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Imagination and Struggle
Charles Wesley and Christian Practices
(1739–1749)

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Singularity in Early Methodism

Patrick A. Eby

Late in his life Charles reflected on his time at Oxford in a letter to Dr. Chandler. He described his time as follows.

My first year at College I lost in diversions. The next I set myself to study. Diligence led me into serious thinking. I went to the weekly sacrament, and persuaded two or three young scholars to accompany me, and to observe the method of study prescribed by the statutes of the University. This gained me the harmless nickname of Methodist.¹

This reflection indicates that even late in his life Charles looked at his time in Oxford as the time when he became more serious in his Christian walk. Between his first and second year he had gone from diversions to diligence. The documents from this time show what this shift involved. His new diligence included a striving for the one thing needful, of being restored in the image of God. This included having a singleness of mind and being totally devoted to loving God, which is referred to in this study as “singularity.” Some of the activities in which the Oxford Methodists participated included, but were not limited to, the following: regularly partaking of the sacrament (at least once a week), fasting on Wednesday and Friday (the stationary fasts of the Church), rising early (by six o’clock according to some of Charles’s correspondence) and caring for the poor. In this article I will address the role singularity played in early Methodist theology. I will also examine the struggle the Oxford Methodists endured not only to define the limits and practices of singularity, but also their struggle in defending these principles in the face of many critics.

One of the most important studies of Oxford Methodism is Richard Heitzenrater’s dissertation, “John Wesley and the Oxford Methodists, 1725–35.”² In his dissertation, Heitzenrater argued that singularity and the way Oxford Methodists put it “into practice, is what set the Methodists apart, especially in the Oxford setting.”³ The group was made up of

those persons were who had willingly associated themselves with others who were also seeking, in Wesley’s own words, “a right state of soul, a mind and spirit renewed after the image of him that created it.” Having reached this goal is not the criterion. The means used in striving for this goal are not in themselves the measure. Rather the Methodists were those who were striving for that “one thing needful,” and to that end had a “single intention” in life—“to please God” by improving “in Holiness, in the Love of God and thy Neighbor.”⁴

¹ John R. Tyson, ed. *Charles Wesley—a Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 59. “Letter to Dr. Chandler.”

² Richard P. Heitzenrater, “John Wesley and the Oxford Methodists, 1725–35” (Ph. D., Duke University, 1972).

³ *Ibid.*, p. 275.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 44–45.

The practices and definition of singularity was not static; instead as new members joined, the practices of the group changed. Not only that, it seems the application of these practices was more consistent as the group developed. For instance, in noting John's rather relaxed pace on a return to Oxford in June of 1729, Heitzenrater observed, "his life did not yet exhibit the intensity or singularity of purpose which was to motivate the hustle and bustle of later years."⁵ Commenting on his life and schedule five years later in 1734, Heitzenrater stated, "the tone of [John] Wesley's own life continued to grow more intense as the singular demands of a holy life were increasingly put into practice."⁶

When Charles began to be more serious in 1729, his brother Samuel and his family noted the change. Charles told his brother John, "They wonder here I'm so strangely dull (as indeed mirth and I have shook hands and parted) and at ye same time pay ye compliment of saying I grow extremely like you"⁷

The dedication to this type of lifestyle did not seem to have been easy for Charles. In a letter to his father on June 11, 1731, Charles recounted how difficult it was to convince his students of the necessity of being singular. Charles shared how one of his students—one whom people feared Charles would make into an Enthusiast—now received communion only three times a year, and had also given up his prayers and studying.⁸ The struggle to practice and promote singularity was not limited to the students. Both Charles and the other members of Oxford Methodism faced challenges from at least one of the leaders of their college. Dr. Terry, who was a canon of Christ Church,

was rumored to be prepared along with the censors to "blow up the Godly Club," as they were called by some. The complaints directed at John Wesley in particular, focused on the impression that he was singular, whimsical, and formal.⁹

At about the same time these rumors were being spread, Charles may have indicated to John that he doubted the necessity of constant communion. Maybe the external attacks were wearing on Charles. Heitzenrater contended that,

When Charles himself began wavering on the question of the Sacrament during the next month, it is likely that the opinion of Clayton was of some weight and value in helping John Wesley "recover" his brother to their former view.¹⁰

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 83, 85.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 232.

⁷ Charles Wesley, Letter to John Wesley ([May 17, 1729]), Rev. G. Parkinson, "Copy of a Letter from Charles to John Wesley," *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* ii, no. 3 (1899):223.

⁸ Charles Wesley, Letter to Samuel Wesley, Sr. (June 11, 1731), ed. Frank Baker, *Charles Wesley: As Revealed by His Letters*, rev. ed., The Wesley Historical Society Lectures (Madison, New Jersey: Charles Wesley Society, 1995), p. 17.

⁹ Heitzenrater, p. 140. Cf. John Wesley, Letter to Richard Morgan, Sr. (Oct. [19], 1732), *Letters I*, ed. Frank Baker, vol. 25 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980), pp. 341–42.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 165. This conclusion is drawn from the July 19, 1732 diary entry of John Wesley, "Charles came, talk of the Sacrament, recovered him. V.F."

