



Charles Wesley and the Hymns of Methodism

JOHN TYSON

Charles Wesley (1707–1788) is remembered as the lyricist behind many of our favorite Christian hymns. What would our Christian holidays be without his “Hark the Herald Angels Sing,” and “Christ the Lord is Risen Today?” These are only the tip of the proverbial iceberg of the prodigious poetical productivity of the co-founder of Methodism! He penned more than 9,000 separate compositions, more than 400 of which continue in contemporary hymnals.¹ Of the 458 separate publications issued by John and Charles Wesley, sixty-four of them (14 percent) were hymnbooks; their vast impact is inestimable.²

¹ See John R. Tyson, “Introduction,” in *Charles Wesley: A Reader*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 20–29, for an introduction to Wesley’s hymnological corpus.

² See Frank Baker, ed., *A Union Catalogue of the Publications of John and Charles Wesley*, (Stone Mountain, Georgia: George Zimmermann, 1991), 2–30.

The hymnody of the Wesley brothers, Charles and John, has resulted in some of the best-loved hymns within the Christian tradition. The hymns of these brothers, especially Charles, grew out of his ministry, and his need to reach people through song with the proclamation of the gospel good-news that would touch their hearts and souls.

The Wesleyan hymns were the sound-track of the Methodist revival; setting the Bible and its verities to music, they were a Christian catechism for the unlettered and unchurched. In his own day, however, Charles Wesley was more famous as a pastor, preacher, and evangelist than as a hymnist. Hence, his terse obituary in the *Methodist Minutes of Conference* opined: "His *least* praise was his talent for poetry..."³

Charles Wesley followed his elder brother John in many things, including a frenetic, evangelistic partnership that spanned nearly fifty years. Every year, for over twenty years, Charles and his grey mare travelled the 700 mile "Methodist triangle" from Bristol (where he relocated), to New Castle, on to London and then back to Bristol again; within it dwelled over two-thirds of the population of industrializing Georgian England. As he traveled, Charles preached two or three times a day, often in an equal number of towns and villages. He sometimes spoke in Anglican churches, but more often Wesley's mission took him to farmers' fields, village market squares, pit-heads, docks, or factory fronts where the unchurched, working people who were too poor and too busy to attend the established Church were found. On July 3, 1739, for example, "near ten thousand people, by computation, gave diligent heed to the word [Charles] preached in Moorfields [London]: 'Thou shall call His name Jesus; for He shall save His people from their sins,' (Matt 1:21 KJV)."⁴ His contemporaries esteemed Charles Wesley's preaching so well they made his *only* published sermon, "Awake Thou that Sleepest," the "best seller" among the hundreds of pamphlets published by the Wesleys.⁵ His text and title for the sermon, "Awake Thou that Sleepest," epitomized Charles's intention to shake his contemporaries from their spiritual slumber, and to awaken them to the sorry state of their own souls as well as the horrific challenges faced by good people all around them. In this, Charles Wesley wholeheartedly embraced early Methodism's stated mission: "...to reform the nation, particularly the Church; and to spread scriptural holiness over the land."⁶

³ John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson (London: Hayman Bros. & Lilley, 1877), XIII, 514.

⁴ Tyson, *Charles Wesley*, 155.

⁵ See Tyson, *Charles Wesley*, 212-222; for the text of the only Charles Wesley sermon published during his own lifetime.

⁶ Wesley, "The Large Minutes of Conference," in *Works of John Wesley*, VIII: 299.

After 1753, however, the love-bonds of family life with his lovely wife (Sarah Gwynne Wesley), and three surviving children gradually curtailed Charles's travels, as did his recurrent illnesses. A laconic line from the preface of Charles Wesley's *Short Hymns on Select Passages of the Holy Scriptures* (1762) bore witness to the later impediment: "God, having graciously laid His hand upon my body, and disabled me for the principal work of the ministry, has thereby given me an unexpected occasion of writing the following hymns."⁷ Two things are notable here; first, that Charles considered itinerant evangelism "the principal work" of his ministry; and secondly, then, as now, Charles's hymns did his traveling for him. It should also be noted that even while he was "disabled" for "the principal work of ministry" Charles served London Methodism's two largest chapels until his untimely death in 1788, when "...after spending fourscore years with much sorrow and pain, [he] quietly retired into Abraham's bosom."⁸

WHY SHOULD THE DEVIL HAVE ALL THE GOOD MUSIC?

