

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 31: Golden Age of Hymns

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## The Golden Age of Hymns: Did You Know?

Dr. James Townsend is Bible editor at David C. Cook Publishing Co. and author of eight volumes in The Bible Mastery Series (Cook).

Charles Wesley wrote 8,989 hymns (at least three times the output of poet William Wordsworth). Dr. Frank Baker calculated that Charles Wesley wrote an average of 10 lines of verse every day for 50 years! He completed an extant poem every other day.

John and Charles Wesley published 56 collections of hymns in 53 years.

"Amazing Grace"—Americans' favorite hymn according to the Gallup Poll—was written by the former captain of a slave ship. That "wretch," John Newton, eventually became an Anglican minister and worked to abolish the slave trade.

"Hark! The Herald Angels Sing" was originally written as "Hark! How All the Welkin Rings" (meaning "how all the heaven rings"). Thankfully, Charles Wesley's popular Christmas carol was changed by his friend George Whitefield, the famous evangelist who sparked America's Great Awakening.

Charles Wesley was an accomplished field preacher, who on occasion addressed crowds of 10,000 and 20,000 people. He experienced considerable opposition, sometimes from rock-throwing mobs. In fact, his well-known hymn "Ye Servants of God, Your Master Proclaim" was written "to be sung in a tumult."

Eighteenth-century hymnbooks were usually only collections of texts—they did not include musical notes. The first American hymnal to join tunes with texts was not published until 1831.

The usual method of singing in church was by "lining out"—having a leader say one line, and the congregation repeat it. (This was done because hymnbooks were expensive, and many worshipers could not read.) People did not sing one line immediately after another, as they do now.

The singing of hymns was not officially approved in the Church of England until 1820.

Isaac Watts, who wrote such well-known hymns as "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross" and "Joy to the World," was an accomplished writer in many areas. He wrote a textbook on logic that was used at Oxford. His children's hymnal may be the most popular children's classic ever published. *Alice in Wonderland* parodied some of its hymns (for example, "Tis the Voice of the lobster, I heard him declare.")

John Wesley's first two published books of tunes included only a melody line, because he held serious doubts about the propriety of singing in parts.

Throughout Charles Wesley's life, his Methodist companions sang none of his hymns in Sunday worship. (Throughout Wesley's lifetime, Methodists stayed in the Anglican church, which did not employ the new hymns in worship. Wesley's hymns were sung in informal Methodist gatherings during the week.)

William Cowper, who wrote a classic hymn on God's providence—"God Moves in a Mysterious Way His Wonders to Perform"—tried a number of times to commit suicide. He suffered from mental illness.

Many early hymns contained more than a dozen stanzas. Charles Wesley's "Soldiers of Christ, Arise," for example, originally boasted 18 stanzas. Brother John Wesley included only 12 of these in his 1780 hymnbook—and he divided them into 3 separate hymns.

In eighteenth-century England, many hymns contained rhyming words that no longer rhyme today. For example, **join** could rhyme with **divine** or **thine**; and **convert** could rhyme with **art**.

The first hymnbook of the Wesleys was published not in England but in America (in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1737). And it contained no texts by Charles Wesley. For his effort, John Wesley was "arraigned before a grand jury for altering authorized psalms and for introducing unauthorized compositions into church services."

Peter Böhler, who helped lead John and Charles Wesley to experience conversions, once said, "If I had a thousand tongues, I'd praise Christ with them all." Charles Wesley expanded this stray comment into lines that became the well-known hymn "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing."

Augustus Toplady, who wrote the famous hymn "Rock of Ages," called John Wesley a "tadpole in divinity." Wesley in turn called Toplady "the most rancorous hater of the gospel system." Nevertheless, in Toplady's 1776 hymnal, "Rock of Ages" stood next to Charles Wesley's "Jesu, Lover of My Soul."

There is evidence that Toplady plagiarized his most famous hymn ("Rock of Ages") from his opponent, Charles Wesley!

Isaac Watts's collection of psalms and hymns was still selling as many as 60,000 copies per year over 100 years after it was published. His **Psalms of David** went through 31 editions in its first 50 years, including a 1729 reprinting issued by Benjamin Franklin.

Augustus Toplady wrote 6 hymns; William Cowper wrote 68; John Newton wrote 280; Philip Doddridge wrote around 400; and Isaac Watts wrote 697. But Charles Wesley wrote 8,989.

Though not usually known for writing hymns, John Wesley did write several original hymns, and he translated many from German.

John Wesley often severely edited his brother Charles's hymns, both for length and theology. When Charles wrote "Thou didst in love Thy servant leave," John wrote in the margin, "Never!"

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## The Hymn Born in a Synagogue

How a Hebrew text and synagogue melody became a well-known Christian hymn.

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The roots of early Christian worship grew in the soil of the first-century Jewish synagogue service. In Scripture and psalm, in sermon and prayer, the gathered community celebrated what God had done—and anticipated God's mighty acts yet to come. In light of this, the well-known hymn "The God of Abraham Praise" offers a glimpse of history.

Thomas Olivers (1725–1799), the hymn's author, was born in Wales and orphaned at age 4. Apprenticed early to a shoemaker, he grew to adulthood a wild, rootless man.

In his mid-twenties, however, Olivers was converted through the preaching of George Whitefield. Soon after, he became an evangelist with John Wesley. Olivers spent more than twenty years—end 100,000 miles—as an itinerant preacher. Later, he became co-editor of Wesley's *Arminian Magazine*.

### In the Great Synagogue

Tradition tells us that on a Friday evening in 1770, Olivers attended Sabbath worship at the Great Synagogue, Duke's Place, London. There, as the "Yigdal" (traditional Hebrew doxology) was sung by cantor Meyer Lyon (d. 1796), Olivers was so moved that he approached the operatic vocalist personally. In the mid-eighteenth century, cantors had begun to use musical notations, especially for new and popular compositions, and Lyon graciously provided Olivers with his tune (*Leoni*).

The Methodist preacher then adapted the text of the Jewish doxology (which was based on the Thirteen Articles of Faith stated by famous Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides in the twelfth century). The opening word, *yigdal* (Hebrew for "may He be magnified"), inspired Olivers's free rendering. The resulting work, "A Hymn to the God of Abraham," was printed in leaflets and found instant approval in the churches.

### A 12-Stanza Hymn

Here are four representative stanzas from the twelve originally composed by Olivers:

*The God of Abrah'm praise,  
Who reigns enthroned above;  
Ancient of everlasting days,  
And God of Love:  
Jehovah Great I Am!  
By earth and heav'n confest;  
I bow and bless the sacred Name,  
For ever bless'd.*

*There dwells the Lord our King,  
The Lord our Righteousness  
(Triumphant o'er the world and sin),  
The Prince of Peace;*

*On Sion's sacred height,  
His Kingdom still maintains;  
And glorious with his saints in light,  
For ever reigns.*

*The God who reigns on high,  
The great archangels sing,  
And "Holy, holy, holy," cry,  
Almighty King!  
"Who Was, and Is, the same;  
"And evermore shall be;  
Jehovah—Father—Great I Am!  
"We worship Thee."*

*The whole triumphant host,  
Give thanks to God on high;  
Hail, Father, Son, and Holy-Ghost,  
They ever cry;  
Hail, Abrah'm's God—and mine!  
(I join the heav'nly lays,)  
All Might and Majesty are Thine  
And endless Praise.*

## **Two in Harmony**

Later years brought trials to the two men. Olivers, in 1789, was dismissed from the press by Wesley, and he retired in London. Lyon had to resign after singing in Handel's "Messiah"; later he became reader in the Kingston, Jamaica, synagogue.

Jewish-Christian relations over the centuries have been often problematic, sometimes tragic. But today the singing of "Yigdal" in the synagogue, and "The God of Abraham Praise" in the churches, invites the memory of two who were in harmony as they sought to praise the Lord of All.

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## The Forgotten Wesley

Often overshadowed by his famous older brother, Charles Wesley has emerged as perhaps "the greatest hymnwriter of all ages."

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Imagine the cameras are rolling for a new motion picture.

Scene 1–1736. A young man is taking an early morning bath in a Georgia swamp, when an alligator swims toward him.

Scene 2–1709. Flashback. A toddler is being rescued from an English house engulfed in flames.

Scene 3–1738. A man in his early thirties is speaking to an august audience at the University of Oxford.

Scene 4–1744. Angry townspeople are hurling stones at the man, now nearing middle age.

Shall we cast Richard Chamberlain or Michael York to play this fascinating character who will speak on more than one occasion to crowds exceeding ten thousand people?

Who is this Englishman who, according to Frank Baker, averaged writing ten poetic lines a day for fifty years? Who wrote 8,989 hymns, ten times the volume composed by the only other candidate (Isaac Watts) who could conceivably claim to be the world's greatest hymnwriter?

Who is this poetic genius who produced "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing," "And Can It Be," "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing," "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling," "Jesus, Lover of My Soul," "Christ the Lord Is Risen Today," "Soldiers of Christ, Arise," and "Rejoice! the Lord Is King!"?

It is "forgotten" Charles Wesley.

### Premature and Precocious

Charles Wesley was the eighteenth of Samuel and Susannah Wesley's nineteen children (only ten lived to maturity). He was born prematurely, and appeared dead, in December 1707. He lay silent, wrapped in wool, for weeks.

When older, Charles joined his siblings as each day his mother Susannah, who knew Greek, Latin, and French, methodically taught them for six hours. Samuel Wesley, Charles's father and Epworth minister, demonstrated some ability at poetry, for Alexander Pope commended his *Dissertation on the Book of Job* (though Charles was far less lavish in his praise). A gift for verse seemed to run in the family. In *History of the English Hymn*, Benjamin Brawley noted that at least five of the Wesley children "had talent for the making of verse."

Charles spent thirteen years at Westminster School, where the only language allowed in public was Latin. He added nine years at Oxford, where he received his M.A. It was said that he could reel off the Latin poet Virgil by the half hour.

While at Oxford, Charles broke school rules to invite a poorer Oxford man to breakfast with him. That guest, George Whitefield, called Charles "my never-to-be-forgotten friend." Charles played a Barnabas role in the life of Whitefield, who initiated the practice of preaching in the open air to thousands of non-churchgoers.

To counteract the spiritual tepidity of those times, Charles formed the Holy Club. He penned: "I went to the weekly sacrament and persuaded two or three young students to accompany me to observe the method of study prescribed by the University, that gained me the harmless name of Methodist." Because of the group's rigid religious regimen, which later included early rising, Bible study, and prison ministry, members were called **Methodists** or **Precisianists**. (It is a quirk of history that today we do not have the First Precisianist Church instead of the Methodist one.)

### **Conversion of a Missionary**

Unconverted missionaries to America—that's what John and Charles Wesley were! In 1735, John had met General James Oglethorpe, who founded the colony of Georgia, and John agreed to sail to the rough outpost as chaplain. Charles, also ordained in the Church of England, was pressed into service as secretary to Governor Oglethorpe.

Shot at, slandered, sick, shunned even by Oglethorpe, Charles had his own portable hell ("I carry my hell about me"). He could have echoed brother John's sentiments, as they dejectedly returned to England the following year: "I went to America to convert the Indians, but, oh, who will convert me?"

After returning to England, Charles taught English to the Moravian Peter Böhler, who in turn (like Apollos in Acts) taught Charles the way of God more perfectly. Much talk was in the air about the "new birth" and instantaneous conversion. Böhler asked Charles why he hoped to be saved. Charles answered, "Because I have used my best endeavors to serve God." When Böhler shook his head, Charles thought him most uncharitable.

During May of 1738 Charles was sick and rooming at the house of John Bray, a poor brazier. On May 17 Charles began reading Martin Luther's volume on Galatians. He diaried: "I laboured, waited, and prayed to feel 'who loved me, and gave himself for me' [Galatians 2:20]." On Whitsunday, May 21, he heard Mr. Bray's sister say, "In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, arise, and believe, and thou shalt be healed of all thy infirmities." He shortly found himself convinced, and journaled: "I now found myself at peace with God, and rejoice in hope of loving Christ."

Two days later he began a hymn celebrating his conversion. On May 24, John arrived late in the evening and announced, "I believe," after his heartwarming conversion experience in Aldersgate Street. Appropriately, the group of friends in Charles's room "sang the [conversion] hymn" together.

### **A "Vile" Evangelist**

May 21 to 24, 1738, was surely a hinge of human history. The next few years in Charles's **Journal** read like the most astounding evangelistic fiction. Over fifty evangelistic conversions appear during the summer months of 1738.

At George Whitefield's instigation, John and Charles eventually submitted to "be more vile" and do the unthinkable: preach outside of church buildings. In his **Journal** entries covering 1739 to 1743, Charles computes numbers of those to whom he has preached. Of (only!) those crowds for whom he states a figure, the total during these five years comes to 149,400!

From June 24 through July 8, 1738, Charles reported preaching twice to crowds of ten thousand at

Moorfields, "that Coney Island of the eighteenth century" (as Luccock, Hutchinson, and Goodlove call it in ***The Story of Methodism***). He preached to twenty thousand at Kennington Common, plus gave a "sermon on justification before the University" of Oxford. If anyone conceives of Charles Wesley as a recluse in some retired garden (as Isaac Watts was), writing hymns as a devotional dilettante, let him or her read Volume I of ***The Journal of Charles Wesley***. He was an evangelist and pastor extraordinaire.

### **Marriage, Meddling, Mellowing**

On a trip to Wales in 1747, the adventurous evangelist, now 40 years old, met 20-year-old Sally Gwynne. Their correspondence ripened into love, and the following year Charles wrote this verse:

Two are better far than one  
For counsel or for fight  
How can one be warm alone  
Or serve his God aright ?

Charles and John had made an agreement that neither would marry without consulting the other brother. John agreed to Sally, and he officiated at Charles and Sally's wedding in August 1749. After two weeks of preaching near their home, Charles left for another round of itinerant evangelism. By all accounts, their marriage remained happy.

Meanwhile John became interested in Grace Murray, who had nursed him to health following a long illness. When Charles learned that John and Grace had decided to marry, he was aghast. He (incorrectly) believed she had been promised to a friend and fellow minister, and he immediately rode to Grace and forced her to break the engagement. John was crushed. The next time he decided to marry, he did not tell his brother.

Charles continued to travel and preach, sometimes creating tension with John, who complained that "I do not even know when and where you intend to go." His last nationwide trip was in 1756. After that, his health (and possibly, disapproval of some other Methodist preachers) led him to gradually withdraw from itinerant ministry.

He spent the remainder of his life in Bristol and London, preaching at Methodist chapels.

### **Magnificent Obsession**

Throughout his adult life, Charles continued to write verse, predominantly hymns for use in Methodist meetings. He produced fifty-six volumes of hymns in fifty-three years, producing in his lyrics what brother John called a "distinct and full account of scriptural Christianity."

