

Still The Viability of Charles Wesley's Hymns Today Shaping Our Faith

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Some years ago I asked Fred Pratt Green, the late distinguished British Methodist hymn writer the following question: "You have written some of the most poignant, celebrative, and theologically significant hymns of the twentieth century; why is it that you have never concentrated on the inner spiritual journey of the Christian?" He replied: "Because no one will ever do that better than Charles Wesley did it." Over the years I have reflected on the implications of Pratt Green's comment and am convinced that there are a number of reasons why Charles Wesley's hymns are still viable for worship and witness in the twenty-first century. They portray what every church in the Wesleyan and Methodist tradition should be: scriptural, evangelical, sacramental, and missional. All of these dimensions of the Wesleyan movement are related to the inner spiritual journey of which Pratt Green speaks.

Scriptural

Unquestionably the early Methodists often learned the truths of the Scriptures through the singing and study of Charles Wesley's hymns, for they are steeped in scriptural language, imagery, and metaphors. When one reads the Wesley hymn texts in volume 7 of the Bicentennial edition of *The Works of John Wesley*, which contains the hymn book, *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists* (1780), and notes the biblical references in the margin, one becomes aware of how thoroughly absorbed Charles Wesley was in the Bible and in expressing its truths through his hymns.

He believed that the Scriptures impart endless blessings to the individual and the community of faith. His prayer based on Revelation 1:3, "Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein," is still up-to-date for public and private worship and devotion:

Come divine Interpreter,
Bring me mystic words thy book to read,
Ears the mystic words to hear,
Words which did from thee proceed,
Words that endless bliss impart;
Kept in an obedient heart.

One notes the inner spiritual journey the believer makes with the Scriptures, for they are to be kept in an obedient heart.

Charles was not merely an antiquarian or biblical literalist, however, for he wrote:

Whether the Word be preached or read,
No saving benefit I gain

From empty sounds or letters dead;
Unprofitable all and vain,
Unless by faith thy word I hear
And see its heavenly character.

Holy Scripture and the experience of faith are indispensably bound together. This is why Charles once stated very explicitly:

The Word in the bare literal sense,
Tho' heard ten thousand times, and read,
Can never of itself dispense
The saving power which wakes the dead;
The meaning spiritual and true
The learned expositor may give,
But cannot give the virtue too,
Or bid his own dead spirit live.

Evangelical

The hymns of Charles Wesley are also evangelical. They are constantly beckoning the faithful to proclaim the good news of Christ's redemptive love. They call everyone to witness to the gospel. At a time in the 1740s when the Methodists were being terribly oppressed and persecuted in England, Wesley wrote a little booklet of hymns entitled *Hymns for Times of Trouble and Persecution* (1744), in which the opening stanza of a familiar hymn reads:

Ye servants of God, your Master proclaim,
And publish abroad his wonderful name;
The name all victorious of Jesus extol,
His kingdom is glorious and rules over all.

Imagine the Wesley brothers standing on a street corner with a band of Methodists facing an opposing mob and lining out these lines so that the faithful can sing this powerful witness in the face of ensuing violence. Charles is very clear that even in the most difficult of times Christians are to stand up and proclaim the wonderful name of Jesus. They are to share the gospel!

Of those who think that Wesley's eighteenth-century language is simply too out-of-date to be sung anymore, we ask—Do we not want the congregations of Methodism to continue to sing the powerful summons to evangelization found in the following four lines of the hymn "Give me the faith which can remove"?

I would the previous time redeem,
And longer live for this alone,
To spend and to be spent for them
Who have not yet my Savior known.

Charles Wesley provides the church with a marvelous balance of the mandate of the Great Commission, to share the gospel of Christ, and of the Great Commandment, to share the love of Christ.

This is what the Wesley brothers bid the people called Methodists and others in every age to do! Yet, living to spend oneself for others requires a deep inner journey of faith for which Wesley pleads in this hymn.

Sacramental

The Wesleys never conceived of the church as evangelical apart from the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion, which are integral to the inner spiritual journey. They saw baptism as a sign and seal that sin is washed away and the truth and mercy of the gospel are felt. Baptism is also an act through which the Holy Spirit acts to seal one's pardon. Hence, Charles Wesley writes:

Oh that the souls now baptized herein,
May now the truth and mercy feel,
May rise and wash away their sin—
Come, Holy Ghost, their pardon seal.

