



Justice in Methodist Hymnody

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Abstract: The Report to the 2023 British Methodist Conference, *A justice-seeking Church*¹, contains a short section on 'justice and Methodist hymns'. This article explores in more detail how the word justice is used and understood over time and argues that the notion of social justice as we currently understand it only entered our hymnody in the twentieth century. We outline reasons for this, offer some reflections on justice in Methodist hymns and suggest that we need to continue to create hymns that feed a justice-seeking church.

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Hymnody was an essential element in the birth and growth of Methodism. All the movement's convictions and core theology were passed on through song, and those who sang the words were shaped into the people called Methodist. It is surprising then that the notion of social justice, a value that most modern-day Methodists (and many outside the denomination) associate with Methodism, is almost absent from its earliest hymns.²

The word justice does appear in several of the hymnbooks of the Wesleys, but it rarely has the meaning now most commonly linked with the term. Picking up Micah 6.8, Charles Wesley wrote:

*Whoe'er to thee themselves approve,
Must take the path thy word hath show'd;
Justice pursue, and mercy love,
And humbly walk by faith with God. (Hymn 123, 1780)³*

The early Methodists would have sung this as they sang their faith. However, the idea of pursuing justice in line three, which at first sight looks like a call to live justly and/or to make a just society, is not developed. Rather Charles, who has faithfully followed the unfolding of the Micah text in this verse, moves in the following verses to prompt the singer to acknowledge that past or present action are not to be trusted for salvation. The human condition is wholly depraved and without hope except in Jesus, the crucified.

¹ The Methodist Church *A justice-seeking church: the report of the Walking with Micah project*, (Methodist Conference 2023)

² We are using the notion of social justice to mean the fair treatment of all individuals and groups, together with individual, corporate and structural actions to achieve such an end.

³ O. Beckerlegge & F. Hilderbrandt, ed., *The Works of John Wesley Vol 7, Bi-Centenary edition* (Oxford OUP, 1983).

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*But though my life henceforth be thine,
Present for past can ne'er atone;
Though I to thee the whole resign,
I only give thee back thine own.*

*What have I then wherein to trust?
I nothing have, I nothing am;
Excluded is my every boast,
My glory swallowed up in shame.*

*Guilty I stand before thy face,
At me I feel thy wrath abide;
'Tis just the sentence should take place
'Tis just; - but O thy Son hath died!*

*Jesus, the Lamb of God hath bled,
He bore our sins upon the tree;
Beneath our curse he bowed his head;
'Tis finished! he hath died for me!*

In other words, though we are charged by the prophet to live justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God, we need to recognise, first and foremost, that our own sinful nature is without redemption save in Christ. This radical focus on and trust in Christ is the central message not only of this hymn but of the whole corpus.

The 1780 collection, the defining hymnbook of the early Methodist movement, is structured around the idea of personal salvation and offers hymns for stages on the journey of faith. It begins with an exhortation to return to God, then moves through conviction of sin, repentance, new birth, the trials and challenges of life and growth as a believer; what one person called the Pilgrim's Progress of the 18th century.⁴ Although the word justice appears in this hymnbook, it usually refers to God's divine law or final judgement. The word righteousness, a recurring theme in Charles' hymns, which is strongly linked with the notion of justice, tends to mean God's gracious putting right of our individual wrongdoings, another term for personal salvation. Likewise, images of bondage are usually metaphors for individual sin rather than systemic injustice. Social justice is not a salient feature of these hymns.

Whilst the 1780 hymnbook represents the Wesleys' distillation of their hymn collecting and writing,⁵ several other collections preceded it, beginning with the 1737 hymnbook produced in Georgia. The search for expressions of social justice in these publications proves equally unsuccessful. The emphasis throughout is on articulating a theological understanding of Christian faith and experience. The classical doctrines of God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, creation, the human condition, incarnation, salvation, are seen through the lens of personal encounter with the divine, leading to a call to grow in holiness.

John Wesley wanted hymnody to pervade everyday life, offering hymns to be sung at work, as well as hymns for grace before meals, at meals and after meals, for occasions in civic life and in troubled times, yet in none of these is the idea of creating a socially just society. He would not have understood the concept in a way that is comparable to contemporary thought. Equally, it is possible to identify in Charles' bible-soaked hymns the texts which liberation theologians often highlight, e.g. The Magnificat (Luke 2.46-55), the Nazareth announcement (Luke 4.16-21), Micah 6.8, Isaiah 58, but always the emphasis in these hymns is on the nature of God's saving grace and not on the

⁴ J. E. Rattenbury, *The Evangelical Doctrine of Charles Wesley's Hymns* (London: Epworth 1941). 111. See also B. Manning, *The Hymns of Wesley and Watts*. London: Epworth, (1943), 11-12, where the arrangement of the 1780 collection is described as 'a spiritual biography of the sort of person whom he [Wesley] calls in his Preface a real Christian.' R. Leaver, "Psalms and Hymns and Hymns and Sacred Poems" in *Music and the Wesleys* edited by Nicholas Temperley and Stephen Banfield, 41-51. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010, argues that Wesley only intended the 1780 collection to be used in the societies and for personal use and should be taken together with other Wesley hymnbooks more intended for public worship, to form a rounded picture of Wesley's intended use of hymns. Whatever the truth of this, it was the 1780 collection which proved to be enduring and the key reference point for Methodist hymnody.

⁵ Rupert Davies regarded the 1780 book as 'definitive' of Wesleyan theology'. R. E. Davies, *Methodism*, London: Epworth Press, 1976, 97.

actions of those who respond to God's love. The key and only human response is to find salvation in Christ and to grow in holiness.

