

Charles Wesley: Spiritual Theologian

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Date: 04 October 2009

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[0 : 0 0] Okay, why don't we begin with just a word of prayer. Can you hear me in the back? Okay, let's begin. Father, we do invite the presence of your Holy Teaching Spirit with us this morning, realizing that we're gathered as your people and that we need so very much to hear from you, to be taught, to be corrected.

And we pray that you would help us live that article of our faith today, that we believe in the communion of saints, and that as we keep company with Charles Wesley, even more than that, we would find that we're keeping company with you.

So we invite you to be here among us this morning, in Christ's name. Amen. All right, I've entitled the talk this morning, Charles Wesley, Spiritual Theologian, and found one of the portraits.

I've put a little picture there on the outline for you of Charles Wesley. But I thought I'd begin by reading one of Paul's great prayers in the book of Ephesians, where Paul says this, For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name.

I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.

[1 : 3 3] And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled to all the measure of the fullness of God.

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations forever and ever.

Amen. I feel like I want to say this is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Why do I put that passage at the top of the outline when I want to talk to you about Charles Wesley?

I think this is a passage that illustrates in its very form what I want to talk about with Charles Wesley in referring to him as a spiritual theologian.

Evagrius of Pontus, the first monastic theologian from the early Church, said, a theologian is one who prays and one who prays is a theologian. And the theology that we read in this prayer in Ephesians is the theology of a prayer.

[2 : 5 5] Its very form is prayer. It's the mother tongue language of the Christian who confesses Christ. And just three features of this prayer that I think are features of Charles Wesley's theology.

And we'll come back to this. But it's that spiritual theology is doxological, aspirational, and ecclesial. Three unusual words. But let's unpack those.

Spiritual theology is doxological. It leads to doxology. It begins and ends in doxology in praise. And you see that here in the form of this prayer that opens up into praise.

And the very last sentence is one that we use as a doxology. It is... The form of it is prayer. Theology is done on our knees.

And it opens out into mystery. But this is not the mystery of post-modern skepticism. This is not the mystery of agnosticism.

[3 : 57] Sometimes I tease my students that when they say mystery, they mean that their head hurts. Right? But this is the mystery that we are finite and God is infinite so that we cannot take in, in one view, this much love.

We cannot take in, in one view, this much grace. Look at what Paul says. To know love that surpasses knowledge. How do you know something that surpasses knowledge?

To be filled to the measure of the fullness of God. How do we have the capacity, how is our cup big enough to be filled with the fullness of God? This opens out into a mystery that is positively revealed, but beyond, we can endlessly explore, beyond what we can grasp.

So that's the sense in which theology begins in worship and ends in worship that we'll see in Charles Wesley. Secondly, spiritual theology is aspirational.

By that I mean that this is a theology that theology is meant to excite desire for God, longing for God.

[5 : 08] It is meant to be transformational. It has a direction. It has an end in mind. It has a goal. And theology is all about putting us on a path to the future, to the great good that is coming, to heaven and to Christian maturity.

And you can see that in terms of Paul's longing for the Ephesian believers here to be rooted in love and to grow toward this goal. And again, we'll see that aspiration in Charles Wesley.

And then lastly, it's ecclesial, that it's grounded in a deep sense of the church. This is not freelance. This is not just eccentric or individual, but it is according to the power that has worked within us to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations forever and ever.

So that in outline, the bit that I want to preach is that bit. Okay? And then we'll talk about Charles Wesley. A bit about Charles Wesley's biography.

Who is Charles Wesley? You have his dates there, 1707 to 1788. 2007 was the tercentenary of his birth.

[6 : 25] And it saw the publication of a number of books, a number of good books, about Charles Wesley, such that it looks like there's a bit of a renaissance or a Charles Wesley revival going on in different ways.

And I brought just a few of these. I wrote a review essay. And so I had this kind of stack of books in 2007. And I thought I'd just show you a couple of them. They're on the American, on this side of the Atlantic, and on the other side in Britain, there are two biographies.

So Erdman's published one, John Tyson, Assist Me to Proclaim. He deals a little bit more with the hymns. Then Gary Best with Epworth Press in England, Charles Wesley, a biography.

But two good, very readable biographies came out. But also there was a major conference, I believe it was in Liverpool, out of which came a collection.

There must be some 30 scholarly essays in here. Charles Wesley, Life, Literature, and Legacy. And just of an unusually high quality, excellent, excellent work. But all of this has been grounded on a renewed attention to the actual manuscripts and the poems and the hymns and the writings and the letters.

[7 : 41] So there isn't yet, we haven't got organized enough yet to do a kind of big critical edition of the works of Charles Wesley. But we are seeing people have cracked his shorthand.

And so we have the new edition of the Manuscript Journal. Maybe aware of John Wesley's journal. Charles kept a journal too. The Manuscript Journals have been coming out. Three volumes of his unpublished poetry.

I mean, there was enough published in his own lifetime. I mean, dozens of hymn books. But there's also the unpublished poetry. And there's an edition of his letters coming out and so on.

So it's kind of an exciting time to find out more about Charles Wesley. After 300 years, there's still more to find out just at the basic level of manuscripts we haven't read yet that haven't been published.

So 2007 was a big birthday party for Charles Wesley in various ways. One of the things that we discovered in 2007, I think, is that Charles is not the same as John.

[8 : 45] And I think John Wesley, we think of as the founder of Methodism. And often, and I've been guilty of this, we sort of, it's almost like it's a hyphenated compound, John and Charles Wesley.

And what you say of one, you can say of the other. And they're brothers after all. Or John gives you prose and then Charles gives it to you in poetry. You know, or that somehow they're just kind of the same.

