CHARLES WESLEY AND THE ARTICULATION OF FAITH

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According to his more famous brother John, Charles Wesley was a man of many talents, of which the least was his ability to write poetry. This is a view with which few perhaps would today agree, for the writing of poetry, more specifically hymns, is the one thing above all others for which Charles Wesley has been remembered. Anecdotally, we may all recognize that this is the case. If one were to look up Charles in more or less any of the many general biographical dictionaries that include an entry on him one will find repeated that Charles is portrayed as a poet and a hymn-writer. Comparatively little, if any, attention is paid to other aspects of his work. On a more scholarly level one finds the same. Obviously, there are exceptions but among historians of Methodism and in 18th-century church history the picture painted of Charles is all too monochrome. His role as the “Sweet Singer of Methodism” is as unquestioned as his broader significance is undeveloped.

It is possible, of course, that in saying that Charles Wesley’s “least” talent was that which he possessed in the poetic arena, his brother John may simply have been seeking to extol longed-for virtues at the expense of the actual. That may be the case. However, we should not be so quick to brush aside John’s comments here. After all, being born before Charles and dying after him, John knew his younger brother throughout the entire eighty-one year course of the latter’s life and for fifty of those years the two brothers were near inseparable. They had their differences to be sure. Sibling rivalry, heart-felt theological disputes and straightforward clashes in personality all contributed to what was at times a very stormy relationship, but that John knew Charles perhaps better than almost any other person (Charles’ wife Sarah is the chief competitor here) is surely indisputable. So when John says that Charles’ least talent was his poetry, we must at least consider the evidence.

Here is the problem: the evidence. What evidence do we have that would enable us to judge the accuracy of John’s comments regarding his brother? Let us make the question a little broader: what evidence do we have that would enable us properly to assess Charles Wesley as an all-round figure of the 18th century and a force both within early Methodism in particular and

1 See Minutes of Conference, 1.201
English church history in general? At first sight the situation looks good. For example, Charles left behind about 600 letters. In addition to the letters written by Charles, there are hundreds written to him giving the context of what Charles spoke about. Charles also compiled a journal for the years 1736 to 1756, a text that runs to approximately 300,000 words. It is true that this journal is very uneven, especially after 1751, but for the latter part of the 1730s and for the crucial decade of the 1740s we have a very substantial account of his work in Charles' own hand. In addition there are a few tracts (though probably not more that a half dozen or so) and a small sample of his sermons. Together these materials make up a substantial deposit of primary materials and it ought to be possible from them to piece together something of Charles' life and work and assess his other talents (organizational, homiletic, evangelistic, pastoral, etc.) which his brother's remark implies he possessed.

This is in addition to his poetic work, which now stands at some 9,000 items, of which perhaps as many as 2,500 may have been written specifically as hymns. Some of these, it is true, are very short. But the short ones are balanced by much longer pieces including one that runs to 48 stanzas!

In light of this wealth of primary evidence, then, the historian, and, given the content of much of the material that has just been mentioned, the theologian, really ought to be able to approach Charles Wesley scholarship with some considerable optimism. Just who was this man, this brilliant character of the 18th century, who could apparently write poetry on almost any topic (children cutting teeth, Handel's birthday, the expected French invasions, and even the pugilistic abilities of Grimalkin, his pet cat: "I sing Grimalkin brave and bold, who makes intruders fly, his claws and whiskers they behold and squall and scamper by")? He was a person who, indisputably, composed some of the most magnificent hymns of the Christian tradition. The wealth of primary materials ought to give the scholar access, but the reality is much less encouraging.

Above all the problem lies in the state of primary textual research. The hymns and poems, it is true, are now in a relatively good state of academic repair, though this has only been true since 1992 and even here one has to say that there is a real need for Osborn's thirteen-volume work of 1872 to be updated.

The prose corpus is much more a problem. It is not an exaggeration to say that until only very recently, within the past five years in fact, the bulk of Charles' prose materials were quite literally lying around in boxes, uncatalogued, almost entirely unresearched and, in the case of the substantial shorthand materials, undeciphered. The situation has improved somewhat

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recently, principally because the bulk of the papers have now been catalogued by Gareth Lloyd. There is still much to be done, however. For example, of the 600 or so letters that Charles has left behind (we are talking only of those he wrote, not those he received), only about 150 have been published either in part or in full. This statistic is depressing, for it means that without engaging in extensive primary textual research, which would include travel to libraries and archives across the globe (Charles Wesley letters are found in locations as far apart as New Zealand and Oxford, Texas, Manchester, North Carolina, Bristol and Georgia) the potential Wesley scholar cannot gain access to the relevant primary materials.

