

Wesleyan Ecclesiology: Charles Wesley's Understanding of the Nature of the Church

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Like his brother John, Charles Wesley did not write extended treatises on ecclesiology. Clearly both of the brothers accepted the premise of Article XIX of the Articles of Religion of the Church of England, which stated: "The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in which the pure word of God is preached, and the sacraments duly administered according to Christ's ordinances in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same." Therefore, neither felt the need to set out to write ecclesiological treatises. Both, however, express at times explicit views of the church. Charles does so, especially in his hymns and sacred poems, which reflect his belief in the apostolicity, catholicity, unity, and holiness of the church, which are explored in this chapter.

The Nature of the Church

Apostolicity is at the heart of Charles Wesley's theology of the church. In *Short Hymns on Select Passages of the Holy Scriptures* (1762)¹ he suggests a strong adherence to the principle of apostolic succession, namely, the long line of ordained clergy, which originated in the New Testament, but was rooted in the priesthood of Moses and Aaron, and passed down through the ages via the early church.

Impower'd thro' Moses's hallowing hands,
Aaron before the altar stands,
The consecrated priest of God!
Jesus *his* officers ordains:
And thus the *Christian* priest obtains
The gift of elders' hands bestowed.²

Wesley held fast to apostolic succession, within which the Church of England stood, and he was clear that the separation from Rome did not originate as an ecclesiastical one. Charles's posture on apostolic succession led him to oppose his brother John's "ordination" of superintendents ("bishops") for America in 1784.

¹ 2 vols. (Bristol: Felix Farley, 1762); henceforth cited as *Short Hymns* (1762).

² *Short Hymns* (1762), 2:351, Hymn 685.

Hebrews 5:4 (“No man taketh this honor unto himself, but he that is called of God, as was Aaron”) precipitates the above-quoted lines, expressing in part Charles Wesley’s sentiments on ordination. The second stanza of the same hymn makes clear his opposition to dissenting views.

The *catholicity* of the church is also emphasized strongly by Charles Wesley. While the church is the body of Christ and includes those who believe in him and follow him, Wesley envisions—

A church to comprehend
The whole of human race,
And live in joys that never end
Before thy glorious face.³

The all-encompassing “whole of human race” is the Wesleyan view of the church universal. From Charles Wesley’s perspective the church universal is not, however, merely an “earthbound” church. As God’s church, it is not limited to time and space.

One family we dwell in him,
One church above, beneath,
Though now divided by the stream,
The narrow stream of death.

In “Christ from whom all blessings flow” he also makes very explicit the *unity* of the church.

Many are we now, and one,
We who Jesus have put on;
There is neither bond nor free,
Male nor female, Lord, in thee.

Love, like death, hath all destroyed,
Rendered all distinctions void:
Names and sects and parties fall;
Thou, O Christ, art all in all!⁴

Earlier in the same poem he prays, “Join us in one spirit, join.” Wesley knows that unity resides in God’s grace: “Jesus, united by thy grace, / and each to each endeared.” The church of Jesus Christ is a grace-united church.

³ *Short Hymns* (1762), 1:392, based on Isa. 66:21-23: I will also take of them for priests and Levites, saith the Lord. For as the new heavens and the new earth, which I will make, shall remain before me, saith the Lord, so shall your seed and your name remain. And it shall come to pass, that from one new moon to another, and from one sabbath to another, shall all flesh come to worship before me, saith the Lord.

⁴ *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (London: Strahan, 1740), 195; henceforth cited as *HSP* (1740).

Holiness is also a distinctive aspect of the nature of the church. Wesley formulates a prayer that should be the constant prayer of the church in any age to reform the nation and spread scriptural holiness throughout the land.

Jesus, we wait to see
That spotless church of thine,
The heaven-appointed ministry,
The hierarchy divine;
Command her now to rise
With perfect beauty pure,
Long as the new-made earth and skies
To flourish and endure.⁵

How does the church demonstrate or live out its apostolicity, catholicity, unity, and holiness? If it exists by God's grace, it is a means of the realization of that grace in the world. John Wesley understood the church to be a fellowship of believers, a redemptive fellowship, which impacted not only its members, but the community at large. Thus the church is defined not only by what it is but by what it does—how it implements what it is by nature. In the *General Rules* one learns that Methodist believers are to avoid evil, do good, and attend to the ordinances of the church. Thus, it is not surprising to find Charles Wesley emphasizing how the church realizes its nature.

Let us for each other care,
Each the other's burdens bear;
To thy church the pattern give,
Show how true believers live.⁶

For Charles Wesley at the heart of the realization of all aspects of the nature of the church is love of God and love of neighbor.

