

**[CW?] *Strictures on the Substance of a Sermon ... by Thomas Coke*<sup>1</sup>  
(1785)**

On September 1–2, 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. These ordinations took place in Bristol, in secret, in part because CW was there at the time. CW first learned of the action in a letter from his Bristol friend Henry Durbin dated October 28, 1784. A week later Durbin made CW aware that a published flyer was being circulated in Bristol, in which JW justified his act of ordaining.<sup>2</sup>

The distress that JW’s action caused CW, and CW’s strong dissent, are evident in a long manuscript poem he crafted in late 1784–early 1785.<sup>3</sup> CW’s suspicion about Coke enticing JW into this action also peeks out in the poem. But through the first half of 1785 CW continued to assure JW about Thomas Coke that “I bear him much good will and shall never hurt him.”<sup>4</sup>

This changed after Coke arrived in London in mid-July 1785, returning from North America.<sup>5</sup> Coke brought with him a copy of the sermon he had preached—and immediately after published—at the service confirming Francis Asbury as a Superintendent of the newly created Methodist Episcopal Church.<sup>6</sup> CW was appalled by the criticisms of the Church of England in the sermon, and the encouragement he discerned for Methodists in Britain to separate from the Church as well. CW’s first response was to remind his brother John of “your *Reasons Against a Separation* (printed in 1758, and in your *Works*), and entreat you, in the name of God and for Christ’s sake, to read them again yourself, with previous prayer.”<sup>7</sup> CW followed this up by reprinting his 1760 edition of *Reasons*, highlighting publicly JW’s prior commitment.<sup>8</sup>

In an apparent move to alleviate criticism, an edition of Coke’s *Sermon* was published in London in September 1785, that omitted a couple of passages where Coke seemed to side wholly

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<sup>1</sup>This document was produced by the Duke Center for Studies in the Wesleyan Tradition under editorial direction of Randy L. Maddox, with the assistance of Aileen F. Maddox. Last updated: October 7, 2024.

<sup>2</sup>JW, to Our Brethren in America, Sept. 10, 1784, *Works*, 30:268–70.

<sup>3</sup>CW, MS Revd.

<sup>4</sup>CW to JW, c. April 30, 1785, MARC, DDWes 3/59 (shorthand summary of reply on JW’s letter of April 23).

<sup>5</sup>See JW, Diary, July 19, 1785, *Works*, 23:530.

<sup>6</sup>Thomas Coke, *The Substance of a Sermon, preached at Baltimore, in the state of Maryland, before the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, on the 27th of December, 1784, at the Ordination of the Rev. Francis Asbury, to the Office of a Superintendent* (Baltimore, MD: Goddard and Langworthy, 1785).

<sup>7</sup>CW to JW, Aug. 14, 1785, MARC, MA 1977/157, JW V.III, pp. 21–24.

<sup>8</sup>See CW, *Reasons Against a Separation from the Church of England* (1760).

with the colonists in their rebellion against English rule.<sup>9</sup> While this may have appeased some, it drew rebuke in a more fiery response to Coke's ordination sermon by "A Methodist of the Church of England," titled *Strictures on the Substance of a Sermon preached at Baltimore in the State of Maryland, Before the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, On the 27th of December 1784, at the Ordination of the Rev. Francis Asbury to the Office of Superintendent by Thomas Coke, L. L. D., Superintendent of the Said Church*.<sup>10</sup>

Who was this "Methodist of the Church of England"? What can be said for certain is that it was someone who shared the criticisms of Thomas Coke that CW was voicing by late 1785 in his manuscript verse and letters. At least one contemporary attributed the *Strictures* to CW.<sup>11</sup> And JW may have been assuming the same when he admonished CW, in reference to Coke, that "to publish as his *present thoughts* what he had before retracted was not fair play."<sup>12</sup>

On the other hand, CW never overtly claimed this publication, which consistently refers to both JW and CW in the third person. And when Coke published a rejoinder to the *Strictures*, one of his arguments was that the author could not be a "Wesleyan" Methodist, because the work denies the doctrine of Christian Perfection—while JW and CW clearly affirm the doctrine.<sup>13</sup> (Of course, Coke might have been citing CW against CW!) Pending further evidence, a slight question mark must remain alongside the name of CW as the author of *Strictures*.

