



# Charles Wesley in Historical Perspective: Poet, Priest and Theologian

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May I begin by saying that what a pleasure it is for me to be invited to deliver this lecture here at Gresham College. I am deeply indebted to those who very kindly invited me to speak this evening; I hope that I will repay the kindness by presenting a lecture that is at least tolerably interesting to this audience gathered here.

My task is to speak on the subject of Charles Wesley in this the tercentenary year of his birth. I am very pleased to do so since, as I hope will come across in this lecture, Charles is an individual who I personally find inspiring. And I do use that word fully conscious of what some in this room may understand by it - an individual who is able to lift our spirits and to help us catch at least a glimpse of something far greater than ourselves. For some Charles will be an example of the heights to which the human spirit may aspire poetically. But for some Charles may even be inspirational in that he, more precisely his poetic work, may help those who are looking to achieve a sharper focus on that which is by definition is always in need of further clarification: our picture of God.

So it is a pleasure to be here and to able to present some thoughts on the topic of 'Charles Wesley in Historical Context: Poet, Priest and Theologian'.

## **Introduction**

According to his more famous brother John, Charles Wesley was a man of many talents of which the least was his ability to write poetry.[i] This is a view with which few perhaps would today agree, for the writing of poetry, more specifically hymns, is the one thing above all others for which Charles Wesley has been remembered. Anecdotally I am sure that we all recognise that this is the case; and indeed if one were to look Charles up in more or less any one of the many general biographical dictionaries that include an entry on him one will find it repeated often enough: Charles is portrayed as a poet and a hymn-writer; while comparatively little, if any, attention is paid to other aspects of his work. On a more scholarly level too one can find it. Obviously there are exceptions, but in general historians of Methodism in particular and eighteenth-century Church history more widely have painted a picture of Charles that is all too monochrome and Charles' role as the 'Sweet Singer of Methodism' is as unquestioned as his broader significance is undeveloped.

The reasons for this lack of full attention being paid to Charles are several and it is not (contrary to what is usually said) simply a matter of Charles being in his much more famous brother's shadow; a lesser light, as it were, being outshone by a greater one. No, it is much more complex than that. For example, in his new book, Dr Gareth Lloyd has shown just how severely Charles Wesley has suffered at the hands of his biographers. Seen in his historical context Charles was, as Lloyd has shown, a contentious figure whose vision for Methodism did not fit all that well with that to whom the task of writing up the story of the tradition's origins and ethos fell during the nineteenth century. And as these early historians (who, understandably, were to some extent also apologists), sought to explain Methodism's roots and mark out the new denomination's own space on the ecclesiological map, they found a Charles who was a somewhat problematic figure. As a result Charles Wesley was consciously side-lined by those whose task it was to assemble the first account of this tradition's early history; at least that is Lloyd's argument. The long-term

result is that Charles Wesley, a sometimes troublesome individual who fought and lost some important battles for the soul of Methodism, has been sanitised by giving him the safe, and indeed inspiring role, of the 'the sweet singer of Methodism'. It is a role that has often been as unquestioned as his broader significance has been undeveloped. It is not true to the evidence, however. So what I hope to indicate in this lecture this evening is something of the other aspects of Charles that are all too often forgotten and to give a portrait of the man as all-round poet, priest and theologian.

But to return to John's remark that Charles 'least' talent was his poetic. Now it is possible of course that in saying this, John may simply have been seeking to extol longed-for virtues at the expense of the actual. That may be the case. However, I am not so sure that we should be so quick to brush aside John's comments here. After all, being born before Charles and dying after him, John Wesley knew his younger brother throughout the entire 81 year course of the latter's life and for a good 50 of those years the two brothers were near inseparable. They had their differences to be sure. Sibling rivalry, heart-felt theological disputes and a straightforward clash in personality all contributed to what was at times a very stormy relationship indeed; but that John knew Charles perhaps better than almost any other person (Charles' wife Sarah is the chief competitor here) is surely indisputable. So when John says that Charles' least talent was his poetic, we ought at least to consider the evidence.

And here is the heart of the problem: the evidence. What evidence do we have available that would enable us to judge the accuracy of John's comments regarding his brother? Let us make the question a little broader: what evidence do we have that would enable us properly to assess Charles Wesley as an all-round figure of the eighteenth century and a force both within early Methodism in particular and English church history in general? Some will know some of his hymns, but what else is there by which we may judge the theological and historical importance of this man?

Well - at first sight the situation looks good. For example Charles left behind about 850 letters (which is quite a few more than, say, St Paul, and judging by the secondary literature to which Paul's letters have given rise we all think we know quite a lot about him!)

