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Charles Wesley's Experience of Salvation

The Evidence of the Sermon Corpus

Kenneth G. C. Newport

It is reported that Isaac Watts, himself the author of some truly magnificent hymns, once said of Charles Wesley's "Wrestling Jacob," that it was worth all the verses that he himself had ever penned.¹ Such high praise for Charles Wesley's poetic art is not unusual: Watts might have judged "Wrestling Jacob" to be one of the finest hymns ever to have been written, but what, asked John Wesley, "would Dr. Watts have said, if he had lived to see my brother's two exquisite funeral hymns beginning, 'how happy every child of grace, that knows his sins forgiven' and, 'come let us join our friends above, that have obtain'd the prize!'"² More recent scholars have judged Charles Wesley to be Britain's "greatest hymnographer,"³ and the 1780 Methodist hymn book, to which Charles was the principal contributor, "a liturgical miracle."⁴ It is perhaps not surprising, then, given such recognition of real hymnographic genius, that it is chiefly for his poetic legacy that Charles has been remembered.

It is clear, however, that it was not only in the composition of hymns that Charles Wesley's literary abilities excelled. According to his brother John, it was Charles and not he who was best able to express himself in letters: "I am very sensible" wrote John "that writing letters is my brother's talent rather than mine."⁵

¹The remark is attributed to Watts in the obituary of Charles Wesley inserted into the Minutes of Conference for 1788 (*Minutes of the Methodist Conferences, from the First, Held in London, by the Late Rev. John Wesley, A.M. in the Year 1744* 4 vols. [1812–1818] 1.201). The hymn "Wrestling Jacob," was first published in *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1742). The full text, which runs to fourteen verses, is found in George Osborn, ed. *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley*, 13 vols. (1868–1872), 2.173–176. The hymn is analyzed, and the opinions of several scholars concerning it are presented in Glenn Clark, "Charles Wesley's Greatest Poem," *Methodist History* 26(1988):163–171.

²The remark is attributed to John Wesley in an editorial footnote added to a reprint of Dr. Watts's praise for "Wrestling Jacob" in John Wesley's collected works (*The Works of John Wesley*, 14 vols. [London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1872; repr. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, n.d.], 13.514, hereinafter WJW).

³S T Kimbrough, Jr., and Oliver A. Beckerlegge, eds. *The Unpublished Poetry of Charles Wesley*, 3 vols. (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1988–1992), 1.17.

⁴R. Newton Flew, *The Hymns of Charles Wesley: a Study in their Structure* (London: The Epworth Press, 1953), p. 10.

⁵Frank Baker, *Charles Wesley as Revealed by His Letters* (London: Epworth, 1948), p. 6. This small book by Baker, now more than fifty years old, is the only work devoted to a study of the extensive surviving Charles Wesley letter corpus. This is unfortunate since there is much in this material that could with profit be brought to light. The full extent of the corpus is not easy to gauge. In 1948 Baker had counted and transcribed at least 600 letters (p. 4) and the true figure seems likely to be well above that. The John Rylands Library alone holds in excess of 600 MS letters in Charles's hand. The only significant attempt to bring at least a portion these letters to publication was that of Jackson, who in 1849 published 106 of them as an appendix to his edition of the journal.

Similarly, Charles's journal⁶ has a lively prose style which conveys well enough, if generally rather tersely, the sense of the excitement he felt as he went about his early work in America and later as an itinerant Methodist preacher. Hence, it seems, we must conclude that whatever Charles's poetic merits, he was also a master of prose.

There is ample evidence to suggest also that the craft of sermon construction, like the writing of hymns, letters, and a journal was a form of literary activity to which Charles was able to give full and vibrant expression. Indeed, it was probably in the context of Charles's preaching abilities that John wrote to his brother "In connexion I beat you; but in strong, pointed sentences, you beat me."⁷ According to John Whitehead (1740–1804), John Wesley's first official biographer, and an individual who had heard both John and Charles preach, Charles's sermons were more "awakening and useful" than John's,⁸ which is high praise indeed when seen in the context of John's own not insignificant preaching abilities. Whitehead went on to note regarding Charles:

His discourses from the pulpit were not dry and systematic, but flowed from the present views and feelings of his own mind. He had a remarkable talent of expressing the most important truths with simplicity and energy; and his discourses were sometimes truly apostolic, forcing conviction on his hearers in spite of the most determined opposition.

So powerful was Charles's preaching that it led to some excess. On April 1, 1739, one "B. Nowers" had "strong pangs" and "groaned, screamed and roared out" when he heard Charles preach. Clearly, then, Charles's words could have a dramatic effect.

To this evidence could be added much more. However, such seems unnecessary since the point has already been made: Charles Wesley was more than a hymn-writer. In other written forms of expression, and, it seems, in the pulpit, he was able to express himself with clarity and vision. His surviving prose works, then, no less than his hymns and poems, deserve the scholar's attention. The many voices of Charles, and not just the poetic one, must be heard if we are to gain a full and rounded appreciation of the man and his contribution to the origin, growth, and theological content of early Methodism. As a society we must take this seriously. We must take into full account Charles's prose works.

