

Charles Wesley's Lyrical Credo

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Introduction

DESPITE THE FACT THAT virtually everyone familiar with the Wesleyan tradition echoes the observation—early Methodists first learned their theology by singing it—scholars over the years have given much less attention to the lyrical theology of Charles Wesley than to the theology of his brother, John. Students of Charles have scrutinized particular aspects of his theology, to be sure, from its Trinitarian foundations to its millennialist speculations, from its vision of Christ's work of redemption to the presence of Christ in the worshiping community, from its articulation of faith as the means of salvation to its vision of *theosis* as the goal of the Christian life, from its presentation of sacramental grace and time in the Eucharistic hymns to its missiological ambiance in some of the most well-known texts.¹ But only a number of publications (many of them in the last quarter of the century) examine his

1. For essays and monographs on these respective topics as illustrative of such theological inquiry, see Vickers, "Making of a Trinitarian Theology"; Newport, "Premillennialism"; Tyson, "Charles Wesley's Theology of the Cross"; Gallaway, "Presence of Christ"; Chilcote, "Charles Wesley and the Language of Faith"; Kimbrough, "'Theosis' in the Writings of Charles Wesley"; Loyer, "Memorial, Means, and Pledge"; Meistad, "Missiology of Charles Wesley." Interest in Charles Wesley as a theologian is not completely novel. A volume entitled *The Theologians of Methodism*, edited by W.F. Tillet, included a brief essay: Herbert, "Charles Wesley: The Poet—Theologian of Methodism." For general studies of the theology of Wesley's hymns, see Dale, "Theological and Literary Qualities"; Lawson, *The Wesley Hymns*; and Yrigoyen, *Praising the God of Grace*.

theology as a coherent whole or have sought to answer the question, What kind of theologian was Charles Wesley? A quick survey of the books and articles that seek to address this issue reveals a variety of perspectives and characterizations of Charles Wesley as theologian.

J. Ernest Rattenbury, perhaps the most significant student of the Wesley corpus during the early twentieth century, described Charles as an “experimental theologian.” In his monumental study of *The Evangelical Doctrines of Charles Wesley's Hymns*,² in particular, he developed a portrait of his subject in a spirit very similar to that of Albert Outler's depiction of Charles's brother, John, as a “folk theologian.” Rather than a “formal theologian,” in the conventional sense of that term, Charles functioned as a popular theologian who oriented his theological work around the needs of the common person of his day. Rattenbury demonstrated Charles's emphasis on the experience of God in his hymns; the theology of his hymns revolved around this experimental dimension of the Christian faith.

In his October 1989 address on “Charles Wesley as Theologian” at the Charles Wesley Publication Colloquium in Princeton, New Jersey, Tom Langford subordinated the younger brother's theological role in the Wesleyan Revival to that of his older brother, John. He viewed Charles as “a theologian in the same sense that anyone who thinks, sings, paints, or dances about God is a theologian.”³ While Charles served a “supportive, encouraging, and propagandizing role” within the life of the movement, he was not a “creative theologian.”⁴ Charles was at best, in Langford's view, a “practical theologian” like his brother, but of less immediate influence or abiding significance in matters of proper theology.

Langford was not unaware of Teresa Berger's groundbreaking dissertation in its original German form, *Theologie in Hymnen*?⁵ published just a year prior to the conference, and that the two scholars differed in their conclusions. Berger argued that Wesley was a “doxological theologian,” whose theological statements *to* God were of equal value to the theological affirmations of formal theologians *about* God. Unlike Langford, she viewed Wesley as a creative, first-order theologian whose hymns were theological documents of critical importance in the development of the Wesleyan theological heritage. Similarly, in his re-examination of Rattenbury's work on Charles, in an essay subtitled “The Theology of Charles Wesley's Hymns,” Brian Beck confirms the theological weight of Charles's hymns in relation to the spiritual formation of

2. Rattenbury, *Evangelical Doctrines*.

3. Langford, “Charles Wesley as Theologian,” 99.

4. Langford, “Charles Wesley as Theologian,” 100.

5. Berger, *Theologie in Hymns*?

the Methodist people. "We deceive ourselves," he maintains, "if we imagine that John Wesley's extensive theological writings were the decisive influence in the formation of the Methodist preachers or their hearers. . . . the words that lingered in the minds of the society members . . . were not snatches from [sermons or notes] . . . but [hymns]."⁶

Following this same basic line of argument, in an essay published in the tercentenary volume, *Charles Wesley: Life, Literature, and Legacy*, Ted Campbell imports a novel term to describe the character of Charles as a theologian. He resonates strongly with Berger and Beck, characterizing Wesley as *theologos*. He employs this Greek term in the same way Christians of the Eastern churches use it to honor those critical figures in the church who gave us words (*logoi*) about God (*theos*).⁷ This description, Campbell argues, "allows us to claim more explicitly Charles Wesley's first-order work (*theologia prima*) of giving us words by which we can speak of God and indeed by which we can speak to God."⁸ In a brief article on "The Theology of Charles Wesley's Hymns," John Tyson concurs with Berger and Campbell, asserting that Wesley's hymns make theological assertions *about* and *to* God.⁹ His preferred descriptive title for Wesley is "praxis theologian," since Charles's fundamental concern, in his view, was how Christian theology is lived out in the world.

