

Changed from glory into glory

Rebecca Slough, Assistant Professor of Church Music
Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary

John Wesley and his younger brother Charles sparked a revival in the Church of England that focused on the disciplines of prayer and small group Bible study. Their intent was to aid the transformation of the heart, to help believers accept salvation with full assurance and grow in loving God with their whole heart, soul, mind, and strength. Rejecting the strict Calvinist belief in predestination, the Wesleys adhered to an Arminian theology that stressed the availability of salvation to all, free will, and Christian perfectionism.

Wesley scholar Frank Whaling claims that although the Wesleys had a theological system, their legacy was a distinctive spirituality.¹ What John preached and wrote in prose form, Charles cast in poetry. Charles's hymns, set to durable tunes, penetrated deep into the soul. John's prodigious organizational

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skill established networks that served both to evangelize nonbelievers and to nurture believers at all levels of spiritual maturity. Together John's patterns of local organization and Charles's substantial collection of hymns served the Methodists long after the brothers died.

A brief overview of the Wesleys' understanding of assurance and their view of Christian perfection will provide a backdrop for our examination of the hymn "Love

divine, all loves excelling." By "assurance" John and Charles Wesley meant that receiving salvation involves both intellectual acceptance and felt experience. They did not define or delimit this experience, but taught that it entails an inward movement of the heart, soul, or spirit, a recognition that salvation has been received. This experience is not primarily emotional, not a feeling

but a deep sense of Christ's justifying love. Calvinist theologians, in particular, challenged this teaching, contending that people cannot know for certain whether they are saved.

Like their views on assurance, the Wesleys' understanding of Christian perfection was controversial, and it is still easily misunderstood.² They claimed that the work of sanctification might be completed, in some rare cases, when one freely accepts the gift of salvation. In the lives of most believers, however, sanctification is a continual process culminating at the time of death. Sanctification is the ongoing transformation of the heart into full love of God through Jesus Christ. Through the sanctifying work of the Spirit of Christ, believers' minds are conformed to Christ, their hearts fill with love for God, and their own desires, needs, interests, and purposes are transformed so they pursue God's will.³ This understanding of justification is radical and far-reaching.⁴ When believers confess their sin on receiving salvation, they freely choose to open themselves to the indwelling of Christ. Using 1 John, John Wesley made the case that believers are thoroughly forgiven and justified; their love is made perfect through Christ.

In the process of sanctification believers continually need the merit of Christ's atonement to cover their errors and mistakes. The Wesleys did not overlook the fact that Christians don't always get it right, that they require God's grace even after receiving salvation. Christians commit errors in judgment that lead to mistakes in practice. They are not perfect in knowledge or infallible, they suffer infirmities, they are tempted. But the Wesleys were not inclined to call such mistakes "sin" in believers who are willingly being transformed by God's love at work in them, who are striving to let Christ's mind and heart dwell in them fully, making them new creatures.

One can see why this position provoked vigorous debate among the Wesleys' theological contemporaries. One can see that this view, applied most appropriately to Christians maturing in sanctification, could be misinterpreted and abused. But the strength of the Wesleys' understanding of Christian perfection lies in the belief in the ongoing sanctification that God in Christ effects in the mind and heart of the believer.

“Love divine, all loves excelling”

Almost all Protestant groups include “Love divine, all loves excelling” in their hymnals or song collections. Roman Catholics have also discovered it. The text follows, as it originally appeared in 1747 in *Redemption Hymns*:

1. *Love Divine, all Loves excelling,
Joy of Heaven to Earth come down,
Fix in us thy humble Dwelling,
All thy faithful Mercies crown;
Jesu, Thou art all Compassion,
Pure unbounded Love Thou art,
Visit us with thy Salvation,
Enter every trembling Heart.*
2. *Breathe, O breathe thy loving Spirit
Into every troubled Breast,
Let us all in Thee inherit,
Let us find that Second Rest:
Take away our Power of sinning,
Alpha and Omega be,
End of Faith as its Beginning,
Set our Hearts at Liberty.*
3. *Come Almighty to deliver,
Let us all thy Life receive,
Suddenly return, and never,
Never more thy Temples leave.
Thee we would be always blessing,
Serve Thee as thy Hosts above,
Pray, and praise Thee without ceasing,
Glory in thy perfect Love.*
4. *Finish then thy New Creation,
Pure and sinless let us be,
Let us see thy great Salvation,
Perfectly restor'd in Thee;
Chang'd from Glory into Glory,
Till in Heaven we take our Place,
Till we cast our Crowns before Thee,
Lost in Wonder, Love, and Praise.*

This hymn has been in continuous use since 1747, although some textual variations have been introduced, in part to address certain theological concerns. In 1780 an editor changed “Jesu” to “Jesus” in verse one; the same editor changed “that Second Rest” in stanza two to “the promised rest.” Not long after the hymn was written, a fellow Methodist proposed “Take away the love of sinning” as a substitute for Charles’s original “Take away the power of sinning,” which suggested an extreme view of Christian perfectionism and a loss of free will. Some written evidence indicates that John Wesley may have disliked this stanza from the beginning; he omitted it in his subsequent hymnals. At some point the stanza was reclaimed, with the change. In 1780 “pure and sinless” in verse four became “pure and spotless,” and beginning in 1889 various editions of *Hymns Ancient and Modern* printed the revision.⁵

Rather than analyzing the hymn line-by-line, I’ll summarize each half stanza in a prose phrase. Hymn analysts often use this technique to get to the heart of the text. You may want to make your own summary before you proceed to mine, which is hardly definitive.

