

THEN SINGS MY SOUL 4: “A THOUSAND TONGUES”

Charles Wesley was born in 1707, and Methodists world wide are celebrating his 300th birthday throughout this year, 2007. Far more extensively than any of John's sermons; Charles' hymns have been revered in the days since their first writing, and continue to be loved even today. My hunch is that when this century passes, we'll still love to sing the great hymns of Charles Wesley.

Charles was born 4 years after John, yet preceded him in a number of ways. Charles was first enrolled in Oxford before John. Charles enlisted the first members of the "Holy Club" before John took over its leadership; and because of that, may more accurately be titled, the Father of Methodism. Though there was never any competition between them; Charles and John were ordained as Priests in the Church of England and journeyed to America together. Charles left Georgia first when his health forced him to return to his homeland. It was that premature return, and those same health issues that led Charles to begin not only to question the validity of his familiar faith, but even to doubt its effect and place in his life. From a state of depression and on a sick bed in May of 1738 Charles cried out for God to make real what he wanted so desperately to believe. Here is what he recorded in his journal on May 21st, 1738:

"I now found myself at peace with God, and rejoiced in hope of loving Christ..... I saw that by faith I stood, by the continual support of faith.....I went to bed still sensible of my own weakness....yet confident of Christ's protection."

The next morning he awoke with a hymn burning in his breast, and as John came to visit he shared with his beloved brother the seedlings of what later became one of his famous hymns. John and Charles that joyful morning sang together these beloved words found on page 363 in the Red Hymnal:

And can it be that I should gain an interest in the Savior's blood!
Died he for me? who caused his pain! For me? who him to death pursued?
Amazing Love! How can it be that thou, my God, shouldst die for me?
Amazing Love! How can it be that thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

Tis mystery all: th'Immortal dies! Who can explore his strange design?
In vain the first-born seraph tries to sound the depths of love divine.
Tis mercy all! Let earth adore; let angel minds inquire no more.
Tis mercy all! Let earth adore; let angel minds inquire no more

He left his Father's throne above (so free, so infinite his grace!),
emptied himself of all but love, and bled for Adam's helpless race.
Tis mercy all, immense and free, for O my God, it found out me!
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Long my imprisoned spirit lay, fast bound in sin and nature's night;
thine eye diffused a quickening ray; I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
my chains fell off, my heart was free, for O my God, it found out me!
My chains fell off, my heart was free, for O my God, it found out me!

Here is a verse not in our current edition of the hymnal:

Still the small inward voice I hear, that whispers all my sins forgiven;
Still the atoning blood is near, that quenched the wrath of hostile Heaven.
I feel the life His wounds impart; I feel the Savior in my heart.
I feel the life His wounds impart; I feel the Savior in my heart.

No condemnation now I dread; Jesus, and all in him, is mine;
alive in him, my living Head, and clothed in righteousness divine,
bold I approach th'eternal throne, and claim the crown, through Christ my own.
Bold I approach th'eternal throne, and claim the crown, through Christ my own.

It was just 3 days later that John felt his own heart strangely warmed, and he too discovered the reality of his sins forgiven, the hope of faith returned, the joy of Jesus reborn, the prospect of preaching reignited, and the promise of heaven rekindled. Charles set about writing hymns, and John set about preaching the word, and together these two brothers changed the landscape of England, and set the first Great Awakening ablaze. Oh,...for a thousand tongues...to sing...I'm getting ahead of myself.

This morning I want to discuss with you the nature and makeup of Charles' hymns. They are so multi-faceted, and deep layered, I'll never do justice, but let me mention 5 characteristics I see running throughout his great hymns.

1. THE HYMNS OF CHARLES WESLEY WERE TESTIMONIAL

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thine eye diffused a quickening ray; I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
my chains fell off, my heart was free, for O my God, it found out me!
My chains fell off, my heart was free, for O my God, it found out me!*

Charles used the metaphor of being a prisoner to describe the state and condition of his soul before he met Jesus Christ as liberator, and savior. He wrote many such songs describing the process of becoming a believer in Jesus Christ. The boys were never ones to discount the influential upbringing of their parents, especially their mother; yet also never assumed (like too many of us) that their family faith would save them until they made it their own.

Testimonies have fallen by the way side. Save for an occasional Confirmation Class member describing his/her experience of coming to Jesus; we as a church, we as a society have fallen silent about giving, or sharing, or even having a testimony. It is largely and unfortunately due to the fact some of us don't have a relationship with Jesus, some of us have yet to have our own chains broken, our own hearts freed, our own sins forgiven. And others of us are so afraid of offending someone; we choose to remain silent, when our testimony, our personal testimony, might be exactly why God led this or that person into our pathway at that moment. Charles wrote numerous hymns that referenced his personal experience of being saved and set free by Jesus Christ. We may never write such hymns, but can't we at least just tell others what Jesus means to us; what Jesus did for us? YES we can!

2. THE HYMNS OF CHARLES WESLEY WERE SCRIPTURAL

Unquestionably the early Methodists learned much, of their scriptural knowledge from the singing of scripture as contained in Charles' hymns. One can hardly read or sing a line in any Wesley hymn and not note it's scriptural base, if not it's being a direct quote or interpretation of some verse from the Bible.

Both John and Charles knew the simply profound truth, that most humans from infancy, learn and retain more, when the subject is set to music..."A b c, d e f g..."