⁶Charles's journal has never been fully published. The most extensive edition is that of Thomas Jackson (Thomas Jackson, ed. *The Journal of the Rev. Charles Wesley, M.A.*, 2 vols. [London: 1849] hereinafter CW, Journal), but this is a poorly edited and far from complete transcription. In particular it is apparent that Jackson omitted all sections of the journal written in Byrom's method of shorthand, a script used fairly extensively by Charles to record some of the more sensitive material.

⁷John Wesley to Charles Wesley, June 27, 1766 (WJW 12.130–131).

⁸John Whitehead, *Life of the Rev. John Wesley*, 2 vols. (1793–1796), 1.292. I owe this reference to Albert C. Outler, ed. *The Works of John Wesley* vols. 1–4 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1984–1987), 1.2, n. 6.

Unfortunately that task is not an easy one, for editions of Charles's prose works are either nonexistent or defective. In particular the letters of Charles Wesley and his journal are currently in a rather poor state of academic repair. The sermons too need attention.

In this area, however, there are grounds for some hope. The Charles Wesley Society has plans in place to publish a text of Charles's journal, and a complete edition of Charles's sermons is now available through Oxford University Press sometime next summer. It is upon the subject of those sermons that I wish to address this study, and in particular upon the subject of the apparent development in Charles's soteriology (that is, his doctrine of salvation) that is evident in the pre- and post-conversion period. What was Charles's experience of salvation?

Before examining Charles's sermons for content relative to this question, however, it is necessary first to outline the extent of the evidence available. This is a regrettably complex area and no full account is here attempted. Rather we must satisfy ourselves with only the very briefest of summaries.⁹

If the record in the journal is anything to go by, Charles must have preached many hundreds, perhaps thousands, of sermons.¹⁰ We are left with just a few. Indeed, after a very extensive search of Methodist library catalogues in archives throughout the world, I have been able to identify a maximum of only 23 surviving sermon texts. Twenty of these survive in MS form, and all are held in the Methodist Archives at the John Rylands University Library of Manchester. This compares with John's sermons, 151¹¹ of which have survived.

One reason for the lack of surviving MSS for Charles's perhaps hundreds or thousands of sermons seems obvious: they never existed in the first place. This is so since Charles early developed the method of preaching without notes, that is, *ex tempore*, and the fact that he preached in this way means that little written material ever came into existence.

Such a method of preaching is, for the historian, problematic, for it means that the text of much of what Charles had to say is simply not available. Obviously the sermons Charles preached "without notes" went with him to the grave and cannot now be recovered. Similarly, caution is called for even where we do have texts, for while Charles did, by his own admission, have a text before him as he spoke (for example his brother's sermon on justification or his MS sermon "On the One Thing Needful")¹²

⁹The extent of the sermon corpus is dealt with extensively in chapter 4 of Kenneth G. C. Newport, *The Sermons of Charles Wesley: A Critical Edition with Introduction and Notes* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001).

¹⁰The journal is replete with references, and indeed sometimes takes on the appearance of little more than a sermon log. Later evidence similarly suggests that preaching was very much Charles's life-blood.

¹¹There is an overlap in the numbers since seven of the texts contained in the Outler edition of John Wesley's sermons are included also in the edition of Charles's. The reasons for this overlap are made plain below.

¹²CW, Journal 1:132 (October 15, 1738). CW, Journal, see fn. 6.

it is plain that he “added much *ex tempore*” to it. Hence the true spirit and content of Charles’s preaching cannot now be recaptured. The historian has a very deficient body of evidence upon which to base his conclusions. The vast majority of Charles’s sermons were either not written down in the first place, or have not survived. Similarly that “much” which Charles “added *ex tempore*” to some of his texts has also gone forever. We must bear this in mind. We do not have the materials necessary for a completely accurate reconstruction of Charles’s experience of salvation.

The situation is not, however, a hopeless one. As I said before, some 23 of Charles’s sermons have been preserved. Most of these are early. Indeed of the 15 surviving sermons that are clearly dated, 13 were composed and preached prior to 1740. And of the remaining 8, most appear similarly to have been early compositions.¹³ This fact may be explicable in terms of the early adoption of the *ex tempore* method. After 1740, it seems, few of Charles’s sermons were committed to paper and hence few have survived.

It would be useful at this point to examine in detail the arguments for and against the authorship of the sermons that have a claim to being by Charles. Unfortunately there is no time to enter into that important discussion here. A quick summary must suffice.¹⁴

Two of Charles Wesley’s sermons were published during his lifetime, and both were eventually to find their way into editions of John Wesley’s works. No controversy surrounds their authorship since early editions of both carry the name of Charles as the author. The MS for neither has survived. These sermons are “Awake thou that sleepest”¹⁵ and “The Cause and Cure of Earthquakes.”¹⁶ No dispute surrounds the authorship of either text.

In 1987, a major step was taken towards bringing to publication Charles’s sermon materials when six sermons, transcribed by Oliver Beckerlegge and Thomas Albin, were published as an occasional publication of the Wesley Historical Society.¹⁷ There is no dispute regarding Charles’s authorship of these texts. They all stem from the formative few years following Charles’s religious awakening in 1738.¹⁸

¹³This evidence is based upon an examination of Charles’s record of preaching in the journal and in letters.

