Biblical Theology in the Hymns of Charles Wesley

Since their founding, the Methodists have always been a people of practicality. The rapid growth and expansion of the Methodist movement in 18th century America is largely attributed to the Methodist understanding of the Christian life as a call to “go.” As the American frontier expanded geographically, the Methodists were on horseback, riding thousands of miles across rugged terrain to reach those on the margins of the developing settlements. Today, Methodists continue to be at the forefront of pertinent social issues, advocating on behalf of the marginalized of society. Given its origins, it is not surprising, then, to see that until recent years, Methodists have had little interest in articulating a comprehensive body of theological work in volumes of written epistemological summae. Instead, we see some of the most profound theological expressions of the Methodist Church in a much more practical and palpable medium: hymnody.

Hustad writes, “Charles Wesley’s hymns were fundamentally a compendium of Methodist theology, covering every aspect of Christian spiritual experience, and may be said to be one of the progenitors of the later gospel song.”¹ Charles Wesley, along with his brother John, wrote something like 9,000 hymns and poems during the course of his life.² Cruickshank mentions that Wesley wrote hymns with a variety of emphases:

¹ Donald P. Hustad, Jubilate II: Church Music in Worship and Renewal (Carol Stream, IL: Hope Publishing Company, 1989), 208.

spiritual hymns with emotional appeal, theological hymns explaining doctrinal concerns, and even polemical hymns which addressed “specific issues in controversies with the Calvinists, Moravians, or others.” In this paper, I will explore the theological and doctrinal significance of one of Wesley’s most famous hymns: *Jesus, Lover of My Soul* and assert that Wesley’s hymnody contains some of the most profound and comprehensive biblical theology that has existed in the Methodist Church.

Wesley employed two main content-focused approaches to explicating his biblical theology: either by unpacking and exegeting a specific passage of Scripture, or by creating a theological mosaic through a collage of passages and biblical language. *Jesus, Lover of My Soul* typifies the second. The hymn does not deal primarily with one passage of Scripture, rather it is a poetic expression of a central theological theme that concerned the Methodists: prevenient grace given to us by the God who seeks and saves. Additionally, the emotive and spiritual aspect of this hymn have lent to its popularity among Wesleyans and Holiness traditions. It is a holiness anthem through and through, containing the language of purity, sanctification, and righteousness.

The enduring appeal of Wesley’s hymns is due in large part to his cultivation of the aesthetic and pastoral aspects of biblical and theological interpretation. We see his aesthetic interests in the way he often personalized the Scriptural text in order that he and his readers could experience the text in a way that speaks to their own story or imagination. As we will see later, much of the language and imagery of *Jesus, Lover of My Soul* is drawn from the highly imaginative wisdom literature and prophecy texts, particularly from the Psalms and Isaiah. His pastoral concerns are demonstrated

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3 Ibid., 312.
through the highly evangelistic nature of his hymns and poetry, along with his desire to write from his own experience in hopes that it would connect with others in their experience. Kalas remarks that Wesley wrote many hymns in times of “public peril,” citing examples of hymns written for times of earthquakes, shipwrecks, public hangings, and imprisonment, to name a few.  

The hymn *Jesus, Lover of My Soul* is one such hymn. The hymn was first published in 1740 during a very tumultuous time in the history of England. There are a few stories that have circulated regarding the origin and circumstance of this hymn. The most compelling is recorded by the American gospel composer Ira D. Sankey:

Charles Wesley was preaching in the fields of the parish of Killyleagh, County Down, Ireland, when he was attacked by men who did not approve of his doctrines. He sought refuge in a house located on what was known as the Island Barn Farm. The farmer’s wife, Jane Lowrie Moore, told him to hide in the milk-house, down in the garden. Soon the mob came and demanded the fugitive. She tried to quiet them by offering them refreshments. Going down to the milk-house, she directed Mr. Wesley to get through the rear window and hide under the hedge, by which ran a little brook. In that hiding-place, with the cries of his pursuers all about him, he wrote this immortal hymn.  

This story, along with other conjectures of the hymn’s origin, points to the significance of Wesley’s contributions to theology: “his poetical interpretation of Scripture has shown how the dramatic mythology of the Bible comes alive.” Wesley’s use of biblical language and imagery in *Jesus, Lover of My Soul* was not just some aimless throwback to the Psalmist; rather, it was born out of a very real experience of needing the safe


haven, refuge, support, comfort, covering, strength, hope, righteousness, truth, grace, and healing streams of God the Father in Christ Jesus through the Holy Spirit right in that exact moment.

Wesley had a commanding grasp of the biblical text, both in languages and theology. Rattenbury argues that “if the Bible were lost, [we] might extract much of it from Wesley’s hymns.”

In the following analysis of the lyrics to *Jesus, Lover of My Soul*, Wesley’s skill for poetic expression in his theology and his comprehensive knowledge of the biblical text will be made evident. The first stanza, containing the title in the lyric, begins the hymn in such a way that it evokes the emotion, imagery, and language of the Psalms especially.

