



Christ Is Alive! A Hymn Study

Christ is Alive!

by Brian Wren

Christ is alive! Let Christians sing.
The cross stands empty to the sky.
Let streets and homes with praises ring.
Love, drowned in death, shall never die.

Christ is alive! No longer bound
to distant years in Palestine,
but saving, healing, here and now,
and touching every place and time.

In every insult, rift and war,
where color, scorn or wealth divide,
Christ suffers still, yet loves the more,
and lives, where even hope has died.

Women and men, in age and youth,
can feel the Spirit, hear the call,
and find the way, the life, the truth,
revealed in Jesus, freed for all.

Christ is alive, and comes to bring
good news to this and every age,
till earth and sky and ocean ring
with joy, with justice, love and praise.¹

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Long Meter:

Suggested tune: TRURO (the tune for which the hymn was written)

Variant: DUNEDIN or DANIEL

The following stanza which appears in most hymnals today has been replaced by the "Women and men" stanza printed above in Wren's 1993 revision.

Not throned afar, remotely high,
untouched, unmoved by human pains,
but daily, in the midst of life,
our Savior in the Godhead reigns.

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C*hrist is Alive!* by poet, hymn writer, and theologian Brian Wren is a hymn that has brought a welcome new dimension to the joy of Easter for Christians over the last thirty years. Wren wrote *Christ is Alive!* in April of 1968, ten days after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., when Wren was serving as minister of the Hockley and Hawkwell Congregational Church (now United Reformed) in Essex, England. Wren originally composed this hymn under the title "The Crucified Lord."

According to Wren, "I could not let Easter go by without speaking of this tragic event which was on all our minds. The hymn tries to see God's love winning over tragedy and suffering in the world. There is tension and tragedy in these words, not just a howl of Easter rejoicing." Wren continues: "Asking what we could appropriately sing, some ten days after Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was murdered in Memphis, TN, I looked through our hymnal. Finding only triumphal imagery of things long ago, far away, and high above, I wrote *Christ is Alive!* to express our faith that Christ is alive today ("here and now"), involved with us ("in the midst of life"), and with an aliveness that can, and will, bring us through suffering and evil ("suffers still, yet loves the more"). The trumpet call, "Christ is alive!", heralds the first stanza, is repeated, then elaborated in stanzas 2-4, and reiterated in

conclusion."³

Reflecting on the hymn today, Wren states that "in 1968 I spoke of Christ's aliveness in inherited language of command and control (whereby Christ conquers, rules, and reigns). Realizing that Jesus refused to domineer over others, I rebuilt the 1989 revision on the 1968 foundation, with stronger images of care, pain and hope ("saving, healing, touching," "drowned in death," "lives where even hope has died"), and awareness of Easter's cosmic meaning ("till earth and sky and ocean ring").⁴

Over the years since the original writing of *Christ is Alive!*, Wren has reworked and revised the text (revised 1978, 1989, 1993), and as a result now has three related layers of intent.

As Carlton Young observes, "the study of the chronology and the theology of the changes that have occurred in this text for three decades shows both the maturing and accommodation of one of our most important hymn writers of the 'hymnic explosion'." This hymn also demonstrates the impact British hymn writing has had on the church in the United States due to Wren's insistence that texts should be inclusive in regard to people. It also reflects the beginnings of a concern in the U.S. for the nonsexist rendering of forms of address and metaphors for deity.⁵

Wren explains, "I tried to express an Easter hope out of that terrible event (the assassination of Dr. King), in words which could be

¹Wren, Brian. 1993 Revision from *Piece Together Praise: A Theological Journey*. Carol Stream, IL, and London, England. Hope Publishing Company and Stainer & Bell; 1996.

²Wren, Brian. *The Worshipping Church*. Carol Stream. Hope Publishing Company.

³Wren, Brian. Interview with the author. November 30, 1998. Online email.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵Young, Carlton. *Companion to The United Methodist Hymnal*. Nashville. Abingdon Press. 1993.

more widely applied, and wrote *Christ is Alive!* because our available hymns spoke of Easter as a glorious event long ago, far away, and high above. Revisions keep the original theme (the risen Christ shares yet outlasts our suffering, making Easter good news for all), while searching for better language than the command-and-control vocabulary of the original. The 1993 revision added the stanza, "Women and men, in age and youth etc.," affirming that the life and love of God are "revealed in Jesus, freed for all."

