

“Love divine” – a holiness hymn of Charles Wesley (1707-1788)

The hymn “Love Divine” happily seems to be increasing in ecumenical popularity these days and features repeatedly in BBC *Songs of Praise*. Charles Wesley wrote this hymn of four stanzas in 1747 as a poem and a prayer that God would give us more perfect, Christ-like love. It is a yearning to live more deeply in the love of God in the power of God’s “loving Spirit”. It was included in the 1747 hymnbook under the section: “*For those that Seek, and those that Have Redemption*”. It starts with humility and ends with heaven. There are echoes throughout of 1 John 4v16: “God is love”.

Verse 1

**Love Divine, all loves excelling,
joy of heaven, to earth come down,
fix in us thy humble dwelling,
all thy faithful mercies crown.
Jesu, thou art all compassion,
pure, unbounded love thou art;
visit us with thy salvation,
enter every trembling heart.**

Our hearts are a humble dwelling and we pray with trembling heart yet we are bold to ask for more Christ-like love, which is the joy of heaven. Christ’s love is unbounded, unsurpassed and is only His to give. What condescension for God to come to earth in Jesus and even to come and live in us! We ask not for a temporary visitation of God’s love but for a fixed, permanent and sanctifying residency. This will crown and complete all the other gifts of grace.

Because the love of Christ is unbounded, all may be included.

Verse 2 (omitted in some hymnbooks)

**Breathe, O breathe thy loving Spirit
into every troubled breast;
let us all in thee inherit,
let us find the promised rest.
Take away the love of sinning;
Alpha and Omega be;
end of faith, as its beginning,
set our hearts at liberty.**

The first verse is addressed to God the Son. The second verse asks the Lord Jesus Christ to breathe into us the calm control of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of love who brings to the believer the calm assurance of adoption as God’s child together with the peace of God and the knowledge of sins forgiven.

In the second part of this verse, John Wesley disliked the suggested phrases of brother Charles which asked the loving Spirit of God to “take away power of sinning/our bent to sinning”. They settled for the phrase: “take away the love of sinning”. Holiness is an experience and an on-going choice. Charles also wrote: “Let us find thy second rest” which echoed the need for a second blessing. The first blessing was justification and the second blessing was sanctification. Charles was impatient and wanted the second blessing immediately while John knew that it required continuous action on our part. The brothers settled on “promised rest” as replacement for “second rest”.

When we grow to love Christ as A-Z, Alpha and Omega, first and last and all in all, we will love sin less.

Verse 3

**Come, almighty to deliver,
let us all thy life receive;
suddenly return, and never,
never more thy temples leave.
Thee we would be always blessing,
Serve thee as thy hosts above,
pray, and praise thee without ceasing,
glory in thy perfect love.**

If the first verse seeks the residency of God the Son and the second verse asks for the life of God the Holy Spirit, this verse addresses God the Almighty Father who is to be gloried on earth as in heaven. Following on from the previous verse requesting liberty from the oppression of sinning, verse three is asking God to give consistent freedom in continuous worship and an experience of the glory of God, just as those in heaven have. Holiness is “perfect love”.

Verse 4

**Finish then thy new creation,
pure and spotless let us be;
let us see thy great salvation,
perfectly restored in thee:
changed from glory into glory,
till in heaven we take our place,
till we cast our crowns before thee,
lost in wonder, love and praise.**

There is a sense of excitement in this verse concerning the future of believers. History is purposeful for believers. The poem, in verse 1, begins with Christ coming to earth and ends with believers taking their place in heaven. Christians have a future. We are a work in progress and are being changed from glory into glory. Holiness is not static but dynamic. God has always something more for us in this life.

“Let us see thy great salvation perfectly restored in thee”. For “great salvation” understand full salvation; entire sanctification; uttermost salvation. Note that it does not say: “restored in me”. The hymn is not individualistic but congregational. The request is for God to restore the perfection of His love in us and only God can give it. “Restored in Thee” implies restored “in and through Thee” for holiness is both a gift and an effort.

One day it will definitely happen when the process of our sanctification will be completed. Besetting self-love and self-coronation will cease and we will take off our paltry crowns and lay them at the feet of King Jesus. We will surely be “lost in wonder, love and praise”.

Let us keep singing this hymn until we feel its reality.

Ken Todd (notes of a talk given at the Down District rally in 2019)