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14. ‘The suffering members sympathise’: Constructing the Sympathetic Self in the Hymns of Charles Wesley

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In a letter to Sarah Gwynne, written in 1747, Charles Wesley declared: ‘Those strong expressions of sin & misery which you repeated came from my heart and not my happy brother’s. I am peculiarly called to weep with you that weep: and those who suffer most I find as near me as my own soul.’ Charles’ portrayal of himself in these terms is, as he implies, in contrast to contemporary descriptions of his brother John. In 1750, the Methodist layman William Briggs wrote John a letter in which he criticized John for certain spiritual failings. ‘You have the knowledge of all experience,’ Briggs wrote, ‘but not the experience of all you know.’ As evidence of John’s lack of deep spiritual experience, Briggs pointed to ‘... the want of sympathy in your discourses and conversations. Those who attend to an inward work more than to an outward, pass through many weighty and grievous conflicts ... When do you feelingly and with tears address yourself unto such?’

These two descriptions may be used to illuminate the differences between Charles’ and John’s characters. They contribute to a fairly common portrayal of the two brothers as profoundly different: John as stable, cheerful, unsympathetic; Charles as melancholic, erratic, sensitive to the suffering of others. A closer reading of these descriptions is equally revealing, however, of certain assumptions about the qualities of the ideal Christian. In particular, both Charles’ and Briggs’ letters reveal assumptions about the quality of sympathy, the ability to ‘weep with you that weep’ or to respond ‘feelingly and with tears’ to those who suffer. Both writers assume that such sympathy is a spiritual quality: in Charles’ letter it is a ‘calling’; in Briggs’ letter it is essential evidence of the work of the Spirit.

In this essay I explore the significance of sympathy in the hymns of Charles Wesley. I argue that in Charles’ hymns, as in the descriptions above, the ideal Christian is constructed as one characterized by sympathetic responses towards the suffering. This ideal is constructed through portrayals of individual Christians, as well as through depictions of Jesus and the Christian community. Recognizing this element within the hymns is a reminder that Charles’ hymns were important not just in encouraging particular theological convictions among early Methodists, but in constructing broader notions of
self and community. I argue that understanding the construction of the sympathetic self within Charles' hymns illuminates significant aspects of early Methodist culture that have been the subject of historical debate, including the intensity of early Methodist community and the responsiveness of English Methodists to the reform movements of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Charles Wesley's hymns were not, of course, written in a vacuum. In giving a central place to sympathy, his hymns reflected a broader trend within English culture. Many historians of eighteenth-century England have pointed to the growing value during this period of 'a new set of attitudes and emotional conventions at the heart of which was a sympathetic concern for the pain and suffering of other sentient beings'.3 The value of sympathy was explored in a wide variety of texts and contexts, along with a number of related concepts such as 'sentiment', 'sensibility', 'pity' and 'benevolence'. These terms are at times difficult to distinguish from one another in their eighteenth-century usage.4

Perhaps the most extensive philosophical exploration of the idea and value of sympathy is found in Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Smith argued that however selfish people might be, they all possessed certain qualities that made them concerned with the needs and happiness of others.

Of this kind is pity or compassion, the emotion which we feel for the misery of others, when we either see it, or are made to conceive it in a very lively manner. That we often derive sorrow from the sorrow of others, is a matter of fact too obvious to require any instances to prove it; for this sentiment, like all the other original passions of human nature, is by no means confined to the virtuous and the humane, though they may feel it with the most exquisite sensibility. The greatest ruffian, the most hardened violator of the laws of society, is not altogether without it.5

For Smith, such empathetic pity for the sufferings of another was one example of sympathy, which he defined broadly as 'fellow feeling with any passion whatsoever'.6 The ability to sympathize with another's experiences was, in Smith's philosophy, a potential 'moral sense' and could thus form the foundation for the moral society. Smith's conviction that people shared a common propensity towards sympathy with each other's sufferings, and that virtue was reflected in a more 'exquisite' or heightened sensibility, can be seen throughout eighteenth-century England. Smith was not the only philosopher to suggest that sympathy could be the basis of a new morality – he was deeply influenced by David Hume, who had earlier affirmed the value of sympathy for society in his *Treatise of Human Nature* (1740). Prior to Hume, the essentially sympathetic nature of human beings had been suggested by Latitudinarian divines of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.7

These philosophical developments echoed ideas within contemporary medical treatises, which explored the 'sympathetic' relationship between organs. Ellis points out that during the eighteenth century, the key terms related to the 'culture of sensibility' – terms such as 'sentiment', 'sympathy' and 'delicacy' – can also be found throughout 'accounts of nerve function, models of
the nervous system, accounts of the “circulation” of the blood and theories of the physiological organisation of the body as a whole. The ‘culture of sensibility’ was perhaps most clearly demonstrated within literary fiction. Novelists such as Henry Mackenzie, Laurence Sterne and Samuel Richardson portrayed heroes and heroines who were men and women of intense feeling. These novels relied on emotive language and heart-rending stories to move the reader to sympathy with these intense characters. Janet Todd describes this ‘sentimental literature’ as ‘exemplary of emotion, teaching its consumers to produce a response equivalent to the one presented in its episodes’. This sentimental literature constructed the ideal person as feeling deeply and sympathizing readily, even involuntarily, with those who suffered. These ideals were explicitly proffered to the reader as models for their own character and responses. In such novels, intense emotion was expressed in an entire ‘sentimental rhetoric of the body’ that included weeping, groaning, blushing, sighing, fainting and an inability to speak.

