

“MY SISTER, DEAREST FRIEND”:  
THE MARRIAGE OF CHARLES & SALLY WESLEY<sup>1</sup>

Two are better far than one,  
For counsel or for fight!  
How can one be warm alone  
Or serve his God aright?

Join we then our hearts and hands;  
Haste, my sister, dearest friend,  
Run the way of His commands,  
And keep them to the end!<sup>2</sup>

*Courtship and marriage*

Unlike his brother John (1703-1791), who fell in love with a number of women, the only really serious romantic relationship that Charles Wesley (1707-1788) ever had was with the woman he eventually married in 1749, Sarah (a.k.a. Sally) Gwynne (1726-1822). Sally was the daughter of a Welsh Calvinistic Methodist, Marmaduke Gwynne (1692-1769), who had been converted in 1737 under the preaching of Howel Harris (1714-1773).<sup>3</sup> Charles first met her in the late summer of 1747 when he paid a visit to her father’s estate in Becknockshire, Wales.

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<sup>1</sup> Extremely helpful in the preparation of the following lecture were these studies: John R. Tyson, ed., *Charles Wesley: A Reader* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Barrie W. Tabraham, *Brother Charles* (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2003); Gareth Lloyd, *Charles Wesley and the Struggle for Methodist Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> This is part of a poem that Charles wrote for Sarah and that is found in a letter to her from Charles, written on September 17, 1748. See Tabraham, *Brother Charles*, 136, n.20.

<sup>3</sup> Geraint Tudor, “Gwynne Family” in John A. Vickers, ed., *A Dictionary of Methodism in Britain and Ireland* (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2000), 145.

Although Sarah was nineteen years younger, it appears to have been almost love at first sight for both of them. In his diary record of their meeting—Charles, like John, kept a regular journal, though not as obsessively—Charles noted of his meeting the father and daughter, “my soul seemed pleased to take acquaintance with them.”<sup>4</sup> In their ensuing correspondence, Charles soon moved from addressing her as “Miss Gwynne” to calling her “Miss Sally” and then finally to “My Dearest Friend,” a clear indication of what was taking place within his heart.<sup>5</sup> Many years later, in 1782 and in a letter to one of his sons, Charles wrote, “If any man would learn to pray, let him think about marrying,” for, he went on to say, “No one step or action in life has so much influence on eternity as marriage. It is an heaven or hell...in this world...”<sup>6</sup> How true this is!

To express his love, Charles often resorted to writing hymns. In his *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1749), he included fifty-five hymns under the title “For Christian Friends.” And while they are all applicable to Christian friends in general, it is obvious, knowing the context in which they were written, their subject: his friendship with Sally.

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<sup>4</sup> Cited Tabraham, *Brother Charles*, 50.

<sup>5</sup> Tyson, ed., *Charles Wesley: A Reader*, 311; Tabraham, *Brother Charles*, 50-51.

<sup>6</sup> Letter to Charles Wesley, Jr., August 30, 1782 in Tyson, ed., *Charles Wesley: A Reader*, 351, 352.

My gifts and comforts all, I know,  
 From Thee alone descend;  
 Thou only couldst on me bestow  
 So true, and kind a friend.  
 Cast on one mould by art Divine  
 Our blended spirits agree,  
 And pair'd above our spirits join  
 In sacred harmony.<sup>7</sup>

Let us both together rise,  
 To Thy glorious life restored,  
 Here regain our paradise,  
 Here prepare to meet our Lord.  
 Here enjoy the earnest given,  
 Travel hand in hand to heaven.<sup>8</sup>

During a lengthy preaching tour of Ireland with his brother John in the autumn of 1747 and the winter of 1748, Charles told John of what was taking place and of his growing desire to marry Sally.<sup>9</sup> Apparently, they had agreed, when in America, not to get married without each other's approval.<sup>10</sup> John, according to Charles, was lukewarm. He "neither opposed" Charles's choice, but nor did he encourage him. John's lukewarmness is evident from Charles' shorthand diary which has not been used to any real extent up until recently.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> "Hymns for Christian Friends: 12" in Tyson, ed., *Charles Wesley: A Reader*, 338.

