

**The Unity of Christians:  
The Vision of Paul Couturier**

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**Christ in the Hymns of Charles Wesley: A Spirituality for the  
Unity of Christians**

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**Introduction**

The Methodist movement, which occupied the centre of the stage in the religious history of the England of the eighteenth century was one – albeit the most important one – of a series of spiritual re-awakenings which during the same period revitalised Protestantism as a whole. In particular, besides Methodism, mention needs to be made of two other dynamic movements of renewal. On the other side of the Atlantic ocean, there took place in New England, in the early part of the eighteenth century, a revival which, in large measure, owed its inspiration to the greatest theologian of New England, and possibly the greatest theologian in the history of North American Protestantism in its entirety, namely Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758). In his *Thoughts on the Religious Revival in New England* (1746), he offered theological reflections on the happenings in New England, which were to have an impact on a much wider sphere of Protestant renewal (1). Of the eighteenth century movement for spiritual renewal known as Pietism, the Lutheran branch was the most influential. It had its roots in the preceding century in the pioneer work of Philipp Jacob Spencer (1635-1703), but reached its culmination in the theology and missionary activity of Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf (1700-1760). Zinzendorf welcomed the exiled Moravian Brethren to his vast estate in Saxony where, under his leadership, they founded the brotherhoods dedicated to unceasing worship of Jesus, the slain Lamb of God, and later to an extraordinary missionary outreach, and known as the Herrnhuter Brüder, the word ‘Herrnhut’ referring to this unbroken vigil of praise and thanksgiving. As is well known, John Wesley visited Herrnhut, after his Aldersgate conversion, whilst, prior to that, both he and his brother had direct

contact with Moravian missionaries, on their way to Georgia in 1735 and then again, both during this first missionary experience and afterwards.

The nub of these two dynamic strands of theological and spiritual re-awakening was renewed, faith-inspired, ardent attachment to the very Person of Jesus as Lord and Saviour and prayerful intimacy with Him in the outpouring of His Holy Spirit. Such ardour, coupled with its unmistakable fruits, that is selfless love of neighbour, could not but produce a transconfessional spiritual unity, capable of transcending the divisions, brought about within Protestantism, by differing interpretations of the Reformers' understanding of doctrine and of ecclesial and ministerial structures, simply by the setting-up of nation-bound Churches, in separation from one another. Furthermore, awareness of this transconfessional spiritual unity, at least in those who were touched by it to the point of true conversion of heart could not but inspire an ardent desire to bring about a practical experience of this spiritual unity in prayer for the unity of all Christians, to be shared across denominational barriers.

Although Methodism outstripped the other renewal movements, thanks to the missionary vision and courage of John Wesley, its founder, and above all to his genius for the setting up of the right pastoral structures for the nurture of the newly converted, a preoccupation not included in classical revivalism engaged in by the charismatic contemporaries of Wesley, such as George Whitefield, or, at least not shared by them to the same extent, Methodism, as a genuine branch of global transconfessional evangelicalism, not only shared with this latter its central theological and spiritual insights, but also was beholden to it for its own growing ecumenical awareness.

It is at this point that what we shall call, for want of a better designation, **The Poetical Achievement of Charles Wesley** must be taken into account. When John insisted that all the preachers of the Methodist movement should consider his brother Charles, as its co-founder, there was doubtless a certain exaggeration in his attitude, due to his brotherly affection for Charles. But the subsequent history of Methodism has proved him to be right for reasons which, in part at least, he foresaw. In his preface to the *Collection of Hymns for the use of the People called Methodists*, published in 1784, and of which the majority of the hymns were composed by Charles, John does not hesitate to ask:

‘In what other publication of the kind have you so distinct and full account of Scriptural Christianity? Such a declaration of the heights and depths of religion, speculative and practical?’