And it's a bit like from my office window, I can look up at Cyprus and it looks like one mountain. But as you drive up, it's Cyprus Bowl and it's kind of, it separates out into two mountains.

And you can kind of realize now that these are distinct figures. And I just mentioned two areas in particular where it seems like you can see them very distinctly.

One is in terms of churchmanship. And I'll talk about that a little bit more. But Charles Wesley was very loyal to the Church of England. He was very wary of the move and the drift towards Methodism, towards separatism in the 18th century.

[9 : 52] So in the 1730s and the 18th century, Methodism emerged as a kind of renewal movement within the Church of England with a kind of cellular structure like small group Bible studies and so on.

And it had lay preachers. But there was always the danger that this thing was going to move towards separation. And it's much more apparent now that it was Charles, even more than John, that was putting the brakes on and trying to prevent that.

Secondly, Methodists, one of the distinctives of the movement that John and Charles started was their focus on what they called Christian perfection that was controversial then as it is now.

And John's belief in particular that an instantaneous and entire sanctification was possible in this life. And that Methodists, faithful, were to be encouraged to pray that they could be so filled with love that there was no more room for sin.

And there were perfectionist revivals in the 1760s where people cried out in meetings not just that they had been justified but that they had been sanctified and were making claims to perfection.

[11 : 04] Charles was always much more wary of those claims than John. And it seems like he, it's like he had a higher standard for perfection and so was less willing to accredit it until maybe rare cases probably just before death and that sort of thing.

So those are a couple of the areas where it seems like they differed a little bit. Let me talk just about a few turning points in Charles Wesley's life subheading there not just John's brother.

First of all is 1729 in Oxford. The first eight years of his life had been spent in Lincolnshire at the Epworth Rectory under the disciplined training and firm hand of his mother Susanna.

Susanna has sort of become the hero these days of Christian homeschoolers. And anyways he had witnessed Charles did the dedicated devotion of both his mother and father.

They were both in their own way very remarkable Christians. Christians. He probably inherited an emotional temperament more like his volatile father Samuel. But he also had a good measure of his mother's strength of mind and discipline too.

[12 : 32] He went on to do his schooling at Westminster School in London and he lived there with his older brother Samuel Junior. and it's there that he became confirmed in his kind of principles of high churchmanship and his loyalty to the government kind of Tory principles that would stay with him for the rest of his life.

And this also in his excellent classical education this is where a kind of foundation is laid for him as a poet. And again we'll talk a little bit more about that. He went on to Oxford for university and he grew somewhat more relaxed in his seriousness about religion.

He complained once to his brother, what, would you have me become a saint all at once? It's sort of like, you know, Augustine as a young man said, give me chastity but not yet.

Would you have me become a saint all at once? The turning point came in 1729 when he returned to the high ideals of devotion he had been raised to appreciate.

He renewed his dedicated dedication to purity of intention. And this is, there's an Anglican ascetical tradition, an Anglican spiritual tradition of holy living, especially out of a literature that comes out of the 17th century.

[13 : 54] And it was Jeremy Taylor and the 18th century William Law. And these readers, these writers presented a vision of the Christian life as disciplined, as seeking after holiness, holiness, and purity of intention.

And this became his own ideals as for John during this period. These first two turning points I should say, John and Charles take these turns together.

So at Oxford he pursues holiness with great seriousness. Fasting, sacramental observance, disciplined Bible reading, small groups for accountability, spiritual diary keeping, and so on.

He's a very earnest and serious young man. He is also described, John Gambold said he was a man made for friendship. Isn't that a wonderful thing to be able to say about somebody? And he seemed to naturally attract others to him.

And he gathered others around him in this pursuit for high Christian ideals. One of those that he recruited into this small group devotional movement at Oxford during these years was the future evangelist George Whitefield.

[15 : 09] During these years, the two brothers Wesley were at the center of a devotional movement which we tend to call Oxford Methodism to distinguish it from the later Methodism.

Because they were labeled Methodists by others as a term of abuse that they're super methodical in their faith, right? That they're over-disciplined in their faith. They had a holy club which other people thought of as a holier-than-thou club, right?

But this Oxford Methodist period is remarkable for the pursuit of holiness. The second turning point that John and Charles, as I say, take together comes between 1736 and 1739.

It was during these years that Charles passed through a profound crisis of insufficiency, that he was unable to live up to the ideals he aspired to. And which of us haven't felt that painful realization as a Christian that the ideals we strive for were not equal to?

And he experienced a climactic evangelical conversion during these years. He found his voice after this as an evangelist and as a poet.

[16 : 24] this period began with a year in 1736 as a failed missionary in Georgia, much like John, going to Georgia with all these ideals of primitive Christianity and a pristine purity and of discipline, but it was traumatic.

There was interpersonal conflict. He went through a near-death experience, nearly died of pleurisy, illness, debility, social estrangement and a sense just of spiritual inadequacy and emptiness.

Together, these experiences provoked an assurance quest. He wanted to know that God's love for him in particular was real and that he could feel it. And there were Christians from Central Europe he had met, Moravians, who testified to this experience.

And he longed for the same experience. And so it proved that he went through his own conversion on the 21st of May in 1738 back in London.

I sometimes refer to this as one of the most perfectly liturgically timed conversion experiences, seeing as it was on Pentecost Sunday that he went through this.

[17 : 42] Let me just see if I can read you a little bit of this. He's bedridden with pleurisy and there's a kind of what coincides together is both his illness and his sense of spiritual insufficiency.

