

Charles Wesley's Hymns and A.M.E. Worship

Dennis C. Dickerson

Bishop Henry M. Turner (1834-1915) served from 1910 to 1912 as prelate of the Eighth Episcopal District of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, which included six annual conferences in Mississippi and Louisiana. This legendary church leader, now a septuagenarian, had been a military chaplain, Reconstruction politician, and African emigrationist. He started as a M.E. Church, South exhorter, was ordained in the A.M.E. Church, served as a pastor in Baltimore and Washington, D.C., and ascended to the bishopric in 1880. He also expanded African Methodism to Africa, Cuba, and briefly to Mexico. Turner, who in 1898 declared, "God is a Negro," prided himself as a Wesleyan hymnologist, had compiled an A.M.E. hymnal replete with compositions from Charles Wesley, and as a bishop, filled annual conference worship services with Wesleyan hymns. In Georgia, for example, where Turner presided from 1896 to 1908, he demonstrated his mastery of Wesleyan hymnody and led in singing from memory numerous renditions appropriate as sermon hymns, as invitations to accept salvation, or as selections to culminate a service of marked spiritual fervor.¹ Turner's fealty to

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30, 1911, at Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, the bishop, congregation, and choir opened the preliminary proceedings with Isaac Watts's inspirational "Come Holy Spirit, Come Heavenly Dove."² Yet, in subsequent sessions the words of some Charles Wesley hymn resonated among singing A.M.E.s from the southern section of Louisiana. At an evening worship the choir and congregation joined in singing a Wesley selection:

Hark, how the watchman cry!
Attend the trumpet's sound!
Stand to your arms, the foe is nigh;
The powers of hell surround.³

On Sunday the congregation sang another Wesley hymn to open the worship service:

And must I be to judgement brought,
And answer in that day
For every vain and idle thought,
And every word I say.⁴

At the evening service "a very large crowd that came (at) 9 a.m., to hear Bishop Turner was still present at 7:30 p.m. They may have been disappointed to learn that the bishop scheduled another minister, Dr. R. D.

Stinson, who preached on "God knows how to deliver his people" from 2 Peter 2:9. The conference scribe said the "sermon was quite helpful and full of information relative to God leading his people out of temptations."

At that point a soloist sang "He is King of Kings." Following the selection, Bishop Turner "extended an invitation" to Christian discipleship and selected a Wesley hymn which he led the congregation singing:

How can a sinner know
 His sins on earth forgiven?
 How can my gracious Saviour show
 My name inscribed in heaven?⁵

In response the conference secretary noted, "Mr. H. H. Lawless joined the church and a large number came forward for prayers."⁶

On the following day, as Bishop Turner prepared to make pastoral appointments, he admonished ministers "to live clean and sober lives" and "to lift up a standard for the people by never ceasing to point them to the Lamb of God that taketh away the sins of the world." Moreover, ministers should "study hard that they may prove themselves workmen who needeth not be ashamed." Then, Turner commissioned conference clergy "to fight sin in high places."⁷ His homily reflected moral standards that he believed were peculiarly Methodist. The hymns of Charles Wesley also testified to the Methodist identity of the prelate and people in the Louisiana Annual Conference. □

1. Dennis C. Dickerson, "African Methodism and Wesleyan Hymnody: Bishop Henry M. Turner in Georgia, 1896-1908," Proceedings of the Charles Wesley Society, vol. 3, 1996, 21-32.

2. Proceedings of the 46th Session of the Louisiana Annual Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church held in Bethel A.M.E. Church, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Beginning Wednesday Morning, January 24, 1911, and ending Monday, January 30, 1911., 18.

3. Ibid., 30.

4. Ibid., 35.

5. Ibid., 38.

6. Ibid., 39.

7. Ibid., 40.

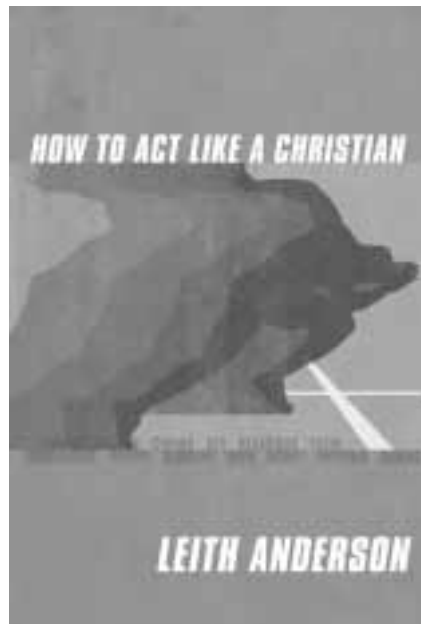
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