

Charles Wesley: Poetic Preacher
Psalm 98; 1 Peter 1:3-9
May 20, 2007

Charles Wesley was a brilliant, gifted, and strong-willed man. He was born on December 18, 1707, four years after his brother John. He was the third and last surviving son of Samuel and Susanna Wesley. He was the eighteenth of nineteen children, ten of whom survived infancy.

Samuel and Susanna Wesley were both children of Church of England preachers who had quarreled with that established church and as a result lost their parishes. The grandsons of these early preachers would also quarrel with the Church of England and lose their pulpits.

Samuel and Susanna were married in 1688. Samuel was ordained a priest in the Church of England in 1689. In 1697 he became priest of the Epworth parish where he remained for the rest of his life.

Susanna raised her children in a disciplined fashion. Girls and boys were taught to read, write, and think. Charles was taught the alphabet at the age of five and began his reading lessons the next day with the book of Genesis.

At the age of eight, Charles entered Westminster School in London. His older brother, Samuel, Jr., was in his mid-twenties and a teacher at the school. Charles became a King's Scholar and received free board and tuition. He became Captain of the school in 1725.

In 1726 Charles followed his two older brothers to Christ Church, Oxford University. He enjoyed the college social life in his early undergraduate years and avoided religious display. When questioned about this by John, he replied, "What, would you have me be a saint all at once?"

In 1729, however, his life took a more serious turn. "My first year at college I lost in diversions," he wrote in a letter to a friend much later in life. "The next I set myself to study. Diligence led to serious thinking." He began to attend Holy Communion more regularly and to meet with friends for spiritual study. Their group was nicknamed the "Holy Club" and "Methodists" for their methodical and disciplined reading of scripture, prayer, and reception of the Lord's Supper. Later that year John returned to Oxford and, typically, began to take over the leadership of the group.

Charles graduated from Oxford in 1730 and began to work as a tutor there. John pressured him to follow his older brothers into the priesthood. Although he "exceedingly dreaded" the idea, he was ordained in 1735. He took a job as secretary to General James Oglethorpe, who was recruiting settlers for a colony in Savannah, Georgia. Charles and John left for

Georgia in late 1735. Charles was in Georgia only six months, for he quarreled with General Oglethorpe and with the parishioners in the small church he served at Frederica. After developing dysentery, he returned to England.

While recovering his health, Charles also sought a deeper, more peaceful spiritual life. He was influenced by the quiet faith and straightforward preaching of German Moravians. In May 1738 he moved into the home of the Bray family, where he continued to struggle both spiritually and physically. On May 21, as he slept Charles heard a voice saying, "In the name of Jesus Christ, arise, and believe, and thou shalt be healed." In fact, the voice was that of Mr. Bray's sister, who thought that God instructed her to speak to Charles in a dream. Charles picked up the Bible to read, "Truly my hope is even in Thee" and "He hath put a new song into my mouth, even a song of thanksgiving unto our God." Suddenly he found himself "at peace with God." His health began to recover and within several days he wrote the hymn, "Where Shall My Wondering Soul Begin" (342 *United Methodist Hymnal*).¹

*Where shall my wondering soul begin?
How shall I all to heaven aspire?
A slave redeemed from death and sin,
a brand plucked from eternal fire,
how shall I equal triumphs raise,
and sing my great deliverer's praise?*

*O how shall I the goodness tell,
Father, which thou to me hast showed?
That I, a child of wrath and hell,
I should be called a child of God!
Should know, should feel my sins forgiven,
blest with this antepast of heaven!*

For once Charles had preceded John, but not for long. Three days later his brother had a similar conversion experience in Aldersgate Street, when he felt his "heart was strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away *my* sins, even *mine* and saved *me* from the law of sin and death."

Following their conversion experiences, the brothers preached with newfound urgency and force. Their passion did not sit kindly with the established clergy at Oxford. A colleague, George Whitfield, invited them

to join him preaching in the open air. Despite their reluctance, they followed Whitfield and began to travel as itinerant preachers.

During the 1740's the brothers began to experience opposition while preaching to thousands in the open air. Charles "first encountered physical danger when a doctor in Wales, angry over Charles' sermon, stormed up to him and demanded an apology for having been called a 'Pharisee.'

"Charles, who wasn't known for his tact, replied, 'I still insist you are a Pharisee...My commission is to show you your sins, and I shall make no apology for so doing....You are a damned sinner.'

