

Proceedings of The Charles Wesley Society

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Assistant Editor, Charles A. Green

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The Charles Wesley Society
Archives and History Center
Drew University
Madison, NJ 07940

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Contributors

S T Kimbrough, Jr., is Research Fellow, Center for Studies in the Wesleyan Tradition, The Divinity School, Duke University, Durham, NC.

Thomas R. Albin is Dean of The Upper Room Chapel and Program Team Leader, General Board of Discipleship, The United Methodist Church, Nashville, TN.

Timothy S. A-Macquiban is Minister of Wesley Methodist Church, Cambridge, UK.

Patrick A. Eby is a Ph.D. candidate at Drew University.

Paul W. Chilcote is Professor of Historical Theology & Wesleyan Studies, and Director, Center for Applied Wesleyan Studies, Ashland Theological Seminary, Ashland, OH.

Kenneth M. Loyer is a Ph.D. candidate at Southern Methodist University.

Charles Wesley and the Identities of the People Called Methodists Today

Timothy S. A-Macquiban

Introduction

In this article, I want to offer a series of vignettes and ten hat-pegs upon which to hang some key ways of understanding the impact of Charles Wesley and his enduring contribution, which still informs Methodism throughout the world today. It is heavily dependent on the work of major writers who have produced a number of important works in the tercentenary year to whom I am indebted, particularly Gary Best¹ and Gareth Lloyd,² as well as the excellent collection of essays edited by Kenneth Newport and Ted Campbell.³

1. All the World as My Parish—the Arminian Imperative

From its beginnings, Methodism has been a radical renewal movement with evangelism at its heart challenging the prevailing Calvinist theology of many contemporaries and the settled ministry of the clergy.

Samuel Wesley, Jr., tried to get his brother Charles to settle down in a parish in Cowley near Oxford in the 1730s but Charles opened his Bible and found the text “with stammering lips and with another tongue will I speak to the people.” It was this that gave him the scriptural warrant to ignore the expectations of his clerical father Samuel and enter the static territorial ministry of the Church of England. He continued to be determined to exercise his ministry within the Church which had ordained him to its priesthood but not to encourage dissent by separation from it. Rather he wished to promote a more vibrant church from within.

Charles stayed to do work in London or wherever directed by his elder brother John in the early post-Aldersgate days of the Methodist movement despite the warnings of the Archbishop of Canterbury and other bishops not to engage in illegal extra-parochial preaching. The crunch time came after March 1739. John Wesley wrote in June of that year: “I look upon all the world as my parish.” Charles Wesley responded that “this is the work I know God has called me to.” He too, submitted to the vile and dangerous task of preaching the good news out of doors to all comers in the fields surrounding Bristol and Kingswood. Preaching to and caring for those dying and in peril of their immortal souls became the crucial indicator of the Arminian imperative that was at the heart of the Methodist identity.

Despite the later efforts of the Public Peace Union in its attempt to keep the peace between Calvinists and Arminians, the hymns Charles wrote in the early

¹ *Charles Wesley: A Biography* (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2006).

² *Charles Wesley and the Struggle for Methodist Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

³ *Charles Wesley: Life, Literature and Legacy* (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2007).

1740s, particularly in *Hymns on God's Everlasting Love* (e.g., "Father of mankind who love . . .) drove a wedge between the two evangelical groups. Any accord broke down in 1769 after George Whitefield left for America, fanned by the fulminations of Hill and Toplady, which led to a fierce pamphlet war with John Wesley. John Wesley fell out with the Countess of Huntingdon. The death of George Whitefield in 1770 and expulsion of John Fletcher and Joseph Benson from her training college at Trevecca ended any possibility of a rapprochement between the Calvinists and Arminians.

2. Methodism and the Mother Church—Its Relationship to Anglicanism

Despite its differences in theology and in patterns of ministry, the Methodist movement tried to maintain good relations with the Church of England from which it was hewn.

Charles Wesley resisted the notion of separation from the Church of England as long as he could. He was nurtured in the bosom of a high Tory Anglican family, which had rejected the religious dissent of their grandparents on both Wesley and Annesley sides. He was brought up by his mother Susanna to be a rational enthusiast and avoid the worst excesses of the religious intolerance that had besmirched the Restoration period under the Stuart monarchs. She had taught him to challenge the norms and to judge religion by the outcomes in a person's life: "Faith without morality is but downright hypocrisy."⁴

In the early days of the Methodist movement, two churches were acquired in 1743 in London (West St. and Snowfields) for services according to the Book of Common Prayer, including the sacrament of Holy Communion so central to Wesleyan spirituality. The *Hymns on the Lord's Supper* published in 1745 was indicative of this ardent desire to keep links with the mother Church and to encourage its sacramental worship.

