

# I. The Sermons

While I have maintained elsewhere<sup>1</sup> that Charles Wesley was a lyrical theologian as reflected in his poetry, clearly Kenneth G. C. Newport has made anew the case, based on Charles's sermon corpus, that he was a theologian in his own right who, as a biblical interpreter, employed exegetical methods of his own day and was a serious theological interpreter of Scripture and the Christian faith. "In places," says Newport, "his exegesis is highly unusual, perhaps even novel, and his reasoning tight and mature."<sup>2</sup> Ted Campbell speaks of Charles Wesley as a *theologos* "in the sense in which the term is used in Eastern Christian churches which speak of the author of the Fourth Gospel as 'St John *Theologos*. . . [i.e.] one who gives us words (*logoi*) about God (*theos*)."<sup>3</sup> Both Newport's and Campbell's perspectives are a helpful corrective to the view that Charles was only and primarily an "experiential theologian."<sup>4</sup> As important as experience was for him, he was able to complement it with conjecture and reason. "It is in prose not poetry that Charles is more clearly seen to apply the logician's art."<sup>5</sup> Therefore, it is important to recognize, as have Newport, J. Ernest Rattenbury,<sup>6</sup> Luke Wiseman,<sup>7</sup> Franz Hillenbrandt,<sup>8</sup> and John Tyson,<sup>9</sup> that Charles stands on his own as a theologian. Furthermore, he did not simply reproduce his brother John's views in his prose and poetry, as close as they stood on many theological issues.

1. See Kimbrough, *Lyrical Theology of Charles Wesley*.
2. Newport, *Sermons of Charles Wesley*.
3. "Charles Wesley *Theologos*," 264–65.
4. See Rattenbury, *Evangelical Doctrines of Charles Wesley's Hymns*, 85–107.
5. Newport, *Sermons of Charles Wesley*, 52.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Charles Wesley, Evangelist and Poet*, 111–54.
8. Hildebrandt and Beckerlegge, *Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists*, 7:1–22.
9. *Charles Wesley on Sanctification*.

Unquestionably foundational to his view of justice for the poor and marginalized is Charles's theology of salvation, which one finds elaborated in his sermons and hymns. It is thus important to emphasize that his poetry is not the only source of his theology. He stands staunchly within an Arminian/Wesleyan interpretation of salvation. His poetry is filled with the celebration of God's free gift of salvation that is available to everyone.

Outcasts of men, to you I call,<sup>10</sup>  
 Harlots and publicans and thieves!  
 He spreads his arms to embrace you all,  
 Sinners alone his grace receives:  
 No need of him the righteous have,  
 He came the lost to seek and save.

Harlots, and publicans and thieves,<sup>11</sup>  
 In holy triumph join!  
 Saved is the sinner that believes  
 From crimes as great as mine!  
 Murtherers and all ye hellish crew,  
 Ye sons of lust and pride,  
 Believe the Saviour died for you;  
 For me the Saviour died.

All of humankind is helpless without God's intervention in Jesus Christ, through whom all may be redeemed. It is this intervention that imbues each individual with the love of God and others, the only viable motivation for human behavior. Indeed, through this love one participates in God's nature, and love enables a life of piety and a life of good works.

Susan White rightly avers that "love . . . is the beginning and end of Charles Wesley's theological vision, with all other characteristics of mind, heart and action radiating from that centre in concentric circles. . . . Charles' presumption is that since love is the essence of God and of the God-human relationship, the understanding of which is the object of our theological quest, it is only by approaching the task with love that we can

10. Charles's hymn "Christ, the Friend of Sinners," in *HSP* (1939), 102.

11. Stanzas 15 and 16 from the eighteen-stanza hymn, "For the Anniversary Day of One's Conversion," from which the hymn "O for a thousand tongues to sing" comes. *HSP* (1740), 122.

hope to know when we have come close to the truth.”<sup>12</sup> The expanse and extent of this love is immeasurable. It is

Love immense and unconfined,<sup>13</sup>  
Love to all of humankind.

Though Charles does have his moments of darkness, he is confident that God will indeed redeem all sinners and that the redemptive love that fills them will strengthen the community of the faithful not only in worship and devotion, but also in acts of compassion and goodwill.

