

Charles Wesley: The Preacher Poet
By Daniel F. Flores

In the newest offering of Charles Wesley studies, Kenneth G. C. Newport, presents hitherto unpublished sermons in *The Sermons of Charles Wesley: A Critical Edition with Introduction and Notes*, Oxford Press 2001. The four hundred seven page hardback book is the first attempt to provide critical analysis to the sermons. It is truly surprising that Charles Wesley's sermons remained boxed away until Thomas R. Albin and Oliver A. Beckerlegge published their transcription of six of them. The main cause for the delay these long years was two-fold. First, most of the sermons were written in Byrom's shorthand, a long forgotten scheme of writing notes. Second, they sat uncatalogued in archival boxes at City Road Chapel, London until 1977 when they were transferred to John Rylands University Library, Manchester. It was Richard Heitzenrater, renowned for his mastery of Byrom's shorthand, who actually discovered them. This information was relayed to Albin and Beckerlegge in 1979, who began the tedious work of transcribing the manuscripts.¹ Kenneth G. C. Newport acknowledges the earlier Albin-Beckerlegge work, but his late volume includes an additional seventeen sermons, a ninety page introduction, and copious discursive footnotes. A very helpful feature of Newport's book is that he included the strikeouts from the sermon manuscripts.

¹Thomas R. Albin and Oliver A. Beckerlegge, *Charles Wesley's Earliest Evangelical Sermons: Six Shorthand Manuscript Sermons now for the first time Transcribed from the Original*, (Ilford, England: Published by the Wesley Historical Society, 1987), 3.

The hymns and sermons of Charles reveal that he was as much *homo unius libri* as brother John. John Wesley wrote his Bible based sermons, freely sourcing the pagan and Christian classics and the church fathers. It was the latter source, a clear obsession with primitive Christianity, that caused so much confusion and resentment against him in Georgia. According to John Wesley, one settler determined never to hear him preach again.

I like nothing you do. All your sermons are satires upon particular persons, therefore I will never hear you more; and all the people are of my mind; for we won't hear ourselves abused. Besides, they say, they are Protestants. But as for you, they cannot tell what religion you are of. They never heard of such a religion before.²

Charles was better at befriending the Georgians. His erstwhile chaplaincy to Oglethorpe offered many opportunities to read prayers, celebrate sacraments, and preach. Although Charles was at first reluctant to take Holy Orders, his attitude changed once he arrived at St. Simon's Island, Georgia.

No sooner did I enter upon my ministry than God gave me, like Saul, another heart. So true is that [remark] of Bishop Hall: "The calling of God never leaves a man unchanged; neither did God ever employ any one in His service whom He did not enable to the work He set him; especially those whom He raises up to the supply of His place, and the representation of Himself."³

² Unnamed Georgia settler quoted by John Wesley, Journal, June 22, 1736, *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. I. 14 volumes, edited by Thomas Jackson, reprinted from third edition 1872. (Baker Books: Grand Rapids, 1996), 34.

³ Charles Wesley, *The Journal of the Rev. Charles Wesley, M.A.*, March 9, 1736. Edited by John Telford., 1909. New Edition by George Van Hooser. (Taylors, South Carolina: Methodist Reprint Society, 1977), 7.

So it was that Charles accepted his role as preacher of the Gospel. Unlike his fastidious brother, there were few complaints against him for his preaching. He did leave Georgia amidst slanderous accusations of adultery which set Governor Oglethorpe against him. Those charges were dismissed upon the admission of perjury by the accusers. Whatever one concludes about the experience in America, Charles was deeply moved by the plight of African slaves which he became privy to on the homeward journey. Recounting a number of horrors inflicted on slaves, he concluded:

These horrid cruelties are the less to be wondered at, because the government itself, in effect, countenances and allows them to kill their slaves, by the ridiculous penalty appointed for it, of about seven pounds sterling, half of which is usually saved by the criminals informing against himself. This I can look upon as no other than a public act to indemnify murder.⁴

Though the sweet hymns of Charles Wesley are dear to Wesleyan sentiment, he is not often thought of in terms of his preaching. Yet, he traveled as an itinerant preacher from the beginning of the evangelical revival in 1738, but less during his more. John thought Charles the better preacher saying to him: "In strong pointed sentences you beat me."⁵ Charles' only curacy was at St. Mary's Parish, Islington, 1739. This was not a happy time for Charles nor for the parish. However, he gained a status as the beloved pastor of the New Room in the Horsefair, Bristol from c.1753 to 1771. During that same period, Charles traveled frequently to the Foundry Chapel in London. It was

⁴ Charles Wesley, *Charles Wesley's Journal*, August 2, 1736, 69.

⁵ Charles Wesley Flint, *Charles Wesley and His Colleagues*, (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Office, c. 1958), 146.

there and later also at City Road Chapel in London that he lived out his latter days as pastor.⁶ Frederick E. Maser believes that his pastoral gifts were remarkable.

