

Reformation Series 2010  
(Lecture Three: Charles Wesley – The Great Methodist Hymn Writer)

III. Charles Wesley: The Great Methodist Hymn Writer.

A. Review.

1. The church is to be reformed and always to be reforming (reformata et semper reformanda).
2. We are to follow the regulative principle: everything must be according to God's Word.
  - a. God commands us to sing to move our hearts towards Him.
  - b. We are to sing psalms (sacred song), hymns and spiritual songs.
  - c. Our hymns must be regulated by God's Word:
    - (i) Be God/Christ centered.
    - (ii) Biblical.
    - (iii) Give glory to God for His Being and works.
    - (iv) Express love to God.
    - (v) Lift up things we should ask.
    - (vi) We must be able to assent: sing amen.

B. Charles Wesley (1707-1788): The Great Methodist Hymn Writer.

1. Birth.

- a. Charles Wesley was born, December 18, 1707, in the parsonage at Epworth, to Samuel and Susanna Wesley, the 18<sup>th</sup> of 19 children.
- b. His father was Rector of the parish who also had some talent in writing poetry.
- c. His mother was a daughter of the Rev. Samuel Annesley, LL.D., an eminent dissenter. (In spite of this connection, they had little to do with the Dissenters, and were steadfastly connected to the Church of England). She was also a staunch supporter of the Stuart dynasty (Jacobite).
- d. Of their nineteen children, only ten survived infancy: seven daughters and three sons: Samuel, John and Charles.
- e. Because of the number of their children and the paucity of their income, the Wesleys struggled with poverty.

2. Education.

- a. He was educated at home for the first eight years of his life by his mother (Bible).
- b. When he was nine, he was sent to Westminster School, where his eldest brother, Samuel – who was teaching there – supported him.
- c. While at Westminster, his father received a letter from Garret Wesley, a wealthy Irish gentleman and member of Parliament, asking to adopt Charles.
  - (i) Since he was too young to answer for himself, Mr. Wesley contributed to his support for several years.
  - (ii) When Charles was old enough to decide, he gratefully declined.
  - (iii) Garret Wesley took his cousin, Richard Colley, instead, who became an Earl and grandfather to the Duke of Wellington.

- d. Charles was later educated at St. Peter's College, Westminster, London, 1721, and at Christ Church, Oxford, 1726.
    - (i) "'He pursued,' says John, 'his studies diligently, and led a regular, harmless life; but, if I spoke to him about religion, he would warmly answer,— 'What? would you have me to be a saint all at once?'" and would hear no more.'"
    - (ii) John left Oxford in August 1727, not to return until November, 1729.
3. The rise of Methodism.
- a. Early in his third year, Charles began to live a very seriously and methodically. "Diligence,' he says, 'led me into serious thinking; I went to the weekly sacrament, and persuaded two or three young students to accompany me, and to observe the *method* of study prescribed by the statutes of the University. This gained me the harmless name of Methodist. In half a year [after this] my brother left his curacy at Epworth, and came to our assistance. We then proceeded regularly in our studies, and in doing what good we could to the bodies and souls of men.'"
  - b. It was the Spring of 1729 when Methodism began, and Charles Wesley was the first Methodist.
  - c. When John joined this "Godly Club," under his energetic leadership, it exerted a wider influence: this movement would later be called "The Methodist Revival."
  - d. So far neither Charles nor John had learned the simple Gospel – they were religious, but their religion was merely formal.
  - e. Charles graduated with a B.A. that year, still pursuing his studies to be ordained.
  - f. In 1732, he graduated M.A., and continued his work as a tutor.
  - g. In 1735, he was ordained as a deacon, and then as a priest on two consecutive Sundays.
4. Conversion.
- a. His father died in 1735, at which time the family home at Epworth was broken up.
  - b. When John decided to go to Georgia in 1735 as a missionary, Charles was persuaded to go with him as secretary to Governor James Oglethorpe.
  - c. His time in Georgia was brief. He returned to England in 1736, and in 1737 came under the influence of Count Zinzendorf and the Moravians.
    - (i) He had begun teaching English to Peter Böhler, a Moravian who was preparing to go to Georgia as a missionary.
    - (ii) In the Spring of 1738, when Wesley became very ill and thought he was dying, Böhler asked him, "Do you hope to be saved?" Charles said "Yes." "For what reason do you hope it?" Charles answered, "Because I have used my best endeavours to serve God." At this, Charles tells us, "He shook his head and said no more. I thought him very uncharitable, saying in my heart: Would he rob me of my endeavours?" It was that shake of his head that shattered Charles' hopes.
    - (iii) Böhler went on to teach Charles not to trust in his works, but in the merits of a perfect Savior.
    - (iv) On May 21, 1738, Charles was converted.
5. Ministry.
- a. After he recovered, he became a curate (assistant priest) for Mr. Stonehouse, the Vicar of St. Mary's, Islington, who also later became a Moravian.

