"DEAR SISTER:” JOHN WESLEY AND THE WOMEN OF EARLY METHODISM

JOHN C. ENGLISH

Apathy, ignorance and immorality: These were a few of the many problems confronting the Church of England as the eighteenth century opened. Among the means which were devised to cope with these problems were the voluntary organizations known as religious societies. Some of these, such as the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (1699) and the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (1701), appealed for support to persons throughout the kingdom.1 Other societies were based in the parish or neighborhood. Inspired by men such as Anthony Horneck and Josiah Woodward, like-minded individuals met week by week to pray together, to read the scriptures and to encourage one another. On Sundays they often attended church or received the sacrament as a group.2

During the administration of Sir Robert Walpole a new type of religious society emerged which descended from the earlier societies but differed from them in significant respects. These were the Methodist societies associated with the names of George Whitefield; Selina, Countess of Huntingdon; and John Wesley. In terms of numbers, the United Societies directed by Wesley was the largest of these “connections.”

One of the ways in which Wesley’s societies differed from those sponsored by Horneck and Woodward was this: the earlier societies had not admitted women;3 Wesley, on the other hand, welcomed them into the United Societies.4 Indeed, women probably formed a majority of the membership.5

2John S. Simon, John Wesley and the Religious Societies (London: Epworth Press, 1921), chapter 1. Societies for the Reformation of Manners are other examples of localized groups.
3The rules which Samuel Wesley, Sr. established for the religious societies at Epworth were quite explicit about this (quoted by David L. Watson, The Early Methodist Class Meeting [Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1985], 195).
4In deciding to admit women, Wesley was probably inspired by his mother, Susanna.
The goals of the United Societies, as Wesley stated them, were “to reform the nation, and especially the Church” and “to spread Scriptural holiness across the land.” How could these goals be attained? One way was to provide a model for others. The United Societies could be a light set upon a hill, an example of genuine community bound together by a mission and a common faith and characterized by mutual trust, loving care, and attention to the needs of others. This ideal cut across the patriarchal structure of English society and the deferential behavior which it entailed. Wesley recognized the incongruity and wrestled with it. Some form of patriarchy is mandated by scripture, he would say. I suggest, however, that in practice Wesley weakened the power of patriarchy and tried to mitigate its effects.

The language which Wesley used to address the societies supports this generalization. Some of this language was borrowed from the home and the family. For example, he encouraged the members of the societies to think of one another as “sisters” and “brothers” in Christ. These metaphors are highly significant.

Wesley used the term “sister” again and again. He intended to emphasize the point that women as well as men are full members of the Christian church. Both men and women have free access to the means of grace and both can receive the gift of entire sanctification. Note, by way of contrast, the house churches described in the New Testament. These churches were composed of men and women; sometimes, indeed, women were chosen for positions of leadership in them. Nevertheless, the contributions which women made to the churches’ life were barely recognized. In the New Testament, a favorite image for a church was the “brotherhood.” The apostles Paul and James repeatedly addressed the members as “brethren.” They rarely referred to the “sisters.”

Wesley intended to narrow the social distance between men and women. The terms “brother” and “sister” illustrate this point as well. Consider, again by way of contrast, a different set of words. The terms “father” and “daughter” have sometimes been used to express the spiritual relationship between a clergyman and a female member of the church. This language is patriarchal in nature. It emphasizes the power of the man, the “parent,” and the presumed weakness of the woman, the “child.” The clergyman issues instructions; the churchwoman is expected to receive and obey them. Wesley knew this father/daughter language from his reading

were men (Churches and Churchgoers: Patterns of Church Growth in the British Isles since 1700) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 69). Since the membership statistics for the entire kingdom were not broken down by sex, an unimpeachable conclusion cannot be drawn. The ratio between men and women might have varied from one region or decade to another. Minutes of Several Conversations between the Rev. Mr. Wesley and Others; From the Year 1744, to the Year 1789, in The Works of John Wesley, 14 vols. (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1872; reprint, Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 8:299. Hereafter the abbreviation JWW will be used for this edition of the Works.
of patristic and Roman Catholic authors. However, it was not the language which he preferred. The word of choice was “sister.”

In eighteenth century England, siblings were not equals. As males, brothers ranked above their sisters. I suggest, however, that the distance between siblings was by no means as great as the distance between fathers and daughters. Brothers and sisters had many things in common. They belonged to the same generation. Each of them experienced subordination in one way or another. Each of them was expected to defer to his or her elders. To present the Methodists as “sisters” and “brothers” was to emphasize the common ground which the sexes shared.

In order to describe the Methodist community, Wesley needed some words which connoted intimacy and mutual affection while avoiding any erotic implications. “Sister” and “brother” suited this purpose admirably. Their experiences as members of families may have helped Methodists to appreciate what Wesley had in mind. Professor Stone tells us that in upper class families “brother-sister ties were particularly intimate.” Practically no Methodists belonged to the upper classes, of course, but perhaps this observation also applies to persons further down the social scale. This must remain an open question, however, since brother-sister relationships, as they existed during the eighteenth century, have yet to be studied in detail.

