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**Imagination and Struggle
Charles Wesley and Christian Practices
(1739–1749)**

**PAPERS PRESENTED
AT
THE NINETEENTH ANNUAL MEETING
OF
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“From Strength to Strength Go On”

Images of Growth in the Hymns of Charles Wesley

Charles Edward White

Andrew Fletcher, a Scottish patriot, once said, “. . . if a man were permitted to make all the ballads, he need not care who should make the laws of a nation.”¹ If he had been speaking about the church, he could have said, “If someone were permitted to make all the songs, that one need not care who made the sermons.” Some churches now spend more time in singing than they do in preaching, and, if my experience is any indicator, in all churches the songs are much more memorable. The Wesleys knew the value of songs so they published *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists* (consisting mainly of Charles’s hymns), which John Wesley called “a little body of experimental and practical divinity.”² This study examines the theme of growth in the Christian life, its possibility and necessity, as reflected in the Wesleyan hymns of the *1780 Collection*. This study is limited to the hymns of that volume. These hymns teach the truths of Scripture from Genesis to Revelation and emphasize the scriptural concepts the Wesleys thought most important.

Along with God’s universal grace, and the possibility of entire sanctification, one of the themes that rises from the Wesleys’ hymns is the possibility and necessity of growth in the Christian life. This theme is mentioned in one hundred thirty-eight of the five hundred twelve Wesley hymns in the *1780 Collection*, or more than twenty-six percent.³ It was an important emphasis for the Wesleys so

¹ Andrew Fletcher, “An Account of a Conversation Concerning a Right Regulation of Governments for the Common Good of Mankind,” in *The Political Writings of Andrew Fletcher* (London: A. Bettesworth, C. Hitch, and J. Clarke, 1732), 372.

² *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists*, in *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 7 (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1983), 74; cited hereafter as *1780 Collection*. Note: All references to the hymns are taken from this source, so I will cite them merely by number. The hymnal’s five hundred twenty-five hymns contain thirteen that were not written or translated by John or Charles Wesley, so I will omit them from this article. Disentangling the contribution of John and Charles to each of their hymns is a difficult task; even the Introduction says, “John stands *behind* Charles in this *Collection*.” Thus I will follow the usual practice and attribute all the hymns to Charles, with the caveat that John sometimes edited them. See *1780 Collection*, 2.

³ The references to growth are listed by hymn and stanza number. Where all the verses of a hymn refer to growth, only the hymn number is listed. These are the stanzas that refer to growth: Hymn(s) 69; 107:4; 108:6–8; 110:4; 128:2; 131:6; 132; 134:9; 135:6; 136; 137:4; 139; 141:1; 142; 143; 146; 151:9; 164:3; 172; 173:8; 176; 178:2; 180:3; 181:4–5; 186:2, 5; 188:2–3; 197:3; 202:5–6; 220:3–4; 257:1; 258; 259; 260; 261; 262; 263; 264; 265; 266; 267; 268; 269; 273:4; 275; 280:8; 284; 292; 293:4; 294; 295; 296; 297:5; 301; 302:4; 303; 304:4; 305; 306; 308; 309; 314:3; 315:5; 316:5; 318:4; 320:4; 321:5–6; 324; 328:5; 329; 330; 331; 332; 333; 334; 335; 336:3; 338; 341:2–3; 344:4; 345:2; 345; 346:1, 5; 348:5; 349:2–5; 350:11, 351; 352; 353; 354:4–5; 356:1–2; 357:3; 359; 360:2; 361; 362:6–8; 363:2–3; 364:2–5; 365; 366:2; 369:6, 8–9; 370:1–2; 371; 372; 374; 377:3, 5; 378; 379; 380; 381; 386; 387; 388:4–8; 389; 390; 391; 392; 393; 394; 395:4–5; 396; 397; 398; 399; 400; 401; 402; 404; 405; 409:2; 412:2; 424:9; 488; 497; 514; 516:4; 519:2; 520:4; 523:12.

they used their hymns to write it on the peoples' hearts.⁴ Or, as stanza five of Hymn 69 says,

With songs to Zion we return,
 Contending for our native heaven,
 That palace of our glorious King—
 We find it nearer while we sing.

