

# My Chains Fell Off

# My Heart Was Free



Timothy Macquiban

A predominant motif of the preaching and hymn-writing of Charles Wesley came from the experience of working with condemned prisoners in Oxford and London gaols, an experience which became paradigmatic for the evangelical conversionist stance of the Methodist movement. The metaphors of imprisonment and freedom were real in a society in which the general population were perceived to be languishing in spiritual stupor and captivity. This was a kairos moment to preach the gospel to all sinners calling for repentance from all those under sentence of death:

This is the time, no more delay;  
This is the Lord's appointed day.

Prisons in the eighteenth century were places of unrelieved misery, sexual promiscuity, disease, squalor and extortion, guaranteed to reduce the will to live and an ability to recover. From 1688 to 1820 the number of hanging offences rose from fifty to about two hundred. Those so convicted and executed were mainly the victims of a social system in which the pressures of poverty and incidence of crime were clearly linked. There was a scant use of imprisonment for criminal offences. The gallows was the indispensable tool for maintaining the authority of the criminal law. Such public punishment was pure theatre, to provide lessons and warnings

for other would-be transgressors of the law. Large crowds gathered to witness the scenes of impending death, to inflict further pain on the condemned or sometimes to rescue their self-declared heroes in defiance of the authorities and ruling classes who had condemned them. Here was a supreme theatrical moment for religion to intervene and demonstrate its power, a chance for criminals to repent, to blame others and to seek forgiveness, a chance for evangelists to shine, using this moment of drama to intensify the opportunities for life-saving conversion not merely to those condemned to hang but also to all convicted sinners who gathered to gape and tremble at human weakness in the face of death

The origins of the Methodist involvement in prison work and in the evangelistic ministry to the condemned lie in the decade earlier

when John and Charles were in Oxford. Their sermons and writings have a leitmotif of imprisonment and release in the *ordo salutis* (order of salvation) they framed as a distinct Arminian contribution to the Evangelical Revival of the eighteenth century. The fact that even today "And Can It Be" remains one of the best known hymns of the

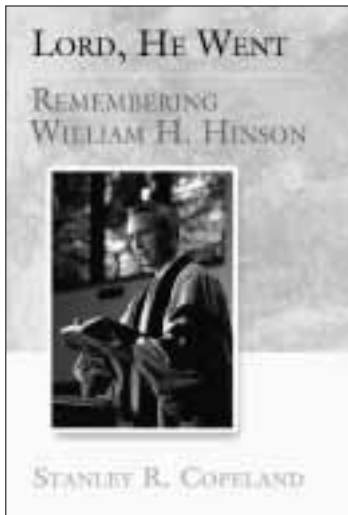
*For Wesley the dying thief or the condemned prisoner becomes a metaphor for the human condition dependent on the mercy of God for life or death.*

Wesleyan movement is indication of the way in which this personal Aldersgate experience of the Wesleys became encapsulated in this imagery which their practical ministerial work had taught them.

Prison visiting, concern for prisoners, and the experience of being in prison was central to the Wesley family. Father Samuel's

## SPECIAL FOCUS

### William Hinton— AN OUTSPOKEN LEADER



#### Lord, He Went

Remembering William H. Hinson

by Stanley R. Copeland

William H. Hinson was a pastor of Houston's First United Methodist Church and an outspoken leader in the United Methodist denomination. He was the author of several books, including *The Power of Holy Habits* and *Solid Living in a Shattered World*, (Abingdon Press). He was also one of the founders of the Confessing Movement of The United Methodist Church and was serving as its president at the time of his sudden death.

Stanley R. Copeland, senior pastor of Lovers Lane UMC in Dallas, was a close friend and associate of Hinson for many years. Here he collects both his and others' remembrances of Dr. Hinson and discusses Hinson's influence within The United Methodist Church.

UZ5-0687334039. Hardcover, \$26.00

Published by  
Abingdon Press

Cokesbury



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CIR66610006 PACP00346381-01

imprisonment and brother Samuel's support for Oglethorpe's reforms (and the establishment of the colony of Georgia) contributed to this. It was at Oxford that John and Charles first became involved in the sort of prison visiting that their own father had engaged in whilst at University. Encouraged by William Morgan in August 1730, they began to visit first the Castle Gaol (for felons) and then the Bocardo (for debtors) preaching and praying and caring for the prisoners. These activities soon earned them opprobrium and the nickname of "The Holy Club," the title of which Samuel senior urged them not to disdain nor give up the work. For Charles such visits were central to the social concerns embodied in the evangelistic works of mercy they engaged in and the pastoral context out of which was forged the theology of the hymns and sermons which flowed from their pens and hearts. No mean preacher himself, a number of his sermons have survived, preached by him and his brother John at the Castle, particularly the first post-Pentecost sermon of 1738 on the text 1 John 3:14 in August of that year. In that same year, Charles moved away from Oxford being the sole theatre of good works and evangelism to the larger cities of Bristol and London, and then beyond, fired by the Aldersgate spirit. In the years 1738 to 1742 he concentrated on the prison at Newgate, ministering to condemned prisoners. The encounters in the cells and the death scenes at Tyburn are evidence of the importance of this aspect of his ministry in these early years after conversion.