But it gets worse. In 1849 Thomas Jackson published 106 of Charles’ letters, by far the most substantial collection currently in print. Understandably, other scholars who have worked in this area have depended upon Jackson, and those few monographs about Charles that do exist are replete with references to it. However, as soon as one does even cursory research on Jackson, it becomes abundantly clear that the standard of his work leaves much to be desired. It is not just a matter of sloppiness. In fact, Jackson does not seem to have been sloppy at all. Rather, one suspects, indeed one must conclude, that Jackson had a policy of deliberately suppressing material that did not fit the version of Methodist history to which he, and many of his 19th-century contemporaries, was committed. One can see in his editorial work that he cut sections from Charles’ material and yet presented the final form as what Charles had actually written. Of course, historiographical standards in the 19th-century are not those operative today. Little has been done by contemporary scholars to rectify the problems Jackson created.

Such a charge is a serious one and needs to be supported, though this is not the place to engage in such polemics at length. Let me draw attention to another and equally important Charles Wesley text edited by Jackson, namely Charles’ manuscript journal. Here again one finds the same basic editorial policy. Sentences, paragraphs and indeed whole pages of the journal are omitted. If one works with the original one can see clearly Jackson’s pencil lines crossing out that which he did not intend to transcribe. Examples are many and include the letter that Charles wrote to the Bishop of London on February 7, 1745, which begins with the interesting words “My Lord, I was informed some time ago that your Lordship had received some allegations against me of one E.S. charging me with committing, or offering to commit, lewdness with her.” It is plainly written in the manuscript journal, but Jackson omits it, and one can understand why. Much more significantly, however, Jackson omitted numerous sections in Charles’ journal that were written in shorthand. These sections are of great importance (much more so, one might reasonably argue, than are sections such as the accusation of lewdness). They are important for our understanding of Charles and throw particular light, for example, on Charles’ relationship with his brother John. There are sections where Charles is deeply critical of John regarding the lat-
ter's unwillingness to entertain the thought that he, Charles, should receive a stipend in return for his work among the Societies. There are also sections that concern John's impending marriage to Grace Murray. Here is a quote from the shorthand passage to give the flavor. The year is 1749.

As soon as I could recover my astonishment, I told him plainly he was given up to Jewish blindness of heart; [and] that the light which was in him was darkness.... I declared I would cover his nakedness as long as I could, and honour him before the people; and if I must at last break with him, would retreat gradually, and hide it from the world. He seemed pleased with the thought of parting, though God knows, as I told him, that I had saved him from a thousand false steps: and still I am persuaded we shall stand or fall together. If he would not foresee the consequence of marrying, I said, he must marry and feel them afterward. . . . What the end of this thing will be only God knoweth, but the cloud at present hanging over us looks very black.

This is clearly a crisis point and it looks as though a break between the brothers is on the cards. In the end, of course, it did not happen, but the picture one gets here is of a very strongwilled Charles refusing to give in to his brother John and taking a very determined stance against him. We know some of this from other sources, but there is much more in the shorthand sections of the journal that throws further light on this whole episode, and others, including a clear indication that Charles had proposed to his own wife several months before telling John of his intentions. For reasons that we need not explore in detail at this point, this was a particularly underhand move on Charles' part and in effect nullified a previous pact that they had made. None of this shorthand material appears in Jackson.

