

GRACE *upon* GRACE

Charles Wesley as Spiritual Mentor

Paul W. Chilcote

United Methodists need winsome spiritual mentors. In an age of religionless spirituality fixated on self-actualization, the Wesleyan heritage provides an different vision of existence—a life of discipleship rooted in Jesus Christ that points to an alternative way of being in the world for the sake of love. Many Methodists through the years have lived in and for this vision, but few have embodied faith working by love more fully than Charles Wesley. He continues to mentor the disciples of Christ today through the story of his life and the legacy of his hymns.

Charles Wesley's vision of the Christian life revolves around clear principles that have stood the test of time. Among the salient themes of his spirituality are the foundation of grace, the power of spiritual narrative, the centrality of accountable discipleship, the complementarity of works of piety and works of mercy, and the gift of song.

Foundation of Grace

"Grace upon grace" summarizes Wesley's understanding of the Christian life. Discipleship begins in grace, grows in grace, and finds its ultimate completion in God's grace. Grace is God's unmerited love, restoring our relationship to God and renewing God's own image in our lives. Life, to put it rather simply, is all about a God who delights in relationships that liberate and restore the human spirit.

Spiritual restoration founded upon God's unconditional love is the cornerstone of the Wesleyan way. Christian discipleship—the arena of God's continuing activity in the life of the believer—is, first and foremost, a grace-filled response to the free gift of God's all-sufficient grace.

Charles sings about the dimensions of this grace in a selection from his Hymns and Sacred Poems of 1749, building upon a favorite text from Ephesians 3:

What shall I do my God to love?
My loving God to praise
The length, and breadth, and height to prove,
And depth of sovereign grace?

Thy sovereign grace to all extends,
Immense and unconfined;
From age to age it never ends;
It reaches all mankind.

Power of Spiritual Narrative

Charles Wesley had a particular interest in hearing the stories of fellow Christians. In the early years of the Wesleyan Revival he solicited spiritual narratives from the rank and file of the movement on a regular basis. He knew instinctively that the life of faith is by its very nature autobiographical. He yearned to know and learn from the way in which God worked in the lives of the faithful. The early Methodist people, as well as their founders, framed their narratives around God's gift of faith and the hope of restored love in this life. Drawing upon the teachings of his Anglican heritage, Charles defined saving faith as a true trust and confidence of the mercy of God through our Lord Jesus Christ and a steadfast hope of all good things to be received at God's hand. He describes this faith in a lyrical mode:

By faith we know thee strong to save
(Save us, a present Saviour thou!)
Whate'er we hope, by faith we have,
Future and past subsisting now.

To him that in thy name believes
Eternal life with thee is given;
Into himself he all receives—
Pardon, and holiness, and heaven.

The center around which all else revolved was the shared experience of faith-as-trust and salvation by grace.

Centrality of Accountable Discipleship

John Wesley said that there was no such thing as a solitary Christian—he would not have been able to build up and sustain a ministry in which his followers were able "to watch over one another in love" without the solidarity and support of his brother. The Wesley brothers modeled accountable discipleship and developed structures that affirmed each Christian's need of oth-

ers to successfully complete the journey of faith. Charles celebrated in his hymns as well small groups, such as the bands and classes, in which the people called Methodists provided mutual encouragement and genuine care for one another:

Help us to help each other, Lord,
Each other's cross to bear;
Let each his friendly aid afford,
And feel his brother's care.

Help us to build each other up,
Our little stock improve;
Increase our faith, confirm our hope,
And perfect us in love.

Works of Piety and Works of Mercy

Fellowship in small groups was just one "means of grace" in a constellation of spiritual practices or disciplines, the purpose of which was richer communion with God through Christ. In addition to Christian fellowship, or conference, the Wesleys also included prayer and fasting, Bible study, and participation in the sacrament of Holy Communion among the so-called "instituted means of grace." They also called these "works of piety." These activities nurtured and sustained growth in grace and love. They also fueled the Wesleyan movement as a powerful religious awakening that was both "evangelical" (a rediscovery of God's word of grace) and "eucharistic" (a rediscovery of the sacrament of Holy Communion as a way to experience that grace).

Eucharist held a special place among these works of piety for Charles Wesley. He viewed sacramental grace and evangelical experience as necessary counterparts of an authentically Christian spirituality. In one of his 166 Hymns on the Lord's Supper, he bears testimony to the importance of these "places" in our lives where God has promised to meet us, but bears witness to the centrality of the Lord's Table:

The prayer, the fast, the word conveys,
When mix'd with faith, Thy life to me;
In all the channels of Thy grace
I still have fellowship with Thee:
But chiefly here my soul is fed
With fulness of immortal bread.

Not only does the sacred meal enable the community to remember the past event of the cross and Christ's redemptive work for all, it celebrates the presence of the living Lord in a feast of thanksgiving and orients the community in hope toward the consummation of all things in the great heavenly banquet to come.

Charles Wesley found it impossible, however, to separate his personal experience of God and devotion to Christ from his active role as an ambassador of reconciliation and social transformation in the world. He mentors us in a spirituality that is truly incarnational. His life consisted of active social service, commitment to the poor, and advocacy for the oppressed.

Authentic Christianity, he had learned, is mission; sincere engagement in God's mission is true religion. The primary means by which he lived out this holistic understanding of Christian discipleship was through "works of mercy" that paralleled the more interior works of piety. His life reveals a missionary vision with an evangelistic core. His most profound desire

was to share the good news he had experienced in Christ with others in both word and deed.

Gift of Song

Without question, the most important legacy that Charles Wesley left behind is his amazing collection of hymns. An early convert heard the Methodists singing before she even reached the place of worship, the very sound of which, she later testified, set all her passions afloat. She encountered God through Charles's sacred songs. If Augustine was right in making the claim that to sing was to pray twice, Charles and the early Methodist people did a lot of praying! Singing praise to God transforms the singer. Sacred song shapes the people of God. Charles's hymns not only formed the minds of the people called Methodists, they also tempered the spirit of this unique community of faith. The hymns themselves were a powerful tool in the Spirit's work of revival and affected the spirituality of the Methodist people, perhaps more than any other single force beside the Bible. Charles reminds us that a singing faith is a contagious faith.

Charles Wesley continues to mentor us in our journey of faith. The vision he sets before us is holistic and dynamic. It is rooted in grace, a story worth telling, a life of mutuality shaped by acts of piety and mercy, a song to be sung. We make his prayer our own as we seek to be faithful:

O thou who camest from above
The pure celestial fire t' impart,
Kindle a flame of sacred love
On the mean altar of my heart!

There let it for thy glory burn
With inextinguishable blaze,
And trembling to its source return
In humble love, and fervent praise.

Jesu, confirm my heart's desire
To work, and speak, and think for thee;
Still let me guard the holy fire,
And still stir up thy gift in me;

Ready for all thy perfect will,
My acts of faith and love repeat,
Till death thy endless mercies seal,
And make the sacrifice complete. □

Paul Wesley Chilcote is president of The Charles Wesley Society and visiting professor of the Practice of Evangelism at Duke Divinity School. This article is drawn, in part, from his book, *Early Methodist Spirituality*, to be published in 2007 by Kingswood Books. He is also the author of *Recapturing the Wesleys' Vision: An Introduction to the Faith of John and Charles Wesley and Changed from Glory into Glory: Wesleyan Prayer for Transformation*. See page 19 to order.

