

## ‘REALLY THEY ARE NOT ABLE’ - ‘MENDING’ CHARLES WESLEY’S HYMNS

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These words come from near the end of John Wesley’s Preface to *A Collection of Hymns for the use of the People called Methodists* (henceforward HPM) published in 1780; the last Methodist hymn book published in the lifetimes of John and Charles Wesley (John 1703-91; Charles 1707-88). The paragraph in which they occur deserves quoting as a whole, as an example of courteous Georgian prose.

And here I beg leave to mention a thought which has been long upon my mind, and which I should long ago have inserted in the public papers, had I not been unwilling to stir up a nest of hornets. Many gentlemen have done my brother and me (though without naming us) the honour to reprint many of our hymns. Now they are perfectly welcome so to do, provided they print them just as they are. But I desire they would not attempt to mend them – for really they are not able.

The Preface in which this paragraph occurs was reprinted in successive Methodist collections until the 1933 *Methodist Hymn-Book* (henceforward MHB). It should however be noted, first, that although, as John Wesley stated in that Preface, ‘but a small part of these hymns are of my composing’, the great majority being by his younger brother Charles, John Wesley played such a significant part in the selection and editing of the collection as to justify its inclusion as Volume 7 in *The Oxford Edition of the Works of John Wesley*<sup>1</sup>.

We remember also that John Wesley, irrespective of any copyright that other authors might have claimed under the 1709 Statute of Anne, ‘mended’ or revised the work of a wide range of authors, notably in his collection entitled *A Christian Library: consisting of extracts from and abridgements of the choicest pieces of practical divinity*, 1749-55.

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1 O[liver] A. B[eckerlegge], ‘John Wesley as Hymn-book Editor’, in *Works*, 55-61

Unfortunately we do not know (at least, I do not know) who were the ‘gentlemen’ who attempted to ‘mend’ the Wesleys’ hymns, or what improvements they offered. So, before we look in any detail at changes that have been made to them in more recent times, let us take a short step backward, to look briefly at linguistic change in the setting of translation.

It is said that mother tongue speakers of German appreciate Shakespeare more than native English speakers. The reason is that while English speakers continue to struggle with Shakespeare’s English, German speakers can make a fresh translation for each generation – as we do, of course, more often than that, with translations of the Bible.

The problem with the Wesleys’ hymns is threefold. First, like Shakespeare, they were written in what is more or less our own language, but no longer that of 250 years or more ago. Second, they were intended to conform to certain patterns of versification, though Wesley used an unprecedented variety of metres, and (even when 18th century pronunciation is taken into account) stretched rhymes almost to breaking point. And third, like the Bible, the Wesleys’ hymns belong to a community – in the case of the Wesleys, primarily though not exclusively ‘the people called Methodists’. Taken together, these factors tend to make the revision of Wesley’s (primarily Charles’s) hymns both desirable and controversial.

The main purpose of this paper is to identify and characterise some of the changes in Charles Wesley’s hymns made in the current hymnals of the Church of Scotland (Church Hymnary 4th edition 2005, henceforth CH4) and the (British) Methodist Church (*Singing the Faith*, 2011, henceforth StF). Comparison between the two traditions may be made easier by the approximate parallelism between their publication and other events:

**Church of Scotland etc.**

- 1927 *Revised Church Hymnary* (CH2)
- 1929 Union of CofS with UFC
  
- 1973 *Church Hymnary*, 3rd edn. (CH3)
  
- 2005 *Church Hymnary*, 4th edn. (CH4)

**Methodist Church**

- 1932 Methodist union
- 1933 *Methodist Hymn-Book*
  
- 1984 *Hymns & Psalms*
  
- 2011 *Singing the Faith*

Charles Wesley's hymns are chosen for this exercise mainly because they form a significant if declining corpus in the current hymn books of the two churches. Compared with earlier collections,<sup>2</sup> Charles Wesley has more hymns than any other author included in all the hymn books consulted, with the notable exception of John Bell and Graham Maule (the John and Charles Wesley of our generation?) in CH4. So far as I know, their hymns have not yet been subjected to 'mending' by other authors.