And May 21st 1738 I waked day of Pentecost he says right at the top of his journal. I waked in hope and expectation of his coming.

At nine my brother and some friends came and sang a hymn to the Holy Ghost. Wonder what hymn it was. My comfort and hope were hereby increased. In about a half an hour they went.

I betook myself to prayer. The substance was as follows. O Jesus thou hast said I will come to you. Thou hast said I will send a comforter unto you.

Thou hast said my father and I will come unto you and make our abode with you. It's Pentecost Sunday. Thou art a God who canst not lie. I wholly rely upon thy most true promise.

[18 : 51] Accomplish it in thy time and manner. He just opens himself up to God saying I want that event of salvation history to be made true for me.

Well there is he's in the home of a brazier in London named Mr. Bray and a woman named Mrs.

Musgrave comes by and she kind of speaks words I'm trying to remember what it is that she says to him but he kind of hears these words and he's wondering if it's a locution if it's actually God speaking and it's her outside the door but he takes it as a word from God that see if I can find here what she said um um um um no wouldn't you know what I can't find it anyways he said um um um um 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 unknown weakness I saw that I stood by faith if

John Wesley described a uh strangely warmed heart in his conversion um Charles referred to it as a palpitation of heart that he experienced a warmth of heart John Tyson in his biography calls this Pentecost made personal and Charles moves on from this experience to have a new assurance a new confidence in 1739 as an evangelist it's like things that he knew were true became deeply personal he had a new kind of sense of being empowered by the Holy Spirit and the surest proof of this turning point in his life was not just the narrative of the experience but was the new fluency he found in every sphere he began to preach extemporaneous without notes or with just a little bit of an outline and we have his preaching diary from this period and he's preaching like a dozen times a week in London and during this period 1739 1740 a lot of people think consider him a much better preacher than his brother

Charles is seen as the more powerful preacher his sermon texts show this confidence as I say a bolder proclamation of God's grace and the work of the spirit and he also began to preach outdoors in 1739 and it's in 1739 that he also began to publish the remarkable body of hymns that he would add to for the rest of his life he begins preaching and he begins singing well for the next decade while he was in his 30s he is in partnership with his brother John as a young single traveling evangelist in the Anglican church a Methodist sort of small M Methodist not yet a denomination and these are in heady days of revival when all seem to walk in a cloud of wonders you can you read some of his sermon manuscripts from this period and you can sense the fire in his bones he doesn't pull any punches in his preaching preaching either the law or the gospel he is front and center as a co-founder of the Methodist movement in London and Bristol and then regions beyond so from conversion and the beginnings of the Methodist movement these two turning points the brothers are together the at his conversion immediately afterwards they sang a hymn and Methodist scholars are generally agreed that the hymn was the one that we know as and can it be and I thought this maybe is a point where we could sing that if we have okay wonderful there's it's on your the handout about the third page there it's 193 and why don't we sing this

[23 : 13] I what's that yeah why don't we sing all five verses and why don't you stand and why don't we sing And man be that I should gain an interest in the Savior's blood.

Tidy for me, cautious pain, for me, with him to death pursued. Amazing love, how can it be?

That thou, my God, shouldst die for me. Amazing love, how can it be?

That thou, my God, shouldst die for me. It is mystery all the mortal dies, who can explore his strange design.

In faith the firstborn serenetrize, to sound the depths of love divine.

[25 : 05] It is mercy all that earth adore, that angel blinds in fire, O Lord.

It is mercy all that earth adore, that angel blinds in fire, O Lord.

He and his all have their throne above, so free, so infinite, his grace.

Emptied himself of all the love, and bled for Adam's helpless grace.

His mercy all the immense and free, for all my God, it found of me.

[26 : 05] His mercy all the immense and free, for all my God, it found of me.

All my grace and spirit lay, past bound in sin and nature's night.

Thine I diffused, I quaking gray, I wore the dungeon flamed with light.

My chains and faith, my heart, my heart was free, I rose and forth and followed thee.

My chains and chains, my heart, my heart was free, I rose and forth and followed thee.

[27 : 05] My chains and chains, my heart, my heart was free, I rose and forth and followed thee.

My chains and chains, my heart, my heart was free, I rose and forth and followed thee.

I butchered the quotation from the conversion. Let me read it to you again. I want you to get this. So he prays this aspiration that Pentecost would be made personal. Having said this, I was composing myself to sleep in quietness and peace when I heard one come in.

Mrs. Musgrave, I thought by the voice. And I heard one say, in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, arise and believe and thou shalt be healed of all thine infirmities.

I wondered how it should enter into her head to speak in that manner. The word struck me to the heart. I sighed and said within myself, oh, that Christ would but speak thus to me.

[28 : 44] I lay musing and trembling. Then I thought, but what if it should be him? What if this was Christ speaking? I will at least send to see. I rang and Mrs. Turner coming.

I desired her to send up Mrs. Musgrave. She went down and returning said, Mrs. Musgrave had not been there. My heart sunk within me at the word and I hoped it might be Christ indeed.

He was really wondering whether this was audibly the words of Christ to him. However, I sent her down again to inquire and felt in the meantime a strange palpitation of heart. I said yet feared to say, I believe, I believe.

She came up again and said, it was I, a weak sinful creature that spoke, but the words were Christ's. He commanded me to say them and so constrained me that I could not forbear.

So he hears these words of Christ. He longs for these words to be true for him. And then he reflects on it and responds to those words. So those are the words that provoke this, as he says, palpitation of heart and this kind of turning point.

[29 : 49] It's kind of like all the pieces are there and it just takes a spark to light the tinder of this conversion experience. All right, just briefly, the last two turning points are courtship and marriage and then his period as a resident minister in Bristol and London.