Not only is heaven nearer while we sing, but every truth of the Christian life becomes more real as we sing about it.

Growth itself is a metaphor for the work of God in the soul. The proper theological term is sanctification referring to what God does in us as opposed to justification which is what God does for us. Justification imputes God's righteousness to us; sanctification infuses God's righteousness into us. Different Christian traditions apportion the weights in the justification-sanctification balance differently. Many of England's most serious Christians in Wesley's century were descendants of the Puritans, and so were reformed in their theology. The human side of reformed theology focuses on justification. If one is justified, then that one inevitably will be sanctified. For a reformed Christian the most important question is, "Am I elect?" One's election is determined "from the foundation of the world" and can be neither obtained nor lost by what one does in this life. In this climate, growth in the Christian life, although important, is not essential. It might be an evidence of election, but certainly not the *sine qua non* of a right relationship with God.

For the Wesleys the most important question in the Christian life is not, "Am I elect?" but, "Am I going on to perfection?"⁵ The Wesleys advocate a dynamic view of the Christian life instead of the static view of reformed theology. They reject the reformed understanding of the Christian life for two reasons: first, it holds that salvation depends absolutely on God's arbitrary choice regardless of human response; and second, it holds that salvation is a once-and-for-all event regardless of the subsequent moral choices people make. In the Bible the Wesleys read, God takes human response into account in his dealings with humanity, and so God's relationship with people develops and changes through time as they interact with him. Thus the Wesleys have no place for the humanly-passive, unchanging Christian life envisioned by the Reformers. Charles even mocks this irresponsible, quietistic Christian life:

⁴ The Methodists were a singing people. They usually sang three to five hymns at a preaching service, as well as singing at the various small group meetings and occasional services, such as Watch Nights. See *1780 Collection*, 61–69.

⁵ Methodist Episcopal Church, *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, William L. Harris, ed., (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1880), 101 ¶152.

No longer now their watch the watchmen keep,
 But love to slumber, and lie down to sleep,
 Their eyelids in *poor sinnership* they close,
 Or rocked in Calvin's arms supinely doze.
 'Always in grace, if once!' their foot stands sure,
 Their lives unholy and their hearts impure.⁶

Image of being awake

No dozing in Calvin's (or even in Jesus') arms for the Methodists! "Awake, awake," cries Charles in the opening stanza of Hymn 296:

Gracious Redeemer, shake
 This slumber from my soul!
 Say to me now, Awake, awake,
 And Christ shall make thee whole.
 Lay to thy mighty hand!
 Alarm me in this hour,
 And make me fully understand,
 The thunder of thy power.⁷

Here the singers recognize that only when believers are awake and active does Christ work in their lives and make them whole.

This hymn goes on in the second stanza to pray:

Give me on thee to call,
 Always to watch and pray,
 Lest I into temptation fall
 And cast my shield away.
 For each assault prepared
 And ready may I be,
 Forever standing on my guard,
 And looking up to thee.

Image of battle

The image of being awake so Christ can work in believers quickly blends into the image of battle where believers are fighting Satan. It is the most common image of Christian growth in Wesley's hymns, occurring in thirty of them in the *1780 Collection*.⁸ Even where the image does not explicitly appear, there are twenty-

⁶ Charles Wesley, "An Epistle to a Friend, Written in the Year July 1743" (MSS 9, 40 in Methodist Archives, Manchester), II, 51-6, cited in *1780 Collection*, 494, n. 1.

⁷ Wesley does not always punctuate his verse according to the *MLA Stylebook*, so I will follow his practice but not litter the text with *sic* to show non-standard uses. The image of awaking is also present in Hymn(s) 294 and 301:6.

