



DISCOVERY

Edited by
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New Notes On An Important Wesley Letter

We are fortunate this quarter to be able to view an important Wesley letter through the scholarship and notes of Dr. Frank Baker, one of the greatest living authorities on John Wesley. The letter is one written to the Rev. Samuel Walker in defense of Wesley's itinerants and the itinerant system. The letter was published in the Telford edition of Wesley's letters, but Telford's notes are sparse, and the letter is here fully annotated for the first time. In addition, since only the signature is in Wesley's handwriting, it has always been a question as to who was Wesley's amanuensis. Dr. Baker answers that question and gives us a new insight into an important but generally overlooked person in early Methodism. Dr. Baker is working on Wesley's letters for the current edition of *The Works of John Wesley* sometimes referred to as the Wesley's Works Project. We requested permission from Dr. Baker to use this fascinating letter and its annotations which will later appear in one of the volumes of Wesley's Letters.

I have always believed that every church in Methodism should subscribe to the current edition of *The Works of John Wesley* so that every preacher in Methodism and the laity could have immediate access to this valuable work as it is published.

To the Revd. Samuel Walker¹

[Kingswood, Sept. 3, 1756]

Revd. and dear sir

[1.] I have one point in view, to promote, so far as I am able, vital, practical religion: <and> by the grace of God to beget, preserve, and increase the life of God in the souls of men.² On this single principle I have hitherto proceeded, and taken no step but in subserviency to it. With this view, when I found it <to be> absolutely necessary for the continuance of the work God had begun in many souls (which their *regular pastors* generally used all possible means to destroy) I permitted several of their brethren whom I believed God had called thereto, and qualified for the work, to comfort, exhort, and instruct those who were athirst for God, or who walked in the light of his countenance.³ But as the persons so qualified were few, and those who wanted their assistance very many, it followed that most of these were obliged to travel continually from place to place. And this occasioned several regulations from time to time, which were chiefly made in our Conference. —⁴

[2.] So great a blessing has from the beginning attended the labours of these itinerants that we have been more and more convinced every year of the more than lawfulness of this proceeding. And the inconveniences, most of which we foresaw from the very first, have been both fewer and smaller than were expected. Rarely two in one year, out of the whole number of preachers, have either separated themselves or been rejected by us. A great majority have all along behaved as becometh the Gospel of Christ,⁵ and I am clearly persuaded still desire nothing more than to spend and be spent for their brethren.⁶

[3.] But the question is, 'How may these be settled on such a footing as one would⁷ wish they might be after my death?' It is a weighty point, and has taken up many of my thoughts for several years. But I know nothing yet. The steps I am now to take are plain. I see broad light shining upon them; but the other part of the prospect I cannot see:⁸ clouds and darkness rest upon it.⁹

¹At Wesley's Leeds Conference in May 1755 Wesley read a paper, 'Ought we to separate from the Church of England', and the members agreed 'that (whether [separation] was *lawful* or not) it was no ways *expedient*'. His brother Charles and his own doubts convinced him that the last word had not been said, and a visit to Truro, the Cornish parish of the evangelical Samuel Walker, lead to a challenging correspondence on this theme, which is here drawing to another climax in the Conference at Bristol, August 26–28, 1756. Walker wrote August 16 (see his letter above) and Wesley here gives his somewhat negative answer, maintaining the confirmed need for a lay itinerancy. Nevertheless his report from the Conference encouraged his brother Charles, who summarized it for Walker in John's words on September 6: 'My brother and I ended the Conference with a strong declaration of our resolution to live and die in the Communion of the Church of England. We all unanimously agreed, that whilst it is lawful or possible to continue in it, it is unlawful for us to leave it.' (Baker, *Wesley and C. of E.*, p. 375, n.49.)

²Cf. Henry Scougal, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*, abridged by John Wesley in 1744.

³Cf. Ps. 89:16 (BCP).

⁴Here and at other points Wesley's amanuensis inserts a dash, which Wesley would normally treat as a new paragraph, and indeed did so in the *Arminian Magazine*, though not uniformly.

⁵Phil. 1:27.

⁶Cf. 2 Cor. 12:15.

⁷Orig., 'might'.

⁸Orig., 'I see not', with 'cannot' indicated above the line by a caret, and 'not' struck through.

⁹Cf. Addison, *Cato*, V.i.13–14:

The wide, th'unbounded prospect lies before me,
But shadows, clouds, and darkness rest upon it.

