

## Church History :: A Pilgrim's Progress: The Wesley Hymnbook as a Manual for Spiritual Growth by Randall McElwain

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Visit the home of a poor eighteenth century Methodist family. Their library is almost nonexistent but they own two volumes essential to steady spiritual growth: a King James Bible and a Wesley Hymnbook. Visit a nineteenth century British Methodist chapel. The Hymnbook is probably marked, "For the Use of Visitors." Members are expected to carry their personal pocket hymnbooks between church and home. Use of the Hymnbook is not limited to Sunday; the Hymnbook is an integral part of private devotions and an important vehicle for personal spiritual growth. Because of the role of hymns in defining our identity, Barry Liesch writes, Protestants have been a "people of two books, the Bible and the hymnbook." If this is true for Protestants as a whole (a thesis developed in recent years by Mark Noll, Richard Mouw, and Stephen Marini), how much more true it is for Methodists who developed under the influence of both the Bible and Wesley's Hymnbook.

The greatest of the Wesley hymn collections, the 1780 Hymnbook, was edited by John Wesley as a book of "practical divinity," a manual for the Christian life. In his preface, Wesley notes the collection's attention to "all the important truths of our most holy religion" and then points to the "regular order" by which the Hymnbook is organized: "The hymns are not carelessly jumbled together, but carefully ranged under proper heads, according to the experience of real Christians." Because of Wesley's desire that the collection serve as a guide to Christian development, the Hymnbook is organized in sections that correspond to the progress of the Christian life. Later hymnals, including some in the Methodist tradition, have borrowed from the Reformed model of organization based on categories of systematic theology. This organization reinforces the importance of the doctrine for Christian believers. Thus, Hugh McElrath assumes that a "good hymnal will intentionally reflect some sort of theological arrangement." Other hymnals are arranged according to the sequence of a worship service or by the Christian Year.

Each of these approaches has value, emphasizing our theological heritage or the importance of order in worship. However, while the Wesleys respected the importance of doctrine and liturgy, their Hymnbook placed particular emphasis on the role of hymnody in developing Christian experience. The 1780 Hymnbook taught theology; but more importantly, it served as an aid to spiritual formation. While the Hymnbook was used in public worship, it was particularly suited to personal devotion. Its organization encouraged the reader's understanding of the path to spiritual maturity.

This spiritual biography traced a "Methodist's Progress" from the first conviction of sin to spiritual maturity:

Part One: Introductory Hymns

Part Two: Convincing

Part Three: For Mourners and Backsliders

Part Four: For Believers

Part Five: For the Society

Part One, "Introductory Hymns," is especially notable for its section "Exhorting Sinners to Return to God." The Hymnbook opens with "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing" proclaiming Jesus' salvific power:

He breaks the power of cancelled sin,  
He sets the prisoner free;  
His blood can make the foulest clean —  
His blood availed for me.

Charles' own conversion became a testimony to God's willingness to save all mankind:

With me, your chief, ye then shall know,  
Shall feel your sins forgiven;  
Anticipate your heaven below,  
And own that love is heaven.

Charles' great Anniversary Hymn is followed by a hymn proclaiming the great doctrine of the unlimited atonement:

Come, sinners, to the gospel feast;  
Let every soul be Jesu's guest;

Ye need not one be left behind,  
For God hath bidden all mankind.

A repeated theme in Part One is the universal call to redemption. In one of the greatest invitation hymns ever penned, Wesley repeats the question from Ezekiel 18:31, "Why will you die?"

Sinners, turn, why will you die?  
God, your Maker, asks you why.  
God, who did your being give,  
Made you with Himself to live;  
He the fatal cause demands,  
Asks the work of his own hands,  
Why, ye thankless creatures, why  
Will you cross his love, and die?

Sinners, turn, why will you die?  
God, your Saviour, asks you why.  
God, who did your souls retrieve,  
Died himself that you might live.  
Will you let him die in vain?  
Crucify your Lord again?  
Why, ye ransomed sinners, why  
Will you slight his grace, and die?

Sinners, turn, why will you die?  
God the Spirit asks you why.  
He, who all your lives hath strove,  
Wooed you to embrace his love.  
Will you not the grace receive?  
Will you still refuse to live?  
Why, ye long-sought sinners, why  
Will you grieve your God, and die?

Part Two, "Convincing," contains hymns contrasting "formal and inward religion." Wesley reflects on the struggles of the formal religion he had long practiced:

Long have I seemed to serve thee, Lord,  
With unavailing pain;  
Fasted, and prayed, and read thy Word,  
And heard it preached— in vain.

Oft did I with th' assembly join,  
And near thy altar drew;  
A form of godliness was mine—  
The power I never knew.

In contrast to this struggle, Wesley testifies to the assurance of faith:

How can a sinner know His sins on earth forgiven? How can my gracious Saviour show My name inscribed in heaven?  
What we have felt and seen With confidence we tell, And publish to the sons of men The signs infallible

Part Three begins the pilgrimage of the sinner who responds to conviction. In opposition to Pelagianism, Wesley understood that man brings nothing of merit to God; even a prayer of repentance is the gracious gift of God:

Ah, give me, Lord, myself to feel,  
My total misery reveal;  
Ah, give me, Lord (I still would say),  
A heart to mourn, a heart to pray;  
My business this, my only care,  
My life, my every breath be prayer!