He does not perceive of the church, however, as being perfect. No, it is imperfect, because it is filled with those going on to perfection. One of his finest poems that illustrates this understanding, is "Lo, the church with gradual light," in which Wesley describes the church's penultimate state on earth despite its eschatological character. The church endures "a long dreary night." The penultimate reality of the church is like the moon, which shines from borrowed rays of the sun. Like the moon the church has frequent eclipses. It is only the light of Jesus Christ that dispels the darkness. The church's eschatological hope, however, is that Christ will come again to purify it.

⁵ *Short Hymns* (1762), 1:392.

⁶ *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, 2 vols. (Bristol: Felix Farley, 1749), 1:248; henceforth cited as *HSP* (1749).

Now she without spot appears,
For Christ appears again,
Sun of righteousness, he clears
His church from every stain.⁷

Wesley continues his interpretation of the eschatological hope of the church with these words:

Bright she shall for ever shine,
Enjoying, like the church above,
All the light of truth divine,
And all the fire of love.⁸

The church is also born of the Spirit, united in Christ, and in the Eucharist one experiences the “perfect harmony” of the church.

Who thy mysterious supper share,
Here at thy table fed,
Many, and yet but one we are,
One undivided bread.⁹

Wesley emphasizes the centrality of *theosis* in the mystical body at the table. We are “One with the Living Bread Divine.” Our hearts, minds, and spirits all meet and are joined in Jesus. As intimate as the bond in Christ may be on earth, however, it is but a foreshadowing of the close tie which shall bind the church eternal.

And if our fellowship below
In Jesus be so sweet,
What height of rapture shall we know
When round his throne we meet.¹⁰

Wesley stresses the unity of the mystical body of the church in these words.

Born of the Spirit and the word,
Are we not brethren in the Lord,
Flesh of his flesh, bone of his bone,
His body mystical and One!¹¹

Wesley writes numerous poems about the unity of the body of Christ, indeed it is a primary theme of his life and ministry. He prays some of the most eloquent prayers for Christian unity to be found in the English language.

Make us of one heart and mind,

⁷ *Short Hymns* (1762), 1:298, based on the Song of Solomon 6:10: Who is she that looketh forth as the morning, fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners!

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Hymns on the Lord's Supper* (Bristol: Felix Farley, 1745), 138, Hymn 165; henceforth cited as *HLS* (1745).

¹⁰ *Hymns for those that seek and those that have Redemption in the Blood of* (London: Strahan, 1747), Nr. 32; henceforth cited as *RH* (1747).

¹¹ *Short Hymns* (1762), 2:392, based on 1 Pet. 2:17: Love the brotherhood.

Gentle, courteous, and kind,
Lowly, meek in thought and word,
Altogether like our Lord.¹²

And—

Giver of peace and unity,
Send down thy mind, pacific Dove;
We shall then in one agree,
And breathe the Spirit of thy love.¹³

Finally, Charles Wesley emphasizes that the church is called to mission. In the inspiring poem “Give me the faith which can remove / The mountain to the plain,” he articulates many dimensions of the church’s commitment to mission. In one stanza, however, he defines a two-fold purpose, which is timely for the church in any age. All of the members of Christ’s body, the church, commit—

To spend and to be spent for them
Who have not yet my Savior known,
Fully on these my mission prove,
And only breathe, to breathe thy love.¹⁴

The two-fold purpose is: (1) evangelism, the sharing of the good news of Jesus Christ, and (2) living a life of personified love as a Eucharistic community. One fulfills both purposes in the context of the fellowship of the church, not in isolation. Wesley emphasizes that the community moves forward in witness and mutual support in God’s mission.

He bids us build each other up;
And gathered into one,
To our high calling’s glorious hope
We hand in hand go on.¹⁵

One finds similar resonances of the fellowship of believers moving forward in witness and mission in these lines:

Help us to help each other, Lord,
Each other’s cross to bear;
Let each his friendly aid afford,
And feel each other’s care.

Help us to build each other up,
Our little stock improve;
Increase our faith, confirm our hope,
And perfect us in love.¹⁶

¹² *HSP* (1749), 1:248; original text: Gentle, courteous, and kind = Courteous, pitiful, and kind.

¹³ *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (Bristol: Felix Farley, 1742), 271; henceforth cited as *HSP* (1742).

¹⁴ From “Give me the faith,” *HSP* (1749), 1:300, stanza 2.

¹⁵ *RH* (1747), Nr. 50.

The church is born by grace and sustained by love. In a poem with the title “A Prayer for Persons Joined in Fellowship” Wesley emphasizes over and over the role of love as the only possible sustenance of the church.