Despite detractors here and there who tend to argue the subordinate status of the hymn as a theological text, one can sense the development of a growing appreciation for Charles Wesley's theological significance today, a scenario parallel to the discovery of John Wesley as theologian a generation earlier. In addition to the descriptions of Charles as experimental, practical, doxological, praxis theologian and *theologos*, perhaps the most important recent characterization is that of Wesley as "lyrical theologian." The connection between the lyrical arts and theology is nothing new, of course. Scripture itself bears witness to the theological significance of sacred song in the community of faith from the Psalms to the hymn texts embedded in the narratives of the New Testament.¹⁰ When Augustine made the claim that to sing is to pray twice, he was bearing witness to the fact that Christians define themselves and their theologies not simply on the basis of what they know or how they think, but by the forms and language they use to praise the One they love. In the current rediscovery of this conversation

6. Beck, "Rattenbury Revisited," 72.

7. Campbell, "Charles Wesley, 'Theologos.'"

8. Campbell, "Charles Wesley, 'Theologos,'" 265.

9. Tyson, "Theology of Charles Wesley's Hymns."

10. Greenman and Sumner, *Unwearied Praise*.

between theology and the arts, contemporary theologians such as William Dyrness¹¹ and Jeremy Begbie,¹² among many others, are expanding the vision of a *theologia poetica*, including the relationship between sacred song and theology. In the much-heralded book, *Resounding Truth: Christian Wisdom in the World of Music*, Begbie maintains that poetry expresses theology potently, but also announces and performs faith in a different voice. He argues the ancient conviction that art, in its multifarious forms, must be recognized as a genuine theological text.

In 1984, ST Kimbrough Jr. coined the term “lyrical theology” in reference to Charles Wesley. In three successive essays,¹³ all reprinted in adapted form in his new book, *The Lyrical Theology of Charles Wesley: A Reader*, he refined the concept, defining it as “a theology couched in poetry, song, and liturgy, characterized by rhythm and expressive of emotion and sentiment.”¹⁴ He explores lyrical theology as both doxology and reflection—as both words to God and words about God. Charles expressed the doxological dimension of his theology primarily in hymns composed for the purpose of worship and devotion. In these texts, according to Kimbrough, “he was seeking a continual offering of the human heart and life to God. Hence, the lyrical theology of doxology is multifaceted, multidimensional, and filled with diverse themes.”¹⁵ But other hymns demonstrate “his way of working through theological issues, thought, and concepts, and of shaping theological ideas” through a poetic medium.¹⁶ Charles used hymns to reflect on the discursive theology of his brother and other theologians of the church, as illustrated, for example, by his Eucharistic hymns, and on the meaning of significant historical events during his life, including the deaths of beloved friends. Through his poetic texts, Charles Wesley created “a vibrant, lyrical theological memory individually and corporately for Christians and the church as a whole.”¹⁷ Kimbrough’s compilation of poetical selections from the Wesleyan corpus is an important step forward in an effort to uncover the rhythms, textures, and tones of his lyrical theology.

11. Dyrness, *Poetic Theology*.

12. Begbie, *Beholding the Glory*; and, with Guthrie, *Resonant Witness*.

13. Kimbrough, “Lyrical Theology”; “Lyrical Theology: Theology in Hymns”; and “Hymnody of Charles Wesley.” Cf. Kimbrough, “Hymns Are Theology”; and “Charles Wesley’s Dynamic, Lyrical Theology.”

14. Kimbrough, *Lyrical Theology*, 3.

15. Kimbrough, *Lyrical Theology*, 53.

16. Kimbrough, *Lyrical Theology*, 54.

17. Kimbrough, *Lyrical Theology*, 72.

A "Lyrical Credo"

It should be immediately obvious that the exploration of Wesley's lyrical theology and any effort to discern its salient features, let alone to map it out in a coherent fashion, is a monumental task. Fortunately, the availability of the hymn corpus and Wesley's prose works in a much more definitive form now makes this kind of important work a real possibility. Perhaps what has happened in the world of John Wesley studies will capture the imagination of those who have interest in Charles, as well. If a full-blown lyrical theology of Charles Wesley stands somewhat beyond our reach at this point in time, however, some modest steps can be taken to discern the primary facets of his coherent theological vision. An important initial question to ask in this regard is, What does Charles Wesley explicitly claim to believe in his hymns? To state this question in a much more concrete form, Is there a "lyrical credo" that we can discern in those texts where Charles actually confesses "I believe" or "we believe"? These questions themselves raise several preliminary concerns that require brief examination.