Indeed this hymn book, rather than the forty-four standard sermons of John Wesley, selected to constitute part of the doctrinal basis of Methodism, became the staple diet for the biblical, theological and spiritual nourishment of Methodists of every social condition and of every level of religious or literary education. Yet this hymn-book only contained a fraction of the total output of Charles Wesley: 525 hymns out of a total of about 9,000 poems, of which 7,300 are hymns. Who can estimate the extent of the theological and spiritual riches to be found in the many masterpieces of such an enormous output, especially as a sizeable part of it was not published until 1988?

Poetic genius, unreservedly, put at the service of gospel truth, gives to the masterpieces of Charles Wesley, and even to the hymnological corpus as a whole, an originality which, even where the basic theological insights are the same, marks them off from the theological treatises or religious poetry of other pioneers of transconfessional evangelicalism. It explains, in particular, the aptitude of the hymns to communicate gospel truth to the culturally disinherited poor, whom a theological treatise could never reach, whilst at the same time affording delight and spiritual nourishment to the theologically educated. Furthermore, when the Arminian approach to spiritual experience, which John Wesley knew to be far more in tune with the biblical data than the Moravian quietism which Zinzendorf sought to impose on the Fetter Lane Society, caused him to part company with Moravianism, he not only enabled Methodism to become fully aware of its own theological and spiritual identity and to build up its own evangelical heritage, but he also paved the way for a hymnological output on the part of his brother, which would take into account all the delicate harmonies of an active, loving response to the mystery of our redemption in the crucified Jesus.

Consequently, in order to show what the hymns of Charles Wesley could contribute to spiritual ecumenism as we understand it today, we must deal, if only briefly, with two other characteristics of the hymns:

1. the extent to which they share in the basic insights of transconfessional evangelicalism and its consequent concern for the spiritual unity of all Christians;

2. their outstanding originality, giving them a unique status in Christian literature as a whole.

Hence the two main subdivisions of the rest of this paper. It will, then, be possible, in the Conclusion, to state briefly what the significance is of this poetical achievement for contemporary spiritual ecumenism.

### **I. The Poetical Achievement of Charles Wesley and Transconfessional Evangelicalism**

It would seem that the thrust of transconfessional evangelicalism towards the spiritual unity of Christians, albeit belonging to institutionally separate Churches, found its first practical expression, in 1744, in the private circulation of letters from person to person, asking for this prayer for unity. Those contacted were to synchronise their prayer, not by coming together in the same place, but by praying within their own faith communities at the same stated times. In a *Memorial*, drawn up by Scottish ministers in 1746, to promote the continuation of this practice, called a *Concert of Prayer*, the times suggested for its synchronisation were a part of Saturday evening and the morning of Sunday each week, to which were added the first Tuesday, or the first convenient day after Tuesday, of each of the quarter periods of the year, in other words, the first Tuesday of February, May, August and November. The unity to be prayed for was couched in eschatological terms: the definitive coming of the Lord's Kingdom. At the same time such prayer was to prepare for this coming by imploring an outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all the Churches. It was to be nourished by the publication of specific texts from Scripture, and by preaching and was to be guided by official pastoral directives. Above all, the proposal was to be made to all Christians regardless of denominational belonging.

From the perspective of our own phase of ecumenical history, the initiative taken by James Haldane Stewart, in Scotland, at the beginning of the nineteenth century can be seen as a further development of the *Concert of Prayer* of 1744. The main intention of the prayer was, once again, to ask for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Christians of all the Churches. The tract published by Stewart in 1821 and entitled, *Hints for a General Union of Christians for Prayer for the Outpouring of the Holy Spirit*, reached a total circulation of 332,127 copies in 1855. More importantly Christians, belonging to separated Churches, were to come together for this prayer in the same place. Thus the prayer became in itself, to a certain degree, a visible expression of unity in faith and love, capable of transcending denominational barriers.

