

# Strange Fires: A Biblical Allusion in John Wesley's Hymns

by Stanley D. Walters

## "Living By Christ"

(John Wesley's translation from Paul Gerhardt)

- 1 Jesu, Thy boundless love to me  
No thought can reach, no tongue declare:  
O, knit my thankful heart to Thee,  
And reign without a rival there.  
Thine wholly, Thine alone I am:  
Be Thou alone my constant flame.
- 2 O, grant that nothing in my soul  
May dwell, but Thy pure love alone;  
O, may Thy love possess me whole,  
My joy, my treasure, and my crown.  
Strange fires far from my soul remove,  
My every act, word, thought, be love.
- 3 O Love, how cheering is Thy ray!  
All pain before Thy presence flies;  
Care, anguish, sorrow melt away  
Where'er Thy healing beams arise:  
O Jesu, nothing may I see,  
Nothing hear, feel, or think but Thee!
- 4 Unwearied may I this pursue,  
Dauntless to the high prize aspire;  
Hourly within my breast renew  
This holy flame, this heavenly fire;  
And day and night be all my care  
To guard this sacred treasure there.
- 16 In suffering be Thy love my peace,  
In weakness be Thy love my power;  
And when the storms of life shall cease,  
Jesu, in that important hour,  
In death as life be Thou my guide,  
And save me, who for me hast died!

It is well known that the vast number of Methodist hymns attributed to the Wesleys are primarily from the hand of Charles. While John may have had a hand in writing some,<sup>1</sup> for the most part his work in the evangelical revival lay elsewhere. However, there is no doubt that he is the translator of thirty-three hymns from the German, and that he did this work during 1736 and 1737 while he was in Georgia. He came into contact with German Christians on ship going to America and began at once to learn German in order to converse with them and to use their writings. Wesley's work of translation has been underestimated, as these hymns are among the earliest German literature to be translated into English, antedating by many years the popularizing of translations by later English writers.<sup>2</sup>

Some of these hymns have become standard entries in hymnbooks of all denominations. Several decades ago John Nuelsen estimated that as many as 77 million English-speaking Christians had German hymns available to them in Wesley's translations.<sup>3</sup>

Among the most popular of these translated hymns has been Paul Gerhardt's "Jesu, Thy boundless love to me," found in 26 contemporary hymnbooks at the time Nuelsen made his count.<sup>4</sup> Some time ago, singing it in public worship, I recognized with surprise that some of the words had been altered in a way which eliminated from it a striking metaphor based upon a little-known Old Testament incident. The present paper is an outgrowth of that discovery.

## **The Hymn and the Metaphor**

### *The Hymn as Translated*

The original Gerhardt hymn had sixteen stanzas which Wesley, although he often omitted stanzas in the hymns he translated, rendered into sixteen English stanzas. In the earliest

---

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Henry Bett has provided literary criteria which lead him to distinguish hymns written by John from those of Charles. See *The Hymns of Methodism in Their Literary Relations*, 3rd edition, 1945.

<sup>2</sup> See especially John L. Nuelsen, *John Wesley and the German Hymn* (Calverley, Yorkshire: 1972). First written in German in 1938, it has now been translated into English and is being distributed in the United States through Dr. Frank Baker of Duke University. I am indebted to Donald Dayton for drawing my attention to this title.

<sup>3</sup> Nuelsen, p. 10

<sup>4</sup> Nuelsen, p. 107

publication of the English version it bore the title "Living by Christ," which is an accurate topic under which the contents may be subsumed. The hymn falls into four parts which mark a more or less orderly and logical progression, as follows.

Stanzas 1-4 give general expression to the greatness and benefits of Christ's love, and to an aspiration for singleness and constancy of devotion to Christ. The next three stanzas express pleas for forgiveness, arising out of penitence for sin and a knowledge of Christ's atoning death. Stanzas 8-12 express the need to follow Christ beyond forgiveness, and stress the rich blessings which flow from a living relationship with him. The last four express new and different aspects of Christ's love, including (lastly) his adequacy in suffering and death.