Later that year several accusations were outlined in a letter published in *Fog's Weekly Journal*.¹¹ The main charges against Oxford Methodism included what Heitzenrater labeled the Pietist principle, "that no Action whatever is indifferent is the chief Hinge on which their whole Scheme of Religion turns."¹² It also charged the Methodists with believing "Religion was design'd to contradict Nature." This was expanded with the charge that if they had the medical knowledge to make the incision they would follow Origen's pattern of ridding themselves of earthly desires so they could focus on the spiritual. The writer even suggested the name of a doctor they could use if they wished to rid themselves of their sexual desire.¹³

A response to this letter was published in February 1733. Although someone outside of Oxford Methodism wrote the letter, John's approval of the letter in his diary seems to indicate that it was an acceptable explanation of Oxford Methodism at that time.¹⁴ The writer described the letter as a response to the questions of a friend, who after reading the letter in *Fog's Weekly Journal*, wanted to know more about this seemingly dangerous group.¹⁵ One of the ways he gathered information was to talk to an unidentified member of the group. He asked this member if he would inform him

of their Motives and Views, and their particular Inducements to a Singularity of Behaviour and Life, which had subjected them to the Censures of so many Persons of Learning and Capacity.¹⁶

This request indicates not the only singular focus of the group, but also that this focus was the source of much of the opposition they faced. After having what the writer described as a good conversation with the member of the group, he threw "his Way two or three Objections to the Method they were in, in respect to the *Singularity* of the Thing . . ."¹⁷ In the end the author of the letter admitted their ideas had been given more consideration than their opponents had suspected. For instance, in addition to their own counsel, they had sought the counsel of "a Clergyman as eminent for Wisdom and Integrity, as most private Men in the Three Kingdoms."¹⁸ This advisor was Samuel Wesley, Sr.¹⁹ Before turning to the

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 188–89. According to Richard Heitzenrater, this "letter was published in *Fog's Weekly Journal*, Saturday, December 9, 1732, pp. 1, 2. It is headed, "To the Author of *Fog's Journal*."

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 189.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 189–90.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

¹⁵ *The Oxford Methodists Being Some Account of a Society of Young Gentlemen in That City, So Denominated; . . . In a Letter from a Gentleman near Oxford, to His Friend at London*, (London: printed for J. Roberts, 1733), pp. 1–2; henceforth cited as *Letter from a Gentleman*.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁹ I reached this conclusion by observing the transcript of a letter in the *Letter from a Gentleman*. On page 5 is the same as a letter from Samuel Wesley, Sr., to John on September 28, 1730, as found in Clarke, *Memoirs of the Wesley Family*, 249–50.

main reason for the letter, which was a defense of the Oxford Methodist against accusations found in the letter in *Fog's Weekly Journal*—a defense which mainly recounted the ascetic nature of the group and questioned the crime in following the rules of Primitive Christianity—the writer gave his own sense of what the group was all about. He felt Oxford Methodists were labeled singular for three main habits. First, they cared for the sick, the poor, and the prisoner. Second, they practiced constant communion. Third, they observed the fasts of the Church.²⁰ The importance of their care for the poor was highlighted by a set of questions the writer received from his inside source. These questions were divided into four groups. The first group included five questions, which focused on imitating God in doing good deeds to others. In one question the actions and the motivation of doing good to the poor was as follows; is it not our duty “. . . always to remember, that He did more for us, than we can do for Him, who assures us, Inasmuch as ye have done it to one of the least of these my Brethren, ye have done it unto Me?”²¹ Specifically this meant that according to their ability they had “Fed the Hungry, Cloathed the Naked, [and] Visited those that are Sick, and in Prison.”²² The second group of questions dealt with their responsibility to do good to their acquaintances by trying to convince them of their understanding of Christianity. A single word sums up their evaluation of the message they were sharing with their acquaintances: necessary. The third group asked more specific questions in how they were to care for the “hungry, naked, or sick.” The final group dealt with caring for those who are in prison.²³

The public struggle, not only with the leaders of the college, but also in the press, may partially explain why Charles informed his brother Samuel of a University statute supporting him in his position. Charles wrote, “Since my last I met with a remarkable clause in our Statutes, which not only justifies, but I think requires, my pressing the duty of fasting on my pupils.”²⁴

In a letter to his father Samuel in June 1733, John shared the struggle he was experiencing during this time. One of the major things that bothered him was the growing reluctance of two of his “young gentlemen” to see the Wednesday fast as necessary and of their diminishing commitment to singularity. He wrote,

One of my young gentlemen told me at my return that he was more and more afraid of singularity; another that he had read an excellent piece of Mr. Locke's, which had convinced him of the mischief of regarding authority. Both of them agreed that the observing of Wednesday as a fast was an unnecessary singularity.²⁵

²⁰ *Letter from a Gentleman*, pp. 8–9.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 16–17.

