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

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# What Writers of Contemporary Worship Songs Can Learn from Charles Wesley

## Reflections and Axioms

Lester Ruth

One of the most haunting suggestions I ever heard is the one that the church is in a situation where it places few theological expectations on musicians, whether as composer, performer, or worship leader. Mulling over this suggestion, I once asked a friend, who is a composer, musician, and liturgical scholar, why that might be so, particularly for contemporary writers of worship songs. He suggested that Christian musicians might be afraid that more theology in their songs would quench passion for God.

Is there really a fear that theology is water thrown on the fire of a love for God? Based on my study of the most used contemporary worship songs (also known as contemporary Christian music) in the United States from 1989 until now, I have grown to conclude that there might well be such a fear. If so, we are in danger of making a tragic divorce between theology and piety.<sup>1</sup> I am afraid we could be reaching a point where we want to have a sound theology so that we are able to write papers and pass church boards of examination to enter ministry, but we do not want it to intrude on how we live before God. Does our theological thinking exist on one plane while the categories that actually gather our heart, minds, and lives day to day operate in a different world altogether?

The Christian faith at its strongest does not separate theology from piety or head from heart and hand. We can love God for theological reasons and theology can help us more fully understand God's love for us. It is ironic for Methodists to forget this vital connection since Charles Wesley's life work demonstrated that sound theology can inspire the heart and provide the means of expressing the deepest, most passionate, most intimately felt love for God. Wesley shows that theology does not have to be water thrown on the fire of passion for God but rather oil which causes it to blaze all the higher. In the following reflection, I wish to highlight several ways in which Wesley as a songwriter can model a way to integrate theology and passion in worship songs for contemporary composers. Each way will be lifted up as a kind of axiom for songwriters today. First, however, let's examine the current state of theological content in the most used contemporary worship songs.

### The State of Contemporary Worship Music

Twice a year Christian Copyright Licensing International (hereafter CCLI) develops lists of the top 25 most used contemporary worship songs based on

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<sup>1</sup> I define piety as the shape of our lived understanding of God and how we attempt to live before God.

reporting by churches holding licenses to use the songs registered with CCLI. The first of the lists came out in 1989 and the most recent (as of the writing of this article) was from August 2008. For researchers who wish to have an objective basis upon which to develop a corpus to study the phenomenon of contemporary Christian music, these lists are invaluable because they are based upon the reporting by a sample of churches holding CCLI licenses. (Currently over 136,000 churches in the United States hold licenses.) Through August 2008, only 86 different songs have appeared on one of these top 25 lists for the United States. These 86 songs form the basis for my following observations. An alphabetical list is provided at the end of the article.

My Trinitarian examination of these songs has already been published,<sup>2</sup> based on five essential questions I brought to this corpus of songs: Do the songs name the Trinity or all three Persons of the Trinity? Do the songs direct worship toward the Trinity as a whole or toward one of the Persons of the Trinity? Do the songs remember the activity of the divine Persons among themselves? Do the songs see worship as participation in inter-Trinitarian dynamics or activity? Do the songs use the character of inter-Trinitarian relationships to explore a desired character for relationships among worshipers in the church?

My conclusions can be summarized as follows.<sup>3</sup> There is minimal naming of the Trinity and little balance in the songs regarding naming of all three Persons. Most of the songs either focus on Jesus Christ or name the divine being as Lord/King/God or simply "You." Only a handful of the songs worship the whole Trinity and only one song ("How Great is Our God" by Chris Tomlin) worships God for being Triune. Worship of the Holy Spirit, especially, is very minimal; worship (and even naming) of God the Father is surprisingly marginal, too.

Because so few songs name or infer more than one Person of the Trinity, very little attention is given to the cooperative work of the three Persons. Even the Father/Son dynamic is minimal whereas the Son/Spirit dimension is almost non-existent in the songs. Not surprisingly, given the prior results, there is virtually no vision of Christian worship as participation in inter-Trinitarian dynamics or activity.<sup>4</sup> The tendency within the songs is to objectify God as the recipient of

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<sup>2</sup> Lester Ruth, "Lex Amandi, Lex Orandi: The Trinity in the Most-Used Contemporary Christian Worship Songs" in *The Place of Christ in Liturgical Prayer: Trinity, Christology, and Liturgical Theology*, ed. Bryan D. Spinks (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2008); Lester Ruth, "How Great is Our God: The Trinity in Contemporary Christian Worship Music" in *The Message in the Music: Studying Contemporary Praise & Worship*, ed. Robert Woods and Brian Walrath (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Remember that these conclusions are based on a limited number, albeit the most used, of contemporary worship songs. There are exceptions to this summary within the corpus. And, if one was to examine the thousands of recently written songs, one could find many other exceptions.

<sup>4</sup> Please see Robin Parry, *Worshipping Trinity* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Publishing, 2005) or James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community & the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997) for what I have in mind regarding a more dynamic Trinitarian understanding of Christian worship.

worship, distinct and separate from us although worthy of receiving our worship. Finally, the most used contemporary worship songs do not explore how the character and relationships of the Trinity might shape Christian relationship. Indeed, references to and awareness of the church rarely exist within this body of songs.