The metaphor of fire with which this paper is concerned is found in the opening section. These four stanzas seem to summarize the major theme of the hymn as a whole, and the metaphor expresses in a fine way the longing for singleness of heart and devotion. For example,

Thine wholly, Thine alone I am:  
Be Thou alone my constant flame. (1:5-6)

and again,

Strange fires far from my soul remove,  
My every act, word, thought, be love. (2:5-6)

and once more,

Hourly within my breast renew  
This holy flame, this heavenly fire;  
And day and night be all my care  
To guard this sacred treasure there. (4:3-6)

The same figure of speech recurs once more in the eleventh stanza,

Be Thou my flame, within me burn  
Jesu, and I in Thee am blest. (11:3-4)

This metaphor has completely disappeared from most contemporary versions of the hymn, a process I shall trace shortly. One of the reasons for its elimination by hymnal editors is probably that it has seemed obscure, particularly the reference to "strange

fires.” It is, however, solidly based on two Biblical passages in the book of Leviticus.

### *The Constant Fire*

Among the priestly writings preserved in the Old Testament are descriptions of the beginning and the earliest practice of Jewish worship procedures. According to the Biblical traditions, the Israelites left Egypt without structured worship arrangements. As they were a people before they had a land, so they were a church before they had a liturgy. They stopped at Sinai for three months during which the tabernacle was constructed and formal worship instituted. According to Leviticus, when sacrifices were finally ready to be offered on the great altar, divine fire supernaturally ignited them (9:24). Thereafter, that fire was to be kept burning continuously, with wood being supplied daily by the priests (6:12-23). Thus, for the Biblical writer, a fire was burning day and night on the altar of sacrifice, kindled by God himself and maintained by regular additions of fuel.

I suggest that Wesley had this fire in mind in the following lines from the fourth stanza,

Hourly within my breast renew  
 This holy flame, this heavenly fire;  
 And day and night be all my care  
 To guard this sacred treasure there. (4:3-6)

In the hymn, of course, the fire is Christ’s love, to which he has referred freely in the preceding stanzas. The links with the Leviticus passage are that Wesley calls it “heavenly fire,” he speaks of the need for daily care to guard it, and prays that it might be renewed hourly within his heart.

In the same sense we can now understand some other lines of the hymn. For example, in the words

Be Thou alone my constant flame (1:6)

the motif of continuous burning is present, and the flame is understood as Christ himself, burning within the believer, whose heart is presumably understood as the altar. So also in stanza 11,

Be Thou my flame; within me burn,  
 Jesu, and I in Thee am blest. (11:3-4)

### *The Strange Fire*

But there is more in the Biblical accounts. In Leviticus 10 there is a story involving two of Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu. As priests, they were to present an offering of incense, using long-handled incense pans filled with coals. The text says that, because they used "strange fire" in this offering, they were themselves consumed by fire which leapt forth from Yahweh's presence. Aaron and his remaining two sons were forbidden even to mourn for their deaths. Although it is a little-remembered story, the event is mentioned five times in the Biblical traditions (Lev. 10:1, 16:1; Num. 3:4, 26:61; cf. 1 Chr. 24:2), showing that it had an uncommon importance for the priestly writers. While the Bible does not explain what "strange fire" means, it is most likely that only coals from the perpetual fire on the great altar were to be used for the incense offerings. Nadab and Abihu erred in using coals from some other, humanly-kindled fire.

Surely this is the source of the imagery in the following lines of stanza two,

Strange fires far from my soul remove  
My every act, word, thought, be love. (2:5-6)

That is, if Christ's love can be symbolized by the perpetual, divinely-kindled fire on the high altar, then any competing loyalty and love can be symbolized by the illicit fire used by Nadab and Abihu.

