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HOLINESS T O D A Y

Worship: The Church at Work

John Wesley's
Legacy in Worship

Hospitality at
the Lord's Supper

Worshiping Christ
in a Culturally
Diverse World



DR. RANDY L. MADDOX (RM), who is the William Kellon Quick Professor of Wesleyan and Methodist Studies at Duke Divinity School and a leading scholar on the life and work of John Wesley, sat down with Holiness Today to discuss John Wesley's contribution to worship in the church.

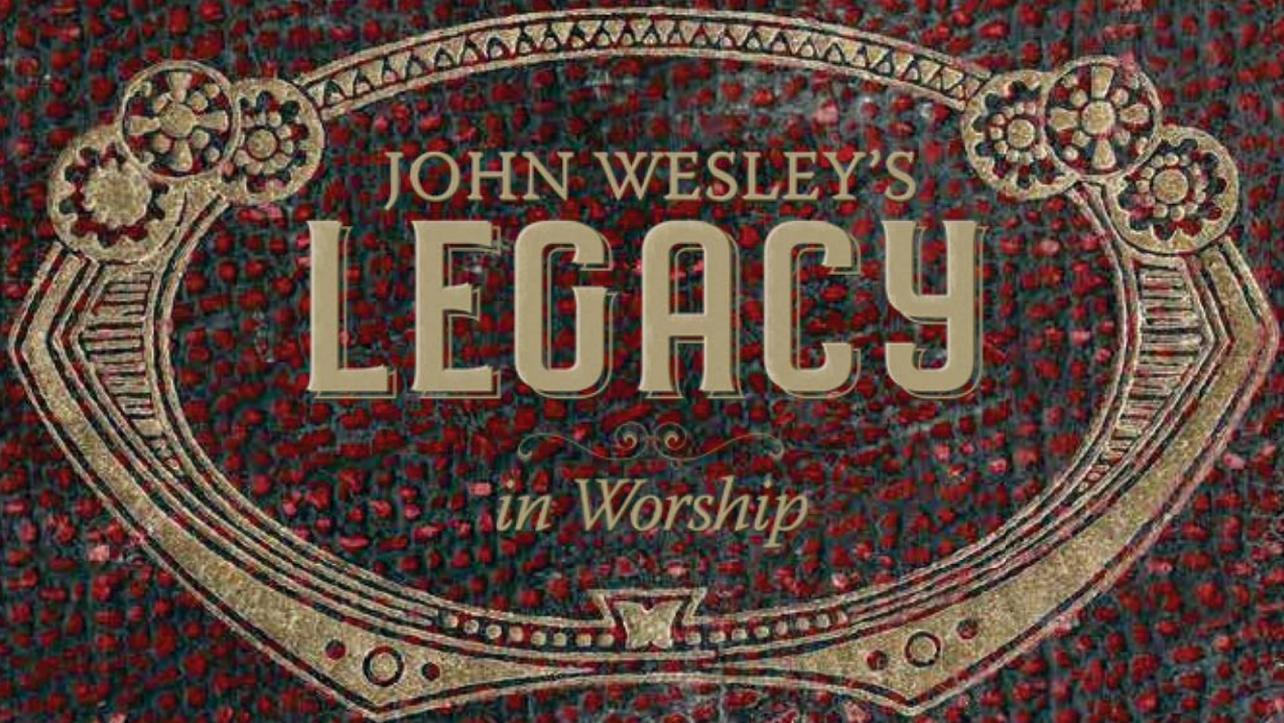
HT: Randy, we know of Charles Wesley's best contributions to church music, but John Wesley made some contributions as well. Can you enlighten us on some of those?

RM: Sure. Perhaps his earliest and most important contribution was simply that he became one of the first clergy members of the Church of England to encourage, in Anglican worship, that they have the Psalter [a musical setting of the Psalms]. He also introduced hymn singing into the actual Church of England services, or at least the middle of the week gatherings.

In 1737, while in Georgia, John Wesley published one of the first collections ever to be published specifically for Anglican worship. This included, in addition to the Psalter, several hymns.