This rather detailed account of the very defective textual base upon which scholarship into the life and work of Charles Wesley has for so long been conducted could easily be extended further, but such is not necessary here. The basic point is this: scholarship into the place of Charles Wesley within early Methodism, which includes an appraisal of his vision for the Methodist societies, his own spirituality, and his theological and historical significance (not to mention at times his rather underhanded moves) will not really be advanced until basic archival-textual spadework has been done. We have really referred to only one or two individual instances of where it makes a difference, but there are many, many more. Despite Lloyd's efforts to raise awareness of the riches of the manuscript collections, almost all of Charles' prose materials lie relatively undisturbed in boxes and folders in the kind of places mentioned above. The result is that even the most recent monographs on Charles' works such as the biography written by Mitchell, simply fail to do their subject justice. They fail to bridge the gap that exists as a result of the lack of textual work. They fail also to get past the barrier that Jackson and others erected in the form of heavily edited texts. The result

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is that in place of a work of integrity what we get is a rehash of the 19th century, a heavily sanitized view of Charles as his brother’s helper and a saintly man who spent his time writing hymns. Now of course there is some truth in this. Charles did write hymns and he did work side-by-side with this brother. They had a special relationship. But if the kind of primary material to which we have made reference above tells us anything, it tells us that Charles was a powerful man, a man of deep convictions, and a man who did not draw back from making those convictions known. He was a contentious man for sure and one who had a very clear view of what the Methodist societies were about, how they related to the Church of England, what the Methodist people should believe, and how they should be ministered to. More attention must be focussed on 18th-century Methodist textual studies.

The first step, in fact, has already been taken with the publication of The Sermons of Charles Wesley, released by Oxford University Press in 2001. The next major tangible result will be the publication of a complete text of Charles Wesley’s manuscript journal. The big project, however, is the Charles Wesley letters. Work has started; it is hoped that the first of two projected volumes will be available sometime in 2007, the tercentenary of Charles’ birth.

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Charles Wesley scholarship will not advance significantly without the kind of text-critical work which has been mentioned above. However, to return to the main theme, we return to explore some aspects of Charles Wesley’s life as it is illustrated chiefly, though not exclusively, in the manuscript prose works.

Let us think first, and briefly, about Charles Wesley’s strength of character and the rather forceful way, at times, in which he expressed the very clear-cut views to which he adhered. This is clearly present in Charles’ letters of Charles (both those by and to him) and also in his journal and tracts.

That Charles Wesley had a reputation for being able to take a firm stance is clear. Consider for example the manuscript sources relating to the issue of the Methodist prophet and enthusiast George Bell (d. 1807). Bell, together with the better known early Methodist Thomas Maxfield, probably the first Methodist lay preacher, worked in the Methodist societies in early 1760s London, where together they preached a doctrine of absolute sinless perfection. “I am perfect,” Bell once stated, “and I can no more fall from my state of perfection than God can fall off his throne.” He was a colorful character who claimed the ability to heal the sick, foretell the future and even, so he said, raise the dead (carefully adding, we ought to note, that though he said he had this power, he said also that the time had not as yet come for him to exercise it). What is more Bell gambled on hitting the prophetic jackpot by predicting that the world was set to come to a dramatic end on February 28, 1763. Contrary to what one might expect, but in keeping with what we know
about such prophetic figures in general, Bell had considerable success in getting others to accept such views, so much so in fact that he was arrested and jailed for causing a public disturbance. Needless to say, John Wesley got involved in this episode and heard Bell preach a number of times. John’s response was weak to say the least, so weak in fact that in a series of letters written to Charles one finds the London Methodists calling for Charles to come to sort out the situation, for it is he, so the letters clearly state, and not John, who has the strength of character to deal with Bell in the way that the situation requires. The letters betray a sense of frustration that John has here, as at other times, failed to see the danger inherent in what was happening and had apparently taken the view that while some of what Bell and Maxfield had to say was in error (and John took a definite dislike to the manner in which Bell was preaching), some of what he said was good. In any case, said John, taking his cue from Gamaliel in Acts 5.39, if God was with the movement there was no point in struggling against it and if God was not, it would come to nothing anyway. The letters betray a strong conviction that Charles will not stand for such things and will be able to deal decisively with Bell and his followers.

Much earlier, in 1740, it was also Charles who took in hand the situation that had arisen with the arrival among the Methodists of Mary Lavington, a member of an apocalyptic group called the “French Prophets.” Charles wrote a short account of this episode in his journal. Separately, however, he wrote a much longer account that until recently has remained unnoticed in the Methodist archives at the Rylands Library.

