give you thanks for your redeeming grace,
the grace to sinners shown.
Your heart-renewing power we bless.

*Join we then with sweet accord,
All in one thanksgiving join;
Holy, holy, holy Lord,
Eternal praise be thine.*

Unsearchable is your love that brought the Savior down.
Made flesh for our sake,
Jesus is our brother now.
He laid his glory by,
that we might your image regain,
and share the nature divine.

On the mysterious tree of Calvary,
your Son stretched out his arms to embrace a fallen world.
He bore the load of our guilt,
and pardon for all now flows from his side.

“Take, eat,” the Bread from Heaven himself had said:
“This is my body given to purchase life and peace for you.
Do this, my dying love to show.
Accept your precious legacy,
and thus, my friends, remember me.”

He took into his hands the cup
and, full of kind concern, looked up
and gave to them what he had blessed.
“Drink you all of this,” he said.
“This is my blood which seals the new eternal covenant
of my grace—
my blood so freely shed for you and all the sinful race.”

His the cross, the grave, the skies, we now recall,
and ask you, Father, to look on your beloved Son,
as with solemn faith we offer up
that only ground of all our hope.
Send, we pray, your everlasting Spirit,
and preach the Gospel to our hearts.

*Come, Holy Ghost, Thine influence shed,
And realize the sign;
Thy life infuse into the bread,
Thy power into the wine.*

*Effectual let the tokens prove
And made, by heavenly art,
Fit channels to convey thy love
To every faithful heart.*

And now, O God, by your pardoning love compelled,
up to you our souls we raise, up to you our bodies yield.
With strength renewed we urge our way
to join the Church triumphant in your love.
Come in your gracious kingdom, Lord,
and all your ransomed servants seal.
Come quickly, Lord, and make us all for glory meet.

*Father, God, thy love we praise,
Which gave thy Son to die;
Jesus, full of truth and grace,
Alike we glorify;
Spirit, Comforter divine,
Praise by all to thee be given;
Till we in full chorus join,
And earth is turned to heaven. Amen.*

Charles Wesley's hymns have, over the generations, inspired other poets and composers. During the tercentenary year, a fitting tribute would be to sing the hymns and songs of other Methodist music-makers. Texts and tunes by such Methodists as Fanny Crosby, Charles Albert Tindley, Georgia Harkness, C. Eric Lincoln, and Carlton Young have found a place in the current hymnal.

Most of all, it is the exemplary faith of Charles Wesley that should remind us of the need to offer worship to our God. Thus we may pray:

Lord God, you inspired your servant Charles Wesley with burning zeal for the sanctification of souls, and endowed him with eloquence in speech and song: kindle in your Church today such fervor, that those whose faith has cooled may be warmed, and those who have not known Christ may turn to him and be saved; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.⁶ □

1. S T Kimbrough Jr. and Oliver A. Beckerlegge, eds., *The Unpublished Poetry of Charles Wesley*, vol. 3: *Hymns and Poems for Church and World* (Nashville: Kingswood, 1992), 195-196.

2. Carlton R. Young, *Companion to The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993).

3. The 1780 text is available as *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 7, ed. Franz Hildebrandt and Oliver A. Beckerlegge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983).

4. This prayer may be used without permission. For the structure of a collect, see *The United Methodist Book of Worship* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1992), 447.

5. The Great Thanksgiving was written by Geoffrey Wainwright and Karen Westerfield Tucker. Permission is given for the reproduction and use of this Eucharistic prayer.

6. Adapted from *The Proper for the Lesser Feasts and Fasts*, 3rd ed. (New York: Church Hymnal, 1980), 159.



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Letters to Sarah

One who has Christ dwelling in his heart, carries his heaven about him everywhere. Then all places are the same.

The two grand hinderances of prayer, and consequently of faith, are self-love and pride: therefore our Lord so strongly enjoins us self-denial and humility.

— Charles Wesley
From letters to his daughter Sarah