

Proceedings of The Charles Wesley Society 1997

Published in the United States by
The Charles Wesley Society, 1999

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Introduction

In the article, “Charles Wesley’s Bristol Hymns and Poems,” the author addresses Wesley’s literary productivity during the years he lived in Bristol, England, which were some of the most productive of his life. Here it was that he settled after marrying Sarah Gwynne in 1749. From that time until they moved to London in 1771, he published more than one-fourth of his total poetic output during his entire lifetime. Among Wesley’s numerous works during this period are some poetical works of considerable length: *Short Hymns on Select Passages of the Holy Scriptures* (1762), a two-volume devotional commentary on the Bible, *Hymns on the Trinity* (1767), and *Hymns for the Use of Families, and on various occasions*. One finds hymns and poems linked to the Christian year, to specific occasions, and others to natural occurrences, events (e.g., the earthquake of March 8, 1750), and persons (e.g., George Whitefield). In 1755 some of his poetry writing took on a different character. Moving beyond hymn writing, Wesley began composing lengthy poetic epistles to various friends on subjects which were of interest to him. Some of these hymns are extremely insightful as regards Charles Wesley’s theology, moral fiber, and personal relationships. This article is a careful chronological survey of Charles Wesley’s published and unpublished poetical works between the years 1749 and 1771.

Some years ago John A. Newton wrote an article, “The Ecumenical Wesley,” for the periodical *The Ecumenical Review*, which was concerned with John Wesley. In “Charles Wesley, Ecumenical Hymnographer” Newton turns to the poet-priest-brother, Charles, in whose hymns he finds the same ecumenical emphasis that characterizes John’s writings. Newton describes the political violence and religious turmoil in which Charles Wesley uttered the cry for tolerance, peace, and unity. While Charles Wesley is not viewed as a twentieth-century ecumenist, he is seen as a contributor to present-day ecumenism by creating a lyrical corpus of the central doctrines of the Christian faith, by emphasizing Christ-like love, or *agape*, as that which unifies, and by creating a lyrical theology that is sung world-wide.

Not very much has been written about Sarah Wesley (Sally, Jr.), daughter of Charles and Sarah (Gwynne) Wesley. She was one of the three children, of the eight born to the Wesleys, who survived the first year of life. Five died at birth or in the first year of infancy. We know more of her brothers, Charles, Jr., and Samuel, both musicians, than of Sally, Jr. In the article “Sarah Wesley, Woman of Her Times” Wilma J. Quantrille paints an interesting picture of this bright and talented woman, setting her in the family, literary, and intellectual contexts of her time. She was a gifted woman who circulated among some of the literary elite of her day, and who also wrote poetry. A significant debt is owed her for the care with which she preserved many of the Charles Wesley family papers.

In the article “Mon tres cher Ami” Peter Forsaith examines the letters of John Fletcher, friend and “Methodist” preacher, who was born in Switzerland. Forsaith

Charles Wesley, Ecumenical Hymnographer

“Names and Sects and Parties Fall”

John A. Newton

Some years ago, the *Ecumenical Review* published a series of articles on major Christian leaders considered from an ecumenical perspective. The series included studies of “The Ecumenical Luther,” “The Ecumenical Calvin,” and—the one which fell to me to write—“The Ecumenical Wesley.”¹ The Wesley under consideration, unsurprisingly, was John, not Charles. It was not difficult, from John’s writings, especially his celebrated *Letter to a Roman Catholic* (1749), and his sermon on “Catholic Spirit,” to understand why, in contemporary terms, “Protestant and Catholic views form part of a growing consensus which sees him as a significant ecumenical theologian.”²

But could we say the same of Charles, who has so often been overshadowed by his older brother? I hope to show that we can, if we take Charles’s essential ecumenical contribution to be, not printed sermons, tracts, or doctrinal treatises, but, uniquely and above all, his hymns. Without in the slightest degree wanting to derogate from John’s fundamental role as the master-builder, humanly speaking, of Methodism, I believe there is still need to do greater justice to Charles. Moreover, if we are thinking ecumenically, there is a sense in which Charles has a decisive edge over John. Outside the world of scholarship, there are surely not many non-Methodist Christians who read John Wesley’s sermons, letters, journal, and occasional writings. Yet Charles’s hymns, it is scarcely an exaggeration to say, are sung in all the churches.

