

GRACE AND THE WESLEY HYMNOLOGY

by

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I. Introduction

My concern in this paper is a seeking to crystallize my understanding of Charles Wesley's conception of grace as well as a desire for this to be an exercise for devotional purposes. The method of approach was to seek to integrate the theological aspects of grace, as the Wesleys understood them, with the expressions of these in Charles' hymn writing, in a format, I hope, that is reflective in nature.

I am aware that for the most part, the theology is John's and the hymns are Charles', but I sense no real dichotomy in that, for the brothers were of one mind as they ministered among and to the body of people called Methodists. It would seem that Charles was content to work under the shadow of brother John.

I am also conscious of the abundance of material involved in such a task and this is reflected in the variance in depth by which the topics have been presented. I acknowledge that I found difficulty in avoiding the overlapping of some of the categories as outlined but the very nature of the concept under discussion made this impossible and probably undesirable.

II. "Grace, Grace God's Grace"⁶⁷

One of the predominant themes of the Wesleys, and of the

⁶⁷ Julia H. Johnston

Wesley hymns, is that of grace. A cursory survey of the published hymns is impressive of this fact.

O for a thousand tongues to sing
My dear Redeemer's praise!
The glories of my God and King,
The triumphs of his grace.⁶⁸

What was this grace about? The "triumphs of his grace" was the experience of God's salvation in the life of the Wesley brothers. In May 1738 Charles spoke to Peter Bohler about confessing Christ. Bohler replied, "Had I a thousand tongues, I would praise him with them all."⁶⁹

Grace also is the grace of God's coming down among us -

Father, whose everlasting love
Thy only Son for sinners gave,
Whose grace to all did freely move,
And send him down the world to save⁷⁰

In the hymn "And can it be" we read,

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!⁷¹

"So free, so infinite his grace!" is this coming down race.

⁶⁸ John Lawson, *The Wesley Hymns* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Francis Asbury Press, 1987), 127.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 129.

It is free in all and free for all.⁷² Yet even more, grace is reaching out to us -

Thy sovereign grace to all extends,
Immense and unconfined;
From age to age it never ends;
It reaches all mankind.⁷³

And

Come, O my guilty brethren come,
Groaning beneath your load of sin!
His bleeding heart shall make you room,
His open side shall take you in.
He calls you now, invites you home;
Come, O my guilty brethren, come!⁷⁴

Our hearts are warmed by the comeliness of this grace. God doesn't overcome us by grace, he draws us to himself; by love he draws us -

Jesus, thy wandering sheep behold!
See, Lord, with yearning pity see
Lost sheep that cannot find the fold,
Till sought and gathered in by thee.

Lost are they now, and scattered wide,
In pain, and weariness, and want;
With no kind shepherd near to guide
The sick, and spiritless, and faint.

Thou, only thou the kind and good,
And sheep-redeeming Shepherd art:
Collect thy flock, and give them food,
And pastors after thine own heart.⁷⁵

⁷² Thomas Jackson, ed., *The Works of John Wesley* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 7:373-374.

⁷³ Lawson, *Op. Cit.*, 96.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 158.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

Love answers with grace, and herein is the logic of grace: not that we are strong, but because we are weak.⁷⁶ Grace: from the beginning of time; from the beginning of my life to its end, God has been reaching out to me to bring me to fellowship with himself through the grace available to sinners by faith in Jesus Christ.

Thy faithfulness, Lord, each moment we find,
So true to thy word, so loving and kind;
Thy mercy so tender to all the lost race,
The foulest offender may turn and find grace.

The mercy I feel to others I show,
I set to my seal that Jesus is true!
Ye all may find favour who come at his call;
O come to my Saviour, his grace is for all.⁷⁷

III. Preventive Grace

All the blessings bestowed upon humanity are of God's mere grace. Grace formed us and grace allows us life. And it is grace that is the first dawning upon the soul toward salvation -

Had not Thy grace salvation brought,
Thyself we never could desire;
Thy grace suggests our first good thought,
Thy only grace doth all inspire.