- b. He labored there for eight or nine months before opposition from the parish and diocese forced him to leave.
  - c. Following Whitefield's example, he went out to the fields to preach, preaching the Gospel to thousands at Moorfields on June 24, 1739.
  - d. He now gave himself to the work of evangelism, going everywhere in the kingdom, Wales and Ireland with great success and great tribulation, as also did his brother John.
6. Marriage.
- a. On one of his tours, he came to Bristol, July 31, 1745, where he became acquainted with Marmaduke Gwynne, Esq., of Garth, a man of some fortune and a magistrate, who had been converted to Methodism, under the preaching of Howell Harris.
  - b. Two years later, while on his way to Ireland, he visited Mr. Gwynne at Garth and became enamored with his daughter, Sarah.
  - c. After repeated visits of Charles to Garth, and Gwynne and his daughter to London, Charles and Sarah were married, April 8, 1749.
    - (i) She was twenty three and Charles forty one.
    - (ii) Unlike John's, Charles' marriage was very happy. His wife accompanied him on his frequent evangelistic travels, until 1756, when he stopped iterating to devote himself to the care of the Societies in London and Bristol.
    - (iii) Eight children were born to them, but only the youngest three – Charles, Sarah, and Samuel – survived infancy, the two boys becoming talented musicians, the girl a poet.
7. Later ministry and death.
- a. He remained in Bristol until 1771, when he moved to London to care for the Societies and to the prisoners in Newgate.
  - b. A Mrs. Gumley presented Charles and Sarah with a twenty year lease of her richly furnished town residence, which became their home. It was only three miles from John's London home, called "The Foundary."
  - c. In 1777, the lease of the Foundry expired, and the City Road Chapel was built. It was here Charles would preach twice on the Lord's Day, or in another of the city chapels, when he wasn't sick, throughout the rest of his life.
  - d. Though he was sick for a good portion of his life, the Lord spared him to see old age.
  - e. He was eighty years old when he died in his house on Chesterfield Street, Saturday, March 29, 1788.
  - f. His brother John was deeply grieved that he would not consent to be buried in the cemetery at City Road Chapel, where he had also prepared a grave for himself.
    - (i) Charles had long been troubled over the relationship of Methodism to the Church of England.
    - (ii) When John began to exercise the role of a bishop and ordain elders and ministers for the Societies in America, Charles strongly disagreed with him.
    - (iii) Even though both were very outspoken, the two remained the closest of friends.
    - (iv) Charles was buried in Marylebone churchyard; he said, "I have lived, and I die, in the Communion of the Church of England, and I will be buried in the yard of my parish church."
    - (v) Eight clergymen of the Church of England were his pall bearers.