The Methodists became known (and were sometimes mocked) for their exuberant singing of Charles's hymns. A contemporary observer recorded, "The song of the Methodists is the most beautiful I ever heard. Their fine psalms have exceedingly beautiful melodies composed by great masters. They sing in a proper way, with devotion, serene mind and charm. It added not a little to the harmonious charm of the song that some lines were sung by only the women, and afterwards the whole congregation joined in the chorus."

From his own day on, Charles Wesley earned admiration for his ability to capture universal Christian experience in memorable verse. Isaac Watts said of Charles's poem "Wrestling Jacob" that it was worth all that he had ever written. In the following century, Henry Ward Beecher declared: "I would rather have written that hymn of Wesley's, 'Jesus, Lover of My Soul,' than to have the fame of all the kings that ever sat on the earth." Finally, the compiler of the massive ***Dictionary of Hymnology***, Dr. John Julian, concluded that "perhaps, taking quantity and quality into consideration, [Charles Wesley was] the greatest

hymn-writer of all ages.”

Perhaps Charles Wesley would have shunned such admiration. Today in Bristol, England, you can view the bronze statue of Charles Wesley with arms outstretched. Emblazoned at the base are words from one of his hymns, epitomizing the magnificent obsession of Charles Wesley’s life: “O let me commend my Savior to you.”

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## Radicals in Times of Revolution

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Charles and John Wesley in some ways presaged the later romantic movement, with its emphases on the lower classes, upheaval, and above all, imagination and strong feelings.

**Lower classes:** Contemporary with the Wesleys was Jean Jacques Rousseau and his romanticized "noble savage." (John Wesley found himself disabused of this notion in America; he reported, "All except perhaps the Choctaws are gluttons, thieves, dissemblers, liars.") Yet the clientele of the Wesleys were usually commoners. Charles Wesley penned: "Outcasts of men, to you I call, / Harlots and publicans and thieves."

Upheaval: The spirit of the French revolutions of 1789 and 1830 is captured in Delacroix's painting **Liberty Guiding the People** (a bare-breasted French woman with Phrygian cap and musket, leading the onslaught). England was spared such revolutionary political upheaval; many church historians have argued that it was because of the spiritual revolution, linked to the Wesleys, that swept the country. Drunkards, wife beaters, and rabble-rousers found their lives revolutionized by the Wesleys' message.

**Emotion:** Eighteenth-century poetry had been "held in the Arctic grip of [Alexander Pope's] heroic couplet," according to Ernest Rattenbury. Yet the second stanza of Charles's conversion hymn captures the distinctive Wesleyan trademark of feeling: "O how shall I the goodness tell, / Father, which Thou to me hast showed, / That I, a child of wrath and hell, / I should be called a child of God! /Should know, should feel my sins forgiven / Blest with this antepast of heaven!" Similarly, in one stanza omitted from "And Can It Be," a couplet asserts: "I feel the life His wounds impart; I feel the Saviour in my heart."

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## Why Wesley Still Dominates Our Hymnbook

Two centuries later, what's the secret of Charles Wesley's undiminished popularity?

The Right Reverend Timothy Dudley-Smith is Anglican Bishop of Thetford, Great Britain, and author of *A Flame of Love: A Personal Choice of Charles Wesley's Verse* (Triangle, 1987).

Charles Wesley has been called "the most gifted and indefatigable hymnwriter that England has ever known." He wrote more hymns, probably, than anyone before or since (save perhaps the blind Fanny Crosby).

Frank Baker has calculated that Charles wrote, on the average, ten lines of verse a day for over fifty years. He must have written nearly ten thousand hymns or religious poems. ***The Collected Poems of John and Charles Wesley***—by far the greater part by Charles—fill thirteen volumes, and much is only now being published.

In the English-speaking world, we probably sing hymns by Charles Wesley more often than we sing the work of any other hymn writer. But more than **quantity** is **usefulness**. In so many ways his hymns are indispensable to our worship. Where would we be at Christmas without "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing"? At Easter without "Love's Redeeming Work Is Done" or "Christ the Lord Is Risen Today"? At Pentecost without "Come, Holy Ghost, Thine Influence Shed"?

Or think of his great hymns of universal praise and of Christian discipleship: "O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing"; "Come, Thou Almighty King"; "Jesus, Lover of My Soul"; "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling."

These hymns are two hundred years old. Why are they still sung today?

I hope to suggest ten attributes possessed by Charles Wesley that go some way to explaining why he is a writer not just for his day, but also for ours.

### Natural Gift for Verse

Charles's natural gift ran in the family, as it sometimes does. His father, Samuel, wrote hymns. All three sons wrote hymns for worship and, according to hymnologist John Julian, one of the daughters, Mehetabel, wrote the best poetry of the family (with the possible exception of Charles). John Wesley was an incomparable translator of hymns—from German, French and Spanish—and wrote originals as well.

Charles was not, however, a musician's musician. Erik Routley said he was probably no more a musician than his brother John. Yet Charles's musical sons acknowledged that he had a musician's as well as a poet's ear.

Once Charles's open-air preaching service (perhaps in Plymouth, England, in June 1746) was rudely disturbed by some half-drunken sailors (some accounts say soldiers) striking up a lewd song called "Nancy Dawson." Charles, even while conducting his own meeting, memorized both meter and words, and wrote seven 8-line verses, probably overnight, to the same tune. The next time the drunks struck up "Nancy Dawson," the Methodists could drown their lyrics with Charles's words:

***Listed into the cause of sin,***

*Why should a good be evil?  
Music, alas! too long has been  
Pressed to obey the devil:  
Drunken, or lewd, or light the lay  
Flowed to the soul's undoing,  
Widened, and strewed with flowers the way  
Down to eternal ruin.*

## Classical Training

Pressed for money—even imprisoned for debt—Charles's father yet determined to have for his sons the best education money could buy. Charles entered Westminster, a prestigious school. Its boys sang in Westminster Abbey, as they do today. Charles went on to become captain of the school.

Here he gained a thorough grounding not only in Greek and Latin literature, but also in the structure of language itself. One example of his classical training comes in the hymn "Soldiers of Christ, Arise." The hymn has these lines: "And take, to arm you for the fight / The panoply of God." The word **panoply** is not in our English versions. From where did Charles derive it?

He took it from Ephesians 6 in the Greek New Testament: *panoplivan*, "the whole armour." Either Charles had his Greek New Testament open before him, or more probably, the whole passage was stored in his remarkable biblical memory—in **Greek**.

## Literary Bent

The reason there are so many hymns of Charles Wesley is that verse was his ordinary form of self-expression. He wrote verses on every occasion: seven Odes on the Victory at Culloden, October 1746; two whole collections on the earthquake of 1750. He wrote for the King's birthday, on worldly bishops, nursery rhymes for his children, on Handel's birthday, to the voters of Middlesex, on witches, for the Prime Minister, on space travel—that is, "On Mr. Lunardi's ascent in a ball—an air for 3 voices."

Verse came as naturally to him as breathing. Robert Bridges would have done well to remember this before appending his insulting footnote to his **Practical Discourse on Some Principles of Hymn Singing**: "[T]he two Wesleys between them wrote thirteen octavo volumes, of some 400 pages each, full of closely printed hymns. One must wish that Charles Wesley at least (who showed in a few instances how well he could do) had, instead of reeling off all this stuff, concentrated his efforts to produce only what should be worthy of his talents and useful to posterity."

Henry Bett, Frank Baker, and J. E. Rattenbury have shown how, sometimes in his most familiar lines, Wesley is drawing on a mind stocked with Milton ("With thee conversing, I forget" or the phrase "adamant and gold"); Pope ("Thine eye diffused a quickening ray"; Pope has "reconciling ray"); Prior ("While the nearer waters roll"); Dryden ("Love divine, all loves excelling" from the **Song of Venus**: "Fairest Isle, all Isles excelling"); and Herbert ("Our God contracted to a span"). Bett would add Shakespeare, some ancient fathers of the church, and other poets, too. If the reading of poetry is one road to acquiring skill in the art, we can be grateful for Charles's literary bent.

## Experience of Forgiveness

Charles had written hymns—indeed, verse of almost every kind—before his conversion in 1738. In Georgia in 1736, General Oglethorpe's wife referred to Charles Wesley's "many sweet hymns." But the "new song" began from the conversion experience of 250 years ago.

John and Charles had returned from their brief and disastrous mission to Georgia. They had been brought

into close touch with a new vitality of personal religion through meeting with Moravian Christians. (John had translated some of their hymns. ) As the ship bringing them home neared the English coast, John found himself saying, "I went to Georgia to convert the Indians—Oh, who will convert me?"

Everyone knows the entry in John's journal describing his Aldersgate experience—how he felt his heart "strangely warmed." What is less well-known is that Charles had undergone a similar experience just three days before.

He was unwell, staying in London, "in the home of a 'poor ignorant mechanic' called Bray. Unwell, and much in prayer, he heard a voice saying 'In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, arise, and believe, and thou shalt be healed of all thy infirmities.' It was in fact the voice of Mr. Bray's sister, who had felt herself commanded in a dream to say these words. Charles got out of bed and, opening his Bible, read from the Psalms: 'He hath put a new song in my mouth, even praise unto our God,' followed by the first verse of Isaiah 40, ' "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people," saith your God.' He wrote in his journal, 'I now found myself at peace with God, and rejoiced in the hope of loving Christ.' "

Two days later he began a hymn upon his conversion, but broke off for fear of pride. He was encouraged to continue, finished the hymn, and sang it next day in company with his brother who had been brought from Aldersgate Street "by a troop of our friends" declaring "I believe." The hymn, almost certainly, was "Where Shall My Wondering Soul Begin?":

***Where shall my wondering soul begin?  
How shall I all to heaven aspire?  
A slave redeemed from death and sin,  
A brand plucked from eternal fire,  
How shall I equal triumphs raise,  
And sing my great Deliverer's praise!***

And note especially stanza five of this text:

***Outcasts of men, to you I call,  
Harlots, and publicans, and thieves!  
He spreads His arms t' embrace you all;  
Sinners alone His grace receives:  
No need of Him the righteous have,  
He came the lost to seek and save.***

J. E. Rattenbury, the Methodist scholar, describes vividly the scene of its first singing, in his critical study, ***The Conversion of the Wesleys***:

"No more strangely prophetic verses were ever written. How should this little sick man imagine, as he seems to have done, the men and women to whom he and his brother will in the future appeal? What likelihood that the voices of these High Anglicans should ever reach such people? No one yet had even imagined field preaching. That sick room must have been crowded with ghosts of the future as Charles Wesley penned the prelude to the great revival. Nothing in Methodist history is more appealing than the vision of those two little men, with streaming but joyous faces, singing in a sick room their evangelical duet.... "

There is the essential secret, as I see it, of Charles's timeless quality. He sings of that most fundamental Christian experience, forgiveness of sins.

**Mind Steeped in Scripture**

That was the highest praise John Wesley could give to his brother's hymns: they were scriptural. Frank Baker likens his verse to "an enormous sponge, filled to saturation with Bible words, Bible similes, Bible metaphors, Bible stories, Bible themes." The Index of Scriptural Allusions in the latest critical edition of John Wesley's 1780 *Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists* (over 90 percent the work of Charles) contains 2,500 entries, including every book of the Bible, save Nahum and Philemon.

Sister Benedicta of the Fairacres Community, Oxford, concludes that the Wesleys' hymns "are not emotional and sentimental instances of enthusiasm connected with a moment of personal experience: they are the controlled and redirected use of emotion combined with a very strong doctrinal understanding, which is instinctively within the main lines of Christian tradition. The Wesleys were concerned with the exact and literal meaning of the words of scripture.... "

Scripture remains—and ever will remain—the foundation on which our faith is built. Hymns that are biblical are therefore on the way to being timeless. They are not like those that marry the spirit of the age, to become a widow within a generation.

### **Pastoral Heart**

Charles had his full measure of empathy. We find him ministering in the condemned cells of Newgate, one of London's barbaric prisons, within weeks of his conversion. Here is an abbreviated version of Charles's journal from 1738:

"Wed., July 12th. I preached at Newgate to the condemned felons, and visited one of them in his cell, sick of a fever, a poor black that had robbed his master. I told him of one who came down from heaven to save lost sinners, and him in particular; described the sufferings of the Son of God, his sorrows, agony, and death. He listened with all the signs of eager astonishment ... while he cried, "What! was it for me? Did God suffer all this for so poor a creature as me?" I left him waiting for the salvation of God."

All that week his ministry continued: that man became, surely, the first black Methodist convert. On Tuesday night Charles, with his friend Bray, was locked in one of the cells with the men to die next day.

Charles went with them in the cart to Tyburn. Ropes would be fixed around their necks, and the cart driven off, to leave them swinging as the noose tightened. Charles wrote: "They were all cheerful; full of comfort, peace, and triumph; assuredly persuaded Christ had died for them, and waited to receive them into paradise.... The Black ... saluted me with his looks. As often as his eyes met mine, he smiled with the most composed, delightful countenance I ever saw.

"We left them going to meet their Lord, ready for the Bridegroom. When the cart drew off, not one stirred, or struggled for life, but meekly gave up their spirits. Exactly at twelve they were turned off. I spoke a few suitable words to the crowd; and returned, full of peace and confidence in our friends' happiness. That hour under the gallows was the most blessed hour of my life."

It was surely the kind of experience that would leave its mark on any young minister with a pastoral heart.

For twenty years or so Charles took his share of field preaching and the care of the Methodist fellowship. Charles wrote and sang his hymns among the congregations. He understood the folk for whom his hymns were written.

### **Creative Originality**

Henry Bett's verdict is: "Fifty years before the Lyrical Revival, a new quality of simplicity and sincerity of

lyrical passion and imaginative daring is found in these hymns." That Lyrical Revival is generally dated from the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798 (though poets like Gray, Burns, Blake, Thompson, and Cowper had heralded it for some time past). But the Wesleys, fifty years before, were recovering a simplicity of style, an imaginative verve, a sense of wonder and passion that was totally new.

To drive home his point, Bett takes Charles Wesley's hymn "I Cannot See Thy Face, and Live" and rewrites it in the accepted style of the period—as Pope might have written it. Here is Wesley:

*I cannot see Thy face, and live,  
Then let me see Thy face, and die!  
Now, Lord, my gasping spirit receive,  
Give me on eagles' wings to fly,  
With eagles' eyes on Thee to gaze,  
And plunge into the glorious blaze!*

Here is Bett's parody of what this would sound like in the style of Pope:

*Th'Eternal none may see and still survive,  
Howe'er devotion search and wisdom strive;  
Then let the vision blest my spirit slay,  
And bear to better, brighter world away!  
Thus, borne on mighty pinions through the skies,  
Those azure fields to see with dazzled eyes,  
The soul, once past the realms of upper air,  
Immerse within the bright effulgence there.*

### Standard of Craftsmanship

But for any work of art to succeed, there must be not only inspiration but perspiration, not only vision but skill, not only creativity but craftsmanship. **Craftsmanship** may seem a strange word for a writer both spontaneous and prolific. How can we claim a standard of craftsmanship for nine or ten thousand hymns and poems, many written within the day, if not within the hour, perhaps on horseback or for a forthcoming meeting?