'Twas grace, when we in sin were dead,
Us from the death of sin did raise;
Grace only hath the difference made;
Whate'er we are, we are by grace.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ J. Ellsworth Kalas, *Our First Song: Evangelism in the Hymns of Charles Wesley* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1984), 9.

⁷⁷ Lawson, Op. Cit., 11.

⁷⁸ J. Ernest Rattenbury, *The Evangelical Doctrines of Charles Wesley's Hymns* (London: The Epworth Press, 1941), 123.

Such grace is irresistible! And this "grace that comes before"⁷⁹ creates within us the power to respond to God or resist him; it is a wooing grace -

Ho! Every one that thirsts, draw nigh!
'Tis God invites the fallen race:
Mercy and free salvation buy;
Buy wine, and milk, and gospel grace.⁸⁰

It is a convincing grace, involving repentance and the breaking of a heart of stone -

Jesu, let thy pitying eye
Call back a wandering sheep!
False to thee, like Peter, I
Would fain, like Peter, weep:
Let me be by grace restored,
On me be all long-suffering shown;
Turn, and look upon me, Lord,
And break my heart of stone.

Saviour, Prince, enthroned above,
Repentance to impart,
Give me through thy dying love
The humble contrite heart:
A portion of thy grief unknown;
Turn, and look upon me, Lord,
And break my heart of stone.⁸¹

⁷⁹ John Lawson in Steve Harper, *John Wesley's Message for Today* (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press, 1983), 40.

⁸⁰ Lawson, Op. Cit., 94.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 99.

But there is struggle, a battle; and prevenient grace holds in balance our inability to move toward God, because of original sin, and our freedom to respond to him.⁸²

Come, O thou Traveler unknown,
Whom still I hold, but cannot see!
My company before is gone,
And I am left alone with thee;
With thee all night I mean to stay,
And wrestle till the break of day.

In vain thou strugglest to get free,
I never will unloose my hold!
Art thou the Man that died for me?
The secret of thy love unfold;
Wrestling, I will not let thee go,
Till I thy name, thy nature know.

My prayer hath power with God; the grace
Unspeakable I now receive;
Through faith I see thee face to face,
I see thee face to face, and live!
In vain I have not wept and strove;
Thy nature and thy name is Love.⁸³

What grace that gives us power to respond, yea, grasp hold of God lest he slip from our hands!

IV. Saving Grace

But having become aware of God and wrestled with him, it is only through the direct knowledge of the grace available to us in

⁸² Colin W. Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today* (London: The Epworth Press, 1960), 41.

⁸³ Lawson, Op. Cit., 39-41.

Christ's death that we can come to justifying faith.⁸⁴

Wherewith, O God, shall I draw near,
And bow myself before thy face?
How in thy purer eyes appear?
What shall I bring to gain thy grace?⁸⁵

And the answer -

O that the world might know
The great atoning lamb!
Spirit of faith, descend, and show
The virtue of his name;
The grace which all may find,
The saving power impart;
And testify to all mankind,
And speak in every heart.⁸⁶

"Grace is both the beginning and the end" of salvation.⁸⁷ It is the source of salvation with faith as the condition or channel through which grace comes.⁸⁸

By faith we know thee strong to save;
Save us, a present Saviour thou!
Whate'er we hope, by faith we have
Future and past subsisting now.⁸⁹

⁸⁴ Williams, Op. Cit., 75.

⁸⁵ Lawson, Op. Cit., 110.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 106.

⁸⁷ John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (Naperville, IL: Alec R. Allenson, 1966), Eph. 2:8.

⁸⁸ William Ragsdale Cannon, *The Theology of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1956), 77; A Skevington Wood, *The Burning Heart* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, Pub. Co., 1967), 227.

⁸⁹ Lawson, Op. Cit., 107.