I have also begun but not yet published a review of how the most used songs tend to speak of divine activity within the economy of salvation. As with the Trinitarian examination, I have several essential questions which I bring to the corpus of songs: On the whole, do the songs place greater weight on divine activity or on that of human worshippers? What range of verbs is used with respect to divine activity? How is the cooperative effort of the Persons of the Trinity portrayed, particularly within the economy of salvation? How dynamic is the sense of time within the economy of salvation? Is God's redeeming activity portrayed as static or ongoing, remote or immanent? Is there an eschatological dimension in the portrayal of salvation?

Based on the results of the Trinitarian study, one could almost guess some of the answers to this new study. These songs emphasize human activity over divine activity. Looking at distinct reference to action, there are, on average, about 5.3 references to human activity and about 3 for divine activity within each song. Over a dozen songs make no reference to divine activity at all.

While a broad range of actions is associated with God, there is actually little repetition of verbs dealing with clear redeeming or saving aspects of God's activity, including the atonement. References to Christ dying are the major exceptions. "Come" is the most used verb attributed to the divine, often as a petition by the worshiper. Some songs in the corpus are strong exceptions to these generalities.

Since so few songs mention two or more of the Triune Persons, there is little portrayal of salvation as a cooperative effort of the Triune God. References to the Father/Son do occur the most within the corpus, especially the mentioning of the Father sending/giving the Son. The role of the Holy Spirit within the economy of salvation receives the least mention.

With respect to a dynamic sense of action, divine redeeming activity is mainly portrayed as solitary events of the past in which the believer should now trust. The songs generally do not deal much with the another time aspect of this redeeming activity, whether by speaking of Christ's current heavenly activity, his coming work in the eschaton, or even by calling the singer to sense his past work in a vivid way now.

### **Wesleyan Axioms for Contemporary Songwriters**

There are several possible lessons from Charles Wesley for lyricists today. Each is a theological path he follows that is often overlooked today in recently written songs. What follows is neither an exhaustive review of Wesley's theol-

ogy<sup>5</sup> nor the entire corpus of his hymns and poems. And it is neither a technical nor exhaustive look at his range of poetic devices.<sup>6</sup> Rather, the axioms which follow are inspired by areas where I have seen theological oversights in contemporary Christian songs and, in contrast, have noticed ways in which Wesley can model expressing profound—yet passionate—theology in lyrical form.<sup>7</sup>

*Axiom #1: Be taken up with the fundamental paradox of the Christian faith: the Incarnation.*

In addition, be attentive to the resulting paradoxical nature of the events in the life of Christ, especially his birth and death. Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man. Wesley believed this. But it was more than just a formal idea for his Oxford homework. It was the interpretive frame for seeing the significance of the major events in the life and ministry of Christ.<sup>8</sup> They were not just simple historic events done to or by a carpenter from Nazareth; they were the work of God.

Consider the birth of Christ. Wesley is caught up in awe of the striking paradox that the Incarnation and birth of Jesus entails. He has a variety of ways of hitting this note. Several examples can come from hymn #4, “Glory be to God on High,” in Wesley’s collection on *Hymns of the Nativity of our Lord* (1745).<sup>9</sup> First, regarding the appearance of the invisible:

God, th’ invisible appears,  
 | God, the blest, the great I AM  
 Sojourns in this veil of tears,  
 And Jesus is his name.

Wesley shifts the paradox to speak of the start of the source of all existence, too:

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<sup>5</sup>To achieve this end, I refer readers to S T Kimbrough, Jr., ed., *Charles Wesley: Poet and Theologian* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1992), especially Thomas A. Langford’s “Charles Wesley as Theologian”; Ted A. Campbell, “Charles Wesley, *Theologos*” in *Charles Wesley: Life, Literature, and Legacy*, ed. Kenneth G. C. Newport and Ted A. Campbell (London: Epworth Press, 2007); Teresa Berger, *Theology in Hymns? A Study of the Relationship of Doxology and Theology According to A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists (1780)*, trans. Timothy E. Kimbrough (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1995); and Paul W. Chilcote, “A Faith That Sings: The Renewing Power of Lyrical Theology” in *The Wesleyan Tradition: A Paradigm for Renewal*, ed. Paul W. Chilcote (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002).

<sup>6</sup>Frank Baker’s *Charles Wesley’s Verse: An Introduction* (London: Epworth Press, 1964) is still a helpful volume. See also Kenneth Shields, “Charles Wesley as Poet” in *Charles Wesley: Poet and Theologian*.

<sup>7</sup>A brief version of this same reflection can be found in Matt Sigler and Lester Ruth, “Charles Wesley and the Power of Poetic Theology,” *The Asbury Herald* 117, 2 (Spring 2007): 12–14.

<sup>8</sup>For a fuller discussion, see Jason E. Vickers, “‘And We the Life of God Shall Know’: Incarnation and the Trinity in Charles Wesley’s Hymns,” *Anglican Theological Review* 90, 2 (Spring 2008): 329–344.

