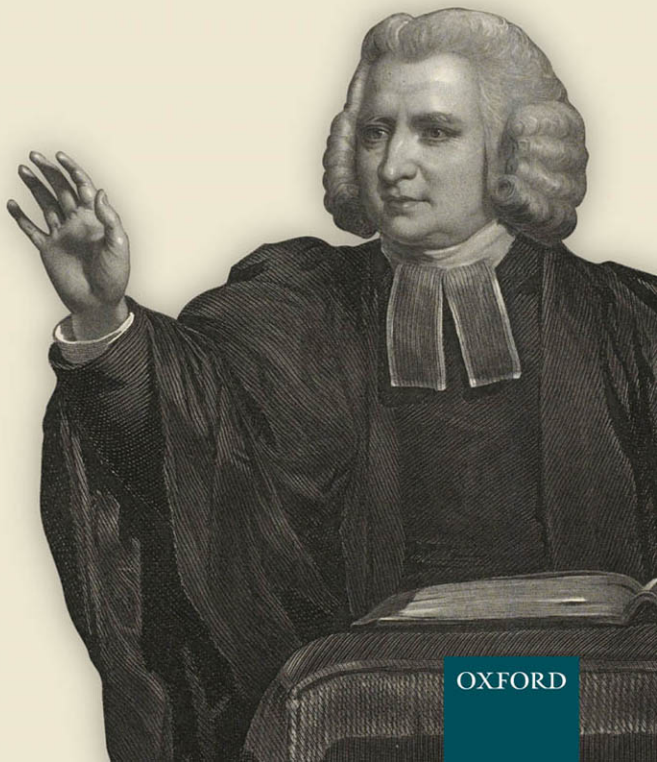


Gareth Lloyd

CHARLES WESLEY

and the STRUGGLE FOR METHODIST IDENTITY



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GARETH LLOYD

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*To my parents David and Jean Lloyd
and grandparents Peter and Gladwys Boyers.
With love and gratitude*

Preface

Charles Wesley was one of the most important leaders of the eighteenth-century Evangelical Revival, an event that saw the birth of Methodism and related movements that continue to occupy a prominent place in the twenty-first-century Church. Regarded by his contemporaries as an outstanding preacher, insightful pastor, and organizer of rare ability, Charles played an invaluable part in promoting and consolidating Methodism during its difficult formative years. There was also, of course, Charles Wesley's literary genius; he is regarded as one of the greatest hymn-writers that the Christian Church has produced and at a time when few people read the sermons of John Wesley or George Whitefield, even non-churchgoers are familiar with such timeless and inspiring works as 'Love Divine' and 'Hark the Herald Angels Sing'. When George W. Bush used a line from a Charles Wesley hymn as the title of his presidential campaign biography, he had reason to expect that most people would be at least familiar with the name of its author.¹

Charles Wesley is clearly a significant figure whose ministry has a resonance that is arguably greater than any of his Evangelical contemporaries. One would expect his story to have been well told by popular biographer and historian alike, but this is not the case; with the exception of his poetry, Charles Wesley's life and work have in fact been neglected.² This surprising treatment of one of the co-founders of the Methodist movement was rooted in the insecurity felt by some important figures within the nineteenth-century Wesleyan Church concerning aspects of the early history of their denomination and Charles Wesley's role in particular; their ambivalence towards Charles continues to cast a shadow over his reputation.

The major influence on the evolution of Charles Wesley biographical scholarship has been the Wesleyan minister Thomas Jackson, the

¹ George W. Bush, *A Charge to Keep* (New York: William Morrow, 1999).

² 'Unlike John Wesley, he has had few biographers, and their work is mostly out of date.' Frederick Gill, *Charles Wesley the First Methodist* (London: Lutterworth, 1964), 11.

author of a two-volume life published in 1841³ and the editor, eight years later, of Charles's journal and appended selection of letters.⁴ The conclusions that Jackson reached had an impact that still influences the way that Charles Wesley is viewed. This is regrettable as his portrayal of the co-founder of the Methodist movement was highly distorted.