In the following comparison, we shall note changes made to those Wesley hymns in the 2nd to 4th editions of the *Church Hymnary* and in the three corresponding Methodist hymn books, comparing them with the earliest versions available to me, notably:

- *Hymns for the People called Methodists* (HPM), Vol. 7 of The Oxford Edition of the Works of John Wesley (1983, originally published in 1780).
- For most hymns not included in HPM, comparison will be based on the 1876 edition of *Wesley's Hymns, With a New Supplement*<sup>3</sup> henceforward 'Sup.'
- For *Hymns on the Lord's Supper* (HLS), the base of comparison is the 1745 first edition, as reprinted in J. Ernest Rattenbury, *The Eucharistic Hymns of John and Charles Wesley* (1948, 195-249)<sup>4</sup>.

For all these sources, Richard Watson and others' *Companion to Hymns and Psalms* (henceforward CHP, 1988) is an invaluable resource. See also John M. Barkley (ed.), *Handbook to the Church Hymnary Third Edition*, 1979.

In order to bring some kind of order into the large number of variations between the different sources, we shall first exclude those which relate to entire categories rather than to individual hymns.

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2 24 out of 707 (3.4%) in CH2; 19 out of 695 (2.7%) in CH3; 15 out of 805 (1.9%) in CH4. 211 out of 805 (22.0%) in MHB; 156 out of 823 (19.0%) in H&P; 79 out of 790 (10%) in StF

3 The body of the 1876 hymn book includes some hymns not included in *Works*, so that the numbers often do not correspond. The Preface to this edition states: 'N.B. The Hymns distinguished by the prefix of an asterisk were not in the editions published during the life of Mr. Wesley.'

4 I am indebted to Dr John McNeill for the loan of this book.

The respective editors of CH4 and StF chose not to vary the indentation of hymn lines adopted in previous editions, nor to capitalise the first letter of each line. They also chose not to capitalise pronouns referring to persons of the Trinity, as CH2 and MHB (but not HPM, Sup, CH3 or H&P) had done.

We shall mention some omissions, usually of whole verses, though these cannot strictly be considered as emendations.

In this process it is worth bearing in mind the editorial policies of the two current hymn books. The Preface to CH4 states (p. ix), under the heading 'Language Issues':

The committee decided against adopting a blanket policy, preferring to decide on each text according to its merits.

Broadly speaking where a text could be sensitively amended [almost John Wesley's term] by the contemporizing of archaic language or by having an exclusive term replaced by an inclusive one, that was done. But where that was not possible, either the whole text was reworked or it was left intact.

The Preface to *Singing the Faith* (p. viii) summarises the criteria agreed 'after a lengthy debate' by the Methodist Conference of 2009. In addition, a Publisher's note<sup>5</sup> (p. xii) states:

Where a copyright text has been altered with permission this is denoted by the abbreviation 'alt.'

The same abbreviation was used in *Hymns & Psalms*, but with a different effect. For example, the last two lines of Charles Wesley's hymn 'A charge to keep I have' (HPM 309, H&P 786, StF 658), based on a passage from Matthew Henry's *Commentary*, originally ran:

Assured, if I my trust betray,  
I shall for ever die.

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5 The publishers are Hymns Ancient & Modern Ltd 'on behalf of the Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes'.

This was ‘radically altered’<sup>6</sup> in H&P to:

So shall I not my trust betray  
Nor love within me die.

The change was presumably made, at least in part, to avoid an apparent contradiction with ‘a never-dying soul to save’ in verse 1. StF retained the alteration, but without the abbreviation ‘alt.’, no doubt because the original hymn was out of copyright, and copyright in the alteration would not be contested.

So, giving priority to the Presbyterian tradition, let us see how far CH4, in comparison with StF, ‘mended’ the 15 Wesley hymns that it retained from previous editions (19 in CH3, 24 in CH2).

The modifications made in this process may be roughly categorised as follows:

1. Changes in **punctuation**, such as the deletion of many of Wesley’s exclamation marks and dashes, and some inverted commas.

Sometimes, however, a dash at the end of a line throws stress onto what follows, or introduces a new development. For example, in ‘O for a thousand tongues to sing’ (HPM 1, which retained its place as no. 1 until MHB), verse 4 has:

His blood can make the foulest clean —  
His blood availed for me.

Such pauses are difficult to maintain when the verse is sung, so that their deletion is understandable.

