



Statue of Charles Wesley in Bristol, England.

“Me, Me He Loved!”

Charles Wesley’s Life and Hymnody

Karen Wiess (2013)

Editor’s Note: The following article was originally a paper submitted for a course on Methodist history at Evangelical Seminary. The author, Karen Wiess, is a seminarian, a certified Lay Speaker at the Ross UM Church in the Susquehanna Conference, and serves as In Mission Thailand Partnership Coordinator with the General Board of Global Ministries (GBGM).

Charles Wesley is often the forgotten brother in the United Methodist heritage. We know him as a hymn-writer, but can miss his influence over the Methodist societies and his dynamic preaching ability. A theologian in his own right, he shared his understanding of God through his poems/hymns. Like his brother, Charles was an evangelist and wanted others to come to know the joy and freedom of Christ. He expressed these sentiments in his hymns, including themes of praise, confession, encouragement, sanctification, salvation, and love. This paper will discuss Charles Wesley’s life, spiritual experience, and musical prowess, using the enduring life of his hymnody.

EARLY LIFE

Charles Wesley was born on December 18, 1707, approximately one month premature. He was the third son to grow past infancy in the Wesley household at Epworth. He survived the fire in 1709 and was surrounded by his sisters for four years after John left for the Charterhouse boarding school in 1712. At eight, Charles was sent to Westminster School (adjacent to Westminster Abbey in London) where his eldest brother Samuel, Jr. taught. Charles was at Westminster School

from 1716 to 1726. During his tenure there he became a king's scholar, which provided for his expenses after 1721, and was a school captain, similar to student body president.

In 1726, Charles left Westminster School for Christ Church, a college of Oxford University. During those first few months Charles and John bonded, since they had essentially been separated off and on for a number of years. In addition, John's group of friends provided Charles with an immediate network of acquaintances "and he set about really enjoying them."¹ He was a jovial fellow who enjoyed life, maybe a bit too much in those first years at Oxford. By May 1729, the Holy Club was birthed (including Charles, William Morgan, and Robert Kirkham) and Charles had become a more sober individual, striving after a regimen of spiritual disciplines that earned him the nickname Methodist. Even though Charles was working at becoming a disciplined individual, "[w]hatever else bound Charles Wesley, silence, solitude, and taciturnity did not."² He was certainly the more likeable of the Wesley brothers. When John returned to Oxford in 1729, he became the leader of the Holy Club, to which Charles was very agreeable. He knew his brother had better leadership skills, and was completely willing to let John take over the role.

Life continued at Oxford for the next several years and Charles was ordained deacon and then elder of the Anglican Church in September 1735. According to Mitchell, "[f]or six years, John had virtually regulated Charles's life in a program of study, prayers, and fastings that undermined his health and by their very futility cast him into melancholia." Charles was in this melancholy frame of mind when he agreed to sail to Georgia with John in 1735. Charles acquired a position with Mr. Oglethorpe, the governor and founder of Georgia. Unfortunately Charles was miserable as both Oglethorpe's secretary and local parson in the colonies, and returned to England sickly, depressed, and lacking faith in the fall of 1736. Little did he know that he had become a small celebrity thanks to his brother's journals, which were being circulated in England. In 1737, Charles traveled about, meeting with churchmen and discussing Moravian spirituality. He seriously considered returning to Georgia, but a severe illness forced him to give up the idea in April 1738.

¹T. Crichton Mitchell, *Charles Wesley: Man with the Dancing Heart* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 1994), 28.

²*Ibid.*, 33.



The Epworth Church where Charles' father Samuel was rector.

CHARLES' ENCOUNTER WITH GOD

Charles Wesley was a man of intense faith after his assurance (or conversion) moment on May 21, 1738. On this date, he felt the assurance of faith for which he had longed during the previous weeks, according to his journal. One can feel the yearning and desire in Wesley's journal for a feeling of God, not just a head knowledge or ethical code. He writes on May 1, 1738, "Mr. Piers called to see me. I exhorted him to labour after that faith which he thinks I have, and I know I have not."³ Charles Wesley had a missing piece to his faith: the experiential aspect of Christ. On May 6, the journal entry includes the following:

God still kept up the little spark of desire, which he himself had enkindled in me; and I seemed determined to speak of, and wish for, nothing but faith in Christ. Yet could not this preserve me from sin; which I this day ran into with my eyes open: so that after ten years' vain struggling, I own and feel it absolutely unconquerable. By bearing witness to the truth before Miss Delamotte, Mr. Baldwin, and others, I found my desires of apprehending Christ increased.⁴

³*The Journal of Charles Wesley*, 2 vols., Thomas Jackson, ed. (London: John Mason, 1849; reprint Baker Books, 1960) 1:85.