[4.] Your *general* advice on this head, 'to follow my own conscience, without any regard to consequences, or prudence, so called',¹⁰ is unquestionably right. And it is a rule which I have closely followed¹¹ for many years, and hope to follow to my life's end. The first of your *particular* advices is, 'To keep in full¹² view the interests of Christ's church in general, and of practical religion; not considering the Church of England or the cause of Methodism, but as subordinate thereto.' This advice I have punctually¹³ observed from the beginning, as well as at our late Conference. You advise, (2), 'to keep in view also the unlawfulness of a separation from the Church of England'. To this likewise I agree. It cannot be lawful to separate from it, unless it be unlawful to continue in it. You advise, (3), 'Fully to declare myself on this head, and to suffer no dispute concerning it.' The very same thing I wrote to my brother from Ireland.¹⁴ And we have declared ourselves without reserve. Nor was there any at the Conference otherwise minded. Those who would have aimed at dispute had left us before. (4) All our preachers, as well as ourselves, purpose to continue in the Church of England.¹⁵ Nor did they ever before so freely and explicitly declare themselves on this subject. Your last advice is, 'That as many of our preachers as are fit for it be ordained, and that the others be fixed to certain Societies, not as preachers, *but* readers and inspectors.'—

[5.] You oblige me by speaking your sentiments so freely.¹⁶ With the same plainness I will answer.—

[6.] So far as I know myself, I have no more concern for the reputation of Methodism or my own than for the reputation of Prester John.¹⁷ I have the same point in view as when I set out, the promoting as I am able, vital, practical religion. And in all our discipline I still aim at the continuance of the work which God has already begun in so many souls. With this view, and this only, I permitted those whom I believed God had called thereto to comfort, exhort, and instruct their brethren. And if this end can be better answered some other way, I shall subscribe to it without delay.—

[7.] But is that which you propose a better way? This should be coolly and calmly considered.—

[8.] If I mistake not, there are now in the County of Cornwall about four-and-thirty <of these> little societies, part of whom now experience the love of God, part

¹⁰See Walker, Aug. 16, para. 3.

¹¹Orig., 'pursued'.

¹²Orig., 'full in', as in Walker's own manuscript.

¹³This use of 'punctually' was rare but correct; the adverb from the Italian synonym 'punctiliously' was even rarer, and never used by Wesley, though in a letter of April 6, 1761, he does refer to 'every punctilio of order'.

¹⁴There is no known letter from John in Ireland to Charles so far this year, but letters must surely have passed between April and August 10, such as this one, quite recently. That John had not yet made himself sufficiently clear to his brother must surely have prompted Charles to write to Walker on August 7, 1756: 'To this end my brother ought (in my judgment), 1. To declare and avow in the strongest and most explicit manner his resolution to live and die in the Communion of the Church of England.' (MS in The Historical Society of Pennsylvania)

¹⁵As Charles Wesley had mentioned to Walker in his letter of Aug. 7, 1756, this had been clear in an agreement subscribed by the two brothers on March 10, 1752, and by most preachers since, 'never to leave the Communion of the Church of England without the consent of all whose names are subjoined'.

¹⁶*Arminian Magazine*, 'plainly'.

¹⁷Prester—short for presbyter—John was a legendary eastern Christian ruler who aroused hopes during the Crusades.

are more or less earnestly seeking it. Four preachers, Peter Jaco,¹⁸ Tho[mas] Johnson,¹⁹ W[illiam] Crabb,²⁰ and Will[iam] Allwood,²¹ design²² for the ensuing year, partly to call other sinners to repentance, but chiefly to feed and guide these few feeble sheep; to forward them, as of the ability which God giveth, in vital, practical religion. —

[9.] Now suppose we can effect that Peter Jaco and Tho. Johnson be ordained, and settled in the curacies of St. Buryan²³ and St. Just; and suppose W. Crabb and Allwood fix at Launceston and [Plymouth] Dock²⁴ as readers and exhorters:²⁵ will this answer the end which I have in view so well as their travelling through the county? —

[10.] It will not answer it so well, even with regard to those societies with whom Peter Jaco and Tho. Johnson have settled. Be their talents ever so great, they will e'er long grow dead themselves, and so will most of those that hear them. I know, were I myself to preach one whole year in one place I should preach both myself and most of my congregation asleep: nor can I believe it was ever the will of our Lord that any congregation should have one teacher only. We have found by long and constant experience that a frequent change of preachers²⁶ is best. This preacher has one talent, that another: no one whom I ever yet knew has all the talents which are needful for beginning, continuing, and perfecting the work of grace in a whole congregation. —

[11.] But suppose this would better answer the end with regard to those two societies, would it answer in those where W. Allwood and Crabb were settled as inspectors and readers? First, who shall feed them with the milk of the Word?²⁷ The Ministers of their parishes? Alas, they cannot, they themselves neither know,²⁸ nor live nor teach the gospel. These readers? Can then either they, or I, or you always find something to read to our congregations which will be exactly adapted to their wants, and as much blessed to them as our preaching?²⁹ And here is another difficulty still. What authority have I to forbid their doing what I believe God has called them to do? I apprehend, indeed, that there ought if possible to be both an outward and an inward call to this work. Yet if one <of the two> be supposed wanting, I had rather

¹⁸Peter Jaco was an itinerant preacher born at Newlyn in Cornwall, and stationed there in 1756 after ministries in Manchester and Bristol.

