



Wey Valley Methodist Circuit – Pastoral Letter 2022 Rev Barrie Tabraham

“*Instructive Structure*” – a hymn of Charles Wesley

Dear friends,

My last two contributions have been about hymnody, and so please forgive me for focussing on one particular and interesting aspect of Charles Wesley’s hymns. As a young man he had been trained in logic, and he found it natural to give his hymns an ordered structure. When you and I sing hymns as part of Sunday worship, it’s most unlikely that we’ll analyse them in any detail – because we’re worshipping God and singing his praises.

The hymn ‘What shall I do my God to love’ (***Singing the Faith 436***) is frequently sung and generally considered to be well-known. If we study it in detail, we find Charles Wesley has given us a beautifully crafted exposition of the love of God, based on the prayer found in Ephesians 3:18-19, i.e.

I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.
(NRSV)

What shall I do my God to love,
My loving God to praise?
The length, and breadth, and height to prove,
And depth of sovereign grace?

The depth of all-redeeming love
What angel tongue can tell?
O may I to the utmost prove
The gift unspeakable!

Thy sovereign grace to all extends,
Immense and unconfined;
From age to age it never ends;
It reaches all mankind.

*Deeper than hell, it plucked me thence;
Deeper than inbred sin,
Jesus’s love my heart shall cleanse
When Jesus enters in.*

Throughout the world its breadth is known,
Wide as infinity;
So wide it never passed by one,
Or it had passed by me.

Come quickly, gracious Lord, and take
Possession of thine own;
My longing heart vouchsafe to make
Thine everlasting throne.

My trespass was grown up to heaven;
But, far above the skies,
In Christ abundantly forgiven,
I see thy mercies rise.

*Assert thy claim, maintain thy right,
Come quickly from above;
And sink me to perfection’s height,
The depth of humble love. **

* *Source: A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists, 1780 edition. The two verses in italics were omitted from The Methodist Hymn Book and subsequent hymn books.*

Notice how the structure of the hymn follows a logical progression of thought:

- Verse 1. This sets out the author’s purpose, and the next five verses deal with each ‘dimension’ in turn:

- Verse 2 – ‘length’. Wesley uses the phrase ‘sovereign grace’ to link the first line of the second verse to the last line of the preceding one. The ‘length’ of God’s grace is seen in its timelessness – ‘from age to age’ – which, therefore, includes *all* people. The observant will notice that Charles Wesley changes the order that is in Ephesians, and begins with ‘length’ rather than ‘breadth’!
- Verse 3 – ‘breadth’. The connection between the verses is maintained with the phrase ‘throughout the world’ following on immediately from the word ‘mankind’ of the previous stanza. The humility that characterised so much of Charles Wesley’s writings is even evident in this hymn of adoration, but the last two lines – ‘So wide it never passed by one, or it had passed by me’ – is significant more for the way it emphasises Charles’ Arminian convictions.
- Verse 4 – ‘height’. Although Charles does not use the word ‘height’ in this verse, the sense, nonetheless, is there. We are given a graphic picture of his sins being literally piled up ‘to heaven’, yet above all is God’s mercy which is higher still.
- Verses 5 and 6 – ‘depth’. As the hymn stands in its modern version (without verse 6), the author’s treatment of ‘depth’ seems to lose a little of its force. However, when the missing verse is re-inserted, the full impact of ‘depth’ becomes readily apparent. The grace of God reaches to the very depths that human sin can descend.
- Verses 7 and 8 complete the picture of God’s all-encompassing love, and the last verse of the original ends with a typically Wesleyan paradox. The height of perfection *is* the depth of humble love! The question posed at the beginning of the hymn can only be answered by recourse to the grace of God – his free love which can only be truly appropriated by the humble, penitent sinner.

We can also see Charles Wesley’s careful structuring techniques on a smaller scale. Even within individual verses we can find balance and symmetry. For example, in the hymn ‘Jesus, lover of my soul’ (*Singing the Faith 355*), we have the following, in verse 3:

Just and holy is thy name,
I am all unrighteousness;
False and full of sin I am,
Thou art full of truth and grace.

Students of literature will immediately recognise the device known as chiasmus, where lines 1 and 4 enclose lines 2 and 3 in the pattern ‘A-B-B-A’ to enhance the impact of the words, which contrast the sinner’s frailty with the perfection of God. On a smaller scale still is the following example:

Let *earth* (A) and *heaven* (B) agree,
Angels (B) and *men* (A) be joined. (*Singing the Faith 358*)

This was a technique which Charles employed in hundreds of his hymns. He did it not only to instruct and clarify, but always to increase the effectiveness of the message he was proclaiming. They were, in Frank Baker’s words, ‘integrated artistic structures, not random heaps of building blocks, no matter how decorative’. The fact that, when we sing his hymns in worship, the orderliness and intricacy of their structure often go unnoticed, is an indication of the effortless way in which Charles Wesley constructed them and is a lasting tribute to his genius.



A Prayer: Loving God, when we sing hymns, whether they be old favourites or new creations, help us to absorb their words and all that they mean, so that our worship may be an offering that is a worthy response to your love for us, shown in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Barrie Tabraham