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What impelled Charles Wesley to a literary production of almost unimaginable proportions? In real terms, writing 9000 hymns and sacred poems meant Wesley produced a finished hymn or poem every other a day—for the entire span of his fifty-year ministry. Nearly thirty years after his death, the unnamed editor of a slim volume of Charles Wesley's sermons (who was very likely his widow) wrote: "His most

⁷ Charles Wesley, "Short Hymns on Select Passages of the Holy Scriptures" in *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley: Reprinted from the Originals, with the Last Corrections of the Authors; Together with the Poems of Charles Wesley Not Before Published*, (London: Wesleyan-Methodist Conference Office, 1872), IX, vii.

⁸ Wesley, *Works of John Wesley*, XIII, 514.

striking excellence was humility; it extended to his talents ... if there ever was a human being who disliked power, avoided pre-eminence and shrunk from praise, it was Charles Wesley.”⁹ His flight from fame was evidenced by the fact most of Charles’s hymns were published without authorial ascription. The Wesleys’ partnership in producing hymns settled into a pattern that typically saw Charles Wesley composing the hymns and poems, while his brother John edited and published them. This pattern was not a fixed rule, however, because it is clear that John composed some of the Wesleyan hymns and that Charles published several important hymnals without John’s editorial interference.

Charles Wesley did not intend to make much money from his hymn writing, since his hymns were mass-marketed in inexpensive publications. In fact, he was so poor that his future mother-in-law insisted Charles demonstrate his ability to raise 100£ annually before she could consent to the marriage to her lovely and talented daughter, Sarah (aka “Sally”) Gwynne to this (apparently) indigent, itinerant Methodist preacher. Charles quickly gathered a collection of occasional hymns from several of his extant manuscripts and produced his “bride-price hymnal,” *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1749). Charles Wesley printed 100 copies of the hymnal, sold them at 1£ each, and presented Mrs. Gwynne with a bond for the prescribed amount. He and Sally married soon thereafter.¹⁰ Fame and fortune were *not* motives behind the Wesleyan hymns—ministry was.

The inter-connection between the Wesleyan hymns and Charles Wesley’s ministry is illustrated by an incident that occurred while he preached at the docks in Portsmouth, in 1746. As he spoke from atop stack of cotton bales, a group of drunken sailors interrupted Wesley by shouting and singing a vulgar ditty about the operator of a local house of ill-repute, “Nancy Dawson.” Wesley turned his irritation into Christian apologetics by telling them he liked their tune but not their lewd lyrics. He challenged them to return later that same Sunday, and he promised to have a song they could all sing together. Tacitly addressing the question often raised by Christian musicians, both

⁹ Tyson, *Charles Wesley*, 9.

¹⁰ See John R. Tyson, “My Dearest Sally,” in *Assist Me to Proclaim: The Life and Hymns of Charles Wesley* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 153–170.

then and now: “Why Should the Devil Have all the Good Music?”
Charles Wesley wrote:

Listed into the Cause of Sin,
Why Should a Good be Evil?
Musick, alas! Too long has been
Presst to serve the Devil:
Drunken, or lewd, or light the Lay
Flow'd to the Soul's Undoing,
Widen'd, and strew'd with Flower's the Way
Down to Eternal Ruin.

Who on the Part of GOD will rise,
Innocent Sound recover,
Fly on the Prey, and take the Prize,
Plunder the Carnal Lover,
Strip him of every moving Strain,
Every melting Measure,
Musick in Virtue's Cause retain,
Rescue the Holy Pleasure?

Come let us try if Jesu's Love
Will not as well inspire us;
This the Theme of Those above,
This upon the Earth shall fire us.
Say, if your Hearts are tun'd to sing,
Is there a Subject greater?
Harmony all its Strains may bring,
JESUS's name is sweeter.

