
How Can Wesleyans Sing the Lord's Song?

by John S. Tremaine

We, as fulfilled Christians, are perilously near an abyss when it comes to assuming proper responsibility for stewardship of the gift of song. There is no dearth of exhortation in this area from Scripture, particularly in the Judeo-Christian heritage. As early as Exodus 15: 1-18, praise comes forth in the Song of Moses, and the structure is clearly that of a hymn of praise. The song contains all the elements of a communicative ascription to God: (1) praise for who He is, (2) praise for what He has done, (3) praise for His victory over the enemy, (4) praise for His constant love, and (5) praise for His "eternal-ness." As we turn to our final Revelation from God we find the saints in exultant praise: "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give Him the glory . . ." (Rev. 19:6, 7).

Singing is serious business, but, like the plan of salvation, it is at once simple and profound. At no point in Scripture is corporate praise delineated as an exclusive thing to be tested and evaluated along aesthetic lines.

This is not to excuse to any degree a careless approach. It is important that we underline the demand for the best stewardship of talent which lies within us. But with the same underlining, the word *all* assumes the utmost importance. In true praise, *all* participate without question. As talents and gifts differ, so will quality. But the charge is clearly there: *all* are to sing.

There is something electrifying and confirming about a group gathered for corporate praise when the Spirit has infused it with His presence and understanding. It is then that a combination of text and tune clearly vindicates itself if it is worthy. The singer, unskilled though he may be, can be caught up in the divinely appointed act and be edified as he becomes a part of the whole. It is here that each person is as im-

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portant as the other, and the “joyful noise” (not to be caricatured here as it too often has been) becomes “music for our Lord to hear.”

Church music has all too often been a “spectator sport,” as we are all aware. The sensitive church musician has long known that a balance must be achieved and kept between congregational participation and the leadership of skilled artists. The latter must lead and assist as they provide dedicated inspiration – never must they entertain. There is never a place in church music for the willful display of talent. Exceptional talent, however, when used unequivocally for the glory of God (Bach: *Soli Deo Gloria!*) has a subtle way of encouraging others less talented to do their best as they join heartily in corporate praise.

Richard Raines, in his preface to the *Wesley Hymnbook*, quotes Bishop Asbury thus:

In examining the arrangement (Asbury’s own hymn publication in 1808), you will find every particular head well furnished with suitable hymns in which are contained a body of excellent divinity, explanatory of, and enforcing, the fundamental doctrines of the Gospel. We now cheerfully commend the work and you to the protection and care of Almighty God, hoping you will still sing with the Spirit and the understanding also: guarding particularly against lifeless formality in this and all other devotional exercises, till you are called to join the innumerable company who in heaven sing the song of Moses and of the Lamb.

What clearer direction could there be than this? It is to all intents and purposes another articulation of Paul’s exhortation in Colossians 3:16 and Ephesians 5:19! Charles Wesley puts it vibrantly into lyrics:

Meet and right it is to sing,
In every time and place,
Glory to our heavenly King,
The God of truth and grace:
Join we then with sweet accord,
All in one thanksgiving join;
Holy, Holy, Holy Lord,
Eternal praise be Thine.

Thee the first-born sons of light,
In choral symphonies,

The Lord's Song

Praise by day, day without night,
And never, never cease;
Angels and archangels all
Praise the mystic Three in One,
Sing, and stop, and gaze, and fall
O'erwhelmed before Thy throne.

Vying with that happy choir,
Who chant Thy praise above,
We on eagles' wings aspire,
The wings of faith and love:
Thee they sing with glory crowned,
We extoll the slaughtered Lamb;
Lower if our voices sound,
Our subject is the same.

Father, God, Thy love we praise,
Which gave Thy Son to die;
Jesus, full of truth and grace,
Alike we glorify;
Spirit, Comforter divine,
Praise by all to Thee be given;
Till we in full chorus join,
And earth is turned to heaven.

John Wesley, in his seven "Directions for Singing," from the preface to *Sacred Melody*, 1761, is explicit as to total participation and "how to do it." His rare combination and balance of discipline and spiritual zeal were constantly evidenced in his editing of hymns (mostly Charles') for the people called Methodists. The business of congregational singing was no mere theory for the Wesleys and their followers: it was put to the test, and it worked! Eric Routley, in *The Musical Wesleys*, states that John was a "thorough-going conservative" when it came to music, and that he (John) often alluded to the fact that the music of the ancients was as simple as that of the Methodists. It was possibly this element of arch-conservatism musically which made him more able to communicate with the masses in hymns. A clear melodic line was of utmost importance. He said in essence, "Leave the fancy stuff to the artists."

Bishop Short, in writing of Wesley genius, reminds us that the brothers continuously urged their followers to sing, then pause and consider what they had sung. They managed to place full responsibility

upon the singer for what he had uttered.

My experience with the Methodists of Great Britain has convinced me that they are seriously committed to the perpetuation of the genius of Wesleyan hymnody. There seems to be no possibility in these days of austerity that a new hymnal will be published; but there is a unity of conviction that the best of Wesley hymns must be preserved and put before the congregation to sing.

Of the 984 hymns in the current *Methodist Hymn Book* (British), 243 are from the pen of John and Charles, many of John's, of course, being translations from the German. Thereby hangs another significant fact: the solid contribution of the Moravians, not only to hymnody in general but to the vitality of personal experience and congregational praise as a deeply devotional exercise. It was, as we all know, this factor which first attracted the Wesleys' attention on the memorable voyage to America in 1735.