Certain scholars would take this point of view. There is some truth in it.

On the other hand, consider Wesley's use of rhyme. W. F. Lofthouse, in the official *History of Methodism*, says, "He was as free as any of his contemporaries with his rhymes: but if in all his thousands of lines there is a single one, however short, which does not rhyme with its fellow, it has escaped me." That is not the mark of slapdash work.

Or take meter. Isaac Watts rarely ventures outside iambics in all his thousand poems—and those largely in three basic meters: common, long, and short. Charles used forty-five different iambic meters, but he also used a number of others, many of them experimentally. Frank Baker, in his *Representative Verse of Charles Wesley*, lists about 100 different meters—iambic, trochaic, dactylic, anapests, and couplets; and variations of almost all these. This extensive variation of patterns is not the work of a man jotting down ephemeral verse to order.

Or consider Bernard Manning's useful phrase "smoothness," which he applied to Charles Wesley's hymns. They flow; they are singable; they have that quality of effortlessness that speaks of care and craftsmanship not far below the surface. John Wesley in his famous preface was generally right to claim for the hymns of the 1780 book: "There is no doggerel, no botches, nothing put in to patch up the rhyme, no feeble expletives, nothing turgid or bombast, no cant expressions, no words without meaning."

Of course, it is not the whole story. In such an output, how could it be? But remember that Charles Wesley tells us himself that his 3,500 poems on the Gospels and Acts—five volumes—were worked through eight times, a revision over a period of nearly a quarter of a century. His extant manuscripts abound in crossings out, tentative corrections, alterations, and possible alternatives. He had, together with his amazing flow and fertility, that part of genius that consists in taking pains.

### **Editorial Humility**

A supreme example of Charles Wesley's humility is the publication of many collections without any indication whether a given Wesley text was by John or Charles. Had they each written about half the book, this would be more natural, but Charles had written 93 percent of the hymns.

Equally striking is the submission of Charles the creator to John the editor. Sometimes, with hindsight, we feel John's editorial judgment was mistaken. Was he right to withhold "Jesu, Lover of My Soul" from the Book of 1780, so that it did not appear in a Methodist hymnal until thirty-five years after the author died? Sometimes John imposed changes that were actually mistaken—as in his destruction of the original symmetry Charles gave to the hymn, "Sinners, Turn; Why Will You Die."

But we have John to thank for the singable form of "Soldiers of Christ, Arise"—unless you wish to sing eighteen stanzas; or "Jesus—the Name High Over All," which Charles wrote as verse nine of a twenty-two-stanza poem; or "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing," which is verse seven of a poem of eighteen stanzas.

This is Dr. Bett's verdict on the reward Charles reaped from the editorial control he allowed to John: "It is only when you go through the original volumes of Charles Wesley's verse, and note the way in which his brother chose the best of the hymns, and then omitted from these the weaker stanzas, until out of a long string of verses of very varied quality there often emerges a hymn of sustained excellence, which is a complete lyric in itself—it is only after such a study that one realizes the excellence of John Wesley's editorial work."

Without John's editorial excellence, and the humility to submit to it, Charles would have been much less as a hymn writer for today.

### **Fervent Devotion to Christ**

There is no understanding of Charles's value as a hymn writer to succeeding generations without this final attribute.

Think of his version of Psalm 45:

***My heart is full of Christ, and longs  
Its glorious matter to declare ...***

Think of the personal pronouns that so abound, as Charles never ceases to wonder that Christ cares for **him**:

***Died he for me, who caused his pain,  
For me, who him to death pursued?***

Bernard Lord Manning draws *The Hymns of Wesley and Watts* to a conclusion with these words: "... **the greatest hymns are Christian, thoroughly and irrevocably Christian; and when I say Christian I mean that they concern Christ....**" Charles Wesley's hymns met that standard.

On Charles's death, it fell to John to note it in the annual Minutes of the Methodist Conference, 1788: "Who have died this year? ... 5. Mr. Charles Wesley, who, after spending four score years with much sorrow and pain, quietly retired into Abraham's bosom. He had no disease; but, after a gradual decay of some months, 'The weary wheels of life stood still at last.' His least praise was his talent for poetry: although Dr. Watts did not scruple to say, that 'that single poem, "Wrestling Jacob" was worth all the verses he himself had written.' "

At first sight it seems even a backhanded tribute to one so signally gifted. The explanation surely lies in the day-to-day ministry that Charles pursued as a preacher of the gospel and one of the leaders of the Society. Year after year, Charles's early journal records his travels and labors; the opposition of mobs on the one hand and of his fellow clergy on the other. Day after day found him faithfully preaching, expounding, exhorting, and "tending the flock." We can understand that in the eyes of his contemporaries, even the exercise of his remarkable gift was not as praiseworthy as the faithful testimony of his life.

### **In Mind of Eternity**

Henry Moore has bequeathed to us a charming picture of Charles Wesley in old age: "When he was nearly fourscore, he retained something of his eccentricity. He rode every day (clothed for winter even in summer) a little horse, grey with age. When he mounted, if a subject struck him, he proceeded to expand, and put it in order. He would write a hymn thus given him, on a card (kept for the purpose), with his pencil, in shorthand. Not unfrequently he has come to our house in the City-road, and, having left the poney in the garden in front, he would enter, crying out, 'Pen and ink! Pen and ink!' These being supplied, he wrote the hymn he had been composing. When this was done, he would look round on those present, and salute them with much kindness, ask after their health, give out a short hymn, and thus put all in mind of eternity."

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 31: Golden Age of Hymns

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## The Hymn Explosion

**In 1700, there were precious few English hymns. In 1800, there were hymnbooks galore. What happened?**

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The eighteenth century saw dramatic changes in the content, and practice, of congregational song. Note, for example, how the rendering of one psalm changed.

In the Bay Psalm Book, published in 1640, Psalm 137 concludes this way:

***Blest shall he be, that payeth thee,  
Daughter of Babylon,  
Who must be waste: that which thou hast  
Rewarded us upon.***

***O happy he shall surely be  
That taketh up, that eke  
Thy little ones against the stones  
Doth into pieces break.***

By the end of the eighteenth century, however, this objective, biblical literalism had been moderated by a subjective spirituality, a concern for poetry, and a New Testament hermeneutic. Thus Timothy Dwight's version of Psalm 137, published in ***The Psalms of David*** (Hartford, 1801), ends with the following stanzas:

***Jesus, thou Friend divine,  
Our Savior and our King,  
Thy hand from every snare and foe  
Shall great deliverance bring.  
Sure as thy truth shall last***

***To Zion shall be given  
The highest glories earth can yield,  
And brighter bliss of heaven.***

How can the strong contrast between these two versions of Psalm 137 be explained?

## Metrical Psalms: No Polishing

The seventeenth century had inherited from the previous century the Calvinist tradition of singing metrical psalms. The most common metrical psalter, by Sternhold and Hopkins, was completed in 1562. But there were others, such as the so-called Bay Psalm Book, first issued in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1640. These psalters reproduced the Hebrew psalms as accurately as possible in English rhyme and meter.

The preface to the Bay Psalm Book outlined the philosophy of metrical psalmody: "If therefore the verses are not always so smooth and elegant as some may desire or expect; let them consider that God's Altar needs not our polishings.... For we have respected rather a plain translation, than to smooth our verses with the sweetness of any paraphrase, and so have attended conscience rather than elegance, fidelity rather than poetry, in translating the Hebrew words into English language, and David's poetry into English metre; that so we may sing in Sion the Lord's songs of praise according to his own will."

But some, while accepting the principle of the Word of God in song, nevertheless thought it perhaps could be better done. In England many voices were raised against the psalms of Sternhold and Hopkins; for example: "their piety is better than their poetry"; "sometimes they make the Maker of the tongue speak little better than barbarism, and have too many verses in such poor rhyme that two hammers on a smith's anvil would make better music."

In order to improve the poetic quality of the Church of England's psalmody, Nathan Tate and Nicholas Brady brought out ***A New Version of the Psalms of David, Fitted to the Tunes Used in Churches*** (London, 1696, revised 1698). By and large their new psalms were a great improvement on the "Old Version" of Sternhold and Hopkins. Thus from Tate and Brady we are still singing "Through All the Changing Scenes of Life" (Ps. 34), and, from the ***Supplement*** of 1700, "While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks by Night."

### **Why Watts Broke from Tradition**

As a boy Isaac Watts had objected to the poverty of the poetry of Sternhold and Hopkins. He later wrote, in the preface to his ***Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament*** (London, 1719): "Tho' the Psalms of David are a Work of admirable and divine Composure, tho' they contain the noblest Sentiments of Piety, and breathe a most exalted Spirit of Devotion, yet when the best of Christians attempt to sing many of them in our common Translations, that Spirit of Devotion vanishes and is lost, the Psalm dies upon their Lips, and they feel scarce any thing of the holy Pleasure."

First, Watts was concerned that the poetic quality of the psalms sung in worship be improved. Second, if congregational songs were to invoke spiritual responses, then these psalms and hymns should reflect the spiritual insights of the author. Third, the way that spiritual insights and responses can be made is by interpreting the Old Testament psalms by the theology of the New Testament. Fourth, both Testaments of Scripture should be interpreted in contemporary terms. Fifth, Christian congregational song should not be confined to the biblical psalms but should also include freely composed hymns on biblical themes.

Thus Watts wrote in the preface to the ***Hymns and Spiritual Songs*** (London, 1707): "There are a thousand lines in it [the Book of Psalms] which were not made for the Church in our Day, to assume as its own: There are also many Deficiencies of Light and Glory, which our Lord Jesus and his apostles have supply'd in the Writings of the New Testament.... You will always find in this Paraphrase dark expressions enlighten'd, and the Levitical Ceremonies chang'd into the Worship of the Gospel, and explained in the Language of our Time and Nation.... "

### **Liberating the English Hymn**

Although Watts was an Independent, or Congregationalist, and wrote primarily for such congregations, his psalms and hymns gave English-language hymnody in general a significant new beginning. Some have therefore called him "the father of the English hymn," which is somewhat misleading, since there were English hymn writers before him. A better title would be, to borrow from Erik Routley, "the liberator of the English hymn." Not only did he produce superlative examples of his new approach to

congregational song, he also opened the way for others to follow, notably Doddridge, Wesley, Newton, with a whole host of others.

The psalms and hymns of Watts quickly became popular and went through literally hundreds of editions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For American Presbyterians and Congregationalists, his psalms and hymns were almost the only songs they sang in their worship. Watts's influence was so pervasive that editors of the many American hymnals and tunebooks of the earlier nineteenth century often attributed an anonymous text to Watts—presumably on the assumption had a 90-percent chance of being right!

The hymns and psalms of Isaac Watts remain central to the basic corpus of English hymnody. They transcend national and denominational barriers. Among them are "I Sing the Almighty Power of God," "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," "Jesus Shall Reign" (Psalm 72), "Our God, Our Help in Ages Past" (Psalm 90), "Joy to the World" (Psalm 98), "From All that Dwell Below the Skies" (Psalm 117), "This Is the Day the Lord Hath Made" (Psalm 118), "I'll Praise My Maker While I've Breath" (Psalm 146), and many more.

## **A Musical Controversy**

The psalms and hymns of Isaac Watts had important musical implications.

First, the author chose to restrict himself to the handful of meters of the old English metrical psalms. This meant his new texts could easily be sung by congregations that already knew these basic melodies.

Second, Watts's psalms and hymns contributed to a reform in the practice of congregational singing. In his preface to *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* (London, 1707) he wrote: "While we sing the Praises of God in his Church, we are employ'd in that part of Worship which of all others is the nearest a-kin to Heaven; and 'tis pity that this of all others should be performed the worst upon Earth.... " The main problem, he argues, was that only Old Covenant themes were customarily sung among New Covenant people.

But there was also a secondary problem. Watts noted that just when the congregation touched upon gospel themes in a psalm, "in the very next line which the Clerk parcels out to us," the brightness of the gospel is clouded by the darkness of the law.

By the clerk "parcelling out" the line of a psalm, Watts is referring to the practice of "lining-out." The clerk, or leader of the singing, would read or sing one line of the psalm, which would then be sung by the congregation. Thus the singing of a long psalm could become extremely tedious with every line of every stanza being repeated. Sometimes an incomplete thought was left hanging at the end of a line, which had to be repeated before it could be continued. It was hardly satisfying or spiritually edifying to sing in such a fragmented way.

This lining-out was referred to either as "The Old Way of Singing," or "Usual" singing. The implication of Watts's criticism is that he intended his psalms and hymns to be sung as complete stanzas, rather than as disjointed lines. This "new" way was frequently referred to as "Regular" singing.

Congregations, such as one in South Braintree, Massachusetts, in the spring of 1722, were embroiled in conflict over "Regular" singing. But the new way prevailed, in South Braintree and elsewhere, and Watts's texts, sung in a manner that made musical sense, significantly contributed to the spiritual renewal of the eighteenth century.

## **Music for a Revival**

The Evangelical Revival of the eighteenth century began in part in the Holy Club in Oxford. This Club was primarily a group of students who were concerned to bring their spiritual lives within a systematic and definable "Method"—hence the term "Methodists."

Those associated with this group were the brothers John and Charles Wesley, who would together create Methodist hymnody; James Hutton and John Gambold, who would be involved in editing and publishing Moravian hymnals; and George Whitefield, who would edit a collection of hymns that would have wide influence. From the outset, in the early 1730s, the members of the Holy Club used hymns in their meetings and private devotions, principally the psalms and hymns of Isaac Watts.

After Oxford, the Wesley brothers spent a short time in America in the mid-1730s. During this time John edited a small hymnal, published in Charleston in 1737, mostly made up of hymns and psalms by Watts. It also included verse by his father, Samuel Wesley, Sr., and his brother, Samuel Wesley, Jr. His other brother, Charles, had hardly begun to write hymns.

On their return from America, both Charles and John had their famous spiritual experiences in the spring of 1738. Charles responded within a matter of weeks by writing the hymn "And Can It Be." A year later he wrote a poem, "For the Anniversary Day of One's Conversion." Within the eighteen stanzas of this poem are found the lines:

***O for a thousand tongues to sing  
My dear Redeemer's praise!  
The glories of my God and King,  
The triumphs of his grace.***

John Wesley later took these lines to form the first hymn of ***A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists*** (London, 1780).

Over the next decades Charles Wesley would pour forth an avalanche of verse, often intensely personal, always profoundly biblical, usually poetically masterful. His verse includes some superlative hymns that are among the finest in the English language. They include: "Christ, Whose Glory Fills the Skies," "Come, O Thou Traveller Unknown," "Forth in Thy Name, O Lord, I Go," "Jesu, Lover of My Soul," "Love's Redeeming Work Is Done," "O Thou Who Camest from Above," "Rejoice! the Lord Is King," "Ye Servants of God," and literally hundreds of others.