Jackson was concerned with a number of themes that were ancillary to a balanced narrative of his subject's life and presentation of relevant texts. He made this clear in the introduction to the biography where he declared his intention of correcting criticism of John Wesley and offering a Methodist opinion on the development of the relationship with the Church of England.⁵ In pursuit of these objectives, Jackson was careful not to publish passages from the manuscript letters⁶ or journal⁷ that criticized John Wesley or put Methodism and its preachers in a poor light. One example of many occurs in the published journal where this comment by Charles Wesley concerning one of the preachers is omitted: 'I wish he were the only worthless, senseless, graceless man, to whom my brother had given the same encouragement [to preach]';⁸ while in Jackson's biography of Charles, the transcription of the manuscript journal entry for 26 October 1756 changes one preacher's description of the Church of England as 'Old Peg' to the more innocuous 'church.'⁹ There are other glaring omissions in Jackson's work; for example, Charles frequently used shorthand to record his most intimate and controversial views, yet his biographer misses these entirely.

³ Thomas Jackson, *The Life of the Rev. Charles Wesley, sometime Student of Christ-Church Oxford: comprising a review of his poetry; sketches of the rise and progress of Methodism; with notices of contemporary events and characters*, 2 vols. (London: Wesleyan Methodist Conference Office, 1841).

⁴ Charles Wesley, *The Journal of the Rev. Charles Wesley, M.A., sometime Student of Christ-Church, Oxford. To which are appended selections from his correspondence and poetry, with an introduction and occasional notes*, ed. Thomas Jackson, 2 vols. (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1849).

⁵ Jackson, *Charles Wesley*, i. p. vi.

⁶ There are more than 800 manuscript letters by Charles Wesley in archive institutions and libraries, of which approximately two-thirds form a discrete collection in the MCA.

⁷ Principally the bound manuscript journal catalogued as DDCW 10/2, MCA (henceforth CWJ).

⁸ CWJ, 12 June 1751.

⁹ Jackson, *Charles Wesley*, ii. 124.

Taken in isolation, such examples of Victorian sensitivity would be relatively harmless were it not for the fact they have never been corrected. After more than two hundred years, scholarship remains heavily reliant on Jackson's incomplete transcripts of the manuscript material.¹⁰ As late as 1989, a major published collection of edited transcripts and extracts from Charles Wesley's works included thirty-three letters of which only seven were based on original manuscripts.¹¹ The rest were taken from Jackson's biography of Charles or his edition of the journal.¹² It should come as no surprise therefore that modern scholarship is still influenced by conclusions concerning Charles Wesley's contribution to Methodism that are more than one hundred and fifty years old.

The principal effect of Jackson's work was to fix the image of Charles Wesley in the Methodist mind as a man who should be remembered chiefly for his hymns. This view of Charles was certainly in broad agreement with that of Methodist historians writing in the generation after Jackson. Like their predecessor, they were disturbed by Charles Wesley's bitter struggle to ensure that Methodism remain a revival movement within the Church of England. Abel Stevens was representative of the views of many when he wrote the following in 1878: 'Charles Wesley whose mind, less noble than his heart, was perpetually fettered by his High-Church sentiments... His influence over his brother on any disputed question was feeble, and deservedly so... he seemed incapable of progress, only because, through his strong prejudices, he was incapable of logic.'¹³

In the twentieth century there were a few attempts to revise such dismissive opinions, but these have been hampered by a continuing

¹⁰ This situation will hopefully be rectified in the near future, as a full-text edition of Charles Wesley's journal, edited by Kenneth Newport and S. T. Kimbrough, is due to be published in 2007 by Abingdon Press. A comprehensive edition of Wesley's correspondence is also being prepared by Kenneth Newport and Gareth Lloyd for publication by Oxford University Press. It is anticipated that the first of two volumes will be published in 2008.