Likewise, hymn collections on Christian doctrine and worship such as *Hymns on the Trinity* (1767); *Hymns on the Lord's Supper* (1745); and *Hymns on the Great Festivals* (1746) whilst containing deeply insightful and evocative hymns, display no connection between faith and justice in society. *Hymns on the Lord's Supper*, for example, offers a profoundly broad range of understandings of the Eucharist, but makes no connection between Holy Communion and acting for justice.

This is not to suggest that the hymns lacked compassion for those in need. There is an awareness of ills of the world and the vulnerability of groups of people. For example, hymn 482 (1780), 'Come let us arise', says in stanza three:

*Then let us attend
Our heavenly friend
In his members distressed,
By want or affliction or sickness oppressed;
The prisoner relieve
The stranger receive,
Supply all their wants,
And spend and be spent in assisting his saints.*

We need to note, however, that this hymn falls in the section entitled 'For the Society'. The society here is the members of the Methodist community where the commitment of each member is towards fellow members. Several other hymns in the section speak of bearing one another's burdens and helping each other on the journey of faith.⁶ While this doesn't mean that the sentiments might not provoke compassion to any in these dire circumstances, its main concern is with building up the faithful and aiding their growth in faith.

Likewise, in the section on 'Believers interceding for the world' these words express a caring compassion:

*We weep for those who weep below,
And burdened for th'afflicted sigh;
The various forms of human woe
Excite our softest sympathy;
Fill every heart with mournful care
And draw out all our souls in prayer. (Hymn 429 v2)*

Nevertheless, most of the hymns in this section do not focus of the plight of needy. Rather they see the fundamental problem as the world caught in the grip of evil and sin, and pray that God will come to enlighten, that sinners will hear the call of grace, that the remnant may be a pure witness, and that specific groups, e.g. the Jews, will be converted.

Whilst hymn 512, carries the claim that the Christian singers are to serve all, the way of service is seen primarily in prayer and witness to Jesus Christ.

*Not in tombs we pine to dwell
Not in the dark, monastic cell,
By vows and gates confined;
Freely to all ourselves we give,
Constrained by Jesu's love to live
The servants of mankind.*

⁶ See, for example, 489, 495, 496, 510.

*Now, Jesu, now thy love impart,
To govern each devoted heart,
And fit us for thy will!*

*Deep founded in the truth and grace,
Build up thy rising church, and place
The City on the hill.*

Overall, the flow of compassion is directed either towards the brothers and sisters of the Society or towards the world, in offering prayers for its salvation and witnessing to the truth.

This paper seeks to examine the tension between the present predominance of social justice narratives, especially in viewing the practice of the Wesleys, and its relative absence in the hymnodic work of the movement's pioneers. This paper will first explore engagements between the Wesley brothers and the notion of justice, before moving on to examine a range of Methodist hymns and hymn books to chart the evolution of this term over time. Ultimately, we offer the view that the time is ripe for a new canon on this theme to emerge and encourage those amongst us toward it vigorously.

The Wesleys and Justice

It would be grossly unfair to suggest that the Wesleys were not concerned about social justice in their own time. As David Field has argued, the triad of 'Justice, Mercy and Truth' was for John a regular way of speaking about outward holiness or love as action in the world. Their concern for the poor was not confined to relieving immediate needs. John was prepared to criticise the rich for lack of engagement with the poor, and the brewers for the exploitation of the poor when the wheat harvest failed, as they bought up the limited resources to make gin, thus robbing the poor of bread. He was also critical of the courts and several times lamented that when compared to other (non-Christian) nations, England came up short in terms of justice, mercy and truth. These critiques of societal structures represent a commitment to seeking social justice. Similarly, his opposition to slavery, included calls for social, political and economic reform. As Field puts it:

Wesley's active engagement against slavery is an example of how works of mercy also go beyond personal charity and diaconal service to include action for social, political and economic transformation.⁷

We need to remember that John Wesley also describes the purpose of Methodism as 'reforming the nation' as well as 'spreading scriptural holiness'.⁸ It is all the more surprising, then, that these notions do not find a place in the early hymnody. There are, we suggest, several reasons for this.

First, the purpose of hymns was to aid the worship of God. As John Wesley writes in his preface to the 1780 Collection, they are 'a means of raising or quickening the spirit of devotion, of confirming his faith, of enlivening his hope, and of kindling or increasing his love to God and man'. Whilst it is true that John Wesley opposed social ills such as slavery and the exploitation of the poor by the distillers and set up structures to enable those trapped in poverty to escape their circumstances, his primary emphasis was on salvation in Christ.⁹ He

⁷ D.N. Field 'Holiness, social justice and the mission of the Church: John Wesley's insights in the contemporary context.' *Holiness*. 2015; Volume 1(2). 88. Joerg Rieger has developed the idea of 'acts of mercy' as social justice in what he calls deep solidarity. J. Rieger 'Exploring the Fullness of Grace: Wesleyan Moves from Charity, Service, and Advocacy to Deep Solidarity'. *Holiness*. 2024; 9(2):89-99.