### **New Hymnals, New Tunes**

The second half of the eighteenth century gave birth to an unprecedented sequence of published hymnals. Most were anthologies containing hymns by a variety of authors. Three of the most influential were those of George Whitefield (1753), Martin Madan (1760), and Augustus Toplady (1776). These hymnals contain the common forms of hymns such as Charles Wesley's "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing"; the composite "Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending," based on hymns by John Cennick and Charles Wesley; and Augustus Toplady's "Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me." Other collections contained only the hymns of Charles Wesley. The remarkable ***Olney Hymns*** (London, 1779) included the hymns of just two authors: John Newton, who wrote "Amazing Grace," and William Cowper, the author of "God Moves in a Mysterious Way."

But there were also hymns by other writers, which continue to enrich contemporary hymnals. They include: "The God of Abraham Praise," by Thomas Olivers, "All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name" by Edward Perronet, and "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah" by William and Peter Williams.

As did the hymns of Watts earlier in the century, the hymns of the Evangelical Revival had musical

implications. Many of these hymns called for refrains and/or extensions to the basic metrical structure. They thus required different tunes, since the old psalm tunes were of a different character. A forerunner of the later eighteenth-century extended tune is **Easter Hymn**, associated with the text "Jesus Christ Is Risen Today." It first appeared in **Lyra Davidica** (London, 1708) and is found in many variant forms throughout the rest of the century. It has a basic 7. 7. 7. 7. metrical structure, with "Alleluia!" added to each line:

Jesus Christ is risen today, Alleluia!  
Our triumphant holy day, Alleluia!  
Who did once upon the cross, Alleluia!  
Suffer to redeem our loss. Alleluia!

Hymn tunes with repeated sections were perhaps more common. Obvious examples are **Miles Lane** and **Coronation**, both associated with "All Hail the Power of Jesu's Name." There is even a repeated tune that comes from a Roman Catholic source in the mid-eighteenth century: **Adeste Fidelis** and its associated text, "O Come, All Ye Faithful." Another form of repeating tune was the so-called "Fuging Tune," which disappeared relatively quickly.

Unlike Watts, who wrote only in the common psalm meters, Charles Wesley used a wide variety of metrical forms. If his hymns were to be sung, new tunes had to be created, or existing tunes had to be adapted.

This was the period of Handelian opera and oratorio. It coincided with technological advances in the printing of music that brought about the sheet-music trade, which made the music of Handel and others popular. Thus, many of the hymn tunes sung by the Methodists of the period were miniature imitations of the Handelian aria, complete with ornaments, trills, and other grace notes!

Charles Wesley sometimes wrote with specific tunes in mind, the most notable example being "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling," which was a parody of Dryden's "Fairest Isle, All Isles Excelling." Dryden's verse appeared in his opera **King Arthur**, for which Henry Purcell wrote the music. Thus Methodists in the eighteenth century sang Wesley's spiritual parody to an adapted version of Purcell's music.

### The Tide of 18th-Century Hymns

Toward the end of the century, Edward Miller, organist of Doncaster parish church, urged reform in the practice of congregational song in the Church of England, which was still primarily metrical psalmody. Miller observed that parochial congregations in England were somewhat careless, inattentive, and irreverent during the psalmody. But this was in marked contrast to what happened in Methodist congregations.

Miller wrote: "It is well known that more people are drawn to the tabernacles of **Methodists** by their attractive harmony, than by the doctrine of their preachers.... Where the Methodists have drawn **one** person from our communion by their preaching, they have drawn **ten** by their music." Even the Church of England could not hold out forever against the tide of eighteenth-century hymnody.

Today, many new hymnals are including fewer nineteenth-century hymns and more eighteenth-century hymns, especially those of Watts and Wesley. It seems we are rediscovering the validity of the spirituality—the "amazing grace" of these hymns. Although written two centuries ago, these hymns are still "music in the sinner's ear."

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 31: Golden Age of Hymns

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## Where Did We Get The Doxology?

The story behind what may be the world's best-known hymn.

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Each week, around the world, thousands of Christian congregations raise their voices in worship:

***Praise God from whom all blessings flow;  
Praise him, all creatures here below;  
Praise him above, ye heavenly host:  
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.***

In countless languages this "Doxology" is treasured. Yet few know the story behind these words, first published in 1709, and fewer still the life of their composer, Anglican Bishop Thomas Ken (1637–1711).

### **Raised by "The Compleat Angler"**

Thomas Ken was orphaned in childhood. He was raised by his older sister, Ann, and her husband, Izaak Walton, noted for his classic *The Compleat Angler*.

In 1651, Ken became a scholar of Winchester College and, in 1661, received his B.A. at New College, Oxford. Such Presbyterian schooling during times of political and religious turbulence only deepened his love for the Anglican heritage of his youth.

In adulthood, Ken held various church and academic positions. He even served as chaplain to Princess Mary until he stood firmly against, in George Crawford's words, "a case of immorality at the Court."

Later, Ken became chaplain to Charles II. But he would not let his house be used to lodge the royal mistress. This time, instead of being dismissed, Ken was rewarded for his courage with a bishopric.

### **Writing Hymns for Students**

Until becoming Bishop of Bath and Wells in 1684, Ken spent most of his life intertwined with Winchester, both College and Cathedral. There the small-statured prelate, through preaching and music, sought to uplift the spiritual lives of his students.

In 1674, Ken published *A Manual of Prayers for the Use of the Scholars of Winchester College*. In it, he charged his readers to "be sure to sing the Morning and Evening Hymn in your chamber devoutly." These hymns were, evidently, already in private circulation.

In the 1695 edition, the words to these hymns (and a "Midnight Hymn") were published as an appendix. The "Doxology" we sing today was the closing stanza of each of these three hymns ("Awake, My Soul, and with the Sun," "All Praise to Thee, My God, This Night," and "My God, I Now from Sleep Awake").

In a 1709 edition, Ken changed "Praise him above y' Angelick Host" to "Praise him above, ye heavenly

host," and the lines reached their final form. The world had gained a priceless instrument of praise.

### **Final Lines of a Long Hymn**

Here are the first, ninth, and last stanzas of Thomas Ken's "Morning Hymn," which originally contained fourteen stanzas:

*Awake, my Soul, and with the Sun,  
Thy daily Stage of duty run,  
Shake off dull Sloath, and joyful rise,  
To pay thy Morning Sacrifice.*

*All Praise to Thee, who safe hast kept,  
And hast refresh'd me whilst I slept,  
Grant, Lord, when I from Death shall wake,  
I may of endless Light partake.*

*Praise God from whom all Blessings flow,  
Praise him all Creatures here below,  
Praise him above, ye Heavenly Host.  
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.*

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## The Golden Age of Hymns: A Gallery of the Hymn Writers' Hall of Fame

The poets who put words in our mouths.

Vinita Hampton Wright is Editorial Assistant for Harold Shaw Publishers. She has written previously for Christian History.

### Isaac Watts (1674–1748)

The homely scholar who moved congregational singing into a new era

*Ye monsters of the bubbling deep  
Your Master's praises spout;  
Up from the sands ye docclings peep,  
and wag your tails about.*

Such was the state of psalm singing in churches when Isaac Watts was young. He complained about the quality of the songs, and his father challenged him to write something better. The following week Isaac—about age 20—presented his first hymn to the church and received an enthusiastic response. The career of the “Father of English Hymnody” had begun.

At Isaac's birth in 1674, his father was in prison for his Nonconformist sympathies (that is, he would not embrace the established Church of England). Young Isaac showed genius, studying Latin, French, Greek, and Hebrew by age 13. Several wealthy townspeople offered to pay for his university education, which would, however, lead him into Anglican ministry. Isaac refused and at 16 went to London to study at a leading Nonconformist academy. Upon graduation, he spent six years as a private tutor. In 1702 he became pastor of an influential Independent church in London, which he served for the rest of his life.

Described as slight, pale, and somewhat homely, Watts suffered rejection from a Miss Elizabeth Singer. One source says that “though she loved the jewel, she could not admire the casket [case] which contained it.”

Serious illness in 1712 brought Watts to the home of Sir Thomas Abney, and there he remained for life, tutoring the children and pastoring his nearby church when he was physically able. Poor health caused him to abandon the ministry for about four years, but he pastored for fifty and was admired as a teacher.

In 1707 Watts published a collection of 210 hymns, entitled *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, one of the first English hymnals. *Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament* came in 1719. Watts considered that the psalms “ought to be translated in such a manner as we have reason to believe David would have composed them if he had lived in our day.”

He thus composed freer translations that emphasized the gospel. “Joy to the World,” “O God, Our Help in Ages Past,” “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,” and “I Sing the Almighty Power of God” are just a few of his 600 hymns. Watts wrote “Jesus Shall Reign,” the first “missionary” hymn, decades before the modern missionary movement. He actually moved church singing into a new era.

Watts was a scholar of wide reputation. He wrote nearly thirty theological treatises; essays on psychology, astronomy, and philosophy; three volumes of sermons; the first children's hymnal; and a textbook on logic that was used at Harvard, Yale, Oxford, and Cambridge. For his work, the University of Aberdeen conferred the Doctor of Divinity degree upon him.

After battling illness for his last thirty years, Watts died in 1748. A monument was erected in



Westminster Abbey. Samuel Johnson observed: "Few men have left behind such purity of character or such monuments of laborious piety."

### **John Newton (1725–1807)**

#### **A "wretch" who found "Amazing Grace!"**

John Newton was nurtured by a devoted Christian mother who dreamed that her only son would become a preacher. But she died when John was a child, and he followed his sea-captain father to a sailor's life. John didn't care for the discipline of the Royal Navy: he deserted ship, was flogged, and eventually was discharged.

He then headed for regions where he could "sin freely," and ended up on the western coast of Africa, working for a slave trader who mistreated him. Newton's life during that period bore the appearance of a modern Prodigal Son's: "a wretched looking man toiling in a plantation of lemon trees in the Island of Plaintains ... clothes had become rags, no shelter and begging for unhealthy roots to allay his hunger." After more than a year of such treatment, he managed to escape from the island, in 1747.

The following year his ship was battered by a severe storm. Newton had read *The Imitation of Christ*, and during the life-threatening voyage he became a Christian.

Ironically, Newton then served as captain of a slave ship for six years. He gradually came to abhor slavery and later crusaded against it.

Newton became greatly influenced by George Whitefield and the Wesleys. He married his long-time sweetheart and began studying for the ministry and preaching in whatever vacant building he could procure. Known as the "old converted sea captain," he attracted large audiences. He was ordained within the Anglican Church, and in 1764 he took a curacy in Olney.

Newton felt dissatisfied with the hymns of the traditional psalter. He began writing his own, many autobiographical in nature, including "Amazing Grace!"

He also befriended poet William Cowper, and they collaborated to produce *Olney Hymns*, which became the standard hymnal of evangelical Anglican churches. The hymnal, which includes Newton's hymns "Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken" and "How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds," was reprinted in England and America for the next century.

In his old age, it was suggested that Newton retire because of bad health and failing memory. He replied, "My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: That I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great Savior!"

### **William Cowper (1731–1800)**

#### **Despite recurring mental illness, he wrote hymns on God's providence.**

William Cowper's poetic achievements are remarkable in light of the fact that mental illness plagued him all his life.

The son of the chaplain to King George II, William worked as a lawyer for several years. At age 32, he was nominated to a position that required a public examination. He grew fearful of that and tried to commit suicide three times—and nearly succeeded. During his stay of eighteen months in the asylum at St. Albans, however, Cowper was converted while reading Romans.

After his release, Cowper resided in Huntingdon with the family of a Reverend Unwin. Upon Unwin's

death, John Newton came to comfort the family, and he convinced Mrs. Unwin, her children, and Cowper to move to Olney where he lived.

The period at Olney was a time of healing and spiritual growth for Cowper. Newton urged Cowper to serve Olney's poor, probably in an effort to take Cowper's mind off his depressions, poor health, paranoia, and fears of damnation. He also convinced Cowper to write hymns for the parish's prayer meetings. The result was ***Olney Hymns*** (1779), which contained 348 hymns—68 by Cowper, who suffered a relapse and was unable to finish his work.

Three of his best-known works are "There Is a Fountain," "Safely through Another Week," and "O for a Closer Walk with God." His famous hymn "God Moves in a Mysterious Way" was written about the time of another bout of mental illness, during which Cowper again attempted suicide. Despite this, John Newton said of him, "I can hardly form an idea of a closer walk with God than he uniformly maintained."

Cowper did not begin his literary career until age 50. His translations of Homer and poems such as "John Gilpin" placed him at the forefront of English poets, and it is the literary Cowper now listed in reference books.

But perhaps Cowper's most meaningful works were the hymns written during fits of despair. It is said that on his deathbed he stated, "I am not shut out of heaven after all."

### **Anne Steele (Theodosia) (1716–1779)**

**The disabled woman who became "by far the most gifted Baptist hymn writer" of her day**

Anne Steele was the eldest daughter of William Steele, Baptist pastor at Broughton, England. Anne was baptized into her father's church at 14 and early demonstrated a gift for writing.

But many misfortunes beset young Anne's life. Her mother died. As a teenager, a fall from a horse rendered her permanently invalid. Just hours before their wedding ceremony, her fiancé drowned in the river where he was bathing. This final painful incident probably gave rise to one of her best-known hymns, "Father: Whate'er of Earthly Bliss."

Steele, who spent most of her days in the quiet seclusion of her father's house, has been described as "cultured, pious, and beautiful." Her father's diary noted on a November day in 1757, when she was 41, that "Nanny sent part of her composition to London, to be printed. I entreat a gracious God, who enabled, and stirred her up to such a work ... to make it useful, and keep her humble." Perhaps it was this emphasis on humility that compelled "Nanny" to write under a pen name, "Theodosia." The proceeds of all her works were donated to charity.

Anne Steele never married, and her already feeble health was aggravated by the shock of her father's death in 1769. Despite her many trials, Steele wrote 144 hymns and 34 psalm versions. She published ***Poems on Subjects Chiefly Devotional*** in two volumes in 1760, and a third was produced after her death. Her hymns received wide acceptance, and her poems were reprinted in America. More than a century after her death, it was written that she "stands at the head" of Baptist hymn writers.

### **James Montgomery (1771–1854)**

**Often in jail, this activist wrote "Angels from the Realms of Glory."**

In 1818, the inhabitants of the Georgian Isles in the South Seas turned from their worship of idols to the Christian faith. The London Missionary Society thought it appropriate that special hymns be written in honor of this milestone. "Hark! The Song of Jubilee" was one of those hymns, authored by James Montgomery.

This controversial newspaper editor had long championed foreign missions and Bible distribution. His passion had personal roots; James's parents had given their lives for the gospel in the West Indies.

James had once studied to be a missionary, attending a Moravian seminary in London. He found poetry, however, more absorbing than his studies.

Not long after the sudden death of both parents on the mission field, James left school and began to cultivate his literary gifts. At age 23 he was appointed editor of the weekly ***Sheffield Register*** in London, a position he would hold for thirty-one years.