⁴*Ibid.*, 86.

He acknowledges that he has struggled for ten years against sin and yet it still prevailed. This realization in some way provided the humility for Wesley to receive the gift of feeling his faith on May 21. He wanted nothing more than to experience his faith in Christ as a holistic thing, bringing together head, heart, and hands. He had been disciplined in scriptural study; participating in the Eucharist, prayer, and singing; and in serving the poor, imprisoned, and maligned for a decade, and yet it did not move him closer to God in his heart. In some ways we can all relate to Wesley's struggle for a tangible encounter with God and this is what makes Charles so accessible. He recounts his grace-filled experience in his journal:

I now found myself at peace with God, and rejoiced in hope of loving Christ. My temper for the rest of the day was, mistrust of my own great, but before unknown, weakness. I saw that by faith I stood; by the continual support of faith, which kept me from falling, though of myself I am ever sinking into sin. I went to bed still sensible of my own weakness, (I humbly hope to be more and more so,) yet confident of Christ's protection.⁵

For Wesley, the peace he received accompanied a realization of his great sin before Christ. This understanding of his personal sinfulness and that of humanity is a theme throughout his hymns, pointing to Christ's sacrifice for all. The awakening to himself as a human was a beautiful thing and he knew it. This self-understanding is one of the reasons his sermons, preaching, and hymns are so powerful, even today. He had an encounter with the Living God, and it impacted the rest of his life. It should be noted that this encounter influenced how Wesley learned about God; it was a spiritual learning that influenced his mind, not his mind influencing his spirit. Rattenbury says it well:

The truth is arrived at, not through intellectual inquiry, but through spiritual combat...[Charles Wesley] won his victory in the sphere of the spirit; the victory undoubtedly illuminated his mind, but the truths that he arrived at were a series of intuitions born of spiritual combat and humble faith.⁶

⁵*Journal of Charles Wesley*, 92 (May 21, 1738).

⁶J. Ernest Rattenbury, *The Evangelical Doctrines in Charles Wesley's Hymns* (London: Epworth, 1954), 99.



The interior of St. Mary's Church, Oxford, where both John and Charles Wesley were ordained as Anglican priests.

MUSICALITY AND POETIC DEVELOPMENT

Charles Wesley played the flute, which opened doors for him to participate in the social life of the University while in Oxford. This interaction with a more artsy crowd suited his personality splendidly, as he was an outgoing, jovial individual. Mitchell writes, “Charles’ outgoing nature and affability allowed him to bare his soul and his situation continually.”⁷ This transparent nature served him well in his writing, allowing emotion and honesty to permeate his poems and hymns.

Charles wrote approximately 9,000 hymns and poems, some the length of one stanza and others up to thirty stanzas. He liked to mark significant occasions with hymns for both personal and public use. By the time of his assurance moment in 1738, Charles had been writing hymns and poetry for quite some time. His father, Samuel Sr., also appreciated verse, although Charles was the better lyricist. He was also very fond of music and had an excellent ear, although his voice was only tolerable.⁸ It was only after the May 21, 1738 experience that Charles began writing powerful and evangelistic hymns. Some of his most beloved hymns were written within the next two years including “Hark the Herald Angels Sing,” “O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing,” and “Christ the Lord is Risen Today.” “The sheer weight of a Wesley hymn comes from his use of words in a particular way, with a strong sense of their multiple possibilities. Each hymn is a word-performance, often brilliant, always dense with meaning.”⁹ Watson goes on to discuss how Wesley’s hymns are accurate for the past, his present, and our time because of how he was able to pull words together to make a lasting impact.¹⁰ Wesley’s hymns have crossed denominational lines because of his strong imagery, scriptural foundation, and lyrical abilities.