Charles also compiled a journal for the years 1736 to 1756, a text that runs to something like 300,000 words. It is true that this journal is very uneven, especially after 1751, but for the latter part of the 1730's and for the crucial decade of the 1740's we have a very substantial account, in Charles' own hand, of his work. In addition there are a few tracts (though probably not more than a half dozen or so)[ii] and a small sample of his sermons. Together these material make up a substantial deposit of primary materials and, one would think, it ought to be possible from them to piece together something of Charles' life and work and assess those other talents (organizational perhaps, homiletic, evangelistic, pastoral, etc.) that, so his brother's remark implies, he possessed.

And this is all in addition to his poetic work, which now stands at some 9,000 items, of which perhaps as many as 2,500 may have been written specifically as hymns.[iii] Some of these, it is true, are very short. But the short ones are balanced by much longer pieces including one that runs to 48 stanzas! (Not sung in its entirety very often these days one suspects).

In the light of this wealth of primary evidence, then, the historian, and given the content of much of the material that has just been mentioned, the theologian, really ought to be able to approach Charles Wesley scholarship with some considerable optimism. Just who was this man, this brilliant character of the eighteenth-century, who could apparently write poetry on almost any topic (including children cutting teeth, Handel's birthday,[iv] the expected French invasions and even the pugilistic abilities of Grimalkin his pet cat. Indeed on this latter point I do often wonder what precisely it was that inspired those lines. Here, surely, we can look over Charles' shoulder and for a brief moment see the very ordinary world in which he lived as he sees his cat fighting in the garden.

*I sing Grimalkin brave and bold  
who makes intruders fly  
his claws and whiskers they behold  
and squall and scamper by*

Yes, Charles could write such doggerel, but he was also a character who, indisputably, composed some of the most magnificent hymns of the Christian tradition. But how do we get to him? As I have said, the wealth of primary materials ought to give the scholar access, but the reality is much less encouraging.

## Primary Sources

Above all the problem lies in the state of primary textual research. For example, we know that Charles was a masterful religious poet and we can reconstruct much of his theological thought from an examination of his hymns and other sacred poems. But to miss the rest of the poetical corpus is to hear only part of what Charles had to say. The entire corpus needs to be examined. But one should not underestimate, however, the size of this task; 9000 texts will take some mastering and to date relatively little attention have been given to the majority of these.

The prose corpus is much more of a problem, indeed it is not too much of an exaggeration to say that until only very recently, within the past 10 years in fact, that the bulk of Charles' prose materials were quite literally lying around in boxes, uncatalogued, almost entirely unresearched and, in the case of the substantial shorthand materials (of which more in a moment), undeciphered. As I say, the situation has improved somewhat recently, principally due to the fact that the bulk of the papers have now been catalogued). There is still much to be done, however. For example, of the 850 or so letters that Charles has left behind, only about 150 have to date been published either in part or in full. This statistic is depressing enough, but it gets worse, for, though we have no time to detail the case here, it is evident that many of the letters that are in print have been edited to the point of being misleading.

Such a charge is a serious one and needs to be supported, though this is not the place to engage in such polemics at length. I simply draw your attention again to Lloyd's book on this point.

However, let me rather draw your attention to another and equally important and equally badly edited Charles Wesley text, namely Charles' MS journal. Here again one finds the same basic editorial policy. Sentences, paragraphs and indeed whole pages of the journal are omitted. (And if you are working with the original you can see clearly enough the editor's [Thomas Jackson's] pencil lines crossing out that which he did not intend to transcribe). Examples are many, and include the letter that Charles wrote to the Bishop of London on February 7, 1745, which begins with the, let us say 'interesting', words 'My Lord, I was informed some time ago that your Lordship had received some allegations against me of one E.S. charging me with committing, or offering to commit, lewdness with her'. It is there plain enough in the MS journal. But it is omitted from the published form, and one can understand why. Much more significantly, however, also omitted are those numerous sections in Charles' journal that were written in shorthand. PP8 Now these sections are of great importance. They are important for our understanding of Charles and throw a particular light, for example, on Charles' relationship with his brother John. For example, there are sections where Charles is deeply critical of John regarding the latter's unwillingness to entertain the thought that he (Charles that is) should receive a stipend in return for his work among the Societies. Sections also that concern John's impending marriage to Grace Murray, a marriage to which Charles was deeply and bitterly opposed. Let me quote just a sentence or two of one of the shorthand passages in question to give you the flavour.