Outside the world of fiction, moral reformers used similar literary techniques to portray the suffering of slaves or prisoners or factory workers to attract supporters to their causes. Reformers gave detailed descriptions of physical and emotional suffering to evoke sympathy among readers that would cause them to respond. An example of this kind of writing from within Methodism is found in John Wesley’s 1774 essay, ‘Thoughts Upon Slavery’. Addressing English slave traders, John wrote:

Are you a man? Then you should have a human heart. But have you indeed? What is your heart made of? Is there no such principle as compassion there? Do you never feel another’s pain? Have you no sympathy, no sense of human woe, no pity for the miserable? When you saw the flowing eyes, the heaving breasts, or the bleeding sides and tortured limbs of your fellow-creatures, was you a stone, or a brute?

As Brycchan Carey has pointed out, the language and style of address that John uses here are typical of contemporary sentimental writing. John’s powerful evocation of sympathy suggests (in spite of Briggs’ criticism of John as unsympathetic) a relationship between the ‘culture of sensibility’ and the culture of early Methodism.

The exact nature of this relationship is complex and contested. Evangelicals, including Methodists, used the language of sensibility in preaching salvation and encouraging reform. For example, in a sermon on the woman caught in adultery, Charles employed many of the techniques of sentimental literature. Calling upon his listeners to consider the woman, he questioned them:

What says your holiness to an adulteress, a notorious, open sinner? Is pity the first emotion you feel at the sight of her, and do your eyes gush out with water, because she hath not kept God’s law? Do you see yourself in her? . . . Are you thus affected towards her, thus full of pity, sorrow and love, and duly humbled under a sense of your own like sinfulness? Or do you not find the contrary tempers?
Charles argues that the ability to respond to the adulteress with sympathy is the distinguishing characteristic of true holiness. While he elsewhere includes many other evidences of holiness, the emphasis here on tearful pity at the sight of the sinner is striking.

Early Methodist culture thus displayed many of the characteristics of the contemporary culture of sensibility. There were, however, underlying philosophical tensions between the suggestion that sympathy provided human beings with a natural moral sense and the evangelical claim that all people were inherently sinful and required conversion and transformation. Furthermore, both evangelicals and others had to grapple with the question of how sympathy related to charitable action. The evangelical reformer Hannah More, after defending sensibility in her early writings, went on in later life to condemn it. Sensibility could reduce suffering to an aesthetic experience, and 'a feeling heart could justify inaction and excuse error'.

The hymns of Charles Wesley provide one context for exploring the relationship between early Methodism and broader cultural trends in relation to sympathy. In their perceptive study of eighteenth-century English hymnody, Janet Todd and Madeleine Forell Marshall have noted the similarities between Charles Wesley's poetic style and that of the 'literature of sensibility'. Little attention has been paid, however, to the ways in which sympathy itself is treated in the hymns. A closer reading of the hymns reveals that sympathetic responses to suffering are a central aspect of many, in portrayals of individual Christians as well as representations of Jesus and the Christian community.

A valuable but neglected source for considering Charles' portrayal of individual Christians is a group of three collections of hymns that Charles Wesley and then George Osborn published under the title *Funeral Hymns*. Charles composed a large number of hymns to commemorate deceased believers. While some of these hymns were written so as to apply to the death of any believer, many of them eulogize individual Christians, providing lengthy descriptions of the exemplary lives and deaths of the deceased. While the hymns do include specific details of the lives and experiences of these individuals, they also repeatedly emphasize certain key virtues as characterizing the deceased individuals they commemorate. Those who read and sang the hymns were encouraged to appreciate and develop these characteristics. These individual funeral hymns are thus a useful indication of how Charles wanted to construct the ideal Christian.

For the purposes of this chapter, it is significant that Charles repeatedly describes the sympathetic character of the individuals he portrays. A typical example is found in a hymn entitled 'On the death of Mrs Mary Naylor, March 21, 1757 (Part III)'.

1. Mercy, that heaven-descending guest,
Resided in her gentle breast,
And full possession kept;
While listening to the orphan's moan,
And echoing back the widow's groan,
She wept with them that wept.
THE SUFFERING MEMBERS SYMPATHISE

2. Affliction, poverty, disease,
Drew out her soul in soft distress
The wretched to relieve:
In all the works of love employ’d,
Her sympathising soul enjoy’d
The blessedness to give.

3. Her Saviour in His members seen,
A stranger she received Him in,
An hungry Jesus fed,
Tended her sick imprison’d Lord,
And flew in all His wants to afford
Her ministerial aid.

4. A nursing mother to the poor,
For them she husbanded her store,
Her life, her all bestow’d:
For them she labour’d day and night,
In doing good her whole delight,
In copying after God.

