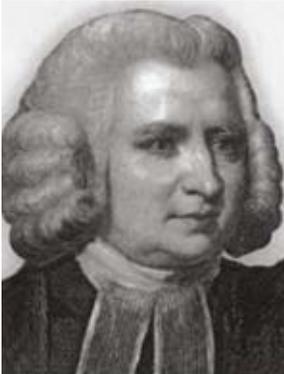




PROFILE IN FAITH



Charles Wesley

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On May 21, 1738, the day of his conversion, Charles Wesley opened the Bible for a word from God and put his finger on a text which graphically described the mighty work of God in his life: "He hath put a new song in my mouth.... Many will see and fear and will trust in the Lord" (Ps. 40:3). That was, indeed, a prophetic word, as thousands of "new songs" would come from the pen of this most prolific and enduring of all English hymn writers.

Charles Wesley's conversion transformed his life, and its impact, through such cherished hymns as "And Can It Be?" and "O for a Thousand Tongues," still lives today. Out of a new heart came a new song, and by exploring Wesley's spiritual pilgrimage we can appreciate all the more the experience which we, standing more than 270 years down the road, still share when we make his song our own.

Born the eighteenth of nineteen children, Charles Wesley was given his early training by his mother, but at the age of ten he was sent to the Westminster School, where his brother Samuel was an instructor. Samuel assumed almost full responsibility for the boy and had a great influence on him. Most importantly, Charles was forever shaped by Arminian-Laudian theology and high church sympathies, which would later result in significant differences with his brother John in the development of the Methodist Revival and with Isaac Watts in the character of his hymnody.¹ Further, Charles's training included an immersion in the biblical texts, which made him a significant biblical scholar in his own right and helped to account for the wealth of biblical allusions in all of his hymns. Charles, perhaps even more than John, was "a man of one book."

From Westminster School Charles moved on to Christ Church, Oxford, where after a slow start he began in earnest to live a life that he hoped would please

his Lord. Joining with a few fellow students in 1728, he began what became known as the Oxford Holy Club, whose members sought to practice the "methods" of spiritual devotion prescribed by the Church of England (hence, the term "Methodists"). Theirs was a rigorous routine that involved daily meetings for prayer and worship as well as a myriad of "good works." Charles's finger was constantly on his spiritual pulse, but there appears to have been no life. On his trip with his brother John to the colony of Georgia to bring the gospel to the Indians he wrote, "Go where I will, I carry my Hell about me" (Feb. 5, 1736). He soon returned to England after a disastrous experience but still could find no peace, as he wrote in 1737²:

*Evil alas! Thou know'st, and few
My days of pilgrimage have been:
With thankfulness, and pain, I view
My thirty years of grief and sin—
Yet O! forgive this eager sigh,
This gasping of my soul to die.*

Later Charles would label this period of his life as "Legal Night," often using images of darkness, chains, and imprisonment to describe it, as for example, "In darkness, chains, and death I was," or

*Long my imprisoned spirit lay
Fast bound in sin and nature's night.*

He was, in his words, a legalist, who had yet to discover God's grace:

*A goodly formal saint,
I long appeared in sight;
By self and Satan*

*Taught to paint
My tomb, my nature, white.
The Pharisee within
Still undisturbed remained;
The strong man,
Armed with guilt of sin,
Safe in his palace reigned.*

And though devoid of gross outward sin, he still could say later,

*For ten long years I lay
A hopeless but reluctant prey
To pride and lust and earth and hell.*

Wesley continued to preach, presenting the gospel as a new birth which presumably he and his audience had received in baptism and in accordance with which they were to live. His message was a call to resignation, self-renunciation, and obedience to the discipline of the church.³ This is illustrated in his sermon, “One Thing Is Needful,” which he frequently gave in this period:

This is our one concern, to shake off this servile yoke and regain our native liberty, to cut away every chain, every passion that does not accord with our evangelical nature. The one work we have to do is to return from the gates of death, to have our diseases cured, our wounds healed and ourselves restored to perfect soundness.

This sermon ends with a vigorous call to “Awake thou that sleepest, to recover the image of God and to keep watch over your soul.” “But,” as F.L. Wiseman explains, “the sermon itself lacks the one thing needful. It gives no proper instruction as to how the needful thing is to be obtained. It bids the sleeper awake to righteousness but gives him no clue as to how he may be made righteous inwardly as well as outwardly.”⁴

In the midst of this “Legal Night” Charles became ill. Peter Boehler, a Moravian Christian whom Charles had known in Georgia, prayed for him and asked him (according to Charles Wesley’s Journal):

“Do you hope to be saved?” “Yes,” I replied. “For what reason do you hope it?” “Because I have used my best endeavors to serve God.” He shook his head and said no more. I thought him very uncharitable and said in my heart: “What, are not my endeavors a sufficient ground of hope? Would he rob me of my endeavors? I have nothing else to trust to.”

He realized then that he lacked faith and confessed to his visitor his unbelief and want of forgiveness.