What, however, is of even greater significance for the subject of this paper is the way in which the brilliant theological mind of Jonathan Edwards enabled him to draw out the deeper theological and spiritual implications of the *Concert of Prayer* of 1744. In 1748, he published a treatise entitled, *A Humble Attempt to Promote Explicit Agreement and Visible Union of God's People in Extraordinary Prayer*. The first part gives an account of the Scottish proposal and reproduces the *Memorial* of 1746. It is in the second part: *Motives to a Compliance with What is Proposed in the Memorial*, that Edwards draws out the theological and spiritual implications, the last part being a reply to objections. For Edwards, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit of which the Scottish ministers speak, is firmly rooted in its Christological source:

‘Herein consists Christ’s communicative *fullness*, even in His being full of the Spirit, and so full of grace and truth, that we might *of this fullness receive*, and grace for grace. He is *anointed with the Holy Ghost*, and *this is the ointment that goes down from the head to the members*.’

‘God gives the Spirit not by measure unto him, that every member might receive according to the measure of the gift of Christ.’ (2)

This therefore was the great blessing he prayed for in that wonderful *prayer* which he uttered for his disciples and all his future Church, the evening before he died, St John, chapter seventeen. Even if there is no direct reference here to these verses of John 17, in which Jesus explicitly prays for the unity of his disciples, the fact that the priestly prayer of Jesus is referred to, coupled with the insistence on the communication of the Spirit of love, adumbrates what would one day be made more explicit by Abbé Paul Couturier in a form of prayer which would come to be accepted by all the Christian communions.

Although however, later on, in the second part of his Treatise, Edwards cites key verses of chapter four of Paul’s epistle to the Ephesians, concerning the unity of local churches as the visible unity, at least from a Catholic perspective, of one sacramental body, which is at one and the same time and irreversibly a mystery of love and an institution, he never develops this understanding of the nature of Christian unity. In the commentary leading up to the quotation of other verses from Scripture, as well as the verses from Ephesians he says:

‘A *civil* union or an harmonious agreement among men in the management of their secular concerns is amiable; but much more a pious union and sweet agreement in the great business for which man was created, even the business of religion; the life and soul of which is LOVE.’ (3)

There is, indeed, a suggestion here that the visibility proper to a society belongs to the civil sphere alone, at least until the eschatological fulfilment of Christian unity at the end of time. This ties in with the vision given to us in the text from Zechariah, presented by Edwards as a scriptural introduction to the whole treatise:

‘Thus saith the LORD of Hosts, It shall come to pass, that there shall come people and the inhabitants of many cities; and the inhabitants of one city shall to go to another saying, let us go speedily to pray before the LORD, and to seek the LORD of Hosts. I will go also. Yea, many people and strong nations shall come to seek the LORD of Hosts in Jerusalem, and to pray before the LORD.’ (Zechariah 8.20-22).

In other words, the visible union of God’s people, which according to its title the treatise seeks to promote, is only visible in so far as shared Christian love can bring about, here and now, a visibly synchronised prayer, looking forward to an eschatological fulfilment in which there will be universal Church unity in terms of a reign of God over the nations, brought together in the new Jerusalem.

It is clear that both the Wesley brothers had the same transconfessional evangelical understanding of ecumenism. They also, saw it as the making manifest of a transconfessional Christian love which not only transcends, but is considered to legitimately bypass the problem of separated confessional and institutional identities. They also shared the same difficulty in holding this transconfessional evangelical spirituality in tension with fidelity to the institutional structures of a State Church, John being ready to cross bridges which Charles was unwilling to cross, because of his greater involvement in the missionary, and therefore, transconfessional, outreach of Methodism.

In a sermon entitled, *Catholic Spirit* (to which was appended the religious poem of Charles Wesley, *Catholic Love*, in a separate publication of 1754, but preached by John for the first

time in Newcastle in 1749), John Wesley shows that he has reached the stage in his career when, with several years of the rapid development of the Methodist movement behind him, he has become fully aware of the transconfessional spiritual implications of the missionary outreach of that movement. In one passage of the sermon, echoing the words of the introductory text, II Kings 10.15, he says:

‘I ask not, therefore, of him with whom I would unite in love, are you of my church, of my congregation? Do you receive the same form of church government, and allow the same church officers with me? Do you join in the same form of prayer wherein I worship God? ... Nay, I ask not of you (as clear as I am in my own mind), whether you allow baptism, and the Lord’s supper at all. Let all these things stand by: we will talk of them, if need be at a more convenient season, my only question at present is this [quoting II Kings 10.15] Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart?’ (4)