And these are really the points where he begins to diverge a little bit from his brother John. John had a very difficult marriage.

Some historians call it the 30 years war. And Charles had a very happy marriage to Sarah Gwynne. And so alongside the model of John Wesley as almost a mendicant, like almost like a Franciscan or a Dominican single man, even after marriage, he said he wouldn't preach or travel a day less for being married.

And that kind of single-minded dedication, we have to set Charles as a happily married man and a family man after 1749. And that actually causes a lot of tension with John Wesley that we won't go into.

But after 1756, the other big difference is he is a resident Methodist minister in Bristol and London. And so for the last 32 years of his life, he's not itinerating.

[31 : 28] He's not traveling like John. He'll occasionally make forays, like to purge the preachers for the sake of discipline and try to clean up after John makes messes. But he basically anchors Methodism in its heartland in Bristol and then in London.

And so that again is a very different kind of picture. And just illustrating some of the tension between the two brothers, this is a letter written to Samuel Walker of Truro, an Anglican evangelical in Cornwall.

And he says, there's lots and lots of letters like this, but late preaching, it must be allowed, is partial separation. And may, but need not indeed, need not lead to total one.

The probability of it has made me, I'm not sure if that word is, I think it might be tremble. The possibility of total separation with the church has made me tremble for years past and kept me from leaving the Methodists.

I stay not so much to do good as to prevent evil. And he's worried about his brothers' counselors. So this is one of the ways you begin to see this tension reflected over these years in London.

[32 : 59] There's much more we could say about that, but I'm just conscious of the time. And I want to talk more about him as a hymn writer. This is the first hymn book they published together in 1739.

So very, very early. And they just kept publishing hymn books one after the other. Hymns and sacred poems that he published together with his brother John. Some 500 classic Methodist hymns were published during these heady days of revival, 1739 to 1746.

After 1746, he publishes under his own name. And that's one of the ways he's able to provide a settlement for his marriage and to provide an income for his family is through his hymn publishing.

He wrote some 9,000 hymns or poems before he died. 27,000 stanzas. 180,000 lines. That's like 10 lines every day for 50 years.

Three times the output of Wordsworth. There's a story about him arriving on horseback at a cottage. And he just runs in and is like, pen, paper.

[34 : 18] And can it be that I should, you know, and kind of has to write. He's just constantly thinking in verse. And I thought just, sorry the image is so small, but this is the original manuscript of Love Divine All Loves Excelling.

And this is just an example of Rejoice the Lord is King, our Lord and King Adore, from Psalm 68, 18, one of the manuscripts of his hymns.

He was a remarkable hymn writer. And if you turn over the page of the handout, in this revival of Charles Wesley's scholarship, Charles Wesley has been, in a sense, rediscovered by literary critics in the last 20 years or so.

He's not just, he's not just, hymn writing was sort of a backwater in terms of any kind of literary criticism.

but largely through the efforts of a critic named Donald Davy and another named J.R. Watson they've tried to place Charles Wesley back front and center as an Augustan poet, an 18th century poet and part of what has happened as a result of that is there's a renewed attention to his art and one of the things I think is fascinating about Charles Wesley and why I feel like no worship service is complete unless there's at least one Charles Wesleyan is his ability to hold together art of the highest level and doctrine of the highest level with passion, energy and enthusiasm and devotion that's as passionate as any chorus, any modern song and I've got two quotations here, one is from John Wesley himself defending his brother's poetry and another from Donald Davy the critic some critics in the period in the 18th century criticized hymnody as being there's a famous line where Alexander Pope sort of criticized

[36 : 30] Isaac Watts talked about sinking every line to the level of the most vulgar capacity in other words in order to write a hymn you have to sink poetry from its fine, complex metaphors and conceits and rhythms to something that can be immediately grasped by a whole congregation but he took that on as an art form it's an austere, restrained form I'm going to limit myself to that constraint, what's required for worship and still write poetry and I think it was Alexander Pope sort of satirized that as sunk poetry but so there was a need in a sense to kind of defend what they were doing but this is John Wesley may I be permitted to add a few words with regard to the poetry I will speak to those who are judges thereof with all freedom and unreserved to these I may say without offense in these hymns there's no doggerel, no botches nothing put up to patch up the rhyme, no feeble expletives here is nothing turgid or bombast on the one hand or low and creeping on the other here are no cant expressions, no words without meaning those who impute this to us know not what they say and actually if you read these critics who are writing about Wesley now they would very much agree they talk about strength of diction we talk common sense both in prose and verse and use no word but in a fixed and determinate sense here are, allow me to say, both the purity and strength and the elegance of the English language and at the same time the utmost simplicity and plainness suited to every capacity lastly I desire a man of taste to judge these are the only competent judges whether there be not in some of the following hymns the true spirit of poetry such as cannot be acquired by art and labor but must be the gift of nature by labor a man may become a tolerable imitator of Spencer, Shakespeare and Milton and so on but unless he be born a poet he will never attain the genuine spirit of poetry so that may sound like special pleading but as I say in this revival of scholarship in our own generation there's a lot of literary critics who are beginning to agree and look at this next quotation from the critic Donald Davy

Charles Wesley's hymns are not like most later hymns geysers of warm feeling and yet heaven knows the feeling is there we respect its integrity and we take its force the force of the feeling because it is not offered in isolation but together with its occasion an occasion grasped and presented with a keen and sinewy intelligence intelligence comes into the poetry of this period not as contraband smuggled in as ingenuity but straightforward and didactic and the intellectual strength does not desiccate the emotions but gives them validity and force isn't that a powerful paragraph?