Charles Wesley was empowered by the Holy Spirit, leading Richard Foster to locate him within the charismatic stream of Christian tradition.¹¹ One of the reasons Wesley is unique is that he is wholly dependent on the Holy Spirit to correct, strengthen, empower, and fill

⁷Mitchell, 33.

⁸Carleton R. Young, *Music of the Heart* (Carol Stream, IL: Hope Publishing, 1995), 116, quoting Baker citing Charles Wesley’s younger son Samuel.

⁹J. R. Watson, “The Hymns of Charles Wesley and the Poetic Tradition,” *Charles Wesley: Life, Literature & Legacy*, Kenneth G. C. Newport & Ted A. Campbell, eds. (Werrington, UK: Epworth, 2007), 361.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Richard J. Foster, *Streams of Living Water* (New York: Harper Collins, 1998), 374.

him with love. His desire to do God's will and love God with every part of his being comes through in his writings. However, it is also apparent that the Holy Spirit influenced his writing, especially in the dramatic ability to communicate God's grace and sacrifice. One does not write 9,000 hymns and poems if one is not divinely inspired.

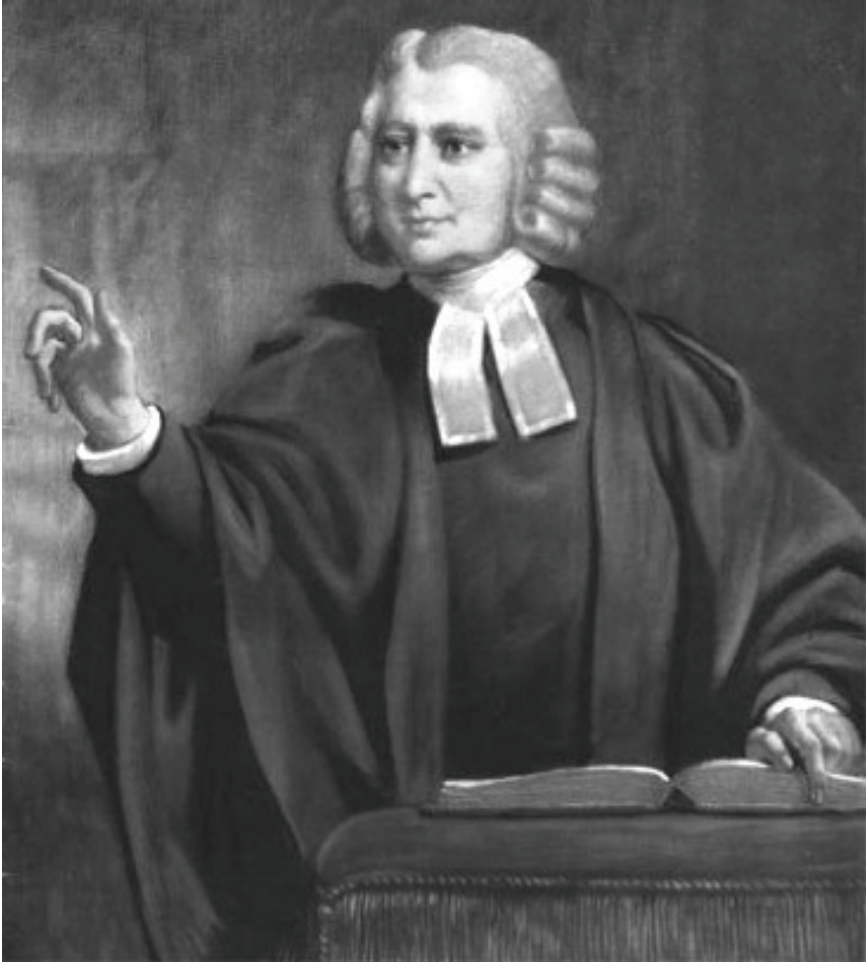
MINISTRY

Charles was as boisterous in his passion for Jesus after his "conversion" as he was in the early "worldly" days at Oxford. Joy seemed to flow out of his heart and Charles would break out into song while traveling, whether on horseback or by coach. "Once, when travelling to London by coach, a fellow passenger was so annoyed by Charles' high spirits that she threatened to beat him! Charles noted in his journal, with a touch of humor, 'I declared, I deserved nothing but hell; so did she.'"¹² Charles was serious about his faith, but he was not so staid that he was unwilling to show emotion, and this made him extremely likeable.

