
Love Divine, All Loves Excelling!

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
by the Very Rev. Sam Candler**

Last week in the Church, we observed the feast of George Herbert, priest and poet (February 27). I was glad to remember his beautiful poetry. It so happens that this week brings another priest and poet to our calendar, but this one of a rather different personality. He is Charles Wesley, the writer of somewhere between five and six thousand hymns!

The Church remembers Charles Wesley not by himself, but with his brother John Wesley, on March 3. Both were ordained priests in the Church of England, but John might well be the more remembered of the two brothers. John was the one called to an early ministry at Christ Church, Savannah (and a short ministry it was!). John was the one whose heart we remember was “strangely warmed.” John Wesley was the leader, of course, of the Methodist movement within the Church of England, a movement that later became its own denomination. When we remember the Wesley brothers, we might well give more attention to John, the older brother.

However, it does us good to emphasize the “love divine” of Charles Wesley! Though they were both priests, and both leaders in an evangelical renewal of the Church of England, it might have been Charles who led the way for his older brother, John. For instance, it was Charles who first started the prayer group, the group of believers, at Oxford University, that would become the Methodist Society. He started it in 1727, when it was known as the “Holy Club.” Only later (1729) did his brother, John, join, who then became the leader of the Methodists (so named because they advocated certain “methods” of holiness and the holy life).

Furthermore, it looks as if it was Charles who was the first to experience a heart-warming conversion at Aldersgate, on May 21, 1738. Brother John’s experience of conversion occurred three days later! Both led the growing group of Methodist preachers, who tried to serve within the established Church of England, but who often preached in the open fields. Of course, there were strains and suggestions that this group would separate from the Church of England. Though originally opposed to separation, John finally relented and ordained Thomas Coke as “superintendent” of the Methodists in the United States, and he seems to have ordained two others as presbyters.

Charles Wesley, the poet and hymn-writer, actually wrote a long poem opposing his brother, John’s separatist actions. Charles was known as a “Church-Methodist,” one who wanted to stay within the identity of the Church of England. Still, both Charles and John remained Anglican priests; they both died as priests in the Church of England.

Perhaps even more importantly, the gifted Charles is responsible for some of the great hymns of the Anglican tradition. We may, today, sing more hymns written by him than by any other single writer! Among them are: “O for a thousand tongues to sing,” “Lo! He comes with clouds descending,” “Christ whose glory fills the skies,” “Come thou long expected Jesus,” and part of “Jesus Christ is Risen Today.”

It will not do to mention Charles Wesley, without including his actual words, his poetry, his hymns. So, here is one of his greatest, “Love divine, all loves excelling.”

*Love divine, all loves excelling,
joy of heav’n, to earth come down,
fix in us thy humble dwelling,
all thy faithful mercies crown.*

*Jesus, thou art all compassion,
pure, unbounded love thou art.
Visit us with thy salvation;
enter ev'ry trembling heart.*

*Come, Almighty, to deliver,
let us all thy life receive.
Suddenly return, and never,
nevermore they temples leave.
Thee we would be always blessing,
serve thee as thy hosts above,
pray, and praise thee without ceasing,
glory in thy perfect love.*

*Finish, then, thy new creation;
true and spotless let us be.
Let us see thy great salvation
perfectly restored in thee.
Changed from glory into glory,
till in heav'n we take our place,
till we cast our crowns before thee,
lost in wonder, love and praise.*

In Charles Wesley, we remember a faithful priest whose gift of poetry and hymnody continues to enrich and edify our lives!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

The Very Reverend Sam Candler
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