

# CHARLES WESLEY

## FAMILY MAN OF METHODISM

Jennifer Woodruff Tait

**C**harles was a brilliant, gifted, and difficult man. Born on December 18, 1707 (four years after John), he was the third and last surviving son of Samuel and Susanna Wesley. His birth was followed by their last surviving child, his sister Kezziah (1709-1741).

Samuel and Susanna were both children of Church of England preachers who had quarreled with that established church and as a result lost their parishes or “livings.” As young adults both Samuel and Susanna returned to the Church of England. They married in 1688 and Samuel was ordained a priest in 1689. In 1697 he took the parish at Epworth with which he was to be associated for the rest of his life. Ten of their nineteen children survived infancy, and Susanna brought them up in a famously disciplined fashion. Girls and boys alike 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 was sent to Westminster School in London. His older brother Samuel Jr. (1690-1739), already in his mid-twenties, was a teacher at the school and paid the expenses of his education. Charles proved to be an able, although not outstanding, student, and at one point was made captain of the school. He also caught the eye of a wealthy and childless relative from Ireland, Garrett Wesley, who wished to adopt Charles as his heir. Samuel and Susanna allowed Charles to make the decision, and he refused the adoption.

### Life at College

Charles followed his two older brothers to Christ Church, Oxford in 1726. By all accounts he was a charming, emotional, sensitive young man, suffering most of his life from poor health. He enjoyed his early undergraduate time, participating in college social life and avoiding religious display. (When the recently ordained John questioned him on this point in 1728, Charles rebuffed him with, “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 being nicknamed the “Holy Club” and “Methodists” for their regulated, focused devotion. Later that year, John, who had become a fellow of Lincoln College and was thus freed from parish ministry, returned to Oxford and, typically, began to take over the leadership of the group.

In 1730, Charles graduated from Oxford and began to work as a tutor there. This life pleased him, but John pressured him to follow his older brothers into the priesthood. Though Charles “exceedingly dreaded” the idea, he submitted to being quickly ordained in 1735, and took a job as secretary to General James Oglethorpe, who was recruiting settlers for a colony in Savannah, Georgia. Along with John, he left for Georgia in late

1735. Charles's time there was brief. He quarreled with Oglethorpe and his parishioners in the small church he served at Frederica, and after developing dysentery in 1736, he returned to England.

## Charles Experiences Conversion

Still technically Oglethorpe's secretary, Charles received a small salary over the next few years which enabled him to travel, preach, and try to recover his health. Seeking for a deeper, more peaceful spiritual life, he became acquainted with devotional author William Law and with a group of German Moravians, whose quiet faith and straightforward preaching impressed him. (There had been Moravians on board the ship to Georgia, but Charles had been too seasick to talk to them.) In April 1738, he resigned his position with Oglethorpe, and in May moved into the home of a devout family (the Brays), where he continued to struggle both spiritually and physically. On May 21, after a visit from John, Charles heard a voice saying as he slept, "In the name of Jesus Christ, arise, and believe, and thou shalt be healed." (It was in fact Mr. Bray's sister, who believed God had told her to speak to Charles in a dream.) Charles picked up the Bible, where his eyes lighted first on the words "Truly my hope is even in Thee" and then on "He hath put a new song into my mouth, even a song of thanksgiving unto our God." He now found himself, as he wrote in his journals, "at peace with God." His health began to recover, and several days later he wrote the hymn "Where Shall My Wondering Soul Begin."

For once, Charles had preceded John, but not for long—his brother had a similar experience in Aldersgate Street three days later. Though they were already preaching a message of personal faith and assurance (one of Charles' most famous sermons, "The One Thing Needful," was written for him by John before the 1738 experience), the new urgency and force of their message did not sit kindly with established clergy at Oxford and elsewhere. In 1739, their friend George Whitefield invited them to join him in Bristol, where he was having great success preaching in the open air. Both Wesleys followed him in this, though not without misgivings. Such preaching was contrary to Church of England practice, especially when done without permission from the appropriate parish priest. Nevertheless, John and Charles began to travel as itinerant preachers. Charles also spent a great deal of time ministering to condemned prisoners at Newgate.

## Marriage to Sally Gwynne

In April 1749, Charles married Sally Gwynne (1726-1822), whom he had met two years before. Her parents, Marmaduke

and Sarah, were wealthy sympathizers with the Methodist movement and often opened their home to traveling preachers. He fell deeply in love with this pretty, intelligent woman, nineteen years younger than he was. Charles had to prove to his mother-in-law that he would be able to support Sally on the income from his writings. Once she gave her consent, they married, and Charles spent his honeymoon at Garth, preaching every day! The newlyweds settled in Bristol. They had eight children, but only three survived—Charles Jr. (1757-1834), Sally Jr. (1759-1828), and Samuel (1766-1837). 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 as well as John and Charles's sister Martha ("Patty").

