

*Hymn for John Wesley (1779)*¹

[Baker list, #403]

Editorial Introduction:

There was always some tension between the early Methodist lay preachers and the ordained clergy active in the movement. As the movement grew the lay preachers complained that the ordained clergy were given the most desirable appointments, particularly in London and Bristol, because they could provide for the sacraments.

One of the most dramatic instances of this tension occurred in Bath and Bristol in late 1779. Edward Smyth, an Irish evangelical clergyman supportive of the Wesleys, had moved to Bath so that his ailing wife could seek treatment at the spa. John Wesley asked Smyth to preach every Sunday while in Bath. This stepped on the toes of Alexander McNab, a lay preacher for thirteen years, who had been appointed superintendent of the Bristol circuit (which included Bath) at the last Conference. McNab challenged Wesley's authority to change an appointment by Conference. Things became heated, with Charles Wesley reporting in a letter to John on November 28, 1779, that McNab had even said that he believed it was now his duty to pray for John Wesley's death! Henry Rack gives some reason to believe that Charles Wesley was exaggerating the situation (see Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 3rd edn., 467–69). It is clear that Charles pushed for approval to remove McNab, an action which he then supervised at a Sunday evening gathering on December 5, 1779, in the New Room at Bristol.² (John Wesley later overturned this action.)

In preparation for this meeting Charles wrote the hymn which follows. It invites the singers to stand with Charles in praying for John Wesley's life, rather than with McNab in praying for his death. Charles sent the original version of the hymn (only five stanzas long) to his brother John the next morning, indicating that some who sang it the night before were encouraging him to publish it.³ While he sounded reticent in the letter, Charles published the hymn as a broadsheet soon after.

Two manuscript versions of the longer published hymn are present in the Methodist Archives at The John Rylands University Library.⁴ Since the variants between these versions and the printed hymn are slight, they are noted in the text below.

Edition:

Charles Wesley. *A Hymn for the Rev. John Wesley sung by his Society in Bristol, on Sunday, December 5, 1779* [Bristol: np, 1779].

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²See Charles's hymns surrounding these events in MS Preachers 1779 and MS Miscellaneous Hymns, 241–46.

³See CW to JW, December 6, 1799, MARC, DDWes 4/40. The original version in this letter does not contain stanza 3 of the printed version.

⁴Their accession numbers in the collection are: MA 1977/594/6 and MA 1977/594/10.

An Hymn for the Rev. John Wesley.
Sung by his Society in Bristol, on Sunday, December 5, 1779.

- 1 Jesus thy hated servant own,
And send the⁵ glorious Spirit down,
In answer to our prayers:
While others curse, and wish him dead,
Do thou thy choicest blessing shed,
And crown his hoary hairs.
- 2 Not for his death but life we pray,
In mercy lengthen out his day,
Our venerable guide.
LONG MAY HE LIVE—thy flock to keep,
Protect from wolves the lambs and sheep,
And in his bosom hide.
- 3 LONG MAY HE LIVE—for England’s good,
The church redeemed by thy own blood,
And through thy Spirit turn
Sinners from sin to righteousness,
While thousands and ten thousands bless
The day that he was born.
- 4 LONG MAY HE LIVE—to serve thy cause,
To spread the victory of thy cross,
To minister thy grace;
And late, to swell⁶ the joys in heaven,
With all the children thou has given
Appear before thy face.
- 5 Thou God that answerest by fire,
With fervent faith and strong desire
Whom we present to thee,
Fill with pure love his ravished breast,
And let the Spirit of glory rest
On all thy church—and ME.
- 6 ME, ME, thy meanest messenger,
Admit his mightier bliss⁷ to share,
And intimately one
Through life, through death together guide,
To sing with all the sanctified
Around⁸ thy azure throne!

CW

⁵MS versions: “thy.”

⁶MS versions: “t’ augment.”

⁷MS versions: “his happiness.”

⁸MS 1977/594/6: “Before.”