

MS Revd — (1784)¹

The finalization of peace with the former American colonies in 1784 ended any pretense that Methodism could remain a movement within the larger Church of England in North America. This reality led John Wesley to take several steps to insure that his Methodist followers across the waters would continue to have access to the full panoply of the means of grace. Most importantly, he took this new situation as warrant for him to act upon his long-held belief, gained from reading Peter King, that presbyters (elders) could ordain in cases of necessity. On 1–2 September 1784, with Thomas Coke and James Creighton (both Anglican elders) assisting, John Wesley ordained two of his lay preachers, Thomas Vasey and Richard Whatcoat—first as deacons, then elders. He then commissioned Coke to serve as superintendent and dispatched the three to serve the North American Methodists. As a further resource John produced an edited version of the *Book of Common Prayer*, which he published as *The Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America* (London, 1784). In the front of this volume, John inserted a letter “To Dr. Coke, Mr. Asbury, and our Brethren in North America” (Sept. 10. 1784).² The letter provided a “little sketch” of Wesley’s justification for the ordinations and production of the liturgy, as well as his advice for handling regular worship services.

Charles Wesley, had long been a critic of how broadly John used lay preachers, as well as other practices that portended a split from the Church of England.³ As such, it is hardly surprising that he took strong exception to John’s actions, and to his justification of these actions in the “little sketch.” Once again he put his dissent in poetic form, this time in a letter of 248 lines of octosyllabic couplets covering eleven quarto pages. The sharp criticism of John’s actions and motives was likely composed in late 1784. It is unclear whether Charles ever shared the manuscript with John, though John was certainly aware of Charles’s general views.

See also the closely related items: MS Brothers, MS Ordinations, and Assorted Verse on 1784 Ordinations.

MS Revd — is part of the collection in the Methodist Archive and Research Centre, accession number MA 1977/583/9 (Charles Wesley Notebooks Box 4). The transcription below is provided with permission of the Librarian and Director, The John Rylands Library, The University of Manchester.

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, and Dr. Timothy Underhill consulting on the shorthand. Last updated: August 19, 2010.

²The letter is available in various editions of John Wesley’s *Works*, including online editions. The best recent study of John’s understanding of this act, and ordination in general, is Adrian Burdon, *Authority and Order: John Wesley and his Preachers* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005).

³See his published “Hymns for the Methodist Preachers” (1760).

I.

To the Revd. — [John Wesley].⁴

Your little Sketch, and sage⁵ Advice
To the free States has bless'd my eyes,
On which permit me, Sir, to send
The Strictures of a faithful Friend,
Who wishes you his doubts to clear
Touching your own great Character.

You say, "Th' Americans distrest
"Unite your Counsel to request:"
I doubt, if they indeed require it,
Or you desire them to desire it:
I fear, your pure benevolence
And care⁶ of souls, is meer⁷ pretence
Your own desires to gratify,
That dying, you may never die,
But vindicate your sacred Claim,
And purchase an immortal Name.

[10]

For King,* (at last you let us know)
Convinc'd you many years ago,

*Sir Peter (afterwards Lord) King.⁸

⁴Published posthumously in *Unpublished Poetry*, 3:95–101.

⁵Ori., "begg'd"; changed to "sound," and then changed to "sage."

⁶Ori., "love."

⁷Ori., "but."

⁸Peter King (1669–1734) was a Presbyterian by upbringing who became Lord Chancellor, and wrote his *Enquiry into the Constitution, Discipline, Unity and Worship of the Primitive Church* in 1691. This is the volume that John Wesley indicates convinced him that elders had the authority to ordain.

“Bishops and Presbyters, in name⁹
“Distinct, in Order are the same; [20]
“And you th’ undoubted Right possess
“Now to ordain whome’er you please:
“Yet have,¹⁰ for peace and order sake,
“Refus’d your lawful Right to take,
“As loth to violate, or wrong
“The Church whom you had own’d so long.
“Your Preachers importun’d in vain,
They coud not get you to Ordain:
Hard-pressing you on every side [30]
To gratify their secret pride,
(Eager the Envied Priests to ape,
And gain a feather in their cap)
Superior to the swelling floud,
A Rock impregnable you stood,
Nor coud Sir Peter self subdue,
Till you was turn’d of Eighty-two.

Woud King’s weak reasons have prevail’d,
Had not your solid¹¹ judgment fail’d,
Had not your wavering heart misled,
And got the better of your head? [40]
To prove a Point, you never was,
You never *will*¹² be, at a loss,

⁹Ori., “~~the same~~” changed to “in name.”

¹⁰Ori., “~~You.~~”

¹¹Ori., “~~Souls and~~” changed to “solid.”

