

TRADITIONS OF SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE

Spirituality and the Hymns of Charles Wesley

CHARLES WESLEY WAS A SPIRITUAL leader, a preacher and theologian, of considerable character. Even so, in comparison to his elder brother, there has been a relative dearth of scholarship and interest directed to the analysis of his genius. People tend to know that he wrote hymns like ‘Love divine, all loves excelling’, ‘Hark, the herald angels sing’, and ‘O thou who camest from above’. If pressed, most people would know little more.

Charles Wesley (1707–1788) was four years younger than his brother John. It is likely that he, rather than John, began the ‘Holy Club’ at Oxford which attracted the nickname ‘Methodist’ for its detailed and organized approach to building the spiritual life. This was in 1729. The overriding objective of those who gathered for study and prayer was the pursuit of holiness. Both brothers spent a short time in Georgia, helping James Oglethorpe to found a colony there. Their endeavours were disastrous, but forced both John and Charles into a re-examination of their spiritual life. On 21 May 1738, a few days before his brother, Charles underwent a dramatic conversion. There was a vision, a calling from the scriptures (‘He hath put a new song in my mouth, even a thanksgiving unto our God. Many shall see it, and fear, and shall put their trust in the Lord’), and the gift of deep peace.

There began the outpouring of hymns and poems to express the rapture of Charles’s mystical experience. Some of them were intensely personal:

Tis Love, 'tis love! Thou died'st for me
I hear thy whisper in my heart!
The morning breaks, the shadows flee:
Pure universal love thou art . . .

Others, equally joyous, focus on God as the source of all that is good:

O for a thousand tongues to sing
My dear Redeemer’s praise!
The glories of my God and King,
The triumphs of his grace.

This new beginning saw Charles Wesley launch upon a ministry of open-air preaching for which he travelled the length and breadth of the land. His preaching won many converts. He was assiduous in his ministry to those

condemned to die at Tyburn, consoling and encouraging them in their prison cells, in the tumbril that took them to the gallows, and at the scene of death itself. He gave prominence to the Eucharist, often giving communion to many hundreds of people at a time. He stoutly defended the Arminian doctrine of the universality of grace against the particularism of Calvinists. 'For all, for all, my Saviour died', one of his hymns proclaimed. In another, he wrote:

Thy sovereign grace to all extends,
Immense and unconfined;
From age to age it never ends;
It reaches all mankind.

Both John and Charles Wesley married. John's marriage to the widowed Mrs Vazeille was (like most of his relationships with women) an utter disaster. In stark contrast, the marriage of Charles to Sarah Gwynne in 1749 was happy and fulfilling to both. The first twenty-two years of their marriage were based in Bristol (Charles tended to keep an eye on the fast developing Methodist causes in Bristol and London with occasional visits to Cornwall and the North of England). At the age of 64 (in 1771) they settled in Marylebone where they lived until the death of Charles in 1788. During this period, Charles Wesley made strenuous efforts to resist the steps being taken by his brother which, in his opinion, were leading Methodists inexorably out of the Church of England. He made his point even in death: he was buried in the churchyard of St Marylebone. His brother and the leading preachers of Methodism were buried in the Chapel graveyard at City Road. If 'Methodism was born in song' then Charles Wesley, 'the sweet singer of the new Israel', acted as its midwife.

A good place to begin to assess Charles Wesley's success as the shaper and instructor of a distinctive Methodist spirituality is, of all things, the 'Table of contents' of a hymn book which appeared in 1780. It was called *A collection of hymns for the use of the people called Methodists*¹ and incorporated the best hymns written by Charles Wesley in a variety of smaller publications that had been appearing since 1737.² The 1780 volume became the definitive hymn book for Methodists and the overwhelming majority of its hymns were written by Charles Wesley.³ Non-Methodists may well wonder why so much is being made of hymns in an article that purports to address Charles Wesley's role as a spiritual director. What the rosary, or pilgrimages, or the *Spiritual Exercises*, or the *Prayer Book* are as aids to spirituality in various Christian traditions, so hymns were (and are) to Methodists. From the Preface to the 1780 Hymn Book we read:

It . . . contain(s) all the important truths of our most holy religion, whether speculative or practical; yea, to illustrate them all, and to prove them both by Scripture and reason. The hymns . . . are

carefully ranged under proper heads, according to the experience of real Christians. So that this book is in effect *a little body of experimental and practical divinity*.⁴

Singing was the medium by which Methodists learned and gave wing to their theology; it was as if the verses of Charles Wesley became the beads they fingered in their desire of 'perfecting holiness in the fear of God'.⁵

With all this in mind, we can now look at the 'Table of contents' to the 1780 Hymn Book. It is in five parts. Part One, with 87 hymns, is introductory. The opening group 'exhort and beseech [the singer] to return to God'.