But the ultimate source of faith is God and God alone!

Author of faith, eternal Word,
Whose Spirit breathes the active flame;
Faith, like its Finisher and Lord,
Today as yesterday the same.

To thee our humble hearts aspire,
And ask the gift unspeakable;
Increase in us the kindled fire,
In us the work of faith fulfill.⁹⁰

From the hymn quoted above, "Wherewith, O God," come the words:

Will gifts delight the Lord most high?
Will multiplied oblations please?

Can these avert the wrath of God;
Can these wash out my guilty stain?

What have I then wherein to trust?
I nothing have, I nothing am;

'Tis just the sentence should take place;
'Tis just; --- but O thy Son hath died!⁹¹

And at the bottom line, in the covenant of grace, God forgives all provided only that we believe in him.⁹²

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 110-111.

⁹² E.H. Sugden, *The Standard Sermons of John Wesley* (London: Epworth Press, 1956), 1:138-139.

No man can truly say
That Jesus is the Lord,
Until thou take the veil away,
And breathe the living word;
Then, only then, we feel
Our interest in his blood,
And cry with joy unspeakable,
'Thou art my Lord, my God!'⁹³

How can we not fail but to respond to such divine grace?

V. Means of Grace

Grace and response; all is of God's grace and we are dependent upon the initiative of God; we must wait upon God. But that does not imply that the walk of faith in grace is a passive one. For the Wesleys, to keep the faith and to keep from falling requires of us continual watchfulness and constant attendance upon the means of grace.⁹⁴ These means of grace were a 'trusting place,' and included worship and fellowship, prayer, private and public, the study of the scriptures, fasting, Christian conference and accountability and climaxed in the sacraments, especially the Lord's Supper.

We meet, the grace to take
Which thou hast freely given;
We meet on earth for thy dear sake,
That we may meet in heaven.⁹⁵

Through the Eucharist, spiritual grace is imparted⁹⁶ and the real presence of Christ is mediated through the elements to the heart

⁹³ Lawson, *Op. Cit.*, 106.

⁹⁴ Jackson, *Works*, 8:322-324.

⁹⁵ Lawson, *Op. Cit.*, 186.

⁹⁶ Williams, *Op. Cit.*, 160.

of the worshipper.⁹⁷

Victim divine, thy grace we claim
 While thus thy precious death we show;
 Once offered up, a spotless Lamb,
 In thy great temple here below,
 Thou didst for all mankind atone,
 And standest now before the throne.

We need not now go up to heaven,
 To bring the long-sought Saviour down;
 Thou art to all already given,
 Thou dost even now thy banquet crown:
 To every faithful soul appear,
 And show thy Real Presence here!⁹⁸

It is by the means of grace, instituted and prudential, that a person's works, corporately through the church, reflect the "living portrait of God's grace."⁹⁹

All praise to our redeeming Lord,
 Who joins us by his grace,
 And bids us, each to each restored,
 Together seek his face.

The gift which he on one bestows,
 We all delight to prove;
 The grace through every vessel flows,
 In purest steams of love.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ Lawson, Op. Cit., 176.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Cannon, Op. Cit., 150.

¹⁰⁰ Lawson, Op. Cit., 186.

The means of grace were not an end in themselves but were ordained that I might know God and that I might express the character of Christ to the world in the context of community, his church.

VI. Sanctifying Grace

O for a heart to praise my God,
 A heart from sin set free!
 A heart that always feels thy blood
 So freely spilt for me!¹⁰¹

These words reflect the desire of the earnest seeker after God. But, oh, the struggle to find rest!

Wrestling I will not let thee go...
 My strength is gone, my nature dies,
 I sink beneath thy weighty hand...
 Yield to me now, for I am weak...¹⁰²

And then the submission -

A heart resigned, submissive, meek,
 My dear Redeemer's throne,
 Where only Christ is heard to speak,
 Where Jesus reigns alone.