From the longer account it is very clear that Charles acted decisively. He went to Mary Lavington’s place of abode and confronted both her and her live-in lover, Mr. Wise. After discussing matters relating to sinlessness and the sacrament, which Lavington referred to as a “beggarly element” and advised her followers to ignore, Charles issued a clear directive to the Methodist people: ‘go with them or stay with us.’ He then went to several Societies reading his report of the incident and telling them to avoid contact with the French Prophets in general and Mary Lavington in particular. Incidentally, Charles seems to have been much more upset about the rejection by the French Prophets of the importance of the Lord’s Supper than he was about their apocalyptic prognostications.

In the general context of arguing for Charles’ strength of character, it is perhaps worth noting further the extent to which he could and did enter into dispute with brother John. We have already noted one example of this, namely his views on John’s intended marriage to Grace Murray, a point upon which, it seems, the brothers nearly broke. The outline of this sad story is already relatively well known and we need not retell it in detail here. Suffice

*Methodist Archives collection, John Rylands Library, Manchester, Box DDCW 8/12
to say that the end result of Charles’ opposition was that he literally raced on horseback from Bristol to Newcastle in an effort to outride and outwit John, and to have John’s intended bride married to someone else, a plan that succeeded. A string of letters in the aftermath of this sorry episode point to an unrepentant Charles who seems to have very little appreciation of his brother’s sadness. Some of this finds expression also in Charles’ poem, “Ah woe to me, a man of woe”:

Ah woe to me, a man of woe
A mournner from the womb
I see my lot and softly go
Lamenting to the tomb

In calm despair I bow my head
The heavenly loan restore
For O! my latest hope is gone
And friendship is no more

Too happy in his love I was
I was—but I submit
Irreparable is the loss
The ruin is complete

In simple innocency drest
The soft Ephesians’ Charms
Have caught him from my honest breast
To her bewitching arms.

It goes on for another six stanzas. Not the most cheerful of poems to write on the occasion of your brother’s marriage! In the letters of Charles there is much more including a fairly clear indication that it was at this time that his relationship with John was in real difficulty and he began to look elsewhere for allegiances, including John Bennet (to whom Grace Murray was now married) and the Countess of Huntingdon.

The same strength of character emerges also during Charles’ dealings with the local preachers. Lay preaching was the backbone of the Methodist movement without which it could hardly have survived at all and certainly would not have grown. But Charles, it seems, was always deeply suspicious of the lay preachers. The remarks he made in a letter to John Bennet are typical of Charles’ attitude, “A friend of ours.” he wrote, and he has brother John clearly in view, “(without God’s counsel) made a preacher of a tailor. I, with God’s help, shall make a tailor of him again.”

Most famously of all, of course, is the issue of the relationship of the

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Methodist societies and the Established Church and in particular the question of whether the Methodist movement ought to establish an order of ordained ministry outside of the Anglican Episcopal structures. Charles’ views were very clear cut both in deed and in word. Many times in both the journal and the letters one finds Charles stating his position very clearly. It was upon this matter of separation that he wrote in 1756 to his brother:

Is it not your duty to stop Joseph Cownley and such like from railing or laughing at the Church? The short remains of my life are devoted to this very thing, to follow your sons (as Charles Perronet once told me we should follow you) with buckets of water, and quench the flame of strife and division which they have or may kindle.⁶

Perhaps as early as the 1760s John may have been thinking about exercising what he considered to be the right of every presbyter: ordination. John saw no biblical basis for separate orders of priest and bishop, which makes his allegiance to the Church of England somewhat surprising in many ways. As it happened, the crisis that had given rise to this passed. But in 1784 the issue arose again and this time John ordained two lay persons, Thomas Vasey and Richard Whatcoat, and also “ordained” (Wesley’s word) Thomas Coke, who was in fact already an ordained priest of the Church of England.

What Wesley was doing, in effect, was consecrating Coke as a Bishop. Wesley spoke of Coke as a “superintendant” rather than bishop, but he surely knew his Greek and Latin well enough to know that if you translate the Greek word episcopos into Latin you end up with “supervisor/superintendent”? The three then sailed for America where Coke proceeded to ordain another Methodist “superintendant,” Francis Asbury. Charles, who had understandably not been consulted prior to John’s actions, was incensed! It was in connection with Coke’s ordination of Asbury that Charles published one his very few tracts, namely the highly critical *Strictures on the Substance of a Sermon Preached at Baltimore in the State of Maryland before the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church.* He also wrote a number of hymns, the manuscripts of which have survived and have recently been published in full. The criticism is stinging and shows again Charles as an individual very able even at this late point in his life (he was now 77 years of age) to take the firmest of stances in opposition to his brother:

Christ our merciful High-Priest
By thy people’s grief distressed
Help us for our guide to pray
Lost in his mistaken way⁷

⁶Baker, 97.
⁷Kimbrough and Beckerlegge, 3. 93.
The criticism goes on:

Wesley himself and friends betrays
   By his good sense forsook
When suddenly his hands he lays
   On the hot head of Coke

And:

So easily are bishops made
   By man's or woman's whim?
Wesley put his hands on Coke
   But who put hands on him?

Pointed, but in fact relatively mild, consider this one written when Charles learned of Coke's ordination of Asbury as a "superintendent." Drawing on the story of how Caligula appointed his horse to a position of great authority in ancient Rome, Charles wrote:

A Roman emperor 'tis said
   His favourite horse a consul made
But Coke brings greater things to pass
   He makes a bishop of an ass.

This is strong stuff. One ought not to underestimate it. There is much more in a similar vein to be found in the Wesley manuscript papers, i.e., the letters, the full journal and the tracts no less than the hymns. Charles was not a man to be taken lightly. He was determined, strong, forceful, some might say even somewhat arrogant, and he was quite able to give his brother, and others in the early Methodist movement, a run for their money when he felt it his duty to do so.

This discussion of Charles' views on the Church of England and ordination brings us on naturally to the question of his theology more generally. This is an area in which surprisingly little work has to date been done, the most obvious exceptions to this rule being a volume of essays edited by S. T. Kimbrough, Jr., the much earlier work of J. Ernest Rattenbury, and a relatively small number of unpublished works.

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1Kimbrough and Beckerlegge, 3. 81.
2Kimbrough and Beckerlegge, 3. 89.
3Kimbrough and Beckerlegge, 3. 81.
9Kimbrough, Poet and Theologian.
In fact a number of scholars have argued that Charles actually has very little to contribute in the theological arena at all. This is not to say that there is no theology in what Charles wrote. Such a judgment would be absurd. The argument is rather that Charles has little or nothing original to contribute. What he has, so the argument goes, he got either from John or from the wider evangelical revival in general. Gill for example wrote:

Their work was indivisible. John organized, Charles provided the impulse. John was the head, Charles was the heart. The latter's contribution was immeasurable: in warmth, fervour and affection. And supremely there are the hymns, without which it is doubtful whether Methodism could have survived.... Charles gave wings to his brother's work, spreading it with a rapidity and gaining for it a popularity it could never otherwise have known. 13

Thomas Langford argued an even stronger case in many ways. According to him, “Charles served a supportive, encouraging, and propagandizing role to and for John” rather than being a theological force in his own right.14 Langford then went on to argue the often repeated position that Charles’ theology is “experiential.” It is a theology that does not conform to the norms expected of that discipline. It is not abstract or an end in itself. Rather, stated Langford, it is a theology of praise, a theology which one can pray and sing tied “inseparably to the worship of God.”15

It would be difficult not to conclude that any analysis of Charles’ theology based upon an examination of his hymns alone will inevitably lead to the view that it was a theology which could be sung and one tied inseparably to the worship of God. Neither will it come as a great surprise to learn that an examination of that (poetic) body of evidence leads to the conclusion that it was as an artist rather than as an individual of great rational insight that Charles may best be remembered. Had attention been given to other genres of Charles’ output, a different, or at least a more balanced, conclusion might have been reached. Here is a hint of how such an argument might develop.

One example from the extensive letter corpus will demonstrate this point clearly. In 1754 Charles wrote a very long letter, approximately 3,000 words, in which he explained in great detail, using fairly standard 18th-century prophetic-exegetical logic, his thinking regarding the eschatological events which he believed were shortly to come upon the world. The letter demands detailed examination.16 As one follows Charles along his intricate exegetical