<sup>8</sup> "Hymns for Christian Friends: 16" in Tyson, ed., *Charles Wesley: A Reader*, 339.

<sup>9</sup> In his Journal for April 19, 1748, Charles recalled how he had told his brother of "his embryo intentions" while they were in Ireland. For the entry, see Tyson, ed., *Charles Wesley: A Reader*, 312; Lloyd, *Charles Wesley*, 91, n.13.

<sup>10</sup> Tyson, ed., *Charles Wesley: A Reader*, 311, 318.

<sup>11</sup> Lloyd, *Charles Wesley*, 92-93.

Why was he reluctant to encourage his brother?

1. Well, first of all, there was the complexity of John's own attitudes towards marriage. He believed that celibacy was better for believers than marriage, plain and simple. While he did not think anyone should forbid marriage, the married life was, in his mind, clearly second-best.<sup>12</sup> Noteworthy that in his Journal from 1738, the year of John's and Charles' conversions, to 1791, the year of John's death, he recorded only four marriages that he did as a clergyman or that he assisted at—and of these four, one was that of Charles. During the same period, he mentioned 104 funerals he did. “Funerals, Wesley believed, might edify; marriages were best avoided.”<sup>13</sup>
2. John would also have been concerned that his partnership with Charles would have been threatened by this relationship. Charles would now be reluctant to spend massive amounts of time away from home, which would affect the itinerant evangelism in which the two of them were involved.<sup>14</sup> It is interesting that John says nothing about either the engagement or the marriage of Charles

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<sup>12</sup> Henry Abelove, *The Evangelist of Desire: John Wesley and the Methodists* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1990), 48-53.

<sup>13</sup> Abelove, *The Evangelist of Desire*, 56.

<sup>14</sup> Lloyd, *Charles Wesley*, 93.

and Sally in any of his extant letters or journal entries up to the day of the wedding.

Charles returned to Wales in March 1748 where he fell quite ill and was nursed back to health by Sally. It was thus, on April 3, 1748, that he seems to have proposed to her. In his *Journal*, he noted: “At night my dearest Sally, like my guardian angel, attended me...I asked her if she could trust herself with me for life and with a noble simplicity she readily answered me she could.”<sup>15</sup> Charles does not seem to have told his brother definitively of the upcoming marriage until November of 1748, which might have been another reason for John’s coolness. He would have felt that Charles had broken their promise to tell the other if they were going to get married.

Sally’s parents were initially not in favour of the marriage. Her father and mother were very well of and were concerned that Charles had no fixed income and thus would be unable to provide for her. Charles was determined that if her parents, and in particular, her mother, were opposed to their marriage, he would take it as a sign from God not to go forward with it.<sup>16</sup> Sally’s mother personally liked Charles. At one point, she said, “she would rather give her child to Mr. Wesley than to any man

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<sup>15</sup> Cited Lloyd, *Charles Wesley*, 91, n.10.

<sup>16</sup> Tyson, ed., *Charles Wesley: A Reader*, 319.

in England.”<sup>17</sup> The problem was that he didn’t seem to have a steady source of income. Charles did speak with his brother about this, and apparently in a letter to Sally’s mother, Charles indicated that monies would be able to be provided from the sale of Charles’ books. To be precise, £2,500 was to be invested to yield an annuity of £100, which would be placed in Sarah’s name. This was a considerable sum for the early Methodists to sign over to Charles, and would cause friction between John and Charles in the days to come.<sup>18</sup>

A week before the wedding, which John was to perform on April 8, 1749, John raised doubts as to the propriety of the wedding. Charles recorded in his *Journal* that “my brother appeared full of scruples; and refused to go” from Bristol to where the wedding was to be held in Wales. Charles was enabled to keep his temper and persuade his brother to go. Understandably, Charles was eager to see Sally, and was upset to find that John had made arrangements to preach at various places along the way! At one point he actually climbed all of the way up to the top of an uninhabited Welsh mountain to preach to some folk who had gathered there.

Some Methodist scholars have argued that this reveals John’s heart for the salvation of the lost. It could be seen as that from one vantage-point.