5. But did she then herself conceal
From her own flesh? or kindly feel
Their every want and woe?
’Tis Corban this, she never said,
But dealt alike her sacred bread
To feed both friend and foe. 20

Wesley identifies Naylor as possessing (or rather, being possessed by) the quality of mercy. The practical aspect of this virtue — the exercise of charity — is, of course, a standard Christian virtue. Charles’ description of Naylor’s charitable acts echoes traditional formulations of charity as the service of Christ in the poor.21 He also, however, emphasizes Naylor’s emotional response to the suffering, a response that is clearly sympathetic. As the first verse concludes: ‘She wept with those who wept.’ Exposure to the suffering of others ‘Drew out her soul in soft distress/The wretched to relieve.’ The imagery of her soul being ‘drawn out’ implies the almost involuntary reaction of emotion to the sight of suffering that characterized eighteenth-century descriptions of sympathy.22 In the final verse, Wesley emphasizes that her response to the suffering of her own family was similarly sympathetic, as she ‘kindly’ felt ‘Their every want and woe.’

Sympathy is depicted here as closely connected to Christian virtue. It is an aspect of mercy, ‘that heaven-descending guest’, and it is described in specifically biblical terms, as a matter of weeping with those who weep (Romans 12:15). This portrayal of Naylor also echoes eighteenth-century formulations of the person of ‘feeling’ or ‘sensibility’. Her ‘gentle breast’ and ‘soft distress’; her empathetic response to the ‘moan’ and ‘groan’ of the suffering orphan and widow; her willingness to ‘kindly feel’ the ‘woe’ of her family: all are reminiscent of the characters described in the literature of sensibility.
Similar portrayals of individuals as deeply sympathetic can be found throughout the funeral hymns. Historians have convincingly argued for the gendering of sensibility during the eighteenth century, but Charles portrays men and women in very similar terms. For example, Charles writes of Mr Thomas Lewis:

6. His heart, as tender as sincere,
   Melted for every sufferer,
   And bled for the distress’d.
   (Where’er he heard the grieved complain.)
   And pity for the sons of pain
   Resided in his breast.

Like Naylor, Lewis is portrayed as deeply sympathetic, and his sympathy is described in physical (though metaphorical) terms. His heart was ‘tender’; it ‘melted’ and ‘bled’ for those who suffered; pity ‘resided in his breast’.

In eulogizing deceased believers in these terms, Charles constructs the ideal Methodist as one who feels deeply and sympathizes readily. The public singing or private reading of these hymns encouraged early Methodist readers or singers to adopt a similar ideal for themselves and others. The descriptions of John and Charles quoted at the beginning of this chapter both, in different ways, reflect this ideal. Without claiming that Charles’ hymns simply made Methodists sympathetic, there is significant evidence to suggest that sympathy became an intrinsic part of Methodist identity. Consider, for example, the Methodist response to the campaign for the abolition of slavery. Methodist support for anti-slavery campaigns was extremely high throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Most Methodists had never been to the West Indies, or seen slaves at work on a plantation, or watched slaves being packed into a slave ship for transport. Their knowledge of this suffering came from its literary evocation in the writings of anti-slavery reformers, writings that conformed to the conventions of the literature of sensibility by seeking to evoke sympathetic responses from ‘persons of feeling’. The powerful response among Methodists to this literature makes sense, I would suggest, in light of the repeated affirmation of sympathy found in Charles Wesley’s hymns.

Clearly, Charles’ construction of the ideal Methodist echoes contemporary affirmations of the value of sympathy, particularly as expressed in depictions of the ‘person of feeling’. While these parallels are significant, however, they may also be misleading. Charles’ hymns emphasize sympathy within a particular theological framework and for particular spiritual purposes. Without attention to this framework and these purposes, the distinctive nature of Charles’ understanding of sympathy will be missed.

As the funeral hymn for Mary Naylor demonstrates, Charles emphasizes sympathy in the context of a traditional Christian motivation for charity. Sympathy towards the suffering is portrayed in this hymn as one aspect of serving Jesus in the poor. In other funeral hymns, human sympathy is also portrayed as a quality that appropriately imitates the sympathy of Jesus. In a funeral hymn for Mrs Mary Horton, Charles writes:
1. Say, ye companions of her youth,
With what sincerity and truth,
How free from fear or shame,
Christ and His members she confess'd,
And through a blameless life express'd
The tempers of the Lamb.

2. How did she put His bowels on,
And answer every plaintive groan
Of poverty and pain!
In sad variety of grief
The wretched sought from her relief,
Nor ever sought in vain.28

The first way in which Horton ‘express'd/The tempers of the Lamb’ was to sympathize like Jesus, to ‘put His bowels on’ in responding compassionately to the needy. The phrase ‘bowels of Christ’ is here as elsewhere used as a metaphor for Jesus' emotions, in particular his sympathy and pity. This hymn thus makes clear Charles’ conviction that Christian charity should involve an emotional, sympathetic response to suffering as well as practical action. More significantly, in portraying sympathy as a quality by which the believer imitates Jesus, this hymn points to Charles’ broader representation of Jesus as a deeply sympathetic person.

The significance given to sympathy in depictions of Jesus can be seen in a lengthy early hymn entitled ‘Written in stress of temptation’. While this hymn does not contain the word ‘sympathy’, a close reading demonstrates that the narrative focuses throughout on sympathetic responses.