The transcription which follows reproduces the only edition of *Strictures*, indicating the page transitions (in **red** font) of the original.

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<sup>9</sup>Thomas Coke, *The Substance of a Sermon ... at the ordination of the Rev. Francis Asbury, to the Office of a Superintendent* (London: W. Paramore, 1785). The passages omitted are identified in footnotes below.

<sup>10</sup>(London: G. Herdsfield, 1785).

<sup>11</sup>See Charles Boone to Samuel Bardsley, Nov. 3, 1785, MARC, PLP 10/27/3: "I suppose you have heard of Mr. C[harles] Wesley's *Strictures* on Dr. Coke's ordination sermon and his further *Reasons against a Separation from the Church*."

<sup>12</sup>See JW to CW, Sept. 13, 1785, *Works*, 30:379.

<sup>13</sup>See Thomas Coke, *A Letter to the Author of Strictures on Dr. Coke's Ordination Sermon ... Baltimore ... Dec. 27 1784* (London: W. Paramore, 1786), 12–16 (pp. 14–15 cite hymns of CW).

## Strictures

It is somewhere said, “Flowers of rhetoric in sermons or serious discourses are like the blue and red flowers in corn, *pleasing* to those who come only for amusement, but *prejudicial* to him who would reap *profit*.”<sup>1</sup> I shall therefore take but little notice of the flowers in this discourse, whether *natural* or *unnatural*, but shall make some cursory observations which I conceive to be of more importance.

The Doctor sets out with an attempt *to vindicate his conduct* in ordaining bishops and elders. He says,

The Church of England, of which the society of Methodists in general have till *lately* professed themselves a part, did for many years groan in America under grievances of the heaviest kind. Subjected to an *hierarchy* which weighs *everything* in the scales of politics, its most important interests were repeatedly sacrificed to the supposed advantages of England. The churches were, in general, filled with the parasites and bottle companions of the rich and the great. Everything sacred must lie down at the feet of a party, the holiness and happiness of mankind be sacrificed to their views. The drunkard, the fornicator, and the extortioner triumphed over bleeding Zion, because they were faithful abettors of the ruling powers. Blessed be God, and praised be his holy name, that the *memorable Revolution* has struck off these intolerable fetters,<sup>2</sup> and broken [p. 4] the ANTICHRISTIAN UNION WHICH BEFORE SUBSISTED BETWEEN CHURCH AND STATE. And had there been no other advantage arising from THE GLORIOUS EPOCH; this itself, I believe, would have made AMPLE COMPENSATION FOR ALL THE CALAMITIES OF THE WAR.<sup>3</sup> ... One happy consequence of which was the expulsion of most of those hirelings.”<sup>4</sup>

Could anyone believe that this was the language of an *Englishman*—a clergyman of the Church of England, and one who calls himself a Methodist? As an *Englishman* he condemns the constitution of his country, and blesses God for *that glorious epoch* when our enemies triumphed over us. As a *clergyman* he vilifies his brethren with the opprobrious names of *parasites* and *hirelings*. And as a *Methodist* he contradicts the uniform declarations and publications of the

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<sup>1</sup>[Jonathan Swift, *Miscellanies. The second volume* (London: Benjamin Motte, 1727), 345.]

<sup>2</sup>[The beginning of this sentence is revised in the London reprint to: “But these intolerable fetters are now struck off ....”]

<sup>3</sup>[This sentence is omitted in the London reprint.]

<sup>4</sup>[The emphasis throughout this paragraph is added by the author of *Strictures*, and the note inserted at this point:] “If report says true, the author of this sermon strove hard to become one of their number. But after making application to Lord [Charles] P[er]w[ell]et, Lord N[or]th, and others from promotion, and being repulsed, he turned his aspiring thoughts into another channel. And though the eccentricity seems great, the end may be *similar*. For it is a well-established maxim, “The higher a person climbs, the lower he has to fall.”