Still let us own our common Lord,
And bear thine easy yoke—
A band of love, a threefold cord
Which never can be broke.¹⁷

He prays for the loving mind of Christ. He prays to be made perfect in love, and that “In earth, in paradise, in heaven, / Our all in all is love.”

The Book of the Church: Holy Scripture

At the heart of the life of the church, the faith and practice of its members, is the church’s sacred book, the Bible or Holy Scriptures. From a series of texts from early (*Hymns and Sacred Poems* [1740]) to later writings (the two-volume work *Short Hymns on Select Passages of the Holy Scriptures* [1762]), we discover Charles Wesley’s understanding of the authority and efficacy of the Bible.

It is the persons of the Holy Trinity, particularly the Holy Spirit, that unseal the meaning of the Holy Scriptures. In a poem to which Wesley gave the title “Before Reading the Scriptures” he invites the Holy Spirit, who is the “Source of the old prophetic fire, / Fountain of life and love” to inspire our hearts. The community of faith stands in historical continuity with the prophets who were inspired by the Holy Spirit to write and speak the truth to God’s people. The Holy Spirit continues to shed light on the truth of the Word. It enables the reader to sound “The depths of love divine.” Hence, in this hymn Wesley adjures all readers of the Bible to invite the Holy Spirit to illumine the Word before every reading.

A similar prayer is found in the hymn, “Come, divine Interpreter.” On one’s own it is impossible to grasp all the mystery of the Holy Scriptures. Hence, one prays:

Come, divine Interpreter,
Bring me eyes thy book to read,
Ears the mystic words to hear,
Words which did from thee proceed,
Words that endless bliss impart,
Kept in an obedient heart.¹⁸

¹⁶ *HSP* (1742), 83.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 86.

His confidence in the power of the Holy Spirit to reveal the true meaning of the sacred text is so strong that he avers: against it all doctrine and experience may be tested. Reflecting on Isaiah 8:20, he writes:

Doctrines, experiences to try,
We to the sacred standard fly,
Assur'd the Spirit of our Lord
Can never contradict his word:
Whate'er his Spirit speaks in me,
Must with the written word agree;
If not: I cast it all aside,
As Satan's voice, or nature's pride.¹⁹

There is a sufficiency in the Word that completes humankind.

All thy word without addition
Renders us for glory meet,
Fits us for the blissful vision,
Makes the man of God complete.²⁰

It also makes us wise unto salvation.

If faith in our dear dying Lord
The sacred instrument applies,
The virtue of his hallowing word
Shall make us to salvation wise,
Wise our high calling's prize t'attain,
And everlasting glory gain.²¹

He also discovers in Ezekiel 37:3-4, the power of the divine energy of the Word.

All-good, almighty Lord,
Thou know'st thine own design,
The virtue of thine own great word,
The energy divine.²²

There is a sense in which Wesley places confidence in the literal Word.

Trusting in the literal word,
We look for Christ on earth again:
Come, our everlasting Lord,
With all thy saints to reign.²³

¹⁸ *Short Hymns* (1762), 2:412, based on Rev. 1:3: Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1:310, Hymn 973.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:89, Hymn 278; based on Deut. 4:2.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 2:337, Hymn 663.

²² *Ibid.*, 2:51, Hymn 1273; based on Ezek. 37:3, 4: Can these dry bones live?

Did Charles Wesley then take the Bible literally? Yes, in the sense that he believed that the promises of God in Holy Scripture could be trusted completely. God will fulfill them. However, when one reads his response to John 6:63, one may hardly conclude that he is a biblical literalist.

The word in the bare *literal* sense,
Tho' heard ten thousand times, and read,
Can never of itself dispense
The saving power which wakes the dead;
The meaning *spiritual* and true
The learn'd expositor may give,
But cannot give the virtue too,
Or bid his own dead spirit live.²⁴

One of the texts, which reveals as well as any the foundational perspective of Charles Wesley's hermeneutic and approach to the Holy Scriptures, is "Whether the Word be preached or read." Without faith, says Wesley, the Word may be preached or read, but may be nothing but empty sounds and dead letters. It may be unprofitable and vain unless one hears by faith. He pleads for the spirit of the Word not the letter, which can be deadly.

In fact, says Wesley, those who "On the bare Word rely" are "wretched comforters." He asks, "What are the all verbal promises?" They are "Nothing to me, till faith divine / Inspire, inspeak, and make them mine." He would read the Holy Scriptures with "appropriating grace" bestowed by Jesus, who can open his eyes "to see" and his heart "to know." Thus, he gains assurance in faith.