An humble, lowly, contrite heart,
 Believing, true, and clean;
 Which neither life nor death can part
 From him that dwells within.

Thy nature, dearest Lord impart!
 Come quickly from above,

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 142.

¹⁰² Ibid., 39-40.

Write thy new name upon my heart,
Thy new, best name of love.¹⁰³

The submission to perfect love; the purifying of the intention of the heart to serve and love God with one's whole heart, soul, mind and strength was, for the Wesleys, the culmination of celebrating the sovereignty of God's grace.

In the hymn "Jesus, Lover of my soul" comes this final verse:

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!¹⁰⁴

VII. Growth in Grace

"Make and keep me pure within" are words which indicate that the experience of sanctifying grace is not the end; there is more! The Christian walk, the sanctified life, the spiritual journey is a life of trust; a perseverance in the grace of God no matter where we are in our experience of God.

The Wesleys were convinced of the activity of the Holy Spirit at every stage of one's journey with God and continually encouraged believers to grow in grace; to move on with God. How was this to occur? By working through the disciplines of the means of grace and through moral experience.¹⁰⁵ How was I to know that I was still on the path and had not deviated? By the witness of the

¹⁰³ Ibid., 142-143.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 89.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 139.

Spirit within, resonating with my spirit, bringing a present assurance of salvation.

How can a sinner know
His sins on earth forgiven?
How can my Saviour show
My name inscribed in heaven?
What we ourselves have felt, and seen,
With confidence we tell,
And publish to the sons of men
The signs infallible.

We by his Spirit prove,
And know the things of God,
The things which of his love
He hath on us bestowed:
His glory is our sole design,
We live our God to please,
And rise with filial fear divine
To perfect holiness.

I want the Spirit of power within,
Of love, and of a healthful mind;
Of power, to conquer inbred sin,
Of love, to thee and all mankind,
Of health, that pain and death defies,
Most vigorous when the body dies.¹⁰⁶

"Come, Holy Ghost, my heart inspire!"¹⁰⁷

VIII. The Christ of Grace

Our thoughts have been focused primarily on the roles of God, the Father and God, the Holy Spirit in imparting grace to the

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 116-118.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

life of faith. Yet the Wesleys were holistic in their theology of the Trinity. And it is in the cross that they found God's great grace for us and all humanity -

Ah! Show me that happiest place,
The place of thy people's abode,
Where saints in an ecstasy gaze
And hang on a crucified God.¹⁰⁸

Hence we sing with Charles:

God of unexampled grace,
Redeemer of mankind,
Matter of eternal praise
We in thy passion find ...

Faith cries out, 'Tis he, 'tis he,
My God, that suffers there!¹⁰⁹

In the same hymn, "that mysterious tree" shows the very heart of the gospel of "unexampled grace." God so loved that he came into this world himself in Jesus, the God-Man, and died for our salvation.

God's presence is here and:

We meet, the grace to take
Which thou hast freely given ...¹¹⁰

The cross and God's presence are intimately linked. For the Wesleys, God was present by his grace because he was the crucified Lord -

With glorious clouds encompassed round,
Whom angels dimly see,

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 131.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 167.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 186.

Will the unsearchable be found,
Or God appear to me?

Will he forsake his throne above,
Himself to worms impart?
Answer, thou Man of grief and love,
And speak it to my heart!

In manifested love explain
Thy wonderful design;
What meant the suffering Son of man,
The streaming blood divine?

Didst thou not in our flesh appear
And live and die below,
That I may now perceive thee near
And my Redeemer know?

Come then, and to my soul reveal
The heights and depths of grace,
The wounds which all my sorrows heal,
That dear disfigured face.¹¹¹

I know now the presence of God because Christ is my Redeeming Lord, and so also in his presence, I know "the wounds which all my sorrows heal." This is, indeed, the God of grace!

¹¹¹ Ibid., 37-38.