⁸ D.N. Field. Holiness, social justice and the mission of the Church: John Wesley's insights in the contemporary context.' *Holiness*. 2015; Volume 1(2).178

⁹ Early Methodism's relationship to the poor has been well researched. See, for example, R.P Heitzenrater. *The Poor and the People called Methodists* Nashville: Kingswood; 2002. Jennings T. *Good News to the Poor*. Nashville Abingdon Press; 1990. Kimborough finds much in Charles Wesley's manuscripts and poetry to support Charles' understanding and concern for the poor, which resonates with what we know of John Wesley's view and practice. However, much of the evidence is in the unpublished texts and very little of this discourse is found in Charles' hymns that made their way into the early hymnbooks. Moreover, the word justice is not used in the poems or hymns cited and is largely an imposed construct that Kimborough uses to cover the helpful findings about Charles views. S.T. Kimborough. *Radical Grace: Justice for the Poor and Marginalised* Cambridge: Lutterworth; 2013.

proclaimed an experiential faith that would warm the heart and change a person's life. Ethics and lifestyle flowed from this experience as disciples continued the journey towards holiness (sanctification). On this journey, it was vital that believers kept their focus on God. As the Preface to the 1739, *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, makes clear, hymn singing is a form of social holiness, not social justice,¹⁰ wherein believers help each other on the journey towards God. Hymns, as a prudential means of grace, were to help Christian companies to maintain such a focus. They did not prescribe particular social actions or identify injustices that needed to be addressed. Rather they nurtured Godward oriented lives that would subsequently issue in doing good, wherever Methodists found themselves.

Second, Wesley's ethics, sometimes called 'agapism'¹¹ were largely taken from the New Testament. Loving God and loving neighbour, together with the command to love one another, were the bedrock of his approach to all Christian living. Much of the radical compassion of Jesus' teaching and action influenced Wesley directly in his own pattern of life and those he sought help in the Christian way. He personally visited and collected funds for those who lived in poverty and encouraged his societies to give away their weekly collection to alleviate those in need. He lived by and preached that money was a snare and that a healthy lifestyle was to earn, save and give all one could. These practices he took directly from the New Testament as a pattern of discipleship for all Christians. The New Testament does not, however, contain much by way of the prophetic call to justice that punctuates the Hebrew Scriptures. Indeed, in the very different context of new, small, widely dispersed Christian communities of the first century, with next to no political power or influential, the focus is on individual rather than structural responses to the evils of the day. Individuals were to live out their faith as a witness to the crucified and risen Christ rather than rise up against oppressive forces. Moreover, where the prophetic calls for justice are found in the Hebrew Scriptures, they are not calls for structural change but for the indifferent rich and wicked exploiters to repent and change their ways. On the part of the believers holy living and faithfulness are called for, and so it is no surprise that these virtues dominate the words of Methodist hymns. They broadly reflect a Biblical outlook in which personal renewal transforms the wider world. Marquardt puts it as follows: "In Wesley's eyes, the most important and most effective means of renewing society was the individual's moral transformation."¹²

Third, the concept of social justice, as a social, political and economic theory, did not begin to appear until the next century. The notion was outlined by the 19th century Jesuit philosopher, Luigi Taparelli d'Azeglio. Taparelli's view of social justice was primarily about the ordering of society, which he believed was divinely decreed. Social justice defended the hierarchical order of the aristocracy and the papacy, but Taparelli also believed that intervention on behalf of the poor was necessary when external economic forces threatened to crush them. This action was necessary to maintain the existing order. It is his view of interventionist economics that has become more strongly attached to the meaning of social justice, rather than his advocacy of the divine ordering of society. This aspect of his writings was later taken up and advocated by various Popes, resulting in Taparelli being counted among the leading thinkers of Catholic Social Teaching.¹³ Whether Wesley would have adopted theory of social justice as it later developed is a moot point. Politically, he was a high church Tory and, like Taparelli, broadly content with the existing ordering of society. Where he took issue was over those actions and practices that degraded and dehumanized those made in the image of God, and this was largely pursued by sharing his views in print and by acts of social compassion. He did not advocate nor use the Methodist societies as a campaigning tool, nor did he assume they would have a political role. They were for a different purpose. Though hymns were sometimes used to combat Calvinism, they did not carry calls to social activism.

¹⁰ Social holiness is sometimes used as a synonym for social justice in contemporary discussions but as Thompson makes clear these are very different concepts. (Thompson, A. C. 'From Societies to Society: The Shift from Holiness to Justice in the Wesleyan Tradition.' *Methodist Review* 3 (2011): 141–72.)

John Wesley was firm that his hymns were for social holiness. For a further discussion of the relationship between social holiness and social justice see R. L. Walton 'Social Holiness and Social Justice'. *Holiness*. 2019; 5(1) January.

¹¹ R. Stone. *John Wesley's Life and Ethics* Nashville: Abingdon Press; 2001. 215. The term was originally coined by W.K. Frankena *Ethics*. Eagleswood Cliffs: N J Prentice-Hall; 1963.

¹² Marquardt M. *John Wesley's Social Ethics: Praxis and Principles*. Nashville: Abingdon; 1992. 131

¹³ For fuller account of Taparelli's work see T.P. Burke. 'The Origins of Social Justice: Taparelli d'Azeglio'. *Modern Age*. 2010;52(2):97-106. and T.C. Behr 'Luigi Taparelli and Social Justice: Rediscovering the Origins of a 'Hollowed' Concept. *Social Justice in Context*, 2005.

19th Century Methodist Hymns books

Methodism grew rapidly in the 19th century, despite (or perhaps because of) its several divisions. By the 1851 religious census, over 2 million registered as worshipping in a Methodist church. By the late 1880s some even expected that Wesleyan Methodist Church would overtake the Church of England as the largest Christian body in England. With this significant growth came a higher status in society, and a growing sense of civic responsibility. However, the hymn books were slow to reflect this.

The Wesleyan Methodists continued to use the 1780 book throughout the 19th century. It was reissued with supplements in 1831 and 1876 but not replaced until 1904, when the experiential structure was changed to a thematic one. Whilst the other strands of divided Methodism in the 19th century each produced their own hymnbooks, the template set by the 1780 collection influenced the structure of the collections and thus all retained a central emphasis on the Christian experience both individual and collective. It is these we will turn to now.