Montgomery became an activist for numerous causes, particularly the abolition of slavery. His radical views earned him fines and imprisonment on at least two occasions. In 1797 he published a collection of poems written behind bars, ***Prison Amusements***.

Eventually his philanthropic and literary achievements were recognized; he was invited to lecture at the Royal Institution and received an annual pension from the British government.

Montgomery is best remembered for more than 400 hymns, most of them written in the early 1770s when he was serving as a pastor in Liverpool. A few came later, such as "Angels from the Realms of Glory," which first appeared as a poem in his newspaper on Christmas Eve of 1816. He published his collection as ***Montgomery's Original Hymns***.

Many hymnologists give him a place after Watts and Wesley, and a substantial number of his works are still in use, particularly in Baptist hymnals.

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## Other Important Hymn Writers

**Philip Doddridge** (1702–1751) refused a university scholarship and became a Dissenting minister. He wrote hymns primarily as summaries to his sermons. They were taught, line by line, to the congregation each Sunday.

At Isaac Watts's urging, Doddridge opened an academy and trained 200 students, over 120 of whom entered the ministry. Later he helped to found an infirmary, and he championed foreign missions before it was fashionable. His treatise, *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul*—based on an outline by Isaac Watts—was translated into seven languages. But he is best known as the author of approximately 400 hymn texts, including "O Happy Day that Fixed My Choice," which still appears in many hymnals.

**George Whitefield** (1714–1770) receives little notice in history books for his hymns, there being much more to say about his incredible preaching career. According to one source, Whitefield began his "career of revival song" in 1738, the year of his first preaching journey to America.

Urgently concerned about the lower classes, Whitefield created hymns based on music they knew. Writes Stuart C. Henry: "Thinking it wrong for the 'devil's house to have all the good tunes,' [Whitefield] had appropriated some popular airs from favorite stage operas of the day and set sacred words to them.... [T]he strains of such music-hall ballads as 'Love in a Village,' or 'Maid of the Mill' floated from the Moorfields Tabernacle, ... What kind of religion sings this kind of song? asked London.... What kind of person is Whitefield, and what sort of religion does he teach?"

Whitefield's *Collection of Hymns*, for "social worship," was designed to be used by his congregation in London, and first appeared when the great Tabernacle was erected there in 1753.

**William Williams** (1717–1791) accomplished in Wales what Watts and the Wesleys had done in England, writing approximately 800 hymns and traveling some 100,000 miles over forty-three years. He preached and sang to the Welsh people in their own language, but he also wrote English hymns such as "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah."

**John Cennick** (1718–1755), for a time George Whitefield's chief assistant, spent his short life in tireless preaching and evangelism in Ireland and England. He produced several volumes of hymns and is known for "Children of the Heavenly King" and the table grace "Be Present at Our Table, Lord."

**John Fawcett** (1739–1817) was converted, at age 16, under the preaching of George Whitefield. He became a Baptist pastor in Yorkshire, conducting an academy for ministers and writing more than 160 hymns, the most remembered being "Blest Be the Tie that Binds."

**Augustus Toplady** (1740–1778) was a priest in the Church of England and verbal opponent of the Wesleys. His "Rock of Ages" actually used words of a Wesley hymn against them. Ironically, "Rock of Ages" is today included in Methodist hymnals (and nearly every other English-language hymnal).

**Timothy Dwight** (1752–1817), Jonathan Edwards's grandson, lived out one of the most impressive careers of that era. He graduated from Yale at 17 and served as chaplain to George Washington during the Revolutionary War. Later he became a Congregational pastor and a representative in the

Connecticut legislature, and he went back to Yale to teach and hold the president's chair. Dwight revised Watts's ***Psalms and Hymns*** in 1797 and added to it thirty-three of his own hymns, among them "I Love Thy Kingdom, Lord."

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 31: Golden Age of Hymns

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## The Golden Age of Hymns: Christian History Timeline

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### The Golden Age of Hymns

**1702** Isaac Watts, "the liberator of the English hymn," becomes Minister of Mark Lane Church in London

**1703** John Wesley, Methodist leader and hymn translator/compiler, is born

**1704** Johann A. Freylinghausen (son-in-law of August Francke) publishes hymnal for pietists

**1705** *Horae Lyricae*, first published collection of Watts's verse

**1707** Isaac Watts's landmark *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*; Charles Wesley, writer of thousands of hymns, born; as is Selina Hastings, Countess of Huntingdon, who founds a branch of Calvinistic Methodists and publishes more than 10 hymn collections

**1709** Thomas Ken's "Doxology" takes current form

c. **1710** New "piano e forte" instrument gains interest

**1712** Cotton Mather publishes hymns by Watts in the colonies; Freylinghausen's second hymnal

**1715** Watts's children's hymnal, *Divine Songs for Children*

**1717** William Williams, the "Isaac Watts of Wales," is born; he writes more than 800 Welsh and 100 English hymns, among them "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah"

**1719** Isaac Watts's *The Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament*

**1721** First tunebooks for American singing schools

**1722** Conflicts over "Regular" singing (not lined-out) in some colonial churches; Count Zinzendorf founds refuge for the Moravians; his nearly 2,000 hymns and piety stir John Wesley, who translates one hymn as "Jesus, Thy Blood and Righteousness"

**1729** Charles Wesley founds Holy Club at Oxford that gives rise to Methodism; Benjamin Franklin reprints Watts's *Psalms of David*; Philip Doddridge, author of 400-plus hymns such as "Hark, the Glad Sound!" opens seminary

**1734** John Cennick converted; an assistant to George Whitefield, he writes "Children of the Heavenly King"

**1735** John and Charles Wesley sail to Georgia

**1737** John Wesley prepares the Charlestown *Collection of Psalms and Hymns*—his first hymnal, the first published in North America, and the first of Church of England

**1738** May 21, Charles Wesley's conversion; May 24, John Wesley's conversion; first American preaching tour of George Whitefield, who spreads Watts's hymns

**1739** Publication of the Wesleys' *Hymns and Sacred Poems*

**1742** Jonathan Edwards uses Watts's hymns in his congregation; Wesleys' *Collection of Tunes As Used at the Foundry*

**1744** First Methodist general conference

**1748** John Newton, author of "Amazing Grace!;" converted; Isaac Watts dies;

**1749** Beginning of Calvinist-Arminian controversy between Whitefield and Wesley; Charles Wesley marries and publishes two-volume *Hymns and Sacred Poems*; papal encyclical points to dangers of instruments and theatricality

**1753** George Whitefield publishes hymnal

**1756** Charles Wesley's last nationwide preaching tour

**1760s** Conflicts in colonial churches: Watts's hymns vs. Psalms

**1760** Martin Madan publishes hymnal; two volumes of Anne Steele's *Poems on Subjects Chiefly Devotional*

**1761** James Lyon's *Urania*, important American tunebook

**1764** John Newton takes parish in Olney

**1766** *Newport Collection*, early American hymnal using several English authors

**1769** Gerhard Tersteegen, German Reformed hymn writer, dies; John Wesley translated his hymns

**1770s** James Montgomery, author of "Angels from the Realms of Glory," writing hymns

**1770** George Whitefield dies; William Billings's *New-England Psalm-Singer*, first all-American tunebook

**1771** Last edition of Freylinghausen's hymnbook; Wesley sends Francis Asbury to America

**1776** Augustus Montague Toplady publishes hymnal including his "Rock of Ages"

**1779** Anglican minister John Newton and poet William Cowper publish *Olney Hymns*, featuring "Amazing Grace;" and "Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken"

**1780** John Wesley's *Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists*

**1783** Reginald Heber born, who later writes "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty!"

**1784** John Wesley outlines Sunday worship service for American Methodists

**1787** John Rippon's Baptist hymnal

**1788** Charles Wesley dies

**1790s** African-American "spiritual" developing

**1791** John Wesley, William Williams, and Countess of Huntingdon die

**1797** Timothy Dwight revises Watts's *Psalms and Hymns*

**1799** Richard Allen ordained Bishop of AME church; 2 years later produces 1st black hymnal for it

### **Church and World Events**

**1701** Yale founded

**1702** Anne Queen of England (to 1714)

**1703** Delaware founded

**1704** John Locke dies

**1705** Philip Jacob Spener, leader of German pietism, dies;

**1706** First American presbytery

**1707** Bach's first work

**1711** Alexander Pope's *Essay on Criticism*;  
Henry Melchior Muehlenberg, the "patriarch of American Lutheranism," born

**1714** Fahrenheit's thermometer

**1715** "Sun King" Louis XIV dies

**1718** William Penn, founder of Pennsylvania, dies; "Blackbeard" the pirate dies

**1719** Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*

**1720** Theodore J. Frelinghuysen's preaching in New Jersey helps spark Great Awakening

**1723** J. S. Bach becomes cantor at St. Thomas Church in Leipzig

**1724** Christianity banned in China

**1725** Bering Straits discovered



**1726** Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*

**1727** George II King of England (to 1760); Isaac Newton dies

**1728** William Law's *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*

**1732** George Washington born; first edition of *Poor Richard's Almanack*

**1733** Oglethorpe founds Savannah, Georgia

**1740–41** The Great Awakening peaks

**1741** American Presbyterians split into "Old Lights" and "New Lights" (to 1758); Jonathan Edwards's "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God"

**1742** First performance of Handel's *Messiah*; Jews expelled from Russia

**1746** Princeton founded

**1747** First German Reformed synod in America

**1748** First Lutheran synod in America

**1749** Fielding's *Tom Jones*

**1751** Diderot's French *Encyclopedia*

**1752** Franklin invents lightning conductor

**1756** Mozart born

**1759** Voltaire's *Candide*; Handel dies

**1760** George III King of England (to 1820)

**1763** Treaty of Paris ends Seven-Years' War

**1766** Mason-Dixon Line

**1767** Composer G. P. Telemann dies

**1769** Junipero Serra founds San Diego; James Watt patents steam engine

**1770** Beethoven born; "Boston Massacre"; James Hargreaves patents spinning jenny

**1773** Boston Tea Party; Jesuits suppressed; Unitarian denomination forms; Jesuits suppressed

**1775** American Revolution begins (to 1783)

**1776** Declaration of Independence; Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of Roman Empire*; Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*; Paine's *Common Sense*

**1781** British surrender at Yorktown; Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*

**1783** U.S. independence

**1787** Constitutional Convention

**1789** French Revolution; First U.S. Congress

**1790** John Carroll first U.S. Catholic bishop

**1790's** Height of slave trade

**1791** Mozart dies; U.S. Bill of Rights; Goethe directs Weimar Court theater

**1792** Birth of Charles G. Finney; William Carey founds Baptist Missionary Society

**1798** Coleridge and Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* heralds Romantic Age

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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Issue 31: Golden Age of Hymns

## America's Hesitation Over Hymns

Why did colonial churches resist the first British musical invasion?

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In England in 1707, Isaac Watts published his classic collection of *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*.

In the New England colonies in 1707, no church organ had yet been installed. The first singing-instruction book would not be written for fourteen more years. And *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* would not be reprinted until about 1720.

While the new hymns were being written and sung throughout England, many American churches and ministers opposed them. Not until well after the middle of the eighteenth century did English hymns achieve a significant place in American worship.

Why? Here is the story of hymns' rocky introduction to American churches.

### Hymns "Of Human Composure"?

In early colonial America, congregational singing consisted almost exclusively of metrical psalms. In this, as in most other matters, the colonies followed the lead of the Mother Country.

The two psalters most widely used were the *Bay Psalm Book* (1640) and Sternhold and Hopkins's *Whole Book of Psalms* (the "Old Version," 1562). The Bay Psalm Book had been compiled by a group of New England divines and was employed in nearly every Puritan church of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Outside the Puritan sphere, congregations relied mostly upon the Old Version, the most popular English psalm book of the time. In some Nonconformist churches there may have been no singing at all, due to objections to "conjoined" singing of believers and unbelievers.

"Hymns of human composure" were not entirely absent, however. In his *Ratio Disciplinae Fratrum* (1726), Cotton Mather observed that "**private** Companies & Families" among the Puritans would sometimes sing "devout **Hymns** they find for their Edification." Mather himself wrote a number of hymns and published a collection of them in 1697. However, Mather and other American ministers generally opposed the use of hymns in the worship service, preferring to rely instead on the inspired words of Scripture in metrical form. Hymns, when used at all, were employed primarily in private devotional exercises.

### Little Public Demand

Despite Mather's preference for metrical psalmody, he made the earliest significant efforts to introduce English hymns to America. He and Isaac Watts corresponded regularly. The New England minister began publishing small groups of hymns by his colleague as early as 1712. In 1715, twenty-two texts selected from Watts's *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* appeared in Boston under the title *Honey Out of the Rock*. This volume was likely prepared by Mather for devotional and small-group use.

Watts's complete *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* went through a Boston reprint about 1720 to 1723.

Benjamin Franklin issued an edition of the *Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament* from his Philadelphia press in 1729.

On another front, John and Charles Wesley arrived as missionaries to Georgia in 1735. Their period of service in the colonies was short-lived, but Charles wrote at least one hymn during this time (1736), and John published *A Collection of Psalms and Hymns* (Charleston, 1737) selected from Watts and other English authors.

Unfortunately, there was little public demand for such works. Two years after publishing Watts's psalms, Franklin complained that he still had unsold copies of the book on his shelves. The first American edition of *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* also met a cool reception, and a second reprint was not immediately forthcoming. Charles Wesley's hymn had to wait fifty-five years for its first American printing, and John's hymnal was quickly forgotten.

The *Bay Psalm Book* was the first book printed in North America for English-speaking colonists. It presented literal translations of Old Testament psalms in rhymed meter and was used in nearly every Puritan congregation in Massachusetts. In the 1700s, many churches fought over whether to allow new "human-inspired" hymns into their worship—or stick to the divinely inspired words in psalters.

## The Great Awakening

The key event in introducing English hymnody into American churches occurred in 1738: the stirring British pulpiteer George Whitefield made his first preaching tour of the American colonies. Whitefield championed Watts's hymns, which were better suited than the metrical psalms to his fervid style of preaching.

The effects of Whitefield's visits and his use of Watts were felt almost immediately. In the next five years, at least six reprints of Watts's hymnic works appeared from American presses.

A few pioneering congregations also began to admit Watts into the meeting house. In 1742, Jonathan Edwards reported that his Northampton congregation had taken up Watts's hymns "and sang nothing else, and neglected the Psalms wholly." Edwards approved of Watts's hymns, but he persuaded the congregation to continue singing the psalms as well.

Watts was not the only English hymnist to benefit from George Whitefield's popularity in America. When Whitefield again toured the colonies from 1739–1741, he brought with him a copy of the Wesleys' *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (London, 1739); this was reprinted in Philadelphia in 1740. Two hymnals by seventeenth-century English authors, Richard Davis and John Mason, also received American editions during this period. Thus, the successful introduction of English hymnody into American churches was largely a result of the Great Awakening.