### The year is 1749

"As soon as I could recover my astonishment" (writes Charles), "I told him plainly he was given up to Jewish blindness of heart; [and] that the light which was in him was darkness - I declared I would cover his nakedness as long as I could, and honour him before the people; and if I must at last break with him, would retreat gradually, and hide it from the world. He seemed pleased with the thought of parting, though God knows, as I told him, that I had saved him from a thousand false steps: and still I am persuaded we shall stand or fall together. If he would not foresee the consequence of marrying, I said, he must marry and feel them afterward . . . What the end of this thing will be only God knoweth, but the cloud at present hanging over us looks very black."

This is clearly a crisis point and it looks as though a break between the brothers is on the cards. In the end of course it did not happen, but the picture one gets here is of a very strong-willed Charles refusing to give in to his brother John and taking a very determined stance against him. Now, we know some of this from other sources, but there is much more in the shorthand sections of the journal that throws further light on this whole episode (and others). None of this shorthand material appears in the published text.

This rather detailed account of the very defective textual base upon which scholarship into the life and work of Charles Wesley has for so long been conducted could easily be extended further, but such seems not to be necessary here. The basic point is this: scholarship into the place of Charles Wesley within early Methodism, which includes and appraisal of his vision for the Methodist societies, his own spirituality and

his theological and historical significance (not to mention his at times rather underhand moves) will not be really be advanced until this basic archival-textual spadework has been done.

However, to return to our main theme: in the remainder of the time we have available I shall explore some aspects of Charles Wesley's life as it is illustrated chiefly, though not exclusively, in the MS prose works I have mentioned.

## 1. Strength of Character

Let us think firstly, and briefly, about Charles Wesley's strength of character and the at times rather forceful way in which he expressed the very clear-cut views to which he adhered. This comes across very clearly in the letters of Charles (both those by and to him) and also in his journal, tracts and poetical compositions.

That Charles Wesley had a reputation for being able to take a firm stance is clear. Consider for example the MS sources relating to the issue of the Methodist prophet and enthusiast George Bell. (Not the same person, I ought to add, as the later Bishop of Chichester)! Bell, together with the better known early Methodist Thomas Maxfield (probably the first Methodist lay preacher), were at work in the Methodist societies in early 1760's London, where together they preached a doctrine of absolute sinless perfection. 'I am perfect' Bell once stated 'and I can no more fall from my state of perfection than God can fall off his throne'. He was a colourful character to be sure: he claimed the ability to heal the sick, foretell the future and even, so he said, raise the dead (carefully adding, we ought to note, that though he said he had this power, he said also that the time had not as yet come for him to exercise it). What is more Bell then gambled on hitting the prophetic jackpot by predicting that the world was set to come to a dramatic end on 28th February, 1763. Contrary to what one might expect, but in keeping with what we know about such prophetic figures in general, Bell had some considerable success in getting others to take on board such views (so much so in fact that he was arrested and jailed for causing a public disturbance). Needless to say John Wesley got involved in this whole episode and heard Bell preach a number of times. But John's response was weak to say the least, so weak in fact that in a series of letters written to Charles at this time one finds the London Methodists calling for Charles to come to sort the situation out, for it is he, so the letters clearly state, and not John, who has the strength of character to deal with Bell in the way that the situation requires. The letters betray a sense of frustration that John has here, as he has at other times, failed to see the danger inherent in what is happening and had apparently taken the view that while some of what Bell and Maxfield had to say was in error (and John took a definite dislike to the manner in which Bell was preaching), some of what he said was good. And in any case, said John, (taking his cue from Gamaliel in Acts 5.39), if God was with the movement there was no point in struggling against it and if God was not, it would come to nothing anyway. The letters betray too a strong conviction that Charles will not stand for such things and will be able to deal decisively with Bell and his followers.

Much earlier, in 1740, it was Charles too who took in hand the situation that had arisen with the arrival among the Methodists of Mary Lavington, a member of an apocalyptic group called the 'French Prophets'. Charles wrote a short account of this episode in his journal; separately, however, he wrote a much longer account that until relatively recently has remained unnoticed but is there in the Rylands archives.[v] From this longer account it is very clear that Charles acted decisively. He went round to Mary Lavington's place of abode and confronted both her and her live-in lover Mr Wise. After discussion on matters relating to sinlessness and the sacrament (which Lavington referred to as a 'beggarly element' and from which she advised her followers to abstain) Charles issued a clear directive to the Methodist people: go with them or stay with us. He then went around several societies reading out his report of the incident and telling them too to avoid contact with the French Prophets in general and Mary Lavington in particular

Charles could also turn his hand and thoughts to matters more general and seek to deal with what he considered to be doctrinal error in his most natural of genres - poetry. For example, his Hymns on God's Everlasting Love, published in 1741, contains material that was specifically aimed at the countering the views of the Calvinists, and Charles had added to them the famous lines regarding the 'horrible decree'. The words are addressed to God.