As stated above, Wesley knows without question that it is the Holy Trinity that unseals the sacred book. Hence, in responding to 2 Timothy 3:15, he prays:

Jesus, the Spirit of faith bestow,
Who only can thy book unseal,
And give me all thy will to know,
And give me all thy mind to feel,
Filled with the wisdom from above,
The purity of heavenly love.²⁵

²³ Ibid., 2:56, Hymn 1284.

²⁴ Ibid., 2:249, Hymn 429. The italics are Wesley's.

²⁵ Ibid., 2:337, Hymn 663.

If there is a foundational text for a Wesleyan *lectio divina*, perhaps it is found in the poem that begins with the words, “The table of my heart prepare.” The scripture to which Wesley is responding is Deuteronomy 6:4-7. The poem is a six-stanza prayer for the complete saturation of one’s life with the Holy Scriptures. In stanza 1 he avers that if one is totally absorbed in them and God writes their precepts on the table of the heart, one will discover that “All things are possible to love.” Here one finds the goal of Charles Wesley’s biblical hermeneutic—the discovery of the possibilities of love.

1. The table of my heart prepare,
 (Such power belongs to thee alone)
And write, O God, thy precepts there,
 To show thou still canst write in stone,
So shall my pure obedience prove
All things are possible to love.

2. Father, instruct my docile heart,
 Apt to instruct I then shall be,
I then shall all thy words impart,
 And teach (as taught myself by thee)
My children in their earliest days,
To know, and live the life of grace.

3. When quiet in my house I sit,
 Thy book be my companion still,
My joy thy sayings to repeat,
 Talk o’er the records of thy will,
And search the oracles divine,
Till every heart-felt word is mine.

4. O might the gracious words divine
 Subject of all my converse be,
So would the Lord his follower join,
 And walk and talk himself with me,
So would my heart his presence prove,
And burn with everlasting love.

5. Oft as I lay me down to rest,
 O may the reconciling word
Sweetly compose my weary breast,
 While on the bosom of my Lord
I sink in blissful dreams away,
And visions of eternal day.

6. Rising to sing my Saviour’s praise,
 Thee may I publish all day long,
And let thy precious word of grace
 Flow from my heart, and fill my tongue,
Fill all my life with purest love,

and join me to thy church above.²⁶

In stanza 2 Wesley prays to the first person of the Trinity, “Father, instruct my docile heart,” for this will make him an able instructor of his own children who will learn early in life “To know, and live a life of grace.”

The benefits are not only for a parent. One is personally enriched. The Bible becomes one’s “companion.” A companion is a friend who accompanies you through all of life’s experiences. One is in conversation with this intimate companion. One talks “o’er the records of [God’s] will” and searches them carefully until the words of the Holy Scriptures are one’s own words.

Charles Wesley dreams of the divine words of the Bible becoming the only subject of his conversation. Literally he wants to walk and talk with this daily companion so that he will “burn with everlasting love.” He would lie down to rest at the end of the day “sweetly composed” by the reconciling Word. He would rise to sing his Savior’s praise and all day long he would proclaim the good news of salvation.

In the last stanza of this poem there is one of the most eloquent statements of the goal of Wesleyan biblical hermeneutics. One does not interpret the Holy Scriptures in a binding, restrictive way so as to control oneself and the community of faith by legalism. One reads the Scriptures and praises the Savior, one becomes so absorbed in the words of Holy Writ that the “precious word of grace” flows from the heart and fills the tongue. All of this has one goal—that one’s life may be filled “with purest love” and joined to God’s church.

The Sacraments of the Church

For Charles Wesley the church is unequivocally a sacramental church.

Baptism

Certainly his hymns for the sacrament of baptism are lesser known than his hymns for the sacrament of Holy Communion, for which he composed an entire volume, *Hymns on the Lord’s Supper* (1745).

²⁶ *Short Hymns* (1762), 1:91-93. Each stanza is originally written in the above sequence but as a separate poem.

A one-stanza hymn, “Truly baptized into the name,” written in response to Acts 19:5, “They were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus,” is important for the way in which Charles weaves so many central facets of Wesleyan theology into eight lines.

Truly baptized into the name
Of Jesus I have been,
Who partner of his nature am,
And saved indeed from sin;
Thy nature, Lord, through faith I feel,
Thy love revealed in me;
In me thy full salvation, dwell
To all eternity.²⁷

In this poem he speaks in the first person on behalf of the baptized. The opening two lines simply state the fact of baptism: “Truly baptized into the name of Jesus I have been.” The next four lines, however, focus on *theosis*, participation in the nature of God. Wesley states that through baptism he has become a partner of God’s nature: “Who partner of his nature am / And saved indeed from sin.” The awareness of salvation from sin is, of course, central to Wesleyan theology.

