

# Singing Our Faith

## Charles Wesley in The United Methodist Hymnal

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The hymns of Charles Wesley are a rich gift to our Wesleyan heritage and to the larger Body of Christ. We not only share them with churches which trace their origins to the 18th-century Methodist movement, but with countless other Christian churches around the world. Using Wesley's hymns, Presbyterians, Baptists, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Roman Catholics and others join us in singing their faith in corporate worship and for personal devotion.

For United Methodists, Wesley's hymns represent the marrow of historic Wesleyan doctrine and the core of the biblical message on which it is based.

Although his texts outnumber those of any other author in The United Methodist Hymnal, they are few compared to the thousands of hymn-poems he wrote. We must not forget that he wrote the poetry, not the music. Furthermore, it is a widely circulated myth that his hymns were set to popular pub tunes of his day to make them more easily sung. They were not.

There are sixty-five Charles Wesley texts in our hymnal. Six are represented in responses with musical settings, mostly in the Psalter (#74, 761, 767, 781, 821, 859). Six are hymn texts without music in various places: "Where Shall My Wondering Soul Begin" (#342); "Sinners, Turn: Why Will You Die" (346); "Our Earth We Now Lament to See" (#449); "Come, Divine Interpreter" #594; "Whether the Word Be Preached or Read" (#595); and "If Death My Friend and Me Divide" (#656). Since they appear without musical settings, congregations are unlikely to sing them.

Some of the remaining fifty-three hymns are well-known and often sung by United Methodist congregations. They include:

"O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing," "Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus," "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing," "Christ the Lord Is Risen Today," and "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling." If those who sing these wonderful texts know who wrote them, they probably do not know much about the author's life or his significant contribution to our heritage. His 300th birthday provides an opportunity for educating more of us.

Many other Charles Wesley hymns regrettably are not often sung in our congregations. Yet they are worthy words and tunes with which we may raise our voices. They may be grouped in six general categories.

*"Christ whose glory fills  
the skies, Christ the true,  
the only light..."*

### Christian Year

As an Anglican priest, Charles Wesley had great affection for the seasons of the church year. He published a large number of hymns for Advent, Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost, many in individual hymnbooks. A few of these hymns are found in our hymnal. They are hymns for Advent and Christmas (#196, 240, 718), Good Friday and Easter (#282, 287, 302, 312), and Pentecost (#332).

### Praise

Our worship appropriately praises the triune God of grace. Seven Wesley texts appear in our hymnal including three (#57, 58, 59) for "O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing," one of which is in Spanish, "Mil Voces Para Celebrar." Others include: "Maker, in Whom We Live" (#88); "Praise the Lord Who Reigns Above" (#96); "Thou Hidden Source of Calm Repose" (#153); "Christ, Whose Glory Fills the Skies" (#173); "Ye Servants of God" (#181); and "Jesus! the Name High Over All"

(#193). There are, of course, other Wesley texts in our hymnal which contain an emphasis on praise, but none more significant than those mentioned here.

### **Justification, New Birth, Assurance**

Countless Charles Wesley texts deal with salvation, forgiveness, new life, and the witness of the Holy Spirit in the Christian life. Five are found in our hymnal: "Come, Sinners to the Gospel Feast" (#339); "Depth of Mercy" (#355); "And Can It Be that I Should Gain" (#363); "How Can We Sinners Know" (#372); "Blow Ye the Trumpet, Blow" (#379). Each of these celebrates the mysteriously wonderful grace of God which comes to us uniquely in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

### **Sanctification and Holy Living**

Both John and Charles Wesley understood that holiness of heart and life was the goal of the Christian life. For them this simply meant, by God's grace, loving God with all that we are and have and loving our neighbor (everyone else) as ourselves. It is not by accident that Wesley texts on sanctification and holy living represent the largest category in the hymnal.