²⁴ Charles Wesley, Letter to Samuel Wesley, Jr. (February 5, 1732/33), Baker, p. 17.

²⁵ John Wesley, Letter to Samuel Wesley, Sr. (June 13, 1733), *Letters I*, ed. Frank Baker, *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980), 25:350.

His disappointment was not limited to these two students. Later in the letter he noted that the number of communicants at St. Mary's had shrunk from twenty-seven to five. All the controversy seemed to make it more difficult to get people to accept his definition of singularity and the practices he associated with it. He shared with his father what he perceived were the costs of his unpopular beliefs; the "consequences of my singularity were reducible to three: diminution of fortune, loss of friends, and of reputation."²⁶

The complaints John received were not only from his students, there was at least one parent who confronted John. Richard Morgan, whose older son had died after being a part of the Oxford Methodists, gave John instructions on how to care for his younger son when he sent him to be a student. In the midst of these instructions he showed his displeasure with Oxford Methodism's emphasis on singularity by noting it was dangerous "for young people to pretend to be more pure and holy than the rest of mankind."²⁷

Although this was a difficult period, with a growing disaffection for Oxford Methodism in general, it was also the year when George Whitefield joined the group. Whitefield was familiar with Oxford Methodism before he arrived as a student. He was not only aware of them; he defended them when he heard people criticizing them. After being introduced to the group by Charles Wesley, Whitefield noted he was practicing the disciplines that had made the group so unpopular. He wrote,

I now began, like them, to live by rule, and to pick up the very fragments of my time, that not a moment of it might be lost. Whether I ate or drank, or whatsoever I did, I endeavoured to do all to the glory of God. Like them, having no weekly sacrament, although the Rubric required it, at our own college, I received every Sunday at Christ Church. I joined them in keeping the stations by fasting Wednesdays and Fridays [and left no means unused, which I thought would lead me nearer to Jesus Christ.]²⁸

Whitefield noted his involvement in other activities common to Oxford Methodism at the time, including "Regular retirement," visiting the sick and poor, and studying books dealing with the "heart of religion."²⁹ One such book was Henry Scougal's *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*.³⁰ This was one of the first books Charles recommended to George Whitefield. Whitefield noted the affect this book had on his life.

²⁶ John Wesley, Letter to Samuel Wesley, Sr. (June 13, 1733), *Letters I in Works*, 25:351.

²⁷ Richard Morgan, Sr., Letter to John Wesley, November 22, 1733. *Letters I in Works*, 25:358. cf. Heitzenrater, p. 235.

²⁸ George Whitefield, *George Whitefield's Journals* ([Edinburgh]: Banner of Truth Trust, 1960), p. 47.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 47–48.

³⁰ For a fuller description of this relationship see, D. Butler, *Henry Scougal and the Oxford Methodists: Or, the Influence of a Religious Teacher of the Scottish Church* (Edinburgh: W. Blackwood and Sons, 1899).

In a short time he [Charles Wesley] let me have another book entitled, 'The Life of God in the Soul of Man;' (and, though I had fasted, watched, and prayed, and received the sacrament so long, yet I never knew what true religion was, till God sent me that excellent treatise by the hands of my never-to-be-forgotten friend).³¹

This book also seemed to be fairly important to Charles Wesley. Not only did he recommend it to Whitefield, he also read this book with his sister Hetty,³² and quoted from it in a letter to James Hutton.

Charles Wesley's emphasis on being restored in the image of God is very similar to Scougal's definition of "true religion." Scougal defined "true religion" as a "Union of the Soul with God, a real participation of the Divine Nature, the very Image of God drawn upon the Soul, or in the Apostle's phrase, *it is Christ formed within us.*"³³ He focused on five characteristics of the Divine Life. "The root of the Divine Life is Faith, the chief branches are Love to God, Charity to Man, Purity, and Humility."³⁴ Of primary importance for this study is Scougal's definition of purity. Scougal defined purity as the ability to

despise and abstain from all pleasures and delights of sense or fancy which are sinful in themselves, or tend to extinguish or lessen our relish of more divine and intellectual pleasures; which doth also infer a resoluteness to undergo all those hardships he may meet with in the performance of his duty.³⁵

In other words purity involved denying oneself of all pleasures that either were sinful in themselves, or even more important for understanding the singleness of Oxford Methodism, avoiding those pleasures which diminished love for God or the ability to endure the hardships necessary to show love to the neighbor. Scougal further clarified his definition of purity saying it "consists in a neglect of worldly enjoyments and accommodations, and a resolute enduring of all such troubles as we meet with in the doing of our duty."³⁶ He illustrated this type of purity by looking at the life of Jesus, who although he did not deny legal pleasures for others, like marriage or wine, chose to live a life without those pleasures. According to Scougal, Jesus refusal to enjoy the blessings of this life should be the example Christians follow. It is this understanding of the Scriptures and of the life of Christ, which seemed to be accepted by Oxford Methodism: Jesus' example was to be followed exactly, even his example of celibacy.

