

THE WHEELS FELL OFF: THE SPIRITUAL DECONSTRUCTION OF CHARLES WESLEY



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INTRODUCTION

At the Baptist church I attended as a child we used to sing a lot of hymns, these were found at first in the green 'Baptist Hymnal' which sat in the little shelf on the back of the chair in front of you, along with the chorus book 'Mission Praise'. In my later childhood some of them were printed on to acetate, and projected on to the wall with our state of the art 'over-head projector'. How modern we were. There were all kind of hymns, some for special occasions, and others that were decidedly more 'every day' – to be sung throughout the year. By and large these hymns felt to me even then like relics of a bygone era, with their soaring organ accompaniment they felt out of date in the 1980s, replete with olde worlde language and full of tortuous pieces of pronunciation. These misgivings notwithstanding, we all had favourites, and least favourites, those songs which we didn't mind singing, and those which we loathed. One of the firm favourites in our house was what we called 'the bicycle song' – so named for the stirring line: "My chains fell off, my heart was free..." It was of course the classic piece of hymnody 'And can it be' by Charles Wesley, perhaps the lesser known of the two most famous Wesley brothers, but still very much one of the key founders of Methodism.

The story is that Charles Wesley penned the song shortly after experiencing a profound spiritual renewal, something that is sometimes described as a conversion. But if it was indeed a conversion, then it is fair to say that it was a strange sort of conversion – hardly the classic 'repentant sinner' sort, for Charles was by any standards a deeply committed man who took his faith and his religious commitments very seriously indeed. In fact what Wesley experienced as a conversion, was what many today would consider as a form of deconstruction. In finding his new faith, he was losing his old one.

NINETEEN BABIES – THAT POOR WOMAN

Charles Wesley was born in 1707, the eighteenth child born to his parents, who would go on to have another baby after him. Of the nineteen infants born to the family, only nine lived beyond infancy. The Wesley family lived at Epworth in Lincolnshire – coincidentally not particularly far from where I live now. Samuel Wesley, Charles' father, was Rector of Epworth, a man who had deep roots in the established church, and a 'complicated' personal and professional life. His long suffering but formidable¹ wife Susanna a deeply committed Christian herself was left on her own more than once with the children – either due to a fall out which led to Samuel

¹ She is described by one biographer as "competent, businesslike, and possessed of a cool rational mentality" – very different to Samuel's dramatic temperament. (Rack, 1989)

leaving the family home², or due to his imprisonment for debt. Samuel it turns out was not a financially prudent man – he spent all the cash the family had on publications which he felt were very important, but which by and large made little impression on the world around him.

Nonetheless, between Samuel and Susanna, Charles Wesley and his siblings were brought up in a household which was steeped in the teachings and traditions of the higher end of the church of England. Both of them had actually been brought up in dissenting traditions, and had independently swung back towards the Catholicism of high church Anglicanism, and this was the culture in to which the boys were born.

Charles went in to adulthood full to the brim of this weighty combination of belief and tradition. At Oxford University he found himself something of a fish out of water among his far more secular peers (comparatively speaking, they were probably very pious – just not enough for the zealous Charles), and so he formed a prayer group, the purpose of which was to focus upon living a holy life by ardent study of the scriptures and doing good works. Their more relaxed counterparts jokingly referred to the group as the ‘Holy Club’, or later, because of their methodically studious approach to study, ‘the Methodists’. The club soon attracted Charles’ older brother John, already an ordained Anglican priest, who went on to take leadership of it – over the course of a few years more of these clubs began to form around the university. Charles graduated with a Master’s degree and in 1735 followed family tradition, entering in to the priesthood.

Later that same year, Charles and John embarked on a voyage, one which for a number of reasons was to be deeply formative in both of their lives: John had felt a ‘calling’ to Christian ministry in America, and when he sailed to take up the post of chaplain in the colony of Georgia, so too did Charles who was appointed to the post of Secretary of Indian Affairs. It took less than a year for the stuffing to be knocked out of the Wesley brothers. They returned to England in 1736 having experienced failure – the reality of trying to live out the message they’d been so keen to transmit having taken something of a toll on them. Stories of mental ill health are found in various narrations of the lives of the Wesleys, and that goes for not just the brothers, but their father too. The reality is that they were immensely hard working, dedicated and idealistic people,

² In 1701 Samuel decided to live apart from his wife after realising that they had different ideas about the legitimacy of William III as King England. During family prayers Samuel had noticed that his wife hadn’t said ‘Amen’ after a prayer for the monarch, and when questioned she admitted that she did not recognise William as King. Samuel couldn’t put up with this, so beatled off to live in London, not returning until some months in to the following year.

and for such people the reality of the world is very often hugely jarring. It's little wonder that by the time the brothers got back to England they were depressed.

MARTIN LUTHER OR PROZAC?