It is significant that when Charles died, John said of him "His least praise was his talent for poetry." John was probably thinking of Charles' s work as preacher and pastor, the latter activity which caused him to be greatly loved by the Methodists of both Bristol and London.⁷

Charles Wesley' s sermons reflect an evangelical commitment to preach to slaves and prisoners and prostitutes and other "sinners." It should be noted that although he confessed an evangelical "conversion" on May 21, 1738, Charles did not abandon his identity as an Anglican priest. Newport notes: "Charles was and remained first and foremost a clergyman of the Church of England whose loyalty to the doctrines, creeds, and traditions of the ecclesiastical body never wavered."⁸ He persisted in relying on the standard theological sources for Anglicans: the Bible, the Homilies, and the Book of Common Prayer. However, he also borrowed from Greek and Latin Christian authors such as Justin Martyr, St. Hilary, St. Basil, and St. Ambrose as well as the seventeenth century philosopher John Norris.⁹

6 Ibid, 158–159.

7 Frederick E. Maser, "Pastoral Values in the Works of Charles Wesley," *Proceedings of the Charles Wesley Society*, Vol. 5 1998. Edited by S T Kimbrough, Jr., (Madison, New Jersey: The Charles Wesley Society, 2001), 119.

8 Kenneth G. C. Newport, *The Sermons of Charles Wesley: A Critical Edition with Introduction and Notes*, (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2001), 68.

9 Ibid, 68.

Frank Baker notes that both Wesleys were keen to “broadcast the good news of personal salvation from sin through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, the normality of a personal assurance of that saving faith, and the possibility of the crowning spiritual experience of what was variously called holiness, Christian perfection, or perfect love.”¹⁰ Within both sermons and hymns the Wesleyan doctrine of perfection appears as a recurring theme. Newport says that “Charles never lost this insistence that the Christian must strive to be perfect or that it is the duty of the believer to seek out and do God=s will.”¹¹ John R. Tyson describes perfection in a very helpful, though brief statement. “Sinlessness through perfect love is the teleological goal behind the gospel of redemption, and as such, it is as apt a summation of Christianity as the Johannine mark of a Christian *agape*.” Tyson finds no exact definition of “perfection” within the corpus of the hymns. However, he notes that as early as 1740, Charles Wesley wrote in his journal that perfection is “utter dominion over sin, constant peace, and love and joy in the Holy Ghost; the full assurance of faith, righteousness, and true holiness.”¹²

The doctrine of perfection has both an inward and an outward element. David Lyle Jeffrey argues that this makes the doctrine very complex. This is reflected most clearly in the hymns, but also appears in the sermons of both John and Charles Wesley.

10 Frank Baker, *Charles Wesley's Verse: An Introduction*, Second Edition, (London: Epworth Press, 1964, 1988), 16.

11 Newport, 59.

12 John R. Tyson, *Charles Wesley on Sanctification*, (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press, 1986), 177.

In the hymns of Charles B always regarded by the Wesleys as an intrinsic part of their teaching and evangelizing B these elements of their [mysticism] spirituality are faithfully reflected. It is thus that the gospel preached by [John] Wesley is a complex thing *spiritually*. His call is to an active life, to evangelize and to reform society, yet he wants all those who take up the challenge to deepen themselves, acquiring the resources of a meditative inwardness; he warns against the mystics, yet highly values their experience. He deplores an excessive pretense to the "rule of reason" in his culture, yet is himself methodistic and rationalistic in his thought.¹³

Charles preached his "plain style" sermons effortlessly in the open air as he did in the pulpit.¹⁴ Open air preaching originated amongst Wesleyans first of necessity of venue. Some minor influence upon this art came from the Quakers and Scottish sacramental seasons. The early Wesleyans were often turned away from the Church of England pulpits. This is not a surprising reaction against lay preachers, but the Wesleys and Whitefield were ordained Anglican priests.¹⁵ There is the famous incident when John Wesley preached outdoors after being put out of his father's church, St. Andrew's at Epworth. A well distributed imaginative engraving by George Washington Brownlow illustrates John standing on his father's tombstone outside the church.¹⁶ Lesser known is the incident in which Charles Wesley first preached open air style at Thaxted at the

13 David Lyle Jeffrey, ed. *English Spirituality in the Age of Wesley*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 31.

14 Newport, 43.

15 Maldwyn Edwards, "John Wesley," *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain*, Vol. I, general editors Rupert Davies and Gordon Rupp, (London: Epworth Press, 1965), 53.

16 John Pudney, *John Wesley and His World*, (London: Thames and Hudson, [1978]), 82.

invitation of some Quakers.¹⁷ Shortly afterwards, like his brother before him, Charles preached from a tombstone when put out of his Islington parish.¹⁸ This preaching in churchyard he did several times. Whitefield's fame as a field preacher was immortalized for his preaching to the poor colliers at Hanham Mount in Kingswood. The description of the success of open air preaching is no less dramatic. "The first discovery of their being affected was to see the white gutters made by their tears, which plentifully fell down their black cheeks as they came out of their coal pits."¹⁹ John Wesley, moved and convinced by Whitefield's outdoor preaching manner, thereafter "submitted to be more vile" by following suit.

