

Preface

One of the difficulties in studying the theology of Wesleyan hymns and sacred poems is that since it is couched in a literary and liturgical art form, it does not fit into the usual intellectual paths defined over the last two centuries for the study of theology, which tends to be a prose endeavor. Charles Wesley composed a number of thematic collections of hymns, such as those based on the Christian year, e.g., *Hymns for the Nativity of our Lord*, *Hymns for our Lord's Resurrection*, *Hymns for Ascension-Day*, *Hymns for Whitsunday*, but his lyrics on a plethora of theological themes, such as sanctification, perfection, holiness, etc., are scattered throughout his over 9,000 hymns and poems from a writing and publishing career that spanned almost fifty years. One of the primary purposes of this volume is to bring together a collection of hymns and sacred poems representative of Charles Wesley's theological thinking. The texts are organized within a theological outline in order to make the study of his theological ideas and concepts more readily accessible, though many of them could be placed in diverse theological categories. By no means should one consider the placement of any text of Wesley in a specific category as the only option, since he frequently addressed many themes and issues within a single text.

The theological outline used for the organization of Wesley's poetry is in five sections: (1) The Glory of the Triune God, (2) The Grace of Jesus Christ, (3) The Power of the Holy Spirit, (4) The Community of Faith, and (5) A New Heaven and a New Earth.

In the first two chapters of this volume I have sought to define lyrical theology and Charles Wesley as a lyrical theologian. It is hoped that this will assist in establishing a new approach to the theology of hymns, which is often relegated to the arena of hymnology, but not taken that seriously. It is here maintained that Charles Wesley's poetry not only represents a

doxological lyrical theology, but also a theology of deep reflection, sometimes not intended for congregational singing.

In chapter three Wesley is set in his own context of the eighteenth century. A number of aspects of his own identity, which greatly assist one in reading his poetry more effectively, are addressed: biblical interpreter, commitment to Christ and the church, ecclesial theologian, sacramental evangelist, catholic vision, advocate of the poor. After examining briefly the historical and theological contexts of the eighteenth century within which Charles Wesley is found, the chapter concludes with an exploration of three aspects of Charles Wesley's lyrical theology whose understanding is vital for the reading and interpreting of his poetic corpus: lyrical theology as doxology, lyrical theology as a reflective process, and historically-oriented lyrical theology.

The fourth chapter, "Literary and Ecclesial Sources Used in Charles Wesley's Poetry," explores some of the literary influences on Wesley which are evidenced in his verse, e.g., Shakespeare, Milton, Dryden, Prior, Young, as well as Greek and Latin poets. Wesley draws on their structure, rhyme, language, metaphors, imagery, and content. One also encounters an array of ecclesial sources in Wesley's poetry. Knowledge of them is essential to the comprehension of his lyrics. Of particular interest are the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, the Book of Common Prayer, the Holy Scriptures, and the Early Fathers of the Church.

Chapter five, "The Wesleyan Poetical Sources Used in this Volume," provides the reader with a brief description of the historical and theological contexts surrounding each original Charles Wesley source from which the poems in this volume are taken.

The selection of poems follows chapter five. Generally the hymns and poems have been included in their entirety, since contemporary hymnbooks often omit certain stanzas. For example, the eleven stanzas of "Christ the Lord is risen today" appear here, even though most hymnbooks include only four, five, or six stanzas. It is important to read the entire poem in order to grasp the fullness of what Wesley is saying through his lyrics. In a few instances selected parts of lengthy poems have been included. Where a text has been edited, the original text is indicated in a footnote. Where Wesley is reflecting on a biblical text, it is cited in a footnote in the Authorized or King James Version, since this is the text Wesley was using.

Where Wesley gave titles to his hymns and poems, they are included. Where he did not, first lines or other lines have been added as titles for explanatory purposes. The sources for the poems are noted in the footnotes.

It is not the intent in this volume to provide an extended discussion of or commentary on the content of the poems included here, but rather to aid readers of Wesley's poetry, as far as possible, to become authentic interpreters of his lyrical theology. While Wesley unquestionably addressed many theological ideas, they are couched in the language of poetry. Poetical language is multi-faceted and, just as one sees many different colors when one turns a diamond in the light, so it is with theology expressed in poetry. That does not mean, however, that one may simply see and hear in Wesley's poetry what one wishes. There are times his position is unequivocally clear. There are other times when his theology is nuanced by the Holy Scriptures, time, events, literature, political and ecclesial currents, heated theological debates of his own time, and the turn of a phrase. Many aspects of his faith interpretation are influenced by context, language, and the social location of knowledge. So often the language of poetry allows the Mystery to be a mystery, something with which Charles Wesley seems to be more comfortable than his brother John.

It is hoped that the background provided here for reading Wesley's poetry will enable new understanding of his texts and appropriate, meaningful interpretation of his lyrical theology that is faithful to his time and relevant to the present.

At the conclusion of this volume there appears the first complete Scriptural Index to the Poetry of Charles Wesley. It includes over 6,000 biblical references¹ on which Wesley wrote hymns and poems, and which in his published and unpublished poetry appeared before the first stanza of a poem. When the index was first prepared and published in the first edition (2011) of this volume, all of the manuscript sources of Charles Wesley's verse were not available to the author. Now they appear on the website of The Center for Studies in the Wesleyan Tradition of The Divinity School of Duke University. In the revision provided here all of the sources, published and unpublished, have been taken into account and the unpublished texts printed by George Osborn in *The Poetical*

1. In addition to a biblical reference he often quotes the text in full or a portion of it.

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Works of John and Charles Wesley (1868–1872) based on biblical passages also have been appropriately documented.

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