14Langford in Kimbrough, “Charles Wesley,” 100.
16This letter is transcribed and discussed in detail in Kenneth G. C. Newport, *Apocalypse and Millennium*, (Oxford: OUP, 2000), and earlier in Newport, “Charles Wesley’s Interpretation of Some Biblical Prophecies.”
pathways, one is aware that here is someone conversant with the thinking of his day. Much of what he said in the letter, for example his view that the Jews would be converted just before the return of Christ, is standard in the 18th century. Much of his exegesis is also in tune with what we would expect given the age in which it was written. This includes his historicist reading of the Book of Revelation and application of many of the principles of that exegetical methodology including the “year-day” principle by which Charles took a period measured in “days” in biblical prophecy, for example the “thousand two hundred and threescore days” of Revelation 12.6, as being equal to a period of literal years in the history of the church. However, in places his exegesis is highly unusual, perhaps even novel, and his reasoning, seen in an 18th-century context, is tight and mature. Here, as also in several of the sermons, we see Charles the theologian and biblical interpreter working at the biblical text, especially Daniel and the Book of Revelation, and doing so using standard 18th-century exegetical methodology. By the application of such methods Charles came to a startling conclusion: the world will end in 1794. Prior to that the Jews will be converted and the Antichrist, the Roman Catholic Church, will be overthrown, though not before a period of persecution at the hands of Rome has befallen the Protestants. The letter is very detailed and exhibits exegetical confidence. This compares starkly with John’s remarks, who once wrote in his journal:

Monday the 6th, and the following days, I corrected the notes upon Revelation. Oh how little do we know of this deep book! At least, how little do I know! I can barely conjecture, not affirm anyone point concerning that part of it which is yet unfulfilled.

This letter, then, suggests that Charles could fashion a theology on his own and that what he had to say was by no means always parasitic of the views of his brother or even those of the wider evangelical revival. In his arguments Charles was able to appeal no less to the head than to the heart. Such a judgment, however, can be arrived at by taking into account not only the hymns, but also the prose materials, for not surprisingly, it is in prose not poetry that Charles is more clearly seen to apply the logician’s art. This aspect of his work may not appear with great frequency in his hymns, but this is perhaps at least as likely to be the dictates of the genre as the result of any real or imagined rational shortcomings on Charles’ part.


For further details of Charles’ eschatological thinking see further Newport, “Premillennialism in the Early Writings of Charles Wesley,” and Newport, “Charles Wesley and the End of the World.” These relatively brief studies take into account not only DDCW 1/51, but some other (though certainly not all) of Charles’ early letters and hymns, the sermon material and the references to eschatological preaching in the journal.
Let us consider a rather different example of Charles' theological art, i.e., his sermon on Acts 20.7. The text is important and is, perhaps, the best example of Charles working systematically through a sermon on a theological question. In the course of this engagement he referred to a number of early church sources which he quoted extensively in Greek. He also subjected a number of individual words and phrases from the Greek New Testament to careful analysis. Here is a good example of his arguing a case on the basis of reason, historical evidence, tradition, and careful linguistic exegesis of the relevant biblical and extra-canonical early Christian texts. Again, as with the letter on eschatology, it is a work of the head not of the heart.

Such examples of Charles working at a theological problem "with his head" and arguing a particular point using some of the standard theological methodology of his day could be multiplied and it is wrong to conclude that Charles was only "the heart" of the early Methodist faith. As Charles articulated his faith, he did so sometimes in poems and hymns, but such was not the limit of his ability to communicate. In the archives there is a mass of material, most yet to be explored, that shows Charles in quite a different light, i.e., a Charles whose theology is carefully constructed out of the exegesis of biblical texts, reason and tradition. This is perhaps what we expect of a good 18th-century Anglican theologian, and Charles was precisely one of them.

Neither was Charles' theology always in tune with that of his brother John. We have noted already how they disagreed on issues relating to episcopal ordination, but there were other points of difference. We cannot develop these in any detail here, but mention only in passing such important issues as Charles' views on perfection. It was in the context of his dispute with Mary Lavington that Charles protested, quoting I John 1.8, "if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us," a position he doubtless also took when dealing with matters relating to Maxfield and Bell. John, on the other hand, was prepared to allow for the possibility of sinlessness in the lives of others, though he did not claim it for himself, and once said that though he had met some 500 persons who claimed they were perfect, he doubted it was true in more that one in ten cases.