⁸ Hymn(s) 180:3; 188:3; 220:3; 257:1; 258; 259; 260; 261; 262; 263; 265; 267; 268; 269; 284; 293:8; 296:2, 4; 301; 305; 306; 310; 328:5; 329:5; 338; 341:1; 349:5; 395:4; 409:2; 497:2; 523:12.

eight hymns in the section called “For Believers Fighting.” The best known hymn in this section is a modern arrangement drawn from Wesley’s three four-stanza hymns based on what Ephesians 6 says about the whole armor of God.⁹ It starts with

Soldiers of Christ arise
 And put your armor on,
 Strong in the strength which God supplies
 Through his eternal Son;
 Strong in the Lord of hosts,
 And in his mighty power,
 Who in the strength of Jesus trusts
 Is more than conqueror.

And concludes in triumph:

From strength to strength go on,
 Wrestle, and fight, and pray,
 Tread all the powers of darkness down,
 And win the well-fought day;
 Still let the Spirit cry
 In all his soldiers, “Come,”
 Till Christ the Lord descend from high,
 And take the conquerors home.

Usually the battle imagery is general and does not specify against whom or what the Christian is fighting. But in Hymn 269 about David and Goliath, Wesley specifically allegorizes the enemy:

Tallest of the earth-born race,
 They tremble at his power,
 Flee before the monster’s face,
 And own him conqueror.
 Who this mighty champion is,
 Nature answers from within;
 He is my own wickedness,
 My own besetting sin.¹⁰

Here the enemy is “My own wickedness / My own besetting sin” or in other words one’s sin nature. This nature is the enemy, which God removes through entire sanctification:

⁹ Hymn(s) 258–260.

¹⁰ Hymn 269:2

In the strength of God I rise,
I run to meet my foe;
Faith the word of power applies,
And lays the giant low;
Faith in Jesu's conquering name
Slings the sin-destroying stone;
Points the Word's unerring aim,
And brings the monster down.¹¹

After the imagery of battle, the second-most common image of growth involves the heart. Wesley devotes four entire hymns to the theme of God's work in the heart and mentions it in nineteen more.¹² He often combines the picture of the heart with other metaphors to express the depth and richness of God's sanctifying grace as in Hymn 334:

Image of the heart

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!

A heart resigned, submissive, meek,
My great 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;

A heart in every thought renewed,
And full of love divine;
Perfect, and right, and pure, and good,
A copy, Lord, of thine!

Thy tender heart is still the same,
And melts at human woe:
Jesus, for thee distressed I am,
I want thy love to know.

¹¹ Hymn 269:6.

¹² Hymn(s) 303:2; 331:2; 332; 334; 335; 341; 348:5; 351:6; 354:3; 362:6; 369:6; 372:2; 374:1; 377:5; 380:4; 388:4; 391:4; 393:5; 397:2; 399:1; 404:5; 497:3; 514:1-2.

My heart, thou know'st, can never rest,
 Till thou create my peace;
 Till, of my Eden re-possessed,
 From every sin I cease.

Thy nature, gracious Lord, impart!
 Come quickly from above,
 Write thy new name upon my heart,
 Thy new, best name of love¹³

In this one hymn, Wesley combines heart imagery with eleven other tropes. He uses blood, a throne, listening, reigning, cleanness, indwelling, imitation, melting, Eden, imparting God's nature, and having a new name to express what God does in the believer's heart.

Image of the journey

Next to the heart, the third-most common image of growth in the Christian life is the image of the journey. This word-picture occurs in twenty of the hymns.¹⁴ Sometimes the journey is simply the path through life until the believer arrives in heaven. As verse twelve of the famous Wrestling Jacob, Hymn 136, says,

Lame as I am, I take the prey,
 Hell, earth, and sin, with ease o'ercome;
 I leap for joy, pursue my way,
 And as a bounding hart fly home,
 Through all eternity to prove
 Thy nature and thy name is Love.

At other times the journey is the Exodus, the journey through the wilderness to the Promised Land. All the land on the east side of the Jordan is the land of sin, where the believer spends "legal years" or years under the law, yearning to possess all God has promised. Hymn 392 sings:

O that I might at once go up!
 No more on this side Jordan stop,
 But now the land possess;
 This moment end my legal years,
 Sorrows, and sins, and doubt, and fears,
 A howling wilderness.

¹³ I have omitted stanza 7.