1. Jesus, lover of my soul, let me to thy bosom fly,
while the nearer waters roll, while the tempest still is high.
Hide me, O my Savior, hide, till the storm of life is past;
safe into the haven guide; O receive my soul at last.

The hymn begins with a plea and captures a very prominent theme of the Psalms and the Prophets: God as refuge and comforter in time of need. God is referred to as “lover of souls” in Wisdom 11:26 (KJV). King Hezekiah, in Isaiah 38:17, also speaks about God delivering him because God loves his soul. This is the first of many times in this hymn where Wesley uses Old Testament imagery and language, but reframes it to include his experience of Jesus Christ. In addition, it must be noted that the experience of hiding and seeking safe haven was very present for Wesley (if the story of this hymn is true). He was literally in hiding, waiting for the storm of angry men to pass.

In the second line of this stanza, Wesley quotes the phrase “the nearer waters roll” from a contemporary English poet, Matthew Prior. Wright notes that Prior was

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7 Kalas, *Our First Song*, 24.
“much admired by the Wesleys and their contemporaries.” Wesley employs the language of Isaiah and the Psalmist, affirming that God is “a hiding place” (Ps. 32:7), “a refuge from the storm” (Is. 25:4), “a covert from the tempest” (Is. 32:2), and calmer of the storm (Ps. 107:29). The message of God’s provision of comfort, protection, and refuge is pervasive in the Old Testament. In following with this message of the Psalms, Wesley offers a petition to Jesus, the Savior, to be the “covert from the tempest” during this great time of need.

The second stanza continues with the same language about refuge, support, comfort, help, and covering:

2. Other refuge have I none, hangs my helpless soul on thee; leave, ah! leave me not alone, still support and comfort me.
   All my trust on thee is stayed, all my help from thee I bring;
   cover my defenseless head with the shadow of thy wing.

Here Wesley expresses praise and affirmation of God’s character, while still developing his prayer of petition. He continues using psalmic language of the Lord being “a refuge in the time of trouble” (Ps. 9:9) and seeks to be hidden under the “shadow of Thy wings” (Ps. 17:8, 61:4, 63:7). And in the midst of this, he affirms God’s trustworthiness and gives voice to his need of God because there is no other in which he can find refuge. The line “leave me not alone, still support and comfort me” is also important to the story about the origin of this hymn. As the story goes, John had been present at the farmhouse with Charles and when they had to flee from the angry mob of men, John and Charles were separated. This left Charles quite alone, in hiding, scared, and having to really rely upon Christ’s comfort and consolation.

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The theme of comfort and consolation in times of trouble found in the Old Testament is continued on in the New Testament, but with reference to consolation found in Christ. Some of Wesley’s language elicits themes from the epistles: “For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ” (2 Cor. 1:5) and “That by two immutable things...we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us” (Heb. 6:18). Wesley speaks of his desire to see Jesus’ coming alongside of him, giving him assistance and offering him comfort, counsel, and exhortation in his time of need.

The third stanza is substantially more heart-rending than the first two. In the first two stanzas, Wesley offers prayers of petition, asks for help, affirms God’s character as the stronghold, protector, refuge, and safe haven in the storm. But the third stanza offers a much different portrait of Wesley’s soul:

3. Wilt Thou not regard my call? Wilt Thou not accept my prayer? Lo! I sink, I faint, I fall- Lo! on Thee I cast my care; Reach me out Thy gracious hand! While I of Thy strength receive, Hoping against hope I stand, dying, and behold, I live.

This stanza is raw and poignant, an expression of deep grief and desire to be heard. Given the story about Charles fleeing the angry mob, it is not hard to imagine that he might have fallen to his knees and yelled out to God in desperation. Yet in the midst of the grief, there is a powerful and heart-felt hopefulness. Interestingly, this stanza has often been excluded from hymnals, including *The United Methodist Hymnal*.9 This is

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perplexing because this stanza serves as the crux of the narrative of this hymn. And, as Wright notes, contains some of “Wesley’s most significant lyrics.”

The narrative of the third stanza echoes David’s psalm of thanksgiving in Psalm 18. David begins with praising God for being the one “in whom I take refuge” (v. 2), he remembers his suffering and recalls that “in my distress I called upon the Lord; to my God I cried for help” (v. 6), he witnesses to God “reach[ing] down from on high” (v. 16) and “gird[ing] me with strength” (v. 32) while God’s “right hand...supported me” (v. 35). In David’s psalm, there is a resolution in which God has come to the rescue and has remained faithful. Wesley’s third stanza also offers a kind of resolution, although it is much different than David’s.

