



Charles Wesley and the “Peaceable Reign” of Christ

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Abstract: One of the neglected themes in the lyrical theology of Charles Wesley is the kingdom of God, what he describes as the peaceable reign of Christ. Inspired by the biblical witness, Wesley’s vision revolves around the concepts of reconciliation; the reign in the heart; and righteousness, joy, peace, justice, and compassion as the constitutive elements of an already-but-not-yet reality.

Keywords: Charles Wesley • lyrical theology • kingdom of God • beloved community • peaceable reign

Introduction

Charles Wesley’s lyrical theology is a biblical theology. Scripture provides the framework, the substance, and the ultimate goal of his theological project of singing the faith. Many of the themes of his theology reflect a typical Wesleyan vocabulary. His hymns are replete, for instance, with images related to redemption, repentance, faith, and holiness. In this essay, I seek to demonstrate how his ultimate vision of the Christian life revolves around Jesus’s teaching related to the kingdom of God, and how he builds a whole new language for the Methodist singer around this central theme.

Students of the biblical witness have used a plethora of terms to capture the meaning of the kingdom of God – a theme that pervades scripture and constitutes the central teaching of Jesus.¹ It is not my purpose here to provide an exhaustive exploration of this language; a couple of well-known examples suffice and serve to locate Charles Wesley among other substantial theologians in this ongoing quest. The central principle of the thought and activity of Martin Luther King, Jr. was what he called the ‘beloved community.’² This was his language for the kingdom of God. In his seminal work, *Living Toward a Vision: Biblical Reflections on Shalom*, Walter Brueggemann identified God’s rule with this singular Hebrew term – “shalom” – and thereby provided a vision of “a caring, sharing, rejoicing community with none to make them afraid.”³ For him all aspects of God’s

¹ “The concept of the Kingdom of God involves, in a real sense,” claimed John Bright, “the total message of the Bible” (John Bright, *The Kingdom of God: The Biblical Concept and Its Meaning for the Church* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1953), 7. From the watershed work of Bright to contemporary studies like that of Nicholas Perrin, *The Kingdom of God: A Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2019) and N T Wright’s popular video series on “Jesus and the Kingdom of God,” much energy continues to be devoted to this topic.

² Kenneth L. Smith & Ira G. Zepp, Jr., *Search for the Beloved Community: The Thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1974), 119-40.

³ Walter Brueggemann, *Living Toward a Vision: Biblical Reflections on Shalom* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1976), 20.

Bio:

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kingdom may be subsumed under this overarching concept within the biblical narrative. For these disciples of Jesus, "beloved community" and "shalom" function as shorthand terms for their profound and dynamic conception of God's rule.

Charles Wesley articulates a similarly compelling vision of God's kingdom in his lyrical theology.⁴ One hymn, in particular, from his collection of *Hymns for the Nativity of our Lord*, describes various dimensions of God's rule. He prays for God's kingdom to come; he celebrates its realisation in the here and now; he admonishes everyone to live into this alternative reality with hope. In this hymn he uses a noteworthy expression as he paints a lyrical portrait of God's dominion, somewhat unique for him but very contemporary in its sound. He describes God's kingdom in the language of a "quiet and peaceable reign."⁵

All glory to God in the sky,
And peace upon earth be restor'd!
O Jesus, exalted on high,
Appear our omnipotent Lord:
Who meanly in Bethlehem born,
Didst stoop to redeem a lost race,
Once more to thy creature return,
And reign in thy kingdom of grace.

When thou in our flesh didst appear,
All nature acknowledg'd thy birth;
Arose the acceptable year,
And heaven was open'd on earth:
Receiving its Lord from above,
The world was united to bless
The giver of concord and love,
The Prince and the author of peace.

O wouldst thou again be made known,
Again in thy Spirit descend,
And set up in each of thine own,
A kingdom that never shall end!
Thou only art able to bless,
And make the glad nations obey,
And bid the dire enmity cease,
And bow the whole world to thy sway.