Lines 5 and 6 emphasize the faith experience. Charles Wesley uses the verb “feel” to express how he experiences God’s nature: “Thy nature, Lord, through faith I feel, / Thy love revealed in me.” God’s nature is love and this is what Wesley senses within himself. Such love is the expression of “full salvation,” which is eternal.

In a second hymn, “Come Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,”²⁸ which bears the original title, “At the Baptism of Adults,” one discovers the foundational elements of a Wesleyan theology of baptism.

1. Come, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,
Honour the means enjoined by Thee,
Make good our apostolic boast,
And own thy glorious ministry.
2. We now thy promised presence claim,
Sent to disciple all mankind,

²⁷ *The Unpublished Poetry of Charles Wesley*, 3 vols., ed. by S T Kimbrough, Jr. and Oliver A. Beckerlegge (Nashville: Abingdon/Kingswood, 1988, 1990, 1992), 2:389-390, based on Acts 19:5: They were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

²⁸ *HSP* (1749), 2:245.

Sent to baptize into thy name:
We now thy promised presence find.

3. Father in these reveal thy Son,
In these for whom we seek thy face,
The hidden Mystery make known,
The inward, pure, baptizing grace.
4. Jesu, with us thou always art,
Effectuate now the sacred sign,
The gift unspeakable impart,
And bless thine ordinance divine.
5. Eternal Spirit, descend from high,
Baptizer of our spirits thou,
The sacramental seal apply,
And witness with the water now.
6. Oh! that the souls baptized herein,
May now thy truth and mercy feel,
May rise, and wash away their sin—
Come, Holy Ghost, their pardon seal.

In the opening lines Wesley affirms that all Christian baptism is Trinitarian. The Holy Trinity has enjoined baptism, which connects the church of every age with the age of the apostles. Through baptism the community of faith claims the “promised presence” of God. It has been sent to disciple humankind and to baptize in God’s name.

Wesley follows the above affirmations with a three-fold prayer to the Holy Trinity. He prays that the Father will reveal the divine Son, Jesus, in those who are baptized, and will make known the “hidden Mystery”—“The inward, pure, baptizing grace.” Baptism is a grace-filled act, which no one can fully comprehend. Even if God makes known the “hidden Mystery,” this does not mean that one can fully grasp its meaning.

Wesley prays to Jesus, who is always present with us, to make the sign of baptism effective and to impart the “unspeakable gift.” What does he mean by the language of “hidden Mystery” and “unspeakable gift”? What is to be revealed? What is to be imparted? Precisely what Wesley says in the first baptismal hymn above—God’s nature, which is love.

Finally, Wesley prays to the Holy Spirit to descend and seal the sacrament and witness with the water. Baptism of water is accompanied by the baptism of the Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is the “baptizer of our spirits.” Once again Wesley turns to the verb “feel,” for baptism is experiential. He says one “May now thy truth and mercy feel.” How does one *feel* two such abstract concepts as truth and mercy? Through the sense of sharing in God’s nature, love, one knows the truth and mercy in God’s redemptive act in Christ. One rises and feels one’s sins washed away.

Eucharist / Holy Communion / Lord's Supper

There can be no question about the importance of the sacrament of Holy Communion for Charles Wesley as pertains to Christian theology and practice, and his understanding of the nature of the church. He and his brother John devoted an entire volume of poetry, *Hymns on the Lord's Supper* (1745), one of his most significant compositions and publications, to multiple facets of this subject. It continues to have an impact in the church, particularly ecumenically. It has been studied by a number of writers, such as J. Ernest Rattenbury, *The Eucharistic Hymns of Charles Wesley* (London: Epworth Press, 1948). See also Geoffrey Wainwright’s Introduction to the publication of the facsimile reprint of the first edition of *Hymns on the Lord's Supper* (1745) (Madison, NJ: The Charles Wesley Society, 1995, second printing 2001), and volume 2 of *Proceedings of The Charles Wesley Society* (1995), a volume that celebrated the 250th anniversary of the publication of *Hymns on the Lord's Supper*, with articles addressing these hymns from various denominational perspectives. Charles Wesley also wrote a brief prose document on the necessity of Holy Communion, which has recently been published in Kenneth Newport’s *Sermons of Charles Wesley*.²⁹

While the volume, *Hymns on the Lord's Supper* (1745), carries both brothers’ names on the title page, it is generally accepted that John wrote the introduction and appropriated the material from Daniel Brevint’s treatise on Christ’s sacrifice and Charles wrote the sacred poems or hymns.

