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# A Tribute to Oliver A. Beckerlegge

1913–2003

S T Kimbrough, Jr.

Oliver A. Beckerlegge was born on October 1, 1913, in Sheffield into a strong Methodist family of Cornish origin from the village of Paul near Penzance. His father owned a light-engineering business in the city, later moving to Chesterfield where he built a small factory on Clayton Street, which still stands today. Oliver Beckerlegge's grandfather had been a Methodist minister in Chesterfield in the nineteenth century.

Oliver attended school in Sheffield and from there went on to the University in that city. First he read French and German, and then worked on a medieval French text, for which he was awarded a Ph.D. by the French department, in which his daughter Honor Aldred now studies. His thesis, *Le Secré de Secrez of Pierre d'Abernun of Fetchem* (1944), may still be found in the university library.

In the late thirties, Beckerlegge taught English briefly in Düsseldorf, Germany and witnessed at first hand the gathering storm in Hitler's Germany, including *Kristallnacht*. Thereafter he returned to England and taught in a school in Mickleover, Derby. He was a conscientious objector during the Second World War, before training for the Methodist ministry.

On May 3, 1951, he and Joyce Cole were married at Parkstone, Dorset. They had three children: Oliver Westcombe (b. February 12, 1952), Honor Joyce [Aldred] (b. July 28, 1954), and Ruth Dodgson [Hays] (b. January 6, 1956)

During his long career as a Methodist minister Beckerlegge served the church in Northamptonshire, Glasgow, Alston, Settle, Cornwall (where the family grew up), Sheffield, Stoke, Cheshunt and Brigg, finally retiring to York in 1981.

Over the years he became a renowned and distinguished Methodist scholar. His knowledge of Methodist history was encyclopedic, and he was an acknowledged authority on Charles Wesley's hymns and John Wesley's writings, including their personal shorthand. He contributed to many learned publications, including *The Works of John Wesley*, and served on the committee which produced the new hymn book for The Methodist Church in Great Britain *Hymns and Psalms* (1983). He was active in the Voice of Methodism, a body which sought to preserve and cherish the traditions of the Methodist people within the wider church family and whose official periodical the *Voice of Methodism* he edited for a number of years.

In the mid-1980s he began working with Dr. S T Kimbrough, Jr., a scholar from the USA, on a project to publish all of the extant unpublished poetry of Charles Wesley. In 1989 he was invited by Kimbrough to be a part of the first international colloquium on the study of Charles Wesley's published and unpublished works. He subsequently became a part of the Steering Committee which

grew out of that meeting and which ultimately drew up the plans for the formation of The Charles Wesley Society, an ecumenical and international membership organization dedicated to the preservation, interpretation, and dissemination of Charles Wesley's works. Beckerlegge was a founding member of that organization the following year 1990 at its first meeting in Princeton, NJ. In 1992 Beckerlegge was honored by the Society with a certificate of lifetime membership.

Beckerlegge made numerous important contributions to the growth and development of the Society. He was the author of the chapter, "Charles Wesley's Poetical Corpus," for the volume *Charles Wesley: Poet and Theologian* (Abingdon/Kingswood, 1992), which included the lectures delivered at the 1989 colloquium. He was editor of two of the Society's publications: *Hymns for Whitsunday* (1994), and *Hymns for our Lord's Resurrection* (1997), and authored for the Society *Charles Wesley's Shorthand*.

In 1995 he suffered a stroke while working on church business in Birmingham. He returned to York, and although he gradually improved, he remained seriously disabled. With the help of social services and caring agencies, Oliver and his wife Joyce remained at home in York until November 2002, when they moved to a nursing home in Chesterfield, just a mile from the home of their daughter Honor Aldred.

In his final months, he attended several concerts in Chesterfield, enjoyed visits from friends and family and Sundays at Calow, and was embraced by the local church. He lived to see his children happy and fulfilled, and his grandchildren grow into fine young people of whom he was extremely proud.

On Tuesday, February 18, 2003, he died in Chesterfield Royal Hospital after a sudden worsening of his condition.

On Thursday, February 27, 2003, he was buried in Spital Cemetery, Chesterfield, within sight of his father's factory, and a short distance from his grandfather's chapel.

The field of Wesley studies shall remain in Oliver Beckerlegge's debt for years to come for his deep commitment to Christ and the church and his indefatigable attention to detail and careful scholarship.

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