Come then to thy servants again,
Who long thy appearing to know,
Thy quiet and peaceable reign
In mercy establish below:
All sorrow before thee shall fly,
And anger and hatred be o'er,

⁴ See Paul W. Chilcote, *A Faith That Sings: Biblical Themes in the Lyrical Theology of Charles Wesley* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017), 106-21 (Chapter 8: Dominion: Situated in God's Shalom). Many of the insights presented here depend greatly upon this earlier work.

⁵ Despite a pervasive reference to kingdom language and images, Wesley only uses this expression in one other hymn in his entire corpus, namely, in his lyrical exposition of Job 29:25, where he sings: "Thy sway among men to maintain, / Compassion and righteousness meet; / Thy reign is a peaceable reign, / Thy seat is a merciful seat" (*Short Hymns on Select Passages of the Holy Scriptures* (Bristol: Farley, 1762), 1:242; Hymn 759). A simple word search for the term "kingdom" in the Wesleyan corpus reveals some rather startling statistics: "In his two published volumes of *Scripture Hymns* the term appears more than 150 times. Likewise, in his manuscript hymns on Matthew's Gospel—a biblical document in which the kingdom of God figures quite prominently—Wesley appropriates the term in more than 100 instances. While the term itself is important, greater significance attaches to the major themes related to God's dominion in the biblical witness and the process by which God resituates the faithful in God's shalom" (Chilcote, *A Faith That Sings*, 106).

And envy and malice shall die,
And discord afflict us no more.

No horrid alarm of war
Shall break our eternal repose;
No sound of the trumpet is there,
Where Jesus's Spirit o'erflows:
Appeas'd by the charms of thy grace
We all shall in amity join,
And kindly each other embrace,
And love with a passion like thine.⁶

Wesley's use of the phrase "peaceable reign" undoubtedly resonates with the contemporary disciple of Jesus. Stanley Hauerwas popularized a term very similar to this – the "peaceable kingdom" – which he used as the title of his groundbreaking primer in Christian ethics, first published in 1991.⁷ This theme had been celebrated in the arts for generations.⁸ In 1820, for example, famous American Quaker artist, Edward Hicks, began a 61-painting series on this theme. Hicks had taken Isaiah 11:6 as the biblical focus of his artistic reflections. Inspired by these paintings over a century later, composer Randall Thompson composed a choral work on "The Peaceable Kingdom." In 1954 Jon Silkin published a poetic collection on this same title. Given the vivid scriptural imagery attached to this vision, it has cried out for artistic expression over the years. Charles Wesley paints with words. As a lyrical artist he sketches out a portrait of life in Christ oriented around this image of a peaceable reign. In this paper we will explore his portrait with reference to a pallet of six primary texts drawn from scripture. Each text, like a color or hue, shapes his vision, adding texture and depth to the portrait he holds before us.

Biblical Inspiration

Wesley's invocation of this term follows on from a constellation of biblical texts which shape this vision and this language. Leviticus 26:3-6 describes the peaceable reign among those who walk in obedient relationship to God. Creation imagery dominates. In this kingdom rains water the land, the earth produces abundant crops, trees yield good fruit, people eat their fill, and no one lives in fear from wild beasts or human foes. According to the Psalmist, in God's peaceable reign, "steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other" (85:10). In Hosea's vision God abolishes the bow, the sword, and war from the land and enables everyone to lie down in safety (2:18-20). No biblical writer articulates this vision more pervasively and persuasively than the prophet Isaiah. In the peaceable kingdom, "they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks;" he proclaims, "nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore" (2:4). When God establishes the peaceable reign "the effect of righteousness will be peace and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever. My people will abide in a peaceful habitation, in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting places" (32:17-18).

Isaiah 11:6-9 provides the primary locus for the iconic vision:

The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.
The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,

⁶ *Hymns for the Nativity of our Lord* (London: [Strahan.], 1745), 23-24. All hymn texts throughout this study are cited from the website of The Center for Studies in the Wesleyan Tradition, Duke Divinity School: <http://divinity.duke.edu/initiatives-centers/cswt/wesley-texts>.