1. I am the man who long have known
The fierceness of temptation’s rage!
And still to God for help I groan:
When shall my groans His help engage?

2. Out of the deep on Jesus I call,
In bitterness of spirit cry;
Broken upon that Stone I fall,
I fall, – the chief of sinners I.

3. Saviour of me, my sad complaint
Let me into Thy bosom pour;
Beneath my load of sin I faint,
And hell is ready to devour.

4. A devil to myself I am,
Yet cannot ‘scape the flesh I tear;
Beast, fiend, and legion is my name,
My lot the blackness of despair.

...
7. My Lord, (I still will call Thee mine,
Till sentenced to eternal pain,)
Thou wouldest not Thy cup decline,
Thy vengeance due to guilty man.

8. My sufferings all to Thee are known,
Tempted at every point like me:
Regard my griefs, regard Thine own:
Jesu! remember Calvary!

9. O, call to mind Thy earnest prayers,
Thine agony and sweat of blood,
Thy strong and bitter cries and tears,
Thy mortal groan, 'MY GOD! MY GOD!'

10. For whom didst Thou the cross endure?
Who nail'd Thy body to the tree?
Did not Thy death my life procure?
O, let Thy bowels answer me!

11. Art Thou not touch'd with human woe?
Hath pity left the Son of Man?
Dost Thou not all our sorrow know,
And claim a share in all our pain?

12. Canst Thou forget Thy days of flesh?
Canst Thou my miseries not feel?
Thy tender heart - it bleeds afresh!
It bleeds! - and Thou art Jesus still!

13. I feel, I feel Thee now the same,
Kindled Thy kind relentings are;
These meltings from Thy bowels came,
Thy Spirit groan'd this inward prayer.

14. Thy prayer is heard, Thy will is done!
Light in Thy light at length I see;
Thou wilt preserve my soul Thine own,
And show forth all Thy power in me.²⁹

This hymn draws its readers or singers into a dramatic experience of temptation and salvation. ³⁰ The first six verses of this hymn introduce the narrator as one overwhelmed by long temptation but continuing to cry out to God. In verses one and two, he describes his plight in biblical phrases that recall the psalmists and the prophets, thus investing his own suffering with profound theological meaning.³¹ The narrator describes his emotional pain at length and in detail – his 'groans', his 'bitterness of spirit', his 'sad complaint', the 'load of sin' he carries, 'the blackness of despair' he feels. His inner struggle
against temptation is compared to the struggle of the Gadarene demoniac, possessed by a legion of demons (Luke 8.26–39).

If the early verses of the hymn describe the suffering of the narrator, verse 7 shifts to a direct and desperate appeal to Jesus. The narrator appeals to the compassion of Jesus towards 'guilty man', as demonstrated in his Passion: 'Thou wouldest not Thy cup decline,/Thy vengeance due to guilty man.' As verse eight makes clear, Jesus' own sufferings make him able to empathize with human pain:

8. My sufferings all to Thee are known,
    Tempted at every point like me:
    Regard my griefs, regard Thine own:
    Jesu! remember Calvary!

In appealing to this empathetic connection, the narrator makes use of biblical precedent. The writer to the Hebrews affirmed that 'we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin' (Hebrews 4.15). Jesus' experience of temptation means that the narrator can present his own sufferings as Jesus' own: 'Regard my griefs, regard Thine own.' To prompt Jesus' memory with regard to his suffering on Calvary, the narrator launches into a vivid description of those sufferings.

Verses 9 to 12 contain a string of emotive references to Jesus' suffering. Jesus' 'agony', his 'strong and bitter cries and tears', his 'mortal groan', his body 'nail'd' to 'the tree' – each is urgently brought to Jesus' attention. The purpose of this description is clearly to produce a powerful emotional response. In verse 10, for example, Jesus is confronted with a series of almost hysterical questions: 'For whom didst Thou the cross endure?/Who nail'd Thy body to the tree?/Did not Thy death my life procure?' The response that Wesley requires from Jesus is not verbal, but emotional: 'O, let Thy bowels answer me!' Jesus' own experience of suffering is posited as the basis by which he is able to 'feel' the sufferings of the narrator. 'Canst Thou forget Thy days of flesh?/Canst Thou my miseries not feel?' asks the narrator.

The emotive descriptions of these first twelve verses are clearly designed to evoke a sympathetic response from Jesus. Both the narrator's suffering and Jesus' own suffering are described in an attempt to create this response. Verse 12 marks the climax to this emotional crescendo, as Jesus' capacity to sympathize is identified as essential to his nature: 'Thy tender heart – it bleeds afresh!/It bleeds! – and Thou art Jesus still!' For Jesus to fail to be sympathetic, these lines imply, would be for him no to longer be himself. It is on the basis of this sympathetic response that Jesus is moved to act. His action involves the transformation of the heart of the narrator and thus his relief from temptation. This transformation is, as the narrator emphasizes, sensible: 'I feel, I feel Thee now the same!' As a result of this perceived transformation, the hymn ends on a note of confident rejoicing.