Moreover, from the eighteenth-century beginnings, Charles’s hymns have been at the heart of Methodist worship, theology, and devotion. In 1988, when world Methodism celebrated the 250th anniversary of John Wesley’s Aldersgate experience of God’s forgiving and renewing grace in Christ, Clifford Longley, a Roman Catholic journalist then working on the London *Times*, wrote an interesting and perceptive article on the Wesleys and early Methodism. He defined the early Methodist people as “A choir, formed by John Wesley, to sing the hymns of Charles, and to live accordingly.” Of course, that is not a comprehensive or adequate definition of early Methodism; but it is a highly suggestive one, and it does serve to underline the vital role of Charles’s hymns in the life and faith of the people called Methodists.

Can we then find in Charles’s hymns the same ecumenical strand that is patent in John’s writings? I think we can, both in terms of their content, and of their later wide acceptance across the churches. First, however, I want briefly to set the eighteenth-century scene, which, with its theological controversies and doctrinal

¹J. A. Newton, “The Ecumenical Wesley”: *Ecumenical Review*, 24 (1972), 160–175.

²Newton, 161.

warfare, was not exactly conducive to ecumenical endeavor. Yet if the Wesleys' century was replete with the *odium theologicum*, it could hardly equal in bitterness the one that preceded it. The Seventeenth Century in England saw the Civil War, the execution of Charles I, the proscription of the Book of Common Prayer, the establishment of the Commonwealth, and a great proliferation of sects and parties. Some of these were revolutionary, like the Diggers and Levellers; some were apocalyptic and millenarian, like the Fifth Monarchy Men, who declared King Jesus as the reigning sovereign. After the tumultuous period of the Civil War and Commonwealth, there followed the Great Ejection of the Nonconformist clergy from the Church of England in 1660 and 1662.

It was in the midst of the political violence and religious turbulence of the Commonwealth, that a voice was raised in favor of tolerance, peace, and unity among Christians. It was a voice to which both John and Charles Wesley were to listen and which they would seek to emulate in their own day. The voice was that of Richard Baxter, the sometime Puritan minister of Kidderminster in Worcestershire: pastor, theologian, preacher, hymn-writer, and proto-ecumenist. John Wesley so admired Baxter and his writings that he made *The Reformed Pastor* (1656)—his classic work on the ministerial office—the recommended textbook for the Methodist preachers. He also published selections from Baxter's voluminous works in the *Christian Library*. They really were voluminous—Baxter published something like 180 books, which earned him the nickname among his contemporaries of “scribbling Dick”! John Wesley never ceased to admire him as a choice example of the “Catholic Spirit.”

Gordon Rupp once wrote about the rather impetuous side of Baxter's character, and applied to him John Henry Newman's criticism of Dr. Pusey's *Eirenicon*, which he wrote to further Anglican–Roman Catholic unity. Newman, by that time a Catholic, said of Pusey, “He launches his olive branches from a catapult”! And yet, has Baxter ever been equaled in his passionate concern for the unity of Christ's people, for healing and reconciliation among the churches? Certainly, to John Wesley, Baxter was “that loving, serious Christian,” whom Wesley contrasts with the bitter spirit of a Nonconformist controversialist of his own day, who wrote harshly of the established Church in his publication, *A Gentleman's Reasons for his Dissent from the Church of England* (1746).³

Baxter's *Reformed Pastor* is replete with calls for Christian unity. He calls on his fellow-Christians of other denominations—he himself was a Presbyterian, but was ready to accept a reformed episcopacy—“Principally to consult and agree upon certain rules for the management of our differences, in such manner as may be least to the disadvantage of the common Christian truths which are acknowledged by us all.”⁴ It was, of course, “the common Christian truths which are

³*The Works of John Wesley* (Bicentennial Edition), vol. 21, “Journal and Diaries IV (1755–65),” ed. W. R. Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater (1992), 10. (Hereafter cited as “JW, Works.”)