In one selection, “Constant Communion,” Charles Wesley lays out the mandate for regular, if not daily, practice of the reception of Holy Communion by all believers. In the brief prose document mentioned at the conclusion of the preceding paragraph, he

²⁹ Kenneth G. C. Newport, ed., *The Sermons of Charles Wesley, A Critical Edition, with Introduction and Notes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

makes the case from Scripture and tradition to support the view of constant communion, and holds the Church of Rome, Luther, Calvin, and the Church of England responsible for the decline in the practice of Holy Communion. “The Church of England is blameable for infrequency of Communion as well as her Presbyterian neighbours.” He believed most sincerely that members of the Church of England are “indispensably held to the same duty by the plain positive injunctions of our own church.”³⁰

Charles Wesley was convinced that—

we may take for granted that we have evident scripture on our side for the necessity of celebrating the Eucharist every Lord’s Day. That we have Christian antiquity to support us in the same doctrine, I believe none of the opponents of this practice will be so hardy as to deny. . . . We have the testimony of St. Luke in several passages of his Acts of the Apostles, of St. Paul in his first Epistle to the Corinthians, of Tertullian, St. Justin the Martyr, the *Apostolic Constitutions*, and lastly of the Roman Pliny to prove that the Holy Eucharist is to be celebrated every Lord’s Day at the least. . . . both scripture and tradition do give plain evidence for the necessity of making at least a weekly oblation of the Christian sacrifice, and of honouring every Lord’s Day with a solemn public celebration of the Lord’s Supper.³¹

In the poem “Constant Communion” Wesley begins by stating that “true followers” of Christ in the early church were those who continued in the regular practice of Holy Communion. They fulfilled their duty: “They kept the Eucharistic feast.” But in his own day he asks in stanzas 10 and 11:

Where is the pure primeval flame,
Which in their faithful bosom glowed?
Where are the followers of the Lamb,
The dying witnesses for God?

Why is the faithful seed decreased,
The life of God extinct and dead?
The daily sacrifice is ceased,
And charity to heaven is fled.³²

Wesley earnestly prays for God to “Restore the daily sacrifice,” for the lack of regular practice of Holy Communion is what quenches the spark of love among the faithful.

Sad mutual causes of decay,
Slackness and vice together move,
Grown cold we cast the means away,
And quenched our latest spark of love.³³

³⁰ Ibid., 282.

³¹ Ibid., 286.

³² *HLS* (1745), 140, Hymn 166, stanzas 10 and 11 of a 22-stanza hymn.

³³ Ibid.

In his poem “Come to the feast, for Christ invites” he goes one step further in his argument for “constant communion.” He believes strongly that no one has the right to determine the non-necessity of the Eucharist, or for that matter its necessity. This is not a matter of human decision.

’Tis not for us to set our God
A time his grace to give,
The benefit whene’er bestowed,
We gladly should receive.³⁴

In Charles Wesley’s view whether or not to administer Holy Communion with constancy is not for either clergy or church councils to determine. He maintains that both Scripture and tradition expect at least the weekly reception of the sacrament. Hence, if one is faithful to the mandate of Scripture and the practice of tradition, one will receive the sacrament at least once a week.

How can the Eucharist be a means of God’s grace? He acknowledges that it is an incomprehensible mystery. One of his forms of address for God in these poems is “God incomprehensible.” He queries how one may presume to grasp the incomprehensibility of God and the mystery of power transmitted through the Eucharist. He does not shrink from asking how the bread and wine become instruments of God’s grace, but avers that he “Need not know the mystery.” What he does know, however, is that his blindness has been removed and now he can see. What he sees is not a resolution of all questions about the mystery but he catches a glimpse of divine, pardoning, self-giving love, which has been poured out for him. This is the vision of the Eucharistic experience.

Wesley speaks of the “unfathomable grace” mediated through the bread and wine. Who can possibly explain how through them one is filled with “all the life of God”?—once more an emphasis on *theosis*.

Let the wisest mortal show
How we the grace receive;
Feeble elements bestow
A power not theirs to give.³⁵

It is at the Eucharistic table that one experiences that God indeed will “Unseal the volume of [divine] grace, / And apply the gospel-word.”

³⁴ *HLS* (1745), 44, Hymn 60.

³⁵ *HLS* (1745), 41, Hymn 57.

