



Charles Wesley

Charles Wesley, priest, hymn writer and the poet of Methodism

“I felt my Lord’s atoning blood / Close to my soul applied / Me, me he loved, the Son of God, / For me, for me, he died!”

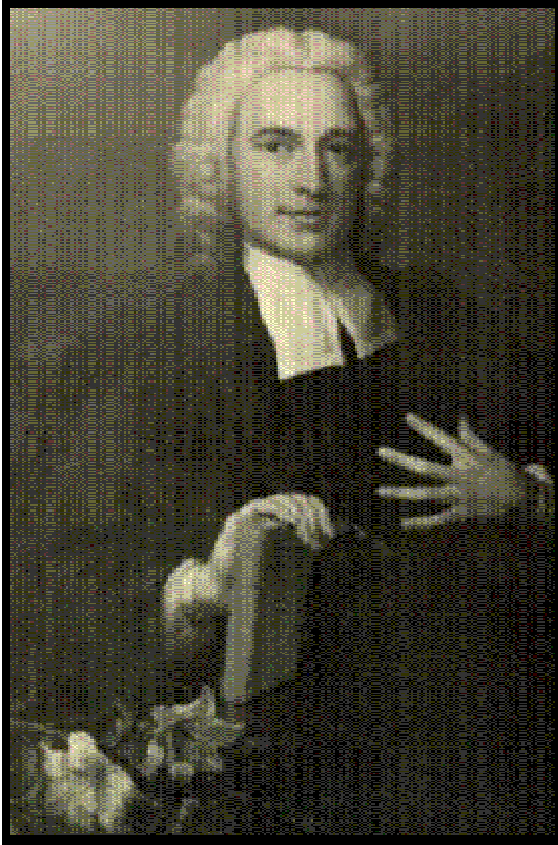
Under the shadow of his brothers Samuel and John during his early life, Charles Wesley developed into a great preacher, England’s greatest hymn writer and one of the three founding fathers of the movement in Christianity called Methodism.

Born on December 18th 1707, the third son of Susanna and Samuel Wesley, Rector of Epworth in Lincolnshire, Charles Wesley was educated at home by his mother and then at Westminster School, London. His brother Samuel had also been educated there and was now a teacher. Charles became a King’s Scholar and then head boy.

After Westminster he entered Christ Church, Oxford in 1726, just after his brother John had left to become a fellow of Lincoln College. Here after, on his own admission, wasting his first year, he began to take his faith seriously and gathered around him a club variously ridiculed as “The Holy Club” and the “Methodists”, because they stood out from other students at the university.

His elder brother John subsequently returned to Oxford, after assisting his father at Epworth, and took over leadership of the Holy Club. He developed its social work, encouraging members to visit the poor and those in prison. John and Charles were joined in the leadership of the group by George Whitefield. These three were to be the key people in the movement called Methodism.

Rev Charles Wesley



After graduation Charles was persuaded to join John in travelling to North America for the purpose of converting native North Americans. Charles secured an appointment as secretary to James Oglethorpe who had been appointed governor of the new colony of Georgia. Reluctantly Charles agreed to be ordained priest in order that he could assist John in his work in the colony.

Life in the colony was a great shock, he was homesick, separated from his brother, ill, disillusioned and unable to cope with the people he encountered there. Declaring, "life is bitterness to me" he returned to England fourteen months after leaving it.

1707 - 1788

John returned a year later having had no more success in the colony. Both suffered a period of uncertainty in their faith. They believed they were saved, that is put into a right relationship with God but, as Charles explained, this was "Because I have used my best endeavours to serve God". Neither was convinced that this was enough nor did they think they deserved it.

Under the influence of the Moravian Peter Bohler and, later, John Bray their views were challenged. In May 1738 the brothers were staying in the City of London, when Charles found himself at peace with God. Two evenings later his brother John was also convinced that he could live in a relationship with God despite not deserving it or ever being able to do enough to earn it.

From then on Charles, with John, was drawn into the movement of spiritual awakening that was beginning in England and Wales in which George Whitefield was already active. He ministered to prisoners in Newgate and the Marshalsea. Like his brother he rode the country preaching, often in the open air. It is often forgotten that Charles was regarded as a finer preacher than his brother.

However Charles Wesley is chiefly remembered for his hymn writing and poetry. His output was enormous, five thousand at least, and the quality is enduring; they continue to form the bedrock of many hymnals. From 1739 he published a number of collections including Hymns for the Nativity of our Lord (1744), Short Hymns on Select Passages of Holy Scripture (1762), and Hymns on the Lords Supper, which express his high doctrine of the sacrament. His work was also included in the hymn books published by his brother.

In 1749 Charles married Sarah Gwynne. They lived in Bristol until 1771 when they moved to Marylebone in London. His regular itinerant ministry ended in 1756. The marriage was described as one of the happiest Christian marriages of all time. Their children were all talented, Charles junior and Samuel as musicians. Their grandson, Samuel Sebastian, is renowned as a composer and organist.

Charles remained very committed to the Church of England. He always sought the agreement of the incumbent to preach in the parish church before resorting to the open air and was critical of anything that might suggest separation of those committed to the Methodist movement from the established church. His brother's decision in 1784 to ordain ministers for North America and to consecrate Dr Thomas Coke as superintendent deeply distressed him.