A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the Methodist Connexion (1800)

was acclaimed by the MNC minutes as follows:

“a Collection of Hymns from various Authors, arranged under proper heads, intended as an Appendix to the Large Hymn Book,” with this footnote, “In this small volume will be found a variety of Hymns, immediately adapted to the different parts of Public Worship - a deficiency in the large Hymn Book which has been often lamented - several of the most popular Hymns are also inserted.”¹⁴

The deficiencies cited in the quotation do not refer to the absence of social justice but a lack of thematic ordering and non-inclusion of hymns for Holy Communion and seasons of the Christian year, as the 1834 version of the combined Large Hymn Book and supplement shows. Here the structure adopted begins with a section on the Existence, Attributes and Works of God, follow by a section on the Incarnation and then The Character and Influences of the Holy Spirit. However, the largest collection in one section is under the heading Particular Classes of Persons. This comprises 214 (33%) of the 660 hymns indicating various states of human response to God such as “Sinners”, “Penitents”, “Backsliders” and the “Lukewarm” followed by the familiar stages of the Christian journey.

Hymns for Divine Worship (Methodist New Connexion, 1864)

This hymnbook of 1024 hymns divides into two major sections. The first section consisting of 332 hymns, is focused on the worship, works and attributes of God; the second and larger of the two, consisting of 692 hymns, focuses on the journey of faith, echoing the categories used in the 1780 collection. The presence of compassion for those outside the life of the church appears to be a little stronger than in the 1780 collection. A subdivision of ‘The Christian Life’ entitled ‘Brotherly Kindness and Charity’ (821-825) precedes ‘For Believers interceding’ and displays compassion for others in need. The hymn ‘Father of mercies’ (825) includes this verse:

*When the most helpless sons of grief
In low distress are laid
Soft be our hearts their pains to feel,
And swift our hands to aid* (verse 3)

The hymnbook also included a section for ‘national solemnities’ (992-100) recognising major events and catastrophes, but these are principally a call on the nation(s) to turn to God.

¹⁴ W. Bainbridge ‘The First Hymn Book of the Methodist New Connexion’ *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society*. 1923. 21-23. This is cited by David M Chapman. *Born in Song: Methodist Worship in Britain*. Warrington: Ralph Wrightsons Ltd.; 2006. in a shorter form on p. 297.

The Primitive Methodist Hymnal (1882)

Sections include a small one on 'Man' (his condition, redemption and warnings) and by far the largest one – Christian Life. This takes us through the experience of becoming a Christian and growing in faith, its privileges, and its duties (work, trust, 'contentment and resignation', prayer, mutual love and forbearance).

This is typical of the style of the era:

*Uplift the blood-stained banner,
And shout with trumpet's sound,
Deliverance to the captive,
And freedom to the bound;
Earth's jubilee of glory, The year of full release:
O tell the wondrous story,
Go forth and publish peace!* (B. Gough, PMH 603 v2)

However, it is not clear what is meant by the captive and the bound – given the context of a robust hymn exhorting Christians to go forth as 'confessors and martyrs' and 'preach the blood of sprinkling and live and die for Christ'. They are perhaps most likely references to the bondages of individual sin rather than any explicit reference to more collective, systemic experiences of suffering. In this sense, it is not dissimilar to the line in 'God is working his purpose out'¹⁵ that reads 'Fight we the fight with sorrow and sin, to set their captives free'.

A benign portrayal of the establishment of God's justice is found in 'Gird on thy conquering sword', which contains the lines:

*Fair truth, and smiling love,
And injured righteousness,
Under Thy banners move,
And see from Thee redress:
Thou in their cause
Shall prosperous ride,
And far and wide
Dispense Thy laws.* (Philip Doddridge, PHM 131 verse 2)

Charles Wesley's hymn about the 'year of Jubilee is come!' is largely spiritual in its tenor:

*Ye slaves of sin and hell,
Your liberty receive,
And safe in Jesus dwell,
And blest in Jesus live;
The year of Jubilee is come!
Return, ye ransomed sinners, home.* ('Blow ye the trumpet blow') PHM 842, verse 4)

In general, the focus of the coming kingdom is more about personal redemption than the new order which Jesus introduces. One of Isaac Watts's hymns is a noteworthy exception with its connection between justice and the poor:

*Great God, whose universal sway
The known and unknown worlds obey,
Now give the kingdom to Thy Son,
Extend His power, exalt His throne.
The sceptre well becomes His hands;*

¹⁵ MHB 812, HP769

*All heaven submits to His commands;
His justice shall avenge the poor,
And pride and rage prevail no more.*

*With power he vindicates the just,
And treads the oppressor in the dust:
His worship and His fear shall last
Till the full course of time be past.*

(PHM 826, vv 1-3)

It is possible to bring other examples from the various hymnbooks of 19th century Methodism, but it would not alter the fundamental picture. Methodists, whatever their label, remained committed to a core of hymns which explored and expressed personal experience of God's saving grace. We can see incremental changes in the structure of hymnbooks, with a movement towards a thematic structure and a small increase in number of hymns that feature compassion towards the needy and even a hint of a desire for social justice. However, as in the hymn last cited, the emphasis remains on the action of God rather than human action or even a human partnership with God in opposing injustice or creating a just society.

Despite the growth of Methodism in the 19th century and its more significant place in English society, hymns remained largely apolitical. Ironically, during this period Methodists were often at the forefront of social change, pioneering trade unions and identifying political reform. Despite this they sang the same pietistic, grace proclaiming hymns. Perhaps in a subliminal way the words of these hymns may have helped to inspire their vision, to fuel their hopes for a better world and to provide courage to take action. The Wesleys' emphasis on grace and thus dignity for all was founded in the Arminian theology encapsulated in Charles' hymns, pregnant with social implications. However, the hymns remained focused on the nature and action of God, whatever good they may have birthed.