In other words, as the theological virtue of love is, as Wesley understood it, communicated by the Holy Spirit to the heart, unity in love allows one to transcend, and bypass in transcending, all considerations of denominational differences. If, in this passage from *Catholic Spirit*, Wesley suspends the necessity of agreement, even if only provisionally, on the ordinances of Baptism and The Lord’s Supper, it is because he wishes to include Quakers in his evangelical missionary outreach. This is made clear in a passage of an article written for the *Arminian Magazine* in 1788 (5). As Frank Baker points out, it also shows that forty years after the preaching of *Catholic Spirit*, Wesley had the same vision of transconfessional spiritual inclusiveness.

In his religious poem *Catholic Love*, appended in 1754 to his brother’s sermon, he says of the capacity of love to transcend all forms of distance and dispersion:

‘For these however in flesh disjoined  
Where’er dispersed o’er earth abroad,  
Unfeigned, unbounded love I find,  
And constant as the life of God;  
Fountain of life, from thence it sprung  
As pure, as even, and as strong.’ (verse 6)

The mention of the saints in heaven, in the last verse (*verse 7*), gives to this unbounded love an eschatological dimension:

‘Join’d to the hidden church unknown  
In this sure bond of perfectness,  
Obscurely safe, I dwell alone  
And glory in the “uniting grace”,  
To me, to each believer given,  
To all the saints in earth and heaven.’ (6)

As was noted in the general introduction, and then again in the brief evocation of the theological reflections of Jonathan Edwards on prayer for Christian unity, the thrust of transconfessional evangelicalism towards invisible unity in the outpoured love of the Holy Spirit, can have no other foundation than the very Person of Jesus. He is the one and only Head, from whom, as Edwards puts it, the ointment of the Holy Spirit flows down on to the members.

Where theological exposition is concerned, this rootedness of spiritual ecumenism in the very Person of Jesus finds its most poignant expression in the theology of Zinzendorf. For him the Cross is at the centre of all authentic religious experience. We must be directly confronted with the crucified Jesus, by truly seeing Him, by truly making contact with Him in the putting of our fingers into the holes left by the nails in His hands and feet, and in the placing of our hand in His open side. Perhaps there is no better summary of the spiritual theology of Zinzendorf than in these words of the *Imitation of Christ*, which he would probably have known:

‘If thou knowest not how to meditate on high and heavenly things, rest in the passion of Christ, and willingly dwell in His sacred wounds.’ (7)

The reservation here expressed about the usefulness of trying to penetrate into the meaning of the Christian mysteries by theological speculation chimes in with Zinzendorf’s own insistence on intuitive seeing, rather than conceptual reasoning, as a source of spiritual insight into the significance of the central Christian mystery of the Cross. To the objection that ‘Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed’ (John 20.29), he replies:

‘in reality and truth one has the creator of all things, the fatherly power, the God of the entire world, standing in his (Jesus’s) suffering form, in his penitential form, in the form of one atoning for the whole human race – this individual object stands, before the vision of one’s heart, before the eyes of one’s spirit, before one’s inward man.’ (8)

How could this kind of theological terminology not remind one of the dramatic quality of Charles Wesley’s portrayal of Jesus Crucified? He literally placards the mystery of the crucifixion in front of us, so that we cannot but consent to look upon the one whom we have pierced (John 19.37).