³¹ Whitefield, p. 17.

³² Charles Wesley, Tuesday, September 13, 1737, S T Kimbrough, Jr., and Kenneth G. C. Newport, eds., *The Manuscript Journal of the Rev. Charles Wesley, M.A.*, 2 vols., (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2008), 1:88.

³³ Henry Scougal, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man or, the Nature and Excellency of the Christian Religion*. . . . With a Preface. By Gilbert Burnet (London: printed for Thomas Bever, 1702), p. 4.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

Although the public fervor may have diminished by 1734, those closest to John Wesley continued to question the necessity of singularity. During this time he struggled to convince John Robson of its importance. He received advice from John Clayton on how to deal with Robson's reluctance to embrace singularity, showing not only the importance of singularity to the group, but also reminding John of the importance they should place on sharing their understanding of the Christian life, even with students who had doubts or difficulties like John Robson.³⁷ Clayton wrote,

I can see no other way of giving them a deep sense that they have but one business to do in life than to be constantly aiming at the *unum necessarium*; and speaking of it not a *little now and then*, but *frequently and fervently*. . . . And as to fasting, communicating, etc., I must say this, that I do not know one instance of a person that took up the practice of them without being first moved thereto by the advice and exhortations of his friend.³⁸

During this time, even his father Samuel, who was generally supportive of John's singularity, questioned his application of it. He took exception to John's singularity in a letter in which he pleaded with John to take his living at Epworth. He argued, "We are not to fix our eye on one single point of duty, but to take in the complicated view of all the circumstances in every state of life that offers."³⁹ His argument not only failed to convince John to take his living at Epworth, it also seems to have strengthened John's resolve to be singular in his life. Within two days of receiving this letter from his father, John noted in his diary "that his evening study group had all indicated they were 'convinced of Celibacy.'" This would become another mark of singularity for the group.⁴⁰

It was not only students like Robson who struggled to live with Oxford Methodism's definition of singularity. In fact, at times singularity became the final objection people had to joining the group. In 1735, George Whitefield informed John Wesley that Mr. Ratcliff, who was a prospective member of the group, accepted "Almost everything, . . . only objects against singularity, the Obligation we lye under to Fast, and to Communicate as often as possibly we can."⁴¹

John's attempts to convince people of the necessity of singularity were not limited to his students, he also attempted to convince his sisters of the need to be singular. In the case of Emilia this attempt was met with strong resistance. She informed John, "You seem to assert we ought to fix all our thoughts, hopes,

³⁷ Heitzenrater, pp. 273–74. John Wesley was concerned with John Robson's failure to attend communion regularly and with his failure to rise early.

³⁸ John Clayton, Letter to John Wesley (Aug. 2, 1734), *Letters I in Works*, 25:392.

³⁹ Samuel Wesley, Sr., Letter to John Wesley (November 20, 1734), *Letters I in Works*, 25:397. cf. Joseph Priestley, ed. *Original Letters* (Birmingham, [Eng.]: Printed by Thomas Pearson, and sold by J. Johnson . . . 1791), pp. 48–50. Heitzenrater, p. 294.

⁴⁰ Oxford Diary. Vol. V, 93 (Dec 9, 1734), as quoted in Heitzenrater, pp. 294–95.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 312, as quoted in George Whitefield, Letter to John Wesley (April 1, 1735).

desires on God alone; here again I differ.”⁴² Her letter to John mainly deals with the charges he made, accusing her of worldliness and of neglecting her prayers and communion. Her answer was to question John’s instance that they were necessary. After defending her actions and inaction, she then turned to John’s motivations. She asked why he was so singular, why did he deny worldly happiness? She thought the answer could be explained by his loss of Varanese to another. She asked him,

Had you not lost your dear Mrs. C[hapo]n[e], where had your love been fixed? On heaven, I hope, principally, but a large share too had been hers; you would not have been so spiritualized, something of this lower world would have had its part of your heart, wise as you are. But being deprived of her, there went all hope of worldly happiness. And now the mind, which is an active principle, losing its aim here, has fixed on its Maker.⁴³

It was also in 1735 that John decided to go to Georgia. In a letter to John Wesley dated September 28, 1735, Dr. John Burton, of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, who had been on friendly terms with John Wesley at least since 1726, tried to moderate John’s singular focus as he prepared to go to America. Although he encouraged him to undertake the mission to Georgia, he also gave John some advice on how to minister to those in his care. He cautioned John, “The generality of the people are babes in the progress of their Christian life, to be fed with milk instead of strong meat.”⁴⁴ His concern was with John’s singularity.