¹⁴See the detailed discussion in this author’s volume, *The Sermons of Charles Wesley*, 71–90.

¹⁵*A Sermon Preached on Sunday, April 4th, 1742, before the University of Oxford. By Charles Wesley, M.A., Student of Christ Church* (London: n.d.). The second edition indicates that it was printed by W. Strahan in 1742. The sermon is included in Outler’s edition of John Wesley’s sermons (Works 1.142–158).

¹⁶*The Cause and Cure of Earthquakes. A Sermon preached from Psalm xlvii. 8. Occasioned by the Earthquake on March 8th, 1750* (London: 1750). The second edition (1756) gives the name of the author as Charles Wesley. The sermon is not included by Outler, but is found in the conference edition of John Wesley’s works (vol. 7.386–399).

¹⁷Beckerlegge and Albin, *Charles Wesley’s Earliest Evangelical Sermons*.

¹⁸Four of the sermons are dated, and two are not, but all seem to have been composed and preached before 1742. Those which are dated stem from July 1738–July 1739.

Consequently they are vibrant and give unmistakable voice to his own evangelical experience. These six sermons, then, have a real claim to being the heart of the surviving homiletic corpus.

The texts of these sermons are in Byrom's shorthand and the difficulty of transcribing the material does present something of a problem in bringing the material to publication for the use of other researchers. In preparing the edition of Charles's sermons, to which reference has already been made, all these shorthand texts have been re-read, and most of the ambiguities in the Albin and Beckerlegge edition ironed out. The sermons in this category are

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|---------------------------|---------|---------------|
| 1. Sermon on 1 John 3:14 | 1738 | (July 16) |
| 2. Sermon on Titus 3:8 | 1738 | (December 21) |
| 3. Sermon on Rom 3:23–24 | 1739 | (January 1) |
| 4. Sermon on Rom 3:23–25 | 1739 | (July 1) |
| 5. Sermon on John 8:1–11 | 1739 | |
| 6. Sermon on Luke 18:9–14 | No date | |

Nearly all the sermons in this category, then, are clearly dated from the period after Charles's "strange palpitation of heart,"¹⁹ and the one remaining seems also to come from this period. As we shall note below, they exude a confidence in the salvation that comes in Christ.

In 1816 a small volume of sermons appeared under the title *Sermons by the Late Charles Wesley A.M. Student of Christ-Church, Oxford. With a Memoir of the Author by the Editor*. This volume poses major problems. This is not the place to discuss in any detail those difficulties.²⁰ Rather we must limit ourselves to a few key points.

The first problem to be negotiated is that of editorial emendation. Of the twelve sermons in the 1816 edition, MSS have survived for 11 and in each case comparison with the originals reveals marked divergence. That problem can of course be easily overcome by reference to those original MSS.

The second and more major problem is that several of the sermons in the 1816 edition appear to be copies of sermons made by Charles from his brother's MSS. Indeed, Charles says as much (in shorthand) in the case of seven of the sermons. This fact was first noted by Richard Heitzenrater in 1969 and his remarks seem entirely accurate.²¹ I have argued at length elsewhere that both common sense and hard textual evidence suggests, however, that Charles did not copy his brother's sermons without making editorial changes and that similarly the fact that Charles preached these sermons, some of them several times, means that they were in at least this sense "his."²² The other five sermons all stand at least a

¹⁹Jackson, pp. 146–147. CW, Journal, see fn. 6.

²⁰See Newport, *Sermons of Charles Wesley*, 77–78.

²¹See Richard P. Heitzenrater, "John Wesley's Earliest Sermons," *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* 37(1969–1970), pp. 112–113.

²²Newport, *The Sermons of Charles Wesley*, chapter 4.

chance of being original Charles Wesley compositions. Again we cannot enter here into full details. However, the evidence suggests that in the case of three sermons (1 Kings 18:21; Psalm 126:6;²³ Phil 3:13–14) we are dealing with Charles's own compositions. I am certain that this is the case with 1 Kings 18:21 and think it entirely probable in the other two. This is not an idle question; these texts, presuming they are Charles's own, give a pre-1738 view of his experience of salvation.

In summary the sermons represented in the 1816 edition are useful and cannot be ignored. All those dated are from the early period in America and hence provide a useful contrast to the post-May 21, 1738 shorthand sermons. That contrast is made here.²⁴

Having thus described the extent of the Charles Wesley sermon corpus, we may now turn to examine the content of those materials. Clearly we need to limit this examination. We shall look in particular at Charles's experience of salvation.

Charles Wesley's theological views have not been the subject of very great debate. This is not to say that the area has been completely neglected, for several major studies (a substantial portion of which regrettably remain in the form of unpublished theses) do exist. However, even when these are taken fully into account, the fact remains that Charles's theological views have been the subject of only a fraction of the detailed discussion that has been conducted concerning those of his brother John.