You will remember how tirelessly Wesley argues in his *Plain Account of Christian Perfection* that by the term "perfection" he means nothing more than loving God with your whole soul, mind, heart and strength, and your neighbour as yourself. Here, in his translation of the Gerhardt hymn, he sounds this theme even before his heart-warming experience of 1738, for the concept of singleness of mind and heart permeates the early stanzas.

O, knit my thankful heart to Thee,  
And reign without a rival there.  
Thine wholly, Thine alone I am;  
Be Thou alone my constant flame. (1:3-6)

O Jesu, nothing may I see,  
Nothing hear, feel, or think but Thee! (3:5-6)

And in stanza two, where the strange fires image occurs, nearly every line speaks of a love for Christ which excludes all other motives:

O, grant that nothing in my soul  
 May dwell, but Thy pure love alone:  
 O, may Thy love possess me whole,  
 My joy, my treasure, and my crown. (2:1-4)

The perpetual divine fire and the illicit fire become complementary symbols in Wesley's use, and constitute a beautiful and striking imagery. The wholeness of love as an inner motive force he symbolizes with the fire kindled by God and burning ceaselessly within. This same wholeness is symbolized negatively by the "strange fires" of lesser loves and loyalties, strange fires which the earnest Christian prays to be removed until "every act, word, thought, be love."

Wesley explicitly recognized the pivotal character of the emphasis made in this hymn.<sup>5</sup> Early in the "Plain Account" he quotes the second stanza in full, and says that it expresses the cry of his heart in 1738 as he was returning to England from Georgia. He goes on to say,

I never heard that any one objected to this. And indeed, who can object? Is not this the language, not only of every believer, but of everyone that is truly awakened? But what have I wrote, to this day, which is either stronger or plainer?<sup>6</sup>

### The Source of the Metaphor

#### *The German Original*

Up to this point, although I have spoken of the hymn "Jesu, Thy boundless love" as a translation from the German, I have largely treated the wording as John Wesley's rather than Paul

<sup>5</sup> It is one of two of his German translations in which is found "the strongest and clearest expression of his teaching of salvation," both before and after his 1738 conversion. The other is "Thou hidden love of God, whose height" (see Nuelsen, p. 38).

<sup>6</sup> For the "Plain Account," see Wesley's *Works* (Jackson edition), XI, p. 354. These paragraphs have been omitted in at least one widely-circulated abridgement of the "Plain Account." Incidentally, this same reference shows that Wesley had made the translation while he was in Georgia, since he did not learn German until he was on shipboard en route to the colonies. So also does his quotation of this stanza in a letter of 14 May 1765, although here he uses the words "strange flames" (*Letters*, Telford edition, IV, p. 299).

Gerhardt's. There remains, therefore, the question of how far the "strange fires" metaphor is Gerhardt's and how far it is Wesley's, a question which can be answered only by recourse to the German original.<sup>7</sup>

The emphasis of the original hymn is on Christ's love and on the need for singleness and wholeness of devotion. Wesley's translation expresses these themes superbly. But the metaphor of the continually burning fire and of the strange fires is certainly not present in the German. Only stanza 11 refers to Christ as fire, with the words, "Be my flame and burn in me." Stanza four, where Wesley introduces the strange fires reference, speaks of watching and preserving a treasure but makes no reference to fire. Rather, using the vocabulary of erotic love, Gerhardt writes, "O that this noble ardour might inflame me endlessly!"

Thus, while there are passing references in the Gerhardt hymn to burning and to fire, the developed metaphor of Wesley's translation cannot be found in the German original. With characteristic freedom, Wesley has rendered the basic theme but with vocabulary and imagery of his own which virtually created a fresh poem.<sup>8</sup>

#### *Another German Translation*

But there is another of Wesley's translated hymns in which the strange fires metaphor is used. This is "Jesu, to Thee my heart I bow," Wesley's second translation, made many months before the Gerhardt hymn. Not now used in any hymnal,<sup>9</sup> it is translated from Zinzendorf, and the pertinent stanza reads,

Jesu, to Thee my heart I bow;  
 Strange flames far from my soul remove!  
 Fairest among ten thousand Thou,  
 Be Thou my Lord, my Life, my Love.

