
Holiness and the Christian Year in the Hymns of Charles Wesley

by C. Barron Buchanan

Evelyn Underhill, in her classic study “Worship,” says, “since the Christian revelation is in its very nature historical – God coming the whole way to man, and discovered and adored within the arena of man’s life at one point in time, in and through the Humanity of Christ – it follows that all the historical events and conditions of Christ’s life form part of the vehicle of revelation. Each of them mediates God, disclosing some divine truth or aspect of divine love to us. Here lies the importance of the Christian Year, with its recurrent memorials of the Birth, the Manhood, the Death and the Triumph of Jesus, as the framework of the Church’s ordered devotion In Christ, and therefore in all the states and acts of Christ, history and eternity meet.”

The writer also states that, “Christian worship is always directed towards the sanctification of life . . . (and) is to be judged by the degree in which it tends to Holiness.”

It is not surprising to find these two themes – the historical and the holy – interwoven in many of Charles Wesley’s hymns, and the hymns for the celebration of the Christian year have an emphasis on sanctification that is unique among hymn-writers. Each aspect of Christ’s life and ministry is viewed in its particular relation to the ultimate goal of the believer’s life: holiness.

The Christian year opens with “Advent,” a word meaning “coming.” Beginning four Sundays prior to December 25th, it is a season of serious preparation for the celebration of our Lord’s birth. Traditionally we bear in mind three “comings” of Christ: His entrance into the world in Bethlehem, His birth here and now in our hearts, and the final

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Advent, when He will appear in judgment and glory. In the hymn, "Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus," Wesley states the theme of our sanctification in the words,

From our fears and sins release us;
Let us find our rest in Thee.

The celebration of Christ's birth on December 25th dates from the early part of the fourth century. This day was chosen not because of any tradition of memory of the exact time of our Lord's birth, but, in part at least, because of the Church's desire to offset the pagan festival of the sun. The connection between the two festivals is suggested in one of the most ancient collects for Christmas: "O God, who hast made this most holy night to shine with the illumination of the true light" Devotion to Christ, the "Sun of righteousness," supplanted the cult of the unconquered-sun. In the third stanza of "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing," we find in the phrase, "Hail the Sun of Righteousness" a reminiscence of the old tradition. This hymn, first published in 1739, was entitled, "Hymn for Christmas-Day." Wesley's original stanzas one through six are found in the *Methodist Hymnal*, and conclude with the line, "Born to give them second birth." However, in the hymn as it was first sung, this was followed by the theme of a still deeper reconstruction of human nature:

7. Come, Desire of Nations, come,
Fix in us Thy humble home;
Rise, the woman's conquering Seed,
Bruise in us the serpent's head.
8. Now display Thy saving power,
Ruined nature now restore;
Now in mystic union join
Thine to ours, and ours to Thine.
9. Adam's likeness, Lord, efface,
Stamp Thy image in its place;
Second Adam from above,
Reinstate us in Thy love.
10. Let us Thee, though lost, regain,
Thee, the Life, the Inner Man:
O! to all Thyself impart,
Formed in each believing heart.

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A little-known collection, "Hymns for the Nativity of our Lord," has two superb examples: In "Hymn V," which begins, "Let earth and heaven combine," the closing stanzas read:

5. He deigns in flesh to 'appear,
Wildest extremes to join,
To bring our vileness near,
And make us all Divine;
And we the life of God shall know,
For God is manifest below.

6. Made perfect first in love,
And sanctified by grace,
We shall from earth remove,
And see His glorious face;
His love shall then be fully showed,
And man shall all be lost in God.

In "Hymn XV" from the same collection, beginning, "All-wise, all-good, almighty Lord," we find:

5. In my weak sinful flesh appear,
O God, be manifested here,
Peace, righteousness, and joy,
Thy kingdom, Lord, set up within
My faithful heart; and all my sin,
The devil's work destroy.

6. I long Thy coming to confess,
The mystic power of godliness,
The life Divine to prove:
The fullness of Thy life to know,
Redeemed from all my sin below,
And perfected in love.

* * * * *

8. Come quickly, gracious Lord, that I
May own, though antichrist deny,
Thy incarnation's power.
May cry, a witness to my Lord,
"Come in my flesh is Christ the Word,
And I can sin no more!"