⁷ Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991).

⁸ See John Howard Yoder, "Artisans of a Peaceable Kingdom," Whitworth University Forum, paper 151, 1984.

and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
 They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain;
 for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
 as the waters cover the sea.

Jesus employs all these images and embodies the peaceable reign in his own life and ministry. These are the characteristics of his reign; the manifestation of this kingdom is his primary mission. The hymn of Charles Wesley, above, demonstrates the way in which all creation groans in anticipation of God's rule. His conception of the peaceable reign of Christ points to several key elements: the gift of reconciliation; Christ's dominion in the human heart; the fruits of peace, joy, and righteousness; the practices of justice and compassion; and the already-but-not-yet character of this rule.

"Your kingdom come!"
 Matthew 6:10

Given the large space devoted to the kingdom in Charles's lyrical theology, it should be no surprise that the petition in the Lord's Prayer – "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt 6:10) – figures prominently in his hymns. He refers to this verse explicitly sixteen times in the 1780 *Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists*. He identifies a dual focus related to God's dominion in this text, namely, the importance of both God's kingdom and God's will. St. Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer inspired Wesley to compose a composite hymn on the peaceable reign of Christ, combining two lyrical paraphrases of Luke 11:2:

Father of me, and all mankind,
 And all the hosts above,
 Let every understanding mind
 Unite to praise thy love,
 To know thy nature and thy name,
 One God in Persons Three,
 And glorify the great I AM
 Through all eternity.

Thy kingdom come, with power and grace,
 To every heart of man,
 Thy peace and joy, and righteousness,
 In all our bosoms reign!
 Thy righteousness our sin keep down,
 Thy peace our passions bind,
 And let us in thy joy unknown,
 The first dominion find.

The righteousness that never ends,
 But makes an end of sin,
 The joy that human thought transcends,
 Into our souls bring in,
 The kingdom of established peace,
 Which can no more remove,
 The perfect power of godliness,
 The omnipotence of love.⁹

Charles yearns for all people to rediscover this "first dominion" which God's creatures rejected and ignored. As in his doctrine of redemption, the concepts of reconciliation and restoration play a central role in his concept

⁹ *Scripture Hymns*, 2:220.

of Christ's kingdom. People, in his view, do not build the kingdom; rather, God must restore the rule of Christ, and this entails reconciliation. Believers receive the kingdom into their hearts and then partner with God in this work in the world.

Reconciliation: The Foundation of the Peaceable Reign

2 Corinthians 5:19

St. Paul writes to the embattled church in Corinth: "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:19). This is the Authorized translation that would have been most familiar to Wesley, with this verse coming, of course, in the context of a larger discourse (namely, 2 Cor 5:11-21) in which the apostle discusses the ministry of reconciliation. Many of St. Paul's most familiar themes resound in this fifth chapter: new creation, imputation, the righteousness of God. In summary statements like this one St. Paul captures God's total mission to which, he believes, the entirety of the scriptural witness bears testimony. Friendship with God characterizes this vision of life. Those drawn into this realm love both God and neighbor. Christ makes this kind of existence possible by breaking down all the barriers that divide people and disrupt God's intended harmony in the created order. Reconciliation itself is both the foundation and the sign of God's peaceable reign and the nearness of God's rule. While the reconciliation of the believer in Christ to God is an accomplished fact, the reconciliation of the cosmos is a continuing process into which the community of faith is invited as the representative of God's alternative vision in the world. God's people are called to stand in the juncture, as it were, between the old world which is passing away and the new world – the peaceable reign – that is being birthed in Christ, despite all appearances.