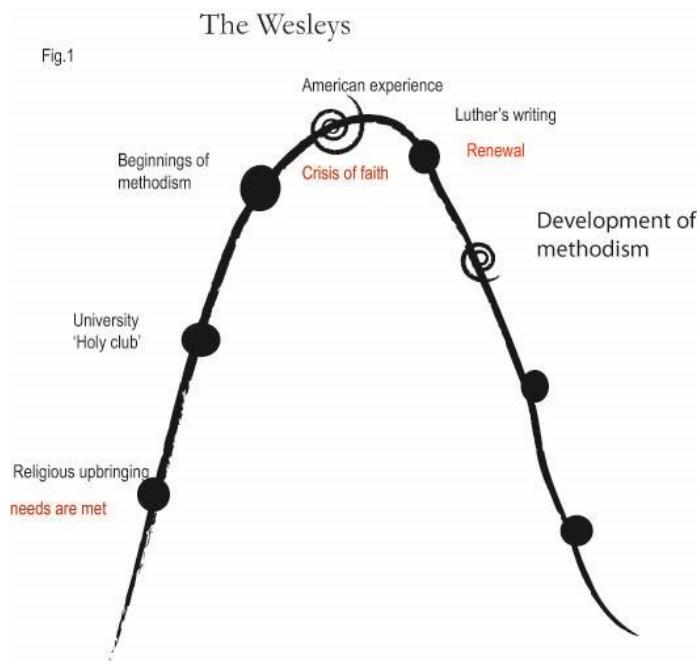
As with many zealous people, Wesley turned for comfort to the work of those who had gone before him, and in this case first to the teachings of the Moravian church, whose missionaries he had previously encountered on the voyage to America. The Moravians were (are) a radical church, in the sense of the original meaning of radical – ‘of the root’ (think ‘radish’). The Moravians began as the Hussites, that is to say the followers of one of the very earliest protestant reformers, Jan Hus, a man who preceded the more famous but far later figures of Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli. Such was his perceived heresy that Hus was burned at the stake by the Council of Constance for the crime of heresy against the Catholic church in 1415, some decades before Luther was even born. It is fair to say that Luther became a fan of Hus, who he came to see as a prophet of reform and renewal. Hus also served as a primary example of both the risk, and the reward, of opposing the Catholic church. Luther, like the Wesleys, was a man of extremes. Deeply committed and with trenchant views that give the appearance of a man entrenching his position to solidify both his offensive and defensive capabilities. And like the Wesleys he was also a man of mental travails – in 1527 he wrote to a friend of a bout of severe existential depression:

“I spent more than a week in death and hell. My entire body was in pain, and I still tremble. Completely abandoned by Christ, I labored under the vacillations and storms of desperation and blasphemy against God. But through the prayers of the saints, God began to have mercy on me and pulled my soul from the inferno below.”
(Kittelson, 2003)

To the attuned reader, Luther gives the impression of a man who spent a lot of time on the edge of mental ill health: driven and passionate, he was prone to extreme language and colourful phraseology as might perhaps be expected from a man struggling to moderate his thoughts. He was however an insightful and powerful speaker and writer, and left an indelible mark on the cultural landscape of Christianity. And he left an indelible mark on the lives of the Wesleys, in more ways than one.

It was reading Luther’s take on the book of Galatians that did the trick for Charles – it was that which helped him find a way out of his spiritual anguish. He found in that manifesto disguised as a commentary, inspiration for a renewed faith. Just as Luther had been nourished by

tradition as a young man, only to find himself repulsed and stifled by it as an adult, so too was the experience of the Wesley brothers. A Damascus road experience of course can only happen if one is on the road to Damascus already, and both Charles and John had been on the road to reformation for some years. It took this existential crisis, however to truly precipitate change. And it just so happened that Charles' experience came just three days before his brother John famously felt his heart 'strangely warmed'. Charles had undergone a conversion or a renewal experience while reading Luther's book and coincidentally it was another of Luther's books, this time his preface to the Epistle to the Romans which was being read at Aldersgate chapel when John underwent his parallel conversion experience. Until then the best John had managed to do was go along with a kind of 'fake it until you make it' advice from well-meaning friends who had advised him to just keep preaching, even if he didn't feel the depth of conviction he knew he should.



These experiences of relief from mental disquiet galvanised the brothers – Charles, his heart free of its chains, penned the anthemic hymn which I came to know as the bicycle song, and his brother John set off on horseback to begin the populist renewal movement of Methodism which sought to reform the church by taking the message directly to the people. Charles' hymn writing was prolific, he remains one of the greatest authors of sacred verse this country has ever known.

SCAFFOLD – CAGE – CLIMBING FRAME

Many people of faith can spot parallels in the journeys of the Wesleys with their own spiritual development. It's an every-day story: we begin with a scaffold, something which supports us in our development, this we build with vigour, finding that to do so gives us something to lean on as we grow. The scaffolding may be dogma, it may be practises, it may be to do with people, for most it's a combination, and for each of us the scaffolding is different, as it depends upon the context of our own development. Very often the scaffolding is deliberately reinforced, as we come under some sort of perceived attack, by way of criticism or doubt. The

bars are thick and unmoving, the structure is deliberately solid and protective. The scaffolding eventually also serves to mark the limits beyond which we are not prepared to tolerate exploration, it sets out our ‘non-negotiables’.

