

THE LIVING HYMNS OF *Charles Wesley*

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The tremendous interest in the hymns of Charles Wesley two hundred and fifty years after the author's birth is evidence enough that they are living hymns, and that they are alive today. We plan to survey briefly the conditions under which they were born, what it was which gave them such life, and the reason for their continuing life through the years.

I.

The hymns of Charles Wesley were born of their times and circumstances—especially as a response to two great needs: The Church of England needed a song; and the people of England needed a Saviour.

It is hard for us to realize to what an extent it is true that the Church of England had come into being without a song that was in any way adequate. The Reformation in Germany, under Martin Luther's great leadership, had developed very early a German hymnody which drew its spirit from the hymns of men like Bernard of Clairvaux and its forms from the German folk songs and popular songs. The Reformation in Switzerland, on the other hand, following John Calvin's strict direction, went back to the singing of Psalms. The Reformation in England had followed Calvin rather than Luther at this point. They had discarded the great hymns of both East and West, lest something uninspired and therefore possibly evil might enter into their worship. They had only "Psalms of David" and no hymns of Christ.

Isaac Watts, an older contemporary of the Wesleys, made a very great advance indeed, really bridging the chasm from psalms to hymns; but, though greatly appreciated by the Wesleys, his hymns were not easily accepted except in the nonconformist churches. So the Church of England was still without a song.

The still more fundamental need was the need for a Saviour. The times were cruel. Life was degraded and corrupt. Religion itself, after all the quarreling between Roman Catholics and followers of the Church of England, and with various kinds of nonconformists, might be formal, contentious or impotent. The people needed to have the Saviour revealed to them. In the providence of God, the Wesleyan hymnody and the revival grew up together in response to the needs. Each was essential to the other, and each was a part of the whole.

II.

But the circumstances and the needs are not a sufficient explanation of all that happened. There were many poets, but the others did not produce a great hymnody. There were many devout Christians conscious of the desperate situation, but they did not produce the revival. In no other group did the times produce anything comparable to the achievements of the Wesleys and their followers. The Wesleys themselves were unique. Their background on both sides of the family furnished a rich preparation of culture, devotion and ability. To this heritage was added a home and school training which made them take their place among the best-educated men of their generation. Their knowledge of Scripture was "profound, exact and extensive." They were acquainted with the ancient and mediaeval poets, and with the poetry of their own day.

The hymns which seem most alive today were the hymns of Charles Wesley's Youth, written between the ages of thirty-one and forty-three, in times of tension, struggle, and sometimes peril. Although he lived to be

eighty years old and wrote more than 6,500 hymns, only one of the thirty which we chose as especially familiar was written after he ceased to itinerate, at forty-three. That one appropriately enough, is "A Charge to Keep I Have."

We must stress again the relationship of the hymns to the revival. The hymns endeavored to express what the revival accomplished in men's hearts. Some were written to awaken men to a sense of their sin and peril, and to call them to repentance and faith. They also taught the doctrines which the sermons proclaimed; and they continue this teaching while the sermons are no longer heard.

But these uniquely-prepared men and the epoch-making revival would not have produced Charles Wesley's hymns had it not been for the life-creating experience which came to Charles, and soon after to John. Charles had written poetry before, but who reads it today? There was needed the divine inspiration in his own soul, which seemed to multiply his powers by infinity. And we can never forget that there were two brothers working together. We recall that where one can chase a thousand, two can put ten thousand to flight. But it was not two of John, nor two of Charles. The combination of the right two elements results in something very much greater than two volumes of either one. Indeed, something comparable to atomic fusion can take place in the realm of the soul. "What hath God wrought!"

III.

The hymns of Charles Wesley are alive today, not just because of the great variety of meters in which he wrote so skilfully and with such fine imagination, nor just because there was a great revival two centuries ago to scatter so widely the hymns it had helped to produce. The continuing movement which grew out of the revival and spread across the world is part of the answer. But the central fact to recognize is this: The hymns still live because their message to mind and heart is the eternal gospel of salvation. Sin is still sin, and Charles Wesley feels its destructiveness. Repentance is still real, and he calls men to his own saving experience of pardon. The glory of God's acceptance of the prodigal is unchanged. The way of salvation is powerfully revealed, even as when the hymns were first sung. The gospel, though nineteen centuries old, is still thrillingly new. But sinners still need to be called. And the universal offer of God's love in Christ is still by many unknown. Read each of these hymns in its entirety:

"Jesus, Lover of my soul,

Let me to Thy bosom fly.

Thou, O Christ, art all I want,

More than all in Thee I find."

"O that the world might taste and see

The riches of His grace!

The arms of love that compass me

Would all mankind embrace."

A recent drawing in The Saturday Review pictured a long-distance runner with his torch in his hand staggering into the presence of the elders who have awaited his coming and his news in desperate intensity. The runner is ready to drop utterly exhausted. But he manages to gasp out the words, "I forgot the message!" Charles Wesley never forgot the message. May we as faithfully remember.

"Happy, if with my latest breath

I may but gasp His Name;

Preach Him to all, and cry in death,

'Behold, behold the Lamb!'"