By 1739 Charles Wesley had established himself as a charismatic evangelist across England. The Methodist movement grew quickly after John's return from the Colonies, and two posts were created as anchors: the Foundry in London and the New Room in Bristol. John took responsibility for the Foundry and Charles led the population at Bristol, then after a month or two they switched places. In addition to preaching at these locations, Charles and John went throughout the countryside adjacent to London and Bristol preaching and teaching. When they were invited, they ventured to other regions including Ireland and Wales. John and Charles were very much a team in this decade and looked after the Methodist movement carefully and dutifully. Charles was exceptionally loyal to the Church of England and believed that his activities were strengthening the church. During the time from 1738 to 1747, Charles exemplified the holy life of an itinerant preacher, shepherding his flock in their needs, encouraging them, and sharing in their joys. His personality inclined him to feel deeply, and this ability translated well to pastoral ministry.

During this period Charles also perfected his craft of preaching out of doors extemporaneously. He was not nearly as diligent as John in journal writing or collecting manuscripts for sermons (especially since he liked to preach extempore), which is why so few of his personal

¹²Barrie W. Tabraham, *Brother Charles* (Werrington, UK: Epworth, 2003), 61.



An image of Charles Wesley preaching.

thoughts and sermons have survived. This period also showed Charles the perils of itinerancy, with threats of death, muggings, and angry mobs adding excitement to the traveling life. We must not forget that Methodists were not always welcome when they arrived in town, and Charles had first-hand knowledge of this animosity.

FAMILY LIFE

Marriage and family life had a profound influence on Charles as he was a faithful husband and devoted father. His later writings are reflective of the joy and sorrow that he had in these roles. Charles Wesley met the Gwynne family in the late summer of 1747 while he was at Bult Wells on a preaching trip. The Gwynnes lived on a large estate (Garth Manor) and opened their home to Methodist preachers on a regular basis. Soon after meeting the Gwynnes, Charles left for Ireland. Once in Ireland, he began correspondence with Sally Gwynne, who was nineteen years his junior (twenty one at the time). Sally was a beautiful and smart young woman who was also wise and competent. Charles could not help but grow in his affection for her.

Because of unfavorable living conditions, Charles left Ireland after six months, physically worn out, and he was welcomed into the Gwynne home to be nursed back to health. During this time, he and Sally fell in love. Before proposing marriage to Sally, Charles needed the approval of his brother, John, and a few other Methodists, even before appealing to Mr. Gwynne. His brother seemed indifferent, and his other friends, including Vincent Perronet, encouraged him to search his heart and pray. In the end, all his friends appeared to find the match favorable. When Charles spoke with Mr. Gwynne, he was sent to Mrs. Gwynne for final approval. She was more difficult to convince, considering the unstable condition of Charles' itinerant lifestyle. Charles had to ensure £100 per annum for Sally, and after having several people write letters to Mrs. Gwynne confirming that he would be able to support Sally through his writing income, Mrs. Gwynne agreed. This courtship lasted about nineteen months and they were married on April 8, 1749.

Charles and Sally took up residence soon after their marriage at No. 4 Charles Street in Bristol, but Charles was still gone weeks at a time on preaching trips. Sometimes Sally would accompany him in their early life together, but as Charles grew older his trips became less frequent due to his fragile health. Charles and Sally had eight children and only three survived past infancy: Charles (Charlie), Sarah (Sally), and Samuel (Sammy). Their son John died in the small pox outbreak that nearly took Sally's life as well in 1753. Sally lived, although she was visibly scarred from the disease. Charles (Sr.) took an active role in the education of his children and with Sally's help (and that of private tutors at times) they taught their children at home. Charlie and Sammy were very musically inclined like their parents (both Charles and Sally were

musically gifted). Sammy rose to fame as an organist and composer, as did his son Samuel Sebastian Wesley, who was offered a knighthood by Queen Victoria in 1873. Sally grew up to be a devout Christian like her parents and spent much time with her Aunt Patty. Charlie never made a commitment to any church and Sammy landed in the Roman Catholic tradition, which was something of a disappointment to Charles.¹³

THE WESLEYAN WAY OF SALVATION

In the United Methodist Hymnal (UMH) there are eighty-one hymns written by Charles Wesley. They are broken down into different categories including the Triune God, Jesus Christ, Holy Spirit, community life, and the new heaven and earth. The two largest categories are those on the Holy Spirit (which includes the theme of grace) and community life, each with twenty-eight hymns.¹⁴ There are eight hymns on personal holiness and six on being united in Christ, which reflects Charles' focus on sanctification and Christ's power to bring people together.