Wesley ends the section for "Mourners convinced of sin" with a hymn on Micah 6:6-8:

Wherewith, O God, shall I draw near

And bow myself before thy face?  
How in thy purer eyes appear?  
What shall I bring to gain thy grace?

Who'er to thee themselves approve  
Must take the path thy word hath showed:  
Justice pursue, and mercy love,  
And humbly walk by faith with God.

What have I then wherein to trust?  
I nothing have, I nothing am;  
Excluded is my every boast,  
My glory swallowed up in shame.

See where before the throne he stands,  
And pours the all-prevailing prayer,  
Points to his side, and lifts his hands,  
And shows that I am graven there.

The group of hymns "for Mourners brought to the Birth" contains "Wrestling Jacob," a favorite hymn of John. Charles Wesley uses Jacob's story for the imagery of a mourner "wrestling" for the blessing. The twelve stanzas end with the testimony:

Lame as I am, I take the prey,  
Hell, earth, and sin with ease o'ercome;  
I leap for joy, pursue my way,  
And as a bounding hart fly home,  
Through all eternity to prove,  
Thy nature, and thy name, is LOVE.

These hymns for seekers are followed by hymns for those "Convinced of Backsliding" and for "Mourners Recovered." They share the tone of seeking found in the hymns for mourners. Part Four contains hymns "For Believers." This extensive group of hymns addresses various aspects of the Christian's pilgrimage: Rejoicing; Fighting (against sin, not against each other!); Praying; Watching; Working; Suffering; Groaning for Full Redemption; for Believers Brought to the Birth; Saved; Interceding for the World.

The largest subsection contains hymns for believers "Groaning for Full Redemption," hymns on entire sanctification. This group includes the popular "Love Divine" as well as the greatest definition of holiness in all hymn literature, "O for a Heart to Praise my God":

O for a heart to praise my God,  
A heart from sin set free!  
A heart that always feels thy blood,  
So freely spilt for me!

A heart resigned, submissive, meek,  
My great Redeemer's throne,  
Where only Christ is heard to speak,  
Where Jesus reigns alone.

A heart in every thought renewed,  
And full of love divine,  
Perfect, and right, and pure, and good—  
A copy, Lord, of thine!

Thy nature, gracious Lord, impart;  
Come quickly from above;  
Write thy new name upon my heart,  
Thy new, best name of love!

Hymns "For Believers Brought to the Birth" encourage believers to persevere their prayers for a pure heart. These hymns

s testify to the possibility of a pure heart using Wesley's favored imagery of restoration:

He wills that I should holy be;  
That holiness I long to feel,  
That full divine conformity  
To all my Saviour's righteous will.

Come, Saviour, come, and make me whole!  
Entirely all my sins remove;  
To perfect health restore my soul,  
To perfect holiness and love.

The hymns for believers seeking a pure heart are followed by a group of hymns "For Believers Saved" referring, in Wesley's terminology, to "Full Salvation." Much has been made of the differences between John and Charles regarding the extent and timing of Christian Perfection, an issue beyond the scope of this article. For the 1780 Hymnbook, however, these differences are set aside. As editor, John chose hymns that reflected basic theological agreement between the brothers. The placement of these hymns of testimony after the earlier hymns for believers "Groaning for Full Redemption" shows that John (regardless of Charles' later doubts) considered these hymns to refer to entire sanctification. Charles Wesley writes:

Quickened with our immortal Head,  
Who daily, Lord, ascend with thee,  
Redeemed from sin, and free indeed,  
We taste our glorious liberty.

Part Five, "Hymns for the Society," begins with the hymn that is sung at the opening of British Methodist Conferences, "And Are We Yet Alive?" These hymns of corporate worship emphasize the Pilgrim's place in a body of believers. John Wesley conceived of his Hymnbook as a "Pilgrim's Progress" to help the believer grow in the Christian life. The hymnal was much more than a collection of hymns to be used on Sunday; it was the daily companion of the growing Christian. The hymnal, particularly the hymns of Charles Wesley, was second only to the Bible in the spiritual formation of early Methodists.

A study of the 1780 Wesley Hymnbook suggests two implications for today. Like Charles Wesley, today's hymn-writers should write hymnody that addresses all areas of the Christian life. Praise is an important theme in hymnody; it is not, however, the only theme. Wesley, like David, understood that lament and instruction are also important themes for hymnody. Hymn-writers must speak to the broad spectrum of spiritual needs with meaningful texts. A second implication of this study is the importance of the hymnal for spiritual growth. In place of light-weight daily devotional booklets, pastors will do well to encourage church members to use the hymnal in their daily devotional time. Perhaps "Daily Bible Reading Charts" could be accompanied with suggested hymns for the day—hymns that trace the progress of the spiritual life. As believers avail themselves of the rich body of hymn literature, they will be encouraged in their spiritual growth.

Charles Wesley celebrated his conversion with a hymn; hymns played a central role in Methodist worship and devotion; and, the Hymnbook gave comfort to dying Methodists. Beckerlegge explained, "They had steeped their minds in their hymn-book; it had, with the Scriptures, fed their souls ever since their conversion; and at the end it did not fail them."

From their (spiritual) birth to the grave, the Hymnbook was the constant companion of early Methodists. John Bunyan portrayed "Christian" carrying a book, the Bible; had John Wesley written a similar allegory of the Christian walk, his Pilgrim would have carried two books, a Bible and a hymnal. Both are valuable roadmaps for the highway to heaven.

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