The portrayal of Jesus in 'Written in stress of temptation' is striking but not unusual. Similar depictions of Jesus as sympathetic fellow-sufferer appear throughout Charles' hymns. These hymns emphasize pity or compassion as
integral to Jesus’ character and the basis on which he can be appealed to for help. In such hymns the concepts of love and sympathy are almost entirely interchangeable. For example, in one of the ‘Hymns for Love’, Charles writes:

1. When shall my grief and pain
   Thy kind compassion move?
   Thou know’st I languish still to attain
   The happiness of love:
   If Thou my suit deny,
   Out of Thy presence cast,
   Excluded from Thy love, I die,
   I die unsaved at last.

2. How shall I plead with Thee,
   Saviour of sinful men?
   Let Thy own dying love for me
   Thy pitying heart constrain:
   The universal load,
   The cross Thou didst endure
   With all the vengeful wrath of God,
   To make my pardon sure.\textsuperscript{34}

As in the previous hymn, Jesus’ pity is here seen as central. Jesus is constrained by his ‘pitying heart’ to help the distressed penitent. Once again, the memory of the cross is evoked to move Jesus to act. Jesus’ sacrificial death on the cross is that which most clearly demonstrates his compassionate nature. Reminding Jesus of the sacrifice he made is thus both a prompt to him identifying with the suffering of the believer and a way of urging him to be true to his nature. Again, the goal of this hymn is the transformation of the narrator, who ‘languish[es] still to attain/The happiness of love.’

In portrayals such as these Jesus has much in common with the ‘man of feeling’.\textsuperscript{35} Like the ‘man of feeling’, Jesus is deeply emotionally responsive to the troubles of others. Like the ‘man of feeling’ too, Jesus expresses this response through physical displays. This can be seen in the references within the hymns to Jesus’ tears. For example, Charles interprets the famous verse ‘Jesus wept’ as evidence of Jesus’ inherently sympathetic nature.

1. Jesus weeps, our tears to see!
   Feels the soft infirmity;
   Feels, when’er a friend we mourn,
   From our bleeding bosom torn:
   Let Him still in spirit groan,
   Make our every grief His own,
   Till we all triumphant rise,
   Call’d to meet Him in the skies.

2. Jesus weeps for sinners blind,
   Mourns the death of all mankind;
Blesses us with sacred showers,
Sheds His tears to hallow ours:
Weeps to make our case His own,
For our guilty joys to' atone,
Wipes at last the mourner's eyes,
Sorrow's source for ever dries.\(^{36}\)

In its context, this verse refers to Jesus' response at the death of Lazarus. Historically, Jesus' tears in this account have been interpreted in a myriad of ways. Margery Lange's study of early modern English sermons on this passage shows Jesus' tears understood as demonstrating, variously: grief at Lazarus' death, grief at human doubt, grief at the sin of the world and compassion for Mary and Martha.\(^{37}\) In this hymn, though Jesus' tears are ascribed multiple meanings, they are first and foremost a sign of his sympathy for human beings. Jesus weeps in response to human tears. This portrayal is typical of Charles' treatment of Jesus' tears, which he repeatedly interprets as evidence of Jesus' pity or sympathy.\(^{38}\)

The portrayal of Jesus in these terms clearly resonates with eighteenth-century ideas about sympathy and sensibility. In assuming that because Jesus loves, he sympathizes – and that these concepts are almost interchangeable – Charles is reflecting the assumptions of the 'culture of sensibility'. Again, however, Charles' understanding of Jesus' ability to sympathize is also connected to broader theological themes in the hymns. In particular, Charles draws direct and indirect connections between his Arminian theology and the sympathy of Jesus. In the hymn above, for example, the lines 'Jesus weeps for sinners blind/Mourns the death of all mankind' clearly contain a typical swipe at limited atonement. More explicitly, in one of the anti-Calvinist 'Hymns on God's Everlasting Love', published in 1741, Charles writes:

6. Sinners, believe the gospel word;
Jesus is come, your souls to save!
Jesus is come, your common Lord!
Pardon ye all in Him may have;
May now be saved, whoever will;
This Man receiveth sinners still.

7. See where the lame, the halt, the blind,
The deaf, the dumb, the sick, the poor,
Flock to the Friend of human kind,
And freely all accept their cure:
To whom doth He His help deny?
Whom in His days of flesh pass by!

8. Did not His word the fiends expel,
The lepers cleanse, and raise the dead?
Did He not all their sickness heal,
And satisfy their every need?
Did He reject His helpless clay,
Or send them sorrowful away?
9. Nay, but His bowels yearn'd to see
The people hungry, scatter'd, faint;
Nay, but He utter'd over thee
*Jerusalem*, a true complaint;
*Jerusalem*, who shed'st His blood,
That, with His tears, for thee hath flow'd.

10. How oft for thy hard-heartedness
Did Jesus in his Spirit groan!
The things belonging to thy peace,
Hadst thou, O bloody city, known,
Thee, turning in thy gracious day,
He never would have cast away.

11. He wept, because thou *wouldst* not see
The grace which sure salvation brings:
How oft would He have gather'd thee,
And cherish'd underneath His wings;
But thou *wouldst not* - unhappy thou!
And justly art thou harden'd now.39

Here Jesus' sympathy and compassion towards all those he encountered on earth - his 'tears', his 'groan', the yearning of his 'bowels' - are taken as evidence of his willingness to save anyone who repents. It is this conviction that also underlies the pleading of such hymns as 'Written in the stress of temptation', which seek to appeal to that sympathetic nature.