The Wesleys focused very much on singing, and we see their lens in the "Rules for Singing" at the beginning of the UMH. Among my favorites are, "Learn these tunes before you learn any others; afterwards learn as many as you please;" and "Above all sing spiritually. Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing him more than yourself or any other creature."¹⁵ The Wesleys knew that people were learning theology through their hymns. We remember and sing songs to ourselves, so if we are singing spiritual songs, we will be affirming our place in God's created order, our humanity or sinfulness, and God's redeeming grace that draws us to him. We move closer to God through song.

1. *Salvation Available for All*

Many of Wesley's hymns speak to the overarching nature of God's saving work through Jesus Christ on the cross. As Berger writes, "The emphasis on God's all-encompassing will to save is particularly important to Charles Wesley ...and finds expression in the word *all* used in several of the Christ-epithets: 'all-atoning Lamb,' 'all-redeeming

¹³Tabraham, 53.

¹⁴Thank you S T Kimbrough, Jr. for listing these at the end of the book, *A Heart to Praise My God* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 199-200.

¹⁵*United Methodist Hymnal* (1989), vii.

Lord,”¹⁶ among others throughout his hymns. This is not a Universalist understanding of “all roads lead to God,” but rather the conviction that salvation through Christ is available for all, regardless of whether all people choose God. In “Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus,” Wesley expresses the encompassing nature of God: “Israel’s strength and consolation, hope of all the earth thou art; dear desire of every nation, joy of every longing heart.”¹⁷ Jesus is the hope, desire, and joy of all, if they choose to follow him. No one has done deeds that are unforgivable or will necessarily exclude them from heaven. In “Sinners, Turn: Why Will You Die” verse seven again speaks to the inclusive nature of God’s work:

Turn, he cries, ye sinners, turn;
By his life your God hath sworn;
He would have you turn and live,
He would all the world receive;
He hath brought to all the race
Full salvation by his grace;
He hath no one soul passed by;
Why will you resolve to die?¹⁸

At the same time, Wesley made salvation immediately personal. In his poem “Glory to God, and Praise and Love,” he writes, “I felt my Lord’s atoning blood, close to my soul applied; me, me he loved, the Son of God, for me, for me he died!”¹⁹ Wesley is very specific in connecting Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross, and feeling the salvific effects of God’s presence. This is also part of his transparent nature, whereby he believes himself a most grievous sinner, and thus encourages others to seek salvation on the grounds that no one is as bad as he. He speaks directly to this theme in verses fifteen through seventeen, where he calls harlots, thieves, and murderers to believe that the Savior died for them and feel his love, for they can be saved “from crimes as great as mine.”

There is an inherent optimism and hope in Wesley’s hymns that deal with salvation, which was dramatically different than the lives that people were living in eighteenth-century England. With the political

¹⁶Teresa Berger, *Theology in Hymns?* Timothy E. Kimbrough, trans. (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1995), 108.

¹⁷UMH, 196.

¹⁸UMH, 346.

¹⁹UMH, 58, also known as his “Anniversary Hymn of Conversion,” the larger poem from which we have, “O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing.”

and social turmoil, people needed something to believe in, some source from which to find new hope. Wesley provided this hopefulness in his hymns. For example, in “Thou Hidden Source of Calm Repose” he writes in the second verse,

Thy mighty name Salvation is,
And keeps my happy soul above;
Comfort it brings, and power and peace,
And joy and everlasting love;
To me with thy dear name are given
Pardon and holiness in heaven.²⁰

Through Jesus Christ we are provided comfort, peace, joy, and everlasting love through his pardon. In such a cynical time as we live in today, this message may be met with skepticism if it is not backed up with attitude and a life transformed (which would be no problem for Wesley). If these are the thoughts and feelings regarding the hope that Christ brings, written by one of the founders of Methodism, we should take notice and evaluate whether or not we believe that Jesus is as great a happiness as Charles expresses. S T Kimbrough, Jr. expounds on this hope in Christ in his commentary:

Although the paradoxes of life often become stumbling blocks to faith, Wesley experienced God as the God of the paradoxes: God comes to us in the tensions and polarities of life with strength and wisdom that enable us to endure. When we feel there is no strength or reason to go on, we discover a hidden Source of power.²¹

Wesley was correct that our world is full of despair, poverty, and shame, and that Christ gives us the strength to walk in the midst of these things if we have a living relationship with him. Otherwise we are held captive by sin and worldliness, which is death. In “Jesus! The Name High over All,” Wesley speaks more about the joy that Jesus brings to sinners (verse two): “Jesus! The name to sinners dear, the name to sinners given; it scatters all their guilty fear, it turns their hell to heaven.”²² Jesus is a transformative Savior, bringing help to the sinner and setting him free. This is good news indeed, and Wesley longs for all to experience his love and mercy.

²⁰UMH, 153.

²¹Kimbrough, Jr., *A Heart to Praise My God*, 179.

²²UMH, 193.

Verse three continues with “O that the world might taste and see the riches of his grace! The arms of love that compass me would all the world embrace.” Apart from the beautiful imagery of God’s arms of love and the feeling that it conjures, Wesley was focused on sharing the message that Jesus Christ is the hope of the world and that his salvation is available for all. Wesley is not being flamboyant in his use of the term “all;” rather he is serious that every person on earth has the ability to accept Christ. It is important to recognize that Wesley includes sin and salvation together as themes in many of his hymns, for one cannot receive salvation without realizing his or her sinfulness.

When one stops to read through Wesley’s hymns on salvation and the grace of Christ, he cannot help but be encouraged by the joy and enthusiasm of Wesley’s writings about God. They are filled with positive change, courage, and hope, all because of Jesus Christ, Redeemer of the world. Through his writing, Wesley brings hope and light to a dark world and we are called as Christians (especially Methodists) to do the same thing.

2. *Prevenient Grace and God’s Overflowing Love*

Charles Wesley was very clear that God’s grace pursues us all and we have the option of ignoring it. Prevenient grace, according to the 2012 *Discipline*, is “the divine love that surrounds all humanity and precedes any and all of our conscious impulses.”²³ God is present with us and has a deep (even infinite) love for us, even without our acknowledgement. This theme is reflected in several of Wesley’s hymns including “Sinners, Turn: Why Will You Die,” “Depth of Mercy,” and “And Can It Be that I Should Gain.”

“Sinners, Turn: Why Will You Die” is based on Ezekiel 18:31-21, which reads, “Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, people of Israel? For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign Lord. Repent and live” (NIV). Yet again we see God’s desire for all to gain life through him and Wesley’s use of this theme, this time in the context of prevenient grace. Wesley asks some theologically pointed questions, as found in verse three of “Sinners, Turn.” Questions such as why are you

²³*The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 2012), 50.

still refusing God's grace? Why are you choosing death? Why are you intentionally ignoring God and grieving his heart?

Sinners, turn: why will you die?
 God, the Spirit, asks you why;
 He, who all your lives hath strove,
 Wooed you to embrace his love.
 Will you not his grace receive?
 Will you still refuse to live?
 Why, you long-sought sinners,
 Why will you grieve your God, and die?²⁴

Wesley paints God as a lover of humanity who tries to get our attention. The Holy Spirit "is always there, inviting and yearning that we enfold God's self-giving love in all we think, say, and do... It entreats us earnestly to personify love until we become love. Refusing this love, this grace, is the refusal of life itself, says Wesley."²⁵ When Wesley asks these questions, he is requiring that the hearers/singers evaluate their lives and determine what is most important to them, their sin or their freedom in Christ. This is foundational to the understanding of God's work in the world before people recognize him as Savior. God strives repeatedly to make his love real to us through the Holy Spirit and yearns for us to respond affirmatively.