You will keep in view the pattern of the gospel preacher, St. Paul, who became all things to all men, that he might gain some. Here is a nice trial of Christian prudence. Accordingly in every case you would distinguish between what is essential and what is merely circumstantial to Christianity, between what is indispensable and what is variable, between what is of divine and what is of human authority. I mention this because men are apt to deceive themselves in such cases, and we see the traditions and ordinances of men frequently insisted on with more rigour than the commandments of God, to which they are subordinate; singularities of less importance are often espoused with more zeal than the weighty matters of God’s law. As in all points we love ourselves, so especially in our hypotheses.⁴⁵

Charles decision to join his brother in going to America involved a shift in his plans. Until his brother approached him, Charles had planned on staying at Oxford. This sudden transition to a pastoral ministry meant Charles would now be responsible to preach. Some of what he preached was copied from his brother, but even though it was copied from his brother, it agreed with the themes found in his earliest sermons. The first sermon by Charles of which we have a record

⁴² Emilia Wesley, Letter to John Wesley ([August 13, 1735]), *Letters I in Works*, 25:431.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ John Burton, Letter to John Wesley (September 28, 1735) *Letters I in Works*, 25:436. Cf. Heitzenrater, p. 326.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

was based on Philippians 3:13–14 and included the phrase, “but this one thing I do.”⁴⁶ In this sermon to pursue “this one thing” meant a commitment to strive for Christian perfection. This pursuit included a rejection of worldly pleasures. He argued:

. . . since we are not so secured of our reward, as to be excluded from all possibility of losing it, we are not at liberty to indulge ourselves in a state of ease and security.⁴⁷

Another sermon he preached on his way to America was based on 2 Kings 18:21. In this sermon he presented the need to choose between two options—love of the world or love of God. The people Charles seemed to be addressing in this sermon were those who had chosen the things of this life. He asked, “Do we not see many Christians who make loud professions of zeal for religion, still anxious for the good things of this life?”⁴⁸ According to Charles, there are three major competitors for our affections, and these competitors lead us away from the most important thing in this life—loving God. These three competitors are the world, the flesh, and the devil. Charles continued emphasis on asceticism can be seen in his definition of the world. He said,

For who is there among us that may be termed holy in the strict sense of the word as it implies a total renunciation of the world, the flesh, and the devil; an entire and absolute devotion of ourselves to God? . . . There are, God knows, many rivals, who will dispute with him his right to absolute and entire dominion. The world with her pomps and vanities, pleasures and delights, entertainments and diversions, has monopolized a large share of our affections.⁴⁹

Later in the sermon he further emphasized this point.

The blessed apostle St James saith expressly (Jam 4.4) that the friendship of the world is enmity with God; and whosoever will be a friend of the world is an enemy of God. Here we see that there is no such thing as dividing our love. The love of the world is absolutely inconsistent with the love of God. So that if we afford the world, or anything besides God any part of our love, in such proportion do we become the enemies of God.⁵⁰

One of the most striking things about this sermon, especially when compared with the singularity practiced at Oxford, was that it lacked a positive focus on the love of neighbor. In this sermon, the love of God was not presented in concert with loving neighbor, caring for the poor, and partaking of the means of grace; instead it was defined almost exclusively by contrasting it with the love of the world. This does not mean that Charles had abandoned these things, but it does

⁴⁶ Kenneth G. C. Newport, ed. *The Sermons of Charles Wesley: A Critical Edition, with Introduction and Notes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 95.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

seem to indicate that this was motive enough to live an ascetic lifestyle for Charles at this time in his life.

A third sermon written by Charles and preached during the earliest days in Georgia was based on Psalms 126:7 and focused on the role of suffering in the life of the Christian. It highlighted the way that the virtues of humility, faith, hope, and love lead to each other and ultimately to an eternal joy. The need for a heavenly focus can be seen in Charles's explanation of those moments when people are overcome by the cares of the world, when they become in Charles's words "like common men." Note how the call for a singular focus went above and beyond the common, it was a call to consistent holiness.

If they have a deep humility, a strong faith, a lively hope, and a fervent love sometimes, do they not at other times droop, and so faint in their minds as to become like common men? If they do, no one can expect their joy should reach farther than the cause of it; they cannot be always happy till they are always holy. When they are always heavenly-minded, they shall then rejoice evermore!⁵¹

In addition to these sermons written by Charles Wesley, there are three sermons from this early period that Charles copied from his brother John that dealt with the issue of singularity. The first sermon Charles preached in America (about one month before the previous sermon) was based on Matthew 6:22–23 and was titled "A Single Intention." Notice that even though this sermon was copied from his brother, it focused on a theme common to all of the sermons observed above. Matthew 6:22–23 reads,

The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light. But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness.⁵²

In the first section of the sermon, Charles described what he meant by "The light of the body is the eye." If the eye be single, your whole life will be filled with light, "But if thine eye be evil, if thy intentions be not single, . . ." then the result is darkness. This singleness, the one thing needful, was described as a "recovery of the image of God." If one was not pursuing this goal, the result was a life filled with darkness, ignorance, guilt, and misery. Charles wrote:

3. 'But if thine eye be evil', if thy intention be not single, if thou hast more ends than one in view; if, besides that of pleasing God, thou hast a design to please thyself, or to do thy own will; if thou aimest at anything beside the one thing needful, namely, a recovery of the image of God: 'thy whole body shall be full of darkness;' thou wilt see no light, which way soever thou turnest.⁵³

