

“Universal Redemption” and “Catholic Love”

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I.

In late April 1739, John Wesley published his sermon “Free Grace” accompanied by a 36-stanza hymn, “Universal Redemption,” perhaps by Charles Wesley, challenging George Whitfield’s focus on limited atonement and unconditional election. This, the earliest single publication in the catalogue of “Charles Wesley’s Published Verse” (www.divinity.duke.edu) lays out the foundation for Methodism’s understanding of God’s grace that is available to all persons for redemption. In their introductory comments to this sermon, Albert Outler and Richard Heitzenrater note that following several years of cooperation between John Wesley and George Whitefield in the mid-1730s, this sermon signaled a major schism between those English evangelicals. This sermon, in contrast to the later “Catholic Spirit,” is “a useful illustration of Wesley’s temper and methods as a polemicist” (*John Wesley’s Sermons: An Anthology*, ed. Outler and Heitzenrater, Nashville: Abingdon, 1991, 49). John’s pamphlet of “Free Grace” received at least ten editions during his life, but was not included in his collected *Sermons*. Eventually he inserted it in his collected *Works*, among other controversial writings.

The authorship of “Universal Redemption,” the accompanying poem, is unclear, with scholars leaning slightly toward assigning it to Charles Wesley. It was included the next year in *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1740), 136–42; but it was dropped after the first edition, perhaps because it continued to appear in subsequent editions of the sermon. John turned to the poem once more when initiating the journal *Arminian Magazine* to defend the universal offer of saving grace, reprinting “Universal Redemption” in the first volume (1778: 235–40). (“Editorial Introduction to ‘Universal Redemption’” found at www.divinity.duke.edu)

The sermon “Free Grace” is built on models of persuasion and is strongly argued. The summary points are as follows:

The grace or love of God, whence cometh our salvation, is FREE IN ALL, and FREE FOR ALL.

I. It is free in all to whom it is given.

II. The doctrine of predestination is not a doctrine of God.

III. Predestination destroys the comfort of religion, the happiness of Christianity.

IV. This uncomfortable doctrine also destroys our zeal for good works.

V. Furthermore, the doctrine of predestination has a direct and manifest tendency to overthrow the whole Christian Revelation.

VI. And at the same time, makes that Revelation contradict itself.

VII. Predestination is a doctrine full of blasphemy. (John Wesley, “Free Grace”)

As may be seen by Wesley’s own outline, the sermon itself is primarily poised against: against claiming predestination as a doctrine created by God, against the work of predestination as it destroys the comfort of religion and happiness of Christian, against the sapping of motivation for good works that happens due to the doctrine of predestination, against the harm done to the Christian Revelation by the doctrine of predestination, and the blasphemous nature of predestination.

In contrast, the hymn “Universal Redemption” focuses much more on praise of God for grace and mercy. In red on the right side of the full text below are summary lines for each stanza. In blue are comments relating the hymn/poem to the sermon.

Section 1 of “Free Grace”

[1] Hear, holy, holy, holy, Lord,
Father of all mankind,
Spirit of love, eternal word,
In mystick union join’d.

Praise of the Trinity

[2] Hear, and inspire my stammering tongue,
Exalt my abject thought,
Speak from my mouth a sacred song,
Who spak’st the world from nought.

I am unholy, make me holy.

[3] Thy darling attribute I praise
Which all alike may prove,
The glory of thy boundless grace,
Thy universal love.

Thou art glory, boundless grace, universal love.

[4] Mercy I sing, transporting sound,
The joy of earth and heaven! [Joy of religion, section III](#)
Mercy by every sinner found,
Who takes what God hath given.

Mercy you give to every sinner,

[5] Mercy for all, thy hands have made,
Immense, and unconfin’d,
Throughout thy every work display’d,
Embracing all mankind.

mercy for all creation, humankind.

[6] Thine eye survey’d the fallen race
When sunk, in sin they lay,
Their misery call’d for all thy grace,
But justice stopp’d the way.