Rev. Mr. John and Charles Wesley for near fifty years: see their *Reasons Against a Separation from the Church of England*, p. 6.

The Doctor proceeds to answer a few questions of his own suggesting:

“But what right have you to ordain?’ The same right as most of the Reformed churches in Christendom; our ordination, in the lowest view, being *equal to any of the Presbyterian*, as originating with three presbyters of the Church of England.” Again: “After long deliberation, Mr. Wesley saw it his duty to for his society in America into an *Independent Church*.” – If that is really the case, is not he become a Dissenter? Does not ordination necessarily imply separation?

[p. 5]

“Our bishops, or superintendents, having been elected *or received* by the suffrages of the whole body of ministers through the continent, assembled in general Conference.” – Where are these *bishops* to be found? Till this sermon appeared (which it is supposed was *published* for that purpose) they were never heard of.

“But of all forms of church government, we think a *moderate* episcopacy the best.” – That is, such as we have formed ourselves!

“But are you not *schismatics* by your separation from the Church?” [...] We are not ignorant, we *cannot* be ignorant, that the chief part of the clergy and members of the *Church of England* (so called) do either tacitly or explicitly deny the doctrine[s] of *justification by faith, the knowledge of salvation by the remission of sins, and the witness of the Spirit of God*; points which we esteem *most fundamental*, yea, *essentially* necessary to constitute a child of God. [...] And though we admire THEIR<sup>5</sup> *liturgy*, and are determined to *retain* it with a few alterations, we cannot, we WILL NOT hold connexion with them till the Holy Spirit of God has made them see and *feel* the importance of the doctrines mentioned above. And for *this schism* (if it must have the name), we are cheerfully ready to answer at the bar of God.”

Have not the same subterfuge been resorted to in all ages to support the worst of causes? And was the state of the clergy and people in England in 1758, when Mr. [John] Wesley printed his “Reasons Against a Separation,” *better* than it is now? Or in 1773, when he *reprinted* them in his *Works*, which he declares to be his “*last and maturest thoughts*”? If not, what does all this recrimination amount to, but a *mere pretence*?

“Why did you not separate before?’ It has long been the desire of the *majority* of the preachers and people.” [p. 6] This remains to be proved, as will appear hereafter.

“Bud did not your preachers constantly exhort the people to attend the service of the *Church of England*?’ In general they did, from a full persuasion, DRAWN FROM EXPERIENCE, *that we had no other alternative to preserve our society but an adherence to the Church of England*<sup>6</sup>—or a formation of ourselves into an Independent Church.” If this is true, does it not discover the grossest *duplicity*, if not *hypocrisy*, in the preachers? And does not the argument prove the falsity of the assertion above “That it had long been the desire of the majority of the *people*”? For if it had long been their desire to *separate*, what means the assertion “We had not alternative to preserve our society but an adherence to the Church of England?”

I shall here give the reader Mr. [John] Wesley’s *Twelve Reasons against Separation*, which will show the fallacy and absurdity of all the Doctor’s arguments on that head.

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<sup>5</sup>[The author of *Strictures* added this instance of emphasis.]

<sup>6</sup>[The author of *Strictures* has added the emphasis in this sentence.]

*Reasons against Separation from the Church of England*

[I.] Whether it be *lawful* or no (which itself may be disputed, being not so clear a point as some may imagine), it is by no means *expedient* for us to separate from the established Church:

1. Because it would be a contradiction to the solemn and repeated declarations which we have made in all manner of ways, in preaching, in print, and in private conversation.<sup>7</sup> [p. 7]

2. Because (on this as well as on many other accounts) it would give huge occasion of offence to those who seek and desire occasion, to all the enemies of God and his truth.