<sup>9</sup>Charles Wesley, *Hymns for the Nativity of Our Lord* (London: [W. Strahan], 1745), 5–6.

Emptied of his majesty  
Of his dazzling glories shorn,  
Being's source begins to be,  
And God himself is born!

Or the paradox can celebrate the containment of the uncontainable:

See th' eternal Son of God,  
A mortal Son of man  
Dwelling in an earthy clod  
Whom heaven cannot contain!

In hymn #6, "Join All Ye Joyful Nations,"<sup>10</sup> Wesley returns to a similar paradox:

See the stupendous blessing,  
Which God to us hath given!  
A child of man,  
In length a span,  
Who fills both earth and heaven.

And he can unfold the paradox of the Incarnation by singing of the juxtaposition of heavenly glory and earthly humility:

Go see the King of glory,  
Discern the heavenly stranger,  
So poor and mean,  
His course an inn,  
His cradle is a manger.

These two qualities are woven together in a single verse in hymn #12, "Sing, Ye Ransomed Nations, Sing."<sup>11</sup> Notice how Wesley repeatedly uses this paradox as the grounds for the worshiper to contemplate what and who can be truly seen in the birth of Christ, a contemplation that leads to worship:

Lo! He lays his glory by,  
Emptied of his majesty!  
See the God who all things made,  
Humbly in a manger laid.

Such paradoxes tend to lead Wesley and those who sing his hymns to wonder both how this could be and why this would be. To the former question, he is willing to allow the paradox to remain a mystery that prompts awe. To this latter question we will return in just a moment.

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

The wonder of the paradox of the Incarnation sometimes leads Wesley to call simply for the contemplation of this mystery. Here is such an exhortation in Hymn #5, “Let Earth and Heaven Combine”:<sup>12</sup>

See in that infant’s face  
 The depths of Deity,  
 And labour while ye gaze  
 To sound the mystery:  
 In vain; ye angels gaze no more,  
 But fall, and silently adore.

The wonder of the paradox so overcomes Wesley that he sees silence as the only possible reaction.

Now it wouldn’t be Wesley if such contemplation was not directly tied to notions of God’s saving activity on our behalf. Salvation is the answer to why God has become human. People are prompted to consider just what God has done to save us and what it means to experience salvation. The small baby of Bethlehem is also a mighty, divine warrior who will defeat Satan on our behalf. For Wesley it is not some warm feeling of sentimentality that should arise in viewing the babe of the manger—“Oh, isn’t he cute”—but awe and wonder. Again from hymn #6:<sup>13</sup>

Gaze on that helpless object  
 Of endless adoration!  
 Those infant-hands  
 Shall burst our bands,  
 And work out our salvation;  
  
 Strangle the crooked serpent,  
 Destroy his works for ever,  
 And open set  
 The heavenly gate  
 To every true believer.

Not surprisingly, having launched such a soteriological interpretation of the birth of Christ, Wesley continues it in his hymns which speak of the crucifixion of Christ. The One who is crucified is not just a carpenter from Nazareth pursuing a disastrous second career or just a prophet persecuted like so many of the earlier prophets. The One who is crucified is still the One who is fully divine and fully human. And that is why his crucifixion can be powerful for us: it is divine activity on our behalf. Very often Wesley wants to make this point by relying on another fundamental paradox: the One who is Immortal dies, sacrificed for those who do not deserve it.

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 9–10.

But this is not merely a rational concept for Wesley, it was grounds for the warming of the heart and real worship passion. Consider the following two examples where in his desire to find the right words to name this God who has died, Wesley falls back on speaking of him as “My Love.” First, from “Saviour, the World’s and Mine”:<sup>14</sup>

’Tis done! My God hath died,  
My Love is crucify’d!  
Break this stony heart of mine,  
Pour my eyes a ceaseless flood,  
Feel, my soul, the pangs divine,  
Catch, my heart, the issuing blood.

Notice the exhortations which Wesley gave to his whole person to react appropriately to contemplating the death of the Incarnate one: My stony heart break; My eyes cry; My soul feel the pangs divine; My heart catch the blood divine. This is not some dispassionate theologizing.

A hymn from *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1742),<sup>15</sup> provides another example of the naming of the crucified Incarnate One as “My Love”:

O love divine, what hast thou done!  
Th’ immortal God hath died for me!  
The Father’s co-eternal Son  
Bore all my sins upon the tree;  
Th’ immortal God for me hath died!  
My Lord, my love is crucified!

So enraptured does Wesley become by the twin mysteries here (First, that the immortal God has died and second, that this God has died for me) that he ends each of the stanzas of this hymn with the same line of wonder: “My Lord, my Love is crucified.” Indeed, in variant forms, it occurs elsewhere in hymns contemplating the crucifixion. This lyric exemplifies how Wesley could speak from his theology and piety simultaneously. Theology was oil, not water, thrown on the fire in his heart.

Acknowledging as God the Savior who had died to save allowed Wesley to develop some powerful theological motifs that he could use to great effect—and affect—in his hymns. One, for instance, was his labeling the blood Jesus had shed for us as “blood divine.” Again, a subtle paradox could be found there. Consider how he used this phrase in the following line from his unpublished poem on the Good Samaritan. The poem contemplates Jesus Christ as the true Good Samaritan and the sinner as the one who had been waylaid along the road.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Wesley, *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (London: W. Strahan, 1739), 168.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Wesley, *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (Bristol: F. Farley, 1742), 26.