From both a theological and an historical point of view such a situation is unfortunate. Charles was a theologian of not insignificant ability, and his analysis of the Bible and attempt to explain both the plight of the human condition and what he perceived to be the divine answer to it deserve careful attention. Both the systematic theologian and the biblical interpreter will find much in Charles's writings that is of value. Charles is also of significance in the context of the history of theology (both from the Anglican and Methodist perspective), for his is in part an attempt to bring together the biblical text and what he considered to be the authoritative traditions of the church, and it was from these raw materials, imbued with his own experience, that Charles attempted to fashion a theology which could survive in the hostile environment of the eighteenth-century.

As is well known, Charles underwent his "evangelical conversion" on May 21, 1738. In the MS journal,²⁵ as in Jackson's edition,²⁶ the day is headed, in upper case letters, THE DAY OF PENTECOST, and indeed May 21 was

²³Charles actually gives the reference as "126.7" (a verse which does not exist).

²⁴There is one other sermon (on John 4:41) and a sermon-treatise on Acts 20:7, but these need not be discussed here.

²⁵Meth. Archives at John Rylands Library ref. DDCW 10/2 (Box code of The Methodist Archives, John Rylands Library, Manchester, UK).

²⁶CW, Journal 1:90.

Whitsunday in 1738. For Charles, however, the day marked not simply a festival of the Church, but a major turning point in his own religious experience.

The exact chronological relationship between this experience and the composition of the hymn “And can it be, that I should gain/an interest in the Saviour’s blood?” has been debated.²⁷ However, the hymn, even if it is not the actual hymn that Charles composed on May 23 “on his conversion” is doubtless a reflection upon the experience of May 21. Verse 4 reads

Long my imprison’d spirit lay,
Fast bound in sin and nature’s night:
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray;
I woke; the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and follow’d Thee.²⁸

As with converts generally, Charles may well have overemphasized the discrepancy between his situation before his experience and that after it (a trap into which some of his commentators may also have slipped). The imagery of the hymn is dramatic: a soul imprisoned by sin in the darkest dungeonal depths is contrasted with spirit flying free in the glory of celestial lights. The wider corpus of Charles’s writings do not support the view of such an absolute and total contrast between his life before May 1738 and that after it.²⁹ However, the sermons do certainly suggest that Charles’s experience of salvation, and his homiletic expression of it, underwent a definite shift somewhere between his leaving America and composing the six shorthand texts.

Eight sermons from this period of “nature’s night” have survived in the hand of Charles Wesley. These are the sermons on Phil. 3:14–15, 1 Kings 18:21 (two versions), Psalm 126:6–7, Matt. 5:20, Matt. 6:22–23, Luke 16:8, John 13:7 and Exod. 20:8. As I have said, of these the first three have a real claim to being Charles’s own compositions. The situation with the remaining five is not so clear, but, as I have argued, at the very least they were sermons which Charles preached and hence may be taken as expressing his own views.³⁰

The dark of Charles’s dungeon and that of his “legal night” are seen fairly clearly in his sermon on Phil. 3:14–15. In this sermon Charles sets about explaining the road to salvation and encouraging his hearers never once to take their eyes from it or stop to rest along the way. God has set before the Christian an ideal, perfection; and unless that ideal is constantly striven for (even if never reached) the believer will not find salvation. As it is reflected in this sermon, Charles’s

²⁷See for example Arnold Dallimore, *A Heart Set Free: The Life of Charles Wesley* (Welwyn, Herts: Evangelical Press, 1988), pp. 61–63; T. Crichton Mitchell, *Charles Wesley: Man with the Dancing Heart* (Kansas City: Beacon Press, 1994), pp. 70–71.

²⁸*Poetical Works* 1.105.

²⁹A point made by Baker.

³⁰All eight of these early sermons are found in the 1816 edition.

world is a threatening and uncertain place. God demands that the Christian be ever diligent in seeking to reach the ideal of perfection, which includes, for Charles, the observation of all God's commands (and how unpleasant it will be for the one caught unawares upon the Lord's return). As if this were not enough, Charles also perceives that the playing field is far from level. Two major forces seek to drag the believer down. The first is the devil and his evil agents, a company ever seeking to hinder the believer as he treads his difficult path. The second is human nature itself, which is unwilling to bend to the will of God and by inclination seeks that which is evil rather than that which is good. Not surprisingly, then, Christians can "never be absolutely certain of their crown of reward." The gaining of that crown is dependent upon the waging of a constant battle, and the ultimate triumph, of the believer over self and the devil. One may never reach perfection, but God demands that it is a goal after which the believer is constantly to strive. God, it is true, has promised salvation, "but it must be remembered that all God's promises are conditional, and that we are bound to fulfil our part of the covenant." Hence one can never be sure of "the favour of God," and indeed to be so is a danger in itself, for it may promote a false sense of security and turn one from the difficult path which alone leads to the narrow gate.