¹¹ Charles Wesley, *Charles Wesley: A Reader*, ed. John Tyson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

¹² Two letters are based on transcripts found in Jackson's biography of Charles and the rest, twenty-four in number, are from Jackson's edition of the journal.

¹³ Abel Stevens, *History of the Religious Movement of the Eighteenth Century called Methodism*, new edn., 3 vols. (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1878), i. 311–12.

dependence on the work of earlier scholars. Mabel Brailsford for example,¹⁴ who in 1954 went further than any other historian in attempting to disentangle the strange relationship between the Wesley brothers, described Jackson's depiction of early Methodism as 'clear and faithful, and I have followed it without question'.¹⁵ In deferring to Jackson's primacy, Brailsford was following in the footsteps of John Telford, the author in 1900 of what has been described as the standard life of Charles Wesley. He referred to 'Thomas Jackson's painstaking and judicious biography, which has been called the best history of Methodism'.¹⁶

In 1948 Frank Baker published a volume containing extracts from Charles's correspondence, much of which was previously unpublished.¹⁷ Baker was the first scholar to concentrate exclusively on this material as a preliminary to a full edition of the letters, a project that was never completed. Baker's use of original sources opened up a range of material, although the book is limited in length and his commentary did not contain much in the way of new insight. Other recent biographies, such as those by Arnold Dallimore¹⁸ and Frederick Gill,¹⁹ offer a sound introduction to the basic facts of Charles Wesley's life, but do not substantially revise the traditional view of the man and his ministry.

There has been an occasional acknowledgement of the problem that Charles Wesley has posed for Methodist scholarship and this insightful comment by Frederick Gill in 1964 stands as a neat summary of the first two centuries of Charles Wesley studies: 'Charles' attempts to preserve its [Methodism's] original aim had failed. As a result, his memory has suffered; with some there remains a lingering

¹⁴ Mabel Brailsford, *A Tale of Two Brothers: John & Charles Wesley* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954).

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 12.

¹⁶ John Telford, *The Life of the Rev. Charles Wesley, M.A., sometime student of Christ Church, Oxford*, revised and enlarged edn. (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1900), p. xiv.

¹⁷ Frank Baker, *Charles Wesley as Revealed by his Letters* (London: Epworth, 1948).

¹⁸ Arnold Dallimore, *A Heart Set Free: The Life of Charles Wesley, Pre-eminent Hymn-Writer, Fearless Evangelist, Powerful Preacher* (Welwyn: Evangelical Press, 1988).

¹⁹ Gill, *Charles Wesley*.

coolness, while to others his logical emphasis has been unwelcome, and in general no popular or clear-cut image has survived.²⁰

The aim of this book is to present a new assessment of Charles Wesley's place in church history, and also his legacy, which was very different from that of his brother. Tension and internal conflict were ever-present aspects of the early Evangelical movement and few people were more closely involved in such strife than John Wesley's aggressive and principled sibling. The troubled partnership between the Wesley brothers will represent one of the central themes of this work: founded on blood kinship and mutual faith, their special bond was one of the driving forces of the Revival for nearly twenty years, yet towards the end of their lives, their relationship was characterized by disillusion and mistrust. They came to stand for different ideals and Charles's reputation and achievements fell victim to the hero worship accorded his brother. This will also be a study of the early Methodist people: the men and women who responded in thousands to the Wesleys' ministry have tended to be overlooked by historians, yet when the opinions and concerns of the brothers' followers are examined regarding the place of their movement in relation to the Church of England, a picture begins to emerge that is very different from the paradigm.

This book is not a conventional biography, but rather an examination of the evolution of Methodism against the background of the life and ministry of one of its principal exponents. The primary theme is one of relationships, principally between John and Charles Wesley, Methodism and the Church of England, and the discordant elements within the wider Evangelical movement. It was from this volatile mix that Methodist identity emerged and the foundation was laid for the expansion of the movement at home and overseas. As the three-hundredth anniversary of Charles Wesley's birth approaches, it is time that his personal contribution to this process was given the attention that it deserves.