"The doctor struck Charles with his cane, causing a melee involving several men and women....It was during these days of danger that Charles wrote his triumphant hymn, 'Rejoice the Lord Is King,' the third verse of which says:

His kingdom cannot fail, He rules o'er earth and heaven;

The keys of death and hell are to our Jesus given:

*Lift up your heart; lift up your voice! Rejoice, again I say, rejoice!"*²

At the age of 40, Charles married Sarah Gwynne, nineteen years younger, the daughter of a Welsh magistrate. Once Charles could prove to his mother-in-law that he would be able to support Sarah from his writings, she gave her consent to the marriage.

John officiated at the wedding, although earlier he feared that his brother would no longer seek happiness primarily from God. In fact Charles had a happy marriage, unlike most of his siblings.

The newlyweds settled in Bristol. They had eight children, but only three survived: Charles, Jr., Sally, and Samuel. The two boys were musical prodigies and Charles encouraged their musical education and performance in concerts. Sally, like her father, was a poet. Unlike her brothers, she became a devout Methodist and was close to her Uncle John.

In 1771 Charles and Sarah moved to London to help further their sons' musical careers. Charles remained in London the rest of his life, superintending Methodist work in London. Since most Methodist preachers were laypeople and only ordained clergy could administer Holy Communion, he spent a great amount of time offering the sacrament to the Methodist faithful, especially after the opening of what is now known as "Wesley's Chapel" on City Road.

Charles died peacefully on March 29, 1788, at the age of 80, with his family at his bedside. The last words his daughter heard him speak were "Lord—my heart—my God."

The most important legacy left by Charles is a collection of over 6,500 hymn texts. Sacred songs are a means of shaping the people of God.

Charles' texts were a way of teaching the theology of the church. The hymns were a powerful tool in the Spirit's work of revival, for singing praise to God transforms the singer. A singing faith is a contagious faith. Charles' range of poetic meters demanded the composition of new tunes and rhythms. In his texts he references all but four of the 66 books of the Bible. I rarely reference Obadiah, Nahum, Zephaniah or Third John either! John and Charles published sixty-four collections of hymns between 1738 and 1785. Referring to the anthology of hymns published in 1780, one scholar declared that it was "after the Scriptures, the grandest instrument of popular religious culture that Christendom has ever produced."³

Our hymnal contains sixty-five texts by Charles Wesley. Perhaps the most familiar are those for special seasons of the church year: *Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus*; *Hark! the Herald Angels Sing*; and *Christ the Lord is Risen Today*. We sang of one his many songs of praise at the beginning of worship, *O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing*. Many hymns contain the primary emphases of Wesleyan theology: our need for justification, being put right with God, because of our sin; the gift of God's grace whereby we receive salvation; the call to holy living; the need for fellowship with other Christians; and the "means of grace," such as prayer, scriptures, and the Lord's Supper, given as gifts of God to nurture our faith.

There are few stories behind specific hymns because Charles was always writing them. He didn't need events to inspire him or stretches of quiet meditative time in which to develop his thoughts. He simply had a gift for poetic expression. As he rode his horse from one gathering of Methodists to another, he carried a card in his pocket and jotted down any thought that struck him. Often upon arriving at the home of his hosts, he would leave his horse in the front garden and run inside the house shouting, "Pen and ink! Pen and ink!" He dared not lose the song composed in his head.⁴

A more recent British Methodist hymn writer, Fred Pratt Green, was once addressed by a colleague who noted, "You have written some of the most poignant, celebrative, and theologically significant hymns of the twentieth century; why is it that you have never concentrated on the inner spiritual journey of the Christian?" Green replied, "Because no one will ever do that better than Charles Wesley did it."⁵

¹ Jennifer Woodruff Tait, "Charles Wesley: Family Man of Methodism," *Circuit Rider*, September/October 2006, pp. 4-5.

² Robert J. Morgan, *Then Sings My Soul, Book 2* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Inc, 2004), p. 39.

³ Dr. Martineau, in a letter to Miss Winkworth, quoted by Henry Bett and Charles H. Kelly, "The Hymns of Methodism in their Literary Relations."

⁴ Morgan, *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁵ S.T. Kimbrough, Jr., "Still Shaping Our Faith: The Viability of Charles Wesley's Hymns Today," *Circuit Rider*, September/October 2006, p. 13.

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