JESUS the Soul of Musick is;
His is the Noblest Passion;
JESUS's Name is Joy and Peace,
Happiness and Salvation;
JESUS' Name the Dead can raise,
Shew us our Sins forgiven,
Fill us with all the Life of Grace,
Carry us up to Heaven.

Who hath a Right like us to sing,
Us whom His Mercy raises?

Merry our Hearts, for CHRIST is King,
Cheerful are all our Faces;
Who of His Love doth once partake
He evermore rejoices:
Melody in our Hearts we make
Echoing to our Voices.¹¹

IN THE MIDST MINISTRY:

The Wesleys had a family history of Christian service that reached back to Charles Wesley's grandfathers on both sides of his family. They were also a family of poets. Charles's father, Samuel, his elder brothers Samuel and John, as well as his sisters, Hetty and Patty, were all published poets. With these examples set before him, it is not surprising the youngest Wesley brother would also try his hand at writing poetry and lyrics. Since he was a talented linguist, with an Oxford M.A. in Classics, it is equally unsurprising Charles wrote so well. The first time his journal reports Charles Wesley writing poetry was during his harrowing trans-Atlantic missionary voyage to Georgia in 1736. His "Written for Midnight" was penned during a hallowing ocean-gale as Charles lamented his decision to join his brother, John Wesley, on a missionary misadventure in the New World. The hymn was subsequently published in John's *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1739).¹²

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¹¹ "On the True Use of Musick," the first five of Wesley's original seven verses, from the manuscript and published in Tyson, *Charles Wesley*, 221–222.

¹² Tyson, *Charles Wesley*, 64–66.

What began as a trickle during the Georgia mission, became a hymnological tidal wave after Charles Wesley's dramatic encounter with a loving God; while on his sickbed he heard someone read aloud from Martin Luther's *Galatians*, on Whitsunday (Pentecost), May 21, 1738.¹³ He felt the Holy Spirit visit him that evening! So Charles composed four hymns to celebrate his conversion and to describe his newly found faith. Two of them, "Where Shall My Wondering Soul Begin," and "And Can It Be That I Should Gain," continue in modern Methodist hymnals.¹⁴ These hymns are replete with first-person phrasing that gives them an authentic and autobiographic tone as they express the feelings of spiritual renewal. "And Can It Be," for example, takes the singer to the dungeon where Peter the Apostle (Acts 12:5–9) was delivered from bondage by a blinding angelic light; but in Charles's hymn it is not only St. Peter who experiences liberation. Wesley wrote: "...I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;/ *my* chains fell off,/ *my* heart was free,/ I rose, went forth and followed Thee."¹⁵ One year after Charles Wesley's "personal Pentecost," he composed the hymn laughingly labelled the "Methodist national anthem:" "O For A Thousand Tongues to Sing." It was originally published, in a fulsome eighteen verses, under the title "For the Anniversary Day of One's Conversion."¹⁶ The hymn-writing project that began as a spontaneous overflowing of his own heart soon became a regular facet of Charles Wesley's devotional life as well as an evangelistic tool.

Two months after his personal Pentecost Charles Wesley began serving as curate at St. Mary's Church in the Islington section of London. He often preached at St. Mary's and was well received for several months. But by April 1739, the insistent tenor and topics of Charles's sermons turned the church wardens against him. Genteel church people recoiled and complained at being told they were sinners in need of salvation. When they inquired after his license to preach, and it was discovered he had *not* been licensed by the Bishop of London, they took steps to prohibit Wesley's preaching. This process came to a head, a month later, when the church wardens linked arms like a

¹³ See Tyson, "Charles's Personal Pentecost," in *Charles Wesley*, 92–11

¹⁴ See "Where Shall My Wonderful Soul Begin," *UMH* #342, and "And Can It Be that I Should Gain," *UMH* #363.

¹⁵ This is part of verse three of the published version of "And Can It Be that I Should Gain," *UMH* #363 & #364.