If we return for a moment to the hymns, there is the question of Charles uncompromisingly incarnational kenotic Christology. At times this went so far as to cause offense to John, who famously omitted Charles' hymn, "Jesu lover of my soul, let me to thy bosom fly" from the 1780 hymn book, doing so, it seems, on the grounds of the "fondling terms" it contained. For John stated, "I have. . . particularly endeavored, in all the hymns which are addressed to our blessed Lord, to avoid every fondling expression, and to speak as to the most high God; to him that is 'in glory equal with the Father, in majesty co-eternal.'"

So far we have argued that much more work needs to be done on the Charles Wesley papers, especially the prose material, and have given some
indication of how the evidence contained in that huge body of literature might alter quite significantly the picture of Charles Wesley, his vision for and work amongst the Methodist societies. We have also argued that while Charles was without doubt a poet and hymn writer of nearly unparalleled ability, he also had many other skills and talents. He worked with his heart, yes, but also with his head.

We consider briefly now the range of Charles’ communicative skills. It is true, of course, that Charles was a highly educated individual who was well able to converse with the theologians of his day. Charles could not only converse with them, but also dispute with them in many and varied ways. Sometimes he worked through the medium of prose. We have seen a little of that in the 1754 letter and in the sermon on Acts 20.7 mentioned above. But he used the poetic form as well. Examples in this latter category range from the uncharacteristic doggerel of such compositions as, “The Unitarian fiend expel, and drive his doctrine back to hell” to a much more substantial and well-crafted onslaught against Calvinism found in the early collection, *Hymns on God’s Everlasting Love* (1741).

It is plain, too, that Charles was an effective communicator of the faith to those who did not have the kind of intellectual skills and privileged education he possessed. The manuscripts again throw light on this matter, for one is impressed how frequently in the archives one comes across material written to Charles praising him for the clear and compelling manner in which he delivered his sermons. In the journal also Charles reported on the impact of his preaching and how many thousands at times came to hear him preach. Certainly he preached with conviction and passion, so much so that on one occasion he got a nose bleed as result. It seems that his preaching could have a dramatic effect on his audience too for the letters and journal are full of stories of people fainting, hallooing, shouting, screaming and so on. So frequent were these occurrences that Charles was rumored to keep a bucket of water with him in the pulpit so that if the need arose he could throw it over any who got too excited and hence calm them down.

Unfortunately very little of Charles’ sermon material has survived. This is due in part because soon after his “evangelical experience” in 1738 he appears to have developed the method of preaching without any preparation at all. He just stood up, opened the Bible at random, and off he went.

Fortunately, however, some of his sermons were committed to paper and some of those manuscripts have survived. In a number of these, Charles’ concern to engage the issues and theological disputes of his day and to do so using carefully constructed arguments concerning and analyses of the human condition can be seen. Into this category one might put not only the sermon on Acts 20.7, but also the only two sermons that Charles actually published during his lifetime, namely, “Awake thou that Sleepest” (preached before the University of Oxford in 1742), and, “The Cause and Cure of Earthquakes” (published in 1755). However, there are other texts that are much simpler and obviously aimed at another kind of audience entirely.
These include Charles’ shorthand sermon on John 8.1-11 (the woman caught in adultery). The sermon is relatively uncluttered and makes a simple appeal to the sinner to come to Christ and, like the woman, hear the words, “neither do I condemn you—go and sin no more.”

One very early account of Charles’ preaching is that given by Joseph Williams of Kidderminster. The manuscript of this has survived. On October 17, 1739, Williams, who was a Congregationalist and not a Methodist, wrote to Charles in the course of which he referred to a report that he has written on hearing Charles preach:

I found him standing upon a table, in an erect posture, with his hands and eyes lifted up to heaven in prayer, surrounded with (I guess) more than a thousand people; some few of them persons of fashion, both men and women, but most of them of the lower rank of mankind. I know not how long he had been engaged in the duty before I came, but he continued therein, after my coming, scarce a quarter of an hour; during which time he prayed with uncommon fervency, fluency, and variety of proper expression. He then preached about an hour from the five last verses of the fifth chapter of the second Epistle to the Corinthians, in such a manner as I have seldom, if ever, heard any minister preach: i.e. though I have heard many a finer sermon, according to the common taste, or acceptation of sermons, yet I scarce ever heard any minister discover such evident signs of a most vehement desire, or labour so earnestly, to convince his hearers that they were all by nature in a state of enmity against God, consequently in a damnable state, and needed reconciliation to God. . . These points he backed all along as he went on with a great many texts of scripture, which he explained, and illustrated; and then freely invited all, even the chief of sinners, and used a great variety of the most moving arguments, and expositions, in order to persuade, allure, instigate and, if possible, compel them all to come to Christ, and believe in him for pardon and salvation.20

And all this, says Williams, was done by Charles with nothing but the Bible in his hand.