The implication that the divine nature is inherently sympathetic is significant in terms of broader theological developments during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. David Bebbington has described the growing evangelical emphasis on the Fatherhood of God during the nineteenth century, in which ideas of the eternal 'paternal pity' of God gained ascendancy over ideas of God's just wrath against sin.40 While Charles' hymns emphasize the 'vengeful wrath' of God the Father, Jesus is portrayed throughout as compassionate and sympathetic. This emphasis on sympathy as a divine quality seems to prefigure later evangelical portrayals of God as a sympathetic father.

Jesus' sympathy is also closely connected in the hymns to his relationship with believers. Specifically, Charles develops the biblical idea of 'the body of Christ' as a basis for shared sympathy. Several biblical passages describe the Church as the body of Christ - and individual Christians as 'members' of this body. A detailed exploration of this concept is found in 1 Corinthians 12.12-27:

For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ . . . For the body is not one member, but many . . . And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it.
Other biblical passages explore the concept of the Church as Christ's body, though elsewhere the connection between shared membership of this body and shared suffering is not emphasized.\(^41\) In Charles' hymns, however, this connection is repeatedly stressed. Jesus' sympathy is seen to derive at least in part from his role as 'Head' of the body.\(^42\) For example, Wesley writes:

1. The members here and Head above,
   United in the Spirit of love
   One mystic body make.
And Jesus, once a Man of woe
The sufferings of His saints below
Doth still in heaven partake.\(^43\)

And, similarly:

   Jesus on the celestial hill
   Doth for his people care,
   Doth suffer in His members still,
   And all our sorrows bear:
   If crush'd on earth the foot complain,
   Feeling the injury
   The Head above cries out in pain,
   'Thou persecutest Me.'\(^44\)

The idea of spiritual unity or 'membership' of Jesus' 'body' seems in Wesley's thought to be almost inseparable from the experience of suffering. Jesus is portrayed here as continuing to partake in the suffering of believers: he 'suffers in His members still'. The boundary between sympathy and unity is here blurred: Jesus actually enters into the pain of his suffering people.

Not surprisingly, this emphasis upon the sympathetic nature of the 'body of Christ' has great significance for Charles' portrayal of the Christian community. Sympathy becomes a central element in the ideal Christian community, as can be seen in a lengthy poem on 'The Communion of Saints', where Charles writes:

4. Sweetly now we all agree,
   Touch'd with softest sympathy,
   Kindly for each other care:
   Every member feels its share:
   Wounded by the grief of one,
   All the suffering members groan;
   Honour'd if one member is,
   All partake the common bliss.\(^45\)

Here 'membership' of Jesus' body is again portrayed as the basis of a profound sympathetic connection. In this portrayal, the community's responses to each other's pains are given far more prominence than their responses to each
other’s pleasures. This emphasis on the sympathetic nature of the Christian community is repeated in many of Charles’ hymns.46

Sympathy, rising out of the spiritual reality of shared membership of Jesus’ body, is portrayed as a quality that distinguishes the Christian community from all others. A hymn on ‘Desiring to Love’ expresses this clearly:

1. O Saviour, cast a pitying eye,
   A sinner at Thy feet I lie,
   And will not hence depart,
   Till Thou regard my ceaseless moan;
   O speak, and take away the stone,
   The unbelieving heart:

2. Till Thou the mountain load remove,
   I groan beneath my want of love;
   O hear my bitter cry:
   Without Thy love I cannot live,
   Give, Jesus, Friend of sinners, give
   Me love, or else I die.

3. Dost Thou not all my sufferings know,
   Dost Thou not see mine eye o’erflow,
   My labouring bosom move?
   Why do I all this burden bear?
   Need I to Thee the cause declare?
   Thou know’st, I cannot love.

4. This is my sin and misery,
   I always find Thy love to me,
   Seal’d by Thy precious blood;
   And yet I make Thee no return,
   I only for my baseness mourn,
   I cannot love my God.

5. The world admire my mystic grief,
   And torture me with vain relief,
   And cruel kindness show;
   They bid me give my wailings o’er,
   And weep and vex myself no more
   For One they never knew.

6. My Father’s children feel my care,
   With kind concern my cross they bear,
   And in my sorrows join;
   The suffering members sympathise,
   And grieve my griefs, and sigh my sighs.
   And mix their tears with mine.
7. But all in vain for me they grieve,  
Their sufferings cannot mine relieve,  
Or mitigate my pain:  
No answer to their prayers they see,  
And prevalent with God for me  
They seem to pray in vain.

8. Thou then, O God, Thine hand lay to,  
And let me all the means look through,  
And trust to Thee alone,  
To Thee alone for all things trust,  
And say to Thee, who sav' st the lost,  
Thine only will be done.47

This hymn again presents Jesus as deeply sympathetic towards the suffer­
ing believer. This sympathy is mirrored here by the sympathy of the sup­
plicant’s fellow-believers. These fellow-believers enter into the suffering of  
the one desiring to love: they ‘bear’ ‘my cross’, they ‘feel my care’. Again, the  
‘body of Christ’ provides the theological framework for these sympathetic  
responses: ‘The suffering members sympathise,/And grieve my griefs, and  
sigh my sighs.’ This sympathetic behaviour is contrasted starkly to the atti­
dute of those in ‘the world’, who ‘admire’ the supplicant’s grief but cannot  
sympathize with it. Sympathy thus unites, but it also divides.  