Wren confesses that his hymns and poems originate in a variety of ways. Some arise from his life story and faith journey. Others arise out of chance events like seeing people at prayer on a transatlantic flight, hearing a tune and wanting to write for it, or being annoyed by a sermon. Sometimes a work of theology excites him to respond by shaping its impact into a faith statement or song. "The sum total of items, and their arrangement, come from the interplay of serendipity and intent, including interaction with others, changing opportunities of a working life, sufficient time overall, and a sense of vocation to express the fullness of Christian faith, as best I can." "In a systematic theology, some things would come out differently, but I would still begin with Jesus, the most reliable source for knowing God, and end with praise."⁶

*Christ is alive! Let Christians sing,
The cross stands empty to the sky,
Let streets and homes with praises ring,
Love, drowned in death, shall never die.*

Through all of the revisions of this hymn, the original theme of the risen Christ who outlasts human suffering recognizes the good news that Easter brings for all. This idea is underscored in

Christ is Alive!

HYMNAL	NUMBER	HYMN TUNE
The Worshiping Church (Hope)	243	TRURO
The Baptist Hymnal	173	TRURO
The Presbyterian Hymnal	108	TRURO
The Lutheran Book of Worship	363	TRURO
The Hymnal 1982 (Episcopal)	182	TRURO
The United Methodist Hymnal	318	TRURO

the first stanza as the congregation sings "Let streets and homes with praises ring."

Wren refers to Christ's words in the fourth line of stanza one; "Love, drowned in death,"; "I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!" (Luke 12:50).⁷ This line also brings to mind Romans 6:3-4: "Do you not know that all of us that have been baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into Christ's death? Therefore we have been buried with Christ by baptism into death, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father-Mother, so we too might walk in newness of life." These references to baptism obviate the use of *Christ is Alive!* at times when the sacrament is observed.

*Christ is alive! No longer bound
to distant years in Palestine,
but saving, healing, here and now,
and touching every place and time.*

Christ is Alive! is a study both in a hymn of celebration of life in Christ at Easter, but it also gathers new meaning when sung at other times in the Christian year. Its metaphors and phrases help us to express our varied experience, having one set of meanings at Easter and other meanings at a funeral, an ordination, or at other times in the year. The juxtaposition of "distant years in Palestine" to "saving, healing,

⁶Wren, Brian. *Piece Together Praise: A Theological Journal*. Carol Stream, IL: Hope Publishing Company, 1996.

⁷All scripture passages are quoted from *The New Testament and Psalms: An Inclusive Version*. Oxford University Press, New York, 1995.

here and now” brings the message of the Good News to a contemporary application, “touching every place and time.”

*In every insult, rift and war,
where color, scorn or wealth divide,
Christ suffers still, yet loves the more,
and lives, where even hope has died.*

Within the hymn, Wren chose words like “insult,” “rift,” and “war” believing these words will evoke different meanings and different experiences for different people. As Wren explains, “an insult is different from a compliment, but one person’s experience of being insulted may be different from another’s.”⁸ It is important that the singers of a Brian Wren hymn know Wren’s belief that a hymn is not only the possession of the writer, but when it is

used in worship, it also belongs to the worshippers. Who is not touched by the words “where color, scorn or wealth divide”? Not only do we suffer under these conditions, but “Christ suffers still, yet loves the more.”

In the following stanza that was added in 1993 Wren demonstrates a powerful example of meaning of the scripture found in Acts 2:17: “In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and the young people shall see visions, and the old people shall dream dreams.”

*Women and men, in age and youth,
can feel the Spirit, bear the call,
and find the way, the life, the truth,
revealed in Jesus, freed for all.*

Wren also quotes John 14:6 in the above stanza: “Jesus said to him, I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to God except through me.”

The 1993 revision praises the aliveness of Christ in women and men, old and young, everywhere. The Spirit of God could not be contained in the life of Jesus, but escaped the confines of that one human life, coming alive in all who believe.