<sup>7</sup> The original German text of all the Wesley translations is available in Nuelsen, who has high praise for the translations, citing numerous authorities besides himself to this end. He notes that some of the German hymns have appeared in several different translations over the years, but that in almost all cases, the one which has continued to be most widely sung has been John Wesley's. The text of "Jesu, Thy boundless love to me" is on pp. 131-35.

<sup>8</sup> See Nuelsen, pp. 43-46, for many examples. For instance, of one hymn Nuelsen says, "One would hardly recognize the original in Wesley's fifth and sixth verses" (46). Of another, "The translation is so free that there is some doubt as to the original German text" (52). Still another translation is so free that it has been traced back to two different Zinzendorf hymns (49).

<sup>9</sup> Nuelsen, p. 79

Wesley titled his translation "Subjection to Christ," which he took to be the main theme of Zinzendorf's hymn. Comparison with the German, however, shows that the original employs the vocabulary of marriage and erotic love in a way which Wesley avoids. For example, a less free rendering of the same stanza might read,

Pure bridegroom of my soul,  
 Extinguish the flame of strange loves;  
 Let me choose your love,  
 O chosen bridegroom.

The original hymn had thirty stanzas, which Wesley cut to six. Among those omitted were several using similarly erotic imagery. For example, again rendering rather closely,

Why, before a brazen flame,  
 Do you strive after strange lovers?  
 Soul, follow rather the Lamb,  
 Whose dying destroyed death. (Stanza 9)

and again,

Love, your ardour so inflames  
 My long-cold breast  
 That I find you quite delectable,  
 O you of all divine passion. (Stanza 10)

Perhaps the wording "strange fires far from my heart remove" was suggested to Wesley by Zinzendorf's expression "flame of strange loves." If so, we should look for its antecedents in Moravian devotional and homiletic usage. But Wesley has used the metaphor in a quite different way, with virtually no allusion to sensual love; and the figure may well have been already in his mind at the time he made this early translation.

### *The Metaphor as Used by Charles*

There is another Wesley hymn which embodies a fire metaphor based on Leviticus. It affords an interesting comparison with the Gerhardt translation, and the contrasts will suggest a further theory about the origin of the metaphor.

The hymn is "O Thou who camest from above," and was published by Charles Wesley in 1762 in his *Short Hymns on Select*

*Passages of Scripture.* It is specifically based on Biblical words to which we have already referred, "Fire shall be kept burning upon the altar continually; it shall not go out" (Lev. 6:13). The hymn is of four stanzas and may be found intact in today's Methodist hymnal. Charles Wesley says in his preface to *Short Hymns* that he wrote many of them during a period of illness, and that many of the thoughts had been suggested by the Old Testament commentaries of Matthew Henry and John Gill. Henry, in particular, has a couple of sentences which might have led to Charles' use,<sup>10</sup> but, in view of the twenty-five-year prominence which the Gerhardt hymn had enjoyed when Charles wrote "O Thou," it seems likely that for this hymn he made use of ideas in his brother John's translation.

*Similarities to John's Use.* The similarities between the two hymns are clear. The emphasis on perpetual fire is found in Charles' reference to an "inextinguishable blaze" (2:2). The need to guard the sacred fire to make sure it does not go out ("Jesu, Thy boundless" 4:5-6) is expressed by Charles in the words "Still let me guard the holy fire" (3:3), where the verbal similarity is striking. The idea of singleness of purpose, expressed by John in "Nothing hear, feel, or think but thee" (3:6) is put by Charles as "Work, and speak, and think for thee" (3:2).

*Differences.* But there are also differences between the use made of the fire-and-altar metaphor in each of these hymns. One of them is that John's use of it reflects a more strongly mystical understanding of the believer's relationship to Christ. For example, in Charles' hymn, the fire, burning on the altar of the believer's heart, is Jesus' gift to him (3:3) and has been kindled there by Christ (1:3). The flame is Christ's love (1:3). On the other hand, in John's hymn, Christ does not ignite the flame, he *is* the fire.