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<sup>17</sup> Cited Tabraham, *Brother Charles*, 51.

<sup>18</sup> Lloyd, *Charles Wesley*, 96. On Charles’ finances, see also Lloyd, *Charles Wesley*, 138-142.

From another perspective, though, it could be seen as John giving his brother an object lesson: marriage must come second-place and evangelism had to be first.<sup>19</sup> Eventually, though, they got to their destination on April 7 and Charles and Sally were married by John on April 8, 1749, at a small chapel in Llanlleonfel.

John's entry in his *Journal* is quite impersonal: "I married my brother and Sarah Gwynne. It was a solemn day, such as became the dignity of a Christian marriage."<sup>20</sup> Here is Charles' entry in his *Journal*, quite a contrast:

Sat., April 8<sup>th</sup>.

*'Sweet day! so cool, so calm, so bright,  
The bridal of the earth and sky.'*

Not a cloud was to be seen from morning till night. I rose at four' spent three hours and a half in prayer, or singing, with my brother, with Sally... Her father, sisters, [he mentions by name five others]...were all the persons present. ...Mr. Gwynne gave her to me (under God): my brother joined our hands. It was a most solemn season of love! Never had I more of the divine presence at the sacrament.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Lloyd, *Charles Wesley*, 96-97.

<sup>20</sup> Cited Lloyd, *Charles Wesley*, 94.

<sup>21</sup> Cited Tabraham, *Brother Charles*, 52.

### *Married life*

A two-week honeymoon followed, but we might raise some questions about it, for Charles preached every day! By that September Charles and Sally had got a house in Bristol—4 Charles Street. After his first night there, Charles wrote in his *Journal*: “I slept comfortably in my own house...”<sup>22</sup> This was a foreshadowing of the future for Charles gave less and less time to itinerant evangelism, and by 1756 had pretty well given up his extensive travelling.<sup>23</sup> When he was away from Sarah, he missed her dearly, as the portion of this letter shows:

My prayer for my dearest partner and myself is, that we may know Him, and the power of His resurrection. ...My heart is with you. I want you every day and hour. I should be with you always, or not at all; for no one can supply your place.”<sup>24</sup>

This decrease in itinerant evangelism, along with other matters, brought a coolness between Charles and his brother, which lasted the rest of their lives.<sup>25</sup>

Noteworthy that one of those matters was a growing receptivity towards Calvinism by Charles. To one of his close friends, John Bennet—who

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<sup>22</sup> Cited Tabraham, *Brother Charles*, 52.

<sup>23</sup> Lloyd, *Charles Wesley*, 97.

<sup>24</sup> Tyson, ed., *Charles Wesley: A Reader*, 337.

<sup>25</sup> For details, see Lloyd, *Charles Wesley*, 97-109, 134-138.



eventually married Grace Murray, whom John Wesley wanted to marry but whom Charles encouraged to marry John Bennet—Charles could write in 1750 that it made no difference to him if John Bennet followed the thinking of Luther or Calvin.<sup>26</sup> During the decade that followed Charles increasingly strengthened ties with Calvinist Evangelicals like Selina Hastings (1707-1791), the Countess of Huntingdon, who became an intimate family friend and who helped nurse Sally through a very dangerous attack of smallpox and he also resumed his friendship with George Whitefield (1714-1770) which had been shattered with the Wesley brothers during the early 1740s owing to controversy over Calvinism. In fact, Sally used to worship regularly at Whitefield's Tabernacle Chapel in Bristol after her marriage. Her father, after all, had been a Calvinist.<sup>27</sup>

Over the years that followed they had eight children, of which five died in infancy. The eldest, named John, only lived sixteen months, dying on January 7, 1753, from smallpox, which also nearly killed his wife, Sally. When Sally and the boy were struck with the disease, Charles was away in London. He hurried home. He found Selina Hastings ministering to the bodily needs of his wife. After a week or so in which Sally's life hung in the balance, she came through, but her face was deeply marred and looked twice her age. To comfort herself after the death of her son,

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<sup>26</sup> Lloyd, *Charles Wesley*, 106.