In face of the accusations of Jacobitism which followed on from the criticism by others of such "catholic" practices, John and Charles made strong protestations of their loyalty to King and country. Methodists, they insisted, were not "a peculiar sect of men, separating ourselves from the Establishment." Charles Wesley declared: "I am as true a Church-of-England man and as loyal a subject as any man."

Abiding in their religious experience was the distrust of Dissent. Charles feared that local Methodist societies could potentially cease to link with their local parish church. He therefore urged local preachers not to fancy themselves "ministers or public teachers" in opposition or challenge to the teaching ministry of the local clergy. When things sometimes got out of hand his brother asked Charles to examine all the preachers for their teaching and morality. The 1755 Conference considered separation from the Church of England but this was firmly

⁴Quotation from Dr. Samuel Annesley in John Wesley, *A Christian Library* (London, 1927), 24:453.

rejected. In 1758 John published his *Reasons against Separation from the Church of England*. In 1769 he reiterated: "We will not, dare not, separate from the Church . . . we are not seceders."

But The Deed of Declaration and creation of Episcopal Methodist Church in America in the mid 1780s were the final straws. John's "ordination" of Thomas Coke as General Superintendent and others as elders opened up a divide between the two brothers.

Charles asked his boyhood friend Lord Mansfield for a legal judgment. He declared: "ordinations amounted to a separation from the Church." From this point Charles in sadness began to turn his back on the Methodist movement coinciding with his decline in health. The last three years of his life were very difficult for his relationship with John: "Let us not leave an indelible blot (of separation) on our memory," he plaintively cried. Nevertheless he continued to pray for both the Church and for his secessionist brother John while breath remained.

3. Born in Song: the Learning Church—the Place of Music and Hymnody in Worship—Methodists a Singing and a Reading People

At the heart of the Methodist movement there has always been singing. Charles taught the Methodists how to do theology through the hymns he wrote for their worship and meditation.

It can be argued that Charles Wesley was more effective in his hymn writing than John Wesley in his sermons in shaping and informing the Methodist movement. He was schooled in a Rectory in which poetry and praise in worship were key elements. He was brought up by Susanna in a household where regular prayer and hymn singing, meditation and self-examination were guiding principles. Beyond Epworth, he was influenced by his elder brother, Samuel, Jr., at Westminster School and Abbey in worship and poetry through the classical education in which he was immersed.

As top scholar at school, as well as captain, he was marked for leadership. At Christ Church Oxford he was encouraged by Samuel senior to "take care to form their minds to piety as well as learning" in the education of the ancient University. In the formation of a small group of students, called by some "the Holy Club," the principles of pious holy living were put into practice.

Some time after his return from America, Charles met John Frederick Lampe, bassoon player at Covent Garden Opera, who subsequently set many of his hymns to music. Charles was convinced of the benefits of hymn singing; for him the words mattered more than tunes: "attend strictly to the sense of what you sing." From the late 1730s the hymns flowed from his pen as a tumble of hymnals fell upon the Methodists. Even in the most difficult situations, Charles's poetic imagination was rarely stemmed. While ill in 1762, he recovered his health at the spa town of Bath by writing over 2000 *Short Hymns on Select Passages of the Holy Scriptures*.

The 1780 hymnal, *A Collection of Hymns for the People called Methodists*, became definitive of the theology and spirituality of the Methodist movement, containing 480 of Charles's hymns out of 525. There was, the Preface declared, in them: "No doggerel . . . no feeble expletives . . . no cant expressions . . . no words without meanings." It was a work of pure lyrical theology in praise of God. Charles demonstrated that he was more a man of one book (i.e., the Bible) than John. For many of the hymns are poetic versions of Scripture, spiced with allusions from classical and English literature. The hymn book was to be the "handmaid of piety." Wife Sally's judgment was that her husband was a writer of poetic hymns which breathed the "religion of the heart," a heart which burst with a passion for Christ finding expressions in his words.