The solution for this sinner bloodied and bruised? A divine/human healing medicine. Wesley resolves the story in this way:

Bind up my wounds by opening thine,  
Apply the balm of blood Divine  
To save a sinner poor.<sup>16</sup>

Wesley's use of the fundamental paradox of the Incarnation to guide his contemplation of Jesus' birth and death creates triggers for awe and wonder, the building blocks of true worship. It also creates hope: we can be assured that the One who acts to save us can actually do it effectively. He is God Incarnate. This is the first way I think Wesley can model a wedding together of theology and piety for the contemporary songwriter: Be caught up in the fundamental paradox of the Christian faith: the Incarnation.

*Axiom #2: Juxtapose our personal stories of salvation  
against a larger, more cosmic story.*

This has not been a common practice in the most used contemporary songs. Few aim to place our personal story and enjoyment of salvation into this larger framework. A few do ("Awesome God," "Our God Reigns," "Shine Jesus Shine," and "In Christ Alone"), but most tend to speak of Jesus' saving activity as a narrower transaction: Jesus has done this for me, I benefit from what he has done, and return worship in response. This is true, but it's not the complete story. Consider what is lost: a bigger context to understand what it is that Jesus has done for me or you, particularly as it is expressed in important biblical themes.

This is probably not a new situation in songwriting, at least, from the nineteenth century. My hunch is that the "for you, for me-ness" of classic evangelicalism is so strong that it can overshadow these broader, biblical dimensions of God's saving activity. Being enmeshed in "for you" or "for me" can block out a realization that Christ's work is "for all" or for the whole world, an important theological theme for the two Wesley brothers.

Consider how Wesley sometimes combines the two, juxtaposing them against each other so that the cosmic story finds the amazing twist of becoming "for me" while the "for me" quality of the gospel finds its true home of wonder in viewing what Christ has done for all God's creation. A good example is "And Can It Be," originally published as "Free Grace" in 1739.<sup>17</sup>

Wesley starts with the personal aspect, posed as a question of wonder:

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<sup>16</sup> S T Kimbrough, Jr., and Oliver A. Beckerlegge, *The Unpublished Poetry of Charles Wesley*, 3 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon/Kingswood, 1990), 2: 122; henceforth cited as *Unpub. Poetry*.

<sup>17</sup> *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1739), 117-9.

And can it be, that I should gain  
An int'rest in the Saviour's blood?  
Dy'd he for me?—Who caus'd his pain?  
For me?—Who him to death pursu'd?  
Amazing love! How can it be  
That thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

And then Wesley turns to a bigger consideration: the cosmic scope of Christ's work, especially his death, that staggers even the thoughts of angels and forces them to give up the search for the limits to God's love.

'Tis myst'ry all! Th' immortal dies!  
Who can explore his strange design?  
In vain the first-born seraph tries  
To sound the depths of love divine.  
'Tis mercy all! Let earth adore;  
Let angel minds enquire no more.  
He left his Father's throne above,  
(So free, so infinite his grace!)  
Empty'd himself of all but love,  
And bled for Adam's helpless race.

Notice what Wesley has done here. He has taken a step back and given us the story behind the story: what's the cosmic backdrop to contemplating Christ's death for a single sinner? It's the breadth of his saving activity: he left his Father's throne above, the heavenly majesty, because of the free, unbounded, unmerited quality of his love, emptying himself of all but love and bled for Adam's helpless race. This is picking up on important biblical notions contrasting the first Adam and Christ as the second Adam. It's this backdrop that provides the real significance to the personal, individual dimensions of Christ's saving work. And this is where Wesley now heads:

Empty'd 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!

It's an amazing juxtaposition: in six lines we've gone from heavenly majesty, the emptying involved Christ's coming, the cosmic scope of Christ's work as part of the large economy of salvation history, to me. I think to put that "for me" part against that larger story only increases the weightiness of realizing that it can be for me. I think this is the second of the lessons Wesley has to teach modern songwriters about incorporating strong theology into worship lyrics: Juxtapose my story of salvation against the world's story of salvation.

*Axiom #3: Incorporate a dynamic sense of time and remembrance in songs.*

Simply put, bring God's saving activity into the here and now. The poetic quality of song lyrics can take advantage of the timeless dimension of God's saving activity, just as perhaps poetry is at an advantage in expressing the paradoxical nature of the Incarnation. An easy way to see it in Wesley's songs is when he fudges on the verb tenses in his lyrics. Consider this well-known Resurrection hymn:

"Christ the Lord is ris'n to day,"  
Sons of men and angels say!  
Raise your joys and triumphs high,  
Sing ye heav'ns, and earth reply.<sup>18</sup>

Now, strictly speaking, the lyric is not historically accurate. Wouldn't it be more accurate for us to sing, altering the verb tenses (excuse what it does to the rhyming scheme) in the following?