They include: "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling" (#384); "Let Us Plead for Faith Alone" (#385); "Come, O Thou Traveler Unknown" (#386, 387); "O Come and Dwell in Me" (#388); "I Want a Principle Within" (#410); "A Charge to Keep I Have" (#413); "O For a Heart to Praise My God" (#417); "Jesus, Thine All-Victorious Love" (#422); "Forth in Thy Name, O Lord." (#438); "Jesus, Lover of My Soul" (#479); "O Thou Who Camest from Above" (#501); "Soldiers of Christ Arise" (#513); "See How Great a Flame Aspires" (#541); "Give Me the Faith Which Can Remove" (#650); and "Rejoice, the Lord Is King" (#715, 716).

Each of these texts speaks about a life nurtured by God's presence and imbued with God's power.

### **Christian Fellowship**

The Christian life is not solitary. It is lived with God and in the presence and fellowship of others. The Wesleyan tradition has always recognized we cannot be

Christians in solitude. Numerous Wesley hymn texts speak about the crucial significance of fellowship for encouragement, sharing, and mission. In our hymnal are: "Christ, from Whom All Blessings Flow" (#550); "And Are We Yet Alive" (#553); "All Praise to Our Redeeming Lord" (#554); "Jesus, United by Thy Grace" (#561); "Jesus, Lord, We Look to Thee" (#562); "Blest Be the Dear Uniting Love" (#566); "Come, and Let Us Sweetly Join" (#699); and "Come, Let Us Join Our Friends Above" (#709).

### **Means of Grace**

Both Wesleys believed that holiness of heart and life could not be realized without employing the gifts God gives to nurture faith and bring it to maturity. These "means of grace" are indispensable to

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sound Christian living and ministry. Not only was Christian conference (fellowship) among them but also prayer, "searching the Scriptures," fasting, and the Lord's Supper.

Charles's hymn "Come, Let Us Use the Grace Divine" (#606) speaks about using God's grace gifts. "Come, Holy Ghost, Our Hearts Inspire" (#603) prays for the guidance of the Holy Spirit to illuminate the message of the Bible.

Lord's Supper hymns were especially important to Charles Wesley. Like his brother, he held the Lord's Supper to be a holy mystery, a means of conveying grace, in which the real spiritual presence of Christ was acknowledged and celebrated. Do United Methodists have this Wesleyan understanding of the Lord's Supper? Four of Charles' hymns seek to lead us to it. They are: "O Thou Who This Mysterious Bread" (#613); "Come, Sinners, to the Gospel Feast" (#616, compare to #339); "Because Thou Hast Said" (#635); and especially, "O the Depth of Love Divine" (#627).

Charles Wesley's hymns are both biblically and theologically substantial. They

supremely embody the Wesleyan heritage out of which has come The United Methodist Church. The occasion of the tercentenary of his birth offers an unprecedented opportunity to help our congregations appreciate the message of Wesley's hymns and their relevance for our time.

One of the challenges facing those who wish to use the Wesley hymns is that they were written in an eighteenth-century idiom. In this regard two suggestions may assist in singing his familiar hymns and learning the unfamiliar.

First, if they are used in worship, it may be useful to take a few moments to read the text to the congregation and to explain some of the biblical and theological imagery in the hymn. This exercise could be useful for the hymns written by other authors as well. A deeper appreciation for the hymn's content may be realized when it is read orally, not simply sung. Meaningful singing may be enriched by the well-read text.

Second, congregations find unfamiliar hymns and hymn tunes difficult to sing. If that is the case, especially with an unfamiliar tune, find a tune which is familiar in the metrical index at the back of the hymnal. For example, "O For a Heart to Praise My God" (#417), a wonderful praise/sanctification hymn, has the same meter (86.86) as the Azmon tune used for "O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing" (#57). The congregation may sing the text to #417 using the tune for #57.

This should be a marvelous year to appreciate singing our Wesleyan faith so well expressed in the hymns of Charles Wesley. □

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