¹²Ori., “~~can.~~”

(To prove, and to disprove it too,¹³)
Just as you wish it false, or true.

In British realms you wave¹⁴ your Right,
Which justly exercise you might
Where in America appear
Nor Bishop, Priest, nor Presbyter.
Wherefore abroad your scruples end;
Elders to Them you boldly¹⁵ send; [50]
Tho' here you fear'd to do the same
"Where Bishops jurisdiction claim:
"You *fear'd t'* invade¹⁶ their Character.^[s]¹⁷
Alas! how weak and insincere!
You was not by that *fear* restrain'd
From sending Preachers thro' the land;
You chose the place of their abode,
You¹⁸ bad them leave it at your Nod,
And for a course of forty years
Appointed all *your* Ministers. [60]

Now to your utmost height you rise,
And your whole Office exercise,
Nor Presbyters, nor Bishops need
To lay their hands upon *your* head,

¹³Ori., "true."

¹⁴I.e., waive.

¹⁵Ori., "truly."

¹⁶Ori., "usurp."

¹⁷"Character" has "primatur" written in the margin as an alternative.

¹⁸Ori., "And."

But nobly, self-appointed, dare
To seize an Apostolic Chair,
And on the creatures of your will
Your glorious ministry fulfil.

And first your sacred hands are laid
On giddy Coke's aspiring¹⁹ head, [70]
Your throne Prelatical t' inherit
Worthy thro' dint of pure demerit:
Then, to secure a doubtful Friend,
The consecrated Pall you send,
A douceur, cross th' Atlantic Sea,
To independent Astbury.²⁰
Two Elders, from the people's lees,
Ordain'd for holy services,
Shall your high Dignity make known,
And prove, the Church is all your own! [80]

Your Liturgy²¹ so well-prepar'd
To England's Church proves your regard²²
Of churches national the best
By you, and all the world confest:
(Why shoud we then your bad counsel take
And for a worse the best forsake?)
You tell us, with her Book of prayer
No book is worthy to compare?

¹⁹Ori., “unsettled”; changed to “ambitious,” and then changed to “aspiring.”

²⁰I.e., “Asbury.”

²¹I.e., the *Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America*.

²²Ori., “Proves to the Church your great regard” changed to “To England's Church proves your regard.”

Why change it then for your Edition,
Deprav'd by many a bold omission? [90]
We never will renounce our creed,²³
Because of Three but One you need,²⁴
No longer the Nicene approve,
The Athanasian Mound remove,
And out of your New book have thrown
God One in Three, and Three in One.²⁵

The Articles curtail'd must be,
To compliment Presbytery:
The²⁶ Saints alas and Martyrs are
All purg'd out of your Calendar, [100]
Since you for Saints²⁷ acknowlege none
Except the Saints of Forty-One,²⁸
With²⁹ their fanatical Descendants
The noble House of Independants!

Such is Your Church, above the rest
Extol'd³⁰ and better than the best;
The Basis sure you laid *alone*,
You rais'd at once the crowning-stone:
And now if any man, you say,
Will point you out a wiser³¹ way [110]

²³Ori., “We will not throw away a creed” changed to “We never will renounce our creed.”

²⁴Ori., “Because of ~~Two you neither~~ need” changed to “Because of Three but One you need.”

²⁵John retained repetition of the Apostles Creed in his abridged liturgy, but dropped public use of the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds. On these and the other alterations that Charles is criticizing, see James Floyd White, “Introduction,” *John Wesley’s Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1984; enlarged edition, Cleveland: OSL Publications, 1991).

²⁶Ori., “~~But~~.”

²⁷Ori., “~~as such~~” changed to “for Saints.”

²⁸Referring to the beginnings of the Puritan revolt against Charles I in 1641. There is a shorthand note in the margin that remains unclear.

²⁹Ori., “~~And~~.”

³⁰Ori., “~~Supream~~” changed to “Extol’d,” with “Exalted” written in the margin as an alternative.

³¹Ori., “~~better~~.”

To govern these poor Sheep, and feed,³²
And safely thro' the desart lead;
You gladly will his counsel take:—
But careful *first* all sure to make,
You steal the steed,³³ and (not before)
You bid us—shut the stable-door.

How is it possible to hide
From your own heart its closest pride?
Pride only gave the dire occasion
Of your clandestine Ordination: [120]
Pride furnish'd the usurping power,
The garret and the secret hour:
Studious to hide from human sight
A deed that coud not bear the light,
Did you your dearest Brother join
In council on your dark design?
Him you pass'd by for reasons good,
Who ready at your elbow stood
And wisely your Exploit conceal'd
To none but favrite Tools³⁴ reveal'd [130]

³²Ori., “and be feed.”