*Thou can not mock the sons of men,  
Invite us to draw nigh,  
Offer thy grace to all, and then  
Thy grace to most deny!*

*Lord, if indeed, without a bound,  
Infinite love Thou art,  
The horrible decree confound,  
Enlarge thy people's heart!*

Some of this material is profound indeed and the literary qualities match the theological insight in scale, although sometimes Charles can allow his standards to drop somewhat. His composition 'For the Mahometans'[vi] is probably not among his best work, but it does show again how Charles was more than willing and able to engage in theological controversy through the medium of poetry.

*The smoke of the infernal cave,  
Which half the Christian world o'erspread,  
Disperse, Thou heavenly Light, and save  
The souls by that Impostor led,  
That Arab chief, as Satan bold,  
Who quite destroyed Thy Asian fold.  
O might the blood of sprinkling cry  
For those who spurn the sprinkled blood!  
Assert Thy glorious Deity,  
Stretch out Thine arm, Thou Triune God  
The Unitarian fiend expel,  
And chase his doctrine back to hell.*

These are not hymns and we will not find them on the front of Christmas cards. They are strong, pointed, acidic attacks, in poetic format, on other forms of religious belief.

In the general context of arguing for Charles' strength of character, it is perhaps worth noting also the extent to which Charles could and did enter into dispute with brother John. We have already noted one example of this, namely his views on John's intended marriage to Grace Murray, a point upon which, it seems, the brothers nearly broke. The outline of the rest of this sad story is already relatively well known and we need to retell it in detail here. Suffice it to say that the end result of Charles' opposition was that he literally raced on horseback from Bristol to Newcastle in an effort to outride and outwit John and get the latter's intended bride married to someone else, a plan that in fact succeeded. A string of letters in the aftermath of this sorry episode point to an unrepentant Charles who seems to have very little appreciation indeed of his brother's sadness. Some of this finds expression also in Charles' poem 'Ah woe to me, a man of woe'

*Ah woe to me, a man of woe  
A mourner from the womb  
I see my lot and softly go  
Lamenting to the tomb*

*In calm despair I bow my head  
The heavenly loan restore  
For O! my latest hope is gone  
And friendship is no more*

*Too happy in his love I was*

*I was - but I submit  
Irreparable is the loss  
The ruin is complete*

*In simply innocency drest  
The soft Ephesians' Charms  
Have caught him from my honest breast  
To her bewitching arms[vii]*

It goes on for another six stanzas. Not the most cheerful of poems to write on the occasion of your brother's intended marriage one has to say!

The same strength of character emerges also during Charles' dealings with the local preachers. Lay preaching was the backbone of the Methodist movement without which it could hardly have survived at all and certainly would not have grown. But Charles, it seems, was always deeply suspicious of the lay preachers. The remarks he made in a letter to John Bennet are typical of Charles' attitude. 'A friend of ours' he writes, and he has brother John clearly in view, '(without God's counsel) made a preacher of a tailor. I, with God's help, shall make a tailor of him again'.[viii]

Most famously of all of course there is the issue of the relationship of the Methodist societies and the established Church and in particular the question of whether the Methodist movement ought to establish an order of ordained ministry outside of the Anglican Episcopal structures. Charles' views were very clear cut both in deed and in word (incidentally I say 'both in deed and in word' since I suspect that John's 'deeds and words' were not entirely consistent in this regard). Many times in both the journal and the letters one finds Charles stating his position very clearly. It was upon this matter of separation that he wrote in 1756 to his brother.

Is it not your duty to stop Joseph Cownley and such like from railing or laughing at the Church? The short remains of my life are devoted to this very thing, to follow your sons (as Charles Perronet once told me we should follow you) with buckets of water, and quench the flame of strife and division which they have or may kindle.[ix]

Perhaps as early as the 1760's John may have been thinking about exercising what he considered to be the right of every presbyter: ordination. As it happened the crisis that had given rise to this passed. But in 1784 the issue arose again and this time John ordained two lay persons (Thomas Vasey and Richard Whatcoat) and also 'ordained' (Wesley's word) Thomas Coke, who was in fact already an ordained priest of the Church of England.