¹⁶ "O For A Thousand Tongues to Sing." *UMH* #56–58.

rugby team to block Charles's path to the pulpit. Remembering the Scripture's injunction: "the servant of the Lord must *not* strive, but be gentle unto all men" (2 Tim 2:24), Wesley confided to his journal: "I was *not* inclined to fight my way through them,"¹⁷ The wardens' opposition came to blows on Sunday May 27, when "Mr. Claggett . . . struck me; raged exceedingly to see the people come flocking to the word. God gave me utterance to make known the mystery of the gospel to four or five hundred listening souls."¹⁸ On that occasion, Charles turned to the door and invited the congregation to join him in the churchyard, and apparently most of the congregation did so. Following the impromptu incident at St. Mary's, Charles Wesley began a campaign of worship *alfresco*. Farmer Franklin's field became a sanctuary for another five hundred people on the next Sunday afternoon and then again in the same evening when Charles Wesley "... invited near a thousand sinners (with whom the whole was filled) at night to 'come weary and heavy-laden' to Christ for rest."¹⁹

Two months prior to Charles Wesley's bold venture into field preaching, his brother John followed Rev. George Whitefield into the same innovation. Both Wesley brothers scrupled against field preaching because it showed a flagrant disregard for Anglican propriety, parish boundaries, and ecclesiastical order. "I should have thought the saving of souls *almost a sin* if it had not been done *in a church*," John confided to his journal.²⁰ Taking encouragement from the example of Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, "one pretty remarkable precedent of *field preaching*," John acknowledged, "I proclaimed in the highways the glad tiding of salvation from a little eminence in a ground adjoining to the city, to about three thousand people."²¹ Charles Wesley expressed similar reservations about "field preaching" even though it had been forced upon him. "My inward conflict continued," he intimated, but the next day, Charles addressed nearly ten thousand people in Moorfields, London, with Jesus's words: "Come unto me ye that travail and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt 11:28). Wesley believed the God-given results of field-preaching verified its

¹⁷ Charles Wesley, *The Manuscript Journal of the Reverend Charles Wesley, M.A., S.T.* Kimbrough and Kenneth Newport, eds. (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2008), I:174.

¹⁸ Wesley, *The Manuscript Journal of the Reverend Charles Wesley*, I:174.

¹⁹ Wesley, *The Manuscript Journal of the Reverend Charles Wesley* I:175.

²⁰ Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, XIX:46.

²¹ Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, XIX:46.

propriety: “My load was gone, and all my doubts and scruples. God shone upon *my* path and I knew this was His will concerning me.”²² His contemporaneous hymn, “Before Preaching,” suggests Charles also found encouragement in God’s promise to “... never leave thee, nor forsake thee” (Heb 13:5):

Forth in Thy strength, O Lord, I go,
Thy Gospel to proclaim,
Thy only righteousness to show,
And glorify Thy name.

Ordained I am, and sent by Thee,
As by the Father Thou:
And, lo! Thou always art with me!
I plead the promise now.²³

Six months after his “conversion,” on October 20, 1738, Charles Wesley’s journal reported he was preaching “extempore.” Initially, he expanded his prepared, written sermon extemporaneously to tailor it more effectively to his audience. But soon Charles simply “expounded” a Scripture passage in a free flowing form that put him into direct conversation with the hopes, needs, and fears of the people standing before him. The Scripture passage Charles expounded on a particular day was often the same Bible passage the Anglican lectionary prescribed for his morning devotions. It seems he also often penned a hymn as his message took shape in Charles’s mind during his devotions. The hymn would be sung to a familiar local tune later the same day during Wesley’s out door evangelism. It drew a crowd, and then punctuated the worship event with congregational song as Charles “lined it out” for the people gathered before him as they joined him in songful celebration of the Bible’s great themes and heroes. Charles Wesley’s published journal, which is in many instances little more than an annotated sermon log, shows many of the Methodists’ favorite hymns were rooted in Charles Wesley’s favorite sermons texts.²⁴

²² Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, XIX:180.

²³ Osborn, *Poetical Works*, I:239.

²⁴ Tyson, *Charles Wesley Reader*, 487–489.