Justice could have barred your grace

[7] Mercy the fatal bar remov’d,
Thy only Son it gave,—
To save a world so dearly lov’d,
A sinful world to save.

but through the son/Savior the bar was removed by mercy.

[8] For every man he tasted death,
He suffered once for all,
He calls as many souls as breathe,
And all may hear the call.

Jesus died for all and calls all

[9] A power to chuse, a will to obey,
Freely his grace restores;
We all may find the living way,
And call the Saviour ours.

with a free choice of salvation.

Arguing the opposing side

[10] Whom his eternal mind foreknew,
That they the power would use,
Ascribe to God the glory due,
And not his grace refuse;

Those foreordained choose God;

[11] Them, only them, his will decreed,
Them did he chuse alone,

only some were chosen to follow Jesus.

Ordain'd in Jesu's steps to tread,
And to be like his Son.

[12] Them, the elect, consenting few,
Who yield to proffered love,
Justify'd here he forms anew,
And glorifies above.

God justifies the elect.

[Back to arguments](#)

[13] For as in Adam all have dy'd, Yet the world is justified and may receive righteousness;
So all in Christ may live,
May (for the world is justify'd)
His righteousness receive.

[14] Whoe'er to God for pardon fly,
In Christ may be forgiven,
He speaks to all, "Why will ye die,
And not accept my heaven!"

any and all may be forgiven.

[15] No! In the death of him that dies, God is not pleased by Christ's death but still calls sinners.
(God by his life hath sworn)
He is not pleas'd; but ever cries,
Turn, O ye sinners, turn.

[16] He would that all his truths should own,
His gospel all embrace,
Be justify'd by faith alone,
And freely sav'd by grace.

God wants all to be saved.

[17] And shall I, Lord, confine thy love,
As not to others free?
And may not every sinner prove,
The grace that found out me?

Shall I hoard God's love and grace?

[18] Doubtless thro' one eternal now
Thou ever art the same,
The universal Saviour thou,
And Jesus is thy name.

Jesus is universal Savior.

[19] Ho! Every one that thirsteth come!
Chuse life; obey the word;
Open your hearts to make him room,
And banquet with your Lord.

[John 7.37, VII.7; Is. 55: come eat with your Lord](#)

[20] When God invites, shall man repel?
Shall man th' exception make?
"Come, freely come, WHOEVER WILL,
And living water take!"

If God invites, we should not stop persons.

[Battling the opposition, as though battling with God](#)

[21] Thou bid'st; and would'st thou bid us chuse,
When purpos'd not to save?
Command us all a power to use,
Thy mercy never gave?

Would God command all & only save some?

[22] Thou can'st not mock the sons of men,
Invite us to draw nigh,

God cannot invite all and only save some.

Offer thy grace to all, and then,
Thy grace to most deny!

[23] Horror to think that God is hate!
Fury in God can dwell,
God could an helpless world create,
To thrust them into hell!

[24] Doom them an endless death to die,
From which they could not flee,
No Lord! Thine inmost bowels cry,
Against the dire decree!

25] Believe who will that human pain,
Pleasing to God can prove:
Let Molock feast him with the slain, [VII.4 of sermon](#)
Our God, we know, is love.

[26] Lord, if indeed, without a bound,
Infinite love thou art,
The HORRIBLE DECREE confound, [VII.3 of sermon](#)
Enlarge thy people's heart!

[27] Ah! Who is as thy servants blind,
So to misjudge their God!
Scatter the darkness of their mind,
And shed thy love abroad.

[28] Give them conceptions worthy thee,
Give them in Jesu's face,
Thy merciful design to see,
Thy all-redeeming grace.

[29] Stir up thy strength, and help us, Lord,
The preachers multiply,
Send forth thy light, and give the word,
And let the shadows fly.

[30] Oh! If thy Spirit send forth me,
The meanest of the throng,
I'll sing thy grace divinely free,
And teach mankind the song.

[31] Grace will I sing, thro' Jesu's name,
On all mankind bestow'd;
The everlasting truth proclaim,
And seal that truth with blood.

[32] Come then, thou all-embracing love,
Our frozen bosom warm;
Dilating fire within us move,
With truth and meekness arm.

