

'BROTHERS IN PERFECTION'

Do you long to be perfect? Just recently I've been re-reading

Charles Wesley has not received the attention from Methodists that he deserves. In the eyes of the general public, John has been seen as the founder and driving force behind Methodism, with Charles simply as his 'assistant' and as a hymn writer par excellence. It is also often assumed that the two brothers shared the same views on most things – apart from the two obvious issues of John's marriage and the break with the Church of England,



of course. It is true that their early careers for the most part followed a parallel course, and that their 'conversion' experiences in May 1738 bear superficial similarities, but it would be quite wrong to relegate Charles to a subsidiary role in the development of Methodism and say, as one historian has done, that 'Charles' genius was derivative'.

One area of theology – the concept of Christian perfection – provides an interesting example of how John and Charles were in agreement over basics, but held different views over some important aspects of the subject.

John Wesley believed that an individual Christian could reach a state of perfection, though he was careful to limit this. He never said that a person could attain 'sinless perfection', nor could he or she be perfect in knowledge or complete freedom from human mistakes, infirmities or temptation – which he called 'involuntary sins'. In his sermon on 'Christian Perfection', John wrote that Christians could be 'saved in this world from all sin, from all unrighteousness... freed from evil thoughts and tempers.'

Despite the way in which John qualified his statements, Charles felt that there were inherent dangers in what his brother taught. He agreed with John that the concept of perfection grew out of the commandment to 'love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and thy neighbour as thyself' (Mark 12.30). However, whereas John believed that perfection (as he understood it) could be attained in this life and be instantaneous, Charles had grave doubts. He saw perfection rather as being part of a more gradual process and was deeply suspicious of anyone who claimed to have achieved it in this life.

The brothers held their different views for many years, and as late as 1766 John wrote to Charles complaining, 'when you and I talked together, you *seemed* at least to be of the same mind with me, and now you are off the hooks again!' The concerns John had were very real, since the early Methodist preachers looked to Charles as well as John for leadership and guidance. In 1768 John was again writing to his brother, saying that he was 'weary of intestine war, of preachers quoting one of us against the other...'

John and Charles never did reach complete agreement on the issue of perfection, which is not surprising in view of the complicated nature of the doctrine. Indeed, John produced no fewer than three treatises on the subject and had constantly to correct the misunderstandings which inevitably arose in the minds of his followers. Nevertheless, both

he and Charles made an important contribution to theology in the eighteenth century. Their views on perfection – even allowing for disagreements – struck a balance between, on the one hand, those who over-emphasised justification (i.e. pardon and acceptance) and became preoccupied with faith alone, and on the other, those who gave undue weight to merit and works in the process of salvation. But above all, John and Charles Wesley's theology was essentially optimistic, and the ultimate testimony to the validity of their teaching is that they were capable of being followed by those who became their fellow believers.