it's and really what it is is I think he's writing within the Anglican tradition that seeks to hold together doctrine discipline and devotion fire in the fireplace and trying to hold that together and so there's a Marxist critic who has written a whole history of hymnody largely through an elite and popular paradigm you know there's the elite learned poetry and then there's popular stuff like Negro spirituals but when he comes to Wesley he says it's both elite and popular it's like in principle written by somebody very learned classical illusions and so on but its destination is popular and it really takes off at a popular level and there's much more we could say about his poetry I wish we had time there are perfect lines for me like born that man no more may die single syllables and yet it sums up so much theology in seven words a line that begins with born and ends with die and it's just there's perfectly balanced periods there's impassively he suffers immortal he dies the compressed paradoxes are the paradoxes of the gospel and they're presented to us in the form of prayer and worship a corporate prayer and corporate worship

I want to give you a few examples of the when do we finish Bill?

soon okay I want to give you a few examples of how popular this hymnody became so if this is really spiritual theology that leads to worship and aspiration that is corporate these aren't individual lyrics these are hymns to be sung by the body of the church how effective was it?

[41 : 52] as I say he's remarkably learned in classical love divine all loves excelling that hymn that begins that way is actually a parody of the libretto of an opera by John Dryden that begins by invoking Venus to come to England as it came to Cyprus to dwell among men and the meter and the diction is actually quoting and then transforming this libretto of Dryden's there are places where Charles Wesley will take and in parallel cross an English word of Latin and Anglo-Saxon derivation and there's all kinds of things that he's doing with the poetry that is remarkably complex even though it's full of passion and can immediately be grasped by working class people singing these hymns but just to give you an idea of how popular this stuff was I've been collecting examples as I've been reading through manuscripts and I can't go through these all but I found a scrapbook of over a hundred letters written to Charles Wesley by lay people and these are some of the things in there

Thomas Cooper who is a carpenter in telling his testimony he said I felt my heart open within me at a meeting and like a fountain of water ran from it and in that moment I felt such love peace and joy past all expression we sang a hymn and I thought I was out of the body with the angels in heaven for I was so full of joy I could not express myself I don't know if you've had an out of body experience singing hymnody but he felt like he was out of the body Mary Ramsey who was a school teacher wrote to Charles Wesley in 1740 she tells of her conversion she recalls sermons she heard in 1739 very early days but another thing she said she wrote another thing that worked in me was some words of that hymn called Christ the Friends of Sinners these words his bleeding heart will make you room his open size shall take you in and she quotes this hymn and how it worked in her this hymn is number 30 in my big fat

Wesley hymn book first published jointly by John and Charles Westy and it's the hymn Where Shall My Wondering Soul Begin and it carried the freight for her spiritually Martha Claggett one of my favorite testimonies her daughter was the first one to come to faith in Christ and her daughter brought Charles Westy to meet with her and they had some meetings and she didn't feel like she could believe and her husband was abusive and she didn't feel like this was very Anglican to actually know your sins are forgiven and he actually meets with her and it's St. Peter's Day and they sing a hymn and I wonder if it's and can it be because that line long my imprisoned spirit lay fast bound in sin in nature's night that's Peter's experience in the book of Acts right it's St. Peter's Day they sing a hymn and she begins to feel like oh

I wish this could be true for me she says she she started to sing hymns when nobody was around and nobody was looking and she went to bed that night and wanting to believe woke up in the middle of the night and found herself singing and that's where the manuscript breaks off but she had her own conversion experience but I like the idea that she sang hymns quote when I was sure no one heard me sort of a secret hymn singer given my voice that's probably how I should sing hymns oh another one of my favorite ones is Elizabeth Halfpenny in Bristol she says probably through her letter Mr. Richards and Mr. Ellison was there at breakfast who sang a hymn whose first line is oh thou who when I did complain at which time I was in some measure supported under my heavy burden she found a kind of relief in singing this hymn but I think you know you have a revival on your hands if people are singing hymns at breakfast right so they're singing hymns at breakfast could you say a word about the tunes are they the ones we sing today some of them are um um um um did Charles write tunes too oh that's a good question no I think they mostly adapt there's a foundry there's a foundry tune book most of the hymns in the 18th century you just have standard meters like long meter short meter um common meter and then you have another tune book and so the tunes aren't as married to specific texts as they are today and so a congregation that knows a few common meter long meter short meter tunes could adapt them to different uh different hymn texts there are some they used a lot of uh handelian uh melodies

George Lamp was another composer um whose music they used and the Methodist singing tended to be more exuberant than nonconformists who used a lot of the old uh psalm tunes the a bit more sober like um oh god our help in ages past would be an old psalm tune and they used more decorated melodies more ecstatic um poetry more interrupted more exclamations and so on um I'm trying to think the the um Advent hymn um is an 18th century tune Low He Comes With Clouds Descending that would be typical of a highly decorated handelian tune from the period thank you yeah um oh as I say I've got pages of these that I I won't read to you um I uh just I think last summer I was looking at a uh in the Bodine Library in Oxford a um um in the Godwin pamphlets they come up bound together uh these 18th century pamphlets there's one that I had ordered up and the whole book came up and it was inscribed on the front in the big hand 1786