Another term which Wesley used to describe the Methodists, in addition to “sister” and “brother,” was the word “friend.” Wesley rejected the notion of friendship which was common in eighteenth century England. As Professor Perkin has explained, the usual conception of a friend was a person who could do a favor for you. The relationship between friends, a “patron” and a “client,” was inherently unequal. It was also self-centered, the patron hoping to reinforce his reputation as a “fixer” and the client striving to manipulate the patron to best advantage.

Wesley had a different idea of friendship. It descended from Greek and Roman sources, such as the Nicomachean Ethics, Books 8 and 9, and Cicero’s dialogue On Friendship. Aristotle and Cicero said that

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friendship is a kind of love; Wesley agreed with this thought. He also connected friendship and the moral good, as they had done. Wesley maintained that virtuous individuals are the only persons capable of friendship. He went on to say that friendship is “disinterested” and “reciprocal.” Genuine friendship is not self-regarding. Each friend wishes the best for the other. True friends help one another to evaluate possible courses of action and to choose alternatives which are practical and morally just.

Societies of “friends:” This was Wesley’s image of the persons to whom he was ministering. If the societies are interpreted in Aristotelian terms, this means that in some sense the members are “equals.” Friends share an ideal of the virtuous life and they act in accordance with it. Thomas Aquinas described this equality in terms of the love which each friend has for the other. Perhaps he was interpreting Aristotle’s language in light of I Corinthians 13, St. Paul’s celebration of love. Wesley at least fitted this passage into the framework which Cicero and Aristotle had provided.

I have been developing the point that the interpersonal relationships which Wesley nurtured helped to undermine patriarchy and deference. I turn now to his interpretation of Christian ethics. Here is a famous Wesley quotation: “The Gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness, but social holiness. Faith working by love is the length and breadth and depth and height of Christian perfection.” Christianity requires the believer to exercise his or her faith, to strive continuously to meet the material and spiritual needs of others. There can be no standing still, Wesley declared. Either the Christian’s commitment is constantly reinforced, by seeking out new opportunities for service, or the believer’s motivation gradually weakens and eventually faith itself withers away.

Let us consider now what the Wesleyan ethic meant, insofar as Methodist women were concerned. If they were to be as active as Wesley required, women would have to assume public roles which they had rarely played before. Some of these jobs would be unpleasant. Wesley advised Miss March, “Put off the gentlewoman.” Go to the uneducated poor. “Creep in among them in spite of dirt and a hundred disgusting circumstances.” He encouraged the timid to step forward and gave

10 JWL, 6:92; Aristotle Nicomachean Ethics 8.1155b; Cicero On Friendship 8:26.
11 JWL, 6:92; see Aristotle 8.1157a; Cicero 5:18.
12 JWL, 6:92; Aristotle 8.1155b; Cicero 7.27.
13 Aristotle 8.1155a.
14 According to Aristotle, friendship is a kind of equality (8.1158a).
15 Aristotle 8.1159b.
17 JWL, 6:192.
19 JWL, 6:207.
recognition to those who persevered. Soon Methodist women learned they were more competent than they had been led to believe. Some of them began to take the initiative themselves, rather than waiting for directions from Wesley, the traveling preachers, or the Stewards. They began to act in ways which Wesley had not foreseen. Women also learned they could influence the administration of the United Societies, even though in theory they were excluded from the policy-making process.

Among the public roles which Wesley encouraged Methodist women to assume was the role of visitor. Two sorts of visiting put the life of the caller at risk, entering the prisons and calling upon the sick. Sarah Peters occupies an honored place in Methodist hagiography. She contracted “a malignant fever” while visiting Newgate Prison in London and died a few weeks later. A few women called upon households where no Methodists lived, trying to persuade the residents to attend a chapel service or a class meeting. They might leave one of the cheap tracts which Wesley had published for general distribution. This type of visiting required an ability to handle repeated disappointments and a certain degree of courage, since the caller might be abused for her pains.

Wesley encouraged the education of women although the scope of his efforts was limited. No doubt he was inspired by the example of his parents, who were careful to give their daughters a good education. More to the point, Methodist women became educators themselves. In some cases, they organized or taught in schools which met under Wesleyan auspices on Methodist property. Among these were the school for girls which was conducted at Kingswood for several years, charity schools, that is, day schools for children from poor families, and Sunday Schools, which taught children to read and write as well as offering religious instruction. Among the pioneers of the Sunday School movement was Hannah Ball of High Wycombe, Oxfordshire. In addition to the “official” Methodist schools just mentioned, several Methodist women opened their own schools for girls. The best-known of these is Mary Bosanquet’s school

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20The duties of a visitor of the sick are stated in A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists (JWW, 8:263).
23George Coles, Heroines of Methodism (New York: Phillips and Hunt, 1883), 264 (Mary Bosanquet Fletcher), 297 (Mary Harrison).
24JWL, 6:97 (Ann Bolton).
25Note the experience of Mrs. Dermott, who was pushed out of a house where she called (Coles, 309–10).
26Sarah Peters was a teacher at the Foundery in London.
at Leytonstone, Essex (later removed to Cross Hall in Yorkshire). All of
the pupils in this school were orphans.

Methodist women created other philanthropic organizations in
addition to schools. The Lambeth