

*Epistle to John Wesley (1755)*¹

[Baker list, #210]

Editorial Introduction:

The early 1750s were a period of growing tension between John and Charles Wesley over the nature and goals of the Methodist movement. A key point of divergence concerned the use of lay preachers. While open to this in principle, Charles was convinced that John was encouraging far too many who had neither the gifts nor the grace to take up the calling. For more on this dimension of the tensions, see Richard P. Heitzenrater, “Purging the Preachers: the Wesleys and Quality Control,” in *Charles Wesley: Life, Literature & Legacy*, edited by Kenneth Newport & Ted Campbell (Peterborough: Epworth, 2007), 486–514.

Even if they were persons of deep spiritual character and clear gifts for preaching, there was another dimension to the challenge of the lay preachers—many of them chafed at the restriction from administering the sacraments. When one of their assistants had sufficient training and could find a willing bishop, the Wesleys supported them seeking ordination. But few were thus qualified.

Things came to a head in October 1754 when two lay preachers, Charles Perronet of London and Thomas Walsh in Reading, administered the sacrament of Holy Communion. Charles Wesley suspected that John was ready to bow to the desires of such preachers, in order to provide for sufficient sacramental ministry among the Methodist faithful. This would have amounted to a clear separation from the Church of England and Charles strongly resisted it. He began to muster support prior to the scheduled Conference at Leeds in early May 1775. As part of this preparation he wrote the poetic epistle with follows and began to share it with some of his sympathetic colleagues (cf. his letter to Samuel Lloyd, 29 April 1755). The epistle stresses Charles’s appreciation for Methodism as a movement, while insisting that it is not the *church*, and it pleads with John to restrain any act that would turn Methodism into a dissenting church.

While John did read a paper at the Leeds Conference rejecting separation from the Church of England, Charles worked to reenforce the point by publishing this *Epistle* and reading it aloud in several of the Methodist societies (cf. his letter to his wife Sarah, 31 May 1755). The effort was generally successful at the time, and the *Epistle* was allowed to go dormant. Then, in 1784, John Wesley was persuaded that the situation on the Methodists in the newly independent colonies in North America required that he ordain two lay preachers. Charles’s response to this act was to reprint the *Epistle*.

Editions:

Charles Wesley. *An Epistle to the Reverend Mr. John Wesley*. London: [Strahan,] for J. Robinson, 1755.

2nd London: [Strahan,] for J. Robinson, 1755

3rd London: J. Robinson, 1785.

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: December 15, 2009.

AN
EPISTLE
TO THE REVEREND
MR. JOHN WESLEY.²

My first and last unalienable friend,
A brother's thoughts with due regard attend,
A brother, still as thy own soul belov'd,
Who speak to learn, and write to be reprov'd:
Far from the factious undiscerning crowd,
Distrest I fly to thee, and *think aloud*;
I tell thee, wise and faithful as thou art,
The fears and sorrows of a burthen'd heart,
The workings of (a blind or heav'nly?) zeal,
And all my *fondness for the Church* I tell,

10

²A manuscript version of this epistle appears in MS Epistles, 89–107. Frank Baker gives the entire epistle, with annotations of variants in the manuscript version, in *Representative Verse*, 288–94.

The Church whose cause I serve, whose faith approve,
Whose altars reverence, and whose name I love.

But does she still exist in more than sound?
The Church—alas, where is she to be found?
Not in the men, however *dignified*,
Who *would* her creeds repeal, her laws deride,
Her prayers expunge, her articles disown,
And thrust the filial Godhead from his throne.
Vainest³ of all their antichristian plea,
Who cry “The temple of the Lord are we!”⁴ 20
“We have the Church, nor will we quit our hold.”—
Their hold of what? The altar? Or the gold?
The altars theirs, who will not light the fire,
Who spurn the labour, but accept the hire,
Who not for souls, but their own bodies care,
And leave to underlings the task of pray’r?
As justly might our christen’d heathens claim,
Thieves, drunkards, whoremongers, the sacred name;
Or rabble-rout succeed in their endeavour
With *High Church, and Sacheverel*⁵ for ever! 30

³Ori., “Filial”; corrected in 2nd printing (1755).

⁴Jeremiah 7:4.

⁵Henry Sacheverell (1674–1724).