In two of his sermons that postdate his conversion of May 21, 1738, one discovers the theological foundation for his perspectives on reaching out to the poor and marginalized, which he greatly expands in his poetry.

### THE SERMON BASED ON TITUS 3:8

This is a faithful saying, and these things I will that thou affirm constantly, that they which have believed in God might be careful to maintain good works.<sup>14</sup>

Charles addresses a very controversial matter in eighteenth-century theological discussions, namely, the relationship of faith and works. In the Wesleyan-Arminian tradition, it was clear that good works were absolutely essential. They could not be averted by an overemphasis on faith. Charles emphasizes that faith indeed is the one true way through which Christ is formed in one’s life, but to aver that faith without works is sufficient is in an inadequate response to the grace of God.

In this sermon Charles writes:

If Christ be given for us, he is likewise given to us; he is formed in our hearts by faith, and lives and reigns in our souls. . . . They are good that do good, being conformed both outwardly and inwardly to Christ Jesus; in whom neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature.<sup>15</sup>

. . .

12. “Charles Wesley and Contemporary Theology,” 523.

13. *HSP* (1749), 1:38, lines 113–14 of a 162–line poem titled “The Beatitudes.”

14. The sermon on this text was preached by Charles on Dec. 21, 1738; Jan. 14, 1739; Mar. 4, 1739.

15. Newport, *Sermons of Charles Wesley*, 164–65.

God rewardeth every man according to his works, that the more our works, the more will be our reward. May you therefore improve every talent to the utmost; having obtained mercy, may you labour more abundantly. Let it be your meat to do the will of your Father. Let it be your constant employment to serve and relieve your Saviour in his poor distressed members.

He gives you now a blessed opportunity. For inasmuch as you do it to one of the least of these his children, you do it unto him. He himself has assured you that whosoever shall give a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple, he shall in no wise lose its [*sic*] reward. Above all give charity because this is the noblest, as taking in both body and soul. What you give them is given toward training up so many candidates for eternity, and the love of little children is now waiting to receive it at your hands.

Indeed whenever you do an alms, you should do it unto the Lord and not unto man. You should see and revere your Saviour in every poor man you ease, and be as ready to relieve him as you would to relieve Christ himself.

Is Christ, is he, an hungered? Give him meat. Is he thirsty? Give him drink. Is he a stranger? Take ye him in. Clothe him when he is naked; visit him when he is sick. When he is in prison, come ye unto him. So shall he say unto you when he comes in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, ‘Come ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.’<sup>16</sup>

This sermon excerpt embodies the fundamental theological perspective of Charles Wesley that guides his behavior: “Let it be your constant employment to serve and relieve your Saviour in his poor distressed members.” “Constant employment” implies all of one’s human activity. In such engagement one is serving Christ the Savior, for there is no division between service to Christ and service to others. To serve one is to serve the other.

Years later, Charles articulated this eloquently in a stanza from a lengthy poem remembering the faithful life of Mary Naylor.

Her Saviour in his members seen,<sup>17</sup>  
 A stranger she received him in,  
 An hungry Jesus fed,  
 Tended her sick, imprisoned Lord,

16. *Ibid.*, 164–66.

17. *Funeral Hymns* (1759), 53.

And flew in all his wants to afford  
Her ministerial aid.

This one stanza about Mary Naylor is an eloquent lyrical summary of what Charles said in the sermon on Titus 3:8: “Is Christ, is he, an hungered? Give him meat. Is he thirsty? Give him drink. Is he a stranger? Take ye him in. Clothe him when he is naked; visit him when he is sick. When he is in prison, come ye unto him.”

This twofold service to Christ and others Wesley sees as a “blessed opportunity.” He then draws on two passages from the Gospel of Matthew to describe the nature of such opportunity: “For inasmuch as you do it to one of the least of these his children, you do it unto him” (25:40);<sup>18</sup> and “whosoever shall give a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple, he shall in no wise lose its [*sic*] reward.”<sup>19</sup> A holistic and integrated view of *diakonia* is at the heart of Charles Wesley’s theology and is central to his outreach to the poor and marginalized. Not only are Christ and those one serves seen as one, but he views charity as the noblest human gesture, for it integrates the body and soul of the Christian. Thus, it engages the whole person.