[33] Let us triumphantly ride on,
And more than conquerors prove,
With meekness/Mightily bear th' opposers down,
And bind with cords of love.

Terrible to think that God is hate and fury;

God would not doom people.

God wants our love, not our pain.

If you, God, are love, help us to love;

enlighten us and spread your love.

Give us to see you clearly, God, mercy, grace;

stir us up to witness to your word.

Let me witness to your grace to all,

for all, your grace and truth.

Warm us with your love,
arm us with truth and meekness.

Let us triumph with your love;

[34] Shine in our hearts Father of light,
Jesu thy beams impart,
Spirit of truth our minds unite,
And make/keep us one in heart.

Trinity, enlighten and unite us!

[35] Then, only then our eyes shall see
Thy promis'd kingdom come;
And every heart by grace set free,
Shall make the Saviour room.

Your promise is that all may be set free by grace,

[36] Thee every tongue shall then confess,
And every knee shall bow,
Come quickly, Lord, we wait thy grace,
We long to meet thee now.

then all shall confess and worship you.

CM AZMON, LAND OF REST/Forgive us, Lord, as we forgive; ST. ANNE, ST. AGNES
CMD FOREST GREEN or KINGSFOLD (ST. AGNES and KINGSFOLD attached for singing)

From the sermon and from some stanzas of the hymn, it is clear that predestination is not a Wesleyan value. What are Wesleyan values instead are universal redemption, the offer of salvation and forgiveness, mercy, grace, and a vision of God's promised kingdom where praise abounds and in which light we are united.

Side note: Three other texts entitled "Universal R[edemptio]n" appear in Charles Wesley's manuscript verse, *MS Thirty*. "O All-embracing Love Divine" is found, as is the hymn above, in Frank Baker, ed., *Representative Verse of Charles Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 167. The other two begin "Saviour of All, whose Bowels move"; and "Captain of my Salvation hear."

II.

Sixteen years later, in 1755, "responding to current sharp tensions among his followers over remaining in connection with the Church of England and ongoing tensions between the Calvinist and Wesleyan branches of the Methodist movement" (Editorial Introduction to "Catholic Love," www.divinity.duke.edu), John Wesley published his sermon "Catholic Spirit" as a tract, accompanied by Charles' seven-stanza "Catholic Love." The sermon had been preached as early as 1750, appearing that year in the third volume of John's *Sermons on Several Occasions*. Outler and Heitzenrater in their introductory comments on the sermon suggest that it is "Wesley's effort to redeem controversy in general by the spirit of Christian love and forbearance. . . . In some ears such language [as the hymn's first stanza] and the attitude behind it would inevitably sound soft-headed. Its [the sermon's] deeper concern, however, may represent Wesley's most important contribution to the cause of Christian unity." Wesley wants in this sermon to move us from arguments about faith in Christ to focus on faith itself and its consequences for our lives, as we live out love of God and love of neighbor (*John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology*, 299).

The text for the sermon comes from 2 Kings 10:15, in the midst of the massacre of Ahab's descendants and the slaughter of the worshippers of Baal: "And when Jehu was departed thence, he lighted on Jehonadab the son of Rechab coming to meet him, and he saluted him, and Jehu said to him, 'Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart?' And Jehonadab answered: 'It is. If it be, give me thine hand.'"

The three points of the sermon may be summarized thusly:

1. Let us consider the question proposed by Jehu to Jehonadab, "Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart?"
2. "If thine heart be right, as mine with thy heart," love all mankind, thine enemies, the enemies of God, strangers, as a brother in Christ.
3. We may learn from hence what a catholic spirit is.

While the focus of the sermon is primarily that if we are agreed in heart then we can be united in Christ and that union in Christ is more important than our arguments about who is in Christ and who is not, the hymn picks up more clearly on the discordant atmosphere and "my" feelings about belonging. The circle of belonging is first defined as "those who cleave to thee," "thy saints," "the little flock," "the chosen few," then as "My brethren, friends, and kinsmen these,/Who do my heavenly Father's will," however dispersed or hidden. Again, the red text represents a summary of the hymn text.