In a verse inspired by 2 Corinthians 5:17, Charles celebrates the momentous change in the believer's life effected by trust in Christ and the in-breaking rule of Christ:

Thrice acceptable word,
I long to prove it true!
Take me into thyself, O Lord,
By making me anew;
Me for thy mercy sake
Out of myself remove,
Partaker of thy nature make,
Thy holiness and love.¹⁰

He describes this true foundation of the peaceable reign as the "reconciling word:"

See me, Saviour, from above,
Nor suffer me to die!
Life, and happiness, and love,
Drop from thy gracious eye;
Speak the reconciling word,
And let thy mercy melt me down;
Turn, and look upon me, Lord,
And break my heart of stone.¹¹

This reconciling word of God illuminates the soul with the gift of faith. God restores sight to the blind and rescues those who dwell in darkness. Those who entrust their lives to God through Christ by faith pray for all the fullness of God in their lives.

¹⁰ *Scripture Hymns*, 2:300.

¹¹ *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, 2 vols. (Bristol: Farley, 1749), 1:122.

The gift unspeakable impart:

Command the light of faith to shine,
To shine in my dark, drooping heart,
And fill me with the life divine;
Now bid the new creation be!
O God, let there be faith in me!

Thee without faith I cannot please,
Faith without thee I cannot have;
But thou hast sent the Prince of peace
To seek my wandering soul, and save;
O Father, glorify thy Son,
And save me for his sake alone!¹²

For those who are "reconciled by grace," God justifies through faith alone, opens mercy's door, offers assurance of forgiveness, relieves burdens, and prepares for heaven.¹³ God's will is that all might be saved and the extent of God's love is so great that we "tremble at the word/Of reconciling grace."¹⁴ This reconciling word composes the weary breast and sinks it into visions of eternity, but also raises believers to sing their Savior's praise, flows from their hearts, fills their tongues, permeates their life with purest love, and joins them to the communion of God's faithful throughout the ages.¹⁵

The Peaceable Reign in the Heart

Luke 17:21

For Charles Wesley, everything begins with the heart. He had been raised with the Authorized Version of Luke 17:21: "Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you." Regardless of other translations which render *entos hymon* "among you" as opposed to "within you," Charles never wavered from his conviction about the centrality of the human heart. His brother, John, had raised this very point in his reflections on this verse in his *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*: "*For behold the kingdom of God is within or among you—look not for it in distant times or remote places: it is now in the midst of you: it is come: it is present in the soul of every believer: it is a spiritual kingdom, an internal principle. Wherever it exists, it exists in the heart.*"¹⁶

Charles's poetic rendering of Matthew 6:10 expresses his longing for God's dominion in the hearts of all people:

When shall thy Spirit reign
In every heart of man?
Father, bring the kingdom near,
Honor thy triumphant Son,
God of heaven, on earth appear,
Fix with us thy glorious throne.¹⁷

¹² *Hymns for those that seek, and those that have Redemption in the Blood of Jesus Christ* (London: Strahan, 1747), 18-19.

¹³ *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (Bristol: Farley, 1742), 130.

¹⁴ *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1749), 2:229.

¹⁵ *Scripture Hymns*, 1:92-93.

¹⁶ John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (London: Bowyer, 1755), note on Luke 17:21. Cf. *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (London: Strahan, 1739), 174; *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (London: Strahan, 1740), 65, 141.

¹⁷ *Scripture Hymns*, 2:142.

“Fix in every heart of man,” he prays, “thine everlasting throne.”¹⁸ He makes his appeal to the broken, to those whose hearts are still turned in on themselves. If any are to participate in God’s rule, they must first turn their hearts to God. Before turning their attention outward, they must first attend to their deepest interior need. “Sinners, turn, believe, and find,” he pleads, “the kingdom in your hearts.”¹⁹

God comes down on earth to reign,
With dazzling majesty confessed:
Every happy, pardoned man
Contains him in his breast.

