

**“LOVE DIVINE, ALL LOVES EXCELLING”:
SOME THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON
THE WITNESS OF A HYMN**

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*This essay was first delivered to the Adult Forum of St. Barnabas Episcopal Church, Denver, Colorado, March 2, 2003. It was discovered and later edited for *Methodist History* by Andrew Scrimgeour with Schubert Ogden's blessing. Scrimgeour notes: "A helpful way into the thought of Martin Luther, Paul Tillich, and Reinhold Niebuhr; it is often said, is through their sermons. That advice holds for the writings of Charles Wesley as well, but the hymns he wrote with his brother John are a rewarding entre as well. Schubert Ogden proves the point with his singular theological probing of one of the great hymns in the Wesley canon, and illumines it as 'a paradigm of their witness.' After reading and reflecting on this article, you will open your hymnal and sing 'Love Divine, All Loves Excelling' as if for the first time." Andrew D. Scrimgeour is Dean of Libraries Emeritus at Drew University.*

The calendars of Anglican churches set aside a day for commemorating the witness of John and Charles Wesley.¹ Although the brothers are identified in *The Book of Common Prayer* simply as “Priests,” they are distinguished elsewhere—as in the *New Zealand Prayer Book*—as “Preacher” and “Poet” respectively. This suggests that perhaps as good a way as any to reflect on what is distinctive in their witness is to take a closer look at a hymn such as “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling.”² It would be too simple to say, of course, that John provided the theological content of its witness while Charles provided its poetic or hymned form. But a certain division of labor along these lines was in a way natural to them. So we may remember both of their contributions by reflecting theologically on this hymn as a paradigm of their witness.

Considered very generally, the distinctive witness of John and Charles Wesley is a Christian witness having three defining characteristics. First of all, it is characterized by a faithful restatement of catholic Christianity as

¹ While *The United Methodist Book of Worship* does not provide a similar date for the Wesley brothers, it does under “Other Special Days”; #439 identifies an “Aldersgate Day or Sunday” as a special day to be celebrated in the month of May. “On Wednesday, May 24, 1738, John Wesley experienced his ‘heart strangely warmed’” while attending a Moravian Society meeting in a room somewhere on Aldersgate Street in London. “This Aldersgate experience was crucial for his own life and became a touchstone for the Wesleyan movement” (439).

² *United Methodist Hymnal* (1989), #384 and *The Hymnal 1982*, #657.

recovered and reinterpreted by the Protestant reformers. With good reason the Wesleys' distinctive style of witness has been described as "evangelical catholicism." Not only was the immediate source of their witness the tradition of Anglican Christianity deriving from the English Reformation, but its "deeper wellspring," as one scholar has argued, was the interpretation of the biblical witness by the fathers of the ancient church, in whose thought and piety the Wesleys discovered what they came to regard as "the normative pattern of catholic Christianity." But if I were to point to a single bias in many of the more recent interpretations of the Wesleys' witness, it would be a tendency to differentiate it far too sharply from that of the great continental reformers.

This is not at all to suggest that the Wesleys' witness would be even more adequately described simply as "evangelicalism." But if I haven't the least doubt that their Christianity is thoroughly catholic, I am equally certain of this in the cases of Luther and Calvin, in both of whom, even as in them, what is recovered and reinterpreted by the rediscovery of the gospel, and hence by *sola scriptura* and *solus Christus*, *sola gratia* and *sola fide*, is what they took to be the faith and witness of the early catholic church. This explains, among other things, why, like their two great predecessors, the Wesleys throughout all aspects of their ministry assume the authority of the Nicene dogma of the trinity of God and of the Chalcedonian dogma of the two natures, human and divine, of the one person Jesus Christ.

On the other hand, it is equally true that these dogmas are not so much made thematic in the Wesleys' witness as presupposed by it. Thus, while they do indeed restate classical christology and soteriology—albeit in terms that, in important respects, are their own—the thematic center of their witness is the constituting article of salvation by grace alone through faith alone, which they know Luther to have spoken of as the *articulus stantis vel cadentis ecclesiae* and the English reformers to have called "the strong rock and foundation of the Christian religion." Centering on this one theme of "salvation by grace through faith," the Wesleys' preaching, teaching, and hymnody are typically concerned with such other evangelical themes as original sin, the use of the law, the necessity of repentance and good works, and, most distinctively of all, Christian perfection.

