

“Primitive Christianity” (1743)¹

[cf. Baker list, #74]

Editorial Introduction:

The leading voices in the Church of England in the eighteenth century championed their church as embodying the faith of the “primitive church.” The Wesley brothers echoed this claim, but they also contended that the constituency of the Church of England in their day broadly failed to emulate the spiritual vitality of the primitive church. They viewed the Methodist movement as an attempt to renew the Church of England along the lines of its most central commitments.

Many of the leaders in the Church of England, and in British culture at large, had questions and concerns about the Methodist movement, sensing in it the ghost of the puritan emphases that had led to civil war in the prior century. John Wesley addressed these concerns in 1743 in a tract titled *An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, insisting that the movement was not trying to undermine the established church. After issuing the tract in Newcastle, John had a second edition published in Bristol, to which he appended a poem titled “Primitive Christianity.” This poem articulated the ideal of Christian spirituality that the Methodists were trying to recover. It remained as an appendix to most subsequent editions of the tract (exceptions noted below).

While there was no indication of the author of “Primitive Christianity” when it appeared in the *Earnest Appeal*, it is present in Charles Wesley’s MS Cheshunt, 160–64; and he included it in his collection *HSP* (1749), 2:333–36. This makes clear that he was the author.

Editions:

[Charles Wesley.] “Primitive Christianity.” In John Wesley’s *An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, 52–55. 2nd edn. Bristol: Farley, 1743.

3rd Bristol: Farley, 1744.

4th Dublin: Powell, 1747.

3rd Bristol: Farley, 1749.

5th Dublin: Powell, 1750. [hymn not present]

6th Bristol: William Pine, 1765. [hymn not present]

6th Bristol: William Pine, 1771.

Included in JW’s *Works* (Bristol: Pine, 1772), vol. 14 [hymn on pp. 172–77].

7th London: Paramore, 1786.

¹This document was produced by the Duke Center for Studies in the Wesleyan Tradition under the editorial direction of Randy L. Maddox, with the diligent assistance of Aileen F. Maddox. Last updated: November 24, 2009.

Primitive Christianity.

[Part 1.]

- 1 Happy the souls who first believed,
To Jesus, and each other cleaved,
Joined by the unction from above,
In mystic fellowship of love.
- 2 Meek, simple followers of the Lamb
They lived, and spake, and thought the same;
Broke the commemorative bread,
And drank the Spirit of their head.
- 3 On God they cast their every care,
Wrestling with God in mighty prayer,
They claimed the grace, through Jesus given;
By prayer, they shut, and opened heaven.
- 4 To Jesus they performed their vows,
A little church in every house;
They joyfully conspired to raise
Their ceaseless sacrifice of praise.
- 5 Propriety was there unknown,
None called what he possessed his own;
Where all the common blessing share,
No selfish happiness was there.
- 6 With grace abundantly endued,
A pure, believing multitude;
They all were of one heart and soul,
And only love inspired the whole.
- 7 O what an age of golden days!
O what a choice, peculiar race!
Washed in the Lamb's all-cleansing blood,
Anointed kings, and priests to God!

- 8 Where shall I wander now to find
 The successors they left behind?
 The faithful, whom I seek in vain,
 Are minished from the sons of men.
- 9 Ye different sects, who all declare,
 “Lo! Here is Christ,” or² “Christ is there;”
 Your stronger proofs divinely give,
 And *show* me where THE CHRISTIANS live.
- 10 Your claim, alas! Ye cannot prove,
 Ye want the genuine mark of love:
 Thou only, Lord, thine own canst show,
 For sure thou hast a church below.
- 11 The gates of hell cannot prevail,
 The church on earth can never fail:
 Ah! Join me to thy secret ones,
 Ah! Gather all thy living stones.
- 12 Scattered o’er all the earth they lie,
 ’Till thou collect them with thine eye,
 Draw by the music of thy name,
 And charm into a beauteous frame.
- 13 For this the pleading Spirit groans,
 And cries in all thy banished ones:
 Greatest of gifts, thy love impart,
 And make us of one mind and heart.
- 14 Join every soul that looks to thee,
 In bonds of perfect charity:
 Now, Lord, the glorious fulness give,
 And all in all forever live.

Part 2.

- 1 Jesus, from whom all blessings flow,
 Great builder of thy church below,

²“Or” changed to “and” in 3rd edn. (1749) only.

- If now thy Spirit moves my breast,
Hear, and fulfil thy³ own request.
- 2 The few that truly call thee Lord,
And wait thy⁴ sanctifying word,
And thee their utmost Saviour own,
Unite, and perfect them in one.
- 3 Gather them in on every side,
And in thy tabernacle hide;
Give them a resting-place to find,
A covert from the storm and wind.
- 4 O find them out some calm recess,
Some unfrequented wilderness!
Thou, Lord, the secret place prepare,
And hide, and feed *the woman* there.
- 5 Thither collect thy little flock,
Under the shadow of their Rock:
The holy seed, the royal race,
The standing monuments of thy grace.
- 6 O let them all thy mind express,
Stand forth thy chosen witnesses!
Thy power unto salvation show,
And perfect holiness below:
- 7 The fulness of thy grace receive,
And simply to thy glory live;
Strongly reflect the light divine,
And in a land of darkness shine.
- 8 In them let all mankind behold,
How Christians lived in days of old;
(Mighty their envious foes to move,
A proverb of reproach—and love.)

³“Thy” changed to “thine” in *HSP* (1749).

⁴“Thy” changed to “the” in 7th edn. (1786).

- 9 O make them of one soul and heart,
The all-conforming mind impart;
Spirit of peace and unity,
The sinless mind that was in thee.
- 10 Call them into thy wondrous light,
Worthy to walk with thee in white;
Make up thy jewels, Lord, and show
The glorious, spotless church below.
- 11 From every sinful wrinkle free,
Redeemed from all iniquity;
The fellowship of saints make known:
And O, my God, might I be one!
- 12 O might my lot be cast with these,
The least of Jesu's witnesses!
O that my Lord would count me meet
To wash his dear disciples' feet!
- 13 This only thing do I require,
Thou know'st 'tis all my heart's desire,
Freely what I receive to give,
The servant of thy church to live.
- 14 After my lowly Lord to go,
And wait upon thy⁵ saints below,
Enjoy the⁶ grace to angels given,
And serve the royal heirs of heaven.
- 15 Lord, if I now thy drawings feel,
And ask according to thy will,
Confirm the prayer, the seal impart,
And speak the answer to my heart.
- 16 Tell me (or thou shalt never go)
"Thy prayer is heard, it shall be so."—
The word hath passed thy lips—and I
Shall with thy people live and die.

⁵"Thy changed to "the" in 6th edn. (1771) and *Works* edn. (1772).

⁶"The" changed to "his" in 6th edn. (1771) and 7th edn. (1786).