[48 : 04] John Lancaster and he was a Methodist who lived on London Road in Manchester and had a Sunday school and he had it is his book and he'd written his name all over it and he just covered the front papers and end papers with words of hymns he copied out uh that had meant much to him right many of them I'm beginning to trace in the uh Methodist hymn books um there's uh maybe just two more because this one is funny um the lay preacher Duncan Wright wrote about a remarkable episode in Ireland at Wexford a Roman Catholic adversary had hidden in a sack in the barn where the Methodists were going to meet and the plan was he had hidden in the sack when the meeting began he would uh sneak out open the door and let in the mob who would set the cat among the pigeons and drive them out so he was planning to let the mob in but he's sitting in the sack hiding and he hears them singing and he thought it a thousand pities to disturb them while singing soon

Duncan Wright tells us the power of God did so confound him that he roared out with might and main and not having power to get out of the sack he was stuck he lay bawling and screaming at last one ventured to see what was the matter and helping him out brought him up confessing his sins and crying for mercy which was the beginning of a lasting work in his soul there's another Methodist preacher who telling him his conversion he said that he used to stalk the Methodists at night you've got to remember this is before electricity right so nights are very dark and he would stalk them kind of following at a distance and he would sit in the long grass outside their meeting houses and hear them worshipping and he would just be weeping and that's what made him want to be with these people to hear these hymns so that's probably enough to give you a sense more stories we could go on with but about the power that this hymnody carried embodied theology not abstract theology to hear people corporately praying and singing and singing their theology and worship full of content but full of feeling too so finally

Charles Wesley spiritual theologian there's a phrase from the early church about Lex I don't know if this is from the early church but Lex or *Lex credendi* which is I think it's sort of like law of prayer is the law of belief is that there's an intimate relationship between prayer what we pray and what we believe and that these things are intimately connected and the way in which we do theology needs to connect these things and I wanted I don't think we'll actually have time to sing I was hoping to sing Love Divine or Love's Excelling but I've got a couple of these hymns on the the last two pages of your outline let's just look at these for a minute and I want to show you and talk a little bit about how these represent a kind of spiritual theology so there's it's 385

Love Divine and then we're going to look over the page at 374 Come Holy Spirit Come Holy Ghost all quickening fire first of all the hymn book in which this appears the Wesleyan hymn book is laid out according to a kind of pattern of the spiritual life from it's sort of a pattern of conversion and it's a pattern of transformation so the whole and you have the outline there on your handout but you can see there was a couple weeks I spent just going through 18th century hymn books and looking at them and most of them aren't organized at all you just get one hymn after the other but the Wesleyan hymn book is organized according to the progress of the spiritual life until you finally arrive at all these participles for believers rejoicing for believers working for believers seeking full redemption the two hymns we're looking at are in this section seeking full redemption and so when we say that his theology is aspirational it's a part of a whole understanding that what begins in conversion is meant to end in Christian maturity okay seeking full redemption seeking all that for which we have been saved like in

Philippians chapter 3 seeking to lay hold of that for which Christ laid hold of me there's the aspiration and whether or not you follow Wesley Charles or John with their doctrine of Christian perfection this section of the hymn book is full of that aspiration of pressing on toward the goal seeking full redemption seeking to be so filled with love that there's no room for sin and this first hymn love divine all love's excelling joy of heaven to earth come down fix in us thy humble dwelling all thy faithful mercies crown the language is that of invocation strong imperatives fix in us thy humble dwelling visit us with thy salvation enter every trembling heart it's it's it's an invocation that the Christ who comes in incarnation would fix in us his humble dwelling and in the second hymn it's the same aspiration invocation imperatives come holy ghost of quickening fire come and in me delight to rest it's another invocation praying for the indwelling praying for the indwelling Christ praying for the indwelling Holy Spirit stanza two if now thy influence

[54 : 32] I feel if now in thee begin to live still to my heart thyself reveal give me thyself forever give appoint my good my goodness just is like a dot a drop my store eager I ask I pant for more eager for thee I ask and pant so strong the principle divine carries me out with sweet constraint till all my hallowed soul is thine plunged in the Godhead's deepest sea and lost in thine immensity what Charles Wesley realized and there's a theologian named Jason Vickers who's written a book on Charles Wesley and he he talks about him as a spiritual theologian in the sense that it takes God to reveal God it's God reveals God and it is the this desire for the indwelling Christ and the indwelling spirit that leads us into the mystery of God we don't understand the mystery of God by speculation we don't understand the mystery of God just by thinking we understand it through prayer through the indwelling spirit through the indwelling

Christ Irenaeus says that God the father reaches out to us with two arms with the son and the spirit and we don't just penetrate the mystery of the trinity by thinking about it and in the early 18th century the beginning of the enlightenment there were all these debates about the trinity and there was a real strong anti-trinitarian movement and the movement of deism and so on and the orthodox apologists most of them anglican tackled that often by entering into the debate on the terms of their opponents and speculating about personality and the trinity and so on and as people have said they won the battle and lost the war and what you were left with was a very dry theology that didn't nourish anybody and a lot of people have wondered was there anywhere in the 18th century you could point to a robust trinitarian theology that really a lively living trinitarian theologian and Jason

Vickers says Charles Wesley look at his hymns on Whitsunday hymns for Whitsunday 1746 I believe it is and it's full of this recognition that God reveals God and that as we respond to the gift of the Holy Spirit as we respond to the revelation of God in Christ we are led into the mystery of the trinity not through speculation but through participation through prayer and through worship and just like in the Ephesians passage that we began with it opens out into mystery but it's not the mystery of agnosticism it's not the mystery of just that my head hurts because I can't think anymore but it's signaled by the word in both of these hymns lost stanza three of the invocation of the spirit of the hymn come