4. Mission Alongside the Poor—"Come Sinners to the Gospel Feast"

One of the chief features of this Arminian evangelical movement was its appeal to and for the poor and marginalized who were sought out by the Wesley brothers as objects of the particular concern of God's everlasting love.

Charles was influenced by his brother Samuel who took him to visit hospitals in the Westminster area of London and shared his interest in prisons, particularly the brave new Georgia experiment with General Oglethorpe. The beginnings of Methodist social witness are to be found in the prison ministry in which Charles and John engaged in Oxford and their interest in the establishment of the settlement of Georgia to which they were attracted as missionaries. Whilst in the Americas Charles Wesley had his first experience of slavery in Charleston and witnessed first hand the "horrid cruelties" inflicted on black slaves.

His greatest satisfaction in ministry was in the prison visiting at Newgate in London and elsewhere. Locked in cells overnight with condemned prisoners gave him unique opportunities to share the message of redemption with those under threat of death. At Tyburn he accompanied the many converts made through his preaching and prayer to their deaths by execution. The themes of imprisonment and release are prominent in many of his hymns which are products of this pastoral and practical ministry among the poor. The last collection of all his published hymns was one For the Condemned Malefactor.

Wesley also wrote many hymns and poems about life and ministry with and among the poor, most of which unfortunately remained unpublished at his death. "Raiment thou to all that need"⁵ (from "Come thou holy God and true"⁶) was a central motif of these hymns and implicit in the Wesleys' praxis. In this, the

⁵This is the first line of stanza 5 of a cento hymn formed by S T Kimbrough, Jr., and published in the songbook, *A Song for the Poor*, edited by Kimbrough (New York: General Board of Global Ministries, 1993, ; rev. edition, *Songs for the Poor* 1997), Hymn 1. Its original source is Charles Wesley's *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, 2 vols. (Bristol: Farley, 1749), 1:39; henceforth cited as *HSP* (1749).

⁶This is the first line of stanza 1 of the hymn edited by Kimbrough. *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1749), 1:38.

importance of the Matthew 25 injunctions is paramount, "making all these actions subservient to a higher purpose, even the saving of souls from death." To "have the mind of Christ and walk as he walked" was central to the Wesleyan theology. Even though Charles Wesley mixed in high society in Bristol and London, he continued to visit the prisons and help the poor. The accusations of turning his back on the poor cannot be justified. As he said: "If you are ashamed of poverty, you are ashamed of your Master."

5. The Catholic Spirit—Friends of All, Enemies of None: the Wesleys and Ecumenism

While we cannot claim that the Wesleys were ecumenists in the modern sense, their desire for unity and for a commonality of purpose with like-minded Christians within the Church as "one, holy, catholic and apostolic" make them proto-ecumenists.

The brothers were brought up in the Epworth household by mother Susanna to see predestination as "inconsistent with the justice and goodness of God."⁷ This harsh view of Calvinism, described as the "injustice of reprobation" molded Methodist relations with Calvinists and spawned hostile hymns and pamphlets.

Charles Wesley was a "man made for friendship." From his early days he gathered around him a circle of friends. At Oxford he befriended George Whitefield, a poor servitor at Pembroke College who owed him "greatest deference and respect." Despite this friendship, the Methodist movement early on forged its Arminian identity in clear distinction. In 1740, Charles excluded a Calvinist from the Foundery society for "the hellish, blasphemous, explosive lie—the foulest tale—that was ever hatched in hell," i.e., his Calvinist beliefs. It was the beginnings of an anti-Calvinist crusade in which the Wesley brothers tried to remain friends with George Whitefield, who was leading the Evangelical Revival in North America.

Charles was much less inclined to attack his Calvinist brothers especially Howell Harris, the leading evangelical preacher in Wales. But there were public clashes with John Cennick one of their erstwhile supporters at Bristol who wrote: "brother Charles pleases the world with universal redemption . . . no atheists can preach more against predestination than they."⁸ Any attempted reconciliations with Calvinist Methodists and Moravians sadly never happened. Yet both sides agreed not to speak ill of the other and there was a mutual understanding that preachers should endeavor to avoid "preaching controversially."

When it came to relations with the Roman Catholics, Charles seems to have inherited the xenophobic fear of all things Catholic which many of his British

⁷Letter to John Wesley, August 18, 1725, quoted in Charles Wallace, Jr., *Susanna Wesley: Complete Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 112–113.