## A Falling Out Between Brothers

Shortly after his own marriage, Charles heard the news that John had fallen in love with Grace Murray, a devout and attractive Methodist widow of humble background. Murray was attracted to both Wesley and another Methodist preacher, John Bennett, but at this point was tending toward John. John had not discussed the matter with Charles, though the brothers had always promised to consult each other about their marriages. Feeling that John's marriage would disrupt the now-growing Methodist societies, Charles rode hastily from Grace to John and back, pleading with them not to marry and, in fact, bringing Grace together again with

Bennett, whom she married in October 1749. The incident caused much trouble between the brothers, and two years later when John did marry widow Molly Vazeille, the result was not a happy one for John or Molly—or Charles, who did not get along with her.

In 1771, Charles and Sally moved to London to help further their sons' musical careers. Here Charles remained for 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 giving the sacrament to the Methodist faithful, especially after what is now known as "Wesley's Chapel" on City Road was opened in 1778.

## Methodism Separates from Church of England

Although Charles and John repaired their relationship after the Grace Murray affair, Charles was deeply suspicious of

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tendencies he saw in John's ministry to move Methodism towards separating from the Church of England. He was heartbroken by John's decisions in 1784 to sign the Deed of Declaration (which guaranteed the existence of the Methodist Conference as an independent body), to ordain ministers for the work in America (especially Thomas Coke, who Wesley consecrated to the work of a "superintendent," which suggested the duties of a bishop), and to revise the Book of Common Prayer for the newly independent Methodist church in the United States. (Charles wrote sarcastically about Coke's ordination, "So easily are Bishops made/ By man's or woman's whim?/ W—his hands on C—hath laid/ But who laid hands on him?") He wrote to a friend that his "partnership" with his brother had dissolved, though not "our friendship. I have taken him for better for worse till death do us part—or rather reunite us in love."

Charles died peacefully on March 29, 1788, with his family at his bedside. The last words his daughter heard him speak, as she wrote to her Uncle John, were "Lord—my heart—my God."

He did not live to see John ordain preachers to serve in Britain, nor to follow the future careers of his sons. Samuel's brief conversion to Catholicism happened before his father's death, but Charles missed his son's later return to an idiosyncratic Protestantism, growing popularity as an organist and composer, and desertion of his wife, Charlotte, to father seven children with his longtime mistress Sarah Suter. Samuel and Sarah's oldest son, Samuel Sebastian Wesley (1810-1876),

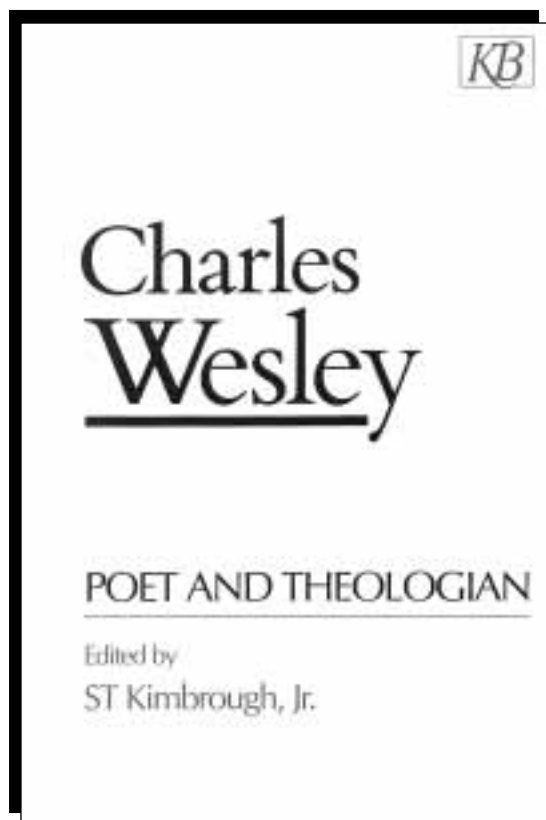
another musical prodigy, became one of the most famous composers of English church music.

To the end, Charles was loyal to all his families despite disagreements and doubts—to his parents, brother, wife, children, the family of Methodists, the family of Anglicans, and above all to that great family of Christian believers in all time and in all places:

One family we dwell in him,  
 one church above, beneath,  
 Though now divided by the stream,  
 the narrow stream of death.  
 One army of the living God,  
 to his command we bow;  
 Part of his host have crossed the flood,  
 and part are crossing now. □



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## Discovering the Real Charles Wesley: *Poet & Theologian*

### Charles Wesley: Poet and Theologian,

*edited by ST Kimbrough, Jr.*

Charles Wesley is widely remembered as a significant hymn-writer, especially among Methodists, but he is not often regarded either as a major poet or as an important theologian. He quite often takes second place to his more famous elder brother, John, and frequently disappears in the face of John's role as leader of "the people called Methodists." This volume attempts to rectify these unfortunate misconceptions by demonstrating that Charles Wesley is a figure of primary literary significance in the history of English religious poetry. It also places his work in the context of a variety of church traditions and seeks to show that Charles Wesley was a theologian of considerable depth and creativity. *Kingswood Books.*

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