What Wesley was doing, in effect, was consecrating Coke as a Bishop. The three then sailed for America where Coke in turn proceeded to consecrate another Methodist Bishop, Francis Asbury. Charles, who had understandably not been consulted prior to John's actions, was incensed! It was in connection with Coke's consecration of Asbury that Charles published one his very few tracts, namely the highly critical *Strictures on the Substance of a Sermon Preached at Baltimore in the State of Maryland before the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church*. He also wrote a number of hymns, the MSS of which have survived. The criticism is stinging and again shows Charles as an individual very able even at this late point in his life (he is now 77 years of age) to take the firmest of stances in opposition to his brother.

*Christ our merciful High-Priest  
By thy people's grief distressed  
Help us for our guide to pray  
Lost in his mistaken way[x]*

And the criticism goes on

*Wesley himself and friends betrays  
By his good sense forsook*

*When suddenly his hands he lays  
On the hot head of Coke[xi]*

And

*So easily are bishops made  
By man's or woman's whim?  
Wesley put his hands on Coke  
But who put hands on him?[xii]*

Pointed, but in fact relatively mild - consider this one written when Charles learned of Coke's consecration of Asbury as a Bishop. Drawing on the story of how Caligula appointed his horse to a position of great authority in ancient Rome, Charles wrote

*A Roman emperor 'tis said  
His favourite horse a consul made  
But Coke brings greater things to pass  
He makes a bishop of an ass.[xiii]*

This is strong stuff. One ought not to underestimate it. And there is much more in a similar vein to be found in the Wesley MS papers; the letters, the full journal and the tracts no less than the hymns. Charles was not a man to be taken lightly. He was determined, strong, forceful, some might say even somewhat arrogant, and he was quite able to give his brother, and others in the early Methodist movement, a run for their money when he felt it his duty to do so.

## **2. Charles Wesley: Theologian**

This discussion of Charles' views on the Church of England and ordination brings us on naturally to the question of his theology more generally. In fact a number of scholars have argued that Charles actually has very little to contribute in the theological arena at all. This is not to say of course that there is no theology in what Charles wrote - such a notion would be absurd. The argument is rather that Charles has little or nothing original to contribute. What he has, so the argument goes, he got either from John or from the wider evangelical revival in general.

Thomas Langford argues an even stronger case in many ways. According to him 'Charles served a supportive, encouraging, and propagandizing role to and for John' rather than being a theological force in his own right.[xiv] Langford then goes on to argue further the oft repeated position that Charles' theology is 'experiential'. It is a theology that does not conform to the norms expected of that discipline; it is not abstract or an end within itself. Rather, states Langford, it is a theology of praise; it is a theology which one can pray and sing and is tied 'inseparably to the worship of God'.[xv]

It would be difficult of course not to conclude that any analysis of Charles' theology based upon an examination of his hymns alone will inevitably lead to the view that it was a theology which could be sung and one tied inseparably to the worship of God. Neither will it come as a great surprise to learn that an examination of that (poetic) body of evidence leads to the conclusion that it was as an artist rather than as an individual of great rational insight that Charles may best be remembered. Had attention been given to other genres of Charles' output, a different, or at least a more balanced, conclusion might have been reached. Let me give just a hint of how such an argument might develop.

### **The Sermon on Acts 20.7**

Let us consider just one example of Charles' theological art: his sermon on Acts 20.7. The text is important in that it is perhaps the best example of Charles working systematically through a sermon at a theological question. In the course of this engagement he refers to a number of early Church sources, which he quotes extensively in Greek. He also subjects a number of individual words and phrases from the Greek New Testament to careful analysis. Here, then, is a good example of his arguing a case on the basis of

reason, historical evidence, tradition and careful linguistic exegesis of the relevant biblical and extra-canonical early Christian texts. It is a work of the head not of the heart.

Such examples of Charles working at a theological problem 'with his head' and arguing a particular point using some of the standard theological methodology of his day could be multiplied and I think it is hence wrong to conclude that Charles was 'the heart' only of the early Methodist faith. As Charles articulated his faith he did so sometimes in poems and hymns, but such is not the limit of his ability to communicate. In the archives there is a mass of material, most yet to be explored, that shows Charles in quite a different light. A Charles whose theology is carefully constructed out of biblical texts, and the exegesis of them, reason and tradition. This is perhaps what we expect of a good eighteenth-century Anglican theologian, and, I suggest, Charles was precisely that.