Be Thou alone my constant flame. (1:6)<sup>11</sup>

Be Thou my flame, within me burn. (11:3)

<sup>10</sup> Speaking of the law requiring constant fire on the altar, Henry says, "By this law we are taught to keep up in our minds a constant disposition to all acts of piety and devotion, an habitual affection to divine things, so as to be always ready to every good word and work. . . . Though we be not always sacrificing, yet we must keep the fire of holy love always burning; and thus we must pray always" (his commentary to Leviticus 6:13).

Gill suggests eight separate things of which the perpetual fire might be "an emblem," from Christ's love to his people to the wrath of God on wicked men to all eternity. None of them, however, seems to fit Charles' particular use of the metaphor.

<sup>11</sup> John is not entirely consistent in his metaphor, however, as in stanza four the words "holy flame, heavenly fire," seem to refer to Christ's love rather than to Christ himself.

This sense of mystical identity with Christ is expressed elsewhere in the Gerhardt hymn,

O knit my thankful heart to Thee. (1:3)

Nor may we ever parted be  
Till I become one spirit with Thee. (8:5-6)

Thee may I seek till I attain:  
And never may we part again. (13:5-6)

By contrast, Charles' hymn is objective, distinguishing clearly Christ from his gift, the burning flame of love. The mystical emphasis would be characteristic of the Moravians from whom Wesley learned the Gerhardt hymn, and also characteristic of an important part of Wesley's spiritual and intellectual pilgrimage. Although Wesley sometimes had hard things to say about "the Mystics,"<sup>12</sup> his use of the German hymns is part of the "overwhelming proof" for his indebtedness, "whether avowed or unconscious, to the mystical tradition of the past."<sup>13</sup>

*John's Use More Literary.* For our purposes a more important difference between these two hymns is that John's use of the metaphor is more subtle and allusive as well as more extended. For example, Charles uses the explicit words,

Kindle a flame of sacred love  
On the mean altar of my heart. (1:3-4)

By use of the vocabulary "kindle" and "altar of my heart," Charles spells out the metaphor, while John simply introduces it allusively by saying,

Be thou alone my constant flame. (1:6)

So also he introduces the "strange fires" reference in 2:5 without antecedent reference to help the reader understand it. He simply

<sup>12</sup> ". . . All the other enemies of Christianity are triflers; the Mystics are the most dangerous of its enemies. They stab it in the vitals" (*Journal* I, 420, 24 Jan. 1738). But such statements should not be construed as blanket condemnations of the Christian mystical tradition. Wesley had earlier written that by the mystics he meant "all, and only those, who slight any of the means of grace" (L. Tyerman, *The Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley, M.A.*, I (London, 1871), p. 133.

<sup>13</sup> R. Newton Flew, *The Idea of Christian Perfection* (London: 1934), p. 315.

employs the metaphor in a subtle and suggestive way, leaving the reader to supply the broader additional information which enhances the power of the image.

By introducing the "strange fires" concept John also elaborates the fire metaphor. Charles makes no reference to rival motives or loyalties in the believer; by alluding to the Nadab and Abihu story John plays on and extends the metaphor. Fire may symbolize either Christ or the alternate devotions competing for first place in the believer's life.

Both of these qualities—allusiveness and elaboration—remind one very much of seventeenth-century English poetry, particularly the device known as the metaphysical conceit, a literary expression in which a metaphor is given elaborate and subtle extension. In Christian writers such as Donne and Herbert it was often employed in poems on the religious life.

*Influence of Herbert?* The fire metaphor is reminiscent of the metaphysical conceit, and I suggest that John's employment of it here stylistically is probably due to his love for the poetry of George Herbert. One cannot help but be reminded of Herbert's poem "The Altar," opening with the lines,

A broken altar, Lord, thy servant rears,  
Made of a heart, and cemented with tears.