Charles concluded this sermon by applying it to the common adventure they were about to begin in Georgia. First, he argued that to be single in their intentions

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 308. Italics are from the original both in this quotation and in those that follow.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 309.

meant observing their religious duties not to please people, but to please God. Second, it meant seeing their work as a way they could please God. Third, Charles applied it to their eating and drinking, or “refreshments.” He quoted 1 Corinthians 10:31 to support this: “Whether ye eat or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.” Fourth, he applied it to their diversions; “Whatsoever ye do.” Finally he applied it to all of their conversations. In other words their whole life was to be focused on God, whether they were involved in religious activities, working, eating, enjoying free time or talking.⁵⁴

Starting in September 1736 Charles preached another sermon copied from his brother John from Luke 10:42.⁵⁵ This sermon was based on the Scripture, “One thing is needful.”⁵⁶ The primary focus was to define singularity. Many of the ideas already noted are present in this sermon, but in this sermon some of them have been qualified. This sermon still related singularity to being restored in the image of God, but it also focused on the loss of the image and the resulting problems. To regain the image would involve having “our diseases cured, our wounds healed, and our uncleanness done away.”⁵⁷ One development was the discussion of the place that pain and pleasure have in the Christian life.

Every pain cries aloud, ‘Love not the world, neither the things of the world.’ And every pleasure says, with a still small voice, ‘Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart.’⁵⁸

This sermon while denying that the marks of success were the one thing needful, did concede they could be a part of it pursuit.

Is it [the one thing needful] to obtain honour, power, reputation, or (as the phrase is) to get preferment? Is the one thing to gain a large share in that fairest of the fruits of earth, learning? No. Though any of these may sometimes be conducive to, none of them is, the one thing needful.⁵⁹

In spite of this concession that honor, power, reputation, and learning may be used to obtain the one thing needful, the sermon still had an ascetic focus. The main distraction to being restored in the image of God was still the love of the world. The diseases from which people need healed included “those inbred diseases of our nature, self-love, and the love of the world.”⁶⁰

Charles began preaching a sermon on Mark 12:30 in October of 1737.⁶¹ The overarching theme of this sermon was how to love God. The emphasis was that the love of everything else should either lead to a love of God, or flow from a love

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 309–13.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 360.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 362.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 364.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 366.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 367.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 366.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 346.

for God. Charles quoted the following to support this premise; “Thou shalt love God alone for his own sake, and all things else only so far as they tend to him.”⁶² The major obstructions to loving God were a divided purpose and the love of the world.

3. What wonder is it, then, that the essential wisdom of the Father knew no mean between a single and an evil eye! That his inspired Apostle cries out with such vehemence of affection, ‘Purify your hearts, ye double-minded;’ that his beloved disciple, after ‘This is the true God,’ immediately subjoins, ‘Little children, keep yourselves from idols.’ What idols and what idolatry we are to keep ourselves from he elsewhere explicitly declares, in those well-known words, ‘Love not the world, neither the things of the world: if any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him.’⁶³

About this time his journal contains some important conversations. One ongoing conversation was with [Peter] Appee. These conversations indicate Charles continued emphasis on being resorted in the image of God and of the importance of singularity. On July 31, 1736, after the sudden death of Appee’s fiancée, Charles had an opportunity to ask him about his loss. Charles recorded the following impression of their conversation. “I concluded his heart was right, and its uppermost desire to recover the divine image.” Immediately after this observation Charles noted the affect the sacrament had on him. “Something of this desire [to be restored in the image of God] I felt . . . and found myself encouraged, by an unusual hope of pardon, to strive against sin.”⁶⁴ Later, after Appee informed Charles of his lack of faith, Charles encouraged him to begin immediately to work out his salvation, which would include “the one condition of exchanging this world for the next.”⁶⁵

His record of two conversations with Appee have some interesting insights, not only into the perception others had of John and Charles in America, but also into the struggles Charles may have had in living out the singular life. The first was the recounting of a conversation between Appee and Oglethorpe, as related to Charles by Appee. Whether or not Appee was accurate in recounting the conversation, the fact remains that on at least some level the behavior of John and Charles was open to the following charges. Their fasting and other “abstentiousness” were seen as “mere hypocrisy.” Appee also related that both he and Oglethorpe felt Charles was either uneasy under the restraints of John, or was more interested in pleasing himself than God. Both of these accusations imply that others felt Charles struggled with being singular. One explanation given for his singularity was that he felt he was under the restraints of his older brother John. Later, Charles recorded the following observation of Appee.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 351.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 352.

⁶⁴ Charles Wesley, July 31, 1736, Kimbrough and Newport, eds., 1:46.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:61; Charles Wesley, October 28, 1736.

He frankly replied he took me to be partly in earnest, but I had a much greater mind to please myself than to please God. That as for money, I did not much value it, but in my eagerness for pleasure and praise I was a man after his own heart. That as I could not hold it, he wished I would leave off my strictness, for I should then be much better company.⁶⁶

Charles neither affirmed nor denied Appee's observations. He recorded them in his journal and let them stand uncontested.