Neither was Charles' theology always in tune with that of his brother John. We have noted already how they disagreed on issues relating to Episcopal ordination, but there were other points of difference too. We cannot develop these in any detail here, but mention only in passing such important things as Charles' views on perfection. It was in the context of Mary Lavington again that Charles protested, quoting 1 John 1.8, 'if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us' a position he doubtless took also when dealing with matters relating to Maxfield and Bell. John, on the other hand, was prepared to allow for the possibility of sinlessness in the lives of others (though he did not claim it for himself) and indeed once said that though he had met some 500 persons who claimed they were perfect, he doubted it was true in more than one in ten cases.

And, if we return for a moment to the hymns, there is the question of Charles uncompromisingly incarnational kenotic Christology; that is to say, the doctrine that in taking on human form, Christ really did become human and lay aside those attributes of divinity that were inconsistent with his humanity. The end result is that one can talk of Jesus in very human terms, and Charles certainly did that. Indeed, at times this went so far as to cause offence to John, who famously omitted Charles' hymn 'Jesu lover of my soul, let me to thy bosom fly' from the 1780 hymn book, doing so, it seems, on the grounds of the 'fondling terms' it contained. For 'indeed' stated John

I have . . . particularly endeavored, in all the hymns which are addressed to our blessed Lord, to avoid every fondling expression, and to speak as to the most high God; to him that is 'in glory equal with the Father, in majesty co-eternal'. [xvi]

### 3. Charles Wesley: The Articulator of the Faith

I want to consider now, just very briefly, the range of Charles' communicative skills, those he exercised in his priestly duties. It is true of course that Charles was a highly educated individual who was well able to converse with the theologians of his day. Charles could converse with them, and also dispute with them and do so in many and varied ways. Sometimes he worked through the medium of prose and we have seen a little of that in the sermon on Acts 20.7 above. But he used the poetic form as well; examples in this latter category range from the uncharacteristic doggerel of such compositions as that which contains the lines 'The Unitarian fiend expel, and drive his doctrine back to hell' to much more substantial and well-crafted onslaught against Calvinism found in the early collection *Hymns on God's Everlasting Love* (1741).

But it is plain too that Charles was an effective communicator of the faith to those who did not have the kind of intellectual skills and privileged education that he had. The MSS again throw light on this, for one is impressed how frequently in the archives one comes across material written to Charles praising him for the clear and compelling manner in which he delivered his sermons. In the journal too Charles reports on the impact of his preaching and how many thousands at times came to hear him preach. Certainly he preached with conviction and passion; so much so that on one occasion he got a nose bleed as result. (It seems that his preaching could have a dramatic effect on his audience too for the letters and journal are full of stories of people fainting, hallooing, shouting, screaming and so on. So frequent were these occurrences in fact that Charles was rumoured to keep a bucket of water with him in the pulpit so that if the need arose he could throw it over any who got too excited and hence calm them down).

Unfortunately very little of Charles' sermon material has survived; this is in part because soon after his 'evangelical experience' in 1738 he appears to have developed the method of preaching without any preparation whatsoever. He just stood up, opened the Bible at random and off he went.



Fortunately, however, some of his sermons were committed to paper and some of those MSS have survived. In a number of these, Charles' concern to engage with the issues and theological disputes of his day to and do so using carefully constructed arguments concerning and analyses of the human condition, can be seen. Into this category one might put not only the sermon on Acts 20.7, but also the only two sermons that Charles actually published during his lifetime, namely *Awake thou that Sleepest* (preached before the University of Oxford in 1742) and *The Cause and Cure of Earthquakes* (published in 1755). However, there are other texts that are much simpler and obviously aimed at another kind of audience entirely. These include Charles' shorthand sermon on John 8.1-11 (the woman caught in adultery).

The sermon is relatively uncluttered and makes a simple appeal to the sinner to come to Christ and, like the woman, hear the words 'neither do I condemn you - go and sin no more'.

One very early account of Charles' preaching is that given by Joseph Williams of Kidderminster; again the MS of this has survived. On October 17, 1739, Williams, who was a Congregationalist and not a Methodist, wrote to Charles in the course of which he refers to a report that he has written on hearing Charles preach.