⁸Letter to George Whitefield, January 17, 1741, quoted in Luke Tyerman, *Life and Times of John Wesley*, 3 vols. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1870–1871), 1:344.

Protestant contemporaries shared. His view of Catholics was directed at Rome: they were “bound in ignorance and sin because of the sorcery of Roman Catholic priests” especially in Ireland, an area ripe for conversion and the target of over twenty visits on a mission to convert those in ignorance. And yet he came to the defense of “trembling persecuted Catholics” in the Gordon riots of 1780, denouncing the displays of bigotry and preaching for an alternative “peace and charity.” This may have been as much the product of the fear of social unrest as it was a plea for religious toleration:

Let the tools of anarchy
 . . .
 Driven as by a whirlwind flee.⁹

6. Primitive Physic—Health and Healing in the Wesleys

The ordo salutis for the Wesleys was not just a matter of spiritual salvation but the liberation of bodies as well as souls through the Methodist blueprint for individual lives lived in holiness and an ethical approach to matters of wealth and poverty, which encouraged personal stewardship in a communitarian spirit.

The link between spiritual disease and physical disease was borne out of the personal experience of Charles, through his illnesses in Georgia and afterwards in London. This may have sensitized him and given him a keen interest in well being which was physical as well as spiritual. He may have recalled the words of Susanna: “Jesus is the only physician of souls, his blood the only salve which can heal a wounded conscience.”¹⁰

Many of his hymns take up this theme, including that which has appeared in all Wesleyan collections from the beginning, “O for a thousand tongues . . .”: “Jesus the name that charms our fears . . .” Here was the hymn writer acknowledging the salvific power of Christ to quell the fears of physical ailments. Another illness in 1740 led Charles to compose “The Physician’s Hymn,” dedicated to his physician, Dr. Middleton:

Myself, alas! I cannot heal,
 But thou shalt every seed expel
 Of sin out of my heart;
 Thine utmost saving health display,
 And purge my inbred sin away,
 And make me as thou art.¹¹

⁹ *Hymns Written in the Time of the Tumults, June 1780* (Bristol, 1780), Hymn 4, stanza 1, lines 5 and 7.

¹⁰ Letter of Susanna Wesley to Charles, quoted in Wallace, pp. 174–175.

¹¹ *HSP* (1749), p. 250, stanza 10 of Hymn 185, “The Physician’s Hymn.”

7. Extraordinary Messengers of God— the Ministry of the Whole People of God

The use of uneducated lay people and women in preaching and in leadership within the infant Methodist movement, contrary to the rules of the Church of England, laid the foundation for the flexible patterns of ministry which have always characterized Methodism.

Charles was perhaps a more effective preacher than his brother John. He was certainly an effective, if strictly disciplinarian, mentor for the lay preachers employed in the early Methodist missions. And yet he feared their power and the threat they posed to church polity. His own vocation as a priest was somewhat reluctant, something he “exceedingly dreaded.” Yet having been ordained, he viewed it as obedience to the call to discipleship.

Following the crisis in Georgia, to be “converted or lost,” being a “prisoner of hope,” called “to spend and be spent” in “ardent love of souls” and his failure in ministry laid bare by his opponents, there was a period of misery and despair as he reflected on his vocation. The ensuing Aldersgate “conversion” experience of his brother John on May 24, 1738, Charles’s own conversion three days earlier, and his regained health shortly thereafter led to renewed preaching with a passion and enthusiasm for sharing good news wherever, even when traveling in coach. His first sermon written thereafter took the text from Galatians 3:22, “out of bondage into the glorious liberty of the sons of God.” He saw it as a mirror of his own experience which found a particular lasting expression in his most famous hymn, “And can it be that I should gain.” His preaching too changed with his widening appeal, becoming more extempore, more inspirational, and less dogmatic. Such enthusiasm brought him into conflict with the Bishop of London and other church leaders who forbade him to preach, but without much success.

George Whitefield, another great preacher of the age, was the trigger for the Wesleys’ own preaching ministry in the open air inaugurated on April 2, 1739 when he told them: “You must come and water what God has enabled me to plant.”¹² John Wesley reluctantly submitted to “become more vile.” Charles took up invitations in the London area to preach in the open-air venues vacated by George Whitefield on Moorfields and Kennington Commons. Such action was challenged by the Archbishop of Canterbury but to no avail.