Herbert's focus is primarily on the altar, and the poem contains recondite allusions to Old Testament laws for altars, such as the one which states that they must be built of stones which have not been hewn out by tools. Only in the last two lines does Herbert introduce the use to which an altar is to be put,

O let thy blessed sacrifice be mine,  
And sanctify this altar to be thine.

It is easy to think that John Wesley's own imagination had been caught by Herbert's altar poem, and that the suggestive and allusive use of the fire metaphor in his translations of German hymns arises out of his own meditation on the believer's heart as an altar on which sacrifices should be offered up to God.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> I should like to draw attention to Louis L. Martz' book, *The Poetry of Meditation* (New Haven: 1954, 2nd edition 1962). Martz argues that the distinctive marks of seventeenth century religious poetry are not the creation of John Donne, but arise out of techniques of spiritual meditation which were well-known in the sixteenth and seventeenth

There is good evidence for Wesley's appreciation of George Herbert. He was the favorite poet of Wesley's mother, Susanna, and the only poet she ever quoted.<sup>15</sup> Susanna held family devotions in her home twice daily, including the singing of two hymns at each. Among the collections of hymns used was Herbert's book of poems, "The Temple," which contains his altar poem.<sup>16</sup> The Wesleys were, therefore, familiar with Herbert from childhood, and Bett thinks "they hardly knew when they were echoing his words."<sup>17</sup> The Wesleys took Herbert's poems with them to Georgia, and John mentions it often in his diary during the voyage, as it served as a book of devotion.<sup>18</sup> In the Charlestown Hymn Book, published by Wesley in America in 1737, six of the seventy-eight hymns are by Herbert,<sup>19</sup> and Bett has identified specific borrowings from Herbert in three of the German hymns translated by Wesley while he was in Georgia.<sup>20</sup> Wesley quoted him "familiarly" in letters throughout his life, he read "The Temple" aloud to his followers, and adapted as hymns for popular use a total of forty-seven of Herbert's poems.<sup>21</sup> Volume 26 of Wesley's *Christian Library*, published in 1753, contained a biography of Herbert as part of a series, "Lives of Sundry Eminent Persons." Wesley published the only significant collection of Herbert's poems which appeared between 1709 and 1799. Indeed, a recent interpreter of Herbert says that most eighteenth-century readers of Herbert learned of him through John Wesley.<sup>22</sup>

John's use of the fire-and-altar figure is worthy of Herbert and is distinctly more literary than Charles'. It engages the imagination but does not tell the reader everything, leaving scope for his own knowledge and sensitivity to operate. At the same time, this allusiveness makes the hymn less suitable for singing by a general

---

centuries. He prefers the term "poetry of meditation" to the more traditional term "meta-physical poetry." It is easy to find Wesley at home in the meditative tradition as it is described by Martz.

<sup>15</sup> "Le seul poète qu'elle cite est G. Herbert, pieux auteur de poèmes sacrés intitulés le Temple." Augustin Leger, *La Jeunesse de Wesley* (Paris, 1910), p. 20.

<sup>16</sup> Nuelsen, p. 22

<sup>17</sup> Henry Bett, *op. cit.* p. 136

<sup>18</sup> Nuelsen, pp. 22, 30

<sup>19</sup> F. E. Hutchinson, "John Wesley and George Herbert," *London Quarterly and Holborn Review*, Vol. 161 (1936), 445.

<sup>20</sup> Bett, pp. 136-39

<sup>21</sup> F. E. Hutchinson, *op. cit.*, p. 439

<sup>22</sup> Joseph H. Summers, *George Herbert, His Religion and Art* (London, 1954) p. 19.

public who may not reflect on the image enough to grasp it fully. It has therefore probably contributed to the gradual elimination of the metaphor, on the grounds that the subtlety makes the hymn less meaningful to the superficial user.