<sup>27</sup> Lloyd, *Charles Wesley*, 144-145.

Sally folded a lock of his hair onto a sheet of paper and labelled it: “My dear Jacky Wesley’s hair: who died of the small-pox, on Monday, Jan. 7<sup>th</sup>, 1754-4, aged a year, four months, and seventeen days. I shall go to him; but he shall never return to me.”<sup>28</sup> To comfort himself after the death of his son, Charles wrote hymns.

Mine earthly happiness is fled,  
 His mother’s joy, his father’s hope;  
 O had I died in *Isaac’s* stead!  
 He *should* have lived, my age’s prop,  
 He should have closed his father’s eyes,  
 And follow’d me to paradise.

But hath not Heaven, who first bestow’d,  
 A right to take His gifts away?  
 I bow me to the sovereign God,  
 Who snatch’d him from the evil day!  
 Yet nature *will* repeat her moan,  
 And fondly cry, “My son, my son!”<sup>29</sup>

Sally was heartbroken over these infant deaths, and a goodly number of letters that survive from Charles are focused on Charles’ attempts to console his wife. When, for example, John James Wesley died in 1768 aged seven months, Charles wrote to Sally:

Father, not as I will but as thou wilt. ...I cannot doubt His wisdom or goodness. He will infallibly do what is best, not only for our

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<sup>28</sup> Tyson, ed., *Charles Wesley: A Reader*, 335.

<sup>29</sup> “On the Death of a Child” in Tyson, ed., *Charles Wesley: A Reader*, 335.

children, but for us, in time and eternity Be comforted by this assurance. ...Peace be with you! May the Lord Jesus himself speak it into your heart, “My peace I give unto you!”<sup>30</sup>

Critical issue for that era? Destiny of infants who die? Teaching of Holy Scripture?

Sarah Wesley lived to be 96, dying in 1822. Many were amazed at how good a singer she was well into her eighties. A Rev. Francis Fortescue wrote in his diary of her that Mrs. Wesley, “who is upwards of eighty years of age, sung, to our great astonishment, two of Handel’s songs most delightfully—‘He shall feed His flock,’ etc. and ‘If God be with us,’ etc.”<sup>31</sup>

### *Wesley as a father*

Charles proved to be not only a loving husband but also a devoted, though also strict, father. He lessened his itinerant ministry for the direct reason that he wanted to pay attention to his familial responsibilities.

A number of letters to his children survive, in which he reveals his concern for their spiritual welfare as well as their temporal needs. For

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<sup>30</sup> Tyson, ed., *Charles Wesley: A Reader*, 346.

<sup>31</sup> Cited John Telford, *The Life of Rev. Charles Wesley, M.A.* (1900), 316. For this reference I am indebted to “Sarah Gwynne Wesley” at the website *John Wesley: Holiness of Heart and Life* (<http://gbgm-umc.org/umw/wesley/>).

instance, in a letter to his daughter Sally, Jr., date unknown, he writes about:

- High heels: “I...rejoice that you have so soon recovered [from] your fall. If it was occasioned by the narrow fashionable heels, I think it will be a warning to you, and reduce you to reason.”<sup>32</sup>
- Need to get up early and go to bed early: “You have a thirst after knowledge, and a capacity for it. Your want of resolution to rise, and study regularly, had discouraged me.”<sup>33</sup> Cp. advice to his son Charles, Jr., on August 31, 1782: “Never sit up late, but when you cannot help it; and resolve to get an habit of rising [early]. I must own I have no heart or hope, till you recover your rising.”<sup>34</sup> Critical is one’s use of time.
- Recommends her reading Thomas à Kempis’ *Imitation of Christ* or William Law’s *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*.<sup>35</sup> The importance of reading.

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<sup>32</sup> Tyson, ed., *Charles Wesley: A Reader*, 354.

<sup>33</sup> Tyson, ed., *Charles Wesley: A Reader*, 355.

<sup>34</sup> Tyson, ed., *Charles Wesley: A Reader*, 355.

<sup>35</sup> Tyson, ed., *Charles Wesley: A Reader*, 355.