## The Ascendancy of Watts

Few churches immediately introduced Watts into the service, but there was growing dissatisfaction with the *Bay Psalm Book* and Old Version. During the course of the next twenty years many churches began turning to Nahum Tate and Nicholas Brady's more recent *New Version of the Psalms* (London, 1696). But by that time the days of metrical psalmody were numbered.

During the 1760s and 1770s the number of American reprints of Watts increased dramatically. One church after another began giving up the "psalms only" and adopting "Watts entire," sometimes supplemented by a collection of hymns from other authors.

This innovation was not always accomplished quickly or without difficulty. For example, after making a trial of Tate and Brady, the Puritan parish church of Spencer, Massachusetts, voted in 1761 to return to the **Bay Psalm Book**. Eight years later, the church voted to try Tate and Brady but instead continued to sing from the Bay Psalm Book, this time in combination with Watts. In October 1769, the congregation finally adopted Watts, which displaced both the **Bay Psalm Book** and Tate and Brady.

This pattern was followed with local variations throughout the remainder of the century. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, Watts's works had become so widespread they enjoyed much the same position in American churches that the metrical psalms had held a century before.

### **Americanizing the Hymnal**

American reprints of English hymnals gradually increased in number during the second half of the eighteenth century. There must have been some demand for them. Undoubtedly, however, these books were used primarily as supplements to Watts or as material for individual worship.

Of special significance was the 1766 publication at Newport, Rhode Island, of a collection for American Baptists, **Hymns and Spiritual Songs** (the "Newport Collections"). This was one of the earliest hymnals printed in America that was not simply a reprint of an English volume by one author. It was a new collection drawing on the hymns of several different writers. Many of the hymns were by Watts, but there were also hymns from other English writers, as well as some anonymous hymns that—judging from their grammar—were probably of American folk origin.

### **Singing Schools**

Singing schools originated early in the eighteenth century in response to ministerial calls for improvement in the psalm singing of New England churches. Most of the music used in singing schools was sacred in nature. Singing schools were often held in church buildings, but the schools frequently had no direct connection to the church.

The first American singing-school tunebooks were published in 1721; these contained only psalm tunes. Beginning in the 1760s, the repertory of the tunebooks was gradually enlarged to include more complex fugal tunes and anthems for trained singers, in addition to psalm and hymn tunes that would be appropriate for congregational use. Since these books were used in music instruction, rather than in worship services, the compiler or composer had greater liberty in the choice of texts. The new English hymns served as important text sources.

Thus, such a well-known Charles Wesley hymn as "Rejoice, the Lord Is King" made its first American appearance in a Philadelphia tunebook, James Lyon's **Urania** (1761). Three years later, Josiah Flagg's **A Collection of the Best Psalm Tunes** (Boston, 1764) included Wesley's "Soldiers of Christ, Arise" and "Ye Servants of God, Your Master Proclaim," neither of which had been previously printed in the colonies.

The most famous of the eighteenth-century American composer/compiler was William Billings. His first tunebook, **The New-England Psalm-Singer** (Boston, 1770), was the earliest to contain only music by an American composer. Billings published six major collections, containing over 250 original psalm and hymn tunes. Significantly, not one of these tunes used a text from the **Bay Psalm Book**. Watts accounted for sixty-five texts, more than any other single source. Billings also set to music English hymns by Charles Wesley and others.

The role of tunebooks in promoting English hymnody in America should not be underestimated. Through such volumes many Americans first encountered hymns that were to become part of the standard repertory. Exposure to these words in the singing school undoubtedly led some people to seriously consider using hymns in the worship service.

## Subpar American Hymns

The texts of Watts, the Wesleys, Newton, and others provided fine examples of hymnic forms. But no American writer arose during the eighteenth century who could rival even the second-rank English hymnists.

One of the best early American authors was Samuel Davies (1723–61), a Presbyterian minister and champion of Watts. Some of Davies's hymns were published in England, and a few saw limited use. However, as Louis F. Benson observed in *The English Hymn*, these efforts showed the "form and manner" of Watts without the "original inspiration."

Not until well into the nineteenth century did America develop hymnists who could adequately follow the lead of the great eighteenth-century English authors.

Some of the most distinctive early American contributions to hymnody were adaptations of Watts's psalms and hymns. Important arrangements of Watts published by Americans included collections by Joel Barlow (1785), Timothy Dwight (1801), James Winchell (1818), and Samuel Worcester (1819). These typically provided versifications of psalms which—for one reason or another—Watts had omitted in the original publications. They also altered his references to Great Britain and the English king, and sometimes replaced his versions with new translations. From the viewpoint of modern congregational singing, the most significant reworking of Watts was by Dwight, who included his own version of Psalm 137, "I Love Thy Kingdom, Lord."

## Why Americans Moved Slowly

The explosion of English hymnody in the eighteenth century was relatively slow to make its impact on American churches. Why? Reasons may be summarized as follows:

1. Metrical psalmody generally retained a grip on American congregations longer than it did in England.
2. When Americans gave up metrical psalmody, they often substituted for it a different kind of monopoly (the hymns and psalm paraphrases of Isaac Watts), leaving little room for worthy hymns by other authors.
3. A number of significant eighteenth-century English works did not receive their first American printing until relatively late in the century.
4. The Revolutionary War caused a hiatus in imports from the Mother Country (not to mention anti-English attitudes).
5. Separation from the Mother Country by a large ocean meant a natural cultural lag.

Nevertheless, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, American church song was much more vigorous than it had been one hundred years before. The singing-school movement had provided a more musical basis for the singing, and the English hymn texts expressed Christian faith more appropriately than had the metrical psalms.

Eighteenth-century English hymns made a considerable impact on the American church. They broke the monopoly of metrical psalmody, provided a well-rounded repertory for Americans to sing, and offered a superior model to which future American writers could look for guidance.



## Were Hymns Good Poetry?

They have endured. But does their lasting popularity prove their quality?

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Church sanctuaries still ring out with the two-hundred-year-old hymns of Watts, Wesley, Newton, and Cowper. But is lasting popularity alone an indicator of true literary quality? Literary historian W. J. Courthope observes that "the critical world is yet to be half-persuaded that a hymn can be poetry."

Early hymns were written in an age that produced the rhymed couplets of Pope, the satires of Swift, and the novels of Defoe, Fielding, and Johnson. These works demonstrate form, elegance, urbanity, and wit. Can hymns measure up?

### Plain and Direct

First, we must admit that not all the poetry of any age or any poet will attain excellence. The hymns of this age are uneven.

The best hymns, however, represent a kind of literary counterculture. Contemporary poetry tended to be ornate and contrived. It was intended for a sophisticated audience that demanded a polished style.

The hymns were characterized by a plain style and simple expression. Yet because they were vivid and direct, the best hymns not only equaled, but even surpassed, much of the literature of the day. Literary critic George Saintsbury, for example, pronounced "Rock of Ages" a "great poem."

### A Distinct Purpose

Hymns took a simple, forceful style because they had a distinct purpose and audience. The purpose of eighteenth-century poetry was enlightenment and entertainment. The purpose of the hymn, however, was public and private worship. Hymns were designed not to glorify the poet but to aid worshipers in expressing their feelings to God.

In his introduction to *The Oxford Book of Christian Verse*, Donald Davie asks what sort of language is most appropriate when speaking to or about God. He concludes that it is "a language stripped of fripperies and seductive indulgences, the most direct and unswerving English.... When speaking to God, in poetry as in prayer, any sort of prevarication or ambiguity is ... unthinkable."

In addition, in Davie's words, hymns "ought to be meaningful to plain men and women, the poet's fellow-Christians." Isaac Watts, for example, expressed in the prefaces to his hymns that his aim was not poetic. Louis Benson explains in *The English Hymn*, "His remarks were addressed to literary critics, who he feared would misunderstand the purpose of his work.... It involved nothing more than loyalty to the Protestant principle that every part of public worship should be ... in a language understood by the people."

Although Watts wrote for a relatively sophisticated audience, his "felicity lay in his gift for locating the common level and his refusal to soar."



Thus, the poetry of Watts and other hymn writers sometimes fails to satisfy the tastes of the literati. But it clearly achieved its stated purpose: leading common people in worship.

Philip Doddridge once told Watts about the effect of his hymns in a village chapel: "There were tears in the eyes of several of the people as they sang his hymns, and after the service was over, some of them confessed that they could not sing at all, so deeply were their minds affected. Such a reward might well be coveted by the greatest of poets."

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 31: Golden Age of Hymns

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## The Spiritual

**In the furnace of slavery, a lasting musical form was forged.**

Angela M. S. Nelson is a doctoral candidate in American culture at Bowling Green (Ohio) State University.

The 1790 census of the United States reported more than 750,000 blacks. The musical expressions of the majority of these blacks—those enslaved in the South—greatly influenced American religious and secular musical forms.

Although some Christians attempted to use the Bible to justify the institution of slavery, the majority of African-Americans embraced Christianity. As a result, they created and performed songs, particularly the spiritual, that had a lasting influence on Christian worship.

Slaves held informal, possibly secret, prayer meetings. Recalled former slave Wash Wilson: "Sometimes us sing and pray all night." The spirituals sung in these meetings drew from hymns, the Bible, and African styles of singing. Most slaves could not read, so the spirituals helped to teach them the Bible.

## Field Hollers

The three primary musical forms produced by the enslaved during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were field hollers, work songs, and spirituals.

Slaves were not allowed to talk to one another while working in the field. But singing, such as the work song or field holler, was permitted. The slaves therefore established a communication network that was unintelligible to their white overseers.

It is difficult to say exactly how these hollers sounded. They probably come close to sounding like the field hollers recorded by folklorists, such as John Lomax, in the early- to mid-1900s. These more-recent recordings suggest that field hollers were calls for water, food, or assistance. Sometimes field hollers let others know where the caller was working, or simply were cries of loneliness, sorrow, and occasionally, even joy.

## Work Songs

Singing accompanied all kinds of work among the slaves. It helped alleviate the monotony of labor and keep the field hands energized by rhythmically synchronizing their movements. "Work songs" addressed various subjects, depending on the kind of work being performed. Consider the following corn song:

*Hooray, hooray, ho!*  
*Roun' de corn, Sally!*  
*Hooray for all de lubly ladies!*  
*Roun' de corn, Sally!*  
*Hooray, hooray, ho!*  
*Roun' de corn, Sally!*  
*Hooray for all de lubly ladies!*  
*Roun' de corn, Sally!*

*Dis lub's er thing dat's sure to hab you,  
Roun'de corn, Sally!  
He hole you tight, when he grab you,  
Roun'de corn, Sally!  
Un ole un ugly, young un pritty,  
Roun' de corn, Sally!  
You needen try when once he git you,  
Roun'de corn, Sally!*

Other work songs were sung by individuals who sang not for the purpose of synchronizing their movements, but for their own entertainment and expression. Work songs reflected the thoughts and moods of those who sang all day long, from "can't-see-morning to can't-see-night."

## **Spirituals**

The religious counterpart to the work song was the spiritual. The first reference to spirituals as a distinctive genre appeared early in the nineteenth century. Many scholars believe, however, that the spiritual originated in the late eighteenth century.

It is not known precisely when the term *spiritual* began to be applied to black religious folksongs. Since the editors of *Slave Songs of the United States* (1867) did not define the term in their compilation, it must have been in common use by 1860.

Improvisation was crucial in the creation of a spiritual. The spiritual was most likely fashioned by combining verses from the Bible and hymns with portions of sermons and prayers given during the worship of the enslaved. Such religious expressions were embellished, and repetitive refrains were added.

The spiritual "My Lord, What a Morning!" for example, was essentially (re)created from the hymn "Behold the Awful Trumpet Sounds." Here is the spiritual:

*My Lord, what a morning,  
My Lord, what a morning,  
My Lord, what a morning  
When the stars begin to fall.  
You'll hear the trumpet sound,  
To wake the nations underground,  
Looking to my God's right hand,  
When the starts begin to fall.*

Two stanzas from the original hymn, first published in Richard Allen's 1801 hymnal, show where the slave composer received his inspiration:

*Behold the awful trumpet sounds,  
The sleeping dead to raise,  
And calls the nations underground:  
O how the saints will praise! ...  
The falling stars their orbits leave,  
The sun in darkness hide:  
The elements asunder cleave,  
The moon turn'd into blood! ...*

## **First African-American Hymnal**

Richard Allen, founding bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, published a hymnal for the congregation he established in 1794. Allen's hymnal, ***A Collection of Spiritual Songs and Hymns Selected from Various Authors by Richard Allen, African Minister***, was printed in 1801. It consists of fifty-four hymn texts (without tunes) drawn chiefly from the collections of Isaac Watts, Charles Wesley, John Wesley, and other writers favored by the Methodists of the period.

Allen's ***Collection*** stands as the first anthology of hymns collected for use by a black congregation. It was also the first hymnal to employ wandering refrains—verses or short choruses attached at random to orthodox hymn stanzas.

The practice of wandering refrains is a form of improvisation. Since improvisation was also inherent in the spirituals, here is evidence that connects the musical tastes of blacks who were enslaved and those, such as Allen and his Philadelphia congregation, who were free.

African-American field hollers, work songs, and spirituals blended African and European-American musical traditions. The spiritual in particular was influenced by the European-American religious traditions—the burgeoning hymns of the 1700s and 1800s.

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## What Did Slave Songs Sound Like?

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Slave songs typically consisted of four-line stanzas alternating with four-line choruses. Within that structure, solo verses alternated with refrains.

Stanzas most often took the **aaab** form (three repeated lines and a refrain) or **aaba** form (two repeated lines, one new line, then a repeat of the first line). Occurring less frequently was the **abcd** form (no repetition of text).

As the following spiritual illustrates, stanza and chorus were linked through the recurrence of refrain lines common to both:

We'll run and never tire, (a)  
We'll run and never tire, (a)  
We'll run and never tire, (a)  
Jesus sets poor sinners free. (R)

Way down in the valley, (a)  
Who will rise and go with me? (b)  
You've heard talk of Jesus, (c)  
Who set poor sinners free. (R)

The lightning and the flashing, (a)  
The lightning and the flashing, (a)  
The lightning and the flashing, (a)  
Jesus sets poor sinners free. (R)

Most melodies used the notes of either the major scale (seven notes) or the pentatonic scale (five notes) with flatted (or "bent") tones.

Rhythmically, slave songs were most frequently in simple duple meters (two beats per measure) as opposed to triple meters.

What gave a distinctive African character to most of the slave songs was the call-and-response pattern. Overlapping occurred: individuals began the refrain before the leader concluded his solo "call," and the leader began to sing the "call" before the group had finished singing the chorus.

Even though slave songs were transcribed as single-line melodies, usually they were not sung in unison. The singers followed the melodic line for the most part, but they allowed themselves to wander from it when its notes were too high, when the text called for special emphasis, or when more variety was needed.

Recurrent themes in both religious and secular folksongs included faith, hope, patience, weariness, and the struggle to be free.

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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## A New Species of Christian Song

Where did the English hymn come from?