### Alterations in the Wording

I have already noted that in most hymnals, including all American Methodist hymnals since the 1930's, this metaphor of burning fire has been gradually eliminated by editorial alterations. Minor alterations were made by Wesley in 1780, at which time he reduced the hymn to nine stanzas (1-6, 8, 15-16). These nine were retained in American Methodist hymnals as two hymns down to the middle of the last century. In 1849 the hymn was reduced to four stanzas (1, 2, 4, 16) but Wesley's wording was still retained.

Then in 1905 the Methodist hymnal dropped stanza two with its reference to "strange fires," replacing it with stanza three.<sup>23</sup> In the hymnal of 1935 stanza four was dropped, which, with its references to hourly renewal of the fire and to diligence in guarding it, is also important for the perpetual fire metaphor. At the same time, the last two lines of stanza one were modified, eliminating the reference to constant flame, to read,

Thine wholly, Thine alone, I'd live,  
My self to Thee entirely give.

Thus, you can sing Wesley's translation still, but the fine figure which tied the first four stanzas together in their emphasis on Christ's love as a single-minded and consuming motive, is now completely missing.

There would be little point in tracing the hymn through all of Christendom's hymnals, but I must return to the alteration which first touched off my interest in it. Where Methodism dropped stanza four, with the reference which has provided the title of this paper, certain Presbyterian hymnals (notably in Scotland and the United States) changed lines 5-6 to read,

All coldness from my heart remove;  
May every act, word, thought, be love.

<sup>23</sup> *The Companion to the Hymnal*, published by The United Methodist Church, states that stanza two, the "strange fires" stanza, was dropped in 1849 (p. 256). I think this is incorrect, as it still appears in turn-of-the-century printings of the 1878 hymnal.

The stanza has been retained but the fire-and-altar metaphor eliminated.

In fact, in order to sing the first four stanzas of this particular Gerhardt-Wesley hymn, as Wesley translated them, you must turn to a Lutheran hymnal. *The Service Book and Hymnal*, first published by Augsburg Press in 1958, has the hymn with only the most minor changes from Wesley's own version. The basic image has been preserved.

One notes the differing fates of "Living By Christ." It has survived intact (first four stanzas) in the Lutheran tradition, doubtless because American Lutheranism derives directly from the German pietist circles of which Paul Gerhardt was a part. The modest alterations in selected Presbyterian hymnals may be due to the nervousness about mysticism characteristic of the reformed tradition.

It remains to urge that hymnals in the Methodist tradition, where "Living By Christ" has suffered the most, restore it to something like its original form. Since stanzas one to four summarize the theme of the full sixteen-stanza hymn and since they are bound together by the metaphor of fire, they form a logical unit. Stanza sixteen has become deservedly familiar through long use and would round out the hymn nicely. Such a restoration would bring back into Methodist hymnody an emphasis together with its symbol which is truly Wesleyan and which has suffered erosion over the decades.

Finally, I want to close by noting that the fire-and-altar metaphor in John Wesley's translation anticipates in a fine way similar images in later Christian hymnody and poetry. One thinks especially of George Croly's fine hymn on the Holy Spirit, which includes the words,

Teach me to love thee as thine angels love,  
One holy passion filling all my frame;  
The baptism of the heaven-descended Dove,  
My heart an altar, and thy love the flame.

But perhaps more striking—if less well-known—are the lines of T.S. Eliot in which two fires are placed side by side. One is the fire of misdirected desire, the other the fire of the Holy Spirit and of Christ which alone can purge away sin, here identified in imagery with the fiery tribulation of a World War II dive bomber.

The dove descending breaks the air  
With flames of incandescent terror  
Of which the tongues declare  
The one discharge from sin and error.  
The only hope, or else despair  
Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre—  
To be redeemed from fire by fire.

...  
We only live, only suspire  
Consumed by either fire or fire.<sup>24</sup>

I think that these words would have been appreciated and gratefully understood by the poet who wrote,

Strange fires far from my heart remove;  
My every act, word, thought, be love.

---

<sup>24</sup> "Little Gidding," IV.