

"O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing" by Charles Wesley

Robin Knowles Wallace

"This is the most characteristic, widely known and sung hymn of the Wesleyan movement" begins Carlton R. Young's commentary to this hymn in *Companion to The United Methodist Hymnal* (p. 510). This "Text for the Anniversary of One's Conversion" was written by Charles Wesley in 1739 to commemorate his conversion on May 21, 1738. From the Wesleyan/Methodist movement this hymn spread to be included in the hymnals of many denominations, occurring most often in sections of praise of Jesus Christ and thanksgiving.

Originally 18 stanzas, a majority of recent hymnals include from four to seven stanzas, with *The United Methodist Hymnal* #58 printing 17 of the stanzas as poetry (the version reprinted here). In a survey of 17 recent hymnals, each of the 20 appearances of this hymn begins with Charles Wesley's original seventh stanza, "O for a thousand tongues to sing"—a plea for many persons to gather to sing God's praise and an acknowledgment of the inadequacy of our praise. Nine arrangements of the hymn surveyed use Wesley's opening stanza to close the hymn, linking our song with that of those who "have gone before"; seven use Wesley's eighth stanza, which suggests the evangelistic movement of God's praise throughout the earth. The United Methodist English and Spanish hymnals are the only ones to include the final stanza of the original, changing Wesley's sense that he was the "chief of sinners" to the confession of the Lordship of Christ, "In Christ your head." The inner stanzas of the hymn differ in many recent hymnals (see Table 1 for comparisons).

In the appearances in recent hymnals, the text appears with the tune AZMON 16 times, most often in the key of G major and in 3/2 meter (see chart). *The Baptist Hymnal* includes an arrangement in late 1800s camp-meeting style

by Ralph Hudson which contains the refrain "Blessed be the name of the Lord" with the tune BLESSED NAME. The other three exceptions to AZMON are worth looking at. Two are fuguing tunes: LYNNGHAM from 1803 appears in *Hymnal: A Worshipbook*, and NORTHFIELD (published in 1889 but written earlier) is found in *New Hymnal for Colleges and Schools*. LYNNGHAM is particularly energetic, and since it is also in G major, provides an interesting alternative for a choral stanza. Erik Routley included a setting of this text to RICHMOND in *Rejoice in the Lord*. That same book also includes a descant by C.S. Lang and the 13th stanza of Wesley's original text, not included in the other hymnals surveyed, but which includes the important Wesleyan phrase "be justified by grace."

Textual adaptations of this text abound, yet even after almost 260 years, they are relatively small. Most hymnals include the change from the original seventh stanza "dear Redeemer" to "great Redeemer." "My gracious Master" has appeared both as "My gracious Savior" and as "My loving Savior." The original text in stanza nine "Jesus! the name" accents the second syllable of Je-sus and has been changed to "The name of Jesus" in two hymnals surveyed. The original 12th stanza has been omitted, asterisked for omission, and changed to "Hear him, ye deaf, ye voiceless ones/ your loosened tongues employ" and "your tongues again employ." S T Kimbrough in *Lost in Wonder: Charles Wesley, The Meaning of His Hymns Today* suggests that this stanza encourages the church to reach out to those differently abled and include them in worship and church programs. Minor changes have appeared in the original first stanza.

Perhaps the most theologically dense stanza is the one beginning "He breaks the power of canceled sin." *The Lutheran Book of Worship* and *Psalter Hymnal* bring the final line into the present tense, "his blood avails for me." *The Presbyterian Hymnal* has made several changes in this stanza so that it reads

Christ breaks the power of
reigning sin,
And sets the prisoner free;
Christ's blood can make
the sinful clean,
Christ's blood availed for
me.

The implication here is that sin has reigned in our lives, and now the power is broken by the anointed One. Yet the "power of canceled sin" speaks to something more. John Wesley speaks often in his sermons about the freedom God gives us from guilt, power, and the presence of sin. An interesting adult education class might focus on this stanza and its relationship to Wesley's understanding of grace, Reformation understandings of righteousness, and ways they help us understand our own salvation.¹

¹My thanks to Sarah Lancaster, Assistant Professor of Worship and Music at Methodist Theological School in Ohio, for pointing out this complexity to me and suggesting Wesley's sermons as a useful resource.