¹⁹Thomas Johnston, a Yorkshire itinerant, who was also stationed in Cornwall in 1756.

²⁰William Crabb was a pious but temperamentally weak preacher who laboured intermittently for a few years, almost certainly in Cornwall at this time.

²¹William Allwood seems to have begun itinerating about 1755, and was stationed in Cornwall in 1756, then spending a few years only in the north.

²²Wesley seems officially to have 'stationed' the first two in Cornwall, and acquiesced in the hopes of the other two, about whom he felt less confident; they all 'designed' to accept that responsibility.

²³Orig., 'Burrian', *Arminian Magazine*, 'Buryan'.

²⁴Orig., 'the Dock'; *A.M.* errata add 'Plymouth'.

²⁵Walker had used the phrase 'Inspectors and Readers' rather than 'Preachers' (para. 6). This Wesley (or his amanuensis) changed to 'readers and inspectors' (para. 4), but here altered 'inspectors' to 'exhorters'. This latter term he had for a decade favoured for the less able men (especially in Cornwall) who might simply be called on to 'give an exhortation'. Howell Harris declared in 1763, 'I could never call myself a preacher, but an exhorter, my gifts being so'. (*History of Methodist Church in Great Britain*, ed. Davies, Rupp, I:237.)

²⁶*Arminian Magazine*, 'teachers'.

²⁷1 Pet. 2:2.

²⁸Orig., 'neither know themselves'.

²⁹Wesley cherished the Book of Homilies (both of Edward VI [1547] and Queen Elizabeth [1562]), and published his own extract of them in 1738 as a manifesto of evangelical teaching — *The Doctrine of Salvation, Faith, and Good Works*. The Homilies were authorized for reading when no sermon was delivered, but these undigested alternatives were hardly satisfactory.

want the outward than the inward call. I rejoice that I am called to preach the gospel both by God and man. Yet I acknowledge, I had rather have the divine without the human than the human without the divine call. —

[12.] But waiving this, and supposing these four societies to be better provided for than they were before, what becomes of the other thirty? Will they prosper as well when they are left as sheep without a shepherd? The experiment has been tried again and again, and always with the same event. Even the strong in faith grew weak and faint. Many of the weak made shipwreck of the faith,³⁰ the awakened fell asleep; sinners changed for a while, returned as a dog to the vomit.³¹ And so by our lack of service many of the souls perish<ed> for whom Christ died. Now had we willingly withdrawn our service from them by voluntarily settling in one place, what account of these could we have given to the great Shepherd of all our souls?

I cannot therefore see how any of those four preachers, or any others in like circumstances, can ever, while they have health and strength, ordained or unordained, fix in one place without a grievous wound to their own conscience, and damage to the *general* work of God. Yet I trust I am open to conviction; and your farther thoughts on this or any subject will be always acceptable to, <Revd. and dear sir,> your very affectionate brother and fellow-labourer

John Wesley

Kingswood
Sept. 3, 1756

Address: 'To / the revd Mr Walker / In Truro / Cornwall / single sheet'

Postmark: 'B/ris/tol' *Charge:* '4' *End* by Walker, 'JW to SW Sepr. 3d 56' and in another rougher hand 'Sepr-3.1756 / JWestly to /SW' *Seal:* remains [? possible to identify at Drew]

Source: Drew, from the collection of Dr. Frederick Maser, in the hand of Dr. John Jones, the closing signature alone being by Wesley. Wesley himself also printed this letter (to succeed that of Samuel of August 16, 1756, which it answered), in the *Arminian Magazine*, 1779, pp. 644–648. The few substantive alterations have been indicated in the footnotes or by insertions within angle-brackets.

Amanuensis: John Jones (c. 1721–1785) is too little known in the history of early Methodism. He had a medical degree, he was the first master of Wesley's Kingswood School, an itinerant preacher (1758–1767), and Vicar of Harwich (1780–1785). During this decade he was Wesley's right-hand man in Bristol, and the amanuensis who preserved Wesley's important correspondence with 'John Smith' at Drew University. (See A. B. Sackett, *John Jones—First After the Wesleys*, WHS, Publ. No. 7 1972.)

³⁰1 Tim. 1:19 (*Notes*).

³¹Cf. 2 Pet. 2:22.