Dr. Madeleine Forell Marshall is on the faculty of the University of San Diego and of California State University at San Marcos. She has taught literature at the University of Puerto Rico, the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, and St. Olaf College. She is co-author, with Janet Todd, of *English Congregational Hymns in the Eighteenth Century* (Kentucky, 1982).

What gave rise to the English hymn in the eighteenth century? What determined its form and the way it worked? Many earlier texts were transformed into congregational hymns (for example, texts from the breviary, from the German tradition, and from Herbert and Milton). Yet the hymns of Watts must be our starting point. The roots of his hymns are the roots of hymnody in English. At least four major roots can be identified.

### Psalms

Throughout the eighteenth century, metrical psalms continued to influence the English hymn. It's a safe bet that the majority of the singers who sang Watts's texts knew the bulk of the psalter by heart. We know that Wesley and his singers sang psalms in Church of England worship. The psalms were at least as familiar to eighteenth-century hymn singers as our own Christmas carols are to us.

Images and even lines from the psalms recur in the hymns. When singing "Joy to the World" (Watts's paraphrase of Psalm 98), the Sternhold-and-Hopkins "Old Version" of the psalm must have been very much in mind especially when psalter tunes were used. If modern congregations are alert to any changes in wording, we can only imagine the critical response to an entirely new hymnody.

While we pretend to discriminate, it's often hard to distinguish hymns from psalms: in fact, the terms are often used interchangeably. Metrical psalms were updated and hymns were heavily biblical.

Isaac Watts's arguments for the new hymnody suggest that psalms were inadequate. We may well wonder. John Dryden's criticism of the old language of older poetry indicates that changes in the English language—as much as any innate limitations of psalmody—provoked Watts's dissatisfaction.

Indeed, the psalms are wonderful expressions of a wide range of devotional attitudes, hardly limited by their pre-Christian composition. They are profoundly "psychological." Like hymns, they are public and private at once, shaping a wide range of devotional attitudes, from near-despair to exultation.

The crucial difference between psalms and hymns comes clear in the explicitly Christian texts explaining and reflecting on the Incarnation, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection, and the sacraments. These demonstrate how far beyond simple praise the hymn had to go as a vehicle for Christian education, for proclamation, for spiritual direction.

Even the poetry that influenced the young English hymn was itself in debt to psalmody. The voice of the psalmist, its rhythms and imagery, was a basic, universal experience of English poets and their readers. Many distinguished poets paraphrased psalms, including the same Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503–1542) who figures prominently in the history of the sonnet. John Milton and many of his contemporaries wrote psalm paraphrases. At every literary historical turn, it seems, the psalms were available as models of sacred poetry as well as congregational song.

## Contemporary Poetry

As poems, hymns proceeded from the understanding of the nature and purpose of poetry common in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. This understanding is not modern.

We tend to think of poetry as a private affair, very personal, a vehicle for feeling. If we read it at all, we expect poetry to be ambiguous, suggestive, perhaps obscurely beautiful. We are unlikely to trust the poets for communication or education. Prose, not poetry, is our medium for public discourse.

When we survey the works of the big-name English poets of the period 1660 to 1740—John Dryden and Alexander Pope—we may well wonder at their subjects. They wrote major poetry on theological, political, and moral issues, even literary and cultural criticism. The private self of the poet is nowhere evident. Poetic language is neither obscure nor ambiguous.

To modern ears, this sounds more like rhetoric than poetics. We might expect the hymn texts sprung from such theory to read more like speeches or sermons. (In fact, myriad sermons of the day were published and read for private or family entertainment. ) Hymns needed, like sermons, to be popularly intelligible, educational, and entertaining. They had a job to do.

But “Joy to the World” and “Amazing Grace!” don’t sing at all like sermons. Why not? Why did early hymn texts sometimes dramatically depart from the poetry of the times?

## An Age of Piety

The hymn belongs to a great age of personal piety, which balanced and complemented the rhetorical theory.

The horrible religious wars and persecutions of the seventeenth century had sorely tested Christians. Mortality rates seem to have surged in this era—deaths from plague, smallpox, malnutrition, childbirth, and venereal disease. Personal piety was very much in order.

In England, popular books addressed the ways of *Holy Living and Holy Dying* (Jeremy Taylor, 1651), the steps of a *Pilgrim’s Progress* (John Bunyan, 1678–1684), and our *Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* (William Law, 1729). Christians were encouraged to keep diaries and regularly to examine their spiritual account.

Thus, in the poetry of the age, the “I,” the poetic persona, triumphs, by the grace of God, over doubt and despair and anticipates joy in heaven. This explains what’s happening in many classic early hymns, like “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross.”

In his Preface to the *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* (1707) Watts described the psychology of hymns: “The most frequent Tempers and Changes of our Spirit, and Conditions of our Life are here copied, and the Breathings of our Piety express according to the variety of our Passions, our Love, our Fear, our Hope, our Desire, our Sorrow, our Wonder, our Joy, as they are refin’d into Devotion, and act under the Influence and Conduct of the Blessed Spirit.”

While Tempers, Spirits, and Passions are less familiar than modern psychological terminology, they are no less acute. They reflect an age of piety that found expression in its hymns.

## European Influences



The English hymn did not develop in isolation. The larger European context helps us understand something more of the politics and the aesthetics of hymnody.

Watts admired the poetry of Madame Guyon (1648–1717) and of the Polish Jesuit Casimir. He was enthusiastic about the powerful effects the plays of Racine and Corneille worked on their readers. Neither Roman Catholic nor secular models were despised.

Watts sought to write hymns that could be sung by a wide variety of Christians. He hoped his hymns would discourage the doctrinal controversy that had torn at the fabric of seventeenth-century life. (According to legend, as an infant, he was nursed on the steps of the prison where his father was confined for Dissent from the established Church of England.)

When John and Charles Wesley put together their first collections of hymns, they supplemented the work of Watts with translations of German hymns. Many of these were Pietist texts that shared the same understanding of Christian poetry as affective, transformative, uplifting. The singer follows a script, contemplating the wounds of Christ or the love of God. The believer is caught up in wonder and devotion. Madame Guyon retained her influence on the eighteenth-century hymn, and we find William Cowper translating a number of her hymns and poems. "There is a Fountain Filled with Blood" seems a fine example of classic continental Pietism.

### **A New Kind of Hymn Drama**

Watts wrote his hymns for use in corporate worship. Both the setting and the familiar meters and tunes restrained the young hymn. However powerful the hymn's content, the context was conservative. Indeed, Watts's singers were (for the most part) educated, experienced worshipers.

However, with the Evangelical Revival [in the late 1730s and 1740s and beyond], the politics and practice of hymnody changed.

Methodists were sent to Church of England worship, where hymns were excluded. The congregation sang metrical psalms, set to familiar tunes. Revival hymns, as such, were for the most part extraliturgical.

Because of this, the hymn enjoyed new freedom. It was relieved of the formal restraints of the expected psalm meters and the contextual constraint of liturgical celebration. German tunes, tunes from popular song, theatrical tunes—a whole range of new formal possibilities became available. Charles Wesley both encouraged and enjoyed the new freedom.

Watts had explained in his Preface how he sought to reanimate lackadaisical believers. He wanted to shape and focus the devotion of the ordinary sort of worshipers. Wesley's task was distinct. Many of the Revival masses were virtual newcomers to Christianity, unfamiliar with Scripture or basic doctrine. The educational charge was heavy, and many of Wesley's hymns simply versify basic Christian education.

Ultimately, Wesley's hymns, together with Methodist preaching, drove for conversion, for the radical reorientation of sinners. The *Journals* of both Charles and John record scores of conversions. Conversion was fundamental to Methodism and remains fundamental. Indeed, Charles's hymn celebrating his own experience (today known as "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing") retains the place of honor in Methodist hymnals.

The exciting new music suited the exciting new texts; together they described, recalled, and urged conversion. This new kind of hymn drama is distinct from Watts's baroque kind. It is less studied, less painful. It is prone to the sweeping gesture and to enthusiasm. Its lasting achievement and appeal is evident in John Newton's conversion hymn, "Amazing Grace."

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# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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## Irrational Music Sung By a Mob of Extremists?

Why the Church of England disliked hymns

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The Church of England did not officially approve the singing of hymns in worship until 1820. For nearly one hundred years, Dissenters and Methodists had been singing hymns. Why was the Church of England so slow to recognize the power and usefulness of "hymns of original composition" ?

### Would-Be Revolutionaries

We easily forget that hymns were written and sung by men and women who lived their lives and practiced their faith on the margins of conventional English Christianity. Anglicans resented, even hated, Dissenters [those who separated from the established Church of England] and Methodists. Thus, hymn singing, which Dissenters and Methodists practiced, came to stand for all that was wrong with non-orthodox faith.

Isaac Watts was a Dissenter, a Calvinist who believed in congregational autonomy or "Independence." While Watts was a loyal British subject, he and fellow Dissenters accepted many of the principles that had led to the Civil War in England. Anglicans had not forgotten the killing of Charles I and the establishment of the Puritan Commonwealth under Oliver Cromwell.

During the Restoration Period (1660–1700) Calvinist Dissenters were widely regarded as would-be revolutionaries, eager to upset the peace and return England to its Puritan past. Dissenters were, accordingly, heavily persecuted, subject to fines and imprisonment. They were excluded from public employment and the university. In *Absalom and Achitophel* (1681), John Dryden describes the Dissenters as rabble-rousing demagogues, determined to destroy the monarchy. Thus, when the Dissenters sang hymns, those hymns were often associated with Christian extremism and even revolutionary politics.

### Brawlers and Brayors

John and Charles Wesley, however, were upstanding university M.A.'s, ordained ministers of the Church of England. Charles even discouraged his brother from any move that might lead to a break between Methodism and the established church. Aristocratic friends and supporters within the church made Methodism seem acceptable.

Yet the Evangelical Revival associated with the Wesleys seems to have raised two kinds of fears. Both reflected on congregational hymnody.

**Fear of the mob:** The first fear was of the vast mass of unwashed, uneducated common people. The Wesleyan congregation seemed a mob. Any mob was volatile, prone to riot, threatening life and property and the precious social order.

**Fear of "enthusiasm":** Anglicans disliked irrational religion. Private inspiration bred individualism and

heterodoxy. The Wesleyan journals, indeed, reflect the array of sectarian possibilities that “revived” communities fell prey to—Moravian, Calvinist, Quietist, and “prophetic.” The hymns themselves, as they center in profound conversion, expressing intense emotion, are “enthusiastick.”

In *A Fine Picture of Enthusiasm* (1740), John Scot described early Revival hymnody as irrational: “The Hymns they sing, i.e. all I have seen or heard of, are not rational Compositions, nor do they accord with the first Principles of all Religion, but like their Prayers, dwell upon a Word, or are immediate addresses to the Son of God, as the supreme Object of Worship. And do represent him as much more friendly and compassionate to the human World than God the Father ever was—so that their Singing is calculated to engage the Passions by nothing more than Words, and the Melody of the Sound, or Voice; but if you would sing with the Understanding, you must have other sorts of Compositions both for Psalmody and Prayer, than what the Foundery or the Tabernacle [Methodist meeting halls] do afford you.”

When he defended hymns in 1757, John Wesley addressed this fear of unreason, claiming of his people that “When it is seasonable to sing praise to GOD they do it with the spirit and with the understanding also ... in psalms and hymns which are both sense and poetry.”

### **Entering the Mainstream**

Hymns were eventually accepted into Church of England worship. Indeed, the future lay with hymns and the political developments that nurtured them. Through Watts’s agency, Dissenting educational theory was institutionalized at Harvard and Yale. In both America and in England, the frightful mob led eventually to democratic government. Christian “enthusiasm,” dissociated from political revolution, lost its terror and entered the mainstream, where it remains to this day.

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## Three Hymnals That Shaped Today's Worship

The hymnbooks of John Wesley, John Newton, and John Rippon endured for generations.

William J. Reynolds is professor of Church Music at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, and author of *Songs of Glory* (Zondervan, 1990).

The eighteenth century has been called the "century of divine songs."

Isaac Watts wrote hymns and metrical versions of the psalms for his London congregation. During the week as his sermon took shape, he wrote a hymn to provide a congregational response to his message. Watts's *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* (1707), and his *Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament* (1719), marked a growing acceptance of singing. They also set the stage for hymn writers who would follow.

Hymn singing was slowly accepted among the Dissenting churches—Congregational, Baptist, Quaker, and some Presbyterian. In some churches there was much opposition to the singing of hymns, and controversies arose that sometimes split congregations asunder.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Church of England allowed only the singing of metrical psalms. It used Tate and Brady's *New Version of the Psalms of David* (1696), or Sternhold and Hopkins's *Whole Book of Psalms* (1562). This hardy "Old Version" was still being used when Queen Victoria was a girl. Not until 1820 was the singing of hymns approved in the Church of England.

Three hymnals climaxed the move toward congregational hymn singing in the eighteenth century.

### John Wesley's 1780 Hymnal

**A primer in theology, published when he was 77**

The greatest contribution to eighteenth-century Christian song was made by the Wesley brothers. John was the methodical leader, administrator, and editor of the Wesleyan movement; Charles, the gifted poet. Charles wrote the hymns, and John compiled the collections, frequently editing and altering his brother's hymns.

Beginning in 1738, the Wesleys published fifty-six collections of hymns (not including tune books) over a period of fifty-three years. At least thirty-six of these collections involved only original Wesley hymns.

The most significant Wesley hymnal was *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists*. It was designed solely for members of the societies John had formed throughout England, Scotland, and Wales. The hymnbook was intended to be both a primer in theology and a guide for public worship and private devotion.

People who had joined Wesley's societies were endeavoring to live Christian lives and were striving for perfection. This is evident in the hymns: well over half relate to the believer's life and faith—"rejoicing, fighting, praying, watching, working, suffering, groaning for full redemption, and interceding for the world."

For the 1780 *Collection*, John Wesley compiled 525 hymns: those he deemed the best hymns of

Charles; a number of his own hymns; and several from other sources, including Isaac Watts. There are twenty-one translations (nineteen from German, and one each from Spanish and French) assumed to be by John Wesley himself.

Many hymns from the 1780 hymnal survive today: "A Charge to Keep I Have," "And Can It Be, That I Should Gain," "Christ, Whose Glory Fills the Skies," "Come, Ye That Love the Lord," "I'll Praise My Maker While I've Breath," "Jesus, Thy Boundless Love to Me," "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling," and "Soldiers of Christ, Arise."

### **John Newton's 1779 Hymnal Produced by two friends in a small church**

In 1764, after his ordination in the Church of England, John Newton, the ex-slave trader, was sent to the village of Olney. He conducted Anglican services in the parish church and began a weekday service for children in which he taught Bible lessons and led the singing of hymns.

Three years after Newton arrived, poet William Cowper moved to Olney. Cowper became a lay helper in the small congregation, and Newton found a kindred soul, his intellectual equal. Cowper was skilled in poetic writing but experienced periods of deep depression.

In 1769, Newton began a Thursday evening prayer service. For almost every week's service, he wrote a hymn to be sung to a familiar tune.

