

Charles Wesley and the Making of the English Working Class

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When I began to pursue my doctorate at Cambridge University in 1979, I had occasion to meet with the head of computer services. She was speaking on the telephone as I entered her office. The conversation was hostile and increasingly raucous. It ended as she slammed down the receiver and exclaimed, “I hate Methodists.” Feeling constrained to bear witness for my co-religionist, I said, “Well, I’m one.” She dismissed my attempt at martyrdom with, “Oh, not you Americans,” and the conversation returned to its expected track. What I surmise provoked her malediction was a conversation with the head of the union of computer workers, demanding more money for less work. As the boss of the operation, she naturally wanted more work for less money. In her mind, to be an obstreperous trade unionist meant to be a Methodist.¹

E. P. Thompson voices a similar sentiment, albeit at much greater length, and for the opposite reason, in his well-known, *The Making of the English Working Class*.² Thompson quotes with approval an idea from Eric Fromm’s *Fear of Freedom* and applies it to the Wesleyan movement, charging that Methodism provided “the compulsion to work by which man was turned into his own slave driver.”³ He wonders how it is possible that a religion could produce people “whose frugality, discipline, [and] acquisitive virtues brought profit to their masters rather than success to themselves?”⁴ Thompson quotes Weber that for the industrial revolution to succeed it had to overcome the “immensely stubborn resistance” of the traditional workers.⁵ These traditional workers were used to toiling about 240 days of the year. Although their workload varied from place to place and from time to time, Europeans in the Middle Ages worked roughly two-thirds of

the year, with about 80 full days and 70 partial days off.⁶ The leading theologian before the Reformation, Thomas Aquinas, had taught them that work, while not a curse, was a necessary evil to be avoided when possible.⁷ When not faced with hunger, often they did avoid it. Max Weber twice cites seventeenth-century Dutch economist Pieter de la Court saying that people only work because, and so long as, they are poor.⁸ How could workers such as these be induced to work long hours more than 300 days a year in the factories of the industrial revolution?

They sang the hymns of Charles Wesley.

Thompson says Methodism changed jolly traditional workers into exploited proletarians. It did so by providing an “inner compulsion” through an “essential disorganization of human life, a pollution of the sources of spontaneity bound to reflect itself in every aspect of personality.”⁹ Methodism was characterized by “joylessness,” “an almost Manichaeian sense of guilt,” “necrophily,” and “perverse imagery” in its hymns.¹⁰ Christ, in these hymns, is “by turns maternal, Oedipal, sexual, and sado-masochistic.”¹¹ Thompson quotes with approval Lecky’s assessment of Methodism: “A more appalling system of religious terrorism, one more fitted to unhinge a tottering intellect and to darken and embitter a sensitive nature, has seldom existed.”¹²

Let us now turn to these hymns that wrought this appalling transformation. First, let us note that even if they are as bad as Thompson alleges, they did help with the literacy of thousands of people. When illiterate people learned the hymns as they were lined out, and then bought a cheap hymnal where the hymns were printed, they taught themselves to read as they matched the letters to the words they knew. This newfound literacy was one of the keys to middle-class life, but we will set that benefit aside to examine Thompson’s charges. Although people differ on what they count as a hymn, most agree that Charles Wesley wrote more than six thousand hymns on a multitude of subjects. Limits of space prevent examination of all his works here, but when seeking to establish Charles Wesley’s theology of work, it seems prudent to limit the scope of the investigation to *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists*, the hymnal John Wesley compiled from his brother’s works.¹³ It is arguably the most widely used source of Charles’s hymns and thus the most powerful influence in shaping the attitudes of Methodists. Charles wrote other songs for workers, such as “A Hymn for the Kingswood Colliers,” but the eight hymns about work in the collection articulate nineteen ideas that summarize his thinking in this area.¹⁴

John Wesley has eight sections in the collection that are aimed at believers. When he divides these songs into the various categories of rejoicing, fighting, praying, watching, working, suffering, groaning for full redemption, brought to birth, saved, and interceding for the world, it seems that he means at least some

of these categories metaphorically. Certainly “fighting” and “brought to birth” are meant spiritually instead of literally. One could also assume that “working” likewise has a spiritual meaning, as when Paul talks about the quality of each one’s work that will be tested on judgment day (1 Cor. 3:13–15). Such an assumption would be wrong as an inspection of the hymns reveals. The message of the eight hymns in this section is that God expects and empowers his children to be good workers for their earthly employers.