Williams was not alone. In the archives there are a number of other reports on Charles’ preaching, including at least a couple of letters that make it clear that their authors thought he was a better preacher that John. That praise, however, is not uniform. One of the letters written to Charles complains that he mumbled, while another account tells how Charles went on for over two hours and probably would have kept going a good deal longer had he not been “booed and hissed out of the pulpit by the lads.” But these are the exceptions.

Charles, then, was evidently a fair theologian and a very good preacher who through various means could articulate and communicate his faith both to the well educated and to the “men of fashion,” as Williams called them, but also to those of “the lower rank of mankind.” In the area of preaching, then, as well as in his hymns Charles seems to have had the ability to articulate his faith in a variety of contexts, using a variety of media and using language suited to the audience before him.

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20Methodist Archives Collection, Box DDPr 1/92, 2-3.
We have sought to demonstrate that Charles Wesley was more than just a hymn writer. Actually, his brother John was overdoing it a bit by saying that his brother's least talent was his poetic one, but that Charles did have other skills is perfectly clear. It is plain also that he was a contentious figure in early Methodism and while he and his brother John did have an extraordinarily close relationship and in general held each other in great regard, this is not to say that they did not have their differences. The period 1749-1752 was particularly difficult and it is doubtful that the relationship ever really recovered fully from the strain under which it was placed during those years. The differences were personal, theological, organizational, and real and we should not underestimate them.

Charles has, like so many others, suffered somewhat as a result of being on the losing side. Not too long after his death, that which he most feared did in fact occur with the separation of the Methodist people from the Established Church. Not surprisingly, as the new movement struggled to its feet and sought independence, the legacy of Charles was quickly forgotten, some might even say “covered up” and the story of the rise and progress of Methodism ever since has been told almost exclusively through the eyes of John. Charles in the meantime has been defused. As the “Sweet Singer of Methodism” he is safe. But the manuscript material tells a rather different story.

Actually, the underlying issues raised here could be extended further. However, the kind of archival work for which we have argued is central not just in Charles Wesley studies, nor yet in early Methodism alone, but very generally in the area of religious history. I was privileged in the past to be associated as a fellow at the John Rylands Research Institute at the University of Manchester, which is where the Methodist archives are kept. From the time that I spent there ferreting through the stacks located on the several floors of archives below the reading room, I know that there are large deposits of denominational material there still largely untouched. Some of this is in the form of printed materials, but much more exciting, in my view, are the manuscript holdings. After all, the kind of material that makes it into print is often representative of only one, usually very privileged, section of any particular religious denomination or other social group. Similarly, that which people are prepared to put into print, or, as we have seen in the case of Charles Wesley and Thomas Jackson, that which others later think suitable for publication, may be only a part of the whole picture.

If one really wants to know what was going on “on the ground,” if one really wants to tap into the religion as it was believed and practiced by the general populace rather than the educated elite, one may well have to get beyond that printed material, while not ignoring it of course, and bring to the surface the manuscript collections, the journals, the letters, the notebooks, the diaries, the sermons, and so on generated by those who lived and
breathed the religion to which they are bearing witness. Of course, the very fact that the people who wrote even this material could write at all means that we may still be at a little distance from the average man or woman in the pew, but we are probably closer. What a tale there is to be told! What an array of popular belief! Even within Methodism one detects a strong streak of fervent eschatological expectation, a belief that at almost any moment the heavens might role back to reveal the Son of Man coming with the angels to right injustices and call all men and women to account. Accounts of spirit possession, both demonic and divine, accounts of attempted, or at least anticipated, raisings of the dead, accounts of prophetic utterances, encounters with the Devil and his angels, and indications that as with so many other nascent religious movements women were able to take advantage of the lack of institutional structures and rise to positions of importance and influence – are all there. This is not what makes it into the official accounts of the rise and progress of Methodism that begin to be written as the movement begins to mature, but it is all the more important for that!