With this background in mind I would like to look at some of the poetry from *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1739). This publication was a collection of poems from several sources, including selections from John or Charles. Forty-two selections, or approximately one third of the collection were excerpts from George Herbert's (1593–1633) *The Temple*, twenty-two translations from the Moravian hymnbook, *Das Gesang-Buch der Gemeine in Herrnhut* (1735), and texts by John Gambold and Antoinette Bourignon (1616–80).⁶⁷ The poems dealing with being restored in the image of God focused primarily on being single in the love of God and on the avoidance of the pleasures of the world.

Several of Hebert's poems addressed the issue of singularity and the trap of worldly pleasures. In "Frailty," pleasures, even though despised, have become a trap. This leads to a prayer to be set free and united to God.

1. Lord, how in silence I despise
The giddy worldling's snare!
This beauty, riches, honour, toys
Not worth a moment's care.
Hence painted dust, and gilded clay!
You have no charms for me:
Delusive breath, be far away!
I waste no thought on thee.
2. But when abroad at once I view
Both the world's hosts and thine!
These simple, sad, afflicted, few,
These num'rous, gay and fine:
Lost my resolves, my scorn is past,
I boast my strength no more;
A willing slave they bind me fast
With unresisted pow'r.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:49–50; Charles Wesley, August 26, 1736.

⁶⁷ John Wesley and Charles Wesley, *Hymns and Sacred Poems: A Facsimile of the First Edition*, London: William Strahan, 1739 (Madison, NJ: The Charles Wesley Society, 2007). Introduction by Paul Chilcote, pp. viii–xiii. Chilcote also noted that this reproduced nearly one fourth of Herbert's original work. p. viii.

3. O brook not this; let not thy foes
 Profane thy hallow'd shrine:
 Thine is my soul, by sacred vows
 Of strictest union thine!
 Hear then my just, tho' late request,
 Once more the captive free;
 Renew thy image in my breast,
 And claim my heart for thee.⁶⁸

In the following poem, Charles Wesley's reflection on Galatians 3:22, the things which divide the heart are concupiscence and pride. He pleads for healing of the sin-sick soul, and the desire to shine in the image of God.

1. Jesu, the sinner's friend, to thee
 Lost and undone for aid I flee,
 Weary of earth, myself, and sin—
 Open thine arms, and take me in.
2. Pity and heal my sin-sick soul,
 'Tis thou alone canst make me whole,
 Fal'n, till in me thine image shine,
 And cursed I am till thou art mine.
3. Hear, Jesu, hear my helpless cry,
 O save a wretch condemn'd to die!
 The sentence in myself I feel,
 And all my nature teems with hell.
4. When shall concupiscence and pride
 No more my tortur'd heart divide!
 When shall this agony be o'er,
 And the old Adam rage no more!⁶⁹

This fear of the pleasures of the world can even be seen in a mealtime prayer. There is a real fear that the senses can lead a person away from living a godly life.

1. Enslav'd to sense, to pleasure prone,
 Fond of created good;
 Father, our helplessness we own,
 And trembling taste our food.
2. Trembling we taste: for ah! no more
 To thee the creatures lead;
 Chang'd they exert a fatal pow'r,
 And poison while they feed.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 41. [John Wesley], "Frailty. From George Herbert." All poetry is quoted from http://www.divinity.duke.edu/wesleyan/texts/cw_published_verse.html. This publication follows certain guidelines in modernizing the text. I am using the original text, which has fewer modifications. These guidelines can be found at <http://www.divinity.duke.edu/wesleyan/texts/guidelines.html>.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 92–93. [Charles Wesley], "Gal iii. 22."

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 35. [Charles Wesley], "Another [Grace before Meat.]"

Although avoidance of the world is a major emphasis of singularity in the *HSP* (1739), there are other expressions of singularity. A hymn translated from Johann Scheffler (1624–1677) emphasized the positive aspect of loving God alone.

1. Thee will I love, my strength, my tower,
Thee will I love, my joy, my crown,
Thee will I love with all my power,
In all my works and thee alone!
Thee will I love till the pure fire
Fill my whole soul with chaste desire.⁷¹

Although this verse focused primarily on the positive aspect, note the last line. The goal was to have a “chaste desire.” The rest of the poem laments the late turn to God. Before this turn to God although searching for God, he confessed, “Thy creatures more than thee I lov’d.”⁷²

John Wesley’s translation of a hymn by Johann Freylinghausen (1670–1739) describes being restored in the image of God as putting on the mind of Christ. This meant becoming gentle and humble, and desiring only those things dear to Christ.

