

CHRIST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

History Series: The History of John Wesley and the Methodist Church

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PART 5: CHARLES WESLEY AND THE FIRST METHODIST SOCIETY

We need to take a brief look at John's brother, Charles, as they worked together throughout Charles' life. Charles Wesley (1707-1788), five years younger than his brother John, was the 18th child of Susanna and Samuel. Along with the other Wesley children, Susanna home schooled Charles until he went to Westminster school in London and then to Oxford University. He was ordained in 1735, the year of his father's death and the year he sailed with his brother John, to Savannah, Georgia. (More on this in Parts 6 - 10) On May 21, 1738, back in England, he was "born again" into a deeper Christian faith after reading Luther's commentary on Paul's Epistle to the Galatians.

Charles was an eloquent preacher and preceded John in field preaching. He is best known, however, for his hymns. It was in the singing of these hymns that the early Methodists kept alive the faith in their hearts. These hymns are expressions of Christian experience and at their heart are the vital Christian doctrines: atonement, grace, love, assurance, eternal life, mercy, pardon, praise and adoration. Charles wrote 6,500 hymns and over 50 are in our hymnal today. Chief among them are *Jesus Lover of My Soul*, *Love Divine all Loves Excelling*, *A Charge to Keep I Have* (my favorite), *O For A Thousand Tongues to Sing* (my father's favorite) and *Hark the Herald Angles Sing*. Actually, Charles and John worked together on the hymns with John being mainly the editor. John, himself, has four in our hymnal and their father, Samuel, has one.

Recall that in August of 1727 John returned to Epworth to be the Curate in his father's parish. A letter of Oct. 21, 1729 recalled him to Oxford to fulfill required duties of his Lincoln Fellowship. He was placed in charge of 11 pupils. (In the British system students studied on their own with the guidance of a tutor to prepare for exams. There were no classes as in the American system.) In addition to his tutoring responsibilities John's private schedule included: Mondays and Tuesdays, Greek and Latin (John and his brother conversed in Latin!), Wednesdays, logic and Ethics, Thursdays Hebrew and Arabic (!), Fridays, Metaphysics and Natural Philosophy (We call it physics now.), Saturdays, Oratory and Poetry, Sundays, Divinity.

While at Oxford, John found that his brother, Charles, along with William Morgan and Robert Kirkham, had formed a "holy club." John joined and almost immediately was recognized as the leader. Their activities included the study of the Bible in Hebrew and Greek, the study of the classics, visits to the poor and sick, a prison ministry and the welfare and religious instruction of poor children. They met with both praise and very harsh criticism. They were called Bible Moths, The Reformers Club, The Godly Club, The Enthusiasts and The Holy Club; however Bishop Potter was friendly to them. Finally, the name Methodist stuck and the Wesleys welcomed the name (even though it had been given in derision). In no way were they morbid however, for they did not deny themselves recreation. Indeed, John's account books show he did not disdain an occasional game of cards! John's strong good sense, cheerfulness, knowledge of human nature and work among the downtrodden gave a manly tone to their zeal. Thus began the Methodist tradition of social activities.