The first hymn in this section comes from an earlier collection, *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, where it was headed “to be sung at work.” It begins by drawing on Colossians 3,

Summoned my labour to renew
And glad to act my part,
Lord, in thy name my work I do,
And with a single heart.¹⁵

Thus it is not the factory whistle nor the lure of the shilling that really orders the singers to their work, but the call of God. Just as the Word of the Lord came to the prophets, and God appointed various ones to serve the church, so God is the one who “summons” (note the sense of authority connoted by this verb) Christians to go to work. The use of the verb *renew* hints that the work is not some innovative project that fascinates by its novelty. No, it is the same old daily grind made more onerous by its boring repetitiveness. Because God is the one who calls, the singers are “glad to act [their] part.” Obeying Paul’s injunctions to work “heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men” (Col. 3:23) the singers work for God, doing the work “in the name of the Lord,” (Col. 3:17) and profess undivided loyalty, the “singleness of heart” Paul mentions in Colossians 3:22.

The second verse reiterates Colossians 3:23:

End of my every action thou,
In all things thee I see
Accept my hallowed labor now
I do it unto thee.¹⁶

The singers affirm that they do not work because of custom or by necessity or even for money but for the glory of God, whose honor is the “end” or goal of their every action. When they affirm that they see God in all things, they are echoing Paul’s words in Romans 8:28 that all things work together for those who love God, or his words in Ephesians 5:20 that speak of giving thanks for all things. Implicit in both these verses is the affirmation made explicit in this line that God is in everything and that Christians can see him. Because the altar sanctifies the

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gift (Matt. 23:19), work that is done in the Lord's name, no matter how mundane or dehumanizing, is truly hallowed and worthy of being offered to God.

The singers address Jesus in verse 3:

Whate'er the Father views as thine
He views with gracious eyes
Jesus, this mean oblation join
To thy great sacrifice.¹⁷

The idea is that because the Father views anything that belongs to Jesus favorably the workers ask Jesus to take the work that they do, "this mean oblation," and add it to his great sacrifice of atonement, thus causing the Father to accept it. Embedded in this verse is the idea that the singers' employment is an offering to God. This concept is a subset of the idea that believers themselves are living sacrifices. If believers are indeed sacrifices, then certainly the work they do is part of that sacrifice. Wesley could also be thinking of Philippians 4:18 where Paul speaks of the money the Philippians gave him as a well-pleasing sacrifice to God. Unstated but present in this image is the idea that the work must not be slovenly or second rate, just as one must not present a diseased animal to the Lord in sacrifice (Ex. 12:5).

The hymn concludes:

Stamped with an infinite desert
My work he then shall own
Well-pleased with me when mine thou art
And I his favourite son.¹⁸

Because the singers' work has been subsumed in Jesus' great sacrifice, it is infinitely deserving of merit. Such excellence will then be owned or accepted by God. The song then concludes with a bit of an anomaly. The singers have been singing about how their work is pleasing to God, but now they move to the idea that they themselves please the Lord. Perhaps fearing works-righteousness, Wesley does not allow them to sing that their good works have earned them God's favor but instead sees God's favor as coming only from the believers' union with Christ. "When mine thou art/And I his favourite son" echoes Ephesians 1:6 that Christians are accepted in the beloved and Romans 8:17 that they are joint heirs with Christ. Perhaps Wesley is seeking to have it both ways: while a careful reading of the hymn eschews the idea that the believers' good works earn their salvation, the juxtaposition of the ideas of good work and personal salvation imply that the former achieves the latter. Thus the opening hymn in the section on work teaches several important ideas: (1) God calls believers to

even to boring work; (2) such work can be done in the Lord's name and with a good attitude; (3) such work advances God's glory; (4) it is a holy sacrifice; and (5) God himself will accept it as an offering.

The second hymn in the section is also addressed to Jesus:

Servant of all, to toil for man
Thou didst not, Lord, refuse;
Thy Majesty did not disdain
To be employed for us!¹⁹

While the Bible never calls Jesus the "servant of all," Paul says he took the form of a servant (Phil. 2:7), and Jesus himself said that whoever wants to be first in the kingdom must be the servant of all (Mark 9:35). Because Jesus is obviously the first in the kingdom, he therefore deserves the title more than anyone. This stanza addresses the disincentive to work that occurs when employees must labor under supervisors who are unworthy of their trust. Wesley addresses this problem with *qal va homer* reasoning (from the lesser to the greater): Jesus, the "Majesty," did not disdain to labor for the singers. Because the difference in intelligence, competence, and moral character between him and the singers is far greater than the distance between them and any of the supervisors they serve, how much more should they be willing to work for them? That such problems could arise is not surprising in a movement that stressed the equality of all humanity and assigned leadership positions with disregard for social status. When a preacher could be given charge over his former employer and a "stuff maker" asked to lead a class containing a "gentleman," it is easy to see how the saved should begin to wonder by what right the unsaved bossed them around at work.²⁰