Come, sinners, to the gospel feast;
Let every soul be Jesu's guest;
Ye need not one be left behind,
For God hath bidden all mankind.

Sinners, wanderers after rest, all that pass by, the poor and maimed, the vilest and worst; nations, fallen peoples—all are invited to turn, to come, to live, to laugh and to feast in the presence of Jesus. At the outset, the universality of God's grace is declared with conviction. Then follow sections which describe the pleasantness of religion (the words 'happy', 'joy', 'rejoice', 'bliss', are like sequins on dark satin), and the goodness of God (shown supremely in the dying love of Jesus, 'the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world').

Sections on death, judgement, heaven, and hell follow before the first Part ends with some hymns that 'pray for a blessing'. It ought to be pointed out here, I think, that the hymns on heaven are, in general, disappointing. Yet Charles Wesley is at his most inspiring on the subject of heaven. The reason for this apparent paradox is simple. A very large number of the hymns treating varying aspects of human life begin with an everyday experience and end with the transposition of that same experience on to the plane of heaven. Thus Charles Wesley's genius for giving a sense of heaven is far more powerful when heaven is presented as a destination for pilgrims than when it is described more statically and objectively for itself. The latter approach is full of such phrases as 'our glorious mansion in the sky', 'O when shall we meet in the air', 'amaranthine bowers', and this:

Each before his Saviour stands,
All in milk-white robes arrayed,
Palms they carry in their hands,
Crowns of glory on their head.

None of this, of course, comes anywhere near the great pilgrimage hymns where heaven is the goal, sometimes seen, always beckoning.

Love divine, all loves excelling
Joy of heaven, to earth come down . . .

After such a beginning where the poet fixes the love of God within the trembling hearts of his people, and after describing the grace and the blessings which bestow an awareness of the presence and salvation of God, the true focus of Christian holiness then becomes clear:

Changed from glory into glory,
Till in heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before thee,
Lost in wonder, love, and praise.

Heaven is the goal of our earthly life and the consummation of our quest for holiness. This is a constantly recurring theme in the hymns of Charles Wesley.

Part Two of the 1780 Hymn Book, a mere seven hymns, describes 'formal' and 'inward' religion. The difference between these two states of being is at the heart of Methodist piety and spirituality. Formal religion meant the scrupulous attention to the 'rubrics and canons of the Church'.⁶ The dutiful performance of these activities took one no further than being 'almost' (as opposed to 'altogether') Christian.

I of means have made my boast,
Of means an idol made!
The spirit in the letter lost,
The substance in the shade.

Basic for the whole of Charles Wesley's thinking is the distinction between the 'form' and 'power' of godliness. It is faith which, making us 'certain of realities we do not see' (Hebrews 11, 1), opens the inward eye of the Christian. Methodists still sing the sublime words of Charles Wesley by which he expounds this theme:

The things unknown to feeble sense,
Unseen by reason's glimmering ray,
With strong commanding evidence
Their heavenly origin display.
Faith lends its realizing light,
The clouds disperse, the shadows fly;

Th' Invisible appears in sight,
And God is seen by mortal eye.

Much of the rest of the 1780 Hymn Book goes on to examine the facets of this inward religion, understood as 'the quest for the length, breadth, depth, and height of love divine'.⁷

Part Three is all about penitence, the change of heart which admits someone to the Christian life. Without it, religion remains formal or outward, a mere matter of duty. So we should pray for that inward sense of our sinfulness and the release from its root and power which God's Spirit can bestow. This often involves a struggle, there is sometimes backsliding. No fewer than 85 hymns explore the ground of these inner battles:

O that I could repent,
O that I could believe!
Thou, by thy voice, the marble rent,
The rock in sunder cleave.

Repentance, contrition, *metanoia*, release from the slavery of sin, forgiveness—whatever the image chosen, the experience of the new birth comes only when the iron grip of sin and self-centredness is broken. The sense of struggle is best captured in Charles Wesley's hymn on the theme 'Wrestling Jacob'. Isaac Watts declared that this hymn was worth all the verses he himself had written.⁸ The twelve stanzas are like rounds of a prize wrestling match. The author is determined to hold the mysterious person who has called him in an armlock, to pin him to the canvas, until he can identify him and unfold the secret of his being:

Wrestling, I will not let thee go
Till I thy name, thy nature know.

