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Charles A. Green
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The Charles Wesley Society

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Perfection Revisited: Charles Wesley's Theology of "Gospel-Poverty" and "Perfect Poverty"*

Synopsis

S T Kimbrough, Jr.

This article addresses a group of texts by Charles Wesley, which enhance his perspectives on life and ministry, both theologically and historically, and which remained unpublished until 1990, when they appeared in volume 2 of *The Unpublished Poetry of Charles Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon/Kingswood) edited by S T Kimbrough, Jr., and Oliver A. Beckerlegge. It suggests that there are perhaps two primary reasons why they may not have found their way into standard Wesleyan hymnic repertory: (1) generally they may not have been intended for singing, and (2) they are often filled with irony and sarcasm, which are not common literary aspects of Christian hymns.

These texts reveal Wesley's understanding of the *character and nature of the poor*, who bear the Spirit's character and are marked by distinguished grace.

The poor in every age and place
thou dost, O God, approve
to mark with thy distinguished grace,
to enrich with faith and love.

The poor are also the body of Christ.

Members of his Church we know
the poor his body are:
all the goods he had below,
they should his garments share.

The poor fulfill a vicarious role as Christ's representatives on earth.

O might I thus through life endure,
and serve my Saviour in the poor.

If one serves Christ in the poor, *the community of faith is responsible for its response to the poor*. The dimensions of this response are reflected in these poems. (1) Proclaim the gospel to the poor. (2) Gather in the poor, particularly to the feast of the Lord. (3) To neglect the poor is to kill them.

The poems also addressed the *nature of the community of faith and an ethic of sharing*. (1) Stewardship of resources is mandatory, and private ownership is indeed questionable.

The difference base of *thine* and *mine*
was lost in charity divine.

*This is a summary of the paper delivered by S T Kimbrough, Jr., on the occasion of the Tenth Anniversary of the founding of The Charles Wesley Society, at its annual meeting on October 16, 1999, in Dallas, TX.

The stewardship hymn “Which of the Christians now / would their possessions sell” this author has published previously (in *Songs for the Poor: Singer’s Edition* [New York: GBGMusik, 1997]) and it is indeed worthy of discovery by the church as perhaps the only surviving Wesley stewardship hymn.

(2) Wesley makes very clear in these poems that *the giving of alms, however, cannot buy grace.*

Alms cannot alone, we know,
cannot grace from God procure.

Finally, these texts reveal *an ultimate theological imperative and an ultimate social principle* for the faith community. The imperative is embodied in a concept found in one of these Charles Wesley texts. It is *gospel-poverty*, which means daring to give up all to supply the needs of others.

A primitive example rare
| of *gospel-poverty*,
to feed the flock his only care,
and like his Lord to be.

Charles Wesley relates this imperative to perfection in another of the poems when he speaks of going on to *perfect poverty* in serving the poor. Clearly, divesting oneself of earthly goods moves one closer to perfection.

The ultimate social principle expressed in these Wesley texts is “*Help us to make the poor our friends,*” for the poor are “Jesus’ bosom friends.”

The poor as Jesus’ bosom friends,
the poor he makes his latest care,
to all his followers commends,
and wills us on our hands to bear;
the poor our dearest care we make,
and love them for our Savior’s sake.

A word of caution is offered at the conclusion of the article, namely, the Wesleys were also deeply concerned with ministry with and among the well-to-do, as their associations with aristocracy and some of their publications, poetry, and journals indicate.

Charles Wesley’s telescopic way of focusing the character and nature of the poor, the vicarious role of the poor in the world, the nature of the community of believers and its mutual sharing of resources, and particularly the powerful concepts of “gospel-poverty” and “perfect poverty” can do much to help individual Christians and the church as a whole in the new millennium to discover a viable life with the poor and hence with Jesus Christ, the Savior. In fact, Charles Wesley will help all Christians to learn that to seek perfection without self-divestment and life with and among the poor may indeed be futile. Yes, without them life with Christ and the way toward perfection may not be possible.