Not many years previous to John and Charles, the Church hymnal consisted of only the Psalms. For hymn writers like Luther, Newton, Watts and Wesley, their attempts to write and create "contemporary" music was met with as much disdain, dismay, and derision, as new music is by some today. They persisted, and undoubtedly wanted not just to sing nice songs, but to make their songs teach, even preach, the multifaceted truths of God's immeasurably deep Word. Here is an example of the scriptural nature of Charles' hymns:

He left his Father's throne above (Heb. 12:2) (so free, so infinite his grace!), (Rom. 5: 21) emptied himself of all but love, (Phil. 2:7) and bled for Adam's helpless race. (Rom. 5: 12-18) Tis mercy all, immense and free, for O my God, it found out me!

I have a grave concern that Christians today, are becoming more and more biblically illiterate, and I'm not just talking about young Christians. We must not let it happen; we must continue our Wesleyan heritage of grounding our music, our sermons, yea, even our lives on the only sustainable, unchangeable, unable to be improved upon Word of God. There is no other foundation upon which we must be built, and no other foundation that will secure us in this life, and sustain us till the next! AMEN? Then let's start reading it, and better yet...LIVING IT!

3. THE HYMNS OF CHARLES WESLEY WERE EVANGELICAL

The hymns of Charles and the sermons of John were above all else, evangelical. These brothers shared a consuming passion to see all people come to the saving and sanctifying grace and knowledge of their Lord Jesus Christ. They were not satisfied to be engaged in this business alone, but endeavored to enlist all who called themselves Christians...especially all who called themselves Methodist Christians to be about the task of saving lost souls.

This heritage was further infused into our DNA with the merger between the Evangelical Church and the United Brethren Church; which more recently has been fused together to become the United Methodist Church. We might rant and rail against the liberal abuses abounding in our church today, but fault lies nowhere but at our own feet! Our Evangelical heritage; once a badge of courage; has become a dead albatross about our lazy necks as we want and expect someone else to do the preaching, someone else to do the thinking, someone else to do our spiritual work of making disciples of the whole world! When did you last lead anyone to Christ? When did you last share your personal testimony with an unbeliever? When did you last offer a smile, or handshake or even a casual nod of the head, in the name of Christ, to someone whom God led directly in your path? It is our birthright to be evangelical...and we have traded it for a watered down pot of spiritless stew...

“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.”

Wesley's hymns let none of us off the hook. Throughout his hymnody, we are called to share the good news with all who have not yet heard it, or seen it. We can do it!

4. THE HYMNS OF CHARLES WESLEY WERE SACRAMENTAL

We often overlook this, but many of the Wesley hymns were written as aids in the celebration of Christian holy days. In fact one whole hymnal was published that contained nothing but hymns for communion. The brothers learned and practiced and preached the need for constant communion with God, they practiced it on an almost daily basis. There were hymns for baptism, and other holidays including these two most famous Charles Hymns, that ironically, share almost the identical tune:

Hark! The herald angels sing, "Glory to the new-born King; Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled!" Joyful, all ye nations, rise. Join the triumph of the skies. With th'angelic hosts proclaim "Christ is born in Bethlehem!" Hark! The herald angels sing, Glory to the new-born King! And:

*Christ the Lord is risen today, Alleluia!
Sons of men and angels say, Alleluia!
Raise your joys and triumphs high, Alleluia!
Sing, ye heavens, and earth, reply, Alleluia!*

5. THE HYMNS OF CHARLES WESLEY WERE MISSIONAL

We have often discussed John's passion for relieving the social conditions of 18th Century England. His tireless work for the orphans and children, his masterful advances in the fields of medicine and science, his commitment to the prisoners and poor, his lobbying and supporting William Wilberforce in abolishing slavery, are just a few examples of John's fulfillment of the great commandment: "To love your neighbor as yourself." One of my favorite quotes of John's was sent to a man who was criticizing him for preaching to the young children who gathered for one of the numerous free feeding programs run by the church. John replied and defended his preaching with this classic line: "What good shall it serve to send the children well fed to hell?"

This missional emphasis was not lost on Charles either, he wrote many songs not only elevating the need to help the poor, but also challenging the rich, and all who claimed to know God with these words:

*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.*

I wonder at the 'coincidence' that these 5 hymn themes are also indirectly reflected in the purposes we have identified for our own church? Just a thought.

As the 1st anniversary of Charles' conversion approached in May of 1739, he once again undertook to write a song with that unusual title: *For the Anniversary Day of One's Conversion*. The first three verses go like this:

*Glory to God, and praise and love be ever, ever given,
by saints below and saints above, the church in earth and heaven.*

*On this glad day the glorious Sun of Righteousness arose;
on my benighted soul he shone and filled it with repose.*

*Sudden expired the legal strife, 'twas then I ceased to grieve;
my second, real, living life I then began to live.*

Charles' conversion was fostered by the loving witness of some Moravian Christians, most notably one named Peter Bohler, whom God also used to influence John's conversion 3 day's later. It was this Mr. Bohler who is first credited for coining the phrase:

"Had I a thousand tongues, I would praise Him with them all." This seed thought became the seventh verse of 17, and the title shortly thereafter, of the hymn that Charles wrote upon the anniversary of his conversion; which has ever since been found on page one of every Methodist hymnal published since then. *O, for a thousand tongues to sing.*

Let's attempt to sing...all 17 stanzas. AMEN

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“Ye servants of God...your Master proclaim,
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