



# The Wesley Brothers: A Unique Collaboration

In this 300th year of celebrating our heritage, the full story of our Methodist beginnings must be told. The church that we know today is the lively proof of the dedicated efforts of two Wesley brothers, not just one. “There is no question that Methodism was cofounded. It took both brothers, the preacher and the poet, as well as many others, to launch this great work of God...”<sup>1</sup> Many loyal Methodists have assigned Charles to the shadows in the genesis of our denominational birth. Nevertheless, it took two brothers in close collaboration with each other and with God to lay the path upon which the Methodist church was born. Their unparalleled cooperation lasted for fifty years. It is an unusual story of sibling partnership—and rivalry, of familial respect—and dissension, that nevertheless spawned the Methodist movement that changed the Christian world. Without the poetic imagination of Charles the younger, we would be bereft of the great hymnody of our church that coined the popular label, “the singing Methodists.”<sup>2</sup> Without the theological and organizational gifts of John the elder, the infant societies would not have found a ready populous eager to follow their lead. Between John and Charles there was a mingling of talents and duties that transcended rigid categories. Their spiritual and creative collaboration formed the intertwining roots that we claim as our distinctive Methodist heritage.

Beverly J. Shamana

This sympathetic partnership of two grace-filled brothers touches the heart of the gospel and shows how God has given us to each other for the sharing of Christ’s gifts in his service. Their unique gifts could certainly have been used independent of each other without dulling the impact on the religious world of their day. But early in their personal conversion experience, they collaborated in such a way that the faith of each was deepened, their gifts developed, and the societies were expanded. The free grace of God inspired their partnership in the ministry.

“Methodism was born in song” and we are “a singing people” who owe a debt of gratitude to a family that shaped the sharing of their gifts and talents. Surely the values instilled by mother Susanna and father Samuel enabled the Wesley brothers to combine their creative capacities for the sake of a mission larger than either brother, even as they worked out their sibling status, and their faith, with fear and trembling.

The exact degree of the Wesley brothers’ collaboration on theology and music is not widely known in our day, but an increasing discovery of literature and letters has come to light that reveals this style in their holy work. In the collection of hymns in Volume 7 of *The Works of John Wesley*, we can see where many hymns of Charles were artfully edited by John to more closely align the text with his preaching, writing, and reference to scripture.<sup>4</sup>

The brotherly cooperation cannot be neatly divided into hymnody and preaching, or writing, and organizing. Charles was also known as an inspiring preacher and shared in the oversight and discipline of lay preachers, while John wrote and collaborated on many hymns still in use today. Together they published books of hymns, poems, and sermons, for the growing society.

In our time it is unusual to find siblings whose theology, gifts and single minded purpose explodes with the synergy and power of the Wesley brothers to impact both the church and society with the spiritual force they found. But the “warm heart” experience formed the foundation of their ministry together. Although it is John’s Aldersgate experience on May 24, 1738, that is remembered and celebrated, it was Charles who first felt this new relationship to Christ three days earlier, on Pentecost. He wrote in his Journal, “I cast down my eye, and met ‘He hath put a new song in my mouth’” (Ps. 40:3).<sup>5</sup>

John and Charles invested their newfound experience into the Holy Club at Oxford, not with the idea of starting a movement, but simply to be faithful to the scripture they studied and lived. Their travels to America and the return to England after a time of failure gave them opportunity to support each other in their disappointment over these efforts.

The most notable and lasting collaboration was *A Collection of Hymns For the Use of The People Called Methodists*, written in 1780. Here the longstanding cooperation between the brothers reached a new height in John’s selection and editing of 525 hymns, most of which were written by Charles. “This hymnbook,” wrote John in the Preface, “is large enough to contain all the important truths of our most holy religion... So that this book is in effect a little body of experimental and practical divinity.”<sup>6</sup>

But the cooperative efforts between John and Charles were not without difficulties. By the time *The Collection* was published in 1786, two years before Charles’ death, the brothers had pulled apart from each other. Charles maintained his difference with John over his ordination of Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury as Methodist bishops for America.

In spite of their disagreement over theological matters such as the doctrine of perfection, the ordination of lay pastors, and the break with the Anglican church, the creative outpouring of their gifts continued

to overflow to the glory of God and the blessing of the Methodist societies. Neither could turn off the creative spigot from which flowed the hymns, poetry, writings, prose, and sermons to the glory of God.

**Notwithstanding their personal and public divisions, these two spiritual giants are models for working jointly for God’s purposes in spite of discord or differing methods.** As young boys reared in a clergy household where father Samuel encountered a variety of conflicted situations in his parish and mother Susanna held deep convictions on child raising and the natural call to evangelism, the boys learned that neither conflict nor death need sever family ties. Yes, they were the pliable students of Susannah and Samuel from whom they received their early education—and also learned that death, family disagreements and temporary estrangement are not the final word in God’s love. The lessons learned in the household of their youth were no doubt penned in the hymns and sermons preached in the open fields to the learned and unlearned who heard the word of grace through their lives of faithful service. If John the first-born could speak to us today, I am convinced he would instruct us to widen our space and make a party for two brothers, John and Charles, called to be partners in Christ’s ministry. □

1 Paul W. Chilcote. “A Faith That Sings,” in *The Wesleyan Tradition*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002) p. 149.

2 Richard P. Heitzenrater, general editor, *The Works of John Wesley, Vol. 7*, (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1983) p. 1.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 2

4 Heitzenrater, Vol. 7.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 6

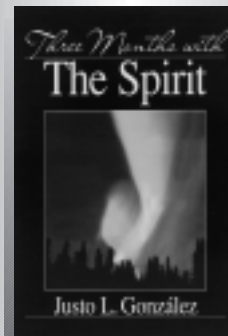
6 ST Kimbrough, Jr., Oliver A. Beckerlegge. *The Unpublished Poetry of Charles Wesley*. Vol. III, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992) p. 93.



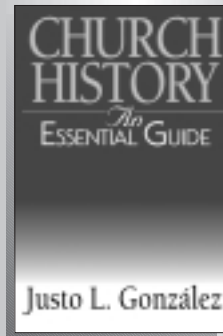
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