There comes a point though, when a scaffolding structure of this sort, becomes indistinguishable from a cage. The realisation of the cage like qualities of our scaffolding often comes at a point of crisis or change in our lives – suddenly that which seemed to support us, feels restrictive. When we need to react to something unexpected, we find the structure around us unable to adapt. The bars which were so protective have no give in them, we are trapped in a prison of our own making. This was the situation that faced the Wesley brothers on their return from America, it was the same situation that Luther found himself in, and it’s an experience which has been encountered by millions of others too.

Just as there are a myriad of cages, so too are there a myriad of responses to the sensation of being trapped. For some it is enough to turn their back on the troubles, or to bury their head in the sand and remain within the safety of their scaffolding, inwardly denying their doubts or concerns. For others it takes a greater effort, and may require some greater level of denial – recall the ‘fake it until you make it’ advice of John Wesley’s peers. Effectively just deny the reality of your experiences/circumstances and redouble your efforts until you feel ok again. There are many people who sustain this kind of existence for extraordinary periods of time, never quite coming to terms with the reality or scale of their cognitive dissonance.

Another option, perhaps the most popular, is to abandon the cage altogether – bust open the bars, or climb on out, and get the hell out of Dodge. Our individualistic culture encourages this – why would you remain trapped in something so restrictive? Stuff the community – this is about precious personal liberty! This is like the story of the prodigal son: he found himself trapped in the stifling, restrictive setting of his family, and so he got up and got out. Give me my inheritance, I’m off... This is such a common story, as church or religion no longer cut it, as leaders fall from their pedestals, as dogma proves too inflexible for the realities of life, they are abandoned. While this brings a measure of genuine freedom, however, it’s hard to altogether escape some of the hang-ups of unresolved questions. Too often in abandoning what had been important, we find ourselves out of sorts, cut adrift, or sat among the pigs. As a result some spend a long time working out their problems through therapy, some learn to live with the dissonance, and others find a replacement for that which they had abandoned in the first place.

An alternative, and perhaps more healthy and productive way of dealing with finding one’s self trapped in a cage, is to look at the possibility of repurposing the cage. And a really

good way of reimagining a cage made of scaffolding poles, is to use it as a climbing frame. To do this requires us to start by climbing out of the cage, its not necessarily a wholesale abandonment of the cage or all it has provided for us, rather it's a recognition that the cage has its limitations, and to transcend these limitations one has to take risks. This is the story of the Wesleys, and it's the story of Luther, and it's the story of a million other individuals less famous than them – they found themselves trapped, and they found a way of climbing out of the cage. Climbing frames can be described in a number of ways – among them is the word 'playful'. Ultimately, to genuinely transcend a cage of dogma, one may have to learn to be playful with it: not easy when that dogma has been the most important thing in one's life. Sometimes this involves gaining some distance from the cage to examine it with a different perspective, and that can take a while.

Climbing frames are also risky, I remember the feeling of falling off the aluminium climbing frame we had in our garden when I was small. The smooth round bars slippery when wet, hard to grip. But if the cage is to remain useful, then it must become home to risk. It was a similar approach that the Wesleys took – they didn't dismantle their cages altogether, nor did they deny their doubts, instead they began to take risks with their theology. They started to use pieces of sacred theology as footholds, climbing higher up the framework to points they had previously felt unable to reach. And in this instance it was Luther who helped them do so (just as Hus had helped him), for he too had undergone the same experience, trapped in the confines of his religion, he had climbed out, and begun to swing around, feeling as he did so the freedom of this new experience. Of course Luther's freedom which was so radical then might seem to us very restrictive still – as indeed may the new found freedom of the Wesley brothers, and even the hard fought freedom of Jan Hus, whose thought crimes were deemed so heinous that he was executed. It is true to say too that this isn't a simply binary situation, all of these characters had their ongoing issues to address. But the process is the thing – remember the Prodigal Son. His freedom came not simply in the fleeting pleasure of the fleshpots, but in the return home with a new perspective, a new way of looking at his old cage.

In this way, the reason for the frustration of the older brother is really obvious too.

"Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.' But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father,

'Look, these many years I have served³ you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!' (Luke 15: 25 – 30)

He is basically saying – 'look, I've been slaving away all these years, never put a foot out of place, and it's been miserable! Now this guy comes back, and he's having a great time. Not fair!' This is a familiar and not entirely unreasonable response. There are many who remain stuck in cages of dogma, tolerating (and defending) the restrictions of teaching and tradition on the grounds that they are ultimately important. The older brother put Jan Hus to death. He may rightly point out that the way the cage is being used is not how it was originally intended to be used, and he may point out too that to use it as a climbing frame exposes one to multiple risks. Perhaps all one can do is ask them if they would just poke their head out of the bars, and look at the view. And then one must be careful that in our new found liberty, we don't seek to restrict others to a new set of cages.

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IMAGES

Cover image: Portrait of Charles Wesley by John Russell (Public Domain).

Fig 1: This diagram shows a simplified version of the spiritual journey of the Wesleys – represented as basic curve. © Simon Cross 2019.

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³ The word used here is δουλεύω which literally translates to 'slaved' – he is saying, 'I have been your slave all this time...'