Thompson has argued that the shift towards an emphasis on social justice in American Methodism in the nineteenth century was the result of several factors. A combination of Enlightenment thought, biblical criticism and evolutionary science brought about a shift away from the 'rehabilitation of soul', as emphasised by Wesley, and towards the notion of a rational soul with moral choices and responsibilities. This combined with the explosive growth of Methodism in North America making Methodism a subculture of American society rather than the counterculture of early Methodism. "Increasingly, the locus of Christian activity became centred not in the *Societies* of the earlier period but in society writ large".¹⁶

A similar pattern was no doubt at work in 19th century British Methodism, but its hymns did not reflect this. It is only in the mid-twentieth century that this feature begins to emerge.

20th and 21st Century Methodist Hymnbooks

1933 Methodist Hymnbook

The Methodist Hymnbook was produced a year after Union in 1932. Its aim was to unite the various strands of Methodism that had come together. It was widely judged a success.¹⁷ The layout of the hymns follows the common pattern of hymns in the 1904 Wesleyan Hymn Book adoring God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, followed by The Christian Life, Death/Judgement/Future Life, The Church and then National and Social Life. It was used for almost 50 years, during which there was a revival of hymn writing, to meet the changing needs of worshipping congregations.¹⁸ The life of the hymn book may account for the limited inclusion of hymns that focused on social justice which emerged in this period.

¹⁶ A.C. Thompson, 'From Societies to Society: The Shift from Holiness to Justice in the Wesleyan Tradition'. *Methodist Review* 3. 2011:141–72.

¹⁷ B Tabraham, *The Making of Methodism* London: Epworth Press, 1995.84

¹⁸ David M. Chapman, *Born in Song: Methodist Worship in Britain*. Warrington: Ralph Wrightsons Ltd., 2006.299

Some of its hymns speak of justice in a legal sense, of divine Law, e.g.,

*Unresting, unhasting, and silent as light,
Not wanting, nor wasting, thou rulest in might;
Thy justice like mountains high soaring above,
Thy clouds which are fountains of goodness and love.*

(Walter Chambers Smith, 'Immortal, invisible' MHB 34 verse 2)

Or:

*Within the kingdom of His might,
Lo! All is just and all is right;
To God all praise and glory.*

*('Sing praise to God who reigns above' Schulz/Cox
MHB 415 verse 2)*

Related sections are those on Service [of God] and Influence (572-605) and ones on Citizenship and Service (890-900), World Peace and Brotherhood (901-912) and Hospitals and Philanthropy (918-923).

883, 'Judge eternal, throned in splendour' by Henry Scott Holland is a notable inclusion, first published in a Christian Socialist magazine at the turn of the century. It has the feel of a prayer to bring judgement and to cleanse our world of its 'bitter things' yet retaining its distinctive Victorian heritage, in language almost reminiscent of William Blake:

*Still the weary folk are pining
For the hour that bring release;
And the city's crowded clangour
Cried aloud for sin to cease;
And the homesteads and the woodlands
Plead in silence for their peace.*

Washington Gladden's hymn 'O Master, let me walk with thee' (MHB600) features in the Service & Influence section. He was a prominent member of the Social Gospel movement in the USA in the early part of the twentieth century, although this hymn is pietistic in tone.

The hymn 'From thee all skill and science flow, all pity, care and love' ends with this plea:

*And hasten, Lord, that perfect day
When pain and death shall cease,
And Thy just rule shall fill the earth
With health, and light, and peace;
When ever blue the sky shall gleam,
And ever green the sod,
And man's rude work deface no more
The paradise of God.* *(Charles Kingsley, MHB 921)*

Justice here is about tranquillity, concord, clarity and harmony. No mention here of justice ending hunger, or poverty, or the pain that comes from other than disease, nor the struggle for justice.

William Walsham How's hymn 'We give to Thee but Thine own'¹⁹ does speak of the ongoing ministry of Christ through his people, of ministering to the lost, providing solace and comfort, including the orphaned and abandoned. It contains the themes of the ending of want and discord, arrival of peace and brotherhood, of

¹⁹ MHB 923

standing fast to truth, of fulfilling duty, of trusting in God to bring about one day the glorious kingdom. MHB909 – ‘When wilt Thou save the people?’ mentions the clear sense of injustice felt by some, but it is not clear whether God’s salvation is invoked to bring about justice that ends the consequences of social evils, or removes the evils themselves:

*Shall crime bring crime for ever, Strength aiding still the strong?
Is it Thy will, O Father,
That man should toil for wrong?....*

*When wilt Thou save the people?
O God of mercy, when?
The people, Lord, the people,
Not thrones and crowns, but men!
God save the people; thine they are,
Thy children, as Thine angels fair;
From vice, oppression, and despair,
God save the people! (Ebenezer Elliot, verses 2 & 3)*

There is more than a touch of misty-eyed wishful thinking in ‘These things shall be: a loftier race’ which looks forward to the paradise of God’s future in which all enmity shall be absent:

*They shall be gentle, brave, and strong
To spill no drop of blood, but dare
All that may plant man’s lordship firm
On earth, and fire, and sea, and air.*

*Nation with nation, land with land,
Unarmed shall live as comrades free;
In every heart and brain shall throb
The pulse of one fraternity... (John Addington Symonds, MHB 910, verses 3 & 4)*

This is also reflected in ‘Turn back, O man, forswear thy foolish ways’ (MHB 912) with the line that ‘Earth shall be fair, and all her folk be one’.