What was the difference between the three preachers John Wesley, Charles Wesley, and George Whitefield? This has been characterized as the difference in the three stages of preaching: Awakening – Conviction – Conversion. It is recorded that Margaret Austin, a single mother, who heard each, heard George and felt unworthy of God’s love, heard John and felt more of a sinner. But when she heard Charles, she experienced God’s forgiving love and such joy that she felt “all things new.”

¹² Quoted in Henry Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast* (London: Epworth Press, 1989), p. 190.

Thomas Maxfield was recruited as the first lay helper at the Foundry chapel after Susanna approved of his preaching. John Cennick at Bristol was similarly employed. John Nelson, a Yorkshire stonemason, was converted in 1742 and became the chief lieutenant of the Methodist movement in the county. About forty others were recruited. Charles vigorously defended the use of lay preachers against the clergy's refusal to evangelize among poor. God, he reminded them, had to use a dumb ass to rebuke the prophet. He acted as a mentor for the young preachers, disciplining them as well as supporting them as he felt necessary. At the 1744 Conference guidelines were laid down. Their task was first, to invite; secondly, to convince; thirdly, to offer Christ and lastly, to build up and to do this in some measure in every sermon. There was a need to study the Scriptures and have a clear understanding of salvation by faith. Charles was concerned not to overemphasize preachers at the expense of the ordained helpers. For this reason he latterly opposed the use of Local Preachers at the City Road Chapel unless there were no ordained clergy available. This led to a clash with John Pawson and the younger generation of preachers.

Charles's own preaching was very extensive despite the transport difficulties and the opposition and hostility whipped up by the local clergy and squirearchy. Rioting was a very frequent occurrence, as at Walsall when he was beaten and at the Sheffield Meeting House which came under attack.

8. "I Felt My Heart Strangely Warmed"— Personal Experience and the Work of the Holy Spirit

At the heart of Methodist theology is an understanding of God's prevenient and justifying grace, the work which God achieves in us and bringing us to new birth as part of his new creation. The Aldersgate experience, celebrated each year in May by the Methodist people around the time of Pentecost, is pivotal in forming Methodist identity.

The inadequate faith experienced by Charles in Georgia with threats of death and persecution underlining his own sense of unworthiness, reduced him to illness and misery. The storms at sea on his return to England mirrored this sense of spiritual crisis: "I was overjoyed by my deliverance out of this furnace." He had continued to preach brother John's sermons especially those concerning sin and the need for rebirth; but was he preaching to himself? He felt that he had insufficient faith: "I who went to America to convert others was never myself converted to God." He felt "unchanged, unhallowed, unrenewed." He was ripe for conversion or a radical change.

The encounter with Moravian Peter Böhler, who urged the "necessity of prayer and faith" sent him back to Oxford but there he was seriously ill with pleurisy. Böhler convinced him that John was wrong to stress the need to earn salvation. The Oxford and Georgia experiments had proved the inadequacy of such a view. He came to recognize the need for transformation and new purpose.

Perhaps the Moravians' six tests of the Christian Life with them back in London. Again he became dangerously ill with pleurisy which brought him to a spiritual crisis. He was forced to move from his friends to the home of John Bray, a Moravian, in Little Britain off Aldersgate Street.

There it was that he read the copy of Luther's *Commentary on Galatians* with its emphasis on Salvation by Faith. On May 20th he was reading the story of the paralyzed man (Mt. 9) and the next day (Whitsunday) Mrs. Musgrave, his nurse, declared to him: "arise and believe, thou shalt be healed of all thy infirmities!" Confirmed then by the prayers of John Bray, which led Charles to the knowledge of salvation and healing (but not immediately of bodily healing). Significantly, Charles continued to doubt. But on May 24th John's own "conversion" experience affirmed Charles's. Strangely warmed hearts did not make them unquestioning of faith. New Birth did not bring Charles instantaneous joy, peace, love. These things were to come gradually in a process of growth. "And can it be . . ." the Methodist conversion anthem, was the mark of the beginnings of momentous changes not only in the life of Charles but of many others.

9. The Path to Perfection—Personal and Social Holiness

Justification and sanctification in Wesleyan theology were not to be kept apart, nor were the twin aspects of personal and societal salvation. Holiness was for both individuals and the public sphere. For Methodists, social action and personal lifestyle were the outworkings of individuals striving for Christian perfection.