I found him standing upon a table, [says Williams] in an erect posture, with his hands and eyes lifted up to heaven in prayer, surrounded with (I guess) more than a thousand people; some few of them persons of fashion, both men and women, but most of them of the lower rank of mankind. I know not how long he had been engaged in the duty before I came, but he continued therein, after my coming, scarce a quarter of an hour; during which time he prayed with uncommon fervency, fluency, and variety of proper expression. He then preached about an hour from the five last verses of the fifth chapter of the second Epistle to the Corinthians, in such a manner as I have seldom, if ever, heard any minister preach: i.e. though I have heard many a finer sermon, according to the common taste, or acceptance of sermons, yet I scarce ever heard any minister discover such evident signs of a most vehement desire, or labour so earnestly, to convince his hearers that they were all by nature in a state of enmity against God, consequently in a damnable state, and needed reconciliation to God . . . These points he backed all along as he went on with a great many texts of scripture, which he explained, and illustrated; and then freely invited all, even the chief of sinners, and used a great variety of the most moving arguments, and expositions, in order to persuade, allure, instigate and, if possible, compel them all to come to Christ, and believe in him for pardon and salvation.[xvii]

And all this, says Williams, was done by Charles with nothing but the Bible in his hand. Williams is not alone. In the archives there are a number of other reports on Charles' preaching, including at least a couple of letters that make it clear that their authors thought he was a better preacher than John. Hear John Whitehead (1740-1804), John Wesley's first official biographer, and an individual who had heard both John and Charles preach, on the matter. According to him Charles' sermons were more 'awakening and useful' than John's,[xviii] which is high praise indeed when set against John's own not insignificant preaching abilities.[xix] Whitehead went on to observe regarding Charles

His discourses from the pulpit were not dry and systematic, but flowed from the present views and feelings of his own mind. He had a remarkable talent of expressing the most important truths with simplicity and energy;[xx] and his discourses were sometimes truly apostolic, forcing conviction on his hearers in spite of the most determined opposition.[xxi]

One could cite much more evidence of this sort, but time does not allow extensive review of the relevant primary documents. However, permit me if you will just one more quotation. It is from James Sutcliffe and refers to Charles' preaching at a very advanced age, in fact probably only a year or two before Charles' death. 'The preacher', says Sutcliffe,

"was an aged gentleman in a plain coat and wig. His voice was clear, his aspect venerable and his manner devout. In his introductory sentences he was very deliberate, and presently made a pause of some moments. This I attributed to his age and infirmities, but in a while he made a second pause, twice as long as before. This to me was painful, but the people took no notice of it. However he helped himself out by quoting three verses of the hymn: 'Five bleeding wounds He bears, Received on Calvary'. And when I was most affected with sympathy for his infirmities, as I then thought, he quoted his text in Greek with remarkable fluency. Coming then to the great salvation, he was on his high horse, age and infirmities were left behind. It was a torrent of doctrine, of exhortation and eloquence bearing down all before him?"[xxii]

I should add of course, lest you think that I am getting carried away by my own enthusiasm for Charles, that the praise is not 100% uniform; one of the letters written to Charles complains that he mumbled while

another account tells of how Charles went on for over two hours and probably would have kept going a good deal longer had he not been 'booed and hissed out of the pulpit by the lads'.

Charles, then, was evidently at least a fair theologian and a very good preacher who could through various means articulate and communicate his faith both to the well educated and to the 'men of fashion' (as Williams calls them), but also to those of 'the lower rank of mankind'. In the area of preaching, then, as well as in his hymns Charles seems to have had the ability to articulate his faith in a variety of contexts, using a variety of media and using language suited to the audience before him.

## Conclusion

Time to draw things to a close.

In this presentation I have sought to demonstrate that Charles Wesley was more than just a hymn writer and sought to put him in broader historical context. Actually I think John was overdoing it a bit by saying that his brother's least talent was his poetic one, but that Charles did have other skills is perfectly clear. PP17 It is plain also that he was a contentious figure in early Methodism and while he and his brother John did have an extraordinarily close relationship and in general held each other in great regard, this is not to say that they did not have their differences. The period 1749-1752 was particularly difficult and I doubt actually that the relationship ever really recovered fully from the strain under which it was placed during those years. The differences were personal, theological, organizational and real and we should not underestimate them.

Charles has, like so many others, suffered somewhat as a result of being on the losing side. Not too long after his death that which he most feared did in fact occur with the separation of the Methodist people from the established Church. Not surprisingly as the new movement struggled to its feet and sought independence the legacy of Charles was quickly forgotten, some might even say 'covered up' and the story of the rise and progress of Methodism ever since has been told almost exclusively through the eyes of John. Charles in the meantime has been defused. As the 'Sweet Singer of Methodism' he is safe. But the MS material tells a rather different story.