Charles says something very interesting about almsgiving, namely, there is a sense of priority that should dominate one’s charity. One should not think of doing something for someone else *per se*; rather, all acts of charity should be done as unto God. He states it this way:

Indeed whenever you do an alms, you should do it unto the Lord and not unto man. You should see and revere your Saviour in every poor man you ease, and be as ready to relieve him as you would to relieve Christ himself.

Many years after composing and preaching this sermon, Wesley wrote:

Members of his Church we know  
The poor his body are:  
All the goods he had below,  
They should his garments share:

18. AV: Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.

19. AV: And whosoever shall give to drink unto one of these little ones a cup of cold water only in the name of a disciple, verily I say unto you, he shall in no wise lose his reward.

But the greedy soldiers seize  
 What should supply his people's need,  
 Leave the members in distress  
 And neither clothe nor feed.<sup>20</sup>

The poor are seen as members of Christ's body, the church. This is a perspective often ignored in discussions of ecclesiology, but for Wesley, such an understanding is fundamental to the nature of the church and to Christian ethical posture. It is at the heart of radical grace, for it claims for the church what the church often does not claim for itself. Historically, the church has set its own boundaries and requirements for membership, which often have excluded the poor.

### THE SERMON BASED ON JOHN 4:41

But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water, springing up into everlasting life.

Wesley preached this sermon based on a text from John's Gospel in 1739, 1740, and 1742. It includes two important passages for this discussion:

if [the Christian] employ himself in any external acts of moral or instituted duty, he does it freely, not of necessity. In acts of charity, he gives from a principle of love to God, and man for God's sake, and so cheerfully, not grudgingly. His alms are not wrung out of him, but proceed from him, as a stream from its fountain.<sup>21</sup>

In this first quotation, Wesley emphasizes the importance of free will in all "acts of moral or instituted duty." No one is forced to act beneficently toward others. One is not required to aid others. Wesley says the determining factor is "a principle of love to God, and man for God's sake." This "principle of love" is central to Charles Wesley's theology and all human action. If we do what we do for others merely out of a sense of duty, our actions may be well meaning but fraught with wrong intention. Furthermore, one does acts of charity with a joyous spirit, or "cheerfully," and by no means "grudgingly." Such acts are done out of free volition; they are not "wrung out" of someone. Wesley uses a wonderful metaphor to describe

20. *Unpub. Poetry*, 2:67; stanza one of a hitherto unpublished poem based on Mark 15:24, "When they had crucified him, they parted his garments . . ."

21. Newport, *Sermons of Charles Wesley*, 262.

how acts of charity should proceed from everyone: “they proceed [from us], as a stream from its fountain.” Just as water freely emerges from a fountain, so good deeds toward others flow unendingly from Christ’s followers, who are filled, first and foremost, with a sense of love for God, all humankind, and all creation.

This “principle of love to God and man for God’s sake” is for Wesley the key to all human behavior. God is the author of this principle, and through it God has made all humankind partakers of the divine nature.

The author of this free principle is God himself, the free agent, the fountain of his own acts, who hath made it a partaker of his own nature. The uncreated life and liberty hath given this privilege to the religious soul, in some sense to have life and liberty in itself. In nothing does the soul more resemble the divine essence than in this noble freedom, which may therefore justly claim the free spirit for its author, (Ps 51:12; 2 Cor 3:17) or the Son of God for its original [*sic*], according wto that of S. Joh (8:36 ‘If the Son shall make you free, then shall you be free indeed’).<sup>22</sup>

It is interesting that Charles connects the function of this “principle of love of God and man” with the concept of *theosis*. He avers that God “hath made it a partaker of his own nature.” Through the fulfillment of the “principle of love,” one becomes a partaker in God’s own nature. In other words, there is an integration of faith and works inspired by love through which participation in God’s nature is enabled. This is a fulcrum of Wesley’s theology of outreach to the poor and marginalized. We are totally free to act on behalf of others, and we do so emboldened and enabled by the “principle of love.”

22. *Ibid.*, 263.