More difficult to defend are places where an apparently minor change alters the sense of a whole verse. A prime example in the Methodist tradition (happily not followed in any edition of CH) is found in the great Easter hymn ‘Christ the Lord is risen today’ (CH4 411 = Sup 716, StF 298). The addition of ‘Alleluia’s in StF and its Methodist predecessors (not in CH2-4), to accommodate the tune from Mendelssohn’s *Festgesang*, changes the

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6 See the discussion in CHP 445, cf. *Works* 465n. CH2, no. 518, had, without any note: ‘And let me ne’er my trust betray, / But press to realms on high.’ The hymn is not included in CH3 or CH4.

meaning. The inverted commas round the first line are removed, making ‘all on earth and angels’ (StF ‘All creation’) ‘join to say’, not ‘Christ the Lord is risen today’, but an unmotivated ‘Alleluia’.

Similarly, in ‘Ye servants of God, your Master proclaim’ (CH4, 130 Sup 859, StF 340), the words “‘Salvation to God who sits on the throne!’” are in inverted commas because they are the words which, in the following line, ‘all’ are exhorted to ‘cry aloud’. The connection is weakened by the omission of the inverted commas in Methodist hymn books and in earlier editions of CH; they are happily restored in CH4 - which also benefits from the current practice of not capitalising the first word of the following line. <sup>7</sup>

2. A large number of amendments are made to take account of changes in English **usage** since the time of the Wesleys.

The ‘mending’ in fact began almost immediately, for example reflecting John Wesley’s disapproval of what he considered excessive sentimentalism in some of his brother’s hymns.<sup>8</sup> For example, ‘O for a thousand tongues to sing’ continues in HPM 1, not ‘My great’, but ‘My dear Redeemer’s praise.’

More generally, current hymn books where possible replace ‘thou’ forms with ‘you’ forms, seeking consistency within a given hymn, but not throughout the collection.

Current collections (and some earlier ones) took advantage of some (but not all) changes in English grammar which would not affect the meaning of hymns, and might even enhance it. In the 2nd verse of ‘Jesu[s], lover of my soul’, where Sup 143 and MHB had ‘Till the storm of life be past’, CH2-4, H&P, and StF all have ‘Till the storm of life is past’, recognising the decline of the English subjunctive.

More difficult to bring up to date, in the 3rd verse of the same hymn, are

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- 7 ‘Hark the glad sound! The Saviour comes’ CH4.277; Stf 171, cf. CHP 81, attributed to Philip Doddridge in StF and to *Scottish Pqrphrases*, 1781, is not by Wesley but illustrates the same point. V.2 in CH4 (also CH3) places a comma after ‘He comes’, signalling a development of v. 1. The effect is weakened by the omission of the comma in StF.
  - 8 See J.E. Rattenbury, *The Evangelical Doctrines of Charles Wesley’s Hymns*, (1941), 3rd edition 1954, 61-84, ‘John Wesley’s use of his brother’s hymns’; O.A. Beckerlegge, ‘John Wesley as Hymn-Book Editor’, in *Works* 7, 55-69.

the lines: 'Raise the fallen cheer the faint, / heal the sick, and lead the blind', where the definite article followed by a singular adjective now misleadingly suggests a group of people)<sup>9</sup>. But 'Jesu, lover of my soul', including an omitted third verse, is a passionate 'I' hymn from beginning to end.

3. Similar flexibility is practised in the still controversial area of **inclusive language**. In 'Hark! The herald angels sing' (CH4 301 = Sup 683, StF 202), current editors admitted 'Pleased as man with man to dwell', lightly modifying Sup 683's 'man with men', while CH 2-4 have 'Pleased as Man with man to dwell.' These versions of the following line embody a real improvement which may reflect a change in the pronunciation of 'Immanuel': Sup had 'Pleased as man with men to appear / Jesus our Immanuel here.'

At the opening of 'O for a thousand tongues to sing', CH4, but not StF, inserts a useful comma, forming a link with the following line. But the 7th verse in HPM 1, which ends 'His soul was once an offering made / For every soul of man', becomes in StF 'His soul was once an offering made / that all may heaven gain.'

4. The ill-defined border between language use and **substance** is crossed in the following line, which called for modification on the grounds of what now appears to be not sexism but racism: 'Cast all your sins into the deep, / And wash the Ethiop white.' Even the allusion to Jer 13.23<sup>10</sup> could not save it from deletion, and the reference to 'your Chief' in the following line does not help.

This may be the time to take a deep breath and note several Wesley hymns which have survived almost untouched into current collections, notably

'And can it be, that I should gain / an interest in the Saviour's blood' (CH4 396 = HPM 193, StF 345). In 'Come, thou long-expected Jesus' (CH4 472 = Sup 688, StF 169) the only significant change is in 2/2, where HPM had 'Let us all thy grace receive', and all other hymn books consulted have 'thy life.' Meet and right it is to sing' (StF 32 = HPM 212) is unchanged in StF, and not

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9 Compare Ps 1.1: literally 'Blessed is the one ...' (NIV), but 'Happy are those' (GNB).

