

*Hymn for John Wesley (1779)*¹

[Baker list, #403]

Editorial Introduction:

There was always some tension between 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 (or privileged on preaching on Sundays), particularly in London and Bristol, because they could provide for the sacraments.

One of the most dramatic instances of such tension occurred in Bath and Bristol in late 1779. Edward Smyth, an Irish evangelical clergyman supportive of the Wesley brothers, 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 M’Nab, a lay preacher for thirteen years, who had been appointed superintendent of the Bristol circuit (which included Bath) at the last Conference. M’Nab challenged Wesley’s authority to change an appointment by Conference.

Charles Wesley and his family were visiting Bristol (and nearby Bath) much of October 1779. His attitude toward M’Nab and other lay preachers who challenged the authority of ordained clergy is evident in three manuscript hymns he wrote that month, where he charged them with “Luciferian pride”! This served to intensify the debate. In mid-November (after his return to London) Charles received a letter from John Valton (the lay preacher currently assigned to Bristol to whom he was closest), informing him of how heated matters had become. This led both Wesley brothers to set out for Bath and Bristol. John stayed only a few days, while Charles remained longer. In a letter in late November Charles reported to John that M’Nab’s anger had reached the point that he proclaimed it his duty to pray for John Wesley’s death! (Henry Rack gives some reason to believe that Charles was exaggerating the situation; see Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 3rd edn., 467–69). In response Charles decided to remove M’Nab from his appointment to the Bristol circuit, 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 M’Nab 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

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: July 11, 2022.

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

³See CW to JW, Dec. 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.

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].

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 redeem’d by thy own blood,
And thro’ 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 ravish’d 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
Thro’ life, thro’ 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.”