Andrew Pratt’s work on the 1933 Hymnbook contains a short section on ‘Mission and the World’. He recognises that 1924 Report to the (Wesleyan) Conference, ‘Christian Politics, Economics and Citizenship’ was regarded by F.W. Dillistone as a possible blueprint for the welfare state. Yet this is not reflected to any great extent in the Hymnbook. Pratt concludes: ‘Closer examination reveals that the section [on Service and Influence] relies heavily on texts that speak of the service of God, rather than the service of society, and many are written in tones that encourage oppression, with the acceptance of task and class as foreordained by God’.²⁰

Hymns and Songs (1969)

There is a clear disjunct between this book and the ones that preceded it, which is not surprising given the seismic changes in society during the intervening decades. This book contains many hymns highly conscious of humanity’s capacity for creating suffering, of hubris, of human stubbornness and reluctance to address the problems of the age. In particular, there were significant contributions by Fred Pratt Green and Sydney Carter, whose attention to matters of human welfare and justice were prominent. The tone of this volume is more collectively contrite: there is less individual confession but rather an awareness of the *collective* dimension to our sinful nature. For instance: ‘God of grace and God of glory; with its reference to the ‘hosts of evil round us’ and in verse 3 (of 4 in H&S):

²⁰ A. Pratt, *O for a Thousand Tongues*. London: Epworth Press, 2004.166

*Heal thy children's warring madness;
 Bend our pride to thy control;
 Shame our wanton, selfish gladness,
 Rich in things and poor in soul.
 Grant us wisdom,
 Grant us courage,
 Lest we miss thy kingdom's goal.* (H E Fosdick)

New hymns that became very popular include not only the one above but 'God is love, let heaven adore him' which speaks of sorrow's 'iron rod' and God's sharing in our pain, and 'Lord, thy Church on earth is seeking' (42) which spoke of 'Freedom [...] to those in bondage' and although the language is slightly more modern than that of the MHB, one could argue that its sentiments are largely about release from personal sin rather than systemic change in our society or world.

Hymns & Psalms (1983)

This book contained 15 hymns in the section 'Justice and Peace' under the theme of God's World rather than God's People. (As we shall see later, *Singing the Faith* placed this in a section entitled of God's Enduring Purposes, which is more suggestive of a response to a call.) Here is an excerpt from one:

*On just and unjust thou thy care dost freely shower;
 Make us, thy children, free from greed and lust for power,
 Lest human justice, yoked with man's unequal laws,
 Oppress the needy and neglect the humble cause.* (G B Caird, H&P 401 v 3)

Aside from the dubious issue of the delineation between 'just and unjust', he does equate the pursuit of justice with the removal of want.

One of the clearest expressions of the desire for just relations is found in Fred Kaan's hymn:

*For the healing of the nations,
 Lord, we pray with one accord;
 For a just and equal sharing
 Of the things that earth affords.* (H&P 402 v 1)

Justice is here understood as right and proper distribution of the gifts God has given. It goes on to add:

*All that kills abundant living,
 Let it from the earth be banned;
 Pride of status, race, or schooling,
 Dogmas that obscure your plan.
 In our common quest for justice
 May we hallow life's brief span.* (H&P 402 v 3)

Several points are worth noting here. The 'common quest' for justice articulates an important theological tenet – that this is not an optional aspect of Christian living but an essential component, and that the nature of this quest is similar to all those who follow Christ. It does not suggest that we all speak or think the same, but it does imply that broadly speaking there is a shared understanding of what justice means.

Furthermore, the search for justice is a means of affording honour, respect and dignity to the life God has given every human being.

Some hymns are clear in their view that it is we (the singers) who are at least partly responsible for the injustice of others' suffering, though not so complicit about violence or oppression:

*Lord, vindicate against our greed
The weak, whose tears thy justice plead;*

*Thy pity, Lord, on those who lie
Oppressed by war and tyranny;
Show them the cross which thou didst bear,
Give them the power that conquered there. (O Christ the Lord... H&P 406, R T Brooks)*

One theme that emerges in *Hymns & Psalms* is that of our partnership with God in enabling the kingdom - incorporating justice – to be known:

*Millions believe the law of life is cunning
Within a world of cruelty and greed;
How can they know God's charity and justice
If helping hands have never reached their need? (The law of Christ.... H&P 407, J P McAuley)*

In this hymn we find the line that 'in charity and justice God is shown' (verse 1) and the question shown above about our responsibility as agents of God's love and justice. This particular hymn is more of a sung statement that reminds us of our faith rather than a hymn addressed to God. As with H&P 406 ('O Christ the Lord'), it also speaks from a place of concern, but about others who face injustice. It does not come from those experiencing it directly, nor do we share in it: the language is of 'them' and 'they' rather than 'us'.

'The right hand of God' (H&P 408) is a rare inclusion from the World Church. We are reminded that 'Our pride and deeds unjust are destroyed by the right hand of God', which also restores, plants and heals.

The hymn that most clearly contains the injunction from Micah 6 – H&P 703414 - is forthright in its breadth of scope in justice. This not only embraces fair government and the delivery of justice seen as protection of the people against 'crime and cruelty' (verse 2) but also words which reveal a certain suspicion of economic gain at the expense of others:

*All who gain wealth by trade,
For whom the worker toils,
Think not to win God's aid,
If greed your commerce soils. (Albert Bayley, verse 3)*

Alan Gaunt's hymn 'We pray for peace' (H&P413) cleverly articulates the nature of Christian peace, one that is based on the truth of God and challenges suffering, warns against complacency and most of all is found in God through Jesus Christ. It is a peace that embraces justice, truth and fraternity rather than the evil that defends unjust laws and fosters prejudice.

Two further hymns deserve a mention. Caryl Micklem's hymn 'Give to me, Lord, a thankful heart' is one of quiet devotion and firm resolve in the cause of God's kingdom, ever conscious of our own failings yet full of trust and hope.