"Christ the Lord was risen back then,"  
Sons of men and angels said!  
Raised their joys and triumphs high,  
Sang the heavens, and earth replied.

Notice what happens. Changing the verb tenses to the past withdrew us from the joy of that first Easter, changing worshipers from participants in the excitement and wonder as first experienced to historians giving an account on what happened at some other time and place.

Wesley also brings that same sense of immediacy to the birth of Christ. Consider, for instance, the verse that we have already looked at that exhorts the listener to look into the face of the Incarnate infant:

See in that infant's face  
The depths of Deity,  
And labor while ye gaze  
To sound the mystery:  
In vain; ye angels gaze no more,  
But fall, and silently adore.<sup>19</sup>

Wesley's framing of the exhortation presumes that the seeing can be done right now. The listener is not asked to consider something far away in time and space but is placed by the hymn at the foot of the manger. There is immediacy to God's saving activity that creates space in the heart for the profound theology in the hymn to be felt as well as thought. Playing with verb tenses allows Wesley to be in raptures regarding the Incarnation and not just affirm it as a cold dogma

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

<sup>19</sup> *Hymns for the Nativity*, 7.

to which he knows he should subscribe. The technique gives a theological shape to his heart and gives him something to sing.

Wesley's dynamic sense of time and remembrance is particularly evocative as he contemplates the crucifixion. Far from being just a sentimental memory or mere distant event in which we should trust remotely, Christ's death is portrayed vividly as occurring right in front of us. Two examples from Wesley's *Hymns on the Lord's Supper* demonstrate how his songs transport us to the foot of the cross, placing us in the biblical scene. The first is hymn #18:<sup>20</sup>

See the slaughter'd sacrifice,  
 See the altar stain'd with blood!  
 Crucified before our eyes  
 Faith discerns the dying God,  
 Dying that our souls might live,  
 Gasping at his death, forgive!

His language gets even more graphic in hymn #122 from the same collection:

Still the wounds are open wide,  
 The blood doth freely flow,  
 As when first his sacred side  
 Receiv'd the deadly blow:  
 Still, O God, the blood is warm,  
 Cover'd with the blood we are;  
 Find a part it doth not arm,  
 And strike the sinner there!<sup>21</sup>

Now, such language may leave one wondering whether Wesley believed that the sacrifice of Christ was an actual historical event, complete, full, and sufficient for our salvation. Of course he did. The doctrinal standards and liturgy of his church, to which he fully ascribed, expressed his own commitments. But Wesley's concern is not dogmatic precision written in prose but the appropriate speech of worship that cultivates theological grounding for awe, wonder, repentance, and the offer of salvation.

The cumulative effect of this dynamic sense of remembrance in Wesley's poetry—and remember that it is poetry, not prose—is to make sound theology participatory, evocative, dramatic, and inviting. Contemplating the now-ness of Christ's death helps worshipers feel their involvement in the story and the full weight of their sinful complicity. Note the initial present tense verbs in a stanza from a 1742 hymn on the passion, "Ye that Pass By, Behold the Man!":<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Charles Wesley, *Hymns on the Lord's Supper* (Bristol: F. Farley, 1745), 14.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 103–4.

<sup>22</sup> *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1742), 23.

Beneath my load he faints, and dies:  
 I fill'd his soul with pangs unknown;  
 I caus'd those mortal groans, and cries,  
 I kill'd the Father's only Son.

As we behold the bleeding Lamb of God, we also find the ever-present availability of his ongoing redemption as another one of the Lord's Supper hymns (#27) puts it: "Now, e'en now, my Lord, and God, / I wash me in thy side."<sup>23</sup>

Behind all of this stands a sound theology of the atonement expressed in poetic ways that are gripping. I would add that Wesley was not alone in this dynamic use of remembrance. It is a recurring feature of many historical forms of worship. This emphasis upon visualizing Christ's death was also found in contemporaneous Presbyterian materials as Leigh Eric Schmidt documents in his study of Presbyterian sacramental seasons, for example.<sup>24</sup> In fact, it is enough of a recurring phenomenon in worship history that it makes the general absence of it in the most used contemporary worship songs even the more striking and, I believe, to the theological impoverishment of recently written songs.

*Axiom #4: Let the worshiper sing biblical stories from the inside out.*

In such a song, the worshiper takes on the persona of the biblical character, singing about an experience of a gracious, saving God. In this way, Wesley provides songs where biblical stories and scriptural language provide the vocabulary to speak about Christian experience. I think this is one of the real challenges to the imagination of songwriters today. Having distanced the biblical story by an undynamic, static sense of remembrance, the current songwriter has to find the language to express Christian experience from somewhere else. Is that why so many songs sound like the lyrics of pop songs? By immersing the worshiper in the biblical story and singing it from the inside out, Wesley can provide biblical language to express what it means to experience God and his salvation.

Sometimes he does this in shorter references. Consider a hymn we reviewed earlier, "And Can It Be."<sup>25</sup> Notice how, when Wesley reaches the point where he wants to transition from the cosmic telling of Christ's redemptive activity to the believer's personal share in salvation, he frames in a way that evokes the story of Peter's imprisonment and release in Acts 12:

<sup>23</sup> *Hymns on the Lord's Supper*, 21.