Time and again Wesley emphasizes that the central focus of Holy Communion is the experience of love, the love of God. His constant Eucharistic prayer is—

Our needy souls sustain
With fresh supplies of love,
Till all thy life we gain,
And all thy fullness prove,
And strengthened by thy perfect grace,
Behold without a veil thy face.³⁶

God's love experienced at the sacred table has power to unite the members of Christ's body, the church. Thus, the Eucharist the key to community.

'Tis here his closest love unites
The members to their Head.³⁷

“God is love” and love is thus the most powerful force in all creation. It alone truly unites those who are estranged, alienated, and divided.

It is at the table of the Lord that the divisions of the church are overcome. Thus, Wesley prays,

We thirst for the Spirit
That flows from above,
And long to inherit
The fullness of love.³⁸

The eschatological hope of the Eucharist is that the fullness of God's love will overcome all separation and fragmentation and unite the body of Christ, the church, as one people. Wesley expresses this hope in these words:

Sure and real is the grace,
The manner be unknown;
Only meet us in thy ways
And perfect us in one.³⁹

In speaking of the early church and its practice of constant communion, Wesley recalls—

O what a flame of sacred love
Was kindled by the altar's fire!⁴⁰

In regular attendance at the altar of the Lord in Holy Communion the flame of sacred love was kept alive. The context of the early church's very existence was the daily

³⁶ *HLS* (1745), 30, Hymn 40.

³⁷ *HLS* (1745), 43, Hymn 60.

³⁸ *A Short View of the Differences between the Moravian Brethren, Lately in England, and the Rev. Mr. John and Charles Wesley* (1748).

³⁹ *HLS* (1745), 41, Hymn 57.

⁴⁰ *HLS* (1745), 139, Hymn 166.

reception of “The tokens of expiring love.” What a picture of the church of Christ in any age—aflame with sacred love at its Eucharistic celebrations!

The Eucharist is unequivocally for Wesley a Trinitarian meal. All persons of the Trinity share in the meal as one Godhead.

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
Sav'd by Thee
Happy we
Shall thy throne inherit:
Here our heavenly banquet tasting.
In thy love
Joy we prove
Ever, ever lasting.⁴¹

As in the invocation of the Holy Spirit in the liturgical *epiklesis*, which is historically a part of most traditional Eucharistic celebrations, Charles Wesley offers prayers of invitation to the Holy Spirit to be present in the experience of Holy Communion. At this Trinitarian meal and experience, Wesley asks the Holy Spirit to be the spark of human memory, awareness, and conscience at the table of the Lord.

Come, thou everlasting Spirit,
Bring to every thankful mind
All the Savior's dying merit
All his suffering for mankind.⁴²

Wesley refers to the Holy Spirit as the Divine Remembrancer. Once again he uses the verb “feel” as he asks, “Let us feel thy (Holy Spirit's) power applying, / Christ to every soul and mind.” Thus, those communing receive the atoning grace via the Holy Spirit.

More specifically Wesley refers to the power of the Holy Spirit shedding its influence over the bread and wine: “Thy life infuse into the bread, / Thy power into the wine.” The goal of the infusion is unmistakable: LOVE.

Effectual let the tokens prove,
And made by heavenly art
Fit channels to convey the love
To every faithful heart.⁴³

⁴¹ *Hymns on the Trinity* (Bristol: Pine, 1767), Hymn 37.

⁴² *HLS* (1745), 13, Hymn 16.

⁴³ *HLS* (1745), 51, Hymn 72.

How does one prepare for this experience of God's grace and love, union with Christ, all the life of God, and the visitation of the Holy Spirit?

In a poem based on Christ's command, "Do this for my sake," Wesley spells out quite definitively how believers are to prepare for the Eucharist.

In stanza 1 he avers that those who desire to commune are to be filled with calm expectation. Like the man waiting for healing at the pool of Bethesda, one expects the grace of God to be revealed in the supper of the Lord.

In stanza 2 Wesley lists the disciplines, which properly prepare one for Holy Communion.

With fasting and prayer
My Savior I seek,
And listen to hear
The Comforter speak;
In searching and hearing
The Life-giving Word
I wait thy appearing,
I look for the Lord.⁴⁴

Before coming to the table, we are to fast, pray, await the voice of the Holy Spirit, diligently study the Scriptures, and be attentive to the proclamation of the Word that gives life. With such preparation we await the appearance of the Lord in the Eucharist. As believers we do all these things because we hope "to inherit / Thy fullness of love." We do all these things because, when we come to the Lord's Supper—

'Tis here we look up
And grasp at thy mind,
'Tis here that we hope
Thine image to find;
The means of bestowing
Thy gifts we embrace
But all things are owing
To Jesus's grace.⁴⁵

Even if believers prepare themselves in all the disciplines Wesley mentions, they do not guarantee the experience of the fullness of God's love and grace at the table, for "all things are owing / To Jesus's grace."