¹⁴ Hymn(s) 69; 136:11-12; 197:3; 205:5; 257:1; 264:2; 280; 296:3; 297:5; 303:4, 6; 308:2; 315:5; 316:5; 321:6; 324; 329:4; 330:6; 362:8; 381:4; 489:2.

Now, O my Joshua, bring me in!
Cast out thy foes; the inbred sin,
The carnal mind, remove;
The purchase of thy death divide!
Give me with all the sanctified
The heritage of love!¹⁵

The opposite of a journey is being established in one place. This metaphor is also a much-used figure for Christian growth as believers become so committed to the Lord that they never stray or wander away from him:

Fill with inviolable peace,
Stablish and keep my settled heart;
In thee may all my wanderings cease,
From thee no more may I depart;
Thy utmost goodness called to prove,
Loved with an everlasting love!¹⁶

Image of healing

Healing is another common image Wesley uses to describe growth in the Christian life. It is present in twelve hymns, but most of the metaphors are contained in #131 and #132.¹⁷ In these two hymns the singers picture themselves as leprous, deaf, dumb, lame, blind, impotent, and dead. They beg for Jesus to cure them:

Jesu, if still thou art to-day
As yesterday the same,
Present to heal, in me display
The virtue of thy name.¹⁸

The various bodily infirmities are metaphors for the sickness of the soul, but Jesus can heal them all:

Impotent, dumb, and deaf, and blind,
And sick, and poor I am,
But sure a remedy to find
For all in Jesu's name.

¹⁵ The image of entry into the Promised Land as a metaphor for sanctification also occurs in Hymn(s) 380:5; 393:3; 395:5; and 396:6.

¹⁶ Besides this occurrence in Hymn 110:4, Wesley uses it in nine other hymns, Hymn(s) 176:2; 178:2; 181:4; 188:2; 202:5; 330:3; 335:2-3; 344:4; 351:4.

¹⁷ Hymn(s) 108:7; 131; 132; 134:9; 181:5; 202:6; 292; 346:6; 353:4; 359:1-2; 386:1; 396:8.

¹⁸ Hymn 131:1.

From sin, the guilt, the power, the pain,
 Thou wilt redeem my soul;
 Lord, I believe, and not in vain,
 My faith shall make me whole.¹⁹

One aspect of healing is giving sight. Wesley devotes one hymn to ringing the changes on this theme. In stanza one the singers glimpse God passing by, and in stanza two they want to see God more clearly:

I cannot see thy face, and live,
 Then let me see thy face, and die!
 Now, Lord, my gasping spirit receive,
 Give me on eagles' wings to fly,
 With eagles' eyes on thee to gaze,
 And plunge into the glorious blaze.

In stanza three they want to catch sight of their eternal reward, and in stanza four cry to see more of God than Moses did. Finally, in stanza five the singers claim the right to behold the “glorious Deity” and see “the nature of thy sinless Son.”²⁰

Closely related to the image of healing is the picture of cleansing or purifying to describe what God does to the human soul. Wesley uses this image in seventeen hymns.²¹ In Hymn 330 he uses two images of cleansing—first washing a cloth and then refining metal:

Wash out its stains, refine its dross,
 Nail my affections to the cross;
 Hallow each thought; let all within
 Be clean, as thou, my Lord, art clean!²²

Image of Crucifixion

In the second line of this stanza Wesley includes another image of growth, that of crucifixion. He uses this image three more times, in Hymn 352 mixing it with the request that God would poison whatever his flesh desires:

Withhold whate'er my flesh requires,
 Poison my pleasant food,
 Spoil my delights, my vain desires,
 My all of creature good

¹⁹ Hymn 132:6, 10.

²⁰ Hymn 275; Other hymns using this image are Hymn(s) 295:5; 302:4; 324:5; 378:5; 388:4; 393:1.

²¹ Hymn(s) 220:4; 273:4; 295:5; 320:4; 330:2; 331:1; 351:7–9; 356:2; 364:5; 378:2; 380:3; 386:2, 396:2, 398:2, 5–6; 402:2; 405:6; 514:3.

²² Hymn 330:2.