But Charles connects the interior life of the spirit intimately with the believer’s engagement in “kingdom ministry.” Urgency characterizes the singer’s plea:

I will, through grace I will;
I do return to thee:
Take, empty it,
O Lord, and fill
My heart with purity:
For power I feebly pray;
Thy kingdom now restore,
Today, while it is called today,
And I shall sin no more.²⁰

Those who turn over their hearts to God for God’s use receive God’s power both to do so and to live as God’s children (see 1 Cor 4:20). Whenever God imparts the Spirit, Wesley argues, “the kingdom restored is power in our hearts.” But unlike the power of the world, this power is that of Christ’s passion, “the strength of salvation, / the virtue of love.”²¹ Charles emphasizes the inextricable connection between this restored capacity and the cruciform nature of Christ’s reign. In his reflections on 1 Corinthians 4:20 he identifies the origins and nature of the power of love in the peaceable reign:

If Jesus doth reign, and save us from sin,
No words can explain his kingdom within,
No boastful reflection on what we possess,
No talk of perfection, or flourish of grace.
Wherever our Lord his Spirit imparts,
The kingdom restor’d is power in our hearts,
The power of his passion, and rising we prove,
The strength of salvation, the virtue of love.

With love we receive the power to obey,
Unspotted to live, unwearied to pray:
His burthens we bear, while here we remain,
His agonies share, and suffer to reign.²²

To describe the fruit of this transformation in the direction of God’s rule, Wesley invariably alludes to Romans 14:17 – the kingdom of God is righteousness, and peace, and joy. In his poetic corpus he defines Christ’s peaceable reign along the lines of this important trilogy.

¹⁸ Ibid., 1:160.

¹⁹ MS Matthew, 113.

²⁰ *Scripture Hymns*, 1:11.

²¹ Ibid., 2:29.

²² *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1749), 2:291.

Righteousness, Joy, & Peace

Romans 14:17

"For the kingdom of God," St. Paul claims, "is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom 14:17). Charles therefore prays:

Bring in the kingdom of his peace,
Fill all our souls with joy unknown,
And stablish us in righteousness,
And perfect all his saints in one.²³

In a reflection on Hebrews 12:2 he simply implores:

Speak gracious Lord, my sickness cure,
Make my infected nature pure;
Peace, righteousness and joy impart,
And pour thyself into my heart.²⁴

A lyrical paraphrase of Luke 17:20 – Jesus' dialogue with the Pharisees about how and where the kingdom comes – elicits the grand trilogy:

Love, the power of humble love
Constitutes thy kingdom here:
Never, never to remove
Let it, Lord, in me appear,
Let the pure, internal grace
Fill my new-created soul,
Peace, and joy, and righteousness,
While eternal ages roll.²⁵

Wesley's reflections on Matthew 5:3 celebrate the peaceable reign as "Glorious joy, / unutter'd peace, / All victorious righteousness."²⁶ In a hymn for "Christian Friends" he anticipates the in-breaking reign:

Now wilt thou make an end of sin,
The kingdom of thy peace
The joy unspeakable bring in,
Th'eternal righteousness!²⁷

In Christ's reign, peace displaces discord and anxiety, joy supplants sorrow and discouragement, and righteousness dislodges depravity and sin. The contrasts between the kingdoms of this world and the peaceable reign of Christ could not be more stark in Charles's poetry. For those who conform their lives to this world, "joy is all sadness," "mirth is all vain," "laughter is madness," and "pleasure is pain." But those who have the mind of Christ experience full and abundant life:

All fulness of peace,
All fulness of joy,

²³ *Collection of Moral and Sacred Poems*, 3 vols. (Bristol: Farley, 1744), 3:241.

²⁴ *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1739), 92.

²⁵ MS Luke, 251-52.

²⁶ *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1749), 1:36.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 2:326.

And spiritual bliss
That never shall cloy,
To us it is given
In Jesus to know
A kingdom of heaven,
An heaven below.²⁸

While each of these constitutive elements of the peaceable reign relate directly to the individual at a deeply personal level, they also have a critical social dimension. Charles perceives a peculiar trajectory related to Christ's peaceable reign. God's dominion begins in the human heart most certainly, but extends into the church, and then expands yet further to the poor, the persecuted, and those pulverized by war and strife. "For Methodists this internal transformation was not enough," observes Andrew Winckles, "the true evidence of the kingdom of God in heart and life was in how it worked outward into community."²⁹

Still the great God resides below,
(And all his faithful people know
He will not from his church depart)
The Father, Son, and Spirit dwells,
His kingdom in the poor reveals,
And fills with heaven the humble heart.³⁰

In his peaceable reign Christ inextricably binds righteous, joy, and peace together with justice and compassion.