The sermon on Phil. 3:14–15 is, then, a rather gloomy one. Charles urges his hearers never to rest from their spiritual labours, that is, keeping the commandments and seeking perfection. Salvation is a "reward which is given" (in the MS Charles has struck out the even stronger remark that it is "wages" which are "paid"), and since that reward has not as yet been given, the task must not as yet be accomplished. Nothing short of perfection is required, and the individual must not stop short of that highest "pitch of piety." Stopping is fatal for he

that would stand still in the paths of ~~virtue~~ piety must not be surprized if he find that he goeth back therein. He not only wasteth his time, but loseth his ground too: and will find, if ever he awakes out of his sleep, that he has not only less time to run his race in, but more of his course to go through than he before imagined. He that doth not constantly and daily strive against the storm of vice and torrent of iniquity, wherewith the world is now overflowed, will be infallibly carried down thereby. There is not resting in the mid way between heaven and hell. We must pursue our way to the former, or we shall infallibly make quick advances toward the latter.

There is, then, no instantaneous salvation. The lot of the Christian is uncertain.

Such thinking is clearly psychologically unhealthy and is perhaps both the partial cause and result of Charles's pessimistic personality, a trait that has been noted adequately before. The contrast between the tone of this sermon and that of many of the later hymns is fairly plain and need not be explored in any great detail here. The atoning blood of Christ, so central (as Tyson and Renshaw point out) to Charles's later theology, makes no appearance in this early sermon. Indeed, Jesus himself is noticeable mainly by his absence, and when he does

appear is it as a judge and taskmaster. Christ promises and calls, but he also expects and requires.

The sermon on Phil. 3:14–15 is not untypical. We have seen that the sermon on 1 Kings 18:21 is likely to be Charles's own composition and here too we find the same basic ingredients. In the sermon Charles sets before the audience the basic choice they have to make. No one can serve two masters and individuals must choose God or the world. There is no half-way point. The point is elaborated. God demands total service and nothing short of that will do. Conditions for salvation are set:

And it is to that due fulfilling of these conditions of salvation that the promise of entering into rest is made us. We know by the covenant that God made with us at our creation, sinless obedience was indispensably required of us: and though the rigours of this covenant are now abate and God through his tender mercy, in consideration of the manifold frailties and infirmities of our natures hath been graciously pleased to propose heaven to us on other terms; and to accept of repentance in lieu of perfect obedience, yet should we greatly deceive ourselves, that there was less to do than ever before was required of men in order to their attainment of heaven and happiness.

Perfect obedience is not, then, required, for it is not a possibility for those caught between Eden and heaven. But the quest for it is. It is Charles position here that Adam was sustained in his Edenic state by his own obedience to the will of God. Once sin entered in, the situation changed, for with sin came the corruption of human nature and the consequent impossibility of sinless perfection. However, God is a just God, and the level of difficulty with which the human side of the covenant can be kept is no less or more now than it was for Adam. Adam was perfect and sinless perfection and obedience were required of him. Adam's children are imperfect, and perfect obedience, though not sinless perfection, is required of them. Charles writes:

Were we able, we should be obliged to be spotless and without sin. And though, through the corruption of our nature, a state of perfection is ~~hardly~~ not to be expected in this world, yet are we commanded to aim at it with all our might: and whosoever voluntarily stops short of it, for ought he knows to the contrary, stops short of the mercy of God.

One must, then, do what one can and, if one has done that (and only if), the shortfall is made up by the merit of Christ. Again, then, Christ is noticeable mainly by his absence and again the contrast with the later material is plain enough. In this sermon, as in Phil. 3:13–14, Charles sets out a difficult path of constant self examination and the requirement of continual progression from bad to better.

In the sermon on Ps. 126:6–7, however, there is a sign of what is later to come. The sermon still exudes a gloomy air, the opening paragraph setting well the general tone:

Experience shows us, that even they who are Christians indeed, who serve God with all their strength may go on their way weeping perhaps for many years, perhaps to the end of their lives. They are followers of him who was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And if any man will come after him, he must suffer with his master more or less; being like him to be made perfect through sufferings.

However, the sermon falls somewhat short of the two so far discussed when it comes to soteriological pessimism. It is still Charles's view that it is the lot of the Christian to travel the hard road towards final happiness, but seems far more certain that it is a goal that can be reached. The blood of Christ begins to take on the significance with which Charles will later invest it.

Humility cannot but lead to faith: a sight of our disease makes us soon fly to the cure of it. Who can feel himself sick and not long to be made whole? What contrite sinner is not glad of a saviour? And he is the more glad, the more firmly he believes, that he is able and willing to save to the uttermost: able to save all that believe, for he is God! And willing, for he is man. He is joy! Joy which none can divide from faith! Joy unspeakable and full of glory! God the Lord God, Jehovah, God over all, the God to whom all things are possible hath undertaken the cause of lost man! He hath promised, he hath sworn to save them. Nay he hath done more than this: he hath bowed the heavens and come down: he hath been made man! He hath lived, suffered, nay died to save them! Yea tell it out in all the lands! God Christ hath died! He hath died to save man! Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad. Publish ye, praise ye, and say, this is the victory which overcometh the world, even our faith. If we can believe all things are possible to him that believeth: to him it is easy, "to rejoice evermore"! Yea, he cannot but rejoice in thy strength, O Lord Christ, and be exceeding glad of thy salvation!