The matter came to head when Charles was staying with a friend, John Bray, whom he describes as “a poor ignorant mechanic who knows nothing but Christ, yet by knowing Him, knows and discerns all things.” Bray shared with him Luther’s commentary on Galatians, which clearly expounded the evangelical doctrine of justification by faith. Charles was astounded that this doctrine, which he could clearly see was in conformity both to the Scriptures and to the teaching of the English Reformers, had been unknown to him until then. He was especially moved by Luther’s comments on Galatians 2:20, in which he stressed the “for me” aspects of the gospel. “At midnight,” Charles wrote on the 21st of May, 1738, “I gave myself to Christ;... I now found myself at peace with God and rejoiced in hope of loving Christ... I saw that by faith I stood; by the continued support of faith, which kept me from falling, though of myself I am ever sinking into sin.”

Immediately he began work on his first hymn, “Where Shall My Wondering Soul Begin?” In this hymn one can almost feel with Wesley the wonder and joy of those first precious moments. At first, all he could do was ask childlike questions of wonder, but in the second stanza he expressed the fact that he “should know, should feel my sins forgiven.” Interestingly, Charles recorded that as he was writing this hymn, he “was persuaded to break off, for fear of pride. Mr. Bray encouraged me to proceed.” One may assume that it was after writing the second stanza that this occurred, for the third stanza reveals his hesitating efforts to pull himself together, asking,

*And shall I slight my Father’s love,
Or basely fear his gifts to own?
Unmindful of his favors prove?
Shall I the hallowed cross to shun, Refuse his
righteousness to impart,
By hiding it within my heart?*

He continues in the fourth stanza with triumphant resolution:

*No—though the ancient dragon rage
And call forth all his hosts of war;
Though earth’s self-righteous sons engage,
Them and their god alike I dare;
Jesus, the sinner’s friend proclaim,
Jesus to sinners still the same.*

The hymn's closing stanzas offer the invitation that would become the hallmark of the eighteenth-century Evangelical Revival: "Come, O my guilty brethren, come!"

This, the first hymn of the Revival, demonstrates a number of features that arose directly from Wesley's conversion experience and that would become characteristic of much of his hymnody. First, one notices the joyful praise pouring from his heart to God:

*How shall I equal triumphs raise,
Or sing my great deliverer's praise?*

This certainly is the dominant theme of "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing," written on the first anniversary of his conversion. God assured him of his love and forgiveness, and a new song of praise was the natural result.

Second, we see the very personal nature of much of his hymnody. The "for me" of Galatians 2:20, so important in his conversion, rings out through the frequent use of the first person pronoun. We notice this clearly in the first stanza of "And Can It Be That I Should Gain?" written only a few weeks after his conversion:

*And can it be that I should gain
An interest in the Savior's blood?
Died he for me, who caused his pain?
For me, who him to death pursued?
Amazing love how can it be
That thou my God shouldst die for me?
(emphasis mine)*

"Jesus, Lover of My Soul" and "Depth of Mercy Can It Be," both written in 1740, also illustrate the intensely personal nature of Wesley's spirituality.

Third, we see Charles's sense of acceptance by God, despite his own sin. He had been justified by faith and could now "know" and "feel" his sins forgiven. The "Legal Night" was now over, and he could now say, "He breaks the power of cancelled sin, he sets the prisoner free"; "The morning breaks, the shadows flee"; and "My chains fell off, my heart was free." But along with his justification was his new sense of adoption into the family of God, as he reflects with wonder

*That I, a child of wrath and hell,
I should be called a child of God.*

All of this, of course, combined to produce a compelling urge to proclaim abroad this wonderful news.

Though this note of joy and praise flowed immediately from his conversion experience and greatly influenced his hymnody, there is another aspect of Wesley's spiritual makeup that showed itself on that night in May 1738. Recall that he wrote, "I now found myself at peace with God and rejoiced in hope of loving Christ." He had gained emancipation and forgiveness, but he did not gain purity of heart or perfect love. He had been justified but was just beginning the process of sanctification. His preconversion goal of the complete restoration of the divine image remained. His search for Christian perfection became a lifelong struggle, for pardon was not enough; he longed to be like Christ.

*A miracle of grace and sin,
Pardoned, yet still, alas, unclean!
Thy righteousness is counted mine:
When will it in my nature shine?*

This aspiration was a dominant theme, especially in later years, of many of Charles's best-known hymns, including such favorites as "O for a Heart to Praise My God," "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling," "I Want a Principle Within," and "A Charge to Keep I Have."

It is said that John provided the "head" and Charles provided the "heart" of the Methodist Revival, and as we see the living and vital experience of new life in Jesus Christ expressed in Charles's hymns, this is easy to believe. Charles Wesley was a man of deep spiritual experience and maturity, which his hymnody vividly reveals. But more particularly, with its ring of praise, its personal nature, its stress on justification by faith, and its expression of aspiration for personal purity and righteousness, Charles Wesley's hymnody reflects the spiritually transforming impact of his conversion experience. His was a grand encounter with Christ, and on that night in 1738 the Lord did, indeed, put a new song in Charles Wesley's mouth, and for that all of us can give thanks.

Notes

1. See Erik Routley, *The Musical Wesleys* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 32.

2. This date is suggested by J. Ernest Rattenbury, *The Evangelical Doctrines of Charles Wesley's Hymns* (London: Epworth Press, 1941), p. 241.

3. F. Luke Wiseman, *Charles Wesley: Evangelist and Poet* (New York: Abingdon Press), 1932, p. 36.



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