He had been drawn to hymns during his boat ride over to Georgia when he was coming as a missionary priest. This is where he encountered the Moravians who already had a practice of writing new hymns based on biblical texts. Prior to that, the Church of England had a stance that only songs taken directly from Scripture should be sung.





JOHN WESLEY'S
LEGACY
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AN INTERVIEW WITH RANDY L. MADDOX

HT: What was in the early collection?

RM: In the 1737 collection, John Wesley included some hymns that were written by dissenting traditions (people in England that were not part of the Church of England, such as Isaac Watts), but he also included some of the first English translations of some of the Moravian hymns which were in German. That became his second major contribution to worship.

Overall, he translated over twenty of the most beloved Moravian hymns from German into English. Rather than a word for word translation, Wesley wrote in a poetic way for English speakers.

HT: We hear stories about the approach of Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley being something like the contemporary Christian music of their day (the 1700s). Is there some truth in that?

RM: In the Eighteenth Century, the Church of England endorsed only the singing of material that came directly from Scripture. Isaac Watts and others in dissenting churches were starting to write new hymns: hymns that were informed by biblical themes, but were much more creative and expressive.

This is a move we can trace in Charles Wesley himself, as he ventured into new and creative hymnody. In that sense, it was much like contemporary music in that authors were writing new pieces and not simply trying to repeat biblical passages.

Also, in the Church of England at the time, musical pieces were primarily performed by choirs. The congregation was only listening.

A contrast in the dissenting traditions and in the Moravian tradition that John Wesley encountered was that the congregation sang the music. This trend eventually became very distinctive of Methodist worship: the whole community sang.

HT: According to John Wesley, what are the ethical implications of worshipping together?

RM: John Wesley's background assumption is that we worship God because God is worthy of worship. The word "worship" means "one who is worthy." Wesley always understood worship as a means of grace.

Worship brings together a range of ways in which God conveys grace to us and, through that grace, transforms us. Wesley paid a great deal of attention to the question, "What are the kinds of worship we participate in, and how do they help form fully-developed Christian people?"

HT: What contrasts do you see between Wesley's approach and contemporary worship trends?

RM: As historian Lester Ruth points out, the hymnody of the Wesley's tends to emphasize the character and actions of God, and then call us to reflect on that. For instance, in Charles Wesley's "O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing," the action verbs relate to God: "He breaks the power of canceled sin; He sets the prisoner free," etc.

In many contemporary worship songs, the focus is more on what we are doing for God: "I praise you; I honor you; I worship

you; I adore you." There is less emphasis upon the description of the full work of God and the full scope of God's redemptive plan.

HT: So, Wesley sought an emphasis upon a broader theology in the content of worship songs?

RM: It is often said there was "more theology" in the hymns of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries than in the worship songs of today. I think this means that there is simply less of a description of the full range of the work of God in much of contemporary worship.

There are contemporary examples of a full theological description of God and the work of God in worship. Stuart Townsend's "In Christ Alone" is an example, though there are elements of Calvinism in some of its theology.

I believe John Wesley would encourage the singing of a song like this and would likely surround it with other songs that promote a fuller expression of the work of Jesus: not only in justification but also in sanctification.

HT: It seems as if many of the Wesleyan hymns can be used in catechism – training people in the broader elements of the Christian faith. Would you speak to this a bit?

RM: Many old and new songs in the church today focus upon expressing our love and emotion to God instead of allowing the grand story of God to be told. There are a few exceptions, but songs generally fall into that category.

These may be called "expressive experiential" songs, and there is a place for them; however, Wesley coordinated the hymns of the church in ways that focused on a deeper expression of the work of God, rather than just our response to God.

HT: So, John Wesley's overall legacy would include a broader focus regarding hymns, encouraging the composition of new hymns that expressed the fullness of faith, and full participation of the congregation in singing together. Is there anything else?