At Newgate as with other prisons, there seems to have been no shortage of offers from evangelical clergy to be allowed to administer consolation to the unhappy malefactors. The Methodists were particularly enthusiastic. The Wesleys were much encouraged by the resignation and godliness which they found in the prisons especially when they found an evangelical penitent. On one occasion Wesley prayed in the cells with a sick prisoner who was to be executed for robbing his master. It was there that the "spirit of faith" came upon him again as he preached to the malefactors and offered them salvation. The night before the executions, as they sang "Behold the Saviour of Mankind" in July 1738, Charles described it as "one of the most triumphant hours I have ever known."

And the next day at the hanging scene, he described the condemned as "all cheerful, full of comfort, peace, and triumph; assuredly persuaded Christ had died for them, and wanted to receive them into paradise." That following morning "the Black and nine other children appointed to die" were led to Tyburn. None appeared to show any terror of their approaching death. When the cart drew off "not one stirred, or struggled for life." Charles spoke a few suitable words to the crowd and returned, as he said, full of peace and confidence in the friend's happiness.

That time spent by the gallows he recorded as being "the most blessed hour of his life."

In many of the hymns, the motif of the dying thief is a powerful trigger for much of the concern for such condemned prisoners and the offer and promise of salvation for all people, irrespective of their human condition. In a hymn of 1749, the condemned malefactor asks:

Hast thou not wrought the sure belief  
I feel this moment in Thy blood?  
And am not I the dying thief?  
And art not Thou my Lord, my God?  
Forgive, and make us fit to die,  
Alas! We are not fit to live.

Richard Watson reminds us of the way in which Wesley uses strongly physical metaphors for the spiritual state. Metaphors of melting and breaking the stony hearts of the unredeemed individual are central. So for Wesley the dying thief or the condemned prisoner becomes a metaphor for the human condition dependent on the mercy of God for life or death. Christ's redeeming work on the cross demonstrates that offer of grace. We need to prepare ourselves for the inevitability of death in the hope of the promise of eternal life that relieves us from the threat of eternal death.

While the cords of sin and death bind the unbeliever, the chains of sin and death can be loosed by the offer of eternal life to those who believe in the atoning death of Christ upon the cross. Charles Wesley's birthday hymn of 1741 is a throwback to the conversion experience of 1738 which has confirmed him through the power of the Spirit as a newly liberated soul, aware of the New Birth or New Creation, who is now not bound by sin and death but a 'prisoner of hope':

The tyranny of sin is past;  
 And though the carnal mind remains,  
 My guiltless soul on thee is cast,  
 I neither hug, nor bite my chains;  
 Prisoner of hope; to thee I turn,  
 And bless the day that I was born.

Wesley uses the figure of imprisonment under the law of sin and death as a legal metaphor for the human condition with all the awareness from the reality of its social impact on the lives of his contemporaries. This pardon of sin and deliverance from the forces of evil draws on the powerful images of freedom from the dark and from the dungeon of the prison, out into the light of a new dawn with no chains, no 'iron yoke,' the 'fetters broken,' as a 'Freeman of the Lord' 'to life restor'd.'

Of all the hymns included in the 1780 *Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People called Methodists*, the most significant and universal in application in modern hymnals is "And Can It Be," in which Charles Wesley likens his pre-Aldersgate condition to the "imprisoned spirit" waiting for deliverance from the dungeon in which he lies "fast bound in sin and nature's night." The awareness of God's infinite mercy "immense and free" brings him a sense of new freedom and the reconciliation with God which he sought. But the imagery is scattered throughout the collection, drawing on the rich veins of biblical allusions of deliverance from Isaiah/Luke 4 and Paul's Letter to the Romans. The gospel of Jesus Christ sets prisoners free 'from the pit' (144.v7) which brings 'sweet release' (215.v3). All can find grace, even 'the foulest offender' (5.v1), even the 'outcasts of men... harlots and publicans and thieves' for whom Christ 'came the lost to seek and save' (29.v5)

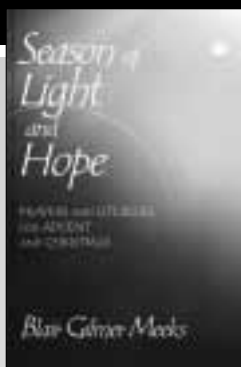
The condition of such captive souls is hellish; they are "guilty spirits oppressed," groaning souls waiting to be released (28.vv1,3). Out of the dungeon of despair, and grief, and oppression, like Daniel in the den (156.v2), tied down by the "tyrant's chain" of sin and death, the believer is led as the Israelites "out of the house of bondage brought, and freed from the th' Egyptian yoke" when "the open door of hope" is offered (284.vv2,4) Paradoxically, the believer, released from one condition of imprisonment, becomes for Christ "the sinner's friend" (138.v1) "the prisoner of thy love" (102.v3), a "prisoner of hope" (119.v3) bringing "life and liberty" (135.v2) to all "happy

sinner's" (336.v1). Because Christ for the Wesleys has been found in the experience of meeting those who were prisoners and strangers, the outcasts of society shunned by conventional Christians of their day, they hold up the work of evangelism amongst the poor and oppressed for their followers: "The prisoner release, The stranger relieve, Supply all their wants, And spend and be spent in assisting his saints" (482.v3) □



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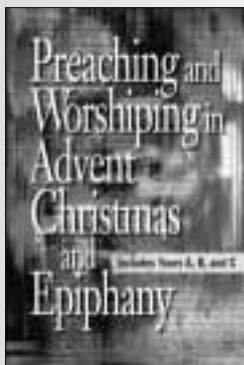
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CIR66610035 PACP00346382-01