Holy Ghost plunged into Godhead's deepest sea and lost in thine immensity and how does the hymn love divine love excelling end on the previous page till we cast our crowns before the lost in wonder love and praise this is the kind of joyous bewilderment that Charles Westley never never forgot that sense of being plunged into this ocean lost in this immensity of wonder love and praise so that what begins with invocation ends in praise and mystery this is one of his hymns to the Holy Spirit he hath made he hath to us made known the awful mystery in the sense of awesome awe inspiring the trinity in one and unity in three and taught the ransom sons of men what angels never could explain beyond our utmost thought and reason's proudest flight we don't penetrate this mystery by our own thinking and just kind of working out one and three beyond our utmost thought and reason's proudest flight we comprehend him not nor grasp the infinite but worship in the mystic three one

God to all eternity isn't that wonderful just a few comments as we close to return to this idea that spiritual theology is doxological it begins and ends in worship it is aspirational true theology should stimulate desire and transformation it has a direction and a movement to it and that it's ecclesial it's grounded in the church these are corporate hymns sung together and Charles Wesley wanted to be deeply a part of church and tradition is what might that mean for us at St.

[59 : 55] John's we have the Bible at the center of our life together at St. John's and I think this is just a reminder Charles Wesley can be a reminder to us not to think of our use of scripture as being just a matter of learning propositions which we then apply to our life and it's good just to learn and do but it but it's a reminder to us that our Bible studies our response to sermons that all of this is rightly in the context of worship that it begins in worship and it ends in worship and that we have positive things revealed things that we can believe are true but it is always more than we can understand who can comprehend the mystery of grace and the mystery of God and it should lead us into worship and that all of our work with holy scripture should lead to this sense of aspiration it should provoke desires and it should lead us to be transformed and with

Charles Wesley in these difficult days of being an Anglican we pray that we may hold together doctrine discipline and devotion in a really ecclesial kind of church based response to God rather than just being freelance Christians so I think the more time I spend with Charles Wesley the more I think he provides a really good model for us of what it means to do theology yeah should we sing love divine sure okay why don't we stand in and sing love divine all loves excelling love divine all loves excelling joy again to earth come down fix in us thy humble dwelling all thy faithful mercies crown

Jesus thou art all compassion pure unfounded love thou art is it us with thy salvation enter tender every trembling plant god god God of the mighty to deliver, let us all thy praise receive.

Son of me, return of heaven, nevermore thy temple sing.

Heave me, worthy, all his blessings, serve me as thy hosts among you.

[63 : 13] Praise and praise thee with unceasing, glory in thy perfect love.

Finished then thy new creation, pure and spotless that must be, let us see thy great salvation, perfectly restored in thee.

Change from glory into glory, till heaven will take our place, till we pass the ground before thee, lost in love and grace.

Great. He sang that one good too. That's great, thanks. Can I have an exchange? Sure, yeah. Have a learner's exchange? Yeah. Thank you.

Yeah. Thank you very much.

[64 : 34] Thank you. Thank you. Yes. As we make heavy weather of the spiritual life, are we saying that God has made his promises and his commands too difficult for us, for we have to believe that these things are reasonably spiritually, reasonably spiritually, and that we become non-believers if we, in a sense, don't trust him, is that the hymn seems to, seems to give us a very basic, experiential, spiritual picture of the life that could be led.

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. If he would just believe it. Yeah. If he would just believe it and not think we have to flutter it, ourselves, and wear a hair shirt.

Yeah, yeah. That's right. No, I think that was exactly the issue that was raised in this period by John Wesley and Charles Wesley, and they accused the Calvinists of not having very high expectations for what God could actually do in a person's life to transform them and change them into the image of Christ.

And the Calvinists worried that the Wesleyans were just being presumptuous. And there's, I think it was Sugden, was the Methodist scholar, who said the difference was their understanding of sin, that the Calvinists believed sin was like a cancer.

That it was systemic, and it probably, you know, would not, you couldn't, wouldn't be finally eradicated until you die.

[66 : 48] You know, you might be able to control it, you might be able to make progress, but it's like a cancer. Whereas for Wesley, sin was like a toothache. You just kind of got to yank it out, you know, and get it out.

And I really like what, I think I talked here once about John Newton a little bit, a Calvinist who entered into a debate in the 1760s, epistolary, exchange of letters with John Wesley.

And he had a lot of kind of almost cute things that he said, like one of them was to Wesley, he said, you might not believe in election, but I can still believe that you're elect. But he also said, after this exchange, he wrote to Lord Dartmouth, the second Earl of Dartmouth, an evangelical aristocrat.

And he'd been writing letters, almost like a chaplain, sort of meditations. And he said, he talked about Wesley believing in perfection, that you can actually get there. And he said, you know, for these and these reasons, I don't actually think you can.

But he said, rather than dispute against it, I'd rather strive towards it. And he said, we often don't realize the potential of what God can do in somebody's life.

[68 : 01] And we do have far too low expectations. And so he said, let me outline some of the particulars where I think we can strive.

So the way, it's interesting that for Charles Wesley, why I call it aspirational, I don't think you find any hymns in the whole Wesleyan corpus thanking God for being made perfect.

They're all aspirational. And even though there were perfectionist revivals in 1762 and so on, where people were claiming to be perfect, the main body of the hymnody, I think this is why we still sing these today, it's in every Christian breast is the aspiration, Lord, I am made to be holy.

I want to be holy. And I want to be more holy than I am. I think the difference is the Wesleyans believe that God could do a lot more of that now than maybe the rest of us believe.

Could be holy and happy in this life. And so the debate sort of went back and forth. So I think, is there anything wrong with, one of Wesley's sermons, he ends, I think it's the sermon on the wedding garment, John Wesley, he says, what does it hurt to ask?

