

## Charles Wesley ... Hymn writer *extraordinaire*!

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**Hymns!** Where would we be without them? They are to our literary life what the book of Psalms is to the Bible. If the entire world's literature was prose it would be a very, well, "prosaic" world, lacking heart and verve. And helping to make that world richly and Biblically poetic rather than prosaic was the man whose life we are considering tonight: Charles Wesley. Many of the hymns we sing today flowed from his pen. He wrote almost 9000 hymns (at least 3 times the output of poet William Wordsworth). Dr. Frank Baker calculated that Charles Wesley wrote an average of 10 lines of verse every day for 50 years! He completed an extant poem every other day. Compare this with some other hymn writers:

- Augustus Toplady wrote 6 hymns
- William Cowper wrote 68
- John Newton wrote 280
- Philip Doddridge wrote around 400
- Isaac Watts wrote 697

*Charles Wesley wrote 8,989; and many of these were composed while riding a horse to his next preaching engagement! His hymns include "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing," "And Can It Be," "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing," "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling," "Jesus, Lover of My Soul," "Christ the Lord Is Risen Today," and "Rejoice! the Lord Is King!" Many of his early hymns contained more than a dozen stanzas. Charles Wesley's "Soldiers of Christ, Arise," for example, originally boasted 18 stanzas. Dr. John Julian, who compiled the massive Dictionary of Hymnology, wrote, "... **perhaps, taking quantity and quality into consideration, [Charles Wesley was] the greatest hymn-writer of all ages.**"*

The word Bernard Manning used to describe Wesley's hymns was: "smoothness." *"They flow; they are singable; they have that quality of effortlessness that speaks of care and craftsmanship not far below the surface."* John Wesley, in his preface to his 1780 hymn book, wrote: *"There is no doggerel, no botches, nothing put in to patch up the rhyme, no feeble expletives, nothing turgid or bombast, no cant expressions, no words without meaning."*

In Wesley's day, the usual method of singing in church was by what was called "lining out." People did not sing one line immediately after another. Someone said one line, and then the congregation repeated it. This was done because hymnbooks were expensive, and many worshipers could not read. While Charles was alive, his hymns were never sung in Sunday worship. Throughout his lifetime, Methodists



stayed in the Anglican Church, which did not employ the new hymns in worship. But Wesley's hymns were sung in informal Methodist gatherings during the week. The Methodists were famed for their hearty singing of Charles Wesley's hymns at their services, often while being mocked, interrupted, and pelted with stones. In fact, his well-known hymn "Ye Servants of God, Your Master Proclaim" was written *"to be sung in a tumult."*

Once Charles's open-air preaching service was rudely disturbed by some half-drunken sailors or soldiers striking up a lewd song. Charles did some 18<sup>th</sup>-century multi-tasking. While conducting his own meeting, he memorized both the meter and words of their mocking song. He then wrote seven 8-line verses to the same tune. The next time the drunks struck up that song the Methodists would be able to drown their interruption with Charles's words to that very tune.

### *What! No Nahum and Philemon! How could he do this!?*

What John Wesley said about his brother's hymns was the highest praise he could give: they were scriptural. Frank Baker said Wesley's poetry was like "an enormous sponge, filled to saturation with Bible words, Bible similes, Bible metaphors, Bible stories, Bible themes." The Index of Scriptural Allusions in the latest critical edition of John Wesley's 1780 Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists (over 90 percent the work of Charles) contains 2,500 entries, including every book of the Bible, except Nahum and Philemon. (Sixty-four out of 66 is not too shabby!)

### *The Impact*

One historian wrote: *"The message **and the music** of the Wesleys reached the desperate, downtrodden, and often gin-besotted underclass in England and some historians speculate that the ministry of the Wesleys brought such far-reaching changes that it may have enabled England to avoid a bloody revolution such as occurred in France in that same century."* Those who attended Gospel meetings in those days heard not only stirring preaching from Whitefield and the Wesleys, they also heard and joined in singing hymns that were rich in Gospel truth—hymns that, in memorable language, told of our ruin in sin, of salvation by God's grace, redemption through Christ's blood, regeneration by the Holy Spirit, and a joyous future in the home of God for all the redeemed. People went away with these words fastened in their minds and sang the words over and over again. Both outdoor and indoor meetings were characterized by the magnificent, hearty singing of Charles Wesley's mighty hymns, sung to music that was simple but was also suited to its high task. *"Many an illiterate person, on being converted, learned to read and write. Almost every one of the early Methodists possessed two books; a Bible and a hymn book. These volumes proved bosom companions, and the Methodist was daily reading his Bible and daily singing from his book of hymns. On the Lord's Day he carried the two volumes to the society and on certain evenings of the week he did the same again. In a multitude of instances, whereas a person had formerly known only a life of ignorance characterized by drunkenness and the sins of the flesh, now, because he was converted, he was not only sober and clean of life, but was reading his Bible and perhaps one or two spiritual books, and was singing and memorizing hymns. How many of Britain's poor were thus raised to new standards of life cannot be estimated, but it must be recognized that the singing and memorizing of Charles Wesley's hymns was as much used by God in this glorious process as was the preaching of the many men who took part in it."*

Henry Moore gives us this charming picture of Charles Wesley in old age: *"When he was nearly fourscore, he retained something of his eccentricity. He rode every day (clothed for winter even in summer) a little horse, grey with age. When he mounted, if a subject struck him, he proceeded to expand, and put it in order. He would write a hymn thus given him, on a card (kept for the purpose), with his pencil, in shorthand. Not infrequently he has come to our house in the City-road, and, having left the pony in the garden in front, he would enter, crying out, '**Pen and ink! Pen and ink!**' These being supplied, he wrote the hymn he had been composing. When this was done, he would look round on those present, and salute them with much kindness, ask after their health, give out a short hymn, and thus put all in mind of eternity."*



His statue in Bristol, England, with his hand upraised as though pleading, has on its base words from one of his hymns, words that capture what has been called the "magnificent obsession" of his life:

**"O let me commend my Savior to you."**