3. Because it would exceedingly prejudice against us many who fear, yea, who love, God, and thereby hinder their receiving so much, perhaps any farther, benefit from our preaching.

4. Because it would hinder multitudes of those who neither love nor fear God from hearing us at all.

5. Because it would occasion many hundreds, if not some thousands, of those who are now united with us to separate from us;<sup>8</sup> yea, and some of those who have a deep work of grace in their souls.

6. Because it would be throwing balls of wild-fire among them that are now quiet in the land. We are now sweetly united together in love. We mostly think and speak the same thing. But this would occasion inconceivable strife and contention between those who left and those who remained in the Church; as well as between those who left us and those who remained with us; nay, and between those very persons who remained, as they were variously inclined one way or the other.<sup>9</sup>

7. Because, whereas controversy is now asleep, and we in great measure live peaceably with all men, so that we are strangely at leisure to spend our whole time and strength in enforcing plain, practical, vital religion (O what would many of our forefathers have given, to have enjoyed so blessed a calm!), this would utterly banish peace from among us, and that without hope of its return.<sup>10</sup> It would engage me, for one, in a thousand controversies, both in public and private (for I should be in conscience obliged to give the reasons [p. 8] of my conduct and to defend those reasons against all opposers), and so take me off from those more useful labours which might otherwise employ the short remainder of my life.

8. Because to form the plan of a new church would require infinite time and care (which might be far more profitably bestowed), with much more wisdom and greater depth and extensiveness of thought than any of us are masters of.<sup>11</sup>

9. Because from some having barely entertained a distant thought of this, evil fruits have already followed—such as prejudice against the clergy in general and aptness to believe ill of

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<sup>7</sup>[Note added in *Strictures*:] “And if this circumstance should ever take place, how would it destroy the usefulness of Mr. Wesley’s writings? For though they might be esteemed otherwise so excellent, such a glaring *inconsistency* and *contradiction* at the close of his life would so prejudice the public that it is probable they would scarcely be read at all by posterity.

<sup>8</sup>[Note added in *Strictures*:] “And is not this likely to be the case in the present instance?”

<sup>9</sup>[Note added in *Strictures*:] “This circumstance ought still to have its full weight.”

<sup>10</sup>[Note added in *Strictures*:] “Has Dr. Coke ever considered this?”

<sup>11</sup>[Note added in *Strictures*:] “This was written before the curate of South Petherton became a candidate for the See of America; but since he has been ordained BISHOP of the Methodist Episcopal Church, these difficulties vanish away.”

them; contempt (not without a degree of bitterness) of clergymen as such; and a sharpness of language toward the whole order, utterly unbecoming either gentlemen or Christians.<sup>12</sup>

10. Because the experiment has been so frequently tried already, and the success never answered the expectation.<sup>13</sup> God has since the Reformation raised up from time to time many witnesses of pure religion. If these lived and died (like John Arndt, Robert Bolton, and many others) in the churches to which they belonged, notwithstanding the wickedness which overflowed both the teachers and people therein, they spread the leaven of true religion far and wide, and were more and more useful, till they went to paradise. *But if, upon any provocation or consideration whatever,*<sup>14</sup> they separated and founded distinct parties, their influence was more and more confined; they grew less and less useful to others, and generally lost the spirit of religion themselves in the spirit of controversy.<sup>15</sup> [p. 9]

11. Because we have melancholy instances of this, even now before our eyes. Many have in our memory left the Church and formed themselves into distinct bodies, and certainly some of them from a real persuasion that they should do God more service. BUT HAVE ANY SEPARATED THEMSELVES AND PROSPERED?<sup>16</sup> Have they been either more holy, or more useful, than they were before?

12. Because by such a separation we should not only throw away the peculiar glorying which God has given us—that we do and will suffer all things for our brethren’s sake, though the more we love them, the less we be loved—but *should act in direct contradiction to that very end for which we believe God hath raised us up.*<sup>17</sup> The chief design of his providence in sending us out is, undoubtedly, to quicken our brethren. And the first message of all our preachers is to the lost sheep of the Church of England. Now, would it not be a flat contradiction to this design to separate from the Church? These things being considered, we cannot apprehend (whether it be lawful in itself or no) that it is lawful for us; were it only on this ground, that it is by no means expedient.