My old affections mortify,
 Nail to the cross my will,
 Daily and hourly bid me die,
 Or altogether kill.²³

This strange combination of healing and killing seems contradictory, but the contradiction is merely apparent. The cleansing occurs when the evil will is nailed to the cross and killed.²⁴ Besides its action in washing out stains, water provides two other word-pictures for Wesley to use. Sometimes water is dangerous and so God keeps the Christian from sinking beneath the waves:

When passing through the watery deep,
 I ask in faith his promised aid,
 The waves all awful distance keep,
 And shrink from my devoted head;
 Fearless their violence I dare;
 They cannot harm, for God is there!

Image of living water

At other times, however, Jesus himself is the living water, which dries up the thirst for other drinks and gives eternal peace:

Thee let me drink, and thirst no more
 For drops of finite happiness;
 Spring up, O well, in heavenly power,
 In streams of pure perennial peace,
 In joy that none can take away,
 In life which shall for ever stay.²⁵

Image of the temple

The Temple supplies the motif for nine hymns, which mention Christian growth.²⁶ Sometimes the image is of the believer becoming a temple built by God as in Hymn 338:

Scatter the last remains of sin,
 And seal me thine abode;
 O make me glorious all within,
 A temple built by God!

Other times the picture is of God coming into the Holy of Holies in the Temple:

²³ Hymn 352:3–4.

²⁴ The other instances of crucifixion imagery are Hymn(s) 338:1 and 341:3. Killing also occurs in Hymn(s) 332:2 and 352:2, and dying in Hymn(s) 338:3; 381:2 and 397:3.

²⁵ The quoted negative stanza is #264:2 and other negative image is #330:4. The quoted positive image is #354:2; the other positive images are #354:1, 3; 379:5; 393:6; 397:6.

²⁶ Besides the two quoted they are #365:3; 371:5; 372:1, 3; 374:2; 379:5; 387:1; 398:4.

Slay the dire root and seed of sin;
 Prepare for thee the holiest place;
 Then, O essential Love, come in!
 And fill thy house with endless praise.²⁷

Image of the indwelling God

Related to the imagery of the Temple, the place on earth where God dwells, is the imagery of God coming to dwell within the believer. This metaphor occurs in twelve hymns, and is the theme of Hymn 341.²⁸

Come, Holy Ghost, all-quick'ning fire!
 Come and my hallowed heart inspire,
 Sprinkled with the atoning blood;
 Now to my soul thyself reveal,
 Thy mighty working let me feel,
 And know that I am born of God.

Thy witness with my spirit bear,
 That God, my God, inhabits there,
 Thou, with the Father and the Son,
 Eternal light's coeval beam:
 Be Christ in me, and I in Him,
 Till perfect we are made in one.²⁹

Here the whole Trinity is invoked to take up its residence in the Christian. As this prayer is answered the believer becomes one with God. Being one with God is similar to the imagery of indwelling and occurs in six hymns.³⁰ In Hymn 363:2 the singer wants to be lost in the immensity of the Godhead's deepest sea and in Hymn 362:7 wants to become one spirit with God:

O that I, as a little child,
 May follow thee, and never rest
 Till sweetly thou hast breathed thy mild
 And lowly mind into my breast!
 Nor ever may we parted be,
 Till I become one spirit with thee.

Another facet of the metaphor of indwelling is sharing the image of Christ as Hymn 389:4 expresses:

²⁷ The first stanza comes from #338:5, the second from #332:2.
²⁸ Hymn(s) 341:1-4, 357:3; 374:1; 378:6; 391:7; 388:6; 393:1; 394:5, 6; 395:4; 399:2; 403:5; 404:3.

²⁹ Hymn 341:1.

³⁰ Hymn(s) 341:4; 362:7; 363:3; 366:2; 386:4; 403:1, 4.

When thou the work of faith hast wrought,
 I here shall in thine image shine,
 Nor sin in deed, or word, or thought;
 Let men exclaim, and fiends repine,
 They cannot break the firm decree;
 All things are possible to me.