²⁰ Gill, *Charles Wesley*, 234.

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It has been my privilege to work for the last fifteen years as the Archivist in charge of the Methodist manuscript collections at the John Rylands University Library, The University of Manchester. It is this collection, unrivalled in its coverage of the Wesleyan wing of the Evangelical Revival that provided much of the research material used in the book. I would like to thank the Archives and History Committee of the Methodist Church of Great Britain and the University Librarian and Director, the John Rylands University Library, The University of Manchester for permission to quote from material in the Archives and also for the reproduction and publication of the illustration of Charles Wesley used as the frontispiece.

The discussion in the preface of previous biographical studies of Charles Wesley is based on my article 'Charles Wesley and his Biographers: An Exercise in Methodist Hagiography', *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester*, 82:1 (Spring 2000), 81–99. Permission to include extracts from the article was kindly granted by Dr Dorothy Clayton, editor of the *Bulletin*. Parts of Chs. 9 and 10 have also been previously published under my authorship as "Croakers and Busybodies": The Extent and Influence of Church Methodism in the Late 18th and Early 19th Centuries', *Methodist History*, 42:1 (October 2003), 20–32. I would like to express my thanks to the editor of *Methodist History* for permission to incorporate parts of that article into this book.

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preoccupation, and especially to Dr Peter Nockles, who read through individual chapters and provided valuable criticism. Needless to say, any imperfections that remain are my own responsibility. I would also like to express my appreciation of Dr Jeremy Gregory and his colleagues in the University of Manchester School of Arts, Histories, and Cultures for their support of my attendance at academic conferences during which the ideas contained in this book were tested and refined.

Finally, I am especially thankful for the support and encouragement of my wife Yvonne, daughter Madeline, and other members of my family. They have supported and encouraged me throughout this long and sometimes tortuous project and I could not have done this without them.

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List of Abbreviations

CW	Charles Wesley
CWJ	Charles Wesley's manuscript journal
JW	John Wesley
JWJ	John Wesley's published journals and diaries
MCA	Methodist Church Archives (John Rylands University Library, University of Manchester)
MS	Manuscript

The Epworth Experience

During his long life, Charles Wesley presented a series of seemingly contradictory faces to the world. At the start of his public ministry during the middle of the 1730s, he was an insecure conservative Oxford graduate, unsure in his ministerial vocation and even his faith. Five years later, he was a fervent Evangelical confidently facing down hostile crowds and critical archbishops, riding a tidal wave of revival. By middle age he had settled back into an apparently reactionary stance with regard to Methodism and the Church of England, fearful of developments in the movement that he had helped to create and yet unwilling or unable to turn his back completely on his brother and their followers.

Charles Wesley, Methodist leader and Church of England minister, defies easy categorization and this has bedevilled commentators since his own day. On the one hand, he always exhibited certain of the characteristics of a conservative High Church Anglican and on the other he was a charismatic Evangelical who to the end of his life thought little of contravening church discipline. Charles came to personify some of the ambiguities of the Methodist movement itself. Were the Wesley brothers and their followers Anglicans or Dissenters, or did they occupy a middle ground? Answers to these questions took many decades to emerge and well into the twentieth century unresolved areas were left behind. Charles represents a continuing puzzle, one that has implications for our understanding of the influences that shaped the Wesleyan branch of the Evangelical movement. The underlying factors that determined the peculiar twists and turns of Charles Wesley's ministry can best be understood by first examining his childhood, for it is in his earliest years that some of the keys to

understanding the personality and denominational identity of this complicated man can be found.

HOME AND FAMILY

Charles Wesley was born on 18 December 1707, the third surviving son and nineteenth child of the Anglican clergyman Samuel Wesley and his wife Susanna. His birthplace was the remote Lincolnshire market town of Epworth where Charles's father was the parish priest from 1695 until his death forty years later.¹ At the time of Charles Wesley's birth, Epworth had a population of about fifteen hundred and was the largest settlement for miles around.² The fenlands surrounding the town had been drained early in the seventeenth century but were still subject to seasonal floods, adding to the isolation of what had long been regarded as one of England's most backward regions.