Wesley ends this verse with the powerful line, “Hoping against hope I stand, dying, and behold, I live.” This line bears resemblance to Paul’s letter to the Galatians in which he writes, “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me” (v. 20). Wesley points to one of the great paradoxes of the faith: that to truly live, one must first die; that “Whoever would save their life will lose it and whoever loses their life for [Jesus’] sake will save it” (Lk 9:24). It is through this paradoxical faith proclamation that Wesley segues into the concluding stanzas of the hymn. The offering of grace from God that Wesley draws us into is that God is a God of salvation, a God of plenteous grace, and a healing stream.

Verses 4 of Jesus, Lover of the Soul exemplifies the evangelistic nature of Wesley’s ministry and writings. These verses proclaim the gospel; that even amidst the storms of life, our distress and great need, Christ seeks us, protects us, comforts us,

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10 Ibid., 117.
and delivers us to salvation through plenteous grace and healing streams. These verses are also emblematic of Wesley’s concern with holiness. Here his language about sanctification becomes unmistakable:

4. Thou, O Christ, art all I want, more than all in thee I find; raise the fallen, cheer the faint, heal the sick, and lead the blind. Just and holy is thy name, I am all unrighteousness; false and full of sin I am; thou art full of truth and grace.

Wesley references several different passages in these two stanzas. At the beginning of stanza four, he draws upon themes from Psalm 23: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want” (v. 1). He connects that to some of Paul’s thoughts in Colossians 3: “Christ is all and in all!” (v. 11). And finally at the end of the stanza uses the language of John’s Gospel when he says, “thou art full of truth and grace” (1:14).

At first glance it might seem as though Wesley was attempting to read Jesus back into the texts of the Psalms and Isaiah. As we have seen thus far, Wesley combines the language of the Psalms and Isaiah with many New Testament references. Upon careful reading, however, we find that what Wesley was really doing was writing his own psalm, borrowing from the language of Scripture, in worship to Jesus Christ. The many varied texts he draws from helps him to create a language and a context for his theological affirmations. For example, by alluding to Psalm 23 and simultaneously referencing passages about Christ (Col. 3:11, John 1:14), Wesley does not seek to try and prove that Jesus is the Lord who is our shepherd in the psalm; instead he attempts to make connections between the emotions and expressions of the psalmic imagery with Jesus claim that he is “the good shepherd” (John 10:11).

The final stanza calls to mind much of the water imagery associated with God throughout the biblical text:
5. Plenteous grace with thee is found, grace to cover all my sin; 
let the healing streams abound, make and keep me pure within. 
Thou of life the fountain art, freely let me take of thee; 
spring thou up within my heart; rise to all eternity.

The most obvious passage alluded to here is the story of the Samaritan Woman from John 4. Jesus says, “But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life” (v. 14). Some accounts of Charles’ angry mob story note that he and John had endured stones being thrown at them from the mob. This makes the language around healing streams all the more significant to the narrative of the hymn, as we can imagine Charles and John both might have suffered physical wounding.

Stanzas 4 & 5 stand in contrast to stanzas 1 & 2. The shift in focus happens in stanza 3 where Wesley seems to find the faith and trust in God that he sought in the first two stanzas. Now in the concluding stanzas Wesley is able to put his hope and faith in the fountain of life and find the healing streams.

The central themes that are drawn from this hymn are the soul’s yearning for a Savior and also God’s seeking His people. As was mentioned previously, there is little propositional theology instructed in this hymn. It is a sacred psalm written from Wesley’s own life and experiences, which in turn conveys his theology. Though Wesley would never have articulated it in this way, there is a sense in which the doctrine of prevenient grace pervades the narrative of this hymn. Lodahl defines prevenient grace in this way: “This ‘grace that comes (or goes) before us’ simply means that God is lovingly and graciously present and active in every human life.”

The Wesleys have left

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a legacy of placing a lot of significance in this doctrine, not by how they taught or intellectually understood it, but by how they lived it out in their lives and witnessed to it. The Wesleys are famous for their heartwarming experiences of God working in their lives, and this is the prevenient grace to which they testified. It is grace which Wesley taught, “encounters us, calls us, and woos us from sin and self-centeredness back toward God.” It is grace by which the Lord keeps us safe, consoles us, delivers us from harm, reaches out God’s hand and leads us to the healing streams.

Using the example of the doctrine of the Trinity which saturated the Wesleys’ theology, Bryant remarks that “To the Wesleys, the doctrine of the Trinity was not simply something to be speculated about by academic theologians and then believed by the Church. It was to influence ‘hearts and lives,’ ultimately affecting the way people lived.” The same might be said for how the Wesleys understood all of theology and the doctrines of the Church. The Wesleys were both evangelistic and pastoral in how they communicated, interpreted, and experienced the Word of God in Scripture. Charles bound together theological concerns with worship of God through song. In this way, he provided some of the most profound theological works through his hymns, which affected the lives of the Methodists and helped to provide for them some self-understanding and identity as a part of the body of Christ.

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12 Ibid., 45.

Bibliography