He succeeds in this task and describes the ecstasy of his discovery:

Lame as I am, I take the prey,
Hell, earth, and sin with ease o'ercome;
I leap for joy, pursue my way,
And as a bounding heart fly home,
Through all eternity to prove,
Thy nature, and thy name, is LOVE.

The interweaving of the Old Testament story of Jacob struggling with his God at Peniel (Genesis 32, 24-32) and the Christian's response to the probing of the Holy Spirit, are quite masterly. In all, as with many hymns in this section, it yields a new and inner religion just as a new day banishes the blackness of night.

Visit then this Soul of mine,
 Pierce the gloom of sin and grief!
 Fill me, radiancy divine!
 Scatter all my unbelief:
 More and more thyself display,
 Shining to the perfect day.

Repentance, the breaking of the power of sin, turns the 'mourner' into the 'believer'.

Part Four, with 283 hymns, is for 'believers'. This is the great, throbbing heart of the 1780 Hymn Book. Here are hymns to nurture and strengthen the faith, hope and love of those who have entered the portals of belief.

It is worth listing the sections categorized in this part of the Hymn Book.

The ten sections are for believers rejoicing;
 fighting;
 praying;
 watching;
 working;
 suffering;
 groaning for full redemption;
 brought to the birth;
 saved;
 interceding for the world.

This is meant to describe every facet of a Christian's life and to provide him/her with precisely that corpus of 'experimental and practical divinity' mentioned earlier. The Wesleys taught that there were four criteria against which to assess the faith and beliefs of a Christian—scripture, the tradition of the Church, reason and experience. These formed the matrix of reference points within which, and against which, religion and piety could be evaluated. The hymns of Charles Wesley, so often intimate and personal, are yet scriptural, rational, and filled with insight from the tradition of the Christian Church. The 1780 Hymn Book arranges its contents in terms of 'experimental and practical divinity'. Subsequent Methodist Hymn Books, especially the more modern, have tended to go for a more doctrinal arrangement.

About forty of the 283 hymns in the fourth part of the 1780 book are still present in our contemporary book. The remarkable feature of this whole section is the number of hymns in the section devoted to the spirituality of 'believers rejoicing'. There are 74 such hymns, by far the largest section. Joy and happiness are the hallmark of Charles Wesley's spirituality. Often it is metre as well as words that convey his exuberance.

How happy the man whose heart is set free,
 The people that can be joyful in thee!

Their joy is to walk in the light of thy face,
And still they are talking of Jesus's grace.

And the following which, sung to Benjamin Milgrove's splendid eighteenth-century tune (Harwich), is positively corybantic:

My God, I am thine;
What a comfort divine,
What a blessing to know that my Jesus is mine!
In the heavenly Lamb
Thrice happy I am,
And my heart it doth dance at the sound of his name.

God is 'the bountiful donor', the 'hidden source of calm repose', a believer's 'help and refuge'. Jesus is 'infinite, unexhausted Love', the 'co-eternal Son, in substance with the Father one', who 'emptied himself of all but love, and bled for Adam's helpless race'. The Spirit 'revives', 'reveals' God's glory, 'inspires' believers to understand 'the meaning of the written word'. But Charles Wesley's God defies segmentation. He is gloriously, rapturously, ecstatically Trinitarian. And what a depth of response he evokes! Let the following serve for the host of examples I might have given:

Three uncompounded Persons One,
One undivided God proclaim:
In essence, nature, substance one,
Through all eternity the same.

Nothing could be more orthodox than that! But did ever the subtleties of Nicaean orthodoxy evoke more fervent praise than this?

Angels and archangels all
Praise the mystic Three in One,
Sing, and stop, and gaze, and fall
O'erwhelmed before thy throne.

The staccato note of the four monosyllabic verbs in the penultimate line (like those in the Prayer of Institution at the Eucharist—took bread, gave thanks, broke it, gave it . . .) are like the rungs of a ladder taking the believer into the sublime heights of the divine mystery.

It is, of course, impossible to continue at length with this analysis within the space available. The reader must imagine the Methodist people singing the faith of the Church, its most complicated doctrines and its most cherished insights—singing them with heart and voice. The outward effect of this was (and is) fellowship: believers sing together, singing is a corporate activity. The

inward effect has been an appropriation of Christian doctrine and the truths of Trinitarian theology far more effective than any catechism could impart.

The final section of the 1780 Hymn Book, Part Five, moves the focus from the individual to 'the society'. Before they separated from the Church of England, Methodists considered themselves to be 'a society', a movement within the church. The 59 hymns in this section have a corporate emphasis. The opening hymn is still used every year at the beginning of the Methodist Conference:

And are we yet alive,
And see each other's face?