- 1a. Dwell in us and bless us, heavenly Love who has come to earth;
- 1b. Jesus, bring your salvation into every waiting heart.
- 2a. Breathe your Spirit into all people so we can receive eternal life:
- 2b. Be our beginning and end so our hearts no longer desire to sin and are free.
- 3a. Come back and never leave us so we may receive your life.
- 3b. We will worship you continually and shine in the fullness of your love.
- 4a. Restore us as new creatures;
- 4b. We are continually being changed by your redeeming love until we will worship you in heaven.

This rendering lacks the vibrancy and energy of the hymn, but the exercise isolates four points of interest: (1) Jesus’ divine character is love, and to participate in his character is to experience love as salvation, freedom, and new life. (2) This love is not some distant

object of devotion or romantic abstraction. It penetrates the body, and specifically the heart, and takes it over. (3) Our response to love is love: worship, service, wonder, and submission. Our love for love increases our desire to be free from the power of sin. (4) We are continually changed by love until we are pure.

The hymn gains strength and dynamism from its verbs, many of them in the imperative mood:

*Fix in us thy humble dwelling
Visit us with thy salvation
Enter every trembling heart
Breathe, O breathe thy loving Spirit
Let us all in thee inherit
Let us find the promised rest
Take away the love of sinning
Set our hearts at liberty
Come, Almighty, to deliver
Let us all thy life receive
Suddenly return and never, nevermore thy temples leave
Finish then thy new creation
Let us see thy great salvation*

Urgency and fervor sound in this hymn. It conveys no doubt about whether we can save ourselves: we can't. Until the second half of the third stanza, we do nothing but pray the hymn. We depend completely on Jesus' indwelling presence in the form of love; our posture is passive. The hymn's energy (helped by a stable meter, strong rhyme pattern, and a lively tune) expresses the desire of our wills to be molded and reshaped by Christ's Spirit. It assumes that our petitions will be answered. By the third stanza we can respond in worship and service on receiving new life; in the fourth stanza we are brought to perfection and participate in the heavenly worship of God, as prefigured in the Revelation to John.

“Changed from glory into glory”

“Changed from glory into glory” is an explicit allusion to 2 Cor. 3:18. “And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into

the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit” (NRSV). In the third chapter of the letter, Paul contrasts the glory revealed in Moses with the glory of God revealed in Christ. Moses’ veil prevented the people of Israel from seeing the glory in Moses’ face. In contrast, Christians not only see the glory of God in Christ but also participate in that glory as they are transformed and conformed to Christ’s image by the Spirit. In the beginning of chapter four, Paul continues to make his case for the basis of his ministry. He proclaims Jesus Christ as Lord, “For it is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6, NRSV). The knowledge of God’s revelation in the incarnate Christ rests in the hearts of believers; it shines from a place where no light is visible to the eye.

The meaning of “glory” in the Bible is itself a study in transformation.⁶ The Hebrew *kabod* carried a cluster of meanings,

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including “weight,” “honor,” “dignity,” “splendor,” “power,” “presence,” and “beauty.” At times in Israel’s history this term and others took on greater significance in describing the presence of God and the people’s experience of God. *Kabod* has little obvious connection with the Greek *doxa*, which generally meant “opinion.” For reasons that are not entirely clear to scholars, the Septuagint translators used *doxa* to render the various Hebrew meanings of *kabod*. Our English translation of *doxa* as “glory” tends to flatten a whole range of meanings into one or two favorites. According to Pauline scholar Carey Newman, the range of Paul’s meanings, which he inherited from the rich Hebrew and

Greek traditions, includes “praise,” “honor,” “status,” “image,” “representation,” “radiance,” “brightness,” “boasting,” “pride,” “greatness,” and “divine presence.”⁷

Charles Wesley, echoing Paul in a way consistent with Wesley’s view of Christian perfection, likely intended that “glory” in this hymn would carry meanings including “image,” “radiance,”

“brightness,” “greatness,” and possibly even “divine presence.” As Christ’s Spirit changes our minds and hearts, we increasingly take on the image of Christ and participate in God’s glory. As sanctification continues, our lives, including our worship and our work, begin to emit radiance, brightness, and greatness that demonstrate Christ’s indwelling presence.