10 On which see the cautious footnote in NIV.

included in CH4.

To these conservative examples may be added 'O thou who camest from above (CH4 578 = Sup 963, StF 564), in which however the punctuation at the end of verse 3, and thus the structure of verses 3 and 4, have been much discussed. The lines run, in CH4: 'Still let me guard the holy fire, / and still stir up thy gift in me: ^ // Ready for all thy perfect will, / my acts of faith and love repeat ... At ^, StF (like H&P) has a dash, HPM a semicolon, and MHB a full stop. CHP (p. 425) comments: 'The grammatical construction of verses 3 and 4 ... is best taken as one complete whole governed by "Jesus". It is a prayer for confirmation ("Jesus, confirm") and or continuance in good works ("Jesus ... repeat my acts of faith and love .").'

In the final refrain to 'Rejoice! The Lord is King' (CH4 449 = Sup 729, StF 335), CH4 modifies Wesley's enhanced eschatology: 'We soon shall hear the archangel's voice' becomes 'We *then* shall hear.'

We end with a hymn that Methodists of an older generation would love to preserve intact, but time moves on (and singers' biblical knowledge perhaps moves backwards).

In 'Lo, he comes with clouds descending' (CH4 477 = Sup 66, StF 177, H&P 241, see CHP 164f.), Sup 4/5 reads 'Jah, Jehovah'. ('Yah is thought to have been originally a cultic exclamation which was used in worship' (A.A.Anderson, *Psalms*, 1.485, on Ps 68.4). In MHB 264 this became 'Alleluia!', in H&P and StF 'Come, Lord Jesus', in CH4, cf. CH2-3, 'oh, come quickly').

CH2 attributes this hymn jointly to John Cennick (1718-55), Charles Wesley, and Martin Madan (1726-90); CH4 notes '\*Charles Wesley ... (altered), based on a hymn by John Cennick'; MHB, H&P, and StF assign it to Charles Wesley. CHP traces in more detail the 'complicated ... history of this hymn', and others with which it has been conflated, concluding: 'The present version, with the proper exception of verse 4 line 5, is faithful to Charles Wesley's magnificent original, apart from ... "The dear tokens of his passion"', which becomes in CH4 'Those deep wounds of cross and passion'<sup>11</sup>

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11 Major theological questions rarely led to emendations of Wesley's hymns. An exception is the controversy over a 'second blessing', modifications of which are noted by Colin Short.

## Conclusion

Given the three factors we mentioned at the beginning of this paper, there are bound to be tensions between contemporary language, changes in world view, and changing beliefs. In some cases deletion is the best solution. Much will depend on the composition of the intended group of users; editors and publishers of hymnals may find this difficult to assess or predict. Congregations will make their own choices, providing pointers to the next edition. In any case, the wise advice of the late Professor W.D. McHardy to panels preparing the revision of the New English Bible may be commended to editors of hymnals: in case of doubt, 'let the text have a vote'.

In this brief survey, we have taken no account of electronically available collections from all traditions, nor of the increasing popularity of non-denominational collections such as *(Complete) Mission Praise* and *Songs of Fellowship* 1-5. (*Mission Praise* has no index of authors). The purpose of this paper is not to defend a Wesleyan fortress, but to commend to others the + heritage which British Methodists hold in trust for the *oikoumené*.

## Abbreviations

- CHP R. Watson, K. Trickett and others, *Companion to Hymns & Psalms*, 1988; Supplementary Notes 1991
- CH1 *The Church Hymnary*, 1898
- CH2 *The Church Hymnary*, Revised Edition, 1927
- CH3 *The Church Hymnary*, Third Edition, 1973
- CH4 *The Church Hymnary*, Fourth Edition, 2005
- H&P *Hymns & Psalms*, 1983
- HCH3 J.M. Barkley, *Handbook to the Church Hymnary Third Edition*, 1979
- HPM John Wesley: *A Collection of Hymns for the use of the People called Methodists*, 1779.
- MHB *Methodist Hymn-Book*, 1933
- StF *Singing the Faith*, 2011
- Works *The Oxford Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, 1983, vol. 7, incorporating HPM.
- Sup 1876 edition of HPM with Supplement