Newton challenged Cowper also to write hymns for these meetings. This Cowper did until he had a serious illness in 1773. Newton later combined 280 of his own hymns with 68 of Cowper's in ***Olney Hymns***.

The hymns were simply arranged in three sections:

Book I, hymns on select texts of scripture;

Book II, hymns on occasional subjects;

Book III, hymns on the progress and changes of the spiritual life.

Among the well-known hymns in ***Olney Hymns*** are "Amazing Grace!" "Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken," "God Moves in a Mysterious Way," "How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds," "O for a Closer Walk with God," and "There Is a Fountain Filled with Blood."

Although compiled for his own use in Olney, Newton's hymnal became more widely known. In 1809, Reginald Heber, parish vicar at Hodnet, Shropshire, wrote to a friend: "My [church's] psalm-singing continues bad. Can you tell me where I can purchase ***Olney Hymns***? Any novelty is likely to become a favorite and draw more people to join in the singing."

### **John Rippon's 1787 Hymnal It sold 300,000 copies in just 40 years**

By the last half of the eighteenth century, Baptists' opposition to hymn singing had greatly declined. Then some of the finest Baptist hymn writers emerged: Anne Steele, Benjamin Beddome, Samuel Stennett, and others.

The increased interest in hymn singing encouraged John Rippon to publish ***A Selection of Hymns from the Best Authors, Intended to be an Appendix to Dr. Watts's Psalms and Hymns***, containing 588 hymns. Rippon (1751–1836) was pastor of the Baptist church at Carter Lane, London, for sixty-three years. An influential minister, he published many sermons and served as editor and publisher of the ***Baptist Annual Register***.

Rippon continued Watts's practice of employing the last hymn as an application of the sermon. Since Watts's hymns did not cover all sermon themes, Rippon enlarged the repertoire.

The ***Selection*** was designed for Baptists, and 187 (32 percent) of the hymns were by Baptist writers. However, Rippon was aware of the potential market among other Dissenters, and so he included hymns by non-Baptist writers such as John Cennick (8 hymns), Philip Doddridge (101), Thomas Gibbons (25), John Newton (19), Augustus Toplady (9), Isaac Watts (39), and Charles and John Wesley (24).

Rippon omitted some hymns' stanzas, rearranged others, changed pronouns from singular to plural, and altered awkward expressions and weak rhymes. His four-stanza version of Edward Perronet's "All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name" (including Rippon's original fourth stanza) has become the accepted one in England and America.

In the preface to the twenty-seventh edition (in 1828), Rippon claimed that more than 200,000 copies had been circulated in England and 100,000 copies in the United States. Louis F. Benson, in ***The English Hymn***, states that "Rippon's judgment and taste, his command of originals, and his editorial discretion, were such to insure lasting success."

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## The Golden Age of Hymns: Recommended Resources

### Questions for Today

1. What is your favorite hymn from "The Golden Age of Hymns"? (**See the Contents for some still-popular candidates.**) What makes this hymn important to you?
2. In what ways is today's outpouring of "praise music" like the proliferation of hymns 250 years ago? In what ways is it different? (**For background, read "The Hymn Explosion".**)
3. Psalms and early hymns were often "lined out," with every line said by a leader before it was sung by the congregation. (**See "The Hymn Explosion" for a fuller explanation.**) This often created a disjointed feeling to worship. What musical practices in today's churches do you think detract from worship? Why?
4. What objections to contemporary Christian music have you heard? How do these reasons compare to the objections to hymns two centuries ago? (**See "Irrational Music Sung by a Mob of Extremists".**)
5. Some early hymns incorporated phrases from secular poetry or were set to bar-room tunes. In what ways does music written by Christians today "borrow" from the broader culture? What are the advantages and disadvantages of this approach?
6. Do you think today's praise choruses will still be sung 250 years from now—in the year 2241? Why?

### Recommended Resources

**For readers who want to study further, here are key resources selected by Dr. Paul Westermeyer, professor of Church Music at Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota.**

- Louis F. Benson, *The English Hymn: Its Development and Use in Christian Worship* (Richmond: John Knox, 1962, reprinted from 1915 edition). Though a bit tedious and dated, this volume still provides valuable detail. Chapters II through VII survey the eighteenth century, from Baxter through Watts, Wesley, and the evangelicals.
- Henry Escott, *Isaac Watts: Hymnographer* (London: Independent Press, 1962). A responsible, somewhat stuffy treatment of Watts and his context.
- Harry Eskew and Hugh T. McElrath, *Sing with Understanding* (Nashville: Broadman, 1980). Includes a thumbnail sketch of Watts, Wesley, and the Evangelical Revival.
- Alfred Burton Haas, "Charles Wesley," *The Papers of the Hymn Society of America, XXII* (Springfield: The Hymn Society of America, 1957). A sketch of Charles Wesley's life and work.\* [\* For information, write The Hymn Society in the United States and Canada, P. O. Box 30854, Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, TX 76129 ]



- ***The Hymn*** 39:4 (October, 1988). A special issue of the quarterly journal of the Hymn Society in the United States and Canada. Five articles are devoted to Wesleyan hymnody and its music.\* [\* For information, write The Hymn Society in the United States and Canada, P. O. Box 30854, Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, TX 76129 ]
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## **Bonus Section: Who Put the Gideon Bible in Your Hotel Room?**

**Nearly 100 years ago, two traveling strangers met by chance, never dreaming what they would start.**

Kevin A. Miller is editor of Christian History.

Paper salesman John "Nick" Nicholson didn't reach his hotel until 9 o'clock that night of September 14, 1898. Another hard day of train rides, carriage rides, and appointments left him wanting only a quiet room in which to write up his orders.

But the lobby of the Central Hotel in Boscobel, Wisconsin, bulged with people. In Nicholson's words, the hotel was "crowded with drummers and 'hangabouts' playing cards, shaking dice, smoking, laughing, cursing, yelling, and singing with clinking of glasses and the tinkle of the mechanical organ."

At the front desk, Nicholson's fears were confirmed: Every room was filled.

### **A Last-Ditch Solution**

The hotel landlord wanted to help Nicholson, a regular customer, so he proposed a last-ditch solution. "We have a man with us tonight by the name of Sam Hill," he said, "a good clean fellow. There's a spare bed in his room, and if you're both willing to share, you could have it." The landlord took Nicholson across the lobby to meet Hill, who was writing up his orders.

The fellow salesman agreed to the arrangement.

In Room 19 later that evening, Hill rolled over to go to sleep. "Excuse me if I keep this light on a little while longer," Nicholson said. "I always make it a practice to read the Word of God and speak to him before I retire."

"Read it aloud," Hill told him. "I'm a Christian, too."

Nicholson read John 15, and the two prayed together. Then he and Hill started talking about the need for Christian traveling salesmen to know about each other. By 2 A.M. they had determined they should start an association.

That morning, the two left the Central Hotel and soon forgot about the plan.

### **Only Three at the First Meeting**

The following May, however, Nick Nicholson met Sam Hill on a street in Beaver Dam, Wisconsin. Chagrined over their previous lack of action, they set a date for the association's first meeting and promised to invite other Christian salesmen to join them.

On July 1, 1899, only one other person showed up at the Janesville YMCA.

Nicholson, Hill, and the newcomer, William Knights, didn't let the small turnout discourage them. They quickly appointed themselves president, vice-president, and secretary-treasurer. They also adopted the

name **Gideons**, after the fiery Old Testament leader.

The fledgling group of Christian “commercial men” met again to encourage each other and spur each other to witness for Christ. At this meeting, in which the Gideons’ emblem was conceived, the group expanded to twelve charter members, all from Wisconsin.

The following year, 1900, saw the first local chapter (called a “camp”), the first edition of **The Gideon Quarterly**, and the first national convention. The convention attracted only thirty-seven of the group’s now-six-hundred members, but it passed this significant resolution: “That every hotel, which Gideons patronize, furnish a Holy Bible for the benefit of its patrons.”

The turn of the century also saw pitched battles arise: Was it proper for “a traveling man” to preach in churches, as many Gideons were being asked to do? Should all Gideons be expected to give their testimony in public, or should timid souls, who were dropping out by the dozens, be exempted? As later president Samuel Fulton explained, “Our organization is difficult to handle. There is a variety of minds, a variety of denominations, and such a wide variety of views with reference to incidental things.... Positions taken did not always please everybody.... ”

### **How Did Bible Distribution Start?**

By 1903, the Gideons added a salaried national secretary and a headquarters in Chicago.

That year, an officer of the Gideons reported on a similar organization in England. “They are doing a great work by putting Bibles in all the rooms of the different hotels they go to,” he said. “I think that we ought to adopt the same. ”

His report was forgotten, apparently, for almost five years.

At the national convention in 1908, however, the Gideons committed themselves to place Bibles in every hotel in the country. But how would they pay for the ambitious scheme? Later that year, churches in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, agreed to fund Bible distribution in their area hotels. The Gideons saw that they could be an “extended arm” of the church.

Soon they began ordering thousands of Bibles. (At first, the Gideons preferred the popular new American Standard Version to the King James; in later years they began distributing the King James Version solely.)

Before the Gideons could approach hotel managers, however, one approached them. Archie Bailey of Iron Mountain, Montana, heard about the group and ordered twenty-five copies for his Superior Hotel. The following month, an order came from Detroit.

From that point, Bible distribution grew rapidly. By the late 1920s, in fact, it had become the best-known—often the only known—aspect of the Gideons. As one member warned in **The Gideon** (December 1928): “Many think still that our Bible work—placing Bibles in hotels—is our only aim. To be sure, this is a most important branch of our work, and the work for which we are chiefly known to the public at large. But the Gideon organization was founded with this object in view: ‘Winning Commercial Traveling Men for Christ.’ ”

Evangelism did continue in other forms. The Gideons sponsored programs at the 1933 Chicago “Century of Progress” Fair and the 1939 New York World’s Fair. Yet Bible distribution remained their largest and most visible project.

## Growth and Pains

In the 1920s, controversy broke out among the Gideons over how to pay for the administrative costs involved in distributing Bibles. Should all donations to the Bible Fund be used strictly to purchase Bibles, or could some of that money defray administration of the program? Eventually, 10 cents per Bible was set aside for administration. (Today, about 8 percent of the Gideons' \$45 million annual budget goes toward administration. )

The distribution to hotel rooms gradually spread to hospitals (1916), public school classrooms (1937), military personnel (1941), and each public school student (1944). In 1953, however, the New Jersey Supreme Court ruled out Bible distribution to New Jersey students, and since then, many states have followed suit.

Despite the setback in schools, the Gideons continue their original and best-known work. Do hotel managers object to Bibles being placed in their rooms? Not to any great extent.

Some managers prefer having them there. Paul A. Westburg's *They Stood Every Man in His Place* includes the story of one hotel manager in Rockford, Illinois. A guest came to the front desk with a Gideon Bible under his arm.

"Being up against it financially, I had my mind made up to forge a check ... to give to you," he admitted. But "when I caught sight of this Bible, ... instead of forging the check as I had planned, I've come to tell you that if you will permit me to go home, I'll mail you the amount of my bill just as soon as I'm able." According to the manager, the man did.

## Today's Organization

Today, the Gideons' membership stands at 100,000, all "business men [no women, except in an auxiliary] who believe in the Bible as the inspired Word of God" and who "have received [Christ] as their personal Saviour." In addition, applicants must be members in good standing of a church and not be "engaged in the manufacture or sale of alcoholic beverages."

The Gideons occasionally have fought financial problems. In 1905, the national headquarters was moved to St. Louis, because the president lived there, and he agreed to personally cover all office costs, as well as edit the magazine. That same year, though, this new president suffered business losses. As a result, two issues of *The Gideon* never went out. The president didn't come to the 1906 convention.

As late as 1954, the Gideons reported a general-fund deficit of nearly \$50,000. To cover the deficit, the cabinet proposed increasing member dues from \$10 to \$25. The membership would approve an increase to only \$12.50.

Overall, however, the Gideons have shown steady, remarkable numerical and financial growth. About 5,000 Gideons attend the annual July convention. Past presidents have included evangelical industrialist and college founder R. G. LeTourneau, and P. J. Zondervan, co-founder of the publishing company by that name.

The original Chicago headquarters has moved to Nashville, and the staff of one has grown to seventy-five. This year, the Gideons will distribute 32,000,000 Bibles, including 1,000,000 to military personnel in Operation Desert Storm. Most Gideon Bibles still wind up in hotels. In 58 languages, in 140 countries, travelers can find a Gideon Bible in (to use writer D. G. Kehl's words) "hostels ranging from Heartbreak Hotel to the Hilton."

Nick Nicholson and Sam Hill, who met ninety-three years ago in Boscobel's Central Hotel, would approve. Because of their original vision, as novelist John Updike wrote, "Every hotel room ... offers a Bible for the perusal of travel-worn salesmen [and] bickering vacationers" who can thereby find "the consolation and stimulation of this incredible, most credible book."

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## Down and Out From Beverly Hills

One man's encounter with a Gideon Bible

PAUL MYERS

*Throughout their history, the Gideons have received letters from people who found and read a Gideon-placed Bible. Here is one such letter from mid-century. The writer went on to become "First Mate Bob" on the long-time religious radio show "Haven of Rest."*

One winter morning in San Diego, after I had wandered many miles along the waterfront, in a daze, I turned my steps wearily toward my hotel room. I had been drinking heavily for weeks.

My mind was tortured by the thoughts of the wife and four children whom I had deserted. Just yesterday, it seemed, I had been a radio executive, in charge of two radio stations in Los Angeles—KFVD and KFAC. The home in which we lived, Beverly Hills, the cars, the servants—the things money and social position can provide for a man and his family—were just a memory. I had dragged my family down with me until they were living in a little hovel, and then, I had deserted them.

I had suffered a complete nervous breakdown and, worst of all, I had completely lost my voice. For a year and a half, I had not been able to speak one word aloud, each effort to talk was just a whisper. The future held no promise.

I opened the door of my hotel room and flung myself into a chair in utter despair. My gaze fell upon a (Gideon) Bible on the floor. In a distracted sort of way, I picked it up and started to read. Old familiar words I had learned as a child, words of life, quick and powerful, leaped out of those pages and found their way into my heart.

I fell to my knees, and spread the Bible upon the chair, and made a vow that I would not leave that hotel room, if I died of starvation, until there came into my soul a knowledge that my sins had been forgiven, until I knew that I passed from death unto life. With a surge of joy, I realized that God's promises were even for men like me.

In that hotel room, I found Calvary's Cross; there I laid my burden down; there, the old man died, and a new one was born. From that place I walked in newness of life, a new creature in Christ Jesus, praise His Name!

God straightened things out between my wife and me, and today she and I and our four children are back together again. The "peace that passeth all understanding" has loosed the taut nerves and muscles which had prevented normal speech, and God gave me back my voice.

Small wonder that there is in my heart a feeling of undying gratitude to the Gideons who have felt the burden to place Bibles in hotel rooms.