

“Sing Lustily And With Good Courage!”

– A Hymn-Poet’s Affirmation of Congregational Song and Appreciation of Charles Wesley’s Hymns.

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Part 1: Why Sing Together? – The Importance of Congregational Song

By “Congregational song” I mean anything (hymn, chant, chorus etc) sung by a group of people assembled to worship God, not as a performance to some other group, but as a vehicle for their worship. Singing together is important. Here are some reasons why:

1. **Congregational Song is Inclusive.** Almost everyone can sing. Many can sing better than they think they can, and everyone can make a joyful noise to God. If you can imitate an ambulance, fire siren or police siren you can change pitch, which means that you can sing. As John Wesley says in his Directions for Singing , “Sing lustily and with good courage. Beware of singing as if you were half dead, or half asleep” and “Sing all. See that you join with the congregation as frequently as you can. Let not a slight degree of weakness or weariness hinder you. If it is a cross to you, take it up, and you will find it a blessing.”

2. **Congregational Song is Corporate.** We belong to each other in the act of singing together. To sing is to say, “I belong with you in Christ; I am not alone, or on my own”: not a soloist, “running before, or dragging behind “ (John Wesley); ,not bawling so as to overwhelm everybody else (ditto); and not holding back because we are worried about how we may sound.

3. **Congregational Song is Corporeal (A body-mind experience)** To sing with full voice entails drawing in air, expelling it through the vocal folds and mouth, and shaping the sound with lips and tongue. It is possible to do this and not believe what we are singing but if we believe it, body mind and spirit powerfully work together.

4. **Congregational Song is “Creedal”** – meaning that it expresses belief and encodes it in memory. When we sing a familiar song the tune helps us to recall the words.

5. **Congregational Song is “Ecclesial”** - It links us with everyone else who has sung the song. The hymn “Now thank we all our God” goes back to a table grace written in 1633 by Martin Rinkhart (1586-1649), a Lutheran pastor in Saxony, Germany. It is almost always paired with the tune, NUN DANKET ALLE GOTT, composed for it by Johann Crüger (1598-1662) during or shortly before 1647. It was based on as biblical text, Sirach (The Wisdom of Solomon) 50:22-24. We sing it in English thanks to translator Catherine Winkworth. Both tune and text were crafted during the Thirty Years War (1618-1648). Imagine a war in your homeland lasting thirty years and you may sing “and *blessed peace to cheer us*” in a deeper way than before.

Rinkhart wrote his prayer in a city that was both war refuge and plague-smitten. By the time he wrote it, he was the only pastor left alive within its walls. He had presided over approximately five thousand funerals (including his wife’s), sometimes numbering fifty to sixty funerals per day. Ponder the words, and join the thousands who have sung this radical act of faith:

Now thank we all our God
 with heart and hands and voices,
who wondrous things hath done,
in whom this world rejoices;
who from our mothers’ arms
has blessed us on our way
with countless gifts of love,
and still is ours today.

O may this bounteous God
 through all our life be near us,
with ever joyful hearts
and blessed peace to cheer us;
and keep in God’s grace,

*and guide us when perplexed,
and free us from all ills
in this world and the next.*

All praise and thanks to God
who reigns in highest heaven,
to Father and to Son
and Spirit now be given
the one eternal God
whom heaven and earth adore,
The God who was and is,
and shall be evermore.

Part 2: Appreciating Charles Wesley – A Look at Three Hymns

“The True Use of Musick” – A Hymn Written in an Afternoonⁱ

Plymouth, England: 1746. On the outskirts of this seaport and naval dockyard, at eleven o’clock in the forenoon, Charles Wesley is preaching in the open air. He rode into town yesterday, on horseback, and tomorrow will ride on. In the past five years he has ridden hundreds of miles, to Nottingham, Sheffield, Leeds and Wakefield, to Bristol and Cardiff, and through Devon and Cornwall.

Some know of him through printed reports, others by word of mouth. He and his brother are variously regarded as godly men, compassionate evangelists, unseemly enthusiasts, and disturbers of the peace.

As Mr. Wesley speaks, his powerful voice carries across the crowd, above the cries of street vendors, drunkards, and children at play, almost as far as the ships of the line whose masts rise at the end of a distant street.