The domestic environment in which the Wesley children were raised was turbulent and at times deeply unhappy. Their father Samuel was a dogmatic if well-meaning man who attempted to rule his family as well as his parish with a rod of iron.³ In this, he was a typical eighteenth-century patriarch, but where his situation was different from many of his contemporaries was in the character of his wife and the acute intelligence and sensitivity of their children. Susanna Wesley was a remarkable woman, educated to a level far beyond what was customary for her sex and time. She was also strong-willed and conformed only so far to the subservient role expected of an eighteenth-century wife. Her serene and rather deferential exterior hid an iron resolve and while there was mutual affection between Charles's parents there were also frequent clashes; Susanna herself remarked on one occasion 'It is a misfortune peculiar to our family that he and I seldom think alike!'⁴

¹ H. A. Beecham, 'Samuel Wesley Senior: New Biographical Evidence', *Renaissance and Modern Studies*, 7 (1963), 90–1.

² Henry Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (London: Epworth, 1989), 45.

³ George Stevenson, *Memorials of the Wesley Family: including biographical and historical sketches of all the members of the family for two hundred and fifty years* (London: S. W. Partridge [1876]), 156.

⁴ Quoted by Brailsford, *A Tale of Two Brothers*, 16–17.

To marital storms were added other problems. Samuel was a devoted clergyman whose concern for the poor was one of his most attractive characteristics and one that his sons were to inherit. As a poverty-stricken student at Oxford he had given his last two pennies to feed a starving child⁵ and in later years he sponsored the education of a poor youth through the university.⁶ Unfortunately this nobility of spirit was not matched by financial common sense and he found it difficult to survive on his clerical income. In 1700 Samuel was forced to apply to the Archbishop of York for assistance,⁷ and five years later he was imprisoned for debt, leaving his large family at the mercy of enemies, who had often threatened to throw them into the street.⁸ Acute financial problems and the resulting insecurity formed an ever-present backdrop to Charles Wesley's early life. Family letters reveal that the Wesleys were sometimes hard pressed to feed their children,⁹ and when Samuel's brother Matthew visited the rectory in 1731, he was shocked by its half-furnished condition.¹⁰ To this precarious situation can be attributed the almost obsessive concern with financial matters exhibited by John and Charles throughout their lives; this was manifested in various ways, from their insistence on frugal living to their keeping of detailed personal accounts.

Samuel Wesley was a difficult man to like. For all his strong principles, compassion, ready wit, and keen sense of humour,¹¹ he was also inflexible, abrupt, and possessed of a fiery temper. In these personality traits as well as his poetic talent, Charles appears to have resembled his father. Samuel was not a man to allow common sense to stand in the way of a firmly held principle: on one occasion he forcibly ejected from his house the mistress of his aristocratic patron and lost a well-paid appointment as a result.¹² This rigidity of outlook

⁵ John Newton, *Susanna Wesley and the Puritan Tradition in Methodism*, 2nd edn. (London: Epworth, 2002), 79.

⁶ Luke Tyerman, *The Life and Times of the Rev. Samuel Wesley, M.A.* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, 1866), 374–5.

⁷ Stevenson, *Memorials of the Wesley Family*, 79–80.

⁸ Samuel Wesley sen., to William Wake, MS letter, 25 June 1705 (MCA: DDWF 1/2).

⁹ Susanna Wesley to Samuel Annesley jun., Published copy letter, 20 January 1722. Susanna Wesley, *Susanna Wesley: The Complete Writings*, ed. Charles Wallace jun., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 93–9.

¹⁰ Tyerman, *Samuel Wesley*, 436–7.

¹¹ Newton, *Susanna Wesley*, 81.