A project on "Charles Wesley and the Language of Faith," the conclusions of which were published in the *Charles Wesley: Life, Literature, and Legacy* volume, involved a detailed analysis of Wesley's use of faith language as a lens through which to focus attention on the Methodist movement and to consider his understanding of faith.¹⁸ This essay examined Charles's use of the term "faith" in the 1780 *Collection* and his published *Journal* and attempted to delineate the elements of a coherent "concept of faith" in those sources. A similar method is proposed here in an effort to discern Wesley's lyrical credo, recognizing the same limitations and dangers of this previous approach. This essay articulates Wesley's credo on the basis of his explicit confessions about it, rather than fitting his hymns into the structure of a traditional systematic theology, or of the Wesleyan *via salutis*, or of some other theological or doxological program. It focuses primarily on what Charles emphasizes by explicit reference to the language or confession of belief.

It is important to recognize that, in Wesleyan theology, a symbiotic relationship obtains between the faith by which one believes (*fides qua creditur*) and the faith in which one believes (*fides quae creditur*). While the previous study on "faith" alluded to above revealed Charles's implicit emphasis on subjective, living, or saving faith, this project examines more fully the objective aspect of faith in his hymns—the content of the faith in which Wesley believes. In order to construct his lyrical credo, therefore, every instance of the personal confession, "I believe," and the corporate

18. Chilcote, "Wesley and Faith."

confession, “we believe,” has been identified in his published and manuscript hymns. Interestingly, these hymns make it abundantly clear that in Charles’s theological vision, he seeks to move the singer from “propositional faith” to an “experience of faith.” What the believer confesses, in other words, can have transforming power in life. Wesley’s lyrical theology, to state the obvious, is much larger than any credo extracted from selected hymns. But Wesley’s explicit language concerning belief can function as a window through which to view the salient themes of his personal credo more clearly. The working assumption is that when Charles employs language like “I believe,” those within the worshiping community or in the context of intimate fellowship engaged those texts with greater attentiveness and a heightened sense of significance with regard to what they were singing or studying, much in the same way that a congregation stands as its members recite the historic Christian creeds.

It will be helpful to look at references to “I believe” separately from the first person plural forms, and then to examine the combined collections as a whole. In Charles Wesley’s hymn corpus, there are forty-five instances of the confession, “I believe,” in forty-one hymns.¹⁹ The vast majority of these hymns are evenly distributed in three major collections, eleven hymns in each: *Hymns and Sacred Poems* 1742, *Hymns and Sacred Poems* 1749, and *Scripture Hymns* 1762. More than half of these hymns (27) are based upon explicitly identified biblical texts.²⁰ Given the fact that one in four of these sacred songs come from the *Scripture Hymns* 1762 collection, this should be no surprise. Wesley based seven hymns on texts from the Hebrew Scriptures; half of the New Testament documents (13 books) provided inspiration for the remaining twenty hymns. In a number of hymns, the words “I believe” simply fall naturally into the poetic line, but in more than half the texts, the line begins with the words “Jesu, I believe” (1), “Jesus, I believe” (2), or much more pervasively, “Lord, I believe” (20). In nine instances, the simple words “I believe” begin a poetic line. Of greater interest for us here, however, are those hymns in which these phrases begin a stanza (20 instances) or function as the opening words of what I will describe as a “credo hymn” (12 hymns). In these hymns, the confessional nature of the hymn as a whole tends to be much more pronounced.

19. The phrase also occurs three times in one hymn by Zinzendorf, translated by John Wesley, Zinzendorf, *Gesang-Buch der Herrnhuter*, 1136, no. 1258. This hymn has not been included in the analysis here.

20. Deut 6:5; Ps 7:1; 71; Isa 40:31; 56:1; Ezek 36:25ff; Dan 6; Matt 5:3–4, 6; 8:15; 14:36; Mark 9:24; Luke 18:1; John 3:18; 7:37–39; 8:12; Rom 4:16ff; 12:12; 1 Cor 10:11; 1 Tim 2:4; 2 Tim 4:5; Titus 2:14; Heb 4:9; 6:1; 1 John 1:9; 2:3; Jude 24; Rev 22:17.