‘Now let us pass the years between  
And view thee bleeding on the tree  
My God who dies for me, for me.’ (9)

But as Zinzendorf also says, ‘it is not enough to look at Jesus on the cross; we must make direct contact with his wounded body’:

‘Turn to Jesus crucified,  
Fly to these dear wounds of His.’ (10)

We must be bathed in His blood:

‘Sink into the purple blood  
Rise into the life of God.’ (11)

Ultimately we must go right inside the body of Jesus:

‘His bleeding heart shall make you room  
His open side shall take you in.’ (12)

To express the exclusiveness of a relationship with Jesus, brought about by intimate contact with His wounds, especially the hole in His side, opening up His heart to us, Zinzendorf turns to the sponsal language of the mystics:

‘The bride and those invited have one object, one beauty, one virtuousness of the Bridegroom to admire. They admire that this man, the Son of God, the Creator of the

world, should have wanted to die on the Cross for His poor human beings, that He obtained His bride with His blood, that He brought back his fallen bride, his fallen wife, His adulteress and on the cross saved this His property, His possession, His creature as a spoil. This is also the impression which the bride-hearts have, which the souls have who throughout their whole life know nothing and want to know nothing other than their Bridegroom.’ (13)

Of this mutual exclusiveness, the bride as the Bridegroom’s possession and spoil, purchased in His Blood, and the Bride’s wanting to know nothing but the crucified love of the Bridegroom, Charles Wesley will say, in one of the most original of his *Hymns on the Lord’s Supper*, if one contrasts it with the Protestant ‘solafideism’ of which Methodism breaks the bonds:

‘And will he not His purchase take  
Who died to make us all His own,  
One spirit with Himself to make,  
Flesh of His flesh, bone of His bone?’ (14)

## **II. His Poetical Achievements and Active Loving Response to Jesus Crucified**

For Charles Wesley, our loving response to the supreme revelation of God’s love for us in Jesus crucified is active in the sense of the biblical Arminianism, referred to above, which differentiates the Methodist understanding of spiritual experience from the quietism of Zinzendorf and the Moravians. In particular, the integration, refused by Zinzendorf, of the works of love, whether Godward in worship, or manward in service of neighbour within the sphere of the faith, inspired intimacy with the crucified Jesus, made it possible to take seriously the call addressed to every Christian believer to reach the perfection of love, not only by personal efforts to make spiritual progress, but by frequent recourse to the means of grace which give strength and sustain such efforts, especially the Ordinance to receive Communion at The Supper of The Lord.

There are, therefore, underlying doctrinal and sacramental themes in which the Wesley brothers were of one mind, and which explain, in part, why the hymns of Charles are so immensely richer in biblical and spiritual nourishment for the spiritual life of the Christian believer than the theological expositions of Zinzendorf. An analysis of these doctrinal

themes is beyond the scope of this paper. Our concern is with the other part of the explanation already referred to, namely a single-minded intense evangelical dedication of poetic genius to the biblical revelation, making possible a communication of that truth, not only to a theologically literate élite, but also to ordinary men and women, which the more academically based Lutheran Pietism had more difficulty in reaching, and even, as was said earlier, to the socially and culturally deprived.

Poetic imagery is particularly apt to express the central truths of revelation for the reason that the Bible also makes use of a superabundance of images in order to communicate them, and further, to communicate them in relational categories, which require a conversion of the heart, and not just a thinking with the head, in order to understand what it is that is being said. In the case of Charles Wesley, his total commitment to the central truths of Christian orthodoxy allows him to let biblical images inspire and direct all his poetic expertise. Nothing demonstrates this more clearly than that the majority of his hymns reveal themselves to be an intricate web of biblical quotations. One continually finds verses in which each line contains at least one quotation - sometimes several - from Scripture. Such compounding of images, even in a single line, is only possible for Charles Wesley, because an excellent classical education had instilled into him the art of deft and subtle allusion. At the same time the coming into play, at the very moment of deft quotation, of an acute poetic sensitivity, can turn this deftness into imaginative and creative interpretation.

Let us take just one verse of one of the hymns of the 1784 collection to illustrate what we have been saying: No. 30, beginning 'See sinner, in the gospel glass'. Let us take the six lines of the second verse:

'Behold the Lamb of God who bears  
The sins of all the world away!  
A servant's form he meekly wears,  
He sojourns in a house of clay,  
His glory is no longer seen,  
But God with God is man with men.'