<sup>24</sup> Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Holy Fairs: Scotland and the Making of American Revivalism*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001). For a more detailed examination in Wesley's hymns, see Kenneth M. Loyer, "Memorial, Means, and Pledge: Eucharist and Time in the Wesleys' *Hymns on the Lord's Supper*," *Proceedings of The Charles Wesley Society* 11 (2006–2007): 87–106.

<sup>25</sup> *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1739), 118.

Long my imprison'd spirit lay,  
 Fast bound in sin and nature's night:  
 Thine eye diffus'd a quick'ning ray;  
 I woke; the dungeon flam'd with light;  
 My chains fell off, my heart was free,  
 I rose, went forth, and followed thee.

What is Wesley doing? He is exploring the experience of being justified and he is using the language of biblical narrative to do so. The poetic, narrative expression of the theology makes it evocative.

Wesley can also do that for extended stories. I believe some of these pieces are some of his most powerful. Both of the following examples likewise deal with justification. His concern is not only the meaning of justification but also the experience of being justified by God. Not surprisingly, such concerns are natural to a theologian who wants to write worship-related material and to evangelize in so doing.

One example of a longer story used for this purpose is a hymn from 1742's *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, "Come, O thou Traveller Unknown," also sometimes known as "Wrestling Jacob" because it is based on the story of Jacob wrestling the angel for a blessing in Genesis 32.<sup>26</sup> Wesley has worshipers singing this story from the inside out so that they can feel the journey to justification and have biblical language to describe the experience. The hymn starts straightforwardly, placing us in Jacob's shoes:

Come, O thou traveller 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.

The story deepens and expands to start embracing the Savior of the Gospel, Jesus Christ. That is who the wrestling partner is:

In vain thou struggest 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.

The wrestling match goes for several more stanzas to this wonderful resolution:

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<sup>26</sup> *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1742), 115–8.

'Tis love, 'tis Love! Thou diedst for me,  
 I hear thy whisper in my heart.  
 The morning breaks, the shadows flee:  
 Pure Universal Love thou art,  
 To me, to all, thy bowels move,  
 Thy nature, and thy name is love.

Notwithstanding the archaic eighteenth century language, I believe what Wesley does here could be instructive for current songwriters: allow the worshiper to sing the biblical story from the inside out, having been placed in it, and all of a sudden we have biblical language that is dramatic, evocative, experiential, and implicitly theological to express Christian experience. Contemporary songwriters, please go and do likewise.

Another compelling example of viewing the biblical story from the inside out is Wesley's poem based on the Good Samaritan story from Luke 10. He uses this story to describe Christ as Savior. Christ is the Good Samaritan and the traveler who gets beat up is the sinner broken down by sin and derailed on the journey to the heavenly city. Who shows up to help the desperate person? The Incarnate God who saves. It's profoundly theological and experiential:

The thieves have rob'd, and stript, and bound . . .  
 My putrid wounds stand open wide,  
 My head is faint, and sick of pride,  
 And all corrupt my heart . . .  
 But Life I see in death appear!  
 The good Samaritan is near, . . .  
 Bind up my wounds by opening thine,  
 Apply the balm of blood Divine . . .<sup>27</sup>

There is an evocative, theological power that is unlocked as we are transported into the story. We feel the utter helplessness as we lay beside the road in a pool of our own sin. And we, like the wounded traveler, cry out for the healing balm of the Good Samaritan, that is, the Incarnate God who dies for us.

*Axiom #5: Let God have strong, key verbs in the song.*<sup>28</sup>

It is both a classic aspect of Christian worship and a basic theological principle that God is revealed in God's activity. Thus put the emphasis upon divine activity so that God gets good verbs—not just the best nouns and adjectives—in song lyrics. When God is portrayed as active, theological concepts become con-

<sup>27</sup> *Unpub. Poetry*, 2:120, 122.

<sup>28</sup> For an interesting comparison with the emphasis on verbs which a believer does, see S T Kimbrough, Jr., "Charles Wesley's Dynamic, Lyrical Theology: The Power and Impact of Verbs," *Proceedings of the Charles Wesley Society* 11 (2006–2007): 15–34.

crete. Consider Wesley's notion of the universal scope of Christ's redeeming work. He could just make the bald theological claim in a lyric: Christ died for all people; God's grace is for all people. He does that sometimes. But he has another way of making the same point: piling up what Christ does for a wide range of people. Again, Wesley's basic source is biblical narrative as in the 1741 hymn on "Jesus Christ, The Saviour of All Men":<sup>29</sup>

Did not his word, the fiends expel?  
 The lepers cleanse, and raise the dead?  
 Did he not all their sickness heal,  
 And satisfy their every need?  
 Did he reject his helpless clay,  
 Or send them sorrowful away?

Note the range of verbs and their strength: expel, cleanse, raise, heal, satisfy, reject, send. This is in contrast with many contemporary worship songs where the worshipers get the strong verbs and God gets a range of nouns and adjectives. Wesley here gives us sinners the range of nouns, not as the actors but as the ones acted upon, the ones who benefit from the power of Christ's word.