The second verse states that Jesus is the example for the Christian worker and restates the idea that all the worker does is a sacrifice to God. In the third verse, Wesley introduces the new concept that through Christ's power the workers can disassociate themselves from the earthly problems caused by unjust or unpleasant working conditions:

Careless through outward cares I go,
From all distraction free;
My hands are but engaged below—
My heart is still with thee.²¹

Paul tells believers to set their affections on things above where Christ is (Col. 3:1–2). Wesley says only the singers' hands are engaged with earthly things, while their hearts are in the heavenly places with Christ. Thus they do not worry themselves about their troubles at work. Adding to the five concepts of the first

working hymn, the second contributes the ideas that believers should work under any man's direction and that by focusing on their status in Christ they can bear the afflictions their work occasions.

The third working hymn begins by restating the idea of the previous stanza that believers can bear difficulties at work by "lifting [their] heart[s] to things above" and adds two new ideas: first, that God's grace is sufficient for them to do so, and second, that such labor brings glory to God. It then goes on to reaffirm that such labor is a sacrifice to God and adds the concept that working in this way fulfills the will of Jesus and causes his name to be praised on earth and in heaven:

Jesus, my single eye
Be fixed on thee alone;
Thy name be praised on earth, on high
Thy will by all be done.²²

One of the most striking images in all Wesley's hymns occurs in the latter part of verse three, but it is difficult to see what it has to do with the idea of working:

My feeble mind transform
And perfectly renewed,
Into a saint exalt a worm—
A worm exalt to God.²³

While it is possible Wesley draws on 2 Peter 1:4 that believers might be partakers of the divine nature, it is more probable that he is playing with the word "exalt" and using it in two different senses. "Into a saint exalt a worm" means to turn a worm into a saint, and then "a worm exalt to God" means to raise the former worm now a saint into the presence of God. If Wesley's use of "exalt" is not perspicuous, even less apparent is the relevance of this prayer to the believers' daily toil. When this hymn first appeared in *Hymns and Sacred Poems* it was entitled "An Hourly Act of Oblation."²⁴ Apparently Wesley envisioned believers using this hymn to offer every hour of the day to the Lord. Since he well knew that many Methodists occupied their hours with manual toil for others, he evidently considered that as they offered that work to God as a constant sacrifice, God would sanctify them and raise them into his presence.

The next hymn was entitled "Before Work" when it first appeared in *Hymns and Sacred Poems*.²⁵ The first verse reaffirms the commitment to do all work, even "daily labour," in Jesus' name.²⁶ The second verse adds the new idea that all the singers' work is assigned by Jesus:

The task thy wisdom has assigned,
O let me cheerfully fulfill,

In all my works thy presence find,
And prove thy acceptable will.²⁷

Not only do the singers affirm that they realize that Jesus has appointed their tasks, they also expect to find Jesus with them as they work. Relying on a wealth of scriptural affirmations of God's presence in every situation (e.g., Deut. 31:6; Josh. 1:9; Hag. 1:13; Matt. 28:20; Heb. 13:5), they apply the general promise to the specific situation of their work. Then, drawing on Romans 12:2 they affirm that they find their tasks part of the acceptable will of God.

Stanza 3 reaffirms God's presence with the workers, his command for them to work, and their offering of it back to him, but introduces two new ideas:

Thee may I set at my right hand
Whose eyes my inmost substance sees,
And labour on at thy command,
And offer all my works to thee.²⁸

The allusion to Psalm 16:8 in the first line ennoble the workers' daily labor, speaking of it in the same breath as David's royal calling. If David stands firm in his calling because of the Lord's presence, then how important must be the singers' work that they can invoke the same divine attendance? The second line alludes to Psalm 139:16 and cuts two ways: God's eyes see the singers' innermost substance and prize their honest toil even if it is humanly demeaning, but God's eyes also see if they slack at their jobs, and thus rob their employer. In addition, God's vision pierces the heart and evaluates the motives with which work is done.

Stanza 4 restates the idea that the singers' labor can be considered in eternal perspective (2 Cor. 4:18) and introduces the new thoughts that the workers' labor is part of Jesus' easy yoke (Matt. 11:30) and that it brings closer the glorious return of the Lord (2 Peter 3:12):

Give me to bear thy easy yoke,
And every moment watch and pray,
And still to things eternal look,
And hasten to thy glorious day.²⁹

Because work has these wonderful benefits, the singers can rejoice in it:

For thee delightfully employ
Whate'er thy bounteous grace hath given,
And run my course with even joy,
And closely walk with thee to heaven.³⁰

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They are not only employed; they are “delightfully” employed. God has not merely assigned them their tasks; they come from his grace, his “bounteous grace.” They do not simply tread the path; they “run [their] course,” and they run it with “joy.” They know such a response is surprising, so they insert the word *even* to show they do not make such statements lightly. Finally, they know Jesus is with them and that the road they share leads to heaven.