⁴Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (1656), ed. John T. Wilkinson (1950 revised ed.), 56.

acknowledged by us all," which John Wesley made central to his writings and proclamation, and of which Charles chiefly sang in his hymns; but of that more anon.

In an eloquent passage of *The Reformed Pastor*, Baxter expatiates on the sin of "the ministers of England" in "undervaluing the unity and peace of the whole church." He laments how rare it is "to meet with a man that smarteth or bleedeth with the Church's wounds," and enlarges feelingly on the general lack of ecumenicity:

Of the multitudes that say they are of the Catholic Church it is too rare to meet with men of a catholic spirit; men have not a universal consideration of and respect to the whole Church, but look upon their party as if it were the whole. . . . The peace of their party they take for the peace of the Church.⁵

Charles Wesley, like his brother John, found Baxter a kindred spirit. On May 19, 1741, preaching at Kingswood, Bristol, Charles expounded John 17:9, "I pray not for the world, but for them which thou hast given me." He refers to the great text of Christian unity in verse 21 of the same chapter, where the Lord prays for his disciples, that "They all may be one, so that the world may believe"; and then he cites Baxter's gloss on the same text, "'That,' to use Mr. Baxter's words on the place, 'by *their* concord, the *world* may be won to Christianity.'"⁶

On October 19, 1756, Charles's *Journal* again refers approvingly to Baxter, and similarly in a context where the unity of Christians is threatened. He preached at Gawksholm, where he was informed that some local Baptists ("a carnal, cavilling, contentious sect," as he terms them) have been enticing many Methodists away from their Society. Charles talked with William Grimshaw of Haworth about the problem, and they were agreed that part of the remedy was "That the Preachers should be allowed more time in every Place to visit from house to house, after Mr. Baxter's pattern."⁷

In referring to Baxter's systematic visiting from house to house, which was at the heart of his outstanding ministry at Kidderminster, Charles is not making a general mention of the need for pastoral visitation. Baxter's "method" of home visiting included careful, regular instruction of individuals and families in the Christian life—prayer and devotion, faith and morals, and the daily practice of their religion. If the local Methodists received that kind of ministry of oversight and instruction, they would be far less likely to be drawn away from the fellowship and communion of their own Society.

Charles's ecumenism was at times open to criticism, at least in brother John's eyes. It is interesting that when they differed on one occasion—typically over the relation of Methodists to the Church of England—John chided Charles that he

⁵Baxter, 101.

⁶*The Journal of the Rev. Charles Wesley, M.A.*, ed. Thomas Jackson, 2 vols. (1849), 1:277. (Hereafter cited as "CW, *Journal*.")

⁷CW, *Journal*, 2:128.

must have forgotten Baxter's teaching. John had learned that Charles had excluded a man from the local Methodist Society, not simply for drunkenness (which John accepted as a valid reason), but also for not attending worship at the parish church. Though John of course encouraged such attendance, he was not prepared to accept the lack of it as sufficient reason for excluding a Methodist from the Society. Writing to Charles from London on July 16, 1755, John upbraids him in these terms: "I wish you had mentioned only his drunkenness in the Society. It was a pity to add anything more." He then brings his heavy artillery to bear, adding the rebuke, "You are acting as if you had never seen either Stillington, Baxter, or Howson."⁸

Thomas Jackson, in his life of Charles, pinpoints the difference between John and Charles on this and kindred issues relating to Methodists and the Church of England. "Mr. John Wesley," he writes, "directed all his energies to the increase and edification of the societies, discountenancing all direct separation from the Church; but still making strict Churchmanship subordinate to conversion from sin and to personal piety." Charles on the other hand, says Jackson, though "equally alive to the necessity of entire holiness, as a qualification without which no man shall see the Lord, . . . often spoke and acted as if he thought Churchmanship essential to piety and salvation."⁹

Nevertheless, though the brothers differed at some points on the obligations of Methodists towards the Church of England, they were at one in their desire for the union of Christians, in love and charity, both for its own sake, and as a part of their witness to an unbelieving world.