As Arians be for orthodox allow'd,
For saints the sensual, covetous, and proud,
And Satan's synagogue for the true Church of God. }

Then let the zealous *orthodox* appear,
And challenge the contested character:
Those, who renounce the whole dissenting tribe,
Creeds, articles, and liturgy subscribe;
Their parish church who never once have mist,
At schism rail,⁶ and hate a *Methodist*;
"The company of faithful souls" are these, 40
Who strive to 'stablish their own righteousness,
But count the faith divine a mad-man's dream?
Howe'er they to themselves may pillars seem,
Of Christ, and of his Church they make no part:
They never knew the Saviour in their heart.

But those who in their heart have Jesus known,
Believers justified by faith alone, }
Shall we not them *the* faithful people own?
In whom the power of godliness is seen,
Must we not grant the Methodists *the men*? 50

⁶Ori., "At schism can rail"; with "can" crossed out in both 1755 printings.

Wide of the Church, as hell from heav'n is wide,
The blaze of riches, and the glare of pride,
The vain desire to be intitled *Lord*,
The worldly kingdom, and the princely sword.

But should the bold usurping spirit dare
Still higher climb, and sit in Moses' chair,
Power o'er my faith and conscience to maintain,
Shall I submit, and suffer it to reign? 80
Call it *the Church*, and darkness put for light,
Falshood with truth confound, and wrong with right?
No: I dispute the evil's haughty claim,
The spirit of the world be still its name,
Whatever call'd by man 'tis purely evil,
'Tis Babel, antichrist, and pope and devil!

Nor would I e'er disgrace the Church's cause
By penal edicts, and compulsive laws,
(Should wicked powers, as formerly prevail
T' exclude her choicest children from her pale) 90
Or force my brethren in her forms to join,
As every jot and tittle were divine,

As all her orders on the mount were given,
 And copied from the hierarchy of heaven.
 Let others for the shape and colour fight
 Of garments short or long, or black or white;
 Or fairly match'd, in furious battle join
 For and against the sponsors and the sign;
 Copes, hoods, and surplices *the Church* miscall,
 And fiercely run their heads against *the wall*; 100
 Far different care is mine; o'er earth to see
 Diffus'd her true essential piety,
 To see her lift again her languid head,
 Her lovely face from ev'ry wrinkle freed,
 Clad in the simple, pure, primeval dress,
 And beauteous with internal holiness,
 Wash'd by the Spirit and the word from sin,
 Fair without spot, and glorious all within.

Alas! How distant now, how desolate,
 Our fallen Sion, in her captive state! 110
 Deserted by her friends, and laugh'd to scorn,
 By inbred foes, and bosom vipers torn,
 With grief I mark their rancorous despight;
 With horror hear the clam'rous *Edomite*;

“Down with her to the ground,” who fiercely cries,
“No more to lift her head, no more to rise!
Down with her to the pit, to Tophet doom
A Church emerging from the dregs of Rome!
Can there in such a church salvation be?
Can any good come out of popery?” } 120
Ye moderate dissenters—come and see! }

See us, when from the papal fire we came,
Ye frozen sects, and warm you at the flame,
Where for the truth our host of martyrs stood,
And clapp’d their hands, and seal’d it with their blood!
Behold Elijah’s fiery steeds appear,
Discern the chariot of *our* Israel near!
That flaming car, for whom doth it come down?
The spouse of Christ?—Or whore of Babylon?
For martyrs, by the Scarlet Whore pursu’d } 130
Thro’ racks and fires, into the arms of God.
These are the Church of Christ, by torture driv’n
To thrones triumphant with their friends in heav’n;

The Church of Christ (let all the nations own)
The Church of Christ *and England*—is but one!

Yet vainly of our ancestors we boast,
We who their faith and purity have lost,
Degenerate branches from a noble seed,
Corrupt, apostatiz'd, and doubly dead:
Will God in such a church his work revive! 140
It cannot be that these dry bones should live.

But who to teach almighty grace shall dare?
How far to suffer, and how long to spare?
Shall man's bold hand our candlestick remove,
Or cut us off from our Redeemer's love?
Shall man presume to say, "There is no hope:
God *must* forsake, for *we* have giv'n her up:
To save a church so near the gates of hell,
This is a thing—with God impossible!"

And yet this thing impossible is done, 150
The Lord *hath* made his power and mercy known,
Strangely reviv'd our long forgotten hope,
And brought out of their graves his people up.

Soon as we prophesied in Jesu's name,
The noise, the shaking, and the Spirit came!
The bones spontaneous to each other cleav'd,
The dead in sin his powerful word receiv'd, }
And felt the quickning breath of God, and liv'd. }
Dead souls to all the life of faith restor'd,
(The house of Israel now) confess the Lord, 160
His people and his Church, out of their graves
They rise and testify that Jesus saves,
That Jesus gives the multiplied increase,
While one becomes a thousand witnesses.