1 Weary of all this wordy strife,
These notions, forms and modes, and names,
To thee, the way, the truth, the life,
Whose love my simple heart inflames,
Divinely taught, at last I fly
With thee, and thine, to live, and die.

Tired of battles, to God I fly to live and die.

2 Forth from the midst of Babel brought,
Parties and sects I cast behind,
Inlarg'd my heart, and free my thought,
Where'er the latent truth I find,
The latent truth with joy to own,
And bow to Jesus' name alone.

I leave behind divisions and claim the hidden truth of Christ.

3 Redeem'd by thine almighty grace,
but I taste my glorious liberty,
With open arms the world embrace,
But cleave to those who cleave to thee,
But only in thy saints delight
Who walk with God in purest white.

Redeemed, I know freedom, and embrace the world, and cling to your holy people.

4 One with the little flock I rest,
The members sound who hold the head,
The chosen few, with pardon blest,
And by th' anointing Spirit led
Into the mind that was in thee,
Into the depths of deity.

I rest with your flock in Christ.

5 My brethren, friends, and kinsmen these,
Who do my heavenly Father's will,
Who aim at perfect holiness,
And all thy counsels to fulfil,
Athirst to be whate'er thou art,
And love their God with all their heart.
6 For these, howe'er in flesh disjoin'd,
Where'er dispers'd o'er earth abroad,

I claim as relatives those who do your will.
(cf. Matt. 12.46-50)

Separated from them yet in you our spring,

Unfeign'd, unbounded love I find,
And constant as the life of God:
Fountain of life, from thence it sprung,
As pure, as even, and as strong.

7 Join'd to the hidden church unknown,
In this sure bond of perfectness,
Obscurely safe, I dwell alone,
And glory in th' uniting grace,
To me, to each believer giv'n,
To all thy saints in earth and heav'n.

I may feel alone but you unite me with all believers
and with your saints

88.88.88. ST. PETERSBURG/Thou hidden source of calm repose (attached for singing)

III.

Teresa Berger includes a good complement to “Catholic Love” in her essay discussing Charles Wesley and Roman Catholicism: “No, they cry, it cannot be! Christians never will agree!” (“Charles Wesley and Roman Catholicism” in *Charles Wesley: Poet and Theologian*, ed. S T Kimbrough, Jr. Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1992, 205-221). For Berger, this hymn points beyond Catholicism to broader ecumenical motivations. It first appeared in *Scripture Hymns*, Vol. 2 (1762), #1236, pages 34-35. Based on Jeremiah 32.39: “I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me forever,” this hymn, like others of the *Scripture Hymns* is relatively short. It echoes many of the phrases from the hymns for class meetings about God uniting Christians for the sake of God’s work and glory in the world.

1 No, they cry, it cannot be!
Christians never will agree!
All the world thy word deny,
Yet we on the truth rely,
Sure, in that appointed day,
Thou wilt give us all one way,
Shew us each to other join'd,
One in heart, and one in mind.

Though the world says Christians can't agree,
You unite us in heart and mind.

2 Hasten then the general peace,
Bid thy people's discord cease,
All united in thy name,
Let us think, and speak the same:
Then the world shall know and own
God himself hath made us one,
Thee their Lord with us embrace,
Sing thine everlasting praise.

Stop our disagreements, unite us for your sake in the world.

77.77.D to ABERYSTWYTH/Jesus, lover of my soul (attached) or MESSIAH/Take my life and let it be consecrated

IV.

How is universal redemption defined in the texts above and can it guide our thoughts and actions in ecumenical and interfaith dialogue? It is clear in the three hymn texts that Jesus died for all persons, not any “elect,” and that God’s grace and mercy abound much more generously than human divisions. One of the theological points this author is drawn to consider is the subtle distinction between redemption and salvation. The whole creation has been redeemed, that is delivered from hell and damnation through the atonement of Christ; through our acceptance of redemption our souls are saved, delivered from sin and its consequences, and we are admitted to eternal bliss, again, through the atonement of Christ. For all persons of free will then, there is redemption whether accepted or not, and salvation offered as free choice.

