

THE LIFE AND HYMNS OF CHARLES WESLEY

A Message by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson
November 25, 2018

If we trace back our roots as United Methodists we would find ourselves in England and face to face with two brothers, John and Charles Wesley. Whereas John is considered the organizational genius behind the founding of Methodism, Charles Wesley's influence and in particular his hymns were as much a part of the Methodist evangelical movement as John's sermons and pamphlets.

Charles was born on December 18th, 1707 to Samuel and Susanna Wesley. He was the 18th of 19 children. His older brother John was the 15th child and five years older than Charles. Only 10 of the 19 Wesley children survived to reach adulthood. His father, Samuel, was an Anglican priest and rector of the church in Epworth, Lincolnshire. While his father busied himself with church work, his mother, Susanna, who knew Greek, Latin, and French, methodically taught all of her children for six hours a day. At the age of 8, Charles was taken to London to attend the Westminster School, located on the grounds of the famous Westminster Abbey. By the age of 13 he became a King's Scholar at the school, and upon graduating from Westminster, Charles enrolled and began his University studies at Oxford. During his first year at Oxford, he described himself as becoming "lost in diversions." In other words, he got a bit caught up in the social life of his freshman year in college.

But during his second year at Oxford he became weary of the lack of spiritual commitment he saw all around him, so he connected with other young men who felt the same way, and they formed a Holy Club in 1727. The Young men met weekly to celebrate Communion and they established a strict regimen of spiritual study, accountability and growth. His older brother, John, joined the group in 1729, and soon became its leader and further shaped the organizational discipline and direction of what became a Holy Club movement. It's at Oxford that the Wesley brothers along with a few others, including their friend George Whitefield, first became known as "Methodists" because of their methodical approach to Bible study, prayer, and service to others.

After graduating from Oxford, Charles followed his father and brother, John, and was ordained into the Church of England. A few months later, in October of 1735, both Charles and John set sail for the settlement of Savannah in the colony of Georgia – John went as a missionary chaplain to the soldiers and settlers and Charles went as the Secretary of Indian Affairs working directly with the appointed governor of Georgia. Unfortunately, both brothers had awful experiences in American and one year later they returned to England feeling like failures and in a state of spiritual confusion.

After returning to England, Charles taught English to a Moravian Christian by the name of Peter Bohler, who encouraged Charles to look more deeply at the state of his soul. Charles and John had first come into contact with the Moravians on their trip over to American, and they never forgot how calm and at peace the Moravian Christians were during a huge storm at sea – a storm that had the rest of the passengers, including the Wesley brothers, as well as the crew in a state of panic. At the age of 31 (in May of 1738), Charles attended a Moravian service. After he returned home from the service, he started reading from Martin Luther's writing on Galatians and he suddenly found himself at peace with God and experiencing a joy in loving Christ that he had not previously known. Just a few days later his brother,

John, had a similar experience which he described as his heart being "strangely warmed." After May of 1738, the Wesley brothers were on fire – their intellectual, methodical faith became infused with a passion that had previously been lacking. Yes, Charles and John had been believers and devote in their Christian practices, but a passionate relationship with Christ had been missing.

Charles, who had struggled with his temper and an unfortunate drinking habit for years found victory over both. He, who was a gifted writer and poet, began writing with a new sense of purpose and power. In 1739, as the first anniversary of Charles conversion experienced approached, he wrote an eighteen-stanza hymn praising the Lord. He titled the hymn, "For the Anniversary Day of One's Conversion." The seventh verse of that hymn began with the words, "O for a thousand tongues to sing." By the late 1760's, that seventh verse was made the first, and eventually the eighteen verses were whittled down even further. (9am - Let us remain seated as we sing the first 3 verses of the 7 verses printed in our hymnal). (11am - Let us enjoy a more contemporary adaptation as SOS shares an arrangement of "O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing").

O FOR A THOUSAND TONGUES TO SING (verses 1,2,3)

After his personal encounter with Christ, Charles was averaging 10 poetic lines a day for the next 50 years. Those first couple of years (1738-40) were especially fruitful in regard to what would become some of his finest and most loved hymns. The next hymn was written in 1739 when he was 32 years old, and it has become a favorite not just for Methodists but for all Christians. Like most writers, Charles did not like the fact that people "tinkered" with his words – in fact, he strongly discouraged it and asked that his verses be sung as written. However, about 14 years after he wrote the verses of his now famous Christmas carol, his old friend and evangelist George Whitefield, published a collection of hymns where he changed the very first line of the hymn. Charles had originally written, "Hark, how all the welkin rings;" at the time welkin was a fairly common English word for heavens. Whitefield changed that first line and thankfully it stuck. Therefore, we all know and love the hymn as "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing." Let's sing verses 1 & 3.