- g. He was survived by his wife, two sons and daughter.
  - h. John treated his widow and children with great generosity and kindness, and afterwards, the Societies of Methodists.
  - i. Three years after the death of his brother Charles, John passed on to his reward, March 2, 1791, in his eighty-eighth year.
  - j. In 1876 a monument was placed in Westminster Abbey in memory of the Wesley's, with this inscription: "I LOOK UPON ALL THE WORLD AS MY PARISH. GOD BURIES HIS WORKMEN, BUT CARRIES ON HIS WORK."
8. Hymns.
- a. Charles was the son of a poet, and the younger brother of a poet, yet he didn't write a poem himself until his entrance into the ministry.
    - (i) His first hymn, so far as is known, was his "Hymn for Midnight," written early in 1737, when he was twenty seven.
    - (ii) It wasn't until he experienced the grace of God that the gift of writing holy songs was stirred up in him. From that day until the very day of his death, this gift was in almost constant exercise. He seemed to think, to speak, to write, in poetic numbers.
    - (iii) His Biographer, Thomas Jackson, tells us that he dictated one final hymn on his death bed: "Having been silent and quiet for some time, he called Mrs. Wesley to him, and requested her to write the following lines at his dictation: 'In age and feebleness extreme, Who shall a sinful world redeem? Jesus! my only hope thou art, Strength of my failing flesh and heart; Oh! could I catch a smile from thee, And drop into eternity.'"
  - b. He wrote at least 6500 hymns – not all of the same caliber, but many that are still in use today.
    - (i) He wrote hymns for just about everything: "His own conversion, his own marriage, the earthquake panic, the rumours of an invasion from France, the defeat of Prince Charles Edward at Culloden, the Gordon riots, every Festival of the Christian Church, every doctrine of the Christian Faith, striking scenes in Scripture history, striking scenes which came within his own view, the deaths of friends as they passed away, one by one, before him, all furnished occasions for the exercise of his divine gift."
    - (ii) Like Watts, he also wrote hymns for children.
    - (iii) To those of the Wesleyan tradition, he is the father of sacred song.
    - (iv) Jackson again writes, "It is as a writer of devotional poetry, that Mr. Charles Wesley will be permanently remembered, and that his name will live in the annals of the Church. In the composition of hymns adapted to Christian worship, he certainly has no equal in the English language, and is perhaps superior to every other uninspired man that ever lived. It does not appear that any person besides himself, in any section of the universal Church, has either written so many hymns, or hymns of such surpassing excellence." (Didn't think highly of Watts?)
  - c. Here's a brief history of the publishing of his hymns:

- (i) “A compilation of seventy psalms and hymns was published by the brothers, John and Charles, anonymously, in 1738. None of these were composed by Charles Wesley; 33 were from the pen of Dr. Watts, and 13 from Tate and Brady’s Version.
- (ii) “A volume of 223 pages and 139 hymns, entitled, ‘Hymns and Sacred Poems,’ followed in 1739, the most of it original; fifty of the pieces were written by Charles, among which were: ‘Christ, the Lord, is risen to-day,’ etc., ‘Hail the day that sees him rise,’ etc., and ‘Hark! the herald angels sing,’ etc.
- (iii) The following year (1740), another volume of 209 pages and 96 hymns, with the same title, made its appearance, in which were first issued: ‘Christ! whose glory fills the skies,’ etc., ‘Depth of mercy, can there be,’ etc., ‘Jesus, Lover of my soul!’ etc., and ‘Oh! for a thousand tongues to sing,’ etc.
- (iv) “Eighteen ‘Hymns for the Nativity’ appeared in 1744, including ‘Come, thou long-expected Jesus!’ etc., and ‘Light of those whose dreary dwelling,’ etc.
- (v) “His eleven ‘Hymns for the Watchnight’ followed; also, his eleven ‘Funeral Hymns,’ a tract of 24 pages.
- (vi) “The same year (1744) Mr. Wesley published his 33 ‘Hymns for Times of Trouble and Persecution,’ one of which was ‘Ye servants of God! your Master proclaim,’ etc.
- (vii) “‘Hymns for those that Seek, and those that Have, Redemption in the Blood of Jesus Christ,’ commonly called ‘Redemption Hymns,’ came forth in 1747, and contained ‘Come, sinners! to the gospel feast,’ etc., and ‘Love divine, all loves excelling!’ etc.
- (viii) “These were followed, in 1749, by two volumes of 455 ‘Hymns and Sacred Poems,’ all of them the production of Charles Wesley, including ‘Soldiers of Christ! arise,’ etc., and ‘Thou hidden Source of calm repose,’ etc.
- (ix) “The next year (1763), he published his 100 ‘Hymns for Children’; and, four years later (1767), came forth a volume of 182 ‘Hymns on the Trinity’; and another of 188 ‘Hymns for the Use of Families, and on Various Occasions.’ In the autumn of 1770, he produced ‘A Hymn on the Death of the Rev. George Whitefield,’ and an ‘Elegy on the late Reverend George Whitefield, M.A.’ The removal of this apostolic preacher seems to have suggested the publication of a small volume of forty hymns, in 1772, with the title, ‘Preparation for Death, in several Hymns.’
- (x) “About a score of his hymns appeared in prose productions issued by himself and brother, at various periods; and about 2,000 more were left in manuscript (unpublished at the time of his death), some few of which have, from time to time, adorned the pages of Methodist and other periodicals.
- (xi) “His ‘Poetical Version of nearly the whole Book of the Psalms of David,’ edited by the Rev. Henry Fish, was published in 1854. He is said to have written 7,000 hymns, of which, those that he published ‘would occupy about 3,000 closely-printed pages.’”