*Jesus, with all your church I long
To see your kingdom come
Show me your way of righting wrong
And turning sorrow into song
Until you bring me home. (H&P 548)*

Fred Pratt Green's hymn 'The Church of Christ in every age...' describes the challenge facing God's people and the denial of life to many:

*Across the world, across the street,
The victims of injustice cry
For shelter and for bread to eat
And never live until they die. (H&P 804)*

With imagination and skill, he combines the Church's ministry of sharing material resources with that of nurturing both ourselves and others in faith:

*For he alone, whose blood was shed,
Can cure the fever in our blood,
And teach us how to share our bread
And feed the starving multitude.*

Singing the Faith (2011)

Singing the Faith is an eclectic compilation of hymns and songs. In by far the largest of its three sections – God's Enduring Purposes – we find 30 hymns on the theme of Justice and Peace (StF 693-723). It is preceded by the section, 'Life and Unity in the Church' and followed by 'The Wholeness of Creation'.

Graham Kendrick's song 'Beauty for brokenness' (StF 693) reveals a sense that the congregation are those who are not poor but know God is of the poor: "give us compassion we pray, melt our cold hearts". The justice spoken of in this hymn is clearly linked to the fulfilment of God's salvation, but the implication is that God's kingdom stands in opposition to the fragility of life for many people, unemployment, land and workers' rights.

In StF 700 by Shirley Erena Murray, 'God weeps' (and bleeds, cries) in the face of human cruelty, neglect and suffering. A similar theme is found in StF 714 'The God who sings' by Douglas Galbraith. It contains the lines:

*The God who shouts
in fury when the powerful shame the
poor will break the chains, and those
who hide in fear he will restore.*

God is not the distant, regal figure of some of the older hymns. Here God is described as standing beside those experiencing injustice and whose emotions are more evident as sharing in those of suffering humanity. We find a rather different tone in StF 702 – "I will speak out for those who have no voices", which is not entirely untypical of other songs coming from a more conservative evangelical position that embrace a profound concern for the poor:

*I will speak out for those who have no voices;
I will stand up for the rights of all the oppressed;
I will speak truth and justice;
I'll defend the poor and the needy:
I will lift up the weak in Jesus' name.*

*I will speak out for those who have no choices;
I will cry out for those who live without love;
I will show God's compassion
to the crushed and broken in spirit;
I will lift up the weak in Jesus' name. (Dave Bankhead, Ray Goudie, Sue Rinaldi & Steve Bassett)*

At first sight, this is a moving, insightful song committed to remedying poverty, exclusion and misery. The language is, however, revealing: the song is not so much about the poor at all, rather the desire to follow Christ and make his presence explicit. Moreover, the emphasis is more on the individual than those experiencing injustice, or Christ. As such it can appear arrogant or naïve, not least in the standing up for the rights of *all* the oppressed. No sense of partnership or solidarity is apparent, nor the causes of suffering, nor dependence on divine aid.

By contrast, Martin Leckebusch's hymn 'Show me how to stand for justice' (StF 713) is almost the opposite. It seeks the guidance of God to 'work for what is right', eschews self-satisfaction or pride and asks for a closer walk with God, in tones reminiscent (again) of Gladden's hymn. His other hymn in this section is StF 703 'In an age of twisted values', which not every congregation can sing with sincerity:

*In sophisticated language we have justified our greed;
By our struggle for possessions we have robbed the poor and weak...*

Yet the hymn's virtue is its stark description of the way our societies are broken, and our need of grace and renewal.

StF 722 'When mountains that we thought secure' (Gareth Hill) speaks of the pain and anguish resulting from human actions. It makes a plea for God's people to have faith that despite what has happened, justice will increase. It is significant that the primary call here is for justice. Not primarily for peace, or God's kingdom, or salvation, or healing. It reflects the contemporary domination of this theme. In former decades, it would have been peace. It contrasts with StF697, a song from the apartheid days in South Africa, 'O freedom (justice, Jesus) is coming' with its confident, almost strident tone.

This leads us to surmise that one contemporary purpose of singing such hymns or songs is to help position ourselves alongside movements striving for justice, and to explore imaginatively the nature of the struggle.

Another of the relatively few items in StF from the World Church is a song of commitment from Central America:

*Sent by the Lord am I
my hands are ready now to make the earth the place
in which the kingdom comes.
The angels cannot change
a world of hurt and pain
into a world of love,
of justice and of peace.
The task is mine to do,
to set it really free.
Oh, help me to obey,
help me to do your will.* (José Aguilar, StF 239)

It expresses the recognition that divine action alone will not bring out the desired change in society, but requires the partnership of men and women to enable God's kingdom – of love, justice and peace – to enter.

Hymn StF 681 'Community of Christ', another hymn by Shirley Erena Murray, invites the Church to look beyond its own communal life to the people that are fractured and in need both locally and on a global scale. The third verse reads:

*Community of Christ, through
whom the word must sound –
cry out for justice and for peace
the whole world round:*

*disarm the powers that war and all that can destroy,
turn bombs to bread, and tears of anguish into joy.*

And finally, a hymn that puts our attempts at seeking justice into the proper perspective of God's coming judgment with humility and hope:

*For Christ the Lord will
surely come, the King
whom kings will fear, and
with God's perfect justice
plumb the justice we do
here, revealing that the
present age and every
age that's past are not
the final moral gauge
that judges us at last.*

(StF 491, 'As servants working an estate' Thomas Troeger)

Conclusion

It is clear that, prior to 1969's *Hymns and Songs*, Methodist hymn collections reveal justice primarily in terms of the divine majesty and righteousness of God, which would be fully manifest at the end time and in the meantime was experienced as justification, grace in Christ, enabling personal salvation. Though the words of these hymns recognise suffering and oppression, which evokes sympathy and acts of compassion (acts of mercy), especially to the household of faith, there is no call to partnership with God in creating a more just world.

Although a theory of social justice was evolving in the late 19th century, the theological landscape prior to the twentieth century was largely ignorant of structural causes of poverty and misery that now underpin much of our global consciousness. There was generally a lack of awareness of the plight of others,²¹ but more significantly a lack of insight to perceive how change could occur. The sad history of slavery and its eventual overthrow, as well as the accompanying legacy of a colonial paradigm, reveals psychological and philosophical obstacles in addition to political or economic ones. Once the structural dimensions of trade, credit, underdevelopment and dependency, of the military-industrial complexes and of poverty, began to be appreciated there manifested a confidence that they could be changed for the betterment of humanity. Where change had not been conceivable, it could not be seen as unjust – but in this new understanding the failure to challenge systems that impaired the lives of millions could no longer be regarded as outside the moral realm. Allied to the increased awareness came new philosophies and resources that enabled many Christians, in all circumstances, to believe that with sufficient inspiration and resolve, change could and should be affected. A response that is collective as well as individual underscores much of late twentieth and twenty-first century hymnody, also reflects Niebuhr's famous comment that "justice is the public face of love".

Through the 20th century, we see a growth in concern with the human condition - particularly needless suffering and justice is less irrevocably linked with the end of all things in the hymns selected for Methodist Hymn books. Following *Hymns and Songs* this becomes more explicit in the hymnody of the Methodist Church. The nature of justice becomes increasingly understood as the removal of want, need, suffering and oppression, rather than the property of God (alone) in a legal, judgmental sense. Justice is seen, more and more, as the task of Christian disciples in partnership with God rather than solely the work of God, and the call to action in the life of the world to challenge injustice and seek to establish justice sounds stronger in Methodist songs.

There can be little doubt that the heightened consciousness of suffering and oppression in the postwar period had some influence on both hymn writers and selectors in the second half of the 20th century, with rapid media developments accelerating awareness. At the same time, the emphasis on God participating in our suffering,

²¹ Other than disasters that were clearly naturally occurring events, such as the Lisbon earthquake, 1755.

expressed in the writings of Moltmann and others, reopens a theological seam that helps create new streams of creativity in poems and hymns. Additionally, the diverse theologies of the last 50 years (e.g. feminist, liberation, black, womanist, queer) often begin from a starting point of pain, oppression or injustices and carry within their theological contributions a desire for justice. These perspectives are reflected in these emerging hymns. In this sense, Methodists hymns are mirroring our changing understanding of the world and the nature of God.

The selection of hymns in *Singing the Faith* offers a range of good resources for a justice-seeking church but we need to highlight certain aspects of the collection. They often are voiced on behalf of others, which suggests that we be in a privileged position, not those suffering, and this can fall into the trap of pleading and taking action 'for them' and thus ignoring the importance of agency on the part of those experiencing injustice. The mantra of 'nothing about us, without us, is for us' is relevant here. As the "Justice-seeking Church" report puts it:

"175. Justice is about 'being with' people rather than 'working for' people. 'Being with' means our relationships are characterised by friendship, respect and a willingness to give time to listening. We practise justice in ways that involve communities in making decisions together, people experiencing injustice having agency and dignity, and people standing and working in solidarity together".

Other hymns stress a sense of partnership, solidarity, and address the causes of suffering, including our own role in them. Some hymns from the World Church speak in the first person of the need and hope for justice. As always, the careful choosing of appropriate hymns is key.

Hymnbooks, intended to last for perhaps 30 years, always reflect the previous period and are limited in their ability to garner the best new material after publication, though *Singing the Faith Plus* has mitigated this problem, by providing additional online contributions and alerting people to new resources.

Our sense is that more hymns on the theme of justice need to be found or created to help feed a justice-seeking church. Such material will, we trust, reflect not only the reality of human experience and hope, and the nature of God in Jesus Christ, but will embody the openness of heart and mind that seeks to partner and learn from the other (person or community) and so to be changed, and to grow in holiness and love.

*We have no mission
but to serve in full
obedience to our
Lord: to care for all,
without reserve,
and spread his liberating Word.* (Fred Pratt Green, StF 415)

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Hymn Books Consulted

- 1737 A Collection of Psalms and hymns
- 1739 Hymns and sacred Poems
- 1742 Tunes book
- 1743 Collection (Morning Hymn book)
- 1745 Hymns on the Lord's Supper
- 1746 Hymns on the Great Festivals
- 1753 Hymns and Spiritual Songs
- 1761 Hymns with Tunes Annexed
- 1767 Hymns on the Trinity
- 1780 Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People called Methodist
- 1789 Sacred Harmony (tunes)

The 1780 book was re-issued with supplements by the WM in 1831, and 1876 but not replaced until **1904** - the first to change the experiential structure to a thematic one.

Methodist New Connexion

- 1834 Hymn book
- 1864 Hymns for Divine Worship

Primitive Methodists

- 1825 Large Hymn-book
- 1854 Revised and Enlarged Large Hymn Book
- 1886 2nd Revised version
- 1912 Supplement

Bible Christians

- 1838 Enlarged version of the 1780 collection
- 1862 2nd enlarged version of 1780 collection
- 1889 Revised version of 1780 = A collection of hymns for the use of people called Bible Christians

United Methodist Free Churches (UMFC)

- 1860 Revised version of 1780
- 1889 UMFC hymnal

After Methodism Union 1932

- 1933 Methodist Hymn book
- 1969 Hymns and Songs (Supplement)
- 1983 Hymns and Psalms
- 2011 Singing the Faith