Some Observations on John Wesley's Relationship with Grace Murray

By Frank Baker

I wish to congratulate my good friend Dr. Frederick Maser on a perceptive article based on sound research, and to thank my other good friends, Dr. John Ness and Mrs. Louise Queen, for the courtesy of inviting me to write a companion article on Wesley and Grace Murray. Even if other work were not so pressing, however, I most certainly would not wish to become embroiled in a controversy over what are basically different interpretations of the same facts, nor to respond with a detailed running commentary upon the article. Some general observations, however, do seem in order.

Dr. Maser is perfectly correct in suggesting that the reference which I gave in footnote 7 to the mutual dissolution of spousals, and which underlay my statement on page 114 (Swinburne, op. cit., p. 236), related to contracts *de futuro* rather than *de praesenti*, though the imposing of conditions such as first securing the consent of Charles Wesley and John Bennet did in some measure reduce the contract *de praesenti* to one *de futuro*, so that no "perfect matrimony" was possible, and the contract might be subject to dissolution (Swinburne, pp. 129-33). As Dr. Maser points out, the conditional nature of this contract *de praesenti* may have furnished Wesley with a possible escape route, rather than the legal force of any mutual agreement to break it. All this is highly technical, however, and open to different interpretations by different lawyers on different occasions, even before 1754 (as Swinburne himself makes clear), let alone in 1977 by two historians who confess themselves not to be legal experts.

The sad series of events is in any case the most important issue, the legal problem an interesting and puzzling subsidiary issue. For a full understanding of the incident it is essential to read all the contemporary records fully, especially the circumstantial narrative with inserted documents left by Wesley himself, and given in lavishly documented form in Augustin Leger, *John Wesley's Last Love* (London, Dent, 1910). After again checking with this, as well as with Swinburne's *Spousals*, I find my sympathies are still mainly
with John Wesley, though I did (and do) sympathize with Grace Murray's bewilderment, though less with her flatly misleading statement in telling John Bennet on September 8, 1748, that she had no prior engagement to Wesley. Again I sympathize with her when after "her repeated request to marry immediately" (September 8, 1749 — see Leger, p. 14, and Wesley's Journal) she agreed to wait for a year, but wished to renew their solemn contract de praesenti (September 21, 1749), assuring their witness, Christopher Hopper, that she had not "the least scruple" about the contract (Leger, pp. 62,39), but was then rushed off her feet by Charles Wesley's impetuous urgency to save his brother and Methodism (Leger, pp. 62,93). Throughout it all I am convinced that Wesley believed that Grace Murray was in some sense his legal wife, the only temporary hindrances being the securing of the consent of his brother and Bennet, which he was sure both would give when they understood exactly how things stood. Unfortunately neither of them did find this out until Grace and Bennet had been publicly joined in matrimony — an event which itself, of course, formed a tacit denial of both the understanding and consent which he sought, and therefore involved a breaking of the contract on Grace's part, and consequently (because he as the injured party never apparently considered litigation) implied its mutual dissolution. (The seeking of Methodist opinion upon the match had by September 8, 1749, been reduced to simply circulating an account of his reasons for marriage and soliciting the prayers of the Methodists, Leger, p. 14.)

Wherever our sympathies lie in this sad entanglement, however, we must clearly not look upon "John Wesley's First Marriage" as a marriage in the modern sense of the term, or even in the same sense as his second marriage to Mary Vazeille. The point behind my original title was at that particular period in history Wesley himself undoubtedly regarded their twice repeated vows in 1749 as more binding than their engagement in August, 1748, which was a simple promise of future marriage; this was in some measure a binding contract of present marriage, however hedged about with problems might be the interpretation and application of the terms of this contract, and however misguided Wesley himself might have been in undertaking such a private marriage. Wesley's own view of their spousals was supported by Grace herself when she wrote on September 25, 1749, "Whom God hath joined together, no man can
put asunder" — even though the events disproved this allusion to the Prayer Book “Form of Solemnization of Matrimony” which they had apparently used. (Leger, p. 89) On October 3, the very day on which Grace and Bennet were married, George Whitefield told Wesley “it was his judgment that she was my wife, and that he had said so to John Bennet,” though Whitefield had been unsuccessful in trying to persuade the pair to wait until Wesley could arrive to unravel the situation. (Leger, p. 87) After this explanation (Alas, too late!) even Charles Wesley realized his own impetuous error, and “blamed her only.” (Leger, p. 88) Although I do not wish to summarize all the details, it does seem to me that Wesley’s legal case was stronger than Goole’s had been, but this again is a matter of interpretation, and interpretation long after the event. Certainly I am heartily glad that he did not attempt to test the issue in the courts, for his was a far more complex story, about which he observed: “Hardly has such a case been from the beginning of the world!” (Leger, p. 99) But whatever the rights and wrongs and possible legal interpretations of the situation, he saw his own course clear before him. Without (as he had claimed a few days earlier) “a minute’s resentment toward those who tore her from me,” he “knew God called” him to the work of his societies, even though his “heart was sinking in [him] like a stone”. (Leger, pp. 83-4) In thirty-one stanzas he summarized his love story. We may close with the last six, referring to the days after his contract de praesenti:

26. Companions now in weal and woe,
    No power on earth could us divide;
    Now summer’s heat, nor wintry snow
    Could tear my partner from my side;
    Nor toil, nor weariness, nor pain,
    Nor horrors of the angry main.

27. Oft (though as yet the nuptial tie
    Was not), clasping her hand in mine,
    'What force, she said, beneath the sky,
    Can now our well-knit souls disjoin!
    With thee I’d go to India’s coast,
    To worlds in a distant ocean lost!'

28. Such was the friend than life more dear
    Whom in one luckless baleful hour
    (For ever mentioned with a tear)
    The tempest’s unresisted power
O the unutterable smart!
Tore from my inly bleeding heart.

29. Unsearchable thy judgments are.
   O Lord, a bottomless abyss!
Yet sure thy love, thy guardian care,
   O'er all thy works extended is.
O why didst thou the blessing send?
Or why thus snatch away my friend?

30. What thou has done I know not now!
   Suffice I shall hereafter know!
Beneath thy chastning hand I bow:
   That still I live to Thee I owe.
O teach thy deeply-humbled son
   To say, 'Father, thy will be done!'

31. Teach me, from every pleasing snare
   To keep the issues of my heart:
Be thou my love, my joy, my fear!
   Thou my eternal portion art.
Be thou my never-failing Friend,
   And love, O love me to the end!