The early influence through reading of William Law's *Serious Call* and his exploration of the concept of Christian perfection, led to John's sermon at St. Mary's Church Oxford of which his brother did not approve. It met with some reservations expressed in this way: "what we can be better than what we are, we are not to think of ourselves as perfect." Charles's skepticism led also to his rejection of Molther's Moravian "diabolical stillness" which viewed sacraments and engaging in social outreach as unnecessary for the saved. Charles wanted to retain a holiness which was thoroughly social and active.

There were several times of conflict with John over concept of Christian perfection. Charles preferred to stress perfection as being attained in stages as a person surrendered more and more to the action of God's Holy Spirit. He held up his great friend John Fletcher as a personal example of holiness. He wrote: "my Perfection is to see my imperfection."

But others were not so modest and claims to have reached a state of perfection grew in the early 1760s amongst preachers whom Charles had to discipline. John's seeming encouragement of them led to Charles's alarm.

Thomas Maxfield was asked to preach on perfection in London. This led to a widespread reaction to the view that God only works through the lives of the sanctified. Charles urged John to expel such perfectionists and his hymns warned against perfectionism, challenging his brother's theology.

Perfection is my calling's prize
 To which on duty's scale I rise;
 And when my toils are past,
 And when I have the battle won,
 Thou in thy precious self alone
 Shalt give the prize at last.¹³

John Fletcher tried to reconcile the two not dissimilar viewpoints. John was eventually condemned for his over enthusiasm and overvaluing of inward feelings. In his defense he published *Further Thoughts on Christian Perfection*.

10. Make Us All One Heart and Mind— Covenant Fellowship of Love and Discipline

Christian education and publishing were at the heart of the Methodist movement in which to be a member of a society was to be committed to growth in learning as well as "vital piety." The membership of bands and classes where the Scriptures were expounded and Wesleyan pamphlets discussed was not an optional extra but a mark of belonging to a reading people bound together in mutual discipline and support.

Charles Wesley was the mainstay for the development of Methodist societies in London and Bristol. His many friends were the spokespersons of the movement. The Holy Club at Oxford was an early experiment in social religion but with no order or rules. From the 1740s the organizational skills of the Wesleys were channeled through the religious societies within larger circuits as the best means to build on preaching and awakening—a lesson they learned from the failure of George Whitefield to capitalize on the effects of his oratory. They had learned from the Moravians and the example of SPCK the vital necessity of small groups as vehicles for Christian Discipleship at heart of Christian Education. The Foundery and New Room societies in London and Bristol were the first Methodist experiments in community life. The class system inaugurated February 1742 in Bristol was not just a financial device but also a pastoral tool for evangelism:

Help us to help each other, Lord
 Each other's Cross to bear,
 Let each his friendly Aid afford
 And feel his Brother's Care.¹⁴

Originally the Wesleys had envisaged that such Methodist societies would be under the control of the clergy including the administration of regular commu-

¹³ *Short Hymns on Select Passages of the Holy Scriptures*, 2 vols. (Bristol: Farley, 1762). 2:139, stanza 2 of Hymn 53.

¹⁴ *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (Bristol: Farley, 1742), p. 83; stanza 3 of "Try us, O God, and search the ground."

nion as part of their disciplined life. This soon broke down as the movement grew and the need for more lay help became evident.

Conclusion

Methodism's place in the development of religion in England in the eighteenth century is characterized by the contribution of Charles Wesley to its life. In *Charles Wesley and the Struggle for Methodist Identity* Gareth Lloyd rightly acknowledges Charles's role as hymn writer extraordinaire in what he calls "Methodism's most precious gift to her parent denomination."¹⁵ Yet, Charles has hitherto been seen mostly in this role as literary genius, who has shaped Methodist spirituality as well as being an outstanding preacher and insightful pastor. The genius of this book, however, is to see his contribution as rather more significant for Methodist polity and to analyze Methodism's own crisis of identity in terms of Charles's contribution as a loyal-conformist Anglican, to the compromise born of the different versions of evangelicalism he and John brought through dual leadership of the movement. A warm catholic evangelicalism, fully committed to social action and the place of the sacraments in worship, founded on biblical preaching for the salvation of individuals' souls and the betterment of society, was the hallmark of Charles Wesley. He was in the Church but not of it. The legacy of Charles Wesley is a paradoxical one, which explains many of the differences of identity within the world Methodist family today.

¹⁵ P. 75.