The first two quote John 1.29: 'Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sins of the world'. The third line is an allusion to St Paul's epistle to the Philippians 2.7: 'But made

Himself of no reputation, and took upon Him the form of a servant'. In writing 'form', Charles keeps close to the meaning of the original *morphen* and the use of 'servant' links the words of St Paul with the 'suffering servant' poems in the book of Deutero-Isaiah. 'He sojourns in a house of clay,' reflects Job 4.19: 'How much less in them that dwell in houses of clay, whose generation is in the dust'. The fifth line transforms an affirmation of St John into a negation. The reference is to a main clause of John 1.14: 'we beheld His glory', that is, the glory of the incarnate Son. The last line echoes the beginning of St John's Prologue: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.'

This verse can, therefore, be regarded as a meditation on the theme of the 'suffering servant'. For it is much more than a series of quotations. The allusions are woven together in such a way that they form, in the imagination of the reader, a unified picture around a dominant image. The quotation from Job in the fourth line speaks of the weakness of man, formed from the dust of the earth. It reinforces St Paul's affirmation concerning the degree of abasement accepted by Jesus, in order to reach us who are but mortal clay. At the same time it enriches the image of the Lamb, introduced in the first line which, in its turn, recalls the 'suffering servant' poems, and particularly Isaiah 53.7: 'he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.' The reference to Isaiah throws into relief the word 'bears'. This word evokes an image of laborious effort in carrying a heavy burden. For this reason, Charles Wesley writes 'bears away' and not 'taketh away', as given in the *Authorised Version*. 'Taketh' adequately translates the Greek *hairon*, but 'bears' is more in keeping with the vigour of the image of the servant crushed under the weight of our sins (Isaiah 43.4). The contrast between 'bears', which connotes the crushing weight, and 'away', which signifies the final triumph of the Lamb, is deliberately emphasised by the separation of the two words – a separation not found in the gospel text. The reader is now prepared to grasp the significance of the unexpected negation in the fifth line: 'His glory is no longer seen'. Even if the object of the Incarnation is to reveal the glory of God, as affirmed by St John in chapter 1.14, this glory is in fact hidden on account of the self-lowering of the Incarnation. The last lines represent the culmination of this cascade of images. The two phrases juxtaposed: 'God with God' and 'man with men' bring to a climax this paradox to which we are brought by the Son's lowering Himself out of love for us. It remains only to contemplate the mystery which lies beyond images. That is why this simple statement of the doctrine of the Incarnation is no longer an image.

Clearly then, like Zinzendorf, Charles Wesley seeks to awaken in us a loving, contemplative *seeing* of the central mystery of our faith: the enfleshment of the very Son of God, leading to the ultimate abasement of the Cross. But the biblical images, presented with the delicacy and the deftness of creative poetic genius, enable him to give a much richer portrait of what we are to see, than the theological expositions of Zinzendorf.

Even the invitation to this act of ‘seeing’ is expressed by Wesley with extraordinary deftness of phrase. The first line of the first verse of the hymn, of which the second verse has just been analysed, runs ‘See, sinners, in the gospel glass’. As ‘See, sinners’ and ‘gospel glass’ supply the controlling insight of the entire hymn, giving it its unity, our attention is drawn to these four words by the use of assonance: the two ‘s’s’ and the two ‘g’s’, and also by the chiasmic arrangement of them. We must look into a mirror to see, whilst it is to sinners that the gospel is proclaimed. ‘See’, by the irregularity of stress which the imperative form of the verb introduces: ‘S-e-e!’ is highlighted in its own right. For, what are we to *s-e-e* with such insistence and urgency? The answer is: ‘the gospel’. But the gospel, for Charles Wesley, is the very Person of Jesus, and therefore the subject of the whole hymn and of the majority of the entire corpus of hymns. But we are warned by the word ‘glass’, with which ‘gospel’ is coupled, that we can only dimly see the things of God: ‘... now we see through a glass, darkly, but then face to face’ (I Corinthians 13.12). In parallel fashion, Zinzendorf warns us, in precise theological language (see quotation above) that the intuitive *seeing* of Jesus crucified for our sins, and bearing eternally the wounds of His crucifixion in His now glorified body, is of the order of faith and in no way gratifies our senses, even whilst it brings us spiritual joy.

