

Hark the Herald Angels Sing

**By
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In 1627, the English Puritan parliament abolished the celebration of Christmas and all other “worldly festivals.” For the remainder of the seventeenth century and well into the eighteenth, hymn carols were hard to come by, but there was an exception.

John and Charles Wesley had aroused the anger of the Anglican Church in England by their Arminian doctrine of “free grace.” While students at Oxford University, fellow classmates started calling them “Methodists” because of their methodical ways; and now because of a printer’s mistake, Charles’ poem was in print in the Church of England’s Books of Common Prayer. The hymn, “Hark, How All the Welkin Rings”, was actually Charles’ “Hymn for Christmas Day.” The church fathers weren’t too happy about it.

Angered by Wesley’s inclusion in the prayer book, the church fathers concluded that at least the song would only be used once a year and would probably fade into oblivion. They couldn’t have been more mistaken, for Charles Wesley’s Christmas hymn was just beginning a most interesting journey.

For more than a century, the song was sung with mild enthusiasm. Then, in 1840, Germany’s boy wonder, Felix Mendelssohn wrote an opera, “The Festgesang,” to celebrate the four hundredth anniversary of the printing press. Fifteen years later, a nineteen year old tenor named William Cummings, in England, discovered that Mendelssohn’s second chorus of “The Festgesang” fit perfectly with Wesley’s “Hymn for Christmas Day.”

Originally titled “Hark, How All Welken Rings,” it might have been lost, but for a printer who used it to fill an empty page. The hymn was edited and re-edited and sung to different tunes until, finally, an English tenor linked a Methodist’s words to a German’s music, written for a celebration having no connection to Christmas. The end result was “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing,” which has gone down in history as one of Charles Wesley’s greatest songs—a hymn predicted to fail by man, but overseen by God to become the most widely sung Christmas hymn ever written. Isn’t that just the way He works?