HARK! THE HERALD ANGELS SING (verses 1,3)

The first Wesleyan Chapel was located in London. Because it was a deserted iron foundry, it became known as the Foundry Meeting House. The next hymn was written the same year as "Hark, The Herald Angels Sing" (1739), but it was specifically written for the very first service in The Foundry Chapel. It was originally entitled "Hymn for Easter Day" and it consisted of eleven four-line stanzas. It was Charles practice to re-tell the Biblical story and teach Christian doctrine by using hymn verses; to do this he needed a lot of verses. In Charles own words, he purposely composed his verses in order that "men and women might sing their way, not only into experience, but also into knowledge." As you might imagine, Charles would likely not be happy about the elimination of so many of his verses over the years. However, most of us today are glad not to be singing hymns with his typical 11 to 18 verses. Charles himself was not actually a tune writer, so many of his hymns were sung to some of the most popular tunes of that day. The "alleluias" at the end of each line of our next hymn were actually added by an editor who wanted to fit Wesley's text to the particular tune in which we sing it today. Let us sing two verses of this glorious Easter morning favorite.

CHRIST THE LORD IS RISEN TODAY (verses 1,3)

As the Methodist movement spread through England, Charles like his brother John traveled extensively on horseback from place to place, like an itinerant, homeless evangelist. Charles was not only a gifted hymn writer, he was also a passionate preacher. However, it wasn't long before many Anglican churches were closed to the radical ways and teachings of the Wesley brothers, and so they started preaching outside churches, in open fields, in cemeteries, in factory yards, and even at local pubs. Thousands of people would gather at a time to hear them preach.

As the number of preachers and preaching places increased, doctrinal and administrative matters needed to be discussed; so John and Charles Wesley, along with four other clergymen and four lay preachers, met in London in June of 1744. This was the first Methodist Conference – and eventually this yearly conference became the ruling body of the Methodist church. The annual meeting was a good opportunity to make important decisions, and to worship and uphold one another in prayer. Because the life of an itinerant preacher was difficult and even hazardous, it wasn't unusual to discover that some among their rank had been lost to illness and death since the previous year's gathering. The following hymn, "And Are We Yet Alive" reflects that reality and was written by Charles five years after the first London meeting. It was sung at those early conferences, and continues to be sung today at Annual Conferences all over the world. Let us sing three verses of "And Are We Yet Alive."

AND ARE WE YET ALIVE (verses 1,3,6)

While preaching in Wales, Charles met Sarah Gwynne, a young woman about half his age; Sarah's father was a wealthy Welsh magistrate who had converted to Methodism. A courtship followed, and Charles wanted to propose, but he was virtually penniless with no way of supporting a wife. To address this financial issue, he published his Hymns and Sacred Poems, as well as his journals and sermons; the royalties from those publications provided Charles with an income that allowed him to marry Sally in April of 1749. For six years, Sally accompanied him on his evangelistic journeys throughout Britain, but at the age of 49 (1756), Charles was exhausted and ill so he and Sally decided to settle down. He continued to preach, visit, counsel, and write hymns, but without all the extensive traveling. He also continued to give unsolicited advice to his brother, John. Charles was not one to bite his tongue when he disagreed with his big brother, John. Charles and Sally had eight children, with only three, two boys and a girl, surviving infancy.

Even though Charles and John Wesley suffered much opposition in their ministry, they had a strong sense of God's call and purpose for their lives and they remained focused on the message of salvation through Christ. The following hymn reflects this strong sense of call and is based on Leviticus 8:35: "You shall remain at the entrance of the tent of meeting day and night for seven days, keeping the Lord's charge so that you do not die; for so I am commanded." The hymn emphasizes Charles' belief that every one of us has a charge to keep, an eternal God to glorify, an immortal soul to provide for, a generation to serve. Let us join our voices in singing the first two verses of "A Charge to Keep I Have."

A CHARGE TO KEEP I HAVE (verses 1,2)

Charles Wesley died in March of 1788 at the age of 80. It is said that he wrote over 6,500 hymns during his lifetime. Some actually put that number closer to 9,000. This is 10 times more hymns than composed by the only other candidate, Isaac Watts,

who could conceivably claim to be the world's greatest hymn writer. In our United Methodist hymnal, there are 49 Charles Wesley hymns. I can honestly say that it was difficult for me to narrow them down to the few that I included in our service this morning. As a result of Charles Wesley's enduring hymnody, The Gospel Music Association recognized his musical contributions to the art of gospel music in 1995 by listing his name in the Gospel Music Hall of Fame.

At the very core of our United Methodist heritage is singing, so it is certainly appropriate that we close our service today by standing and singing three verses of one final hymn.

***BLEST BE THE DEAR UNITING LOVE** (verses 1,2,5)