No doubt one reason for this "existential concentration" is that the Wesleys were, above all, evangelists and pastors whose witness and theology were a "practical divinity" immediately directed toward the decision of Christian faith and the formation of Christian life. But it is arguable, I believe, that the deeper reason for the distinctive style of their witness, very much as for Luther's, is their firm theological grasp of the existential character of Christian faith and witness, which always have to do, not with the being of God in itself, but with the meaning of God for us, and hence also with our own self-understanding and life-praxis. But, whatever the reason for it, a second characteristic of Wesleyan witness equally defining with the first is that its evangelical restatement of catholic Christianity is ever so much more existential and practical than intellectual and metaphysical.

The third characteristic defining the Wesleys' witness is closely related to

the second—namely, its distinctive stress within its overall existential concentration on the power of God's love to overcome the hold of sin over our future as well as the stain of sin on our past. It is just this stress, of course, that comes to expression in Christian perfection's being, as noted earlier, the most distinctive theme of the Wesleyan witness. As surely as one must acknowledge that the Wesleys' understanding of grace and salvation is—and is intended to be—entirely in accord with that of the Protestant reformers, one will as little want to miss its distinctive emphasis on the life-transforming effect of God's love received through faith. As they consistently understand the matter, to trust unreservedly in the gift of God's love, and so to accept God's prevenient acceptance of us, is always to enjoy not only freedom from the *guilt* of sin and forgiveness of the past but also—and as they insist in John's words, "at the same time . . . yea, in that very moment"—freedom from the *power* of sin and openness for the future.

But now, if these are the chief defining characteristics of the Wesleys' witness, it should be clear why I say that the hymn before us is a paradigm expression of it. For although it undoubtedly presupposes the traditional catholic understanding of the divine-human person of Jesus Christ, its stress throughout is not upon the being of Christ in himself but, significantly, upon the meaning of Christ for us, and, specifically, upon his being the one who can and should break the power of sin over our lives—to the extent, indeed, of perfectly restoring us to the original goodness that we have all always already lost by our sin.

As a matter of fact, we know that this distinctive Wesleyan emphasis on Christian perfection was so much in evidence in this hymn as Charles wrote it that it very soon gave rise to controversy and change. In 2:5 of the hymn as printed in the most recent *United Methodist Hymnal* (1989), the words, "Take away our bent to sinning," read originally, "Take away our *power* of sinning," Charles himself having italicized "power" already in the second edition of 1747, presumably because he anticipated criticism. And, sure enough, The Rev. John Fletcher of Madeley was quick to oblige by pertinently asking, "Is not this expression too strong? Would it not be better to soften it by saying, 'Take away the love of sinning'? Can God take away from us our *power of sinning* without taking away our power of free obedience?" In fact, John Wesley himself took exception to so extreme a view of Christian perfection and simply omitted verse 2 from his collection of hymns in 1780—in doing which he has been followed ever since not only by British Methodists, from whose hymnals this verse has always been missing, but also by Anglicans; hence its absence also from *The Hymnal 1982*. Even with such changes, however, the mood of the whole hymn is still dominated by the petition or intercession that we all be made perfect in Christ. So 3:1-4 in *The Hymnal 1982*: "Finish then thy new creation; /pure and spotless let us be; /let us see thy great salvation/perfectly restored in thee"—although here, too, following John's own change in 1780, the word "spotless" has been substituted for Charles's original "sinless" in *The United Methodist Hymnal* (1989) as well as *The Hymnal 1982*.

The only other change from the original in the versions now printed in

both hymnals that may be theologically significant was also made by John Wesley, who in 1:2, “joy of heaven to earth come down,” inserted a comma after “heaven,” thereby turning “to earth come down” into a petition instead of the declaration of faith that Charles himself had intended it to be.

But what does this hymned expression of Wesleyan witness have to say to us today? Without in any way pretending to give an adequate answer, I wish to make four points that seem to me pertinent to grasping its meaning also for us.

1. The hymn, as we have seen, has the form of a prayer of petition or intercession—specifically, the petition or intercession of a Christian believer addressed to Christ and asking that his salvation be made perfect in all for whom it is intended, which is to say, in everyone. This universalistic note is worth underscoring, since it is obviously important for the witness of the prayer in which the hymn consists. The petitions in 1:3 and 7, “fix in *us* thy humble dwelling” and “visit *us* with thy salvation,” are evidently parallel in meaning with the intercession in 1:8, “enter *every* trembling heart.”

In the original 2:1 f, then, this intercession is repeated, “Breathe, O breathe thy loving Spirit/ into *every* troubled breast,” while the original 2:3 voices the same universalism in the all-inclusive petition, “Let us *all* in thee inherit,” which is echoed again in the original 3:2 (2:2 in *The Hymnal 1982*), “let us *all* thy life receive” (italics added). It is perfectly clear, then, that, although the prayer is the prayer *of* a believer, it is not only *for* a believer or believers, but for all human beings—or, at least, for all whose hearts are trembling or whose breasts are troubled, by which is meant, I take it, all who are in any way moved by the existential question of the meaning of their existence.