This preventive grace was vastly important to Charles and at the time he wrote this hymn he was an itinerant evangelist and preacher. His letters indicate he was in Newcastle and Oxford during 1742 (there are no records from his journal in 1742). While in Newcastle, Wesley preached to the Keelman and others whose work surrounded the barge industry. One could guess that they were people of ill-repute, and yet Charles preached and ministered to them out of love and compassion.²⁶ The membership of the Methodist society increased from 70 to 250 while Charles was in Newcastle.²⁷ One can only surmise that this increase had much to do with people understanding the love of God through Wesley's preaching and hymns he had written thus far.

In the hymn "Depth of Mercy," Wesley describes the personal battle we have with sin, and the grace which surrounds us. In the second

²⁴UMH, 346.

²⁵Kimbrough, Jr., *A Heart to Praise My God*, 168-169.

²⁶John R. Tyson, *Assist Me to Proclaim* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 75.

²⁷*ibid.*

verse he writes, "I have long withstood his grace, long provoked him to his face, would not hearken to his calls, grieved him by a thousand falls."²⁸ Wesley is not only describing his sinfulness, but at the same time sharing that no matter what we choose to do, God is still there and has not deserted us. In addition, Wesley is conveying the deep and abiding love that God has for his created beings. God is willing to be slandered, provoked, ignored, and sinned against, all in the name of love. As humans, we cannot comprehend someone loving us enough to put up with the hurt and pain we can inflict. Yet Wesley proclaims that there is such a person, and that is the triune God. Through prevenient grace, God surrounds us with his mercy, as this hymn describes.

Wesley describes God's sacrifice and undeserved grace in the third verse of "And Can It Be that I Should Gain:"

"He left his Father's throne above
(So free, so infinite his grace!),
Emptied himself of all but love,
And bled for Adam's helpless race.
'Tis mercy all, immense and free,
For O my God, it found out me!"²⁹

This verse succinctly describes Jesus' sacrifice on the cross and the reason for it: love. It also describes how God's love searches and finds people out, without costing them a penny. God's grace and mercy is free of charge, and prevenient grace is given to all, without requirements or promises to fulfill. "This reaches the essence of the Methodist message, that God's love is universal, that Jesus is every feeble sinner's friend."³⁰ There is no better message to bring hope and peace than this!

It should not be surprising that these three hymns were written within four years of his spiritual awakening. They speak of God's infinite love and grace for all people, even when we confront him with sin and rebellion. God is willing to pursue us and be rejected because he is love. His love is not dependent upon being reciprocated, but is given freely to all. This theme grabbed hold of Charles in his emotional encounter with God and kept him steady, always reminding him of God's grace seeking us out against personal sin.

²⁸UMH, 355.

²⁹UMH, 363.

³⁰Rattenbury. 99.

3. *Sanctification and the Pursuit of Holiness*

When people think of Charles and John Wesley or Methodists, their doctrine of sanctification should come to mind. John Wesley's enforcement of holiness was almost militant, but Charles had a softer touch, which comes through in his hymns on sanctification and personal holiness. One of the hymns that describe sanctification is "I Want a Principle Within." Holiness is not just about action, it is about having a proper heart or attitude, being free to sin but not wanting to sin, and being fulfilled in love. Holiness is a process, and is a gift from God through the Holy Spirit. This hymn describes these things in an honest way that does not hide our wandering ways.

I want a principle within of watchful, godly fear,
 A sensibility of sin, a pain to feel it near.
 I want the first approach to feel of pride or wrong desire,
 To catch the wandering of my will, and quench the kindling fire.

From Thee that I no more may stray, no more Thy goodness grieve,
 Grant me the filial awe, I pray, the tender conscience give.
 Quick as the apple of an eye, O God, my conscience make;
 Awake my soul when sin is nigh, and keep it still awake.

Almighty God of truth and love, to me Thy power impart;
 The mountain from my soul remove, the hardness from my heart.
 O may the least omission pain my reawakened soul,
 And drive me to that blood again, which makes the wounded whole.³¹

One of the first movements of sanctification is the knowing of right and wrong. Wesley pleads with God in this hymn to provide an accurate conscience and a yielded heart. We cannot move towards righteousness if we do not know what it looks like. Therefore, the Holy Spirit is integral in making one's inward desires line up with God's righteousness. We must always be listening to our conscience and intuition as means of God's correction and direction. God must also make our hearts pliable so that we can continue to learn what it means to love God completely and love our neighbor.

³¹UMH, 410.

