

Hark! The Herald Angels Sing

Then the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people.” Luke 2:10

Upon his conversion, Charles Wesley immediately began writing hymns, each one packed with doctrine, all of them exhibiting strength and sensitivity, both beauty and theological brawn. He wrote constantly, and even on horseback his mind was flooded with new songs. He often stopped at houses along the road and ran in asking for “pen and ink.”

He wrote over 6,000 hymns during his life, and he didn’t like people tinkering with the words. In one of his hymnals, he wrote: “I beg leave to mention a thought which has been long upon my mind, and which I should long ago have inserted in the public papers, had I not been unwilling to stir up a nest of hornets. Many gentlemen have done my brother and me (though without naming us) the honor to reprint many of our hymns. Now they are perfectly welcome to do so, provided they print them just as they are. But I desire they would not attempt to mend them, for they are really not able. None of them is able to mend either the sense or the verse. Therefore, I must beg of them these two favors: either to let them stand just as they are, to take things for better or worse, or to add the true reading in the margin, or at the bottom of the page, that we may no longer be accountable either for the nonsense or for the doggerel of other men.”

But one man did the church a great favor by polishing up on of Charles’ best-loved hymns. When Charles was 32, he wrote a Christmas hymn that began:

*Hark, how all the welkin rings,
“Glory to the King of kings;
Peace on earth, and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled!”
Joyful, all ye nations, rise,
Join the triumph of the skies;
Universal nature say,
“Christ the Lord is born to-day!”*

The word “welkin” was an old English term for “the vault of heaven.” It was Charles’ friend, evangelist George Whitefield, who, when he published this carol in his collection of hymns in 1753, changed the words to the now-beloved, “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing.”

Excerpt from: Robert J. Morgan, *Then Sings My Soul*, page 49