I could scarce reconcile myself at first to this strange way of preaching in the fields, of which he [Whitefield] set me an example on Sunday: having been all my life (till very lately) so tenacious of every point relating to decency and order, that I should have thought the saving of souls almost a sin, if it had not been done in a church.²⁰

The three evangelists regularly preached at Hanham Mount and the "brickyards" and the "bowling green" in Bristol. Thus, they made open air preaching a normal part of

17 Thomas Jackson, *The Life of the Rev. Charles Wesley, M.A.: Some time student of the Christ--Church, Oxford: Comprising a review of his poetry; Sketches of the rise and progress of Methodism; with Notices of contemporary events and characters*, (New York: Published by G. Lane & P. P. Sandford, for the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1842), 156.

18 Ibid, 156.

19 George Eayrs, *Wesley and Kingswood and Its Free Churches*, (Bristol: J. W. Arrowsmith, Ltd., 1911), 46.

20 John Wesley, Journal, March 29, 1739, Vol. I, 185.

Wesleyan ministry.²¹ This innovation was so strange that when Whitefield carried the method of open air preaching to America he even drew the attention of Benjamin Franklin.²²

The early Wesleyans were also influenced by the Scottish "sacramental seasons," also called "communion seasons" or "holy fairs."²³ During the Scottish Reformation, the Ulster-Scots, or Scotch-Irish, developed an open air service which was one of the ancestors of the camp meeting. These religious gatherings were held in outlying areas to meet the sacramental needs of rural folk. They were marked by periods of fasting and reflection. This would continue for a matter of days before culminating in celebration of the Lord's Supper. George Whitefield preached to over thirty-thousand people at the famed "Cambuslang Wark" in 1742.²⁴ Furthermore, he made at least fourteen trips to Scotland during his career.²⁵ There, he experienced the "sacramental seasons" in person.

Last Lord's day, I preached in the morning, in the park at Edinburgh, to a great multitude. Afterwards, I attended, and partook of the holy sacrament, and served

21 Gordon S. Wakefield, *The Spiritual Life in the Methodist Tradition 1791--1945*, (London: Epworth Press, 1966), 80--81.

22 Harry S. Stout, *The Divine Dramatist; George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 220.

23 Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Holy Fairs: Scottish Communion and American Revivals in the Early Modern Period*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 3.

24 J. H. S. Burleigh, *A Church History of Scotland*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 292, 293.

25 *Ibid*, 293.

four tables. In the afternoon, I preached in the churchyard, to a far greater number. Such a passover, I never saw before.²⁶

Although John Wesley made as many as twenty-two visits to Scotland, he was not impressed by the Scottish form of communion, saying: "How much more simple, as well as more solemn, is the service of the Church of England."²⁷ Ergo, Wesley's Anglican preference prevented him from adopting the Scottish service for his Wesleyan preachers. Yet, he seemed at ease with their manners in field services. Charles Wesley, on the other hand, was less affected by the Scottish customs. He preferred to take his preaching to Wales and Ireland.

Charles Wesley's sermons were not always long, but sometimes rather short compared to evangelical sermons of his contemporaries. The example below is rather short, but not atypical of Charles' habit. He was known to add material extempore depending on the feedback of his audience. As stated earlier, they did display a high reliance on Holy Scripture, and the Homilies, and the *Book of Common Prayer*. His sermons often began with the prayer *In Nomine Iesu* or *In Nomine Dei*. They were written in an evangelistic style which became typical of the early sermons written post his 1738 awakening experience. He often preached in an area known as the Brickyard in Bristol, quite near the Temple Church. It was at Temple Church that Wesley and the Kingswood colliers were once repelled from the Sacrament. His audience usually included people of low estate mingled with the curious ruling class. Most of them could

26 George Whitefield to Mr. John Cennick, Glasgow, June 16, 1742, *George Whitefield's Letters, 1734 to 1742*, (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1771, reprint 1976), 513.

27 Burleigh, 294.

have just as well been preached in a longer version at St. Mary' s Parish, Islington in 1739. However, his preaching usually caused a row with the more affluent parishioners.

Charles Wesley' s work with the prostitutes and prisoners was hard enough for the Islington parishioners to bear. They could not endure his evangelistic preaching. "At Islington in the vestry, the churchwardens demanded my license. I wrote down my name; preached with increase of power, on the woman taken in adultery. None went out. I gave the cup."²⁸ Charles felt it necessary to preach evangelical message raw and uncut. He was not without ability to deliver smooth and polished sermons. However, the strong language in this type of sermon had a negative effect on the sensitivities of respectable folk. It is little wonder that the Islington parishioners called for his expulsion. The basis for most of his sermons, though solidly based on Holy Scripture and the Homilies, were guided by this stanza of the famous conversion hymn. What utter irony that he too would have experienced ostracization from his own parish.

Outcasts of men, to you I call,
Harlots, and publicans, and thieves!
He spreads His arms to embrace you all;
Sinners alone His grace receives:
No need of Him the righteous have;
He came the lost to seek and save.

²⁸ Charles Wesley, *Journal*, Sunday April 15, 1739.

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