Charles's hymn on the Johannine exhortation, "Little children, love one another . . .," calls Christians to realize their unity in Christ crucified, since at the cross all the barriers made by sin are broken down:

Giver of Concord, Prince of Peace,
Meek, Lamb-like Son of God,
Bid our unruly Passions cease,
O quench them with Thy Blood.

.
O let us find the antient Way
Our wondering Foes to move,
And force the Heathen World to say,
"See how these Christians love!"¹⁰

Charles takes up the same theme in his great series of hymns for the Love-Feast:

⁸JW, *Works*, vol. 26: "Letters II 1740-1755," ed. Frank Baker (1982), 572.

⁹Thomas Jackson, *The Life of the Rev. Charles Wesley, M.A.*, 2 vols. (1841), 2:132-133.

¹⁰*Hymns and Sacred Poems* (London: Strahan, 1740), 118-119. (Hereafter cited as "HSP [1740].") *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley*, ed. G. Osborn, 13 vols. (1868-1872), 1:298-299. (Hereafter cited as "*Poetical Works*," followed by volume and page number[s].)

Hence may all our Actions flow,
Love the Proof that Christ we know;
Mutual Love the Token be,
Lord, that we belong to thee. . . .¹¹

“By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love one to another” (John 13:35).

One of the fullest expositions of Charles’s zeal for the unity of Christians is to be found in his “Hymns on the Communion of Saints.”¹² Ephesians 4 has been described as “The Magna Carta of the movement for Christian unity.” This passage of the Epistle exults in the truth that Christians share “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” Charles transposes this credo into poetry and song:

Build us in One Body up,
Call’d in one high Calling’s Hope;
One the Spirit whom we claim;
One the pure Baptismal Flame;
One the Faith and Common Lord;
One the Father lives, ador’d
Over, thro’, and in us all,
God Incomprehensible.¹³

The other great New Testament charter of unity, John 17, is also laid under contribution by Charles, in his sequence of “Hymns on the Communion of Saints.” Taking up the prayer of Jesus in the Upper Room, that his followers may be one, as he is in the Father and the Father in him, Charles writes:

We, O CHRIST, have Thee receiv’d;
We the Gospel-Word believ’d:
Justly then we claim a Share
In Thine Everlasting Prayer.
One the Father is with Thee;
Knit us in like Unity;
Make us, O uniting Son,
One as Thou and He are One.¹⁴

It is in this same sequence of hymns on the Communion of Saints, that Charles includes what has become perhaps the best known and most widely loved of all his calls to unity, “Christ, from whom all blessings flow.” In this classic hymn, he makes clear, as the New Testament itself does, that the unity of Christians is not a human construct, but a divine gift:

¹¹*Poetical Works*, 1:354. *HSP* (1740), 185.

¹²*HSP* (1740), 188–204.

¹³*Poetical Works*, 1:356. *HSP* (1740), 188.

¹⁴*Poetical Works*, 1:359–360. *HSP* (1740), 192.

CHRIST, from whom all Blessings flow,
 Perfecting the Saints below,
 Hear us, who Thy Nature share,
 Who Thy mystic body are. . . .

.

Many are we now, and One,
 We who JESUS have put on:
 There is neither Bond nor Free,
 Male nor Female, Lord, in Thee.

Love, like Death, hath all destroy'd,
 Render'd all Distinctions void:
 Names, and sects, and parties fall;
 Thou, O CHRIST, art ALL in ALL.¹⁵

We are reminded there of Richard Baxter's refusal of all sectarian names or party labels; he insisted, rather, that he was "a mere Christian," "a mere Catholic," or, within the English scene, "a mere Nonconformist": all three titles were meant to be inclusive, unitive, comprehensive of fellow Christians over a wide range of denominations.