A group of off-duty sailors, half-tipsy with the daily ration of rum, are heckling and jostling at the edge of the crowd. One of them starts up an obscene parody of the popular ballad, “Nancy Dawson,” and others join in. The preacher’s words compete with a ribald version of the popular song, whose bouncy tune sounds like a cross between “I saw three ships come sailing in” and “Here we go round the mulberry bush.”

Finally, Mr. Wesley stops, holds up his hand, and waits till the sailors finish their song.

“Brethren, I like your music well,” he calls to them, “But if ye are minded to come again this afternoon, I’ll give you better words to sing.”

The sailors wander off. The service ends, and Mr. Wesley retires to a friend’s house. He calls for pen and paper, and begins to write. Food and drink are forgotten. Within hours, he has written new words for the sailor’s tune. Friends help him make hand-written copies.

That evening Charles Wesley preaches again. Word of the confrontation has gotten around. A crowd gathers. Some of the sailors return, less tipsy than before. Mr. Wesley leads in prayer and song. He preaches the dread seriousness of sin and the joyful news of salvation. He carries conviction to many, as much by his evident love for them as by his eloquence. Some stay hostile or indifferent; some shake and weep; others wipe tears from their eyes.

Mr. Wesley looks out over the crowd, and spreads his arms wide to the sailors. He contrasts the peril of being lost with God’s desire for their happiness. “Happiness is the end of your being,” he cries. “But being merry is not the same as being happy. None but a Christian is happy, none but a real inward Christian. I promised you a better song,” he calls. “Take it, and join your hearts with ours.” The new song is passed around. Mr. Wesley leads the singing -

Listed into the Cause of Sin,

Why should a Good be Evil?

Music, alas! Too long has been

Prest to obey the Devil.”

In other words, music has been, like the sailors, enlisted (“listed”), but in the service of the wrong navy - sin, instead of grace. It has been forcibly enrolled (“prest”) into the Devil’s service. Some of the sailors listen more keenly. Mr. Wesley is speaking directly to them. He knows that many were beaten and abducted by Press Gangs, whose royal warrant authorized them to roam through towns and villages, capturing young men for naval service.

The new song calls, not for conscripts, but for gospel volunteers who will recover “innocent sound” as they give music employment “in virtue’s cause,” and “rescue (it’s) holy pleasure.” To the tune they know well, he invites them to sing a better song: “come, let us try if Jesu’s love / will not as well inspire us.” If our hearts are tuned to sing, he asks, “is there a subject greater?”:

JESUS the Soul of Musick is;
 His is the Noblest Passion;
 JESUS'S Name is Joy and Peace,
 Happiness and Salvation:
 JESUS'S Name the dead can raise,
 Shew us our Sins forgiven,
 Fill us with all the Life of Grace,
 Carry us up to Heaven.

By the end of the song, everyone is singing. On the steps of a nearby church, a frock-coated clergyman shakes his head disapprovingly. "Methodists! Tavern songs!" he mutters, and hurries inside.

Hark The Herald Angels Sing! - The Development of a Wesley Hymn

"Hark The Herald Angels Sing!" is one of Charles Wesley's best-loved hymns. Because hymns are public poems, the needs of congregations come before precise adherence to the original wording.ⁱⁱ Thus, many hymns get altered over time, to meet changing needs and word meanings.

In 1739 Charles Wesley wrote a poem with ten stanzas of four lines each, on the wonder of Christ's incarnation. It began thus:

Hark how all the welkin rings!
 "Glory to the King of kings

Joyful, all ye nations, rise,
 join the triumph of the skies.

Universal nature say:

"Christ the Lord is born today."

and ended with the following lines:

Adam's likeness, Lord, efface;
 Stamp thy image in its place;
 Second Adam from above,
 Reinstate us in thy love.

Let us Thee, though lost, regain,
 Thee the Life, the heavenly Man;
 O! to all thyself impart,
 formed in each believing heart.