[II.] It has indeed been objected that, till we do separate, we cannot be a compact, united body.

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<sup>12</sup>[Note added in *Strictures*:] “This observation is fully exemplified in the present sermon.”

<sup>13</sup>[Note added in *Strictures*:] “What a pity it is then that this experiment should have been again repeated!”

<sup>14</sup>[CW had added this emphasis in italics in his 1785 reprint of *Reasons*.]

<sup>15</sup>[Note added in *Strictures*:] “This is an alarming consideration, and ought to be much attended to.”

<sup>16</sup>[CW had added this emphasis in his 1785 reprint of *Reasons*. Here in *Strictures* the note is added:] “Very rarely. And it is probable never will.”

<sup>17</sup>[This emphasis was added in *Strictures*, along with the note:] “Oh what mischief is one weak man capable of doing! — To bring an eternal reproach on the work of the Lord and upon his servants. And to enable the enemies of God and man to exalt and cry, ‘Ah, so would we have it!’”

It is true we cannot till then be “a compact, united body,” if you mean by that expression a body distinct from all others. AND WE HAVE NO DESIRE SO TO BE.<sup>18</sup> [...] [p. 10]

[III.] We look upon *ourselves* not as the authors or ringleaders of a particular sect or party (*it is the farthest thing from our thoughts*<sup>20</sup>) but as messengers of God to those who are Christians in name but heathens in heart and in life, to call them back to that from which they are fallen, to real genuine Christianity. [...] <sup>21</sup>

We look upon England as that part of the world, and *the Church* as that part of England, to which all we who are born and have been brought up therein owe our first and chief regard. [...] <sup>22</sup>

We have a more peculiar concern for our brethren, for that part of our countrymen to whom we have been joined from our youth up by ties of a religious as well as a civil nature. True it is that they are, in general, “without God in the world.” So much the more do our bowels yearn over them.<sup>23</sup> [...] <sup>24</sup>

We look upon the *clergy* not only as a part of these our brethren but as that part whom God by his adorable providence has called to be watchmen over the rest, for whom therefore they are to give a strict account. If these then neglect their important charge, if they do not watch

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<sup>18</sup>[This emphasis was added in *Strictures*, along with the note:] “No, nor never would, if men of ambitious views and worldly designs had not wormed themselves in, to seek their own and scatter the flock.”

<sup>19</sup>[*Strictures* omits the remainder of Sec. II and the first paragraph of Sec. III as found in *Reasons*.]

<sup>20</sup>[This emphasis was added in *Strictures*.]

<sup>21</sup>[*Strictures* omits here: “We are therefore debtors to all these, of whatever opinion or denomination, and are consequently to do all that in us lies to please all for their good, to edification.”

We look upon the *Methodists* (so called) in general not as any particular party (this would exceedingly obstruct the grand design for which we conceive God has raised them up) but as living witnesses, in and to every party, of that Christianity which we preach; which is hereby demonstrated to be a real thing and visibly held out to all the world.”]

<sup>22</sup>[*Strictures* omits here: “We feel in ourselves a strong Στοργή, a kind of natural affection for our country, which we apprehend Christianity was never designed either to root out or to impair.”]

<sup>23</sup>[Note added in *Strictures*:] “How different are the views of Mr. Wesley here from the writer of the sermon under consideration: ‘Blessed be God and praised be his holy Name, that the memorable revolution has struck off these intolerable fetters and broken the anti-Christian union which before subsisted between church and state.’”

