

Charles Wesley was an English leader of the Methodist movement, son of Anglican clergyman and poet Samuel Wesley, the younger brother of Anglican clergyman John Wesley and Anglican clergyman Samuel Wesley (the Younger), and father of musician Samuel Wesley, and grandfather of musician Samuel Sebastian Wesley. Despite their closeness, Charles and his brother John did not always agree on questions relating to their beliefs. In particular, Charles was strongly opposed to the idea of a breach with the Church of England into which they had been ordained. Charles Wesley is chiefly remembered for the many hymns he wrote. He ministered for part of his life in The New Room Chapel in Bristol. His house, located nearby, can still be visited today.



Biographical details

Charles Wesley was the son of Susanna Wesley and Samuel Wesley. He was born in Epworth, Lincolnshire, England, where his father was rector. He was educated at Westminster School and Christ Church, Oxford, and formed the "Oxford Methodist" group among his fellow students in 1727 which his elder brother, John joined in 1729 soon becoming its leader and moulding it to his own notions. George Whitefield also joined this group. After graduating with a Masters' in classical languages and literature, Charles followed his father and brother into the church in 1735. On 14 October 1735, Charles and his brother John sailed on The Simmonds from Gravesend, Kent for Savannah in the Georgia Colony in British America at the request of the governor, James Oglethorpe. Charles was appointed Secretary of Indian Affairs and while John remained in Savannah, Charles went as chaplain to the garrison and colony at near-by Fort Frederica, St. Simon's Island, arriving there Tuesday, 9 March 1736 according to his journal entry. However, matters did not turn out well, and he was largely rejected by the settlers. In July 1736, Charles was commissioned to England as the bearer of dispatches to the trustees of the colony. On 16 August 1736, he sailed from Charleston, South Carolina, never to return to the Georgia colony again.

Charles lived and worked in the area around St Marylebone Parish Church and so, just before his death, he sent for its rector John Harley and told him "Sir, whatever the world may say of me, I have lived, and I die, a member of the Church of England. I pray you to bury me in your churchyard." On his death, his body was carried to the church by six clergymen of the Church of England, and a memorial stone to him stands in the gardens in Marylebone High Street, close to his burial spot. One of his sons, Samuel, became organist of the church.

Marriage and children

In April 1749, he married the much younger Sarah Gwynne (1726–1822), also known as Sally. She was the daughter of Marmaduke Gwynne, a wealthy Welsh magistrate who had been converted to Methodism by Howell Harris. They moved into a house in Bristol in September 1749. Sarah

accompanied the brothers on their evangelistic journeys throughout Britain, until at least 1753. After 1756 Charles made no more journeys to distant parts of the country, mainly just moving between Bristol and London.

In 1771 Charles obtained another house, in London, and moved into it that year with his elder son. By 1778 the whole family had transferred from Bristol to the London house, at 1 Chesterfield Street, Marylebone, where they remained until Charles' death and on into the 19th century. The house in Bristol still stands and has been restored, however the London house was demolished in the mid 19th century.

Only three of the couple's children survived infancy: Charles Wesley junior (1757–1834), Sarah Wesley (1759–1828), who like her mother was also known as Sally and Samuel Wesley (1766–1837). Their other children, John, Martha Maria, Susannah, Selina and John James are all buried in Bristol having died between 1753 and 1768. Both Samuel and Charles junior were musical child prodigies and, like their father, became organists and composers. Charles junior spent most of his career as the personal organist of the English Royal family, and Samuel became one of the most accomplished musicians in the world and often called "the English Mozart." Furthermore, Samuel Wesley's son, Samuel Sebastian Wesley, was one of the foremost British composers of the 19th century.

Best-known Hymns

In the course of his career, Charles Wesley published the words of over six thousand hymns, writing the words for a further two thousand, many of which are still popular.

Some 150 of his hymns are in the Methodist hymn book *Hymns and Psalms*, including "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing, and "The Church Hymn Book" (In New York and Chicago, USA, 1872) where "Jesus, Lover of My Soul" is published.

Many of his hymns are translated into other languages, and form the foundation for Methodist hymnals, as the Swedish Methodist-Episkopal-Kyrkans Psalmbok printed in Stockholm in 1892.

Legacy

He is commemorated in the Calendar of Saints of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America on 2 March with his brother John. The Wesley brothers are also commemorated on 3 March in the Calendar of Saints of the Episcopal Church and on 24 May in the Anglican calendar.

As a result of his enduring hymnody, the Gospel Music Association recognized his musical contributions to the art of gospel music in 1995 by listing his name in the Gospel Music Hall of Fame.

Wesley wrote two of the so-called Great Four Anglican Hymns.

Tercentenary

24 May 2007 was celebrated as the tercentenary of Wesley's birth, with many celebratory events held throughout England, even though Wesley was in fact born in December 1707. The date of 24 May is known to Methodists as "Wesley Day" and commemorates the spiritual awakening of first Charles and then John Wesley in 1738. In particular, in the Village of Epworth, North Lincolnshire, at the Wesley Memorial Methodist Church, there was a flower festival, on 26 and 28 May, with flower arrangements representing some of Wesley's hymns, such as O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing, And Can It Be, and O For a Trumpet Voice.

In November 2007, An Post, the Irish Post Office, issued a 78c stamp to commemorate the 300th anniversary of Wesley's birth.

In Film

* Charles Wesley: Hymns of Praise – Comenius Foundation, 2005, in which Charles Wesley (portrayed by John Jackman) tells the stories behind the writing of many of his hymns

* A Heart Set Free – T. N. Mohan, 2007, a feature-length documentary on Charles Wesley's life and hymns

* Wesley – Foundry Pictures, 2009, starring Burgess Jenkins as John Wesley, R. Keith Harris as Charles Wesley, and featuring June Lockhart as Susanna Wesley and Kevin McCarthy as Bishop Ryder

Charles Wesley's Works:

"And Can It Be That I Should Gain?"

"Christ the Lord Is Risen Today"

"Christ, Whose Glory Fills the Skies"

"Come, O Thou Traveler unknown"

"Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus"

"Father, I Stretch My Hands to Thee"

"Hail the Day that Sees Him Rise"

"Hark! the Herald Angels Sing"

"Jesus, Lover of My Soul"

"Jesus, The Name High Over All"

"Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending"

"Love Divine, All Loves Excelling"

"O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing"

"Rejoice, the Lord is King"

"Soldiers of Christ, Arise"

"Ye Servants of God"