And finally a more personal word; I should say that I think that it is important that a scholar finds his or her discipline not just 'interesting' but inspiring. The academic life, the privileges of which it has my good fortune to enjoy (before I was handed the poison chalice of senior administration at least!), ought not to be oppressive or tiresome, although it is at times both of those things to be sure. But it has its joys. Personally I cannot but be inspired by Charles Wesley. I am inspired, as I think we must all be, by his hymns. But there is so much more than that and the more I uncover about Charles the more inspired I become. I am inspired by this man who felt a burning desire to communicate his faith to others and did so so effectively. I am inspired by this man who spent so many of his days down in the dumps with all of his doubts and depressions (a story we have not here told), but who nevertheless soldiered on. I am inspired by this man who sought so hard to service not just his head, but also his heart; and to understand and articulate his faith while not for a moment robbing it of its mystery. I am inspired by this man who had the courage of his convictions and was prepared to go out to bat for the cause he believed to be right even if, in the end, he lost the match. And I am inspired too by the discipline, the sense of discovery that one gets when working with MS material and the immense if eerie privilege of effectively looking over the shoulders of persons now long dead.

To this point I have steered clear, more or less, of making much by way of remark regarding Charles' spiritual insight and the way in which for some this is a, if not the, reason for wanting to recover his voice and reclaim him as an all-round figure. As an Anglican clergyman, however, I will allow myself the liberty of ending with just one such remark. Charles was without doubt a hymn writer of the very finest calibre. Some would say he was the best the English language has ever known. Remember that as you hear these little-known and humble lines

*If well I know the tuneful art*

*To captivate the human heart*

*The glory, Lord, be thine*

*A servant of thy perfect will*

*I here devote my utmost skill*

*To sing thy praise divine*

For his spiritual insight, no less than for his historical significance and literary brilliance, we have to take this person seriously.

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Notes:

[i] See Minutes of Conference, 1.201

[ii] A Short Account of the Death of Hannah Richardson (1741); Charles was almost certainly responsible also for the work *Strictures on the Substance of a Sermon Preached at Baltimore in the State of Maryland before the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church (1785)* which gives the author as 'a Methodist of the Church of England'. In MSS form there is also an extended account of Charles' dealings with the French Prophetess Mary Lavington (MARC ref. DDCW 8/12), a treatment, in French, on the Lord's Supper (most of which has been copied from the Catholic writer Fénelon [Wesley College ref. D2/9]) and another treatise upon the Lord's Supper held at the Rylands (ref. DDCW 8/16).

[iii] See George Osborn, ed. *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley*, 13 vols. (1868-1872) and ST Kimbrough, and Oliver A. Beckerlegge, eds. *The Unpublished Poetry of Charles Wesley*, 3 vols. (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1988-1992).

[iv] 3.318

[v] DDCW 8/12

[vi] BE Vol. 11

[vii] Kimbrough-Beckerlegge, 3.320

[viii] See further Baker, *Charles Wesley as Revealed by his Letters*, 79-90.

[ix] Baker, *Charles Wesley* p. 97

[x] Kimbrough-Beckerlegge 3.93

[xi] Kimbrough-Beckerlegge 3.81

[xii] Kimbrough-Beckerlegge 89

[xiii] Kimbrough-Beckerlegge 3.81

[xiv] Langford in STK, 'Charles Wesley', 100

[xv] Langford, 'Charles Wesley as Theologian', 97-105, 97.

[xvi] Outler, *Sermons* 4.102-103

[xvii] MARC ref. DDP 1/92, 2-3

[xviii] John Whitehead *Life of the Rev. John Wesley*, 2 vols. (1793-1796), 1.292. I owe this reference to Albert C. Outler, ed. *Sermons*, 1:2, n. 6. The comparison is also made by Charles Wesley Flint, who notes that 'Charles was a born preacher; of the three he is rated second to George Whitefield but ahead of his brother John' (Flint, *Charles Wesley and his Colleagues*, 146.) No evidence is cited in support of this remark.

[xix] A further brief comparison of the preaching of John and Charles is found also in a letter written to Charles by Mary Thomas. She wrote 'When you came to Bristol I seemed to like you better than your brother and thought your way of delivery was finer than his'. The letter is uncatalogued, but may be found in the MAB section of the MARC in a folio entitled 'Early Methodist Volume' item number 128.

[xx] In this context it is worth noting that Charles seems sometimes to have put more energy into his

sermons than was good for him. On one occasion he got himself so worked up while delivering a sermon on Psalms 23 that he bled from the nose for some time afterwards (see Charles Wesley to Sarah Wesley, June 18 [1763]; MARC ref. DDCW 7/16 and printed in Jackson, Journal, 2.251-252).

[xxi] Whitehead, Life, 1.370

[xxii] As quoted in Flint, Charles Wesley and His Colleagues, 148.