A series of revisions, beginning in Charles' lifetime, has shortened the hymn, kept its theme of incarnation and moved it closer to the Christmas nativity story. In 1753 George Whitfield gave us "Hark! *The herald-angels sing* Glory to the *new-born King* " In 1760 Martin Madan changed "Universal nature say: "Christ the Lord is born today" to "*With the angelic host proclaim, "Christ is born in Bethlehem.*" In 1782 Nahum Tate and Nicholas Brady doubled four lines to eight and added Whitefield's alteration as refrain -"Hark! *The herald angels sing* Glory to *the new-born* King. A typical late twentieth-century version is recognizably from Charles Wesley, and an indispensable Christmas hymn:

Hark! The herald-angels sing
 "Glory to the new-born King,
 Peace on earth, and mercy mild,
 God and sinners reconciled.
 Joyful, all ye nations, rise,
 Join the triumph of the skies;
 With the angelic host proclaim,
 "Christ is born in Bethlehem."

Hark! The herald angels sing
Glory to the new-born King.

Christ, by highest heaven adored,
Christ, the everlasting Lord,
Late in time behold him come,
Offspring of a virgin's womb.
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see!
Hail, the incarnate Deity!
Pleased with us in flesh to dwell,
Jesus, our Immanuel ,

Hark! The herald-angels sing
Glory to the new-born King.

Hail, the heaven-born Prince of Peace
Hail, the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all he brings,
Risen with healing in his wings.
Mild he lays his glory by,
Born that we no more may die,
Born to raise us from the earth,
Born to give us second birth:
Hark, the herald-angels sing
Glory to the new-born King.

United Methodist Hymnal, USA 1989, No. 240

The Architecture of a Hymn - And Can it Be?

Some of Charles Wesley's hymn poems are said to pay more attention to immediate verse-by-verse impact (important for open air evangelism) than to structure and direction. An example is "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing", whose original seventeen stanzas can be shortened and arranged in several different ways. By contrast, "And Can It Be?" (1738) is a carefully crafted poem. Here it is, with its many scripture sources (Remember that the Wesley's knew and used the Authorized (King James) Version):

And can it be, that I should gain

an interest in the Savior's blood!?

"Interest" - Acts 8:21

Died he for me, who caused his pain,

Gal 2:20

for me, who him to death pursued?

Amazing love, how can it be

that thou, my God, should'st die for me?

'Tis mystery all: the Immortal dies!

Who can explore his strange design?

In vain the first-born seraph tries

to sound the depths of love divine.

'Tis mercy all! Let earth adore;

let angel minds inquire no more.

1 Pet 1:12

He left his Father's throne above

(so free, so infinite his grace!),

emptied himself of all but love,

Phil 2:7

and bled for Adam's helpless race.

'Tis mercy all, immense and free,

for O, my God, it found out me!

The poem is strengthened by careful repetitions -

And *can it be*, how *can it be* (in different parts of the line)

For me: died he *for me...for me* who him....shouldst die *for me*. . . the immortal *dies*.

Tis mystery all.....'tis mercy all (st 2)...tis mercy all (St 3)

The hymn is built on biblical themes.ⁱⁱⁱ “He left his Father’s throne ...emptied himself” (Philippians 2); “bled” – a single word proclaims the cross, without emotive details but emphasizing its meaning for the believer (“’Tis mercy all, immense and free, for O, my God, it found out *me!*”). Stanza four makes the doctrine of justification by grace through faith memorable by presenting it as a personal drama based on Peter’s deliverance from prison by an earthquake (Acts 12); a series of action verbs (“woke,” “rose,” “went forth,” “followed”) emphasizes the life-changing nature of evangelical conversion.

In “And Can it Be?” Charles Wesley moves us from guilt and condemnation to the assurance of God’s gracious love. There is no harping on how worthless we are; the emphasis is on the effect and efficacy of God’s gracious love. So we come to the hymn’s majestic conclusion as phrase piles on wonder-struck phrase: No condemnation !. . .all in him, is mine !. . .*Alive* in him! . . .clothed in righteousness! . . .*bold* I approach! . . .and *claim* the crown, through Christ my own!

i This imaginative reconstruction is from my book, *Praying Twice: The Music and Words of Congregational Song*, chapter 1 (The full text is on p. 387).

ii A detailed discussion of this point is in chapter 9 of *Praying Twice*.

iii There is at least one probable allusion to other literature. Compare “Thine eye diffused a quickening ray; /I woke, the dungeon flamed with light” with Alexander Pope, *Eloise to Abelard*, lines 1145-6: “Thy eyes diffused a reconciling ray, / And beams of glory brightened all the day.”