We are thereby reminded that, if there is any limit on those for whom the salvation of God through Christ is intended, it is solely the limit of an individual’s indifference to this question or lack of existential concern; and here we need to recall the difference between not *appearing* to have such concern and not *really* having it, and ask whether the second is so much as possible for anyone whose life is a human life at all.

My main point, however, is not such universalism as the hymn expresses; it is that the hymn is the prayer of a believer addressed to Christ, asking that all women and men be perfectly restored in him. And this immediately raises two questions: 1) Why any such prayer at all—or, if you will, what is the point of prayer, anyhow? and 2) Why should a believer, of all persons, pray such a prayer—at least as a prayer of petition that also includes her- or himself, as distinct from an intercession for others only?

I cannot go into the larger question of prayer in anything like the detail it deserves. But the essential point I wish to make is—that prayer, in general, is the means by which we make fully our own the word that God has always already addressed to us implicitly in our own existence, and then explicitly and decisively through Jesus Christ. To be human is not simply to live one’s life as any other animal does, but to understand it—and, as we say by a revealing turn of phrase, to *lead* it. This means, among other things, that a typically human life is a *mediated* life—a life mediated by language, in the

broad sense of grasping things in concepts and putting them into meaningful symbols, whether words or deeds. By means of Christian prayer, accordingly, we appropriate our lives as lives whose ultimate meaning is decisively mediated to us through Jesus Christ.

But appropriating our lives as thus mediated neither is nor ever can be accomplished once-for-all. This is true, for one reason, because we can each live our life, as I've said, only by leading it, and this we can do only by determining it again and again anew by our own free and responsible decisions. But it is also true because the perfection that God's love for us through Jesus Christ makes possible is not a static but a dynamic perfection—a "going on to perfection," as the old Wesleyan formula has it. Therefore, we *are* what we are as Christians only insofar as we ever and again *become* what we are; and to this end, prayer not only for others but also for ourselves is precisely a means—in the traditional phrase, a "means of salvation." By just such prayer as this hymn expresses, we appropriate our existence explicitly, at the distinctively human level of language; that is, we appropriate our individual life in the light of the understanding of human existence that is decisively re-presented to us through Jesus Christ as mediated by the Christian witness.

2. The prayer is addressed throughout to Jesus Christ. (Significantly, 2:8 in *The Hymnal 1982*, "glory in thy perfect love," reads in one of the manuscripts, "glory in thy *dying* love" [italics added]). But, as I indicated above, the understanding of Jesus Christ evidently presupposed by the hymn is the thoroughly orthodox understanding according to which he is not only man but also God. "Love *divine*, all loves excelling, *joy of heaven*[.] to earth come down." "Jesus, thou art *all* compassion, / *pure, unbounded* love thou art." "Come, *almighty* to deliver," "glory in thy *perfect* love," etc. (italics added). Of course, were Jesus understood as merely human, prayer addressed to him, or even through him, would be utterly out of place. But the fact that he is so naturally addressed as divine—in this hymn, indeed, as hardly anything other than divine!—is almost certain to raise some theological questions for many people today. What does it mean to call Jesus divine—and what doesn't it mean? Granted that the language of the hymn that speaks of heaven above and earth below, and so on, is obviously symbolic even for the Wesleys, what, exactly, is it symbolic of?

These are large questions, and I can say very little here by way of answering them. But let me suggest that the key to dealing with them is to ask, first of all, what the question is to which the assertion that Jesus is divine (in whatever formulation) is the answer. In general, we understand the meaning of assertions only if we understand the questions to which they are addressed as answers. But just what this question is in the case of the christological assertion is not as obvious as it may seem. On the face of it, it may seem to be simply the question, "Who is Jesus?" Thus, when Peter is represented in Matthew 16:16 as confessing, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God," this is in response to Jesus' prior question, "But who do you say that I am?" Here, clearly, it is Jesus who is the subject of the assertion, that about which the question asks to which the assertion offers an answer. But in John 1:18, we read, "No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom

of the Father, he has made him known.”

According to the view expressed here, Jesus is the only begotten Son of God because he makes known the God whom none of us has ever seen. In this case, however, it is not so much Jesus who is the subject of the assertion as God because it is really God about whom the question is asked to which the assertion that Jesus is God’s only Son is the answer. Further reflection only confirms more fully, I believe, that the question, finally, to which all assertions of Jesus’ divinity are intended to be the answer is the second question, “Who is God?” Indeed, even Jesus’ question, “But who do you say that I am?” has no other intention than to provoke an answer to the latent or implicit question of God, as if he had asked, “Who, then, is God if it is I who am the Christ, the Son of the living God?”