That well-known hymn "O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing"<sup>30</sup> has a similar stanza that highlights divine saving activity by means of verbs with vitality.

He breaks the power of cancell'd sin,  
 He sets the prisoner free:  
 His blood can make the foulest clean;  
 His blood avail'd for me.

Break, set free, make clean, avail. This is a God and Savior who can do something. Surely that is the most root level sort of theological affirmation. In my current review of the most used contemporary songs from 1989 to the present, I generally see something different. God or Christ gets a limited range of verbs and they are more anemic than the sorts of ones that Wesley uses. I think there is an important theological point that Wesley's divine verb vitality achieves: it allows God to be the main actor in our theological understanding of the drama of salvation and prevents us from objectifying and distancing God. And so I encourage songwriters here to follow Wesley's path: look at your songs and see if God gets strong and vital verbs.

*Axiom #6: Be mesmerized by the Trinity.*

One way that Wesley shows his adoration of the Trinity is in shaping the structure of the song according to the Persons of the Trinity, each stanza focusing on one of the Persons, most typically in the order of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I

<sup>29</sup> Charles Wesley, *Hymns on God's Everlasting Love* (Bristol: F. Farley, 1741), 21.

<sup>30</sup> Charles Wesley, *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (London: W. Strahan, 1740), 121.

have found among the most used contemporary songs that this was a feature in some of the first written ones (“Glorify Thy Name” and “Father, I Adore You,” for example) but has fallen out of usage lately. Wesley follows the same structure but adds a different dimension: unlike the contemporary worship songs, God—and each of the three Persons—is the main actor of the song. The Triune Persons get the good verbs and are honored by remembering what each one does. This emphasis allows Wesley’s songs to be more profoundly theological because they then shine the spotlight on a Trinitarian economy of salvation and Trinitarian salvation history. Consider, for example, the beginning of hymn #15 from the 1742 printing of *Hymns on God’s Everlasting Love*.<sup>31</sup> The hymn is an evangelistic one, a plaintiff cry to sinners to accept the gospel. Wesley has each of the Persons of the Godhead ask the question on why the sinner would choose death over life. Having this question come from the Father, Son, and Spirit sequentially, with appropriate remembrance of what each has done in the economy of salvation, adds the gravitas to the song.

Sinners turn, why will you die?  
 God your Maker, asks you why?  
 God, who did your being give,  
 Made you with himself to live;  
 He the fatal cause demands,  
 Asks the work of his own hands,  
 Why, ye thankless creatures, why  
 Will you cross his love, and die?

Sinners turn, why will you die?  
 God your Saviour, asks you why?  
 God, who did your souls retrieve,  
 Died himself that you might live:  
 Will you let him die in vain?  
 Crucify your Lord again?  
 Why, ye ransom’d sinners, why  
 Will you slight his grace, and die?

Sinners turn, why will you die?  
 God the Spirit asks you why?  
 He, who all your lives hath strove,  
 Woo’d you to embrace his love:  
 Will you not the grace receive?  
 Will you still refuse to live?  
 Why, ye long-sought sinners, why  
 Will ye grieve your God, and die?

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<sup>31</sup> Charles Wesley, *Hymns on God’s Everlasting Love*, 2nd series (London: W. Strahan, 1742), 43.

This brief walk through each of the Person's roles is carried even farther when Wesley dedicates a whole song to exploring some dimension in the Trinitarian dynamics of the economy of salvation, in other words, having the whole song unfold the cooperative effort for our salvation between two or three Persons of the Trinity. This is a huge omission in the most used contemporary worship songs, which tend to focus on one person, usually Jesus Christ. On a few occasions, the connection between the Father and the Son are given in a very brief manner. A common example is that of God sending his Son without further exploration. And, even more striking, the activity of the Holy Spirit in relation to the Father or the Son, is virtually unmentioned in recently written songs.

In contrast, Wesley often explores the active agency of the Spirit in our experience of salvation. Again, my emphasis is not the specific Wesleyan interpretation Charles places on the Holy Spirit's activity but on the phenomenon of drawing attention to the cooperative activity of the divine Persons. Consider the well-known hymn "Spirit of Faith, Come Down," an extended prayerful plea for the Holy Spirit to fulfill its role within salvation. It contains one of the most important of the Wesleyan notions: the Spirit applies the blood of Christ to the believer so that he/she has the inward assurance of being born again and being pardoned by God. The hymn is #27 in the 1746 collection entitled *Hymns of Petition and Thanksgiving for the Promise of the Father*.<sup>32</sup>

Spirit of faith, come down,  
 Reveal the things of God,  
 And make to us the Godhead known  
 And witness with the blood:  
   'Tis thine the blood t' apply,  
 And give us eyes to see  
 Who did for every sinner die  
   Hath surely died for me.

No man can truly say  
 That Jesus is the Lord,  
 Unless 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.

There is simply nothing like this in the most used recently written songs, a theological look at our utter dependence upon the Holy Spirit in the Trinitarian economy of salvation.