Both the line “changed from glory into glory” and the Pauline text to which it refers give us much to ponder about the nature of transformation. “Transformation” is a trendy word in our culture. Energy transformers dot the countryside. Children play with robotic toys that morph into fighting machines. Movie and TV special effects transform images before our eyes. Managers transform organizations and businesses to enhance cost effectiveness and improve products. Volunteers serve on committees to transform church structures and denominational identities. In the vast majority of instances in which we use the word “transformation,” human beings control the process and the outcome. And in these impatient times we expect transformation to be immediate; we frequently measure the effectiveness of a transformation process by the speed of its completion, by how quickly we feel its benefits. Changes over months, years, and lifetimes may entirely escape our notice.

Charles Wesley’s hymn comes to us from a different world. What separates us from the world of the hymn is not just the 250 years that have passed since its composition but also its alien (to us) understanding of human agency, particularly as agency relates to spiritual growth. The imperative mood of the hymn text bears witness to the conviction that Christians cannot change themselves by themselves. We are transformed by the active presence of love, of Christ in our hearts (a synecdoche for mind, image, entire being). What we can do is accept the gift of salvation in Christ, will our minds and hearts to love the Lord our God, and pray for Christ’s Spirit to carry out its sanctifying work throughout our lives. Even the passive verbal form, “changed,” shows that our being transformed from glory to glory is accomplished by an agent who works on us and in us—and perhaps even works us over.

Recently church people have displayed increased interest in the related subjects of holiness, purity, righteousness, and

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godliness. Some of the overtones I've picked up in discussion of these concepts make me wonder whether we adequately understand the nature of these qualities, or—more importantly—what their source is. Much of the talk seems to center on how believers can (should, must) make themselves holy, pure, righteous, or godly. I wonder whether our concern for these Christ-like qualities is breeding a new legalism. Perhaps we're thinking backwards. Holiness, purity, righteousness, and godliness do not begin with our agency, but are the fruits of Christ's Spirit doing its sanctifying work by making our love for God more complete. We will see these fruits evident in the lives of maturing believers. But God, not our good intentions, is the source of these

qualities. Relying on good intentions alone guarantees that we will fail to know holiness, purity, righteousness, and godliness.

The exuberance of Wesley's hymn (especially when sung to a rhythmic tune) may mask the challenges and resistance that are part of letting the Spirit of Christ do its work in our lives. The will to love God can easily be subverted in the midst of daily responsibilities. Letting Christ's love grow in us to its fullest extent will reorder our priorities in ways that can put us in conflict with family, friends, business associates, and even brothers and sisters in our congregations. The heart's radical openness to Christ's Spirit and its work does not exempt it from suffering or pain. To be remade in the image of Christ is to expect the possibility, if not the likelihood, of suffering. Contrary to many cultural assumptions in North America, transformation does not guarantee that our lives will be easier, better, more fun, more successful.

The ultimate purpose of the Spirit's transforming work in us is worship, our unending songs of love, praise, adoration, and thanksgiving. We were created to worship God, and for worship we are changed from glory to glory. Our worship, in all its forms of service to God and the world's peoples, begins on earth and reaches into the future until creation is fully restored. Our sanctification is not simply for our own benefit, but looks forward to the fulfillment of God's larger project of redemption. This

awareness lends a needed corrective to our understanding of personal salvation. Our salvation is not an end in itself. To be saved is not only to have one's soul rescued from eternal death (important as that is); it is also a participation in God's re-creation of the world and its people. As Charles Wesley knew, the end to which the transformation of our hearts, minds, bodies, and spirits is aimed is the fullness of worship, when we find ourselves "lost in wonder, love, and praise."

Notes

¹ Frank Whaling, ed., *John and Charles Wesley: Selected Prayers, Hymns, Journal Notes, Sermons, Letters and Treatises*, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Pr., 1981), 43.

² The following summary is drawn from John Wesley, "A Plain Count of Christian Perfection," in Whaling, *John and Charles Wesley*, 297–377.

³ The Wesleys' theology was unashamedly Christocentric. In today's use, the connection between the Holy Spirit and the person of Christ is sometimes unclear. Use of the term "Christ's spirit" or "spirit of Christ" in this essay is meant to clarify the connection.

⁴ Whaling, *John and Charles Wesley*, 328.

⁵ Frank Baker, ed., *Representative Verse of Charles Wesley* (New York: Abingdon Pr., 1962), 94–6. "Love divine, all loves excelling" appears as no. 592 in *Hymnal: A Worship Book* (Elgin: Brethren Pr.; Newton: Faith & Life; Scottsdale: Mennonite Publishing Hse., 1992). The changes in this text are the work of prior editors, not the work of the *Hymnal* committee.

⁶ For an overview of the development, see Carey C. Newman, *Paul's Glory-Christology: Tradition and Rhetoric* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 162.