Conclusion

⁴⁴ *A Short View of the Differences between the Moravian Brethren, Lately in England, and the Rev. Mr. John and Charles Wesley* (1748).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

Since Charles Wesley's life was centered in the worship of God, it is not surprising that he composed numerous hymns for specific times of worship. In the Church of England there were two major forms of the liturgy, the daily office (Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer), and the Eucharist (on Sunday or other days). Both the daily office and the Eucharist were liturgically adjusted to the cycle of the Christian year according to the Book of Common Prayer. There were, of course, occasional services such as marriage, death and resurrection, and special feast days.

How were Charles's hymns for the opening and closing of worship and for the morning and evening used by the Wesleys, since the eighteenth century worship of the Church of England was not characterized by hymn singing? When would the hymns designated for the opening and closing of worship and for morning and evening have been used? While one cannot give definitive answers to these questions, it is highly likely that they were used in the Societies and members were also encouraged to use the texts for private devotions as well.

The hymn "Come, let us join with one accord" which bears the title "For the Lord's Day" is a superb summary of Wesley's concept of the Christian's doxological vocation. Wesley immediately connects the earthly community of faith with the heavenly community of faith. He says "Come, let us join with one accord / In hymns around the throne." The earthly voices of worship unite with the voices of eternity in singing God's praise. God set aside at creation a day for rest and praise of the divine. Even so, Wesley bids all believers:

Not one, but all our days below,
Let us in hymns employ;
And in our Lord rejoicing, go
To his eternal joy.⁴⁶

The doxological life is a life of constant praise of the Creator for creation and life itself.

Wesley does not forget that the "constant praise" of which he speaks is praise of the Holy Trinity. He exclaims: "Praise to the great Three-One be given / By all on earth, and all in heaven."

The hymn "Blest be the dear uniting love" with the title "At Parting," is indicated as being for the closing of worship. Throughout the development of the Methodist

⁴⁶ *Hymns for Children* (Bristol: Felix Farley, 1763), Nr. 62.

movement this text was used for funerals and memorial services. It is, however, one of Wesley's finest ecclesiological statements.

1. Blest be the dear uniting love
 That will not let us part;
 Our bodies may far off remove,
 We still are one in heart.
2. Joined in one spirit to our Head,
 Where he appoints we go,
 And still in Jesus' footsteps tread,
 And do his work below.
3. O let us ever walk in him,
 And nothing know beside,
 Nothing desire, nothing esteem,
 But Jesus crucified.
4. Closer and closer let us cleave
 To his beloved embrace;
 Expect his fullness to receive,
 And grace to answer grace.
5. While thus we walk with Christ in light,
 Who shall our souls disjoin?
 Souls, which himself vouchsafes to unite
 In fellowship divine!
6. We all are one who him receive,
 And each with each agree;
 In him the One, the Truth, we live;
 Blest point of unity!
7. Partakers of the Savior's grace,
 The same in mind and heart,
 Nor joy, nor grief, nor time, nor place,
 Nor life, nor death can part:
8. But let us hasten to the day
 Which shall our flesh restore,
 When death shall all be done away,
 And bodies part no more.⁴⁷

Even though the members may be separated from one another, they are nevertheless "one in heart." They are also "Joined in one spirit to our Head" (namely, Christ). The members do the work of Christ on earth.

⁴⁷ *HSP* (1742), 159-160.

They have a constant companion and constant communion, as they meet at the table of the Lord and follow in the footsteps of Christ; they “ever walk in him.” And, above all else, they desire and esteem nothing but Jesus crucified.

As the members come closer and closer together and expect to receive the fullness of Christ, Wesley says that in their relationships “grace [is] to answer grace.” What a pattern for the life of the church and its members! They respond to one another always with grace. They are responding to God’s grace in Christ by answering grace with grace. What if all those claiming to be part of the church of Jesus Christ actually lived by the principle for all relationships of “answering grace with grace”? Divisions, disunity, denominational aggrandizement, and selfishness would rapidly diminish.

The unity of the body of Christ rooted in God’s grace cannot be disjoined by anyone or anything, for God in Christ has created a divine fellowship. With reminiscences of St. Paul, Wesley writes:

We all are one who him receive,
And each with each agree;
In him the One, the Truth, we live;
Blest point of unity!

Partakers of the Savior’s grace,
The same in mind and heart,
Nor joy, nor grief, nor time, nor place,
Nor life, nor death can part.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Ibid.