The idea of shining in the image of Christ or of God occurs in five other hymns.³¹ One other aspect of the indwelling trope is the idea of replacing the Christian's old nature with the nature of God:

Heavenly Father, Life divine,
 Change my nature into thine!
 Move and spread throughout my soul,
 Actuate and fill the whole!
 Be it I no longer now
 Living in the flesh, but Thou.³²

Before God can indwell the believer, he must first empty that one of all that is sinful. In Hymn 401 the singers begin by asking God to "bid our sin be gone" and then invite the Godhead to enter:

Father, Son, and Spirit, come,
 And with thine own abide!
 Holy Ghost, to make thee room,
 Our hearts we open wide;
 Thee, and only thee request,
 To every asking sinner given;
 Come, our life, and peace, and rest,
 Our all in earth and heaven!³³

Liberty

Enjoying liberty is a word-picture Wesley uses to describe God's sanctifying work in believers. In Hymn 379:1 the singers plead that they may experience the liberty that they know Christ has won for them:

Since the Son hath made me free,
 Let me taste my liberty;
 Thee behold with open face,
 Triumph in thy saving grace,
 Thy great will delight to prove,
 Glory in thy perfect love.

³¹ Hymn(s) 128:2; 164:3; 338:4; 357:3; 369:8.

³² This one is Hymn 379:4. The others are Hymn(s) 378:3 and 391:6. Related to shining in Christ's image, is claiming the image of Christ mentioned in Hymn 275:6, and receiving the image of Christ in Hymn 333:2.

³³ Hymn 401:4. Two other mentions of this image occur in Hymn(s) 390:4 and 398:3.

In four other hymns they also plead for liberty to be free from unclean spirits and sin.³⁴ Related to liberty is the image of rest which Wesley uses three times. Once the singers say they cannot rest until God redeems them fully, but in the other two hymns they long for the promised rest of God:

Lord, I believe a rest remains
To all thy people known,
A rest where pure enjoyment reigns,
And thou art loved alone.³⁵

Other images

In addition to these images, which occur in many hymns, Wesley has more than forty other images which he uses only a few times. They are returning to Eden, walking on water, being fed, being shepherded, being sheltered, being punished, being corrected when back-sliding, being made into a tree of paradise, experiencing the fire that fell on Mt. Carmel, finding the pearl of great price, being recreated, receiving the crown of righteousness, being winnowed, having God's kingdom restored, being embraced by God, having one's carnal mind removed, having Christ's mind, becoming a little child, the sun clearing away clouds, God reigning in us, being stamped or sealed with God's likeness, crushing a rebel, slaying a serpent, applying Christ's blood, serving the poor, surrendering to God, completing a sacrifice, casting out the bond woman, being baptized, having thirst satisfied, planting and uprooting, being drawn to God, being restored, not wandering from God, having strength and power, being upheld, having a renewed mind, breaking a yoke, moving a mountain, wrestling, and exalting a worm.³⁶

³⁴ Hymn(s) 390:1; 396:5; 397:1; 404:2.

³⁵ Hymn 132:9 says he cannot rest, while Hymn(s) 391:1-3 and 514:5 speak of entering God's rest.

³⁶ Returning to Eden Hymn(s) 369:6; 378:1; walking on water Hymn 176:4; being fed Hymn(s) 186:2, 5; 295:3; 380:6-7; being shepherded Hymn 176:1; being sheltered Hymn(s) 263:3-4; 264; being punished Hymn 172.; being corrected when backsliding Hymn 173; being made into a tree of paradise Hymn 412:2; experiencing the fire that fell on Mt. Carmel Hymn 400; finding the pearl of great price Hymn 389:5; being recreated Hymn(s) 304:4; 374:3; 389:6; 390:2; receiving the crown of righteousness Hymn 393:2; being winnowed Hymn 488; having God's kingdom restored Hymn 398:4; being embraced by God Hymn 520:4; having one's carnal mind removed Hymn 392:5; having Christ's mind Hymn 273:4; becoming a little child Hymn(s) 341:2-3; 362:7; the sun clearing away clouds Hymn 328:4. God reigning in us Hymn(s) 338:4; 372:3; being stamped or sealed with God's likeness Hymn(s) 365:5; 381:1; crushing a rebel Hymn 176:3; slaying a serpent Hymn 352:6; applying Christ's blood Hymn 353:3; serving the poor Hymn 354:4; surrendering to God Hymn 370:1; completing a sacrifice Hymn 318:4; casting out the bond woman Hymn 346:3; being baptized Hymn 365:4; having thirst satisfied Hymn(s) 360:2; 380:3, 9; planting and uprooting Hymn(s) 332:2; 345:5; 387:2; being drawn to God Hymn 331:3; being restored Hymn 378:1; not wandering from God Hymn 345:2; having strength and power Hymn(s) 107:4; 346:1, 5; 404:1, 6; being upheld Hymn 303:7; having a renewed mind Hymn 345; breaking a yoke Hymn 377:3; moving a mountain Hymn(s) 371; 405; wrestling Hymn 516:4; exalting a worm Hymn(s) 314:3; 390:4.