Holy Communion was so important to John and Charles Wesley that they devoted an entire volume of hymns to this subject: *Hymns on the Lord's Supper* (1745). John probably prepared the prose introduction on the sacrifice of Christ, appropriating Daniel Bevint's work on this theme, and Charles wrote the hymns. The brothers were convinced that the focus on the saving sacrifice of Christ's body and blood offered for all should regularly send believers out from worship to be faithful servants of Christ and the church.

In his hymn on "Constant Communion" Charles maintains that the lack of observance of Holy Communion will put out the flame of love among the faithful.

Sad mutual causes of decay,
Slackness and vice together move,
Grown cold we cast the means away,
And quenched our latest spark of love.

The Wesley brothers practiced weekly communion and, if possible, daily communion, nevertheless Charles asks:

Why is the faithful seed decreased,
The life of God extinct and dead?
The daily sacrifice is ceased,
And charity to heaven is fled.

In his hymn "Come to the feast, for Christ invites" he goes a step further in his plea for constant communion, by affirming that no one has the right to determine the non-necessity of Holy Communion.

'Tis not for us to set our God
A time his grace to give,
The benefit when'er bestowed,
We gladly should receive.

At the Holy Communion Table, one experiences that God indeed will "Unseal the volume of [divine] grace, / And apply the gospel word," for this meal is a means of God's grace. And it is through God's grace at the Table that we are renewed in love on inner spiritual journey to gain all of the divine life.

Our needy souls sustain
With fresh supplies of love,
Till all thy life we gain,
And all thy fullness prove,
And strengthened by thy perfect grace,
Behold without a veil thy face.

At the Holy Communion Table the divisions of the church can be overcome. Thus Charles prays:

Sure and real is the grace,
The manner be unknown;
Only meet us in thy ways
And perfect us in one.

Missional

The hymns of Charles Wesley constantly call the faithful to God's mission in the world. Above four lines were quoted from the hymn "Give me the faith which can remove" but here is the complete stanza. The test of mission is living only to breathe the love of God.

I would the precious time redeem,
And longer live for this alone,
To spend and to be spent for them
Who have not yet my Savior known;
Fully on these my mission prove,
And only breathe to breathe thy love.

In another poem Charles appeals to the senses of sight and hearing as a means of opening the inner recesses of our souls to the fullness of God's mission.

On us, O Christ, thy mission prove,
Thy full authority to heal,
The blindness of our hearts remove,
The lameness of our feeble will,
Open our faith's obedient ear,
Our filthy, leprous nature cure,
Call us out of the sepulchre,
And preach perfection to the poor.

According to Wesley the faith community moves forward in witness and mutual support in God's mission. Help us to help each other, Lord, Each other's cross to bear; Let each his friendly aid afford, And feel each other's care.

Help us to build each other up,
 Our little stock improve;
 Increase our faith, confirm our hope,
 And perfect us in love.

The witness and mutual support in God's mission of which Wesley speaks is for all people of God's creation and especially the poor. Charles Wesley has given the church a social manifesto by which to live out its Christian love in the following lines.

Work for the weak, and sick, and poor,
 Raiment and food for them procure,
 And mindful of God's Word,
 Enjoy the blessedness to give,
 Lay out your gettings to relieve,
 The members of your Lord.

Thus, Charles Wesley provides the church with a marvelous balance of the mandate of the Great Commission, to share the gospel of Christ, and of the Great Commandment, to share the love of Christ.

Though there are many more worthy emphases in Charles Wesley's hymns, these four—scriptural, evangelical, sacramental, and missional—are at the heart of Wesleyan spirituality. And they remind us of why the Wesleyan hymn corpus is so vital in the life and practice of Methodism in the twenty-first century. When we sing and study his hymns, we provide the contemporary church with the resonance of Wesleyan spirituality: a church grounded in the Holy Scriptures, that passionately proclaims the saving message of the gospel of Christ, that is renewed in love by

God's grace at the table of Holy Communion and is sent out by the body and blood of Christ to be faithful in the mission of service to all, especially the poor.

For contemporary settings of Charles Wesley hymns for use in worship (congregational and choral singing) I recommend the following inexpensive songbooks with companion CDs: *Songs for the World and Songs for the Poor*. (See Page 28.) □

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