Justice & Compassion

Isaiah 11:6-9

Charles mandates that faithful disciples of Jesus translate the personal gifts of righteousness, joy, and peace, therefore, into concrete acts of justice and compassion in the world. In a hymn he composed for his wife on their wedding day Charles affords a unique window into the aspects of Christian character shaped by the values of God's way and rule.

Come, let us arise,
And press to the skies,
The summons obey,
My friend, my beloved, and hasten away!
The master of all
For our service doth call,
And deigns to approve
With smiles of acceptance our labor of love.³¹

The hymn encourages bride and groom to be accountable to one another in love and good works as a performance of God's rule in their lives. Their common witness to the peaceable reign meant attending to those who were distressed, afflicted, and oppressed. Their kingdom work entailed relieving prisoners, receiving strangers, and supplying all their wants. Kingdom ministry included acts of justice and compassion. The world depends on these works of mercy for there to be any hope of wolves and lambs to live together in peace and harmony.

²⁸ *Redemption Hymns*, 32.

²⁹ Andrew Winckles, "Kingdom of God—Kingdom of Man: Freedom, Identity, and Justice in Charles Wesley and William Blake," Unpublished paper presented at the *North American Society for the Study of Romanticism Conference*, Park City, Utah, August 12, 2011, unnumbered pages.

³⁰ *Scripture Hymns*, 1:167.

³¹ *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1749), 2:280-81.

Various forms of injustice clamored for attention in Wesley's day. His hymns encouraged commitment to God's vision of the peaceable reign and active engagement in ministries of justice. In one of his *Hymns of Intercession for all Mankind*, in particular, Wesley paints a vivid portrait of a world gone wrong, but offers an alternative biblical vision for life as God intended it to be:

Our earth we now lament to see
With floods of wickedness overflowed,
With violence, wrong, and cruelty,
One wide-extended field of blood,
Where men, like fiends, each other tear
In all the hellish rage of war.

The singer intercedes on behalf of humanity with regard to the atrocities associated with a fallen world. Charles calls upon Jesus to intervene:

O might the universal Friend
This havoc of his creatures see!
Bid our unnatural discord end,
Declare us reconciled in thee!
Write kindness on our inward parts
And chase the murderer from our hearts.

He locates the hope for peace in the transformation of the human heart and calls on all faithful disciples of Jesus "To follow after peace, and prize / The blessings of thy righteous reign." This, and only this, will restore "The paradise of perfect love."³²

Isaiah's iconic vision provides the imagery for many of his hymns in which he describes the reign of Christ. His brilliant lyrical paraphrase of Isaiah 11:6-7 provides a powerful illustration of the theme:

Prince of universal peace,
Destroy the enmity,
Bid our jars and discords cease,
Unite us all in thee.
Cruel as wild beasts we are,
'Till vanquished by thy mercy's power,
We, like wolves, each other tear,
And their own flesh devour.

But if thou pronounce the word
That forms our souls again,
Love and harmony restored
Throughout the earth shall reign;
When thy wondrous love they feel,
The human savages are tame,
Ravenous wolves, and leopards dwell
And stable with the lamb.³³

In Charles's poetry, war always represents the antithesis of this peaceable reign.

Messias, Prince of Peace,
Where men each other tear,

³² *Hymns of Intercession for all Mankind* (Bristol: Farley, 1758), 4.

³³ *Scripture Hymns*, 1:316.