HYMNS AS VEHICLES OF WESLEYAN EVANGELISM:

The Wesleyan small groups, which were risen up by their mass evangelism, became the backbone of the Methodist movement. In the close fellowship and shared accountability of those classes and bands, the Methodist hymnbooks were spiritual and liturgical guides; they also served as a reading primer, Bible commentary, and theological text book for the marginally educated people who populated the movement. These hymns were, as Brian Yeich pointed out, a “Handmaid for Piety,” and “Catalyst for Human Development.”²⁵ The titles of some of Wesley’s “occasional hymns” and many of his *Funeral Hymns* (1756) match up well with the names and occupations registered on extant Methodist “class lists” to create a vivid picture of the people who comprised the classes and benefited from their connection with Methodist hymnody.

The Wesleys produced hymnals for the great Christian festivals like: *Hymns for the Nativity of our Lord* (1744) and *Hymns for our Lord’s Resurrection* (1746), for liturgical events like *Hymns For the Lord’s Supper* (1745), or to clarify and celebrate theological doctrines like *Hymns and Prayers for the Trinity* (1761). Their two volumes of *Hymns on God’s Everlasting Love* (1741, 1742) mounted a theological broadside against what they viewed as classical Calvinism’s depiction of an unloving and exclusionary God. Charles’s massive *Short Hymns on Select Passages of Scripture* (1762), was an entire Bible commentary in verse.

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²⁵ Brian Yeich, “Poetry as the Handmaid of Piety: Hymns as the Catalyst for Human Development in Early Methodism,” *The Asbury Journal* 67, no. 1 (2018), 77–92.

Wesley's own spiritual odyssey. Stirred by the scene of the sun setting by the sea at Land's End, for example, Charles mused about the short distance between this world and the next: "Lo! On a narrow neck of land,/ Twixt two unbounded seas I stand/ Secure, insensible;/ A point of life, a moment's space/ Removes me to that heavenly place,/ Or shuts me up in hell."²⁶ Methodist preacher, Adam Clarke, visited the same location many years later, and described it to his wife, Mary, by letter:

I write this, my dear Mary, in a situation that would make your soul freeze with horror; it is on the last projecting point of rock of the "Land's End," upwards of two hundred feet perpendicular above the sea, which is raging and roaring most tremendously, threatening destruction to myself and the narrow point of rock on which I am now sitting. On my right hand is the Bristol Channel, and before me the vast Atlantic Ocean. There is not one inch of land from the place on which my feet rest, to the vast American continent! This is the place ... where Charles Wesley composed those fine lines, "Lo on a narrow neck of land"...²⁷

In December of 1753, while Charles was "on the road again," his wife and first-born son contracted lethal small pox. As he raced home to be by their side once again his heart poured out poetical prayers and petitions: "For a sick Child," and "For a Child in the Small-pox." Since he habitually referred to his wife, Sally, as "my dearest friend," the several agonizing hymns entitled, "Oblation for a Sick Friend" were probably penned with Sally in mind. His three "Prayers for a Sick Child," were soon followed by the heart wrenching lines: "Dead! Dead! The child I love so well!/ ... Mine earthly happiness is fled,/ His mother's joy, his father's hope;/ O had I died in *Isaac's* stead!/ He should have lived, my age's prop,/ He should have closed his father's eyes,/ and follow'd me to paradise."²⁸ And the hymn, "A Mother's Resignation on the Death of a Child," appeared soon after Charles's young son

²⁶ Osborn, *Poetical Works*, IV:316.

²⁷ Edwin Hatfield, "Adam Clarke on the Edge," in *Poets of the Church: A Series of Biographical Sketches of Hymn-Writers with Notes on Their Hymns*, (New York: A. D. F. Randolph Company, 1884), 657.

