

I grew up in the United Methodist Church (UMC). From age three, I was in the choir and attended summer choir camps. I learned about Charles Wesley and memorized some of his hymns. As an adult, I served on staff as head intercessor of a UMC. Part of my role was to help individuals and families grow in their prayer lives. This included teaching prayer classes, introducing a variety of prayers in worship services, and weaving prayer into church life.

In all these years of service and familiarity with Charles Wesley, I never knew he had written two sets of *Intercession Hymns*. Had I known, I would have taught a prayer class on these hymns and incorporated them into worship services. I have no doubt this would have made the life of prayer in our church more dynamic, by appealing to more people.

Wesley published his first set of 40 *Intercession Hymns* in 1758,<sup>1</sup> with a set to follow in 1759. Prayer was an important part of community life for the early Methodists. They gathered at the end of the week to intercede for each other and for the nation and world:<sup>2</sup> “Fill every heart with mournful care, And draw out all our souls in prayer” (Hymn 1, v 2). Given Charles Wesley’s gift for writing hymns, it is not surprising he wrote prayers as verse to be set to music.

Music makes it easier to remember words. Not only were these hymns valuable for prayer gatherings, but also they could have been sung easily at home. They might have come to a person’s mind during the day. The repetition and rhythm would have helped people get the scripture-based prayers and truths into their hearts.

The *Intercession Hymns* would also have helped people recall ways to pray in time of need. People often tell me they are afraid to pray out loud, or they go blank when put on the spot. These hymns would have been a powerful way for people to learn and grow bolder in prayer, and to learn to trust hearing from the Holy Spirit. The collective intercession would have been powerful as well. It brings to mind the harps and bowls of Revelation 5:8.

Wesley published these hymns two years into the Seven Years' War.<sup>3</sup> The realities of this environment can be seen in these hymns: "Tho' famine, plague, and sword ... the ill shall end In everlasting good" (Hymn 15, v 7) – which has both "now and future" tones regarding God's kingdom. Hymn 14 is a prayer for the King of Prussia who was supporting England:<sup>4</sup> "Thou by the Christian hero stand, And guard the issues of his heart" (Hymn 14, v 4). Even in time of war, Wesley is concerned about a leader's heart transformation. Whether related to the war or not, an apocalyptic theme had also emerged in Wesley's hymns two years earlier; that theme continues in the last five *Intercession Hymns (1758)* entitled "For the Kingdom of God."<sup>5</sup>

The *Intercession Hymns (1758)* are grouped by focus: Prayers for mankind, the Church, the war, the government, struggles in life, people not saved, people deceived, and God's kingdom. These hymns highlight many Wesleyan themes:

**Salvation:** This theme reflects Charles Wesley's heart for the lost and his imperative to intercede worldwide for people to know Christ. Wesley emphasizes that salvation is available for all: "To every soul the Son reveal" (Hymn 1, v 4).

**Sanctification:** Sanctification is part of walking out a person's salvation. These hymns reflect prayers for sanctification, healing, and restoration, including restoration of the earth. "Write kindness on our inward parts," Wesley writes, describing the process of sanctification. "And chase the murderer from our hearts" (Hymn 2, v 3).

**Kingdom:** The working out of God's kingdom in the present, through sanctification and transformation, as well as the coming of God's future kingdom are celebrated and implored in these hymns. The coming kingdom takes apocalyptic as well as joyful tones. "The nations of the earth constrain To follow after peace, and prize ... the paradise of perfect love" (Hymn 2, v 4) creates both a "now and future" picture of God's kingdom. "Jesus, her ruinous walls rebuild"

(Hymn 4, v 2) refers both to Isaiah and the Church of England. “Thy kingdom to advance below” (Hymn 18, v 4) is part of Wesley’s prayer for Parliament’s role in society’s transformation.