This is a message which Charles preached as early as April 18, 1736, and preached at least four more times within the course of the next four months. It is, to be sure, a break in the otherwise gloomy clouds that seem to hang over his work during at this time. However, it does give a hint of what is later to come.

With Charles's sermon on Matt. 5:20 we are back on familiar territory. This is a sermon which may well have been copied from John, though the general tone, format and style seem to fit well enough Charles's perceived state of mind and the thrust of his theology during this period. Charles notes that Jesus instructed his followers to seek a righteousness which is greater than that of the scribes and Pharisees (Matt. 5:20). According to Charles there are two basic ways in which such greater righteousness can be obtained. The first is through the performance of a greater number of good deeds than those done by the scribes and Pharisees, and especially the performance of good deeds not only in a distinctly religious (*i.e.*, worship) context, but also in everyday life; more deeds, more righteousness. Secondly, deeds should be done from good motives. The scribes and the Pharisees do deeds to be seen by men, says Charles (drawing on Matt. 6:5), but the Christian does them to please the Father. Salvation, described here again as a "reward," is rooted in what is done. The Pharisees do too few deeds for the

wrong motives and will not enter the kingdom. The successful Christian, however, does more good deeds and for the right motives (to please God and not man) and will get into the kingdom as his just reward.

The other three sermons that have survived from this pre-conversion period are all copies made from John's MSS and allowance must be made for this fact. However, the central message of "The Single Intention" (and Charles must at the very least have agreed with it) is simple enough: God has brought the people safely to the place in which they now reside (Charles first preached the sermon on American soil on March 14, 1736), and it is now their duty to choose whom they will serve. Once this intention is clear, it will direct actions. The intention of the Christian must be single and not divided between two ends, for God will not be served by halves. There is then an obvious overlap here between this sermon and the sermons on 1 Kings 18:21 and Phil. 3:14–15 already discussed briefly, and it shares with those other sermons a sense of soteriological uncertainty. The religious life and the quest for salvation are not an easy road. Every aspect of one's life should be geared towards a single intention. If the "eye" wanders, that is, if the individual looks anywhere else other than to God, the consequences will be terrible indeed, for

no sooner shalt thou divide thy heart, and aim at anything beside holiness, than the light from which thou turnest away being withdrawn, thou shalt not know whither thou goest. Ignorance, sin, and misery shall overspread thee, till thou fall headlong into utter darkness.

The sermon on "The Single Intention" also links very clearly with the sermon on Luke 16:8 ("Wiser than the Children of Light"). Again in this sermon we find Charles appealing to his audience to serve only one master. The sermon hinges on the observation that "the children of this world are . . . wiser than the children of light" in that they know whom it is they serve and serve him with all their heart. This can be contrasted with the position of the Christian who all too often offers only a half-service to his master. Thus while the "children of this generation" are not absolutely wise, they are nevertheless wiser than the children of light who, though they know where they want to be, do not pursue their goal with proper, single-minded diligence. A sense of the real effort required to achieve salvation is, then, as obvious in this sermon on Luke 16:8 as it is in the others I have briefly discussed.

All these relatively early sermons from Charles's period in "nature's night" seem to pull in the same general direction. They do, it is true, touch upon some other issues, but all five are predominantly concerned with the question of salvation and how it is attained. In the sermon on Psalm 126:6–7, there is a break in the clouds, but the general picture which emerges in these early documents is of an individual weighed down by feelings of sinfulness and soteriological uncertainty. In the face of this comes Charles's appeal to a more determined approach

to religion and the call of God. Jesus said “be perfect,” and it is to such a state that the individual must aspire. He may never reach perfection, but the quest for it (human nature and the Devil notwithstanding) is nevertheless a divine imperative. It is in this general context that we must read Charles’s reflections on his conversation with Peter Böhler on February 24, 1738. The story is a famous one, but a small portion of it is worth quoting here. In his journal Charles wrote:

Soon after Peter Böhler came to my bedside. I asked him to pray for me. He seemed unwilling at first, but, beginning very faintly, he raised his voice by degrees, and prayed for my recovery with strange confidence. Then he took me by the hand, and calmly said, ‘You will not die now.’ I thought within myself, ‘I cannot hold out in this pain till morning. If it abates before, I believe I may recover.’ He asked me, ‘Do you hope to be saved?’ ‘Yes.’ [I replied] ‘For what reason do you hope it?’ [he asked] ‘Because I have used my best endeavours to serve God.’ He shook his head, and said no more. I thought him very uncharitable, saying in my heart, ‘What, are not my endeavours a sufficient ground of hope? Would he rob me of my endeavours? I have nothing else to trust to.’³¹

We must be careful. Charles never lost this insistence that the Christian must strive to be perfect or that it is the duty of the believer to seek out and do God’s will, and it would be inaccurate simply to suggest that a works-based righteousness was replaced by a Christ-based righteousness following the events of May 21, 1738. Indeed, we have seen that the insistence upon the sufficiency and centrality of Christ’s death in the plan of salvation, an aspect of Charles’s theology which was to become so central in his later work, appears reasonably clearly, if briefly, in his sermon on Psalm 126:7. However, following his experience in May 1738 a change does seem to have occurred. As Baker has noted

Henceforth . . . Whitsuntide was always to be a peculiar time of blessing for him. Underlying the choppy surface of his Christian experience were the calm deeps of his new certainty of God’s love for him.³²

The later sermons reflect that certainty and it is to those texts that we may now turn.³³ The first sermon to have survived from the period after May 21, 1738, is that on 1 John 3:14. This sermon is divided into two parts and Charles did not generally preach both parts on the same occasion. Again it would be easy to overemphasise the extent to which this sermon (both parts 1 and 2) differs from the early sermons. However, that they are quite different seems unmistakable. In this earliest post-“Pentecost” sermon, Charles still finds a place for good works. They are, says Charles, “the necessary effects or fruits or signs of a living faith.” They are necessary “not to make, but to show us acceptable.”