The next hymn originally titled “For a Believer, in Worldly Business” restates many of the concepts of the previous hymns.³¹ It introduces a new image drawn from Luke 10:

Faithful to my Lord’s commands,
I still would choose the better part,
Serve with careful Martha’s hands,
And loving Mary’s heart.

Apparently the singers do not have to choose between Lazarus’ sisters. They can offer Jesus the best of action of each woman. The final verse draws together much of Wesley’s theology of work but adds the idea that in their earthly work believers begin to experience heaven:

O that all the art might know
Of living thus to thee!
Find their heavens begun below
And here thy glory see!
Walk in all the works prepared
By thee to exercise their grace
Till they gain their full reward
And see thy glorious face.³²

Not only does work prepare Christians for heaven as Hymn 315 says, but as believers work for God, they find “their heavens begun below” and see God’s glory right here on earth. Admittedly, this perspective is not easy to attain for living in this way is an art—an art that Wesley hopes all his singers will master.

The last three hymns in this section do not obviously refer to work, so it is hard to understand why John Wesley puts them here. Hymn 317 speaks of God’s direction of believers’ lives saying they are led by God’s “unerring Spirit.” Hymn 318 does mention the word *work* but only in the context of all that believers do in their daily lives. Hymn 319 is a song about the Bible and how it influences Christians as they walk through the day and sleep through the night. Interesting as it would be to reconstruct Mr. Wesley’s thinking, speculation about why he includes these hymns in this section would be fruitless because they do not even

refer to work directly and, and they add nothing to Charles Wesley's theology of work.

To summarize, Charles Wesley's hymns on work in *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists* articulate nineteen important ideas:

1. God calls believers to work—even to boring work.
2. Such work can be done in the Lord's name and with a good attitude.
3. Such work advances God's glory.
4. Such work is a holy sacrifice.
5. God himself will accept it as an offering.
6. Christians should follow the leadership of their bosses, even unworthy ones.
7. Christ enables believers to bear the hardships of the workplace.
8. Jesus himself assigns the particular task to each laborer.
9. Successful performance of work brings glory to God the Father and to Jesus, God the Son.
10. Daily labor is a means God uses to sanctify believers.
11. Jesus accompanies them in their work.
12. Any work is noble.
13. God evaluates work, and even judges the motives with which it is done.
14. Work is part of Jesus' easy yoke.
15. Work hastens the coming of the Lord.
16. Work comes to us not as a curse, but as part of God's bounteous grace.
17. Work is a delight that brings Christians joy.
18. Work bring believers closer to heaven.
19. Work allows people to experience heaven on earth.

It is evident that the theology of Charles Wesley as sung and believed by laborers in the eighteenth century made them better factory workers. While it is true that out of Wesley's six thousand hymns there are some whose imagery is out of fashion today, Thompson's characterization of them seems unfitting. "Joyless" they are not. More serious is his charge that the changes these hymns occasioned did not help the workers themselves but only their employers. Yes, the working conditions were horrendous. It was the Methodists, however, who

helped to mobilize the masses to form the unions to protect the workers. Another mitigating factor reducing the seriousness of Thompson's charge is that the poor themselves voted with their feet, leaving the bucolic countryside for the "satanic mills." As C. P. Snow has noted: "... with singular unanimity, in any country where they have had the chance, the poor have walked off the land into the factories as fast as the factories could take them."³³ Specifically in England, the evidence strongly suggests that living standards improved and workers welcomed the new way of life.³⁴ It seems anachronistic at best to claim these workers did not know what was good for them.