Conclusion

Besides using images of Christian growth in the individual verses of his hymns, Wesley sometimes puts a growth metaphor into every verse of a hymn.³⁷ One of them does not so much describe Christian growth as taunt the three famous opposers of that growth: the flesh, the world, and the devil:

O my old, my bosom foe,
Rejoice not over me!
Oft-times thou hast laid me low,
And wounded mortally;
Yet thy prey thou couldst not keep;
Jesus, when I lowest fell,
Heard me cry out of the deep,
And brought me up from hell.

Foolish world, thy shouts forbear;
Till thou hast won the day;
Could thy wisdom keep me there,
When in thy hands I lay?
If my heart to thee incline,
Christ again shall set it free;
I am his, and he is mine
To all eternity.

Satan, cease thy empty boast,
And give thy triumphs o'er;
Still thou seest I am not lost,
While Jesus can restore,
Though through thy deceit I fall,
Surely I shall rise again,
Christ my King is over all,
And I with him shall reign.

O my three-fold enemy,
To whom I long did bow,
See your lawful captive, see,
No more your captive now!
Now before my face ye fly;
More than conqueror now I am;
Sin, the world, and hell defy,
In Jesu's powerful name.³⁸

³⁷ Hymn(s) 132; 136; 139; 142; 143; 146; 172; 176; 258; 259; 260; 261; 262; 263; 264; 265; 266; 267; 268; 269; 275; 284; 292; 294; 295; 296; 301; 303; 305; 306; 308; 309; 324; 329; 330; 331; 332; 333; 334; 335; 338; 345; 351; 352; 353; 359; 361; 365; 371; 372; 374; 378; 379; 380; 381; 386; 387; 389; 390; 391; 392; 393; 394; 396; 397; 398; 399; 400; 401; 402; 404; 405; 488; 497; 514.

³⁸ Hymn 266.

Here every stanza expresses God's work in the soul. The first stanza jeers at the flesh. Though not as clearly identified as the other enemies, it—the sinful nature—here is the singers' "old . . . bosom foe" who has often "wounded [them] mortally" and taken them as "prey." Yet Jesus has rescued them. Then the singers address the world saying that its wisdom and even the pull it exerts on the heart comes to nothing because of Christ's power. Finally, the singers turn to the devil, who brings believers low through his deceit, declaring that Jesus makes them rise again. The fourth stanza summarizes the song, naming the enemies as sin, the world, and hell and admitting that the singers were once their "lawful captive[s]." But that was then, and now in Jesus' powerful name they are more than conquerors.

By filling their hymnal with songs about God's work of sanctification, the Wesleys make it clear that God expects his children to grow in grace. Charles Wesley epitomizes this truth when in Hymn 365 he cries, "I cannot rest in sins forgiven."³⁹ Justification is a wonderful gift of God, but it is not the only benefit Jesus won by his death and resurrection. Beginning the instant the cleansing blood touches the heart is the process of sanctification which transforms people "from glory into glory" or even more dramatically,

Into a saint exalt a worm—
A worm exalt to God!⁴⁰

Because Methodists expect God to work in them they cannot be content to wallow in their sins as others do:

Let others hug their chains,
For sin and Satan plead,
And say, from sin's remains
They never can be freed:
Rejoice in hope, rejoice with me,
We shall from all our sins be free.⁴¹

Because they know the Christian life is a battle, a journey, or any one of the more than fifty dynamic metaphors, Methodists realize they need to avail themselves of every means of grace that God provides. John Wesley describes how they should live: "Not in careless indifference, or in indolent inactivity; but in vigorous, universal obedience, in a zealous keeping of all the commandments, in watchfulness and painfulness, in denying ourselves, and taking up the cross daily; as well as in earnest prayer and fasting, and a close attendance on all the ordinances of God."⁴²

³⁹ Stanza 4.

⁴⁰ The reference to glory is Hymn 374:3, and the worm comes from Hymn 314:3.

⁴¹ Hymn 336:3.

⁴² *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection as Believed and Taught by the Rev. Mr. John Wesley, from the Year 1725, to the Year 1777*, in *Works of John Wesley*, 3rd edition, (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1872), reprinted by Baker Book House, 1979, 11:402.

One of the most important ordinances of God is Christian fellowship, regularized in the class meeting. Other believers, who do not often sing about Christian growth, have a different picture of the Christian life. For them the most important part of Christianity is being justified, and this experience is the greatest gift God gave to people in this life. Once they receive it, it is their inalienable possession. No matter how they subsequently act, bliss is to be theirs for eternity.

It is easy to see how this misunderstanding of the Christian life devalues the importance of the Christian community. If justification is truly God's greatest gift on earth, then people need not "wrestle, and fight, and pray" seeking to go on from strength to strength, because they already possess all that God plans to give them in life.⁴³ A Christian group, then, is not a company of seekers, questing after God, but the fellowship of those who have already arrived. If this salvation is really a permanent possession, unaffected by one's way of living, what need is there of carefully guarding one's heart, and of allowing others to keep watch over one's soul? Of course, Christian fellowship is good, even enjoyable, but one may live without it. How different this view of the Christian life is from that of the Wesleys! For them conversion is important, but it certainly was not the ultimate gift of God to the living Christian. Rather conversion is only a birth, the beginning of a life-long process. As John Wesley says, "[Conversion] is a part of sanctification, not the whole, it is the gate to it, the entrance unto it. When we are born again, then our sanctification, our inward and outward holiness, begins; and thence forth we are gradually to 'grow up unto Him who is the Head.'"⁴⁴ After Christians have been born again, they must continue to grow. Wesley urges Christians to remember that "Although we are renewed, cleansed, purified, sanctified, the moment we truly believe in Christ, yet we are not then renewed, cleansed, and purified altogether; but the flesh, the evil nature, still *remains* (though subdued). So much the more let us use all diligence in 'fighting the good fight of faith.' So much the more earnestly let us 'watch and pray' against the enemy within."⁴⁵

Given such an understanding of the Christian life, it is easy to see why Wesley formed his hearers into classes. If the Christian walk is really so perilous, then it is obvious that those on the road need all the help they can get. If "it is only when we are knit together that we 'have nourishment from Him, and increase with the increase from God,'" then he is a fool who does not make use of this means of grace.⁴⁶ If the Christian life is an unstoppable progress to heaven, then one might as well take a cruise ship. If enemy submarines lurk beneath the waves, one needs a convoy.

⁴³ Hymn 260:4.

⁴⁴ "The New Birth," *Works*, 6:74.

⁴⁵ "Sin in Believers," *Works*, 5:156.

⁴⁶ "Preface to Hymns and Sacred Poems 1739" *Works*, 14:320.

The Wesley's hymns not only promote the means of grace and encourage Christian fellowship, they also remind Christians that the goal of the Christian life is Christlikeness. Unless believers persevere to the end and fully grasp that for which God grasped them, God's mercy will avail them nothing. Or as Charles Wesley put it:

Answer that gracious end in me
For which thy precious life was given,
Redeem from all iniquity,
Restore, and make me meet for heaven;
Unless thou purge my every stain,
Thy suffering and my faith are vain.⁴⁷

⁴⁷Hymn 364:2.