<sup>24</sup>[*Strictures* omits here: “They do lie ‘in darkness and the shadow of death.’ The more tender is our compassion for them. And when we have the fullest conviction of that complicated wickedness which covers them as a flood, then do we feel the most (and we desire to feel yet more) of that inexpressible emotion with which our blessed Lord beheld Jerusalem, and wept and lamented over it. Then are we the most willing ‘to spend and to be spent’ for them; yea, to ‘lay down our lives for our brethren.’”]

over them with all their power, they will be of all most miserable, and so are entitled to our deepest compassion. So that to *feel*, and much more to *express*, either *contempt or bitterness* towards them betrays AN UTTER IGNORANCE OF OURSELVES and of the spirit which we especially should be of.<sup>25</sup> [...<sup>26</sup>] [p. 11]

The Rev. Mr. Charles Wesley has also superadded the following strong declaration:

I think myself bound in duty to add my testimony to my brother's. His twelve reasons against our ever separating from the Church of England are mine also. I subscribe to them with all my heart. Only, with regard to the first, *I* am quite clear that it is neither expedient nor LAWFUL for *me* to separate. And I never had the least inclination or temptation so to do. My affection for the Church is as strong as ever, and I clearly see my calling—which is to live and to die in her communion. This, therefore, I am determined to do, the Lord being my helper.

When these *Reasons* are calmly considered, is there any argument with Dr. Coke has advanced to justify a separation from the Church of England which is not fully answered by them?

I shall take up but little of the reader's time with the Doctor's "Consideration of the Characteristics of a *Christian Bishop*" (which composes great part of his discourse). For it is so very *ideal*, and militates so much against the description of bishops in the New Testament, that the dwelling on this subject must be disgustful to the serious mind. Particularly as it is a description of no *living character*—and much to be feared, very little applicable to the writer himself. A specimen or two may suffice.

In speak of the Christian bishop's *humility*, the Doctor says, "There is something interwoven with human nature which immediately recoils at the very appearance of pride." It is to be doubted whether the Doctor has sufficiently studied human nature from the above assertion, seeing the fact on all hands proves the reverse.

Again: "There is no impediment in his soul to the divine operation." Where is that bishop to be found, either living or dead? [p. 12]

Of the bishop's *wisdom*, he says: "He was born to govern. He sets his feet in the centre of his sphere and feels the smallest motion through every parallel. He knows with the clearest precision when to speak and when to be silent; when to move and when to be still; when to *parry* and when to *thrust*." Admirable figures!

Of his *seriousness*: "He lives in the presence of his Master, and says *nothing but what is becoming* the audience chamber of the King of Kings."

And to the bishop of *his own making* (on which occasion this sermon was preached) he says:

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<sup>25</sup>[This emphasis was added in *Strictures*, along with the note:] "It is to be presumed that the BISHOP of the Methodist Episcopal Church never read this sentence. *It is worthy to be written in characters of gold*; and it is particularly recommended to *him*, that he would consider it with the deepest attention; for a greater contrast can't exist than the language of his sermon and these Reasons."

<sup>26</sup>[*Strictures* omits the entirety of JW's Sec. IV. in *Reasons*.]



“Only *feel thine importance*, and feel thy danger, and let not the foot of pride come against thee; but preserve thyself in all humility, and chastity, and holy love, and then thou shalt be a vessel of gold in the sanctuary of God. *Thou shalt bring millions to righteousness immediately or remotely, and shall shine in glory as a star of the first magnitude forever!*”<sup>27</sup>

How far the specimen of this sermon here given, or *the sermon itself*,<sup>28</sup> together with the conduct and proceedings of the author, discovers him qualified for the great office he had *assumed* must be left to the decision of the candid reader.

However, a caution may be necessary *to the members of the Church of England in connection with the Methodists*, that they stand on their guard and be not drawn into the snare laid for them. For as several persons have been ordained *in England*, and near twenty *in America* by Dr. Coke, the design is evident that *a separation* is intended.

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<sup>27</sup>[The author of *Strictures* added the instances of emphasis in this quotation.]

<sup>28</sup>[Note added in *Strictures*:] “Printed by Goddard and Langworthy, at Baltimore in Maryland; and not a mutilated abstract printed in London to serve sinister views.