³¹MS Journal, 114–115; CW, Journal 1:82.

³²Baker, *Charles Wesley as Revealed by His Letters*, p. 33.

³³The two sermons not discussed are those on Exod 20:8 and John 13:7. Both of these were copies from John’s MSS and neither deals very directly with the question of salvation.

On the question of how one achieves that acceptance in the first place, however, there seems a fair distance between what one finds in this sermon and that which Charles put forward in these earlier texts. As we saw, Charles's general position in the earlier material seems to be that God accepts only those who are daily involved in the difficult task of struggling to draw ever closer to that (always elusive) state of perfection. Sins must be overcome, progress must be made, devotion must be complete and single-minded. The individual must do what is within his power, assured only that Christ will make up the deficit when, and only when, he has done his very best. In this later sermon, however, the conditions seem rather easier to fulfill.

Oh that any one of you would even now arise and go to his Father and say unto him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before Thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy Son!" He sees you now, while you are a great way off, and has compassion, and only awaits your turning towards him, that he may run and fall on your neck and kiss you. Then he will say, "Bring forth the best robe (even the robe of Christ's righteousness) and put it upon him, for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

The sermon may even be read as a spiritual autobiography. There are, says Charles, three types of persons in the world: those who are wicked and seek not God, those who are wicked and seek God, and those who are righteous. Those in the first state are without hope so long as they remain in it. Unless they seek God, God can do nothing for them. The second group seems to resemble quite distinctly Charles in the period leading up to May 1738. These are they who are wicked, who know they are wicked, and seek to become righteous; "the love of Christ seems to constrain them, and they want to do great things for him." For a while the world seems to have lost its hold upon them; "the devil, that roaring lion, is chained; and the flesh but rarely troubles them." However, temptation comes once more and "their own wickedness makes head against them" and from this time such a person

treads the same dreadful round of sin, repenting and sinning again. His comfort is withdrawn, his peace is lost; he pray[s],³⁴ resolves and strives, but all in vain; the more he labours, the less he prevails; the more he struggles, the faster he is bound: so that after a thousand thousand repeated defeats he finds at last that sin is irresistible. Then does he take up that sad complaint (Romans 7) which he feels the apostle wrote of him, 'That which I do, I allow not: for what I would, that I do not; but what I hate, that do I. . . . Oh wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death!'

It is at this point according to Charles that righteousness comes. It is instantaneous. The robe is thrown around the sinner. He has come home.

³⁴Corrected from "prayed." The sense seems odd in this context. It may be a simple error on Charles's part, or perhaps even a slip brought about as a result of his remembering his own experience.

There is an obvious sense, then, in which this sermon differs from those that have gone before it. The gloom-laden soul searching seems largely to have gone and in its place has come a conviction that God in Christ has done in a moment what Charles had thought would take a life-time. This is not to say, however, that the pilgrim has landed so safely on the other shore that he need never fear a return to his former state. In fact, says Charles, the belief that the justified sinner might never fall from the state of grace is nothing short of an “arrogant doctrine of devils.” However, Charles assures his audience that no one may fear that he will (as opposed to may) fall from grace so long as he remembers that it is a real possibility. Even in this sermon, then, there is a sense in which salvation is uncertain. There is also a place for good works. Neither of these aspects of Charles post-“Pentecost” theology, however, seems to occupy so central a position in his thinking as it did in the earlier corpus. The other shorthand sermons express similar thoughts. In the sermon on “faith and good works” (Titus 3:8), for example, Charles returns to the question of the relationship between the two and again puts forward the view that works come after faith and are the consequence and not the cause of divine acceptance.

First we are to insist that a man is justified, that is, forgiven, and accounted righteous by grace only through faith, exclusive of all good works and righteousness of his own; then, that he is to evidence this justification by universal obedience; by continually exercising himself unto godliness; by expressing the whole mind that was in Christ Jesus.

The sermon continues this general line of argument throughout, but one should not underestimate the continued insistence on the necessity of good works as a part of religious life. Indeed, at one point Charles makes the remark “His [Christ’s] righteousness is not imputed to me unless I manifest it by righteousness inherent in me,” which, if it is not straightforwardly Pelagian, surely verges on synergism. Drawing on the epistle of James, Charles points out that a faith that is not manifest in works is a dead and worthless faith. Similarly in the sermon on John 8:1ff. Charles presses home the point that Christ said to the woman go *and sin no more*.