It would, of course, be a gross anachronism to suggest that Charles was an ecumenist of a twentieth-century kind—that is, one who seeks the visible unity of all Christ's people. In his hymn on "Catholic Love," he can write:

Forth from the midst of *Babel* brought,
 Parties and sects I cast behind;
 Enlarged my heart, and free my thought,
 Where'er the latent truth I find,
 The latent truth with joy to own,
 And bow to Jesu's name alone.¹⁶

But in the later verses of this same hymn, he makes clear that he is thinking of an invisible church of true believers, scattered across the visible denominations, hidden within them, yet secretly one in Christ:

For these, howe'er in flesh disjoin'd,
 Where'er dispersed o'er earth abroad,
 Unfeign'd unbounded love I find,
 And constant as the life of God.

.

¹⁵*Poetical Works*, 1:361–362.

¹⁶*Poetical Works*, 6:71.

Join'd to the hidden church unknown
 In this sure bond of perfectness,
 Obscurely safe, I dwell alone,
 And glory in the' uniting grace,
 To me, to each believer given,
 To all thy saints in earth and heaven.¹⁷

The limitations of his ecumenical sympathies are evident in his hymn for the "Church Catholic," where, while praying for the worldwide *ecclesia*, he cannot resist a dig at Rome:

Forth from the midst of *Babel* call
 Thy servants who Thy word obey,
 Before Thy plagues o'erwhelm them all,
 That own the BEASTLY PONTIFF'S sway,
 Before Thy fiery breath consume
 The last great Antichrist of *Rome*.¹⁸

In this kind of verse, and this one by no means stands alone, Charles is a typical eighteenth-century English Protestant, seeing the Pope as the man of sin, to be identified with the Beast of Revelation, and the great enemy of all true Christianity.

Yet in other ways, Charles can and does contribute to present-day ecumenism, and I suggest three ways. First, in his concentration on the central doctrines of the Christian faith, held by the great majority of Christians, he provides, through the corpus of his hymns, a unitive means of grace, which can still draw divided Christians closer to one another. Second, he shares his brother John's conviction that it is *agape*, the divine charity, Christ-like love, which is at the heart and core of the Christian life, and which alone can make us one. John, in his *Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, is one with Charles in the hymns, in stressing that Christian perfection means simply "being made perfect in love," the love, says John, that Paul speaks of in 1 Corinthians 13, and which alone can bring about the unity for which Christ prays. Third, and finally, Charles can and does assist us in the modern ecumenical pilgrimage, because more and more of the pilgrims, across the churches, are learning to sing and to love his hymns.

It has long been true, indeed, that Charles's hymns have been sung by Christians of many denominations—especially his hymns for the great festivals. Would Advent be the same without "Come, Thou long-expected Jesus"? or Christmas without "Hark! the herald angels sing"? or Easter Day without "Christ the Lord is risen today"? But, over and above these select classics among the hymns, we are beginning to see a wider discovery of Charles's great outpouring of Christian praise—for personal devotion as well as congregational worship—

¹⁷*Poetical Works*, 6:72.

¹⁸*Poetical Works*, 6:113.