To keep the hymn within bounds of the norms of congregational singing, Wren omitted a stanza in his 1993 revision of *Christ is Alive!*, and moved stanza four to become

IMAGES OF CHRIST

A Dialogue Sermon
by Brian Wren and Susan Heafield

- HE: I’m a man, and Jesus was a man. If I follow Jesus, perhaps I’ll become the kind of man Jesus was. Is that the gospel for men?
- SHE: I’m a woman, and Jesus was a man. Whatever I do, I can’t be the kind of woman Jesus was. So what is the gospel for women?
- HE: Week by week, year by year, we tell the story of Jesus of Nazareth, a real person, a man who lived two thousand years ago. His life story challenges and inspires us, because one compelling life is worth more than a thousand general principles. But Jesus was a man, not a woman. So in countless paintings, hymns, Sunday School lessons, stained glass windows, bed-time stories, pageants, movies, drama and song, the church presents a man’s life as the ideal, the example, God’s revelation in human perfection, a model for all of us to imitate. How can we speak about one man’s life in a way that is good news for both women and men?
- SHE: The apostle Paul was a man, and we could have some great arguments about how far his maleness affected his preaching. But although Paul was a man, a Jew and a citizen of Rome, he didn’t preach a gospel that was only for Jewish men who were Roman citizens.

At the moment of his conversion, Paul heard God calling him to be God’s messenger to the Gentiles. He helped to create a network of communities which can accurately be called “inclusive,” because they included Jews, Gentiles, women, men, free citizens, and slaves.

As Paul says to the churches in Galatia, “In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Gal 3:27-28)⁹

⁸Wren, Brian. Interview with the author. November 30, 1998. Online email.

stanza three in the latest revision. The stanza that is omitted in Wren's 1993 revision, appears in most hymnals currently in use that include *Christ is Alive!*:

*Not throned afar, remotely high,
untouched, unmoved by human pains,
but daily, in the midst of life,
our Savior in the Godhead reigns.*

It was Wren's feeling that the new stanza seemed important to write, whereas the "Not throned afar" stanza seemed less vital in 1998 than in 1968. The new stanza reflects a long process in Wren's poetic life in which he has tried to do full justice to Jesus of Nazareth, a male Jew, and his meaning, as Christ, for women, men, and children of all times and places. This process is articulated by Wren in Chapter 7, "A Male for Others", from Wren's book, *What Language Shall I Borrow?*¹⁰

The following excerpt (see sidebar on page 24) is from a dialogue sermon by Wren and his marriage partner, Reverend Susan Heafield, entitled "Images of Christ." The dialogue sermon is based upon the scripture Colossians 2:6-7 and 3:5-17; II Corinthians 3:18 and 5:16; and Galatians 3:27-28. This sermon represents the continuing "working out" of this male/female relationship to Jesus of Nazareth, and Jesus the Christ, by Wren and Heafield.

In the final stanza, Christians celebrate the good news in this and every age as Christ brings joy, justice, love, and praise. Wren draws from Colossians 1:24 in this stanza: "I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of Christ's body, that is, the church."

*Christ is alive, and comes to bring
good news to this and every age,
till earth and sky and ocean ring
with joy, with justice, love and praise.*

ABOUT THE HYMN WRITER, BRIAN WREN

As a minister of the United Reformed Church in England, Brian Wren worked for several ecumenical organizations with an international outreach and then, in the early 1990's, moved to the United States, where he has been engaged as a visiting lecturer and workshop leader in numerous seminaries, colleges, and churches on subjects related to hymnwriting, creative worship, and language issues. Wren has championed the cause of inclusive

language in hymnody and worship and has brought about a considerable expansion of imagery in God language—an expansion articulated in such hymns as *Bring Many Names* and *May the Sending One Defend You*. Brian Wren has a deep concern that contemporary texts come from the real world in which we live. This includes giving voice to the experiences of those who have been neglected, rejected, abused, or divorced, as in *When Love is Found* and *This Is a Day of New Beginnings*.¹¹

ABOUT THE TUNE, TRURO

The name TRURO refers to the old city in Cornwall, England, which is famous for its pottery and its cathedral.

Additional Hymns by Brian Wren

A Woman in a World of Men

Christ Crucified Now is Alive

Christ is Risen!

Faith, Moving Onward

Jesus is Good News to All the Poor

Jesus is With God

Sing My Song Backwards

⁹Heafield, Susan, and Wren, Brian. *Images of Christ*. Online. November 30, 1998.

¹⁰Wren, Brian. *What Language Shall I Borrow?* Crossroad. New York. 1989.

¹¹Wicker, Vernon. "Twentieth-Century Hymnody in Great Britain". *The New Century Hymnal Companion*.

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