Thus in these early sermons the basic framework of a thoroughly Arminian soteriological system seems already firmly in place. Works are still important. They are the signs of justification, but more than that they are still, in Charles thinking, necessary to it. Thus Charles asks with St. James, “For what doth it profit, my brethren, that a man say he hath faith, and hath not works?” Can a faith which is without works save him? Can an idle, dead and devilish faith avail for his salvation? To which comes in effect the answer “no,” albeit that the reply is partially hidden behind a logical smoke-screen (faith that does not manifest itself in works is not true faith, therefore the absence of works indicates and absence of [true] faith. Hence the individual who has not works cannot be saved since it is evident from his lack of works that he also lacks [true] faith, which is requirement

of salvation). This having been said, however, there is an obvious sense in which these early post-“Pentecost” sermons exude a soteriological confidence absent from the earlier texts, and while it may be possible to put the materials under sufficient logical pressure to reveal inherent theological cracks, this is perhaps to miss the real power of the sermons, which is their appeal to experience and revelation. According to Charles, God can and does save sinners. That same God also requires a certain standard of behaviour from those whom he has justified on the basis of their faith. Such assertions make popular religious sense, even if to the theologian they seem to require significant further explication. (And speaking as one who was originally trained in New Testament studies I would have to say that Charles seems to summarize Paul adequately on these points—but that is another study).

The remainder of the shorthand sermons, and the sermon on Eph. 5:14, continue in the same general vein and need not be discussed in any greater detail here. With all six of these texts the one overriding concern is salvation and how it is achieved and the one consistent answer that is given is that it is by faith in Christ, who has paid the price of human sin.³⁵

There is, then, much in the sermons that could usefully be explored and here some indication of that richness has been indicated. Charles, as others have noted, often found that pessimism and depression dogged his steps. This mood is reflected in many of the sermons. However, while caution has properly been urged on the point, it is nevertheless doubtless true that in the sermons one can see a distinct change. Charles’s heart may on occasions have been recaptured, the chains refastened and flaming light partially extinguished. But that Charles did go through a moving experience somewhere in the latter part of the 1730s (and we should of course take the journal seriously and note Charles’s own account of the “DAY OF PENTECOST”). The sermons which come after the 1738 watershed display a new-found confidence, which, while it was sometimes prone to assaults from Charles’s congenital depressive personality, was never lost. Baker has put it well: the surface of Charles’s Christian experience was choppy, but it reached great depths.

In concluding this article I should like to make three points. First, it is hoped that enough of the evidence has been given to suggest that Charles’s “strange palpitation of heart,” which, we should note, took place three days before John’s “strange warming” of the same bodily organ, marked a definite turning point in his religious experience. The sermon evidence seems to confirm that found in the journal and the hymns that this was an experience which was to strike deep into Charles’s religious life. We have taken care not to overemphasize the extent to

³⁵Charles is, as we would expect, thoroughly Anselmian on this point, as a reading of the materials will show. This point comes across very strongly in the sermons on Rom. 3 where, even allowing for the fact that much of the terminology is taken from the Homilies, Charles’s acceptance of the satisfaction theory is plain enough.

which a works-righteousness was replaced by a faith-righteousness after May 21, 1738, but that the event did bring Charles to a different perspective seems indisputable.

Second, and I think just as importantly, it is hoped that this study has given at least some indication of the wealth of material that has yet to be subjected to serious and intensive analysis. In fact, of Charles's prose works the sermons represent by far the smallest body of evidence. The letters in particular hold out great promise of further insight into the life of Charles, his spiritual development, and his often stormy relationship to his brother John. The journal also is a virtually unused resource.

In this context we should note that for many the fact that the hymns and poems have been mentioned in this lecture only infrequently will be a cause for great concern, and properly so. No adequate account of Charles's theological views can be given without making reference to the poetical corpus, which must remain central to Charles Wesley research. The point is so obvious it hardly needs mention. However, one of the purposes of this discussion has been to seek to highlight the wealth of information that is to be found in the prose materials and it is hoped that that has now been done.

Third, and finally, I would like to press again the point that Charles *was* a theologian in his own right and that as a theologian he was able to use the head no less than the heart. The best example of this from the sermon corpus is Charles's treatise on Acts 20:7, a document to which we have not here referred, but even ignoring that text, it is plain that Charles was able to develop theology systematically throughout the sermon corpus. It shows signs of development, but it is, one might say, a systematic theology that appeals to the reason and to Scripture no less than to religious experience for verification.

Charles did give wings to his brother's theology, and he was perhaps primarily the "heart" rather than the "head" of early Methodism. However, to restrict Charles to the role as his brother's echo or to listen only to his poetic voice is, I believe, to miss a great deal. I might not go as far as John in describing Charles's talent for poetry as his "least"; I am not altogether confident, however, that John was speaking entirely tongue-in-cheek when he said this or that he was thereby seeking to extol longed-for virtues at the expense of actual ones. He was a letter-writer, a journalist, and certainly a preacher. Further research is needed into these other areas of Charles's literary and theological legacy and it is my hope that The Charles Wesley Society will continue to promote the same.