[69 : 22] And that sort of is a question that haunts me. Why not ask to be so filled with love that there's no more room for sin? Why don't you at least ask?

You know? And I think, why not? You know, isn't that the aspiration of every Christian? Of course we don't want to be presumptuous. But it's good to be reminded that there is a goal to the spiritual life.

And the Wesleyan spirituality tended to be agonistic, struggling, wrestling. Jacob was one of their favorite hymns. Wrestling, I will not let thee go till I thy name, thy nature know.

They're always wrestling. Whereas I think the Calvinists also sought maturity, but they understood maturity more about, I think, more fully grasping, more fully grasping the mystery of Christ in the way that they talked about it.

So, yeah? There's a scriptural thing, you know, it says you don't have because you do not ask. Yeah. Yeah. Also, you mentioned Lex Orendi, Lex Kodendi. Yeah. That's the method used in meditation in many groups, you know?

[70 : 31] Yeah. I think the Franciscans used it. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. It's a method of reading and then reading again and rereading, first in the mind and then out loud.

Right, you're thinking of Lectio Divina? Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I think the way the phrase is sometimes used for the theology in the early church is as they're trying to articulate what we believe as the church, it needs to be equal to the language of worship that we use when we address God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Right? So the law of belief needs to, at some level, be equal to what we confess and pray and our baptismal faith, Father, Son, and Spirit.

So there has to be a relationship between the two. Yeah. Hi. Yeah. I noticed a lot and really well done setting of maybe Charles above John and poetry above prose in what you've been saying, which was maybe exactly what Christianity needed right when enlightenment nationalism was setting in.

But I'm just curious what would be said to the other side if you've been given a talk about prose and about John? Can you say that once more in other words?

[71 : 50] I'm not sure I entirely follow. What could be said about what side? What could prose do that poetry could grasp the Trinity in a way that prose can? Pardon me?

It's a true of that poetry. Yeah. I think, I'll come at this in a roundabout way. By the time you get to the 19th century, certainly the 20th century, the sense is that you don't want to be too didactic in art.

In art forms, you don't want to just kind of tell people things. People don't want to be preached at in a novel. And so people skip over sermons in 19th century novels and so on. Like, we'll just skip those bits, right?

The kind of talky bits. And that somehow beauty and straightforward truth, you know, you don't hold them together.

And that beauty is enigmatic and so on. And by the time you get to romantic poets, like the wonderful poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, a lot of the poetry is suggestive and gesturing and so on.

[73 : 07] This is a period, it seems to me, when all the art forms, whether it's painting or poetry, hold together the didactic and the teaching along with beauty.

and so it's no surprise that it's in this period that hymnody takes off, right? A kind of form of poetry that teaches and to kind of hold those two things together.

So there's a way in which there's, I think, a particularly close relationship, if you like, between prose and poetry, between beauty and truth, between delight and teaching.

And most of the evangelists in this period are very clear that poetry is the handmaid of piety. It doesn't have this kind of grand function of its own.

It's meant to be an aid or a stimulus or a handmaid. That was the way that John Wesley put it, that poetry is a handmaid of piety. So in that sense, I suppose he would have elevated prose he would have said, you know, we speak plain words for plain people and clarity was highly valued.

[74 : 19] But then right behind that was the importance of poetry. Was Charles Wesley ever, I don't know, the right word is suspended from the church name?

No. No, he wasn't. Nor was John. I mean, they had lots of run-ins. And there's a way that the Church of England at this point, a convocation had been prorogued and there was a way that the disciplinary structure of the Church of England was not such as that it was easily able even to act in terms of the Methodists.

Thomas Macaulay, was it, in the 19th century said that the Pope would have known exactly what to do with John Wesley would have made him Director General of a new Jesuit order. But the Church didn't really have a response to the Methodists per se.

But Charles, some of the literature now, there's a lot of literature about how bad really was the Church of England in the 18th century. Like, was it bad or was it really bad? I think those are basically the two categories.

but there's a sense maybe we should read Charles Wesley not as sort of an example of how the Church was in such bad shape and so here's Methodism which is moving towards separation but understanding Charles Wesley as an exemplar of some of the best piety of the Church of England in the 18th century because he understood himself as an Anglican minister right until his death.

[75 : 55] And there was a letter I read at the Huntington Library in California last year of Charles writing to forget who it was but he was basically saying that he hadn't been to the Methodist conferences for years but he was going to go set the cat among the pigeons and go restore it.

Like, he was just really upset with all those people moving towards separation. He did not want that and so he he was determined as long as he could to stay in the Church of England and that was the biggest point probably of tension between him and his brother.

And so I think it's becoming more obvious that John would have probably separated. He would have followed and listened to the lay people. He said things like I live and die as a member of the Church of England and he said all those things but John was far more willing to separate earlier than Charles was.

He gives a good message for the liberals doesn't he? How do you mean?

Well, they answer him in a simple simple way appealing to British the value. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, certainly I think for all of the simplicity of Charles Wesley he he had a robust it wasn't dissolving theology into piety or dissolving theology into a kind of simplicity that just says we can do without this this and this.

[77 : 26] It was I think that one of the things that powerfully speaks to us from Charles Wesley is his ability to speak simply and yet within the tradition of the Church and its theology.

Harvey? Do you think we're all Wesleyan churches still sing, Charles? I think so. Yeah, I mean I don't know what you know every Church has their canon within the canon for hymns that they'll sing or what they'll do and I don't know which bits they do or which then there's all the hymn book editors that change things but I don't know.

Thank you, Bruce. Thank you.

Thank you.