¹² *Ibid.* 82.

and authoritarian manner made him unpopular with the people of Epworth, who were notoriously distrustful of outsiders and a match for their stiff-necked rector in stubbornness. Charles's sister Mehetabal described the inhabitants of the village of Wroot, who were also under her father's pastoral charge, in the following short poem:

Debarred of wisdom, wit and grace
 High births and virtue equally they scorn,
 As asses dull, on dunghills born;
 Impervious as the stones, their heads are found;
 Their rage and hatred steadfast as the ground.
 With these unpolished wights, thy youthful days
 Glide slow and dull, and nature's lamp decays:
 O what a lamp is hid' midst such a sordid race!¹³

Samuel with his non-local origins, Oxford education, and demands for tithes represented an alien and unwelcome intrusion into a close-knit rural community.¹⁴ So strong was the hostility that his crops were damaged,¹⁵ and when he was arrested in 1705 it was to the obvious delight of many of his parishioners.¹⁶ To give an even more sinister twist to an already unpleasant picture, the fire that destroyed the rectory in 1709, almost taking the life of John Wesley in the process, may have been a result of arson.

Samuel's relations with his seven daughters were also difficult and he certainly gave them little reason to regard him with affection. He wrote on one occasion 'I creep uphill more than I did formerly, being eased of the weight of four daughters out of seven, as I hope I shall be of a fifth in a little longer.'¹⁷ The girls spent long periods away from home, staying with relations or working in schools for a pittance, and only two of their marriages could be said to be anything other than disastrous, those of Mary and Anne, indicating that the others were either unlucky or had looked upon matrimony as an escape route. The oldest daughter Emily revealed something of the tension and despair that was part of their daily lives in a letter to her brother John:

¹³ Quoted by Tyerman, *Samuel Wesley*, 389.

¹⁴ Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 45–6.

¹⁵ Stevenson, *Memorials of the Wesley Family*, 88.

¹⁶ Samuel Wesley sen. to John Hutton, MS letter, 27 June 1705 (MCA: DDWES 6/1).

¹⁷ Quoted by Gill, *Charles Wesley*, 25.

I think you are not well rewarded by my father for all you have done; he thinks you [are] not a good son or friend. Take what care you can of your own interests, our family are full of fine sanguine dreams, my old belief yet remains that my father will never be worth a groat . . . and we of the female part of the family consequently left to get our own bread, or starve . . . but life will be over in a few years and then sure all sorrow will end . . . now indeed to die seems to me not only tolerable but desirable, that it is as Hamlet says, a dissolution devoutly to be wished . . .¹⁸

EDUCATION AND SPIRITUAL NURTURING

Very little is known about Charles Wesley's earliest years or how he responded to life as a member of this fragile family. However unstable aspects of his upbringing might have been, two priceless gifts that Samuel and Susanna gave their offspring were a home schooling and a grounding in spirituality that was remarkably advanced for its time and place. With her husband busy with his parochial duties, Susanna took on the chief responsibility for raising the children and her distinctive methods have received attention from scholars who have seen in her system a forerunner of the principles of Methodist discipline.¹⁹

The central feature of Susanna's system was the imposition of tight control over every aspect of a child's life in order to break the will, which she described as the 'root of all sin and misery'.²⁰ In a famous letter of 1732 she described her child-rearing methods and repeatedly stressed the central importance of this point: 'This therefore I cannot but earnestly repeat, break their wills betimes. Begin this great work before they can run alone, before they can speak plain, or perhaps speak at all. Whatever pains it cost, conquer their stubbornness, break the will, if you would not damn the child . . .'²¹ Physical discipline had a part to play in this process and by Susanna's own admission her children from the age of 12 months were taught to 'fear the rod and cry softly'.²² However, her method did not depend solely on the

¹⁸ Emily Wesley to John Wesley, MS letter, 31 December 1729 (MCA: DDWF 6/2).

¹⁹ Susanna Wesley, *Susanna Wesley*, 367–8.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 370.

²¹ Susanna Wesley to John Wesley, Published copy letter, 24 July 1732. Susanna Wesley, *Susanna Wesley*, 370.

²² *Ibid.*