- d. Charles’ hymns, with John’s leadership, greatly promoted the growth of the Methodist church.
- e. The most popular and widely used in America are ‘Oh for a Thousand Tongues to Sing,’ ‘Jesus, Lover of My Soul,’ and ‘Love Divine All Loves Excelling.’

9. Select hymns – their background and usefulness.

- a. "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing":
- (i) This hymn was written to commemorate his conversion.
  - (ii) "The keynote was probably given him by a remark of the Moravian missionary, Peter Böhler: 'Had I a thousand tongues I would praise Him with them all.'"
- b. One of his hymns for children was called, "Gentle Jesus, Meek and Mild."

Gentle Jesus, meek and mild,  
 Look upon a little child;  
 Pity my simplicity,  
 Suffer me to come to Thee.

Fain I would to Thee be brought,  
 Dearest God, forbid it not;  
 Give me, dearest God, a place  
 In the kingdom of Thy grace

Lamb of God, I look to Thee;  
 Thou shalt my Example be;  
 Thou art gentle, meek, and mild;  
 Thou wast once a little child.

Fain I would be as Thou art;  
 Give me Thine obedient heart;  
 Thou art pitiful and kind,  
 Let me have Thy loving mind.

Let me, above all, fulfill  
 God my heav'nly Father's will;  
 Never His good Spirit grieve;  
 Only to His glory live.

Thou didst live to God alone;  
 Thou didst never seek Thine own;  
 Thou Thyself didst never please:  
 God was all Thy happiness.

Loving Jesus, gentle Lamb,  
 In Thy gracious hands I am;  
 Make me, Savior, what Thou art,  
 Live Thyself within my heart.

I shall then show forth Thy praise,  
 Serve Thee all my happy days;  
 Then the world shall always see  
 Christ, the holy Child, in me.