Where war is learnt, they must confess
Thy kingdom is not there:

Fightings and wars shall cease,
And in thy Spirit given
Pure joy, and everlasting peace
Shall turn our earth to heaven.³⁴

There is also an amazing body of hymnody related to the poor in Wesley's collected works. Work alongside the poor requires both elements of the reign – justice and compassion. "Perhaps the uniqueness of his contribution lies," as Kimbrough has argued, "in the way he opened for the church to remember its responsibility to the dispossessed of the earth."³⁵ Wesley "creates a hymnic, poetically remembered theology," he claims, "that articulates the imperatives of ministry to the poor."³⁶ Charles's doctrine of the peaceable reign demonstrates God's love for the poor, their important role in the community of faith, and the responsibility of all faithful disciples to engage in advocacy for all who are dispossessed. The following hymn well illustrates both Charles's attitude toward the poor and the actions that faithful Christians should take on their behalf, all modeled after Jesus:

The poor as Jesus' bosom friends,
The poor he makes his latest care,
To all his followers commends,
And wills us on our hands to bear;
The poor our dearest care we make,
And love them for our Savior's sake.³⁷

Charles depicts the compassionate character of those whose lives have been conformed to the image of Christ through their ministry alongside the marginalized. Mary Naylor was one such woman, an active leader of the Methodist Society in Bristol noted for God's rule in her life:

The golden rule she has pursued,
And did to others as she would
Others should do to her;
Justice composed her upright soul,
Justice did all her thoughts control,
And formed her character.

Affliction, poverty, disease,
Drew out her soul in soft distress,
The wretched to relieve;
In all the works of love employed,
Her sympathizing soul enjoyed
The blessedness to give.

A nursing mother to the poor,
For them she husbanded her store,
Her life, her all, bestowed;
For them she labored day and night,
In doing good her whole delight,
In copying after God.³⁸

³⁴ Ibid., 1:305.

³⁵ S T Kimbrough, Jr., "Charles Wesley and the Poor," in *The Portion of the Poor: Good News to the Poor in the Wesleyan Tradition*, edited by M. Douglas Meeks, 147-67 (Nashville: Kingswood, 1995), 148.

³⁶ Ibid., 155.

³⁷ MS Acts, 421.

³⁸ *Funeral Hymns* (London [Strahan,], 1759), 51.

An affective experience of God's rule and an outward performance of the kingdom defined Wesley's doctrine of the peaceable reign of Christ. As Winckles has observed, the genius of Methodism in this regard was "a subjectivity founded not upon individual autonomy and rights but on the freedom to do God's will, to enact the kingdom on earth."³⁹

"Already but not yet"
Hebrews 2:8–9

Wesley encouraged the church, like the individual disciple, to strive for perfection. But he also acknowledged the elusive nature of perfect love. God's dominion has come in Jesus Christ and yet the church still prays for it to come. With regard to the peaceable reign of Christ there is an "already but not yet" dynamic at work. George Eldon Ladd popularized this language in the 1950s, describing both a present and future dimension of the kingdom of God in scripture.⁴⁰ Charles drew the same conclusions, basically conceiving a realm in which God rules in the present and a future fulfillment of God's reign that is not yet fully realized. He describes both realities in his hymns.

He bears witness to the present rule of Christ in a lyrical reflection on Daniel 7:18.⁴¹ The present kingdom, he argues, is already given to all the saints below. "It is not of this world, we know, / But comes with Christ from heaven." He celebrates the fact that God's people live in this peaceable reign "before we reach the sky" and in the present moment "with Christ triumphant live." The church celebrates this present reign, partners with God to cultivate its values, and proclaims God's vision of shalom. Times of trouble, in particular, elicit Charles's hopes for a fuller manifestation of the peaceable reign in the future.

We know that his word
And promise are past;
Thy kingdom, O Lord,
Shall triumph at last:
The kingdoms before thee
And nations shall fall,
And all men adore thee,
The monarch of all.⁴²

Daniel's description of the God of heaven who destroys, breaks in pieces, and consumes all other kingdoms provides the graphic language that suits Charles's vision well. "Thy kingdom come," he prays, "All these worldly powers o'erthrow, / And scatter, and consume!" And he anticipates a divine monarchy that will be "founded in perpetual grace."⁴³

Father, by right divine,
Assert the kingdom thine;
Jesus, power of God, subdue
Thine own universe to thee;
Spirit of grace and glory too,
Reign through all eternity.⁴⁴

Sometimes the present and future coalesce in Wesley's poetry. The imagery of the heavenly banquet in his Eucharistic hymns, in particular, evokes this eschatological fusion.