This hymn also identifies, however, the potential limits of sympathy in  
Charles’ understanding. As verse 7 makes clear, the sympathy of the sup­
plicant’s fellow-believers is ultimately ‘all in vain’. Their empathetic ‘sufferings’  
and even the prayers that they are moved to pray are ineffective. The solution  
to the deep need of the narrator can only be provided by God. The repeated  
use of the words ‘alone’ and ‘only’ in the final verse emphasizes that it is God’s  
intervention that ultimately makes a difference, not the ‘means’ of the com­
community’s sympathy and prayers. This final verse seems to imply a warning  
that the sympathy of other Christians, while comforting, must not be relied  
upon for that which only God can provide. This hymn and others caution  
that the sympathetic fellowship offered by the Christian community could  
become idolatrous.48  

While for Charles the shared membership of Jesus’ body means that  
Christians are particularly sympathetic towards each other, the hymns also  
emphasize the importance of sympathy towards all who suffer. So, for exam­
ple, in a ‘Hymn for the National Fast’, written in 1782, Charles writes:

3. With every sufferer,  
We drop the generous tear,  
(Whom Thy tendering Spirit leads,)  
Pity no distinction knows,  
Love for all the wounded bleeds,  
Love embraces friends and foes.49
As this hymn makes clear, the ‘tendering Spirit’ leads Christians into an all-embracing sympathy. Even those American rebels whom Charles identifies as ‘foes’ are included in this embrace. Sympathy here becomes not only the means by which believers express love for each other, but also the means by which believers relate to those across boundaries of belief, race and nationality.\(^{50}\)

As has been noted, the promotion of sympathy as a particular virtue existed within the broader culture of eighteenth-century England, but in Charles’ hymns it is given a particular, Christological interpretation. Jesus is presented as inherently sympathetic, and the Passion is presented as both source and expression of this sympathy. Believers, individually and as a community, suffer and sympathize in imitation of a suffering and sympathetic Lord. This Christological framework also places limits on sympathy within the hymns. The broader uneasiness within evangelicalism about the power of sympathy is mirrored in Charles’ insistence that human sympathy must not be relied on to provide that spiritual good which only God can provide. Sympathy in the hymns could be humanitarian, but it could never be humanist. Charles’ portrayal of sympathy thus both reflected and resisted common contemporary constructions of the sympathetic person.

The construction of the ideal Methodist in these terms has real significance for illuminating certain distinctive aspects of early Methodist culture. It is a commonplace that Methodism was concerned with individual experience, but as D. Bruce Hindmarsh has argued in his recent book on evangelical conversion narratives, ‘if the converts in the early Evangelical Revival appear as individualists of a sort, they were also communitarians of a sort’.\(^{51}\) The Methodist conversion narratives he examines reveal that many individuals were drawn to the intense experience of community that early Methodism offered.\(^{52}\) The writers of these narratives repeatedly draw attention to the value of the fellowship they experienced in the intimate settings of band and society meetings. These meetings provided a context within which those who were seeking salvation or greater holiness could share their experiences, comfort, challenge and pray for one another. Such shared practices were explicitly identified as ‘means of grace’.\(^{53}\)

Like many aspects of early Methodism, this intense community can be seen in part as a response to the particular social and cultural conditions in which eighteenth-century English people lived. As David Hempton and others have argued convincingly, early English Methodism thrived in areas where old ties to squire and parson had been loosened or disrupted, often because of broader social changes involving population growth and mobility.\(^{54}\) Methodism offered an alternative community, based on alternative loyalties. This community was based not on shared family, social status or denomination, but on the perception of a shared experience of conversion.

Charles’ emphasis on sympathy grows out of this context and affirms it. In a community gathered around the shared (and often painful) experience of conviction, conversion and the struggle for sanctification, the practice of sympathy provided a powerful cohesive force. The expression of sympathy in this context affirmed the shared nature of these experiences and so their validity. Charles’ letters are full of his appreciation for the intensity of Methodist fellowship, and his hymns encourage Methodists to develop the quality of
sympathy that contributed to this intensity. Through hymns that depicted Jesus as profoundly sympathetic, Methodists were encouraged to associate divine love with the practice of sympathy. Through funeral hymns that lauded the sympathetic nature of deceased believers, they were provided with exampels of the sympathetic ‘person of feeling’. Through the emphasis on shared membership of Christ’s body, they were assured that they could truly sympathize with each other’s sufferings because these sufferings were ultimately part of a shared spiritual story and identity.

To ‘weep with you that weep’ was, for Charles Wesley, not only a personal calling, but also a mark of true Christian character and community. In constructing the ideal Methodist as deeply sympathetic, Charles’ hymns resonate powerfully with broader cultural trends within eighteenth-century England. They also encourage the formation of a new, distinctively Methodist self, one that would follow a sympathetic Lord in weeping ‘for all mankind’.