- c. His most famous hymn: “Jesus, Lover of My Soul.”
- (i) Henry Ward Beecher said of it: “I would rather have written this hymn than have the fame of all the kings that ever sat on the earth.”
  - (ii) J. M. King writes, “Long as the English language remains will this tenderest and finest of all heart-hymns shed the fragrance of the name of Jesus far and wide, and help trembling souls to trust in Him. There is no hymn that is more often whispered into the dying ear. Millions of anxious souls have breathed this prayer when coming to the Saviour for the first time: and this hymn has been the means of enabling them to find in Christ their Refuge and their Friend. We can have no better wish than that this precious hymn of Charles Wesley’s may be our song all through the land of our pilgrimage and our glorious Death-song at the last.”
  - (iii) “The circumstance of the writing of this hymn is interesting. The story goes that Charles Wesley was roused from his sleep one night by a terrible storm. Being unable to rest he got up, put on his dressing-gown, and, opening his casement window stood looking out upon the stormy scene. Suddenly a bird, exhausted by the wind, and hotly pursued by a hawk, flew through the open window right into Charles Wesley’s breast for protection. Having saved the bird and placed it in security, he turned to his desk and wrote this immortal hymn, so realistic and descriptive of the fear and intense longing of the anxious soul to find safety and rest.”
  - (iv) Here are a few stories connected with it:
    - (a) R. E. Welsh writes, “Several years ago a ship was burned in the English Channel. Among the passengers were a father, mother, and their infant daughter. When the alarm of fire was given the family became separated in the confusion. The father was rescued and taken to Liverpool; but mother and child were carried overboard, drifted out of the Channel, the mother clinging to a fragment of the wreck, her little one clasped to her breast. A vessel bound from Newport, Wales, to America, was moving slowly on her course. Their attention was called to the floating object: there was no ship within sight, and they thought it could not be a human being. But they sent a boat. As the boat approached the floating fragment, suddenly the sound of a gentle voice was borne on the breeze, and the sailors heard these words sung: Jesus, Lover of my soul.” Mother and child were rescued, were afterwards conveyed to America, where they found husband and father.”
    - (b) “Another story is told, and, although evidently ‘cooked,’ may well have had something true to cook. A party of Northern tourists formed part of a large company gathered on the deck of an excursion steamer, that was moving slowly down the historic Potomac one beautiful evening in the summer of 1881. A gentleman had been delighting the party with his happy rendering of many familiar hymns, the last being the petition, so dear to every loving heart, ‘Jesus, Lover of my soul.’ The singer gave the first two verses with much feeling, and a peculiar emphasis upon the concluding lines that thrilled every heart. A hush had fallen upon the listeners, that was not broken for some seconds after the musical notes had died away. Then a gentleman made his way from the outskirts of the crowd to the side of the singer, and accosted him with, ‘Beg your pardon, sir, but were you actively engaged in the late war?’ ‘Yes, sir,’ the man of song answered courteously; ‘I fought under General Grant.’ ‘Well,’ the first speaker continued,

‘I did my fighting on the other side, and think — indeed am quite sure — I was very near you one bright night eighteen years ago this very month. It was much such a night as this. If I am not mistaken, you were on guard-duty. We of the South had sharp business on hand. I crept near your post of duty, my weapon in my hand; the shadows hid me. Your beat led you into the clear light. As you paced back and forth you were humming the tune of the hymn you have just sung. I raised my gun and aimed at your heart, — and I had been selected by my commander for the work because I was a sure shot. Then out upon the night floated the words: “Cover my defenceless head With the shadow of Thy wing.’ Your prayer was answered. I couldn’t fire after that. And there was no attack made upon your camp that night. I felt sure, when I heard you singing this evening, that you were the man whose life I was spared from taking. The singer grasped the hand of the Southerner and said, with much emotion: ‘I remember the night very well, and distinctly the feeling of depression and loneliness with which I went forth to my duty. I knew my post was one of great danger. I paced my lonely beat, thinking of home and friends and all that life holds dear. Then the thought of God’s care came to me with peculiar force, and I sang the prayer of my heart, and ceased to feel alone. How the prayer was answered I never knew until this evening. ‘Jesus, Lover of my soul’ has been a favourite hymn; now it will be inexpressibly dear.”