No doubt it will be objected that the rather fastidious exercise of analysing just how many references to Scripture Charles Wesley is capable of packing into one verse of a hymn would be of no interest to the ordinary believer, even if he were theologically literate enough to undertake it. This is quite true. But in order to bring doctrinal and spiritual nourishment to such a believer, the hymns of Charles Wesley do not have to be analysed in this way. If such were the case, there would be no explanation as to how the 1784 Collection, in particular, brought this nourishment, in all its richness, to the Methodist congregations who sang the hymns in their pews from generation to generation, and of whom many were drawn from the working class as, for instance, the congregations of coal miners in different parts of England.

A simple comparison might show how such can be the case. One does not have to redistribute a cake into its constituent ingredients in order to appreciate its tastiness. On the contrary, the less one is aware of such constituents in the act of eating, the more likely one is to be able to enjoy the tastiness of their combined impact as a cake. Similarly, the creative artistry, with which Wesley presents us with the key images of the biblical revelation, make his presentation react on our subconscious in such a way as to become rich spiritual nourishment for our conscious faith-response to that revelation. In a lecture entitled *The Recall to Religion in the Hymns of Charles Wesley*, Bernard Manning brings out admirably the impact of this artistry, by contrasting it with what he calls ‘the ill-regulated verse’ of the century following Wesley. The example he gives is taken from George MacDonald’s morning prayers:

‘Lord, let me live and act this day,  
Still rising from the dead;  
Lord, make my spirit good and gay,  
Give me my daily bread.’ (15)

This verse is redolent of Scripture, with references, not only to the Lord’s Prayer, but also to other scriptural texts; but there is something either bald, or trite, or both, about the way they are reproduced. ‘Spirit good and gay’ is particularly ugly, even if it did not suggest unfortunate overtones to the present generation. The net result is poetry which falls flat on the mind and leaves the heart untouched.

Furthermore, Wesley combines with his unique poetico-religious genius a mind disciplined by a classical education in a mode totally unknown to the technological barbarians of the present generation. He was, thus, able to write hymns in which every verse has a meaning which is complete, and even the couplets within a verse. The result of such clarity, when combined with the singing of a melody, repeated for each verse, is to heighten the aptitude of the hymns to imprint their doctrinal and spiritual content on the minds of even the non-theologically literate. It is true that the working class Methodists of the Durham coal-fields or elsewhere, without formal theological education, but steeped in the words and images of the Bible, were much more accessible to the subconscious efforts which both the discipline and the artistry of the hymns could have on their minds and hearts, leading them to loving

faith-response to the central figure of all the hymns, the crucified Jesus, than the self-styled Christians of post-modernism. Does that mean that to correspond with present trends, not to say pander to them, we must relegate the poetical achievement of Charles Wesley to historical archives? To this ultimate question we must now turn in conclusion.

### **Conclusion: The Poetical Achievement of Charles Wesley and Spiritual Ecumenism**

Within the limits of specifically ecumenical considerations, there are two major reasons why the poetical achievement of Charles Wesley cannot be relegated to the past. Two words aptly sum up these reasons: heritage and holiness.

An eminent Methodist historian of the twentieth century, Gordon Ruff, has put his finger on the reason why such relegation is unthinkable:

‘The reader who turns the pages of the thirteen volumes (the Osborn Collection) of the hymns and poems of Charles Wesley will not be surprised to find in them, on almost every page, evidence of a writer in almost all respects conditioned by the time and culture in which he thought and wrote ... What will astonish him, and may well move him, will be to discover again and again divine songs which seem to escape such limitations altogether, a Christian devotion which is beyond the centuries, full of beauty, grace, and truth.’ (16)

In other words, not least among the qualities of a great many at least of the hymns, which we owe to the poetico-religious genius of Charles Wesley, is their timelessness.