The third season of the Christian year is called “Epiphany,” meaning “manifestation.” Celebration on January 6th, the Western Church came to commemorate the visit of the magi to the Christ-Child, introducing an emphasis upon our Lord’s manifestation to the gentiles. In hymns for this season we will find the theme of Christ as light. In, “Christ, Whose Glory Fills the Skies,” Wesley stresses the idea of “inward light,” and the phrase, “Cheer my eyes and warm my heart,” is expressive of a joyful Christian experience. It is the third stanza that is most specifically oriented to the concept of holiness: “. . . Pierce the gloom of sin and grief; *Fill me, Radiancy divine.*”

In the Early Church Easter and Pentecost were times of initiation of new members into the Christian fellowship. Out of the disciplines preparatory to baptism on Easter Even there developed the season of Lent. By the time of the Council of Nicea in 325, most of the churches had adopted a Lenten fast of six weeks, or roughly forty days. Throughout the season we are led to consider the sufferings of Christ. One of the most poignant Lenten hymns is, “O Lord Divine, What Hast Thou Done.” The third stanza presents the Cross as “pardon”; but the fourth recognizes the even greater power of Christ’s death as “healing”:

Then let us sit beneath his cross,
And gladly catch the healing stream;
All things for him account but loss,
And give up all our hearts to him:
Of nothing think or speak beside:
My Lord, my Love, is crucified.

Easter Day is the primary festival of Christians, the “royal feast of feasts.” Every Sunday is a commemoration of Easter, the first day of the week, when our Lord rose triumphant from the grave. The fifty days from Easter to Pentecost was the only festival observed by the universal church during the first three centuries of its history. The period was one continuing season of joy. Though we are best acquainted with Wesley’s, “Christ the Lord is Risen Today,” there is a collection entitled, “Hymns for Our Lord’s Resurrection.” Number III opens: “Happy Magdalene, to whom . . .” In the fourth stanza we read:

Who can now presume to fear?
Who despair his Lord to see?
Jesus, wilt Thou not appear,
Show Thyself alive to *me*?

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Yes, my God, I dare not doubt,
Thou shalt all my sins remove;
Thou hast cast a legion out,
Thou wilt perfect me in love.

Number VIII in the same collection is the familiar, “Rejoice, the Lord is King!” The fifth stanza stresses the death of our sins:

He all His foes shall quell,
Shall all our sins destroy,
And every bosom swell
With pure seraphic joy:
Lift up your heart, lift up your voice,
Rejoice, again I say, rejoice.

The Feast of the Ascension was instituted in the fourth century by the Church in Jerusalem. The day is the fortieth after Easter, according to the Book of Acts. A splendid hymn is found in the *Methodist Hymnal*, “Come, Let Us Rise with Christ.” Concerning sanctification, the final stanza is quite specific:

To him our willing hearts we give
Who gives us power and peace,
And dead to sin, his members live
The life of righteousness;
The hidden life of Christ is ours
With Christ concealed above,
And tasting the celestial powers,
We banquet on his love.

The Feast of Pentecost (or “Whit-Sunday”) is the celebration of the gift of the Holy Spirit to the waiting Church. This theme and its Blessed Subject moved deeply in the heart of Charles Wesley, and we discover hymn after hymn extolling the Spirit. Here are excerpts from “Hymns for Whit-Sunday,” published in 1746: “Hymn I” begins, “Father of everlasting grace”:

6. Send us the Spirit of Thy Son,
To make the depths of Godhead known,
To make us share the life Divine;
Send Him the sprinkled blood to 'apply,

Send Him, our soul to sanctify,
And show, and seal us ever Thine.

From “Hymn III,” beginning, “Eternal Spirit, come”:

3. No gift or comfort we
Would have distinct from Thee,
Spirit, principle of grace,
Sum of our desires Thou art,
Fill us with Thy holiness,
Breathe Thyself into our hearts.

From “Hymn IV,” beginning, “Sinners, lift up your hearts”:

4. The cleansing blood to 'apply,
The heavenly life display,
And wholly sanctify,
And seal us to that day,
The Holy Ghost to man is given;
Rejoice in God sent down from heaven.

And, finally, from “Hymn XXXI,” which opens, “Spirit of holiness,
and Root”:

4. Through Thee the flesh we mortify,
A daily death rejoice to die,
And live from sin for ever free:
An holy sinless life to lead
Is only in Thy track to tread,
To walk in love, in God, in Thee.