- (c) [Or] During the American Civil War the opposing armies of the Federals and Confederates on a certain occasion, were facing each other. One night a Confederate sentry was on duty when he heard the sound of singing coming from the Federal lines. He proceeded cautiously in their direction, and observed an enemy sentry pacing up and down, singing ‘Jesu, Lover of my soul’. Bringing his gun to his shoulder, he was about to shoot, when the singer came to the words, ‘Cover my defenceless head With the shadow of Thy wing’. This was too much for the Confederate and he lowered his weapon and allowed his would-be victim to go unharmed. Many years passed, and the Confederate, now a private gentleman, was aboard an excursion steamer on the Potomac River, when he heard an evangelist singing this hymn. Memories were aroused, and thinking he recognised the voice, he made his way to the singer and in conversation found that the evangelist was indeed the sentry he had nearly shot. Great was their mutual joy when he revealed to the singer the peril from which he had been saved in that night long ago, when on sentry duty he besought divine protection by singing, ‘Jesu, Lover of my soul’.”
- (d) Amos R. Wells, writes, “Just before the battle of Chickamauga a drummer-boy dreamed that he had gone home and was greeted by his dear mother and sister. He awoke very sad, because both mother and sister were dead, and he had no home. He told the little story to the chaplain before he went into the battle. He was left on the field with the dead and dying, and in the quiet of the night his voice was heard singing ‘Jesus, Lover of my soul.’ No one dared go to him. When he reached the lines, ‘Leave, ah! leave me not alone, Still support and comfort me,’ his voice grew silent; and the next day his body was found leaning against a stump, beside his drum. He had indeed gone home to his mother and sister.

(e) “This was Finney’s last song, sung by him the day before his death. The hymn has brought comfort to innumerable death-beds.”

(v) “Jesus, Lover of My Soul.”

Jesus, lover of my soul,  
 Let me to Thy bosom fly,  
 While the nearer waters roll,  
 While the tempest still is high!  
 Hide me, O my Saviour, hide,  
 Till the storm of life be past;  
 Safe into the haven guide,  
 Oh, receive my soul at last!

Other refuge have I none,  
 Hangs my helpless soul on Thee;  
 Leave, ah! leave me not alone,  
 Still support and comfort me!  
 All my trust on Thee is stayed,  
 All my help from Thee I bring;  
 Cover my defenseless head  
 With the shadow of Thy wing.

Wilt Thou not regard my call?  
 Wilt Thou not accept my prayer?  
 Lo! I sink, I faint, I fall—  
 Lo! on Thee I cast my care:  
 Reach me out Thy gracious hand!  
 While I of Thy strength receive,  
 Hoping against hope I stand,  
 Dying, and, behold, I live!

Thou, O Christ, art all I want;  
 More than all in Thee I find:  
 Raise the fallen, cheer the faint,  
 Heal the sick, and lead the blind.  
 Just and holy is Thy name;  
 I am all unrighteousness:  
 False and full of sin I am;  
 Thou art full of truth and grace.

Plenteous grace with Thee is found,  
 Grace to cover all my sin;  
 Let the healing streams abound,  
 Make and keep me pure within.  
 Thou of life the fountain art

Freely let me take of Thee:  
 Spring Thou up within my heart,  
 Rise to all eternity!

- (vi) Samuel Coleridge said of Luther, “He did as much for the Reformation by his hymns as by his translation of the Bible, for in Germany the hymns are known by heart by every peasant. They advise, they argue, from the hymns.”
- (vii) In the same way, many came to know Jesus through the hymns of Charles Wesley that may never have been touched through his or his brother John’s preaching.

10. Sources: The first seven located at WholesomeWords.org.
- a. “Charles Wesley: Hymn writer.” *A Dictionary of Hymnology...* edited by John Julian. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1892.
  - b. “Charles Wesley: ‘The Poet of Methodism.’” *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge...* New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1912.
  - c. “Charles Wesley.” *The Poets of the Church: A Series of Biographical Sketches of Hymn-Writers...* New York: Anson D.F. Randolph & Company, 1884.
  - d. “Charles Wesley.” *Romance of Psalter and Hymnal: Authors and Composer* by R. E. Welsh. London: Hodder and Stoughton; New York: Pott., 1889.
  - e. “Charles Wesley: Hymn Writer.” *Dictionary of National Biography*. London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1899.
  - f. “‘Jesus, Lover of My Soul’: Charles Wesley. *A Treasure of Hymns ...* by Amos R. Wells. Boston: United Society of Christian Endeavor, 1914.
  - g. “Jesu, Lover of My Soul.” *Bright Talks on Favourite Hymns...* by J.M.K. London: The Religious Tract Society; Chicago: John C. Winston Co., [1916].
  - h. Stem Publishing.