RM: While John Wesley himself wrote very few hymns, he was the primary source for sorting through the vast number of hymns that his brother Charles wrote. We have over 9,000 hymns penned by Charles Wesley, many of which are not very useful for corporate worship because they were written for other purposes.

John Wesley is the one who sorted through those hymns, decided which ones to put into the hymnals that were regularly used in worship and arranged and organized them.

When we look at John's collections, they are always organized in a way that attempts to move through the various aspects of the character of God and of the Christian life. Again, Wesley understood worship as a means of grace: it is one of the ways in which God conveys grace to us, and through that grace, transforms us.

HT: That leads us to the sacraments. I have noticed what could be called a rediscovery by many Nazarenes of the importance of the sacraments as a focus in worship. Did Wesley emphasize the sacraments?

RM: Yes. What you see through the work of John and Charles Wesley is an attempt to hold together the best of the Reformation and of the classic Catholic tradition. I would suggest that this was an attempt to emphasize the importance of the whole person participating in and being formed through worship.

John Wesley's ideal for his Methodist people was that, in addition to their own prayers at home and small group gatherings during the week, they would have a Sunday worship service together. In these services, there would be elements such as the reading of the Word, prayer (both extemporaneous and written), singing hymns together, a sermon, and a gathering at the Lord's Table.

Formal prayers would include the liturgy of confession leading to the Eucharist. In John Wesley's own writings, he would mention moments in which he felt strongly moved (a self-described "melting"). These moments typically occurred during the celebration of the Lord's Supper after having confessed his sins and been invited to the Table as part of the family of God.

HT: Would there be any final words of advice John Wesley might give to pastors and worship leaders?

RM: Wesley thought that every pastor was to be a practical theologian. He believed that the work of a pastor was to help shape theology through preaching and teaching, as well as through singing, worship, observation of the sacraments, and participation in small groups.

If I could use a basketball metaphor: A good coach for basketball is going to drill the players in shooting shots so that they become the best foul-shooting team, but preparation doesn't end there. Coaches are also going to make sure that their practices are well-rounded in a way that develops every aspect of the game.

Likewise, John Wesley charged his preachers with this: "Make sure you preach Christ in all His offices." In other words, if you spend all your time just saying that Jesus forgives you (the priestly role of Christ), you are going to risk losing balance. Jesus also models for us the prophetic role of the Church, and He works to bring about healing in our life as king and physician.

I believe Wesley would urge pastors and worship leaders to ask questions like, "How are we exposing people to the fullness of Scripture and not just a few hobby-horse passages?" With a desire for this fullness of Scripture, Wesley decided to keep the lectionary (a schedule of readings from the Bible for Christian church services during the course of the year) in the copy of the Book of Common Prayer he sent over to the American church in Richmond.

We should also be mindful that when we worship, we are not just praising. We are encouraging confession and emphasizing the whole scope of prayer and devotion. This holism is an essential part of John Wesley's legacy for worship today. **HT**

Wesley's Directions for Singing (1761)

Learn these tunes before you learn any others; afterwards learn as many as you please. Sing them exactly as they are printed here, without altering or mending them at all; and if you have learned to sing them otherwise, unlearn it as soon as you can.

SING ALL. See that you join with the congregation as frequently as you can. Let not a slight degree of weakness or weariness hinder you. If it is a cross to you, take it up, and you will find it a blessing.

SING LUSTILY AND WITH A GOOD COURAGE. Beware of singing as if you were half dead, or half asleep; but lift up your voice with strength. Be no more afraid of your voice now, nor more ashamed of its being heard, than when you sung the songs of Satan. Sing modestly. Do not bawl, so as to be heard above or distinct from the rest of the congregation, that you may not destroy the harmony; but strive to unite your voices together, so as to make one clear melodious sound.

SING IN TIME. Whatever time is sung be sure to keep with it. Do not run before nor stay behind it; but attend close to the leading voices, and move therewith as exactly as you can; and take care not to sing too slow. This drawling way naturally steals on all who are lazy; and it is high time to drive it out from us, and sing all our tunes just as quick as we did at first.

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.

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/wesleys-directions-for-singing>