In the last analysis, then, assertions of the divinity of Jesus are assertions about who God is, where “God” refers to the ultimate mystery by which our own existence and all existence are embraced as by their primal source and their final end.

3. But now the striking thing about our hymn is that, although it evidently *presupposes* that Jesus is divine, what it itself *asserts* is precisely the material meaning of this presupposition—namely, that the God who is the ultimate mystery of our existence is precisely “pure, unbounded love.” In other words, the witness expressed in our hymn goes way beyond the merely formal assertions that Jesus is divine and that the divine, therefore, is what is decisively re-presented to us through Jesus to the material assertions that the divine is nothing other or less than the pure, unbounded love mediated to us through Jesus, even as Jesus himself can be nothing other or less than the decisive mediation to us and to all of just this divine love. So the point of our hymn’s witness is existential: it is the assertion that the ultimate mystery whence we all come and whither we all return is neither an empty void nor a consuming enmity but a boundless love—the pure, unbounded love of which Jesus is the decisive re-presentation and in which he ever gives and calls us to place our faith.

4. But what does it mean thus to believe that our lives are grounded and ended in pure, unbounded love? Here, it seems to me, our hymn merely points in the direction in which we must look for an answer without actually providing one. I refer to two lines in the verse unfortunately missing from *The Hymnal 1982*, “Take away our bent to sinning” and “set our hearts at liberty.” The petition thus expressed is clearly for freedom from sin—more exactly, freedom from the *power* of sin as well as its guilt. Accordingly, to experience this kind of freedom is just what it means to believe what Jesus decisively gives and calls us to believe. To believe that the ultimate mystery of one’s existence is the pure, unbounded love made known to us through Jesus is to experience a radical freedom—both *freedom from* all things, whether ourselves or the world, and *freedom for* all things, all our fellow creatures as well as ourselves.

Why so? Well, if the sole primal source and final end of all things is nothing other than the pure, unbounded love that we know through Jesus, and if we really believe this by unreservedly trusting in it as love and being

unqualifiedly loyal to it accordingly, then nothing else can ever finally claim us or in any way become necessary to the ultimate meaning of our lives. For then we know that whatever exists owes both its being and its meaning to God's all-encompassing love for it, and but for the reality of this love would neither be nor mean anything at all.

But really to believe this—to believe it not merely intellectually but existentially—is to be free from ourselves, to be done with the arrogant pride that supposes that it is we ourselves who are in some way the ground and end of our existence—as though all that we are or can ever become were not entirely God's gracious gift. Likewise, it is to be freed from our bondage to the whole world of other things—as though any of them were more than a mere creature, as utterly dependent on God's love as we are for all that it can even possibly be or ever mean. At the same time, just because it is pure, unbounded love alone on which we ourselves and everything else all ultimately depend, unreserved trust in this love and unqualified loyalty to it mean that we are also free for ourselves and all things as wholly embraced by this love.

Thus, if arrogant pride no longer has any place in our lives, it is far otherwise with the confident self-affirmation in which we venture to be all that we can possibly be. Because we believe that what is finally sovereign over all things is the pure, unbounded love of God, we have the freedom and courage to love ourselves as well as all others beyond the limits by which our love is otherwise always bound.

To sum up: what this hymned expression of Wesleyan witness has to say to us today is just what all authentic Christian witness always has to say to us—namely, that the encompassing mystery of our existence is neither a sheer indifference to our lives nor an unreconciled hostility toward them but their boundless and unconditional acceptance—an acceptance, therefore, that frees us both from and for ourselves and all our fellow creatures, and thus sets us free for a life of "faith working though love," and—as I would add to Paul's formula—love seeking justice and peace.

To hear this witness and believe it, however, may or may not mean that we appropriate the particular terms through which it is expressed either in this hymn or in any other expression of the Wesleyan witness. Certain it is that, if we are to speak as effectively to women and men in our time as the Wesleys did in theirs, we will not be able to rely uncritically on the same traditional terms—however adequate we ourselves may happen to find them. For there is not the least question that these terms, and the conceptual-symbolic schemes with which they are all of a piece, have now become alien to the experience and thought of large numbers of modern Western persons. The important point, in any case, is to recognize that all witness, including whatever new terms we ourselves must now devise, exists for something beyond itself for which it is never more than the means—namely, the witness of faith of the Christian community through which we are again and again confronted with God through Jesus Christ only by being confronted thereby precisely with ourselves, with the question of the meaning of our own existence, and thus with what we ourselves are willing to be and to become.