For this reason the Congregationalist Bernard Manning, some of whose remarks have been referred to earlier, does not hesitate to point out to Methodists their duty to transmit this precious possession of their spiritual heritage to future generations, not only of their own Communion, but also of all Christian communions:

‘You talk much, and you talk rightly, of the work Methodism does for the world and for the universal Church; but your greatest – incomparably your greatest - contribution to the common heritage of Christendom is in Wesley’s hymns ... unless you preserve it for the use of the faithful, till that day when we are all one, we shall lose some of the vast gifts of God.’ (17)

But does not the very existence of the ecumenical movement give Roman Catholics a necessary share in such a duty? Do they not at the very least have the duty to acquire sufficient awareness of what is precious in the Methodist heritage, to be better equipped to enter into spiritual relationships with Methodists, and through that relationship to be better able to appreciate the value of this heritage for their own spiritual lives? ‘Catholics,’ writes John Paul II, quoting the Vatican Council Decree on Ecumenism in *Ut Unum Sint*, ‘must joyfully acknowledge and esteem the truly Christian endowments from our common heritage which are to be found among our separated brothers and sisters.’ (18)

Furthermore, as Bernard Manning has pointed out, what gives timelessness to Wesley’s hymns is what gives it to the Latin hymns of the Catholic Church inherited from the Middle Ages: the correlation of a both vivid and orthodox presentation of the central mysteries of the Christian revelation with the dispositions which must constitute the loving faith response to those mysteries of every Christian soul, whatever the historical, or cultural, context may be. As was shown in the first part of this paper, Charles Wesley had the incomplete understanding of the requirements of integral Christian Unity, characteristic of transconfessional evangelical spirituality. But from that spirituality he inherited what constitutes its deepest insight: the absolute necessity to respond, in penitent love, to the unspeakable mercy of God towards us, as shown in the crucified Jesus. And not only did he inherit, but above all, as the second part of this paper has amply pointed out, he greatly heightened, thanks to his poetico-religious genius, what he had inherited.

Such penitent love, as all the major ecumenical documents of the Catholic Church have stated, must be the tap-root of the spiritual ecumenism which the same documents designate as the ‘soul of the ecumenical movement’. Again in *Ut Unum Sint*, the Pope writes:

‘Dialogue cannot take place merely on a horizontal level, being restricted to meetings, exchanges of points of view, or even the sharing of gifts proper to each Community. It has also a primarily vertical thrust, directed towards the One who, as the Redeemer of the world and the Lord of history, is Himself our Reconciliation.’ (19)

One can easily imagine Charles Wesley, from his place in heaven, saying “Amen”, to that!!

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#### Notes

1. See *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 2 vols., *The Banner of Truth Trust*, vol. 1, 1984 reprint, pp 365-430.
2. *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol 2, *The Banner of Truth Trust*, 1979, p.288. The Treatise entitled: *The Humble Attempt*, etc., occupies pp. 278-312).
3. *Ibid.*, p. 295.
4. E.H. Sugden, *Wesley's Standard Sermons*, London, Epworth Press, 1964, vol. 2, pp 135-136.
5. Quoted by Frank Baker on p.136 of *John Wesley and The Church of England*, London, Epworth Press, 1970.
6. Sugden, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, p. 127.
7. Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, Book 2, chapter 1, 004.
8. Zinzendorf, *Londoner Reader Lecture VII*.
9. C. Wesley, *Hymns on the Lord's Supper*, no. 45, v.3.
10. C. Wesley, *Hymn Book of 1784*, No. 20, v.1.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.* no.29, v.7
13. Zinzendorf, *Londoner Reader, III*
14. Charles Wesley, *Hymns on the Lord's Supper*, No. 114.
15. B. Manning, *The Hymns of Wesley and Watts*, London, Epworth, 1993, p.35.
16. Gordon Ruff, *Religion in England 1688-1791*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1986, p.416.
17. Manning, *op. cit.*, p.13.
18. *Ut Unum Sint*, no. 47, ¶ 1.
19. *Ibid.*, no. 35.