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<sup>32</sup> Charles Wesley, *Hymns of Petition and Thanksgiving for the Promise of the Father* (Bristol: F. Farley, 1746), 30.

Similarly, Wesley's being fascinated with the Trinity and writing songs that explore the internal relationship for our benefit means that he also has a wealth of songs that explore the atonement more fully than anything recently written. This is shocking enough that I would like to repeat the thought: whereas Wesley's Trinitarian emphasis allows him to explore the atonement richly, recently written songs tend to be impoverished in this regard. A good example is Wesley's song "Arise My Soul, Arise"<sup>33</sup> which has as its center the ascended Savior appearing before the heavenly throne of God the Father. Notice that the Spirit makes an appearance, too.

Arise, my soul, arise,  
Shake off thy guilty fears,  
The bleeding sacrifice  
In my behalf appears;  
Before the throne my surety stands;  
My name is written on his hands.

Five bleeding wounds he bears,  
Receiv'd on Calvary;  
They pour effectual prayers,  
They strongly speak for me;  
Forgive him, O forgive, they cry,  
Nor let that ransom'd sinner die!

The Father hears him pray,  
His dear anointed one,  
He cannot turn away  
The presence of his Son:  
His Spirit answers to the blood,  
And tells me, I am born of God.

Such hymns show that Trinitarian theology is not merely a framework of concepts for Wesley to which he knows he should formally adhere. Rather, celebrating the Triune Persons and their cooperative work on our behalf was the logic of his love for God and the means by which God's love is known. His heart had acquired a Trinitarian shape.

Each of the axioms I suggest from Wesley shows that there can be a vital marriage between theology and piety. Each axiom opens up in its own way and invites the worshiper to step into not merely dull dogma but what Dorothy Sayers once provocatively called "the greatest drama ever staged" and described as "this terrifying drama of which God is the victim and hero."<sup>34</sup> Wesley would have heartily agreed, noting that the wonder of this Trinitarian drama rests in the amaz-

<sup>33</sup> *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1742), 264-5.

<sup>34</sup> Dorothy L. Sayers, "The Greatest Drama Ever Staged" in *Christian Letters to a Post-Christian World: A Selection of Essays* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 15.

ing quality of God's grace and in our share in it. The Wesleyan axioms for contemporary songwriting, whether focusing on the paradox of the Incarnation or placing our personal share in salvation against a larger cosmic backdrop or piling up vivid verbs to highlight the breadth of the Savior's activity, seek to name dimensions by which new songs can form our hearts in that same biblical story.

Thus Wesley's manner of lyrical theology is a lot more like oil than water, oil that causes the blaze of passion for God to roar, not water that quenches the fire. Wesley is, I believe, a great example of how we can love God theologically and know God's love for us theologically and write songs that express this passion.

Why should we care? I'm afraid if we're not theological in our songwriting and song selection, we're in danger of losing the gospel as the base content of our worship. And, if that happens, what difference does it make if we are passionate about anything?

**Alphabetical List of Songs Appearing on Top 25 List for the U.S.A.  
from CCLI From 1989 Through 2008**

Above All	Indescribable
Ah Lord God	I Stand In Awe
All Hail King Jesus	I Will Call Upon The Lord
Amazing Grace (My Chains are Gone)	I Worship You Almighty God
Arise And Sing	In Moments Like These
As The Deer	Jesus Name Above All Names
Awesome God	Joy To The World
Beautiful One	Let There Be Glory and Honor and Praises
Because He Lives	Lord Be Glorified
Better Is One Day	Lord I Lift Your Name On High
Bind Us Together	Lord Reign In Me
Bless His Holy Name	Majesty
Blessed Be Your Name	Mighty to Save
Breathe	More Precious Than Silver
Celebrate Jesus	My Life Is In You
Change My Heart Oh God	Oh How He Loves You And Me
Come Now Is The Time To Worship	Open Our Eyes
Days of Elijah	Open the Eyes of My Heart
Draw Me Close	Our God Reigns
Emmanuel	Praise The Name Of Jesus
Everlasting God	Sanctuary
Father I Adore You	Seek Ye First
Forever	Shine Jesus Shine (Lord The Light Of Your Love)
Friend of God	Shout To The Lord
Give Thanks	Surely The Presence Of The Lord
Glorify Thy Name	The Heart of Worship
God Of Wonders	The Wonderful Cross
Great Is The Lord	There's Something About That Name
Hallelujah	This Is The Day
He Has Made Me Glad	Thou Art Worthy
He Is Exalted	Thy Lovingkindness
Here I Am to Worship	Trading My Sorrows
His Name Is Wonderful	Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus
Holy Ground	We Bring The Sacrifice Of Praise
Holy Is The Lord	We Fall Down
How Can We Name A Love	We Have Come Into His House
How Great Is Our God	We Will Glorify
How Great Thou Art	What A Mighty God We Serve
How Majestic Is Your Name	When I Look Into Your Holiness
I Could Sing of Your Love Forever	You Are My All in All
I Exalt Thee	You Are My King
I Give You My Heart	You're Worthy of My Praise
I Love You Lord	
In Christ Alone	