It dates from the 1740s when Methodists were persecuted and reviled:

What troubles have we seen!
What conflicts have we passed!
Fightings without and fears within,
Since we assembled last.

Further hymns follow on the society meeting, praying, giving thanks and parting.⁹

I have tried in this survey of the 1780 *Collection of hymns for the use of the people called Methodists* to give an impression of Charles Wesley's capacity to describe, analyse and nourish the faith-experience of those who were coming in to the church under the preaching and social ministries of the first generations of Methodism. They have energy, they are very personal and intimate, yet they have doctrinal backbone to an impressive degree. More than any other aspect of Methodist piety, they shaped the spirituality of Methodist bands, classes and societies.

A study of the hymns from a literary point of view soon reveals the breadth of Charles Wesley's reading and culture.¹⁰ Ideas are culled from the Church Fathers, especially Ignatius, Tertullian, Jerome, Eusebius, Lactantius and Augustine. Wesley's use of Thomas Aquinas and Thomas à Kempis seems to have been mediated by his knowledge (use?) of the Breviary. He was deeply versed in the Anglican Book of Common Prayer. The Caroline divines and William Law touched and sharpened his thought. Secular literature constitutes another rich seam in Charles Wesley's creative output. There are allusions to Horace, Virgil, Caesar, Aesop and Homer; to Dryden, Prior, Young, Shakespeare, Herbert, Quarles, Waller and Cowley. But above all, of course, his hymns display a deep knowledge (and skilful use) of holy scripture. One example must serve for the multitude.¹¹

Behold the servant of the Lord!
I wait Thy guiding eye to feel,

To hear and keep Thy every word,
 To prove and do Thy perfect will,
 Joyful from my own works to cease,
 Glad to fulfil all righteousness.

These six lines recall the following six passages in the Authorized Version of the Bible:

And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord [Luke 1, 38]

I will guide thee with Mine eye [Psalm 32, 8]

If a man love me he will keep my words [John 14, 23]

That ye may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God [Romans 12, 2]

For he that is entered into his rest, he also hath ceased from his own works, as God did from his [Hebrews 4, 10]

For thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness [Matthew 3, 15]

John Wesley, in the Preface he wrote to the 1780 Hymn Book, concluded with words that self-evidently offer the contents as food for growing Christians, nourishment to those in search of holiness. He wrote:

I would recommend it to every truly pious reader: as a means of raising or quickening the spirit of devotion, of confirming his faith, of enlivening his hope, and of kindling or increasing his love to God and man. When poetry thus keeps its place, as the handmaid of piety, it shall attain, not a poor perishable wreath, but a crown that fadeth not away.¹²

Leslie Griffiths

NOTES

¹ *A collection of hymns for the use of the people called Methodists* has been edited by Frantz Hildebrandt and Oliver A. Beckerlegge, and published in 1983 by the Oxford University Press as Volume 7 of *The works of John Wesley*.

² See *A collection*, p 22.

³ See *Charles Wesley's verse: an introduction*, by Frank Baker, 2nd edition (Epworth Press, 1988). Baker addresses the question of authorship by John and/or Charles Wesley in his chapter 14 (pp 102-15).

⁴ *A collection*, p 73f. The emphasis is mine.

⁵ *A collection*, p 74.

⁶ This distinction is clearly made in *A short history of Methodism (1765)* reprinted in Volume 9 of *The works of John Wesley*, published by Abingdon (1989).

⁷ *A collection*, p 188, n., where the editor notes that for the Wesleys inward religion was 'a quest', a notion which distinguished their teaching radically from the idea of 'stillness' being taught by Molther and the Moravians.

⁸ *A collection*, p 250, n.

⁹ In order to control my material I have had to make some severe choices. In this essay, I have limited myself to a consideration of those hymns written by Charles Wesley that have a personal character. I have had to exclude the hymns where there is a focus on corporate spirituality and, even more heartbreaking, those which explore the dynamic of the eucharistic mysteries. For the latter, see J. Ernest Rattenbury: *The eucharistic hymns of John and Charles Wesley* (Epworth, 1948).

¹⁰ See Baker, *op. cit.*, esp. chapters 3 and 6; also Henry Bett: *The hymns of Methodism* (Epworth, 1913), esp. chapters 6, 7 and 8; and Frank Baker (ed): *Milton for Methodists* (Epworth, 1988).

¹¹ See Bett, *op. cit.*, p 71.

¹² *A collection*, p 75.