Nor can it seem to souls already freed
Incredible, that God should wake the dead,
Should farther still exert his saving power,
And call, and quicken twice ten thousand more,
Till our whole Church a mighty host becomes,
And owns the Lord, the opener of their tombs. 170

Servant of God, my yoke-fellow and friend,
If God by *us* to the *dry bones* could send,
By *us* out of their graves his people raise,
By *us* display the wonders of his grace,

Why should we doubt his zeal to carry on
 By abler instruments the work begun,
 To build our temple that in ruins lay,
 And reconvert a nation in a day,
 To bring our Sion forth, as gold refin'd,
 With all his saints in closest union join'd
 A friend, a nursing-mother to mankind? } 180

Surely the time is come, for God to rise,
 And turn upon our Church his glorious eyes,
 To shew her all the riches of his grace,
 And make her throughout all the earth a praise:
 For O! His servants think upon her stones,
 And in their hearts his pleading Spirit groans:
 It pitieth them to see her in the dust,
 Her lamp extinguish'd, and her gospel lost:
 Lost—till the Lord, the great restorer came, 190
 Extinguish'd—till his breath reviv'd the flame;
 His arm descending lifted up the sign,
 His light appearing bad her *rise and shine*,
 Bad her glad children bless the heavenly ray,
 And shout the prospect of a gospel-day.

Meanest and least of all her sons, may I
Unite with theirs my faith and sympathy!
Meanest, and least—yet can I never rest,
Or quench the flame enkindled in my breast:
Whether a spark of nature's fond desire, 200
That warms my heart, and sets my soul on fire,
Or a pure ray from yon bright throne above,
That melts my yearning bowels into love;
Even as life, it still remains the same,
My fervent zeal for our Jerusalem;
Stronger than death, and permanent as true,
And purer love, it *seems*, than nature ever knew.

For her, whom her apostate sons despise,
I offer up my life in sacrifice,
My life in cherishing a parent spend, 210
Fond of my charge, and faithful to the end:
Not by the bonds of sordid interest ty'd,
Not gain'd by wealth or honours to her side,
But by a *double birth* her servant born:
Vile for her sake, expos'd to general scorn,

Thrust out as from her pale, I gladly roam,
Banish myself to bring her wanderers home.
While the lost sheep of Israel's house I seek,
By bigots branded for a schismatick,
By real schismaticks disown'd, decry'd, 220
As a blind bigot on the Church's side:
Yet well content, so I my love may shew,
My friendly love, to be esteem'd her foe,
Foe to her order, governors, and rules:
The song of drunkards, and the sport of fools;
Or, what my soul doth as hell fire reject,
A pope—a *Count*—and leader of a sect.

Partner of my reproach, who justly claim
The larger portion of the glorious shame,
My pattern in the work and cause divine, 230
Say is thy heart as *bigotted* as mine?
Wilt thou with me in the Old Church remain,
And share her weal or woe, her loss, her gain,
Spend in her service thy last drop of blood,
And die—to build the temple of our God;

Thy answer is in more than words exprest,
I read it through the window in thy breast;
In every action of thy life I see
Thy faithful love, and filial piety.
To save a sinking Church, thou dost not spare 240
Thyself, but lavish all thy life for her:
For Sion's sake thou wilt not hold thy peace,
That she may grow, impatient to decrease,
To rush into thy grave that she may rise,
And mount with all her children to the skies.

What then remains for us on earth to do,
But labour on with Jesus in our view,
Who bids us kindly for his patients care,
Calls us the burthen of his Church to bear,
To feed his flock, and nothing seek beside, 250
And nothing know, but Jesus crucify'd.

When first sent forth to minister the word,
Say, did we preach ourselves, or Christ the Lord?
Was it our aim disciples to collect,
To raise a party, or to found a sect?

No; but to spread the power of Jesus' name,
Repair the walls of our Jerusalem,
Revive the piety of antient days,
And fill the earth with our Redeemer's praise.

Still let us steadily pursue our end, 260
And only for the faith divine contend,
Superior to the charms of power and fame,
Persist thro' life, invariably the same:
And if indulg'd our heart's desire to see,
Jerusalem in full prosperity,
To pristine faith, and purity restor'd;
How shall we bless our good redeeming Lord,
Gladly into his hands our children give,
Securely in their mother's bosom leave,⁷
With calm delight accept our late release, 270
Resign our charge to God, and then depart in peace!

⁷Ori., "live"; in both 1755 printings.