What the German reformers utilized in 1517 and the English discarded in 1534, the Wesleys, building upon Isaac Watts' pioneering, revived. Music of the people became again an essential ingredient, and the congregation sang its faith with fresh and lasting enthusiasm.

A word about tunes is in order here: it has been a most revealing and sometimes frustrating experience to be a part of vastly differing groups around this country and Great Britain, where certain tunes have implanted themselves with certain texts through the years. There are many to whom new or otherwise associated tunes are intolerable, and others to whom a new tune becomes a challenge and even brings stronger meaning to a text. While volumes could be written upon this subject, there are a few simple guidelines which we who deal with congregational praise should heed: a good tune should be musically strong and relatively simple, both in vocal range and melody line. The "feeling" it carries (and this of course is controversial, but to a degree conclusive) should be sympathetic to the text.

We find entirely too frequently the impression that Charles Wesley adapted just any common tune that would do, in order to get people to sing. This does not "hold water" upon close scrutiny. Any tunes which have come down through the years have been found to be worthy. The folk tunes used were almost certain to have been the sort which would not lend themselves to vulgar usage.

Although there is little positive proof, we note in referring to the rare 1868 collection, *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley*, very often the direction: "to be sung to . . ." followed by the title of

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a previously written hymn or some well-known song. When a tune fit, it was used, there being a general knowledge of metre, for many alternate texts. The object was to get God's people to sing, but worthily, by a tune which suited the text. Enough fragments have been preserved from early tune books to prove this point, although music was scarce, and still is in many quarters.

We of Wesleyan persuasion often lose sight of the fact that there were two specific classes of hymns used for years among Methodists. The first, called forth in amazing quantity by the urgency of their zeal and times, were manifest to convert the unsaved and support a sweeping mass evangelism. The second type was just as evidently pointed to the educative and spiritually deepening process of the societies.

The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley (1868), by far the most comprehensive collection of their output in hymns, is most revealing in its scope and significance in its chronology. No facet of Christian experience goes untouched. The authors' own comments and titles indicate an incredible insight into the needs of their times, the propagation of the doctrine of "free grace," and a steady and insistent search for Christian perfection. The passing years show a sure progress toward affirmation of the sanctified life as the only goal for every believer. Truly the Wesleyan hymnals are textbooks of Methodist theology; and let us say parenthetically that the most recent hymnbooks in the Methodist tradition have done infinitely better with authentic texts and emphasis than their predecessors had done for a few decades. The newest, *Hymns of Faith and Life*, is in many instances a masterpiece. It even includes a number of Wesley hymns overlooked in the British *Methodist Hymnbook* which are rich in the best Wesleyan tradition.

How then shall we of Wesleyan faith and practice sing the Lord's song? First, we are committed as Christians and by example to the very best. This means that the selected text, be it Watts, Wesley, or another, must be Scripturally and doctrinally sound. Then it must be singable. If there is any doubt in the minister's mind, it should be dispelled by his musical associates, given the above guidelines. Next, a contagious enthusiasm born of conviction and knowledge of the text will be bound to convey itself to a congregation when they know their primary object is heartfelt praise. The "how" can come as we proceed.

Countless ways of improving congregational singing have been advocated; but any "gimmick" short of a Spirit-born exuberance is in es-

sence shallow. I am reminded of a scheduled hymn-sing at the inception of the 1970 Asbury Revival when Charles Wesley's "See How Great A Flame Aspires" was requested by a student who selected it only on the basis of its appropriate text. As far as we knew, it had never been sung here before, and even the tune was new. However, it was sung by an inspired congregation with assurance and great fervor. Need we further proof?

Lest we be accused of taking our title out of context, we must insist that the Lord's song will always be in a sense "in a strange land." The life in Christ is an enigma to the unbeliever, who must be wooed and won by such means as anointed preaching and singing. Then he will discover to his great delight that the vehicle of song carries the message of his heart strongly in the company of others, feeble as his own efforts may be.

Every hymn must stand the test of its acceptability for corporate praise or prayer. This ruled out many of Charles Wesley's poems from publication in hymnals, and we could have profited by John's careful editing in many songbooks since his time! Voices lifted in concert must vocalize experiences and affirmations which are within reach of all and Biblically based. There is no room for apocryphal assertions.

Shall we, then, without carelessness or smugness, appropriate and utilize the heritage which is ours in Wesleyan hymnody? This is not in any sense an argument for exclusiveness. Wesleyan hymnody is not the one "ultimate," but no branch of Christendom has been more richly endowed in both authorship and effective use of sacred song. It then behooves us to give it its rightful place in the rich and ever-expanding area of congregational praise; and to subject our choices to the same careful scrutiny these founding fathers of ours demonstrated.

We could very well be entering a new and stronger day of effective singing by applying both content and principle of our rich past to the creativity of contemporary Christian song. There is no question as to the validity of this theory if it is really practiced.

Above all, sing spiritually. Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing Him more than yourself, or any other creature. In order to do this attend strictly to the sense of what you sing, and see that your heart is not carried away with the sound, but offered to God continually; so shall your singing be such as the Lord will approve here, and reward you when He cometh in the clouds of heaven.

– VII from John Wesley's preface to *Sacred Melody*, 1761