among Christians of the Free Church, Anglican, Orthodox, and Roman Catholic traditions. There is time to give only a few examples. In 1996, a new paperback series of Fount Classics, published by HarperCollins, included a volume devoted to *Songs and Sermons: John and Charles Wesley*, introduced by an Anglican priest, Robert Van de Weyer, which includes the text of twenty-five of Charles's choicest hymns, from the period 1739 to 1762. In 1987, the Anglican hymn-writer, Timothy Dudley-Smith, published *A Flame of Love: A personal choice of Charles Wesley's verse*. In his Introduction, he writes: "Week by week, across the English-speaking world, we sing (I believe) more hymns by Charles Wesley than by any other hymn writer. . . . Charles Wesley's place in contemporary hymnody is, I believe, unmatched." He adds the interesting observation: "I venture to think also, that it is due to him more than to any other man that the use of the hymn book in private devotion is still practised, and valued by those who practise it."¹⁹ In 1985, David and Jill Wright published their *Thirty Hymns of the Wesleys* (Paternoster Press). In 1966, two Anglican scholars, H. A. Hodges and A. M. Allchin, published *A Rapture of Praise: Hymns of John and Charles Wesley*. In their introduction, they make clear their concern to show how the Wesleys "understood and expressed the common Faith of Christendom and the common devotional inheritance which they had received through the tradition of the Church of England."²⁰

These authors and compilers were all Anglicans, but most recently, in the July 1997 number of the *Epworth Review*, we find Fr. Francis Frost, Professor of Theology in the Catholic University of Lille, discovering some of the treasures of Charles's eucharistic hymns, in his W. F. Flemington Lectures, given at Cambridge in 1995.²¹ Catholics certainly relish the *Hymns on the Lord's Supper*. They find there strong sacramental teaching and a doctrine of the Real Presence which they may not have expected to find in evangelical Protestantism. Christians of the Orthodox East have been slower, perhaps understandably, to discover the treasures of Charles Wesley's hymns, but when they do, they find much that speaks to them. A text which meant much to both John and Charles Wesley is 2 Peter 1:4, "Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature" (AV). That theme of theosis, that human beings by grace are to share the divine nature through Christ, is one of the central strands of Orthodoxy. They will find it powerfully expressed in Charles's hymns. Take this verse from "Let earth and heaven combine":

¹⁹T. Dudley-Smith, *A Flame of Love* (1987), vii.

²⁰H. A. Hodges and A. M. Allchin, *A Rapture of Praise* (1966), 9.

²¹Francis Frost, "The Three Loves: A Theology of the Wesley Brothers," *Epworth Review*, 24 (July 1997), 86–116.

He deigns in flesh to appear,
 Widest extremes to join;
 To bring our vileness near,
 And make us all divine:
 And we the life of God shall know,
 For God is manifest below.²²

The same note is struck in “Father of everlasting grace”:

Send us the Spirit of thy Son
 To make the depths of Godhead known,
 To make us share the life divine.²³

Or again, in “Since the Son hath made me free”:

Heavenly Father, Life divine,
 Change my nature into thine!
 Move and spread throughout my soul,
 Actuate and fill the whole!
 Be it I no longer now
 Living in the flesh, but thou.²⁴

There is no need to multiply examples, but I hope I have said enough to illustrate the way in which Charles’s hymns have shown their power to appeal to Christians well beyond the confines of the Methodist tradition. I believe that is fundamentally because Charles is not sectarian, but strikes a universal Christian note. He concentrates on the central doctrines of the Faith, ringing the changes on them in a seemingly endless variety. He sings continually of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Bishop Edward King, in his work for unity, used to say, “What we need is more Christlike Christians; the nearer we draw to Christ, the nearer we shall be drawn to one another.” Charles’s hymns were written to draw us to Christ, and as they accomplish that purpose, so they enable us to become more truly one in him.

²²*Hymns and Psalms* (London: Methodist Publishing House, 1983), Hymn 109, stanza 3. *Hymns for the Nativity of our Lord* (1745), No. 5, p. 8.

²³*Hymns and Psalms*, Hymn 300, stanza 2. *Hymns of Petition and Thanksgiving for the Promise of the Father* (1746), No. 1, p. 4.

²⁴*JW, Works*, vol. 7: “A Collection of Hymns for the use of the People called Methodists,” eds. Franz Hildebrandt and Oliver A. Beckerlegge (1983), 552; *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (London: Strahan, 1739), p. 221, stanza 11 of original. Wesley’s original first line reads: “Heavenly Adam, Life Divine.”