²⁸ Osborn, *Poetical Works*, VI:252-53.

died. These soul straining hymns, along with many happier ones, were subsequently published in Wesley's *Hymns for the Use of Families* (1767).²⁹

In Charles Wesley's *Hymns for Children* (1763) hopes and fears for his young family blended his poetical muse with the eye of a devoted husband and doting father. There is even a Charles Wesley hymn "For a Child Cutting His Teeth," written as he wearily rocked a teething child to sleep. "Suffering for another's sin" he wrote, concluding that the pain and irritation felt by both child and parent was somehow be connected to original sin. The same hymn concluded with a prayer for the child's protection and deliverance from all sin and all pain:

Thine it is to bless and heal,
Thine to rescue and repair;
On our child the answer seal,
Thou who didst suggest the prayer;
Send salvation to this house;
Then, to double health restored,
I and mine will pay our vow,
I and mine will serve the Lord.³⁰

AN OFFICIAL HYMNAL FOR THE NEW METHODIST CHURCH:

As the Methodist movement began to look more and more like a separate church, in his old age John Wesley took concerted steps to plan for its continuance. His *Model Deed* (1763) linked their chapels together under centralized control. It ensured that Methodist congregations would not actually own their chapels, rather they would be owned by the Methodist Conference and held in trust for each congregation. *The Deed of Declaration* (1784) furthered this organizational process and provided for the succession of Methodist leadership after the passing of the Wesley brothers. Even more blatantly, in that same year, John Wesley "commissioned" two Anglican Elders (or priests) for missionary service in American Methodism, and "appointed" two men to be "superintendents" for the Methodist work in America. By

²⁹ Osborn, *Poetical Works*, VII:5–200.

³⁰ Osborn, *Poetical Works*, 89–90. Verse six of "For a Child Cutting His Teeth" is cited above.

the time the American Methodists met in their 1784 Christmas Conference, in Baltimore, however, those who had been “commissioned” considered themselves *ordained* clergy while superintendents Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury were received as *bishops* for the newly founded American Methodist Episcopal Church.

In this same organizational climate John Wesley collected, selected, and shaped the contents of their many occasional hymnbooks into one “big” hymnal which he hoped would become the standard resource for Methodists on both sides of the Atlantic.³¹ In England, the *Collection of Hymns for the People Called Methodists* (1780) gradually replaced the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* as the devotional guide for early English Methodists. Its text only format lent it as easily to praying as to singing. The same format also insured that when the Methodist hymns were sung, they were paired with popular, local tunes. But Wesley’s official “big” hymnal was not as popular among American Methodists as it was with their British counterparts. While new-found American nationalism likely played a role, their revivalist proclivities leaned American Methodists toward rousing and repetitive gospel songs instead of Wesleyan hymns and led them to believe Methodists prayed better with *both* their eyes *and* their books closed.

John culled 525 hymns from the brothers’ many publications to form his 1780 *Collection of Hymns*. His “preface” reported the collection was given “a regular order” in which the hymns were “...carefully arranged under proper [theological] heads, according to the experience of real Christians. So that his book is in effect a little body of experimental and practical divinity.”³² The fact that John Wesley, who published no new catechism, creed, or systematic theology, but looked upon this “big” hymnbook as a primer “of experimental” (that is, “experiential”) and “practical divinity” for the Methodists reveals much about the spiritual impact and didactic role he envisioned for the Methodist hymns. Borrowing the phrase of hymnologist T.S. Gregory, the Wesleyan hymns intend “... not only *express* but to *induce* the [Christian] experience they reveal.”³³

³¹ Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 71–78.

³² Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 74.

³³ T.S. Gregory, “Charles Wesley’s Hymns and Poems,” *London Quarterly and Holborn Review* 182 (1957): 261. [Emphasis added]

CONCLUSION:

As I began my ministerial vocation, more than a half-century ago, a godly senior pastor reminded me: “ministry is *primarily* presence.” It was an important insight; I thought so at the time and frequently thereafter! This was the principle behind the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ as Immanuel, “God-with-us.” And it is also the reason for the impact and staying power of the Wesleys’ hymns; they were born in and celebrated the intersection of faith in God with the joys and sorrows of real human life. Since these hymns are dipped deep in the stuff life is made of, they continue to encourage, direct, and to elevate Christian living even in our own troubled times. Hence, they remain relevant for us not only because of their spiritual, theological, and literary value; these hymns continue to speak to us about verities of Christian faith in the context of real Christian living and they bid us to sing along. ⊕

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