**Love and Grace:** As people sang and prayed these hymns, love and grace would have taken root in their hearts. The hymns are also a way for people to pray for others to encounter God’s love and grace. “We wrestle for the ruin’d race, By sin eternally undone, Unless thou magnify thy grace, And make thy richest mercy known” (Hymn 1, v 3) emphasizes our dependence on God’s grace for salvation. The hymns concerning daily struggles demonstrate God’s love and offer a reminder to focus on His love in all circumstances, whether joy, illness, poverty, war, or an ordinary day. “What but thy love’s almighty power Can save a minister of grace” (Hymn 6, v 3) reminds us that love and grace are the gift that keeps on giving.

**Trinity:** The *Intercession Hymns* offer a clear message of the Trinity. Wesley addresses God variously as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – often within the same hymn. “Spirit” ... “God” ... “Saviour” (Hymn 18, v 1-2) is just one example of Wesley’s Trinitarian focus.

Some of the *Intercession Hymns* concerning life’s struggles and for unsaved people groups would not be appropriate today, at least not in their entirety. Yet the topics are important to include in intercession. Hymn 24 “For All Women Labouring of Child” is gut-wrenching and reflects the grim realities of the time. It begins “The women sad, whose hour is come, Or painfully approaches near” (v 1). Missing are the joy and celebration of child birth today.

Ironically, Hymn 25 “For All Sick Persons” is more upbeat, albeit not much more optimistic. The prayer is for God to detain the person to receive spiritual (not physical) wholeness; or to let the person see God’s goodness here; or to bring the person home to God.

Hymn 32 seems a pretty harsh judgment of the Jewish people: “Outcasts from thee, and scatter’d wide, Thro’ every nation under heaven, Blaspheming who they crucified, Unsav’d,

unpitied, unforgiven, Branded like Cain, they bear their load, Abhor'd of men, and curst of God" (v 2). This is different from today's prayers to bless Israel. The language of Hymn 33 "For the Turks" is not very affirming either: "Which now in sin and error lies, Wrapt in Egyptian night profound, With chains of hellish darkness bound" (Hymn 33, v 1). These hymns would hopefully not be prayed as such today. Hymn 35 covers heresies that might not be familiar today, in name or in spirit, e.g., "While millions drink the Arian lie, Or poison'd by Socinus, die!" (v 2); "How long shall the Pelagian dream The doom of fallen spirits seal; ... ?" (v 4).

I cannot criticize Wesley for harsh-sounding language because I was not living in that time period. In Wesley's defense, the scope of these prayers shows his heart for those who did not know Christ: "Life from the dead for all mankind" (Hymn 32, v 4); "With healing in thy wings arise, A sad benighted world to bless" (Hymn 33, v 1); "Thy glory let all flesh behold, and then fill up thy heavenly fold" (Hymn 34, v 4), which is both "now and future," underscoring the importance to Wesley of spreading the salvation message *now*.

For years, I have prayed for a way to reach more people in the church on the theme of prayer. I believe that by introducing me to Charles Wesley's *Intercession Hymns*, God has answered that prayer. Not many people are eager to sign up for a prayer class. But many are interested in learning more about church history, especially the Wesleys within a UMC congregation. People are also interested in the stories of hymns, more so than prayer. And the biblical themes woven into these hymns would make this topic appealing for Bible studies.

Teaching on the *Intercession Hymns* would be a great way to introduce more people to prayer, by incorporating intercession into those topics that appeal to more people. Even though I no longer serve at a UMC, I write and teach about prayer as a prayer missionary in the community, making curriculum available to churches. I know what my next project will be!

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<sup>1</sup> All hymn citations and “Editorial Introduction” references in this paper are quoted from *Intercession Hymns (1758)*, [file:///C:/Users/Owner/Documents/Downloads/56\\_Intercession\\_Hymns\\_\(1758\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/Owner/Documents/Downloads/56_Intercession_Hymns_(1758).pdf). Accessed through the website of The Center for Studies in the Wesleyan Tradition, Duke Divinity School, <https://divinity.duke.edu/initiatives/cswt>.

<sup>2</sup> “Editorial Introduction” to *Intercession Hymns (1758)*.

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