[Furthermore,] Wesley knew how important the cultivation of the conscience was for the maintenance of healthy and happy relationships. Most important, he was concerned that the early Methodist people develop a biblical understanding of how good and evil forces shape decisions in our lives. Of particular concern to him was the seductive power of pride, wrong desire, and the wandering will.³²

In order to make proper and godly decisions, we must be aware of what is in our hearts and then confess and repent of that sin. We can be blinded by sin in so many ways, that teaching new believers how to develop a godly conscience was a priority. This hymn is a wonderful prayer, and would have been a good way to stay connected to God in a humble relationship, which is part of the sanctification process.

Another hymn on sanctification is “Jesus, Thine All-Victorious Love.” Wesley wrote this in 1740 as well, which adds to the list of amazing work that he did in the two years after his spiritual awakening. Wesley appreciated fire metaphors for the work of the Holy Spirit, and in verse two he writes, “O that in me the sacred fire might now begin to glow; burn up the dross of base desire and make the mountains flow!” This description of a holy fire within that burns sin away is vivid. The sanctifying fire of the Holy Spirit removes sin so that our faith grows enough to make mountains move. This fire not only burns away sin but sets our hearts on fire for God. In verse four Wesley writes, “Refining fire, go through my heart, illuminate my soul; scatter thy life through every part and sanctify the whole.”³³ The Holy Spirit appreciates being invited into our lives to do God’s refining work in us. The plea in verse four acknowledges the gift of sanctification through the fire of God.

GOD IS LOVE

As much as personal sin is a theme in Wesley’s hymns, so is God’s gift of love. “For Charles Wesley the most comprehensive statement Holy Scripture makes about God’s nature is ‘God is love,’ yet it is precisely divine love, which ‘is most unsearchable.’”³⁴ Wesley’s God was a God of mystery, and in many ways Wesley was a “reasonable”

³²Paul W. Chilcote, *John and Charles Wesley: Selections from Their Writings and Hymns, Annotated & Explained* (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2011), 148.

³³UMH, 422.

³⁴S T Kimbrough, “Theosis in the Writings of Charles Wesley,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 52:2 (2008), 201.

mystic. He did not isolate himself like other mystics, but he sought and wrote about encounters with God that are highly personal and intimate in nature. “Wesley is awestruck by the expression of divine love toward him and all humankind and knows indubitably that no one deserves such love. No one in earth or heaven, no angel, can explain God’s charity. It is, and shall always be, a mystery.”³⁵ He believed everyone could have a deep experience of God that was rooted in scripture and reason, yet which was, at the same time, a complete mystery. God’s boundless love for humanity does not make rational sense when compared to the sin and pain we inflict on ourselves, on others, and against God. Wesley’s experience of God as mystery and his infinite love comes through in his hymns and poems. The poem “Being of Beings, God of Love” exemplifies Wesley’s experiential, even mystical, theology of love that permeated his writing for fifty years.

Being of beings, God of love,
To thee our hearts we raise;
Thy all sustaining pow’r we prove,
And gladly sing thy praise.

Thine, wholly thine, we pant to be;
Our sacrifice receive;
Made, and preserved, and saved by thee,
To thee ourselves we give.

Heav’nward our every wish aspires,
For all thy mercy’s store;
The sole return thy love requires,
Is that we ask for more.

For more we ask; we open then
Our hearts to embrace thy will;
Turn, and revive us, Lord, again
With all thy fullness fill.

Come, Holy Ghost, the Saviour’s love
Shed in our hearts abroad;
So shall we ever live, and move,
And be, with Christ, in God.³⁶

³⁵Kimbrough, Jr., *Theosis in the Writings of Charles Wesley*, 200.

³⁶*Living Hymns of Charles Wesley* (Winona Lake: Light and Life Press, 1957), 47.

Charles Wesley had a very specific gift of hymn writing that has blessed millions of people around the world. His creative ability was only matched by his transparency regarding his sinful nature. Even though he struggled with depression and sickness in his life, these challenges only made his faith stronger, and that much more real, once he had an experiential encounter with God. Wesley's hymns are transforming, if one focuses on the words. They convey hope, joy, freedom, and love, and all of these are sorely needed in our world today. May we embrace Wesley's confidence in the Divine, and bring others to know the deep love that is in Christ!