Further evidence against Thompson's case came to light in the decade following the publication of his work. In the twentieth century, a conflict raged among economists about what happened to the average person during the Industrial Revolution. By 1970, however, it was apparent that while the population of England and Wales almost tripled between 1750 and 1850, the standard of living also increased at least slightly.³⁵ Even Thompson admits that by 1840 most people were better off than their grandparents had been fifty years before.³⁶ Obviously, those alive in 1840 were far better off than people had been one hundred years previously. Not only were there more people with a better standard of living, but also it was during the Industrial Revolution that workers, transformed by Wesley's theology of work, "began to exercise effective and sustained control over their own lives, and to have sustained political and industrial power, for the first time in history."³⁷ Thus England and Wales, while empowering their workers, were also producing approximately three times as much food and other necessities as they had a century before. Evidently, the main effect of this increase is that fewer children died in infancy, rather than an easing of the conditions of adult life. While some adults would rather that their babies died so that their own standard of living might increase, obviously many rejoiced to see more children at the table. If nothing else, this decrease in infant mortality shows that Methodism and its hymns brought a major blessing. Thompson's indictment proves false. More accurate is the assessment of Roy Hattersley, John Wesley's most recent biographer, that the prosperity of modern England is based on the ideas of the eighteenth century.³⁸ Some of the most revolutionary of those ideas went into the hearts of the poor as they sang the hymns of Charles Wesley.

Notes

1. For historic and current links between the trade union movement and Methodism see Nigel Scotland, "Methodism and the English Labour Movement 1800–1906," *Anvil* 14:1 (1997): 36–48.
2. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vantage Books, 1966). The venom is diffused through the book but manifests itself most clearly in chapter eleven, "The Transforming Power of the Cross."
3. Thompson, *Making*, 357. The original quote is taken from Eric Fromm, *The Fear of Freedom*, section 81, accessed August 11, 2012, <http://majnown.files.wordpress.com/2011/07/erich-fromm-the-fear-of-freedom-escape-from-freedom.pdf>.
4. Thompson, *Making*, 356.
5. Thompson, *Making*, 356. The original quote is from Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: HarperCollins Academic, 1930; New York: Routledge, 1992), 60. Citation refers to the Routledge edition.
6. Hugh O'Reilly, "Medieval Work and Lesiure," accessed August 10, 2012, http://www.traditioninaction.org/History/A_021_Festivals.htm.
7. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, 187, iii, accessed August 20, 2012, http://www.ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/summa.SS_Q187_A3.html.
8. Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 60, 177. Note that in the first instance the "t" is omitted from de la Court.
9. Thompson, *Making*, 358, 372.
10. Thompson, *Making*, 369–70.
11. Thompson, *Making*, 370–71.
12. Thompson, *Making*, 374. The original quote is in William Edward Hardpole Lecky, *A History of England in the Eighteenth Century*, vol. 3 (1878, repr., London: Longman, Green and Company: 1917), 77.
13. John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 7, "A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists," ed. Franz Hildenbrandt and Oliver A. Beckerlegge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 78. Hereafter *Hymns* with the number (X) and verse (Y) of the hymn cited X:Y.
14. John and Charles Wesley, *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley*, collected and arranged by G. Osborn, vol. 1 (London: Wesleyan Methodist Conference Office, 1868), 287–88.
15. *Hymns* 312:1. (Also see the note on this hymn at the bottom of the page.)
16. *Hymns* 312:2.

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17. *Hymns* 312:3.
18. *Hymns* 312:4.
19. *Hymns* 313:1.
20. Henry D. Rack, "The Decline of the Class Meeting," *Proceedings of The Wesleyan Historical Society* 39, no. 1 (February 1973): 15n13.
21. *Hymns* 313:3.
22. *Hymns* 314:2.
23. *Hymns* 314:3. While the image of a worm being changed into a saint is not common in modern hymnody, the Wesleys used it often. An electronic search of the first volume of the thirteen-volume collection of John and Charles's poems reveals eighteen mentions of "worm" or "worms." See *Poetical Works*, vol. 1.
24. *Hymns* 314 note.
25. *Hymns* 315 note.
26. *Hymns* 315:1.
27. *Hymns* 315:2.
28. *Hymns* 315:3.
29. *Hymns* 315:4.
30. *Hymns* 315:5.
31. *Hymns* 316 note.
32. *Hymns* 316:5.
33. C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 26.
34. R. M. Hartwell, "The Standard of Living Controversy: A Summary," in *The Industrial Revolution*, ed. R. M. Hartwell (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1970), 170.
35. The population of England and Wales in 1750 is estimated at 6.5 million and by the census of 1850 it was 17.9 million. See the website of the Comenius Project of the Blangwawr Comprehensive School, accessed January 17, 2014, <http://promise.blangwawr.co.uk/Library/Report/Chapter%201.pdf>. For the data on the standard of living see R. M. Hartwell, "The Standard of Living Controversy: A Summary," in *The Industrial Revolution*, ed. R. M. Hartwell (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1970), 178.
36. Cited in Hartwell, "Standard," 178.
37. Hartwell, "Standard," 179.
38. Roy Hattersley, *John Wesley: A Brand from the Burning* (London: Abacus, 2002), 2.