5. Renew thy image, Lord, in me,
Lowly and gentle may I be;
No charms but these to thee are dear:
No anger may’st thou ever find,
No pride in my unruffled mind,
But faith and heav’n-born peace be there.
6. A patient, a victorious mind
That, life and all things cast behind,
Springs forth obedient to thy call,
A heart, that no desire can move,
But still t’adore, believe and love,
Give me, my Lord, my life, my all.⁷³

Charles agreed with this assessment. Being restored involved certain attitudes and disciplines, each which would lead to being totally focused on Christ.

4. Meek and lowly be my mind,
Pure my heart, my will resign’d!
Keep me dead to all below,
Only Christ resolv’d to know,
Firm and disengag’d and free,
Seeking all my bliss in thee.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 198. [Johann Scheffler], “Gratitude for our Conversion. From the German.”

⁷² Ibid., p. 199.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 182. [Johann Freylinghausen], “Christ Protecting and Sanctifying.”

⁷⁴ Ibid., pp. 219–20. [Charles Wesley?], “John xvi. 24.”

This singleness even included pursuing God while at work. This can be seen in a hymn titled “To be sung at Work.”

3. Thy bright example I pursue
To thee in all things rise,
And all I think, or speak, or do,
Is one great sacrifice.
4. Careless thro’ outward cares I go,
From all distraction free:
My hands are but engag’d below,
My heart is still with thee.⁷⁵

These few verses show some of the ways singleness was expressed in poetry. Was this the position of John and Charles at this point of their lives? That question is more difficult to answer than it may appear at first. The preface to this collection included the following disclaimer:

Some Verses, it may be observ’d, in the following Collection, were wrote upon the Scheme of the Mystic Divines. And these, ’tis own’d, we had once in great Veneration, as the best Explainers of the Gospel of CHRIST. But now we are convinced that we therein greatly err’d: not knowing the Scriptures, neither the Power of GOD.⁷⁶

The preface went on to explain why they had rejected these “Mystic Divines.” They were deemed no longer acceptable because they “*lay Another Foundation.*”⁷⁷ Although the “Mystic Divines” rejected outward works as leading to justification, they affirmed that our inward righteousness was required for justification. John and Charles no longer accepted that either inward or outward righteousness was the “*Ground of our Justification.*”⁷⁸ Instead, holiness of heart (inward righteousness) and life (outward righteousness) were a result of justification. The sole ground or merit for our “*Acceptance with GOD . . . is the Righteousness and the Death of CHRIST, who fulfilled GOD’S Law, and died in our Stead.*”⁷⁹ Even the condition of justification was not tied to these works but was a result of faith alone. John and Charles did specify a relationship between faith and these works in the preface. Faith did not include either good works or holiness, but it did necessarily produce them.⁸⁰ A second difficulty with the “Mystic Divines” was the way they pursued holiness. They pursued holiness in isolation, “*To the Desert, to the Desert, and GOD will build you up.*”⁸¹ For the Wesleys, there are no “*Holy Solitaries.*”⁸² “*The Gospel of CHRIST knows of no*

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 194. [Charles Wesley?], “Another [To be sung at Work.]”

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. iii.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. iv.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. v.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid., p. viii.

Religion, but Social; no Holiness but Social Holiness. Faith working by Love, is the depth and height of Christian Perfection.”⁸³ This rejection of the “Mystic Divines” makes it difficult to make any firm statements about the theology of John or Charles based on the hymns in this collection. At the very least, any hymn that seems to assert the theology rejected in the preface should be treated with caution and, at the most, expressing a theology they formerly held, but now had rejected. In other words, many of these poems, even if they agree with what we have seen of John’s and Charles’s theology and practice at Oxford and in Georgia, may not be the position they would have held in 1739. This raises an interesting question. How did the poetry in this collection shape early Methodism?⁸⁴ Did John and Charles create expectations for the Christian life they had already abandoned? S T Kimbrough, Jr., has noted the importance of this collection for the formation of early Methodist theology.

The 1739 volume is extremely important for the understanding of Wesleyan theology and the nature of the emerging Methodist spirituality and devotional life.⁸⁵

He has also noted “This collection functioned as a primer in theology for the Methodist people.”⁸⁶ Proof of this can be seen by the large number of allusions to these hymns by early Methodists, including but not limited to Mary Fletcher, Hester Ann Rogers, and Jane Cooper.⁸⁷

What has been emphasized in this article is the primary place singularity played in early Methodism, a singularity marked by asceticism, a dedication to the means of grace and a complete dedication to loving God and neighbor. This emphasis on singularity was expressed in many of the poems found in *HSP* (1739). The preface to this hymnal rejected the theology of the Mystics who used to be highly thought of by John and Charles. How the emphasis on singularity changed because of this rejection of the Mystics is difficult to judge, but even if John and Charles had changed their view of singularity by 1739, it would continue to influence early Methodism because of its inclusion in *HSP* (1739). Whether or not this emphasis continued, and if so for how long, requires further study.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xx. In his Introduction to *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1739) Paul Chilcote claims that this volume and its contents were widely alluded to in the writing of early Methodists.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. iii. Preface by S T Kimbrough, Jr.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. vi. Introduction by Paul Chilcote.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. xx.