At the table the community of faith dwells, as it were, in both kingdoms, present and future. Only a thin veil separates the one from the other.⁴⁵

³⁹ Winckles, "Kingdom of God."

⁴⁰ See George Eldon Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God* (London: Paternoster Press, 1959).

⁴¹ *Scripture Hymns*, 2:63-64.

⁴² *Hymns for Times of Trouble* (London: Strahan, 1744), 9.

⁴³ *Scripture Hymns*, 2:58-59.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 2:143.

⁴⁵ *Hymns on the Lord's Supper* (Bristol: Farley, 1745), 84.

The church triumphant in thy love
Their mighty joys we know,
They sing the Lamb in hymns above,
And we in hymns below.

Thee in thy glorious realm they praise,
And bow before thy throne,
We in the kingdom of thy grace,
The kingdoms are but one.

Gathered around the table for “thy great kingdom feast,” the faithful feel God’s promise of “eternal rest.” “Yet still an higher seat,” Wesley proclaims, “We in thy kingdom claim.”

That glorious heavenly prize
We surely shall attain,
And in the palace of the skies
With thee for ever reign.

He articulates an inclusive vision of Christ’s peaceable reign in a lyrical paraphrase of the parable of the great banquet in Luke 14:15-24. In this hymn he sounds a note of eschatological urgency with regard to the ultimate victory of God’s inclusive love. In the peaceable reign of Christ, God invites all to the table. God offers grace to every soul. God excludes none from the gracious offer of life in the reign of shalom to come. Wesley paints a compelling and dynamic portrait of the peaceable reign through the imagery related to this banquet:

Come, sinners, to the gospel-feast,
Let every soul be Jesu’s guest,
Ye need not one be left behind,
For God hath bid all humankind.

Sent by my Lord, on you I call,
The invitation is to all.
Come all the world: come, sinner, thou,
All things in Christ are ready now.

Come then ye souls, by sin oppressed,
Ye restless wanderers after rest,
Ye poor, and maimed, and halt, and blind,
In Christ an hearty welcome find.

This is the time, no more delay,
This is the acceptable day,
Come in, this moment, at his call,
And live for him who died for all.⁴⁶

Permanency characterizes the peaceable reign of Christ, and Wesley invests his life and places his hope in this ultimate promise of God:

Earthly kingdoms soon decline,
Totter, fall, and pass away;
Permanent, O Christ, is thine,
Cannot moulder, or decay;
Every other power o’rethrown

⁴⁶ *Redemption Hymns*, 63-66 (selected verses).

Shall its destined period prove,
Thy dominion stands alone,
Fixed as thine eternal love.⁴⁷

In Charles's mind this eternal reign is nothing less than "paradise restor'd,"⁴⁸ and he prays ultimately, with all creation, for the fullest possible realization of the peaceable reign of Christ in and for all:

Come then to thy servants again,
Who long thy appearing to know,
Thy quiet and peaceable reign
In mercy establish below:

Appeas'd by the charms of thy grace
We all shall in amity join,
And kindly each other embrace,
And love with a passion like thine.⁴⁹

Conclusion

Charles Wesley's portrait of the peaceable reign of Christ functions like an icon that draws us into the reality of God's love. We yearn and pray for this kingdom to come. Engaging this work of art entails deep heart work, with reconciliation providing the primary background for the image that emerges. Charles floods his canvas with the colors of righteousness, joy, peace, justice and compassion. But the painting remains unfinished until we add the colors of our own lives and live into the shalom that God intends for every living creature. Wesley's lyrical vision of the peaceable reign of Christ invites us in. It invites us to embrace one another. It invites us to love with a passion like that of Jesus.

⁴⁷ MS Luke, 7.

⁴⁸ *Scripture Hymns*, 2:76.

⁴⁹ *Nativity Hymns*, 24.

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