³³Ori., “horse.”

³⁴“Favrite Tools” has “favourites” written below it as an alternative.

Not to your Partners in degree
Not to your own Presbytery.
Surely you meant to verify
By after-facts the Popish Lie,
And in your hugger-mugger³⁵ fashion
To act the Nags head Ordination,
And power Pontifical assume
Greater than all the Popes of Rome.

Why woud you aim at things so high³⁶
Why on your Self alone rely?³⁷ [140]
How frivolous³⁸ your strongest Plea
Of Self-impos'd Necessity!
"You ask a Bishop to ordain
[³⁹Whom you believe a proper man,³⁹]
A proper Man *your* friends esteem,
But *his* a man improper deem:⁴⁰
You trust your friends, to you best known,
Best known to Him He trusts his own!
And who can his refusal blame,
When all men woud have done the same? [150]

³⁵"Hugger-mugger" means "secret."

³⁶Ori., "~~Ah~~, why woud you ~~aspire~~ so high" changed to "Why woud you aim at things so high."

³⁷Ori., "~~And~~ on your ~~single~~ Self rely" changed to "Why on your Self alone rely."

³⁸Ori., "~~Defend your Cause~~" changed to "How frivolous."

³⁹Ori., "~~suppose~~."

⁴⁰In the margin, in shorthand, is an alternative to these two lines (though not in the same metre):

A proper man your friends esteem him
May all a man improper deem him.

This urges you to let him see
You are a Bishop good as He,
And need not ask his Lordship's leave
For power you to yourself can give,
Or make, after one flat denial,
Upon the rest a farther⁴¹ trial:
For if they shoud ordain your sons,
They woud not do it *all at once*:
No instantaneous starts they know,
So cool, deliberate, and slow, [160]
You cant for their proceedings stay
The thing admitting no delay:
(Yourself was doubtless in such haste
Lest help from hence shoud come too fast)
And if our Bishops shoud ordain,
They woud expect the Rule to gain
To govern the whole Church and guide,
Whereas you will⁴² yourself preside
And modestly yourself esteem
A fitter Governor than Them [170]

⁴¹“Fruitless” is written in the margin, most likely as an alternative to “farther.”

⁴²Ori., “woud.”

Somebody owed you, friend,⁴³ a shame
Or this you had forborn to name,⁴⁴
For by your self-preferring⁴⁵ brag
You let the Cat out of the bag,
And vanity too strong for art
Bewrays the weakness of your heart.

But grant the Bishops *shoud* bow down,
And you their great Superior own,
Must they to abject Coke submit
Who licks the dust under your feet? [180]
Does Coke deserve to reign supreme?
Or can you give your spirit to Him?
Your reign will be concluded soon,
And where is Coke, when you are gone?
Will Asbury to Coke give place,
Or fly in his Archbishop's face,
Against his Consecrator swell
"And all his own importance feel?"*
And while the little flock they tear,
Be sure to gain the largest share. [190]

*See Bishop Coke's Ordination Sermon.⁴⁶

⁴³Ori., "Sir."

⁴⁴"Never woud proclaim" is written in the margin, most likely as an alternative to "had forborn to name."

⁴⁵Ori., "~~this injudicious~~" changed to "your self-preferring."

⁴⁶Thomas Coke, *Substance of a Sermon Preached at Baltimore ... at the Ordination of the Rev. Francis Asbury to the Office of Superintendent* (London: Paramore, 1785).

But grievous ills you apprehend
Unless yourself Superintend,
And rescue from despotic sway
The Brethren in America.
For as the State's and Church's yoke
Is from their neck so strangely broke
So disintangled from the chain
Why shoud we hamper them again?
Freed from the English Hierarchy
Your people you exult to see,
Left at discretion to pursue
The scriptures—as explain'd by You,
And the primeval Church to own,
Where Priests and Bishops are but One.

[200]

YOU JUDGE IT BEST (and much you love
To judge, and your own Acts approve)
You judge it best, that they shoud stand
Subject to none but your command
(As You and Providence design'd)
From England totally disjoin'd,

[210]

As who their Mother never knew,
As loose, and disengaged—as You.

But we bewail their wretched state,⁴⁷
(Whom you alas, congratulate)
Griev'd, that triumphant Wickedness
Rebellion curst with sad⁴⁸ Success
Traitors, and Gaul, and furious Zeal,
Murther, and Anarchy, and Hell
Have giv'n the States their liberty
Yet GOD, you say, has made them free!

[220]

⁴⁷Ori., “fate.”

⁴⁸“Its” is written in the margin, most likely as an alternative to “sad.”