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O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing

Glory to God, and praise and love
be ever, ever given,
by saints below and saints above,
the church in earth and heaven.

On this glad day the glorious Sun
of Righteousness arose;
on my benighted soul he shone
and filled it with repose.

Sudden expired the legal strife,
'twas then I ceased to grieve;
my second, real, living life
I then began to live.

Then with my heart I first be-
lieved,
believed with faith divine,
power with the Holy Ghost re-
ceived
to call the Savior mine.

I felt my Lord's atoning blood
close to my soul applied;
me, me he loved, the Son of God,
for me, for me he died!

I found and owned his promise
true,
ascertained of my part,
my pardon passed in heaven I
knew
when written on my heart.

O for a thousand tongues to sing
my dear Redeemer's praise!
The glories of my God and King,
the triumphs of his grace.

My gracious Master and my God,
assist me to proclaim,
to spread through all the earth
abroad
the honors of thy name.

Jesus the name that charms our
fears,
that bids our sorrows cease;
'tis music in the sinner's ears,
'tis life, and health, and peace!

He breaks the power of canceled
sin,
he sets the prisoner free;
his blood can make the foulest
clean;
his blood availed for me.

He speaks, and listening to his
voice
new life the dead receive;
the mournful, broken hearts re-
joice,
the humble poor believe.

Hear him, ye deaf, his praise, ye
dumb,
your loosened tongues employ;
ye blind, behold your Savior
come,
and leap, ye lame, for joy.

Look unto him, ye nations, own
your God, ye fallen race!
Look, and be saved through faith
alone,
be justified by grace!

See all your sins on Jesus laid;
the Lamb of God was slain,
his soul was once an offering
made
for every soul of man.

Harlots and publicans and thieves,
to holy triumph join!
Saved is the sinner that believes
from crimes as great as mine.

Murderers and all ye hellish crew,
ye sons of lust and pride,
believe the Savior died for you;
for me the Savior died.

With me, your chief, you then
shall know,
shall feel your sins forgiven;
anticipate your heaven below
and own that love is heaven.

—Charles Wesley, 1739

An integrated worship beginning

(To be used in its entirety
or in part)

Prelude: AZMON

Instrumental arrangements (such
as those found in *Musical Supple-
ment to The United Methodist
Hymnal*, 1991, #33-37 for brass
and organ)

Introduction to the hymn:

Glory to God, and praise and love
be ever, ever given, by saints be-
low and saints above, the church
in earth and heaven. Let us stand
and add our heart-felt praise to
God with these thousands of
tongues from the church past and
the church present.

Hymn: O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing

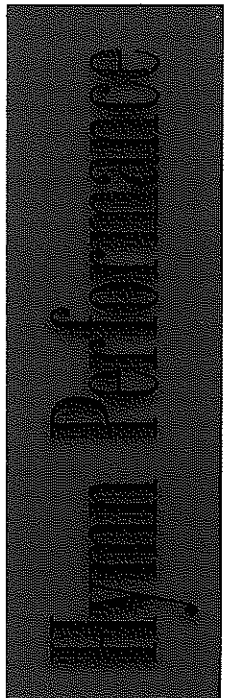
(Adjust stanzas according to your hymnal)

stanza 1 all in unison	AZMON in G
stanza 2 all in harmony	AZMON in G
stanza 3 choir	LYNGHAM in G
stanza 4 all	AZMON in G
stanza 5 choir	RICHMOND in G
stanza 6 all	AZMON in G a cappella
stanza 7 all	AZMON in A ^b or with organ har- monization/descant

Collect

All-gracious God, through Jesus Christ you break the
power of sin and death in our lives. Grant that we may
ever sing your praises with heart and mind, soul and
strength to your eternal glory, with Jesus Christ and the
Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

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