Notes

1 Charles Wesley to Sarah Gwynne, Dublin, 17 November 1747, MARC, DDCW, 5/3.

2 William Briggs to John Wesley, 5 April 1750. MARC, Colman Box.


4 Markman Ellis has discussed the difficulty of defining the term ‘sensibility’ as it was used in eighteenth-century England – he suggests that writings on sensibility from the period are ‘a philosophical nightmare of muddled ideas, weak logic and bad writing’. Markman Ellis, The Politics of Sensibility: Race, gender and commerce in the sentimental novel (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 7.


7 Karen Halitunen quotes a number of examples. ‘Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain’, 304–5.

8 Ellis, The Politics of Sensibility, 18–19.

9 For example, Henry Mackenzie, The Man of Feeling (London, 1771); Laurence Sterne, A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy (London, 1768) and Samuel Richardson, Pamela: or Virtue Rewarded (London, 1740).


11 Markman Ellis, The Politics of Sensibility, 19.


14 Brycchan Carey, 'John Wesley's Thoughts upon slavery and the language of the heart', Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester, 85, Nos. 2 and 3 (Summer and Autumn 2003), 278–84.

15 Different arguments in regard to this relationship are put forward by Todd, Sensibility; Wood, Slavery, Empathy and Pornography; and G. J. Barker-Benfield, The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and society in eighteenth-century Britain (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

16 Newport, Sermons, 254–5.

17 Janet Todd, Sensibility, 64, 137. Hannah More criticized 'sentiment' in 'On the Danger of Sentimental or Romantic Connexions' (1778).


19 Charles himself published two collections: one in 1746 and a subsequent one in 1759. Osborn apparently collected together another substantial group of funeral hymns, 'most of which were not published during the author's life' (the entire collection is in PW, 6.188–366; the quotation is from 6.289).

20 PW, 6.270–1.


24 For the gendering of sensibility, see Barker-Benfield, The Culture of Sensibility. For a discussion of differences between sentimental literature authored by men and women, see Patricia Meyer Spacks, 'Oscillations of Sensibility', New Literary History, 25, No. 3 (Summer 1994), 505–20.

25 'On the Death of Mr. Thomas Lewis, April, 1782', PW, 6.350.

26 For the involvement of Methodists (and other evangelicals) in the anti-slavery campaigns, see Adam Hochshild, Bury the Chains: Prophets and rebels in the fight to free an empire's slaves (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), especially chapters 9 and 22.

27 Other hymns that communicate this understanding of charity include 'Before any work of charity' and 'In the work', PW, 5.18–21.

28 'On the Death of Mrs. Mary Horton, May 4, 1786, Aged Thirty-four. (Part III) PW, 6.359–60. There are eight verses.

29 PW, 1.273–6.

30 I refer to the central figure of this narrative as 'the narrator'. As this figure is firstly identified with Charles himself (and because Charles writes 'I am the man . . . ') I have used masculine pronouns in referring to him. This is not to suggest that Methodist women could not make use of such a hymn, but it does raise
interesting questions about the place of gender in the process of appropriating such a narrative.

31 Lamentations 3.1; Psalm 130.1–2; Isaiah 28.16 (the latter verse is also quoted in 1 Peter 2.6–8, and Wesley is obviously following this Christological interpretation).

32 There are a number of sources for this description. The Anglican Litany contains references to ‘Thy agony, Thy bloody sweat’. Wesley also seems to be referring again to Hebrews. Hebrews 5.7 – ‘Who in the days of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save him from death, and was heard in that he feared.’

33 A small selection of examples from many hymns that portray Jesus in these terms include PW, 1.83–5; 2.156–8; 4.250; 5.231–2; 9.34; 11.118; 11.223; 12.104.

34 Hymn IX, ‘Hymns for Love’, PW, 8.363. There are two more verses.


38 See PW, 1.330–2; 11.223; 11.233; 11.268–9.

39 PW, 3.20–3.


41 For example, see Romans 12.4–5 and Ephesians 4.15–16.

42 A selection of examples of Wesley’s use of the idea of membership of the body of Jesus in relation to suffering includes PW, 1.362; 2.216; 4.339; 5.78; 5.232–3, 253–4; 10.112, 301, 425; 11.89, 308; 12.140.

43 PW, 12.234. This hymn is written in reference to Acts 9.4, ‘Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou Me?’ There are two more verses.

44 PW, 10.112. This hymn is written in reference to Zechariah 2.8, ‘He that toucheth you toucheth the apple of His eye.’

45 PW, 1.362.

46 For example, PW, 1.298–9; 2.164–6; 3.373–4; 4.473–4; 5.78.


48 See, for example, ‘Upon Parting with His Friends (Part II)’, PW, 1.245–6.

49 PW, 8.324.

50 Other examples of sympathy for enemies include PW, 4.28; 8.335.


52 Hindmarsh, The Evangelical Conversion Narrative, 150–6.

53 Hindmarsh, The Evangelical Conversion Narrative, 151.


55 For examples of Charles’ description of intense times of fellowship, see letter to Sarah Gwynne, 5/6 February, [1749], MARC, DDCW, 5/25; letter to Sarah Gwynne Wesley, 26 September, [1757], MARC, DDCW, 5/75; letter to Sarah Gwynne Wesley, 8 September, [1757], MARC, DDCW, 5/104.