What limitations are suggested? Clearly, John and Charles were working within a Christian context in the British Isles, calling persons to deeper lives of faith made visible through love of God and love of neighbor, rather than working with Christianity and some other belief system. These texts can thus be read as addressed toward evangelicals who believed in limited atonement, toward others “in the church” who held different beliefs (Quietists, Church of England adherents, other nonconformists) and even Roman Catholics. For the Wesleys, love of God evidenced through love of neighbor was an essential tenet of faith, one that promoted unity, harmony, and love, as visible witness to God’s glory.

What does love of neighbor look like in these three texts (moving from ecumenical questions to interfaith questions)? Since for the Wesleys love of God is seen through our love of neighbor, and if no one is doomed to hell and damnation (universal redemption), all persons are worthy of God’s love and thus ours. While for the Wesleys that primarily meant Christian unity, that is, ecumenical, their willingness to work in the colonies and offer salvation to the Native Americans and others “outside a Christian state” does not limit their followers from taking that sense of universal redemption and hearts in agreement on matters of treatment of persons and God’s creation into interfaith work.

Are these Wesleyan understandings sufficient for the challenges of today’s world for engaging with other spiritual communities and political understandings? For this author, this question raises the question of the exclusivity of the salvation offered in Jesus Christ—is Jesus the only way to God? If no one is doomed to hell and damnation, can Christians be a witness to an abundant life of salvation through Jesus Christ delivered from sin and its earthly consequences? While, of course, the answer is theoretically, yes, the human side of living out that liberation is difficult to see in practice. Surely there are dramatic stories of persons who find Jesus Christ as their salvation and yet there are way too many who live as “almost Christians,” so the issues become two-fold: Can Christians be good witnesses to the power of salvation through Jesus Christ? Can Christians then find interfaith work useful for the building up of the values of the reign of God? The Wesleys have given us important starting points for both of those questions in their hymns on universal redemption (yes, God really does love every single person and does not damn them) and on having a catholic spirit of harmony in working with others for values we and God hold dear. If nothing else, the hymns surveyed suggest that the battles we often engage in are a waste of energy.

Current examples of lyrical theology, as seen in publications of Methodists in the United States and the United Kingdom along with the Global Praise Group, which draw out the threads of these early hymns are listed here, alphabetically with years of publication and pertinent phrases from their texts:

“Across a dark autumnal sky” also known as “Honking Hymn” Colin Gibson, 1998 learning from God’s non-human creatures new languages of love, sharing burdens, cherishing each other, being present (no mention of God or Jesus, other than leader, so potential interfaith)

“Great God, as we are gathering” Andrew Pratt, 1996 quell enmity and fear,/bring honesty and openness,/make understanding clear and you make your people one

“Help us trace your rainbow colors” Andrew Pratt, 2008 Share praise, justice, mercy, common purpose, welcome all

“Let justice roll down like a river” Colin Gibson, 1994 subtext: not limited to Christian

“Out of joy and out of need” Daniel Charles Damon, 2011 Out of joy and out of need/we gather as your people,/drawn by custom or be creed/to minaret or steeple. *concludes* Out of care and out of need/we listen to each other./Drawn by custom or by creed/to love and to discover.

“The world's great age is yet to be” Fred Pratt Green, 1989 Then let all people of goodwill,/Of every race or creed,/Our God-appointed task fulfil, *and* In attitude and deed;/And out of hope and faith create/That world for which the ages wait

“We cannot make an easy, safe distinction” Andrew Pratt, 2008 We meet with those who paint a different picture,/ who value God in words not yet our own,/in dialogue we offer one another/ a vision we could never find alone.

“When our culture or religion blinds us to complicity” Andrew Pratt, 1992 Fire a mood of coexistence,/end repression, set lies free,/break the bonds of hidden hatred,/Lord, forgive . . . [sic] begin with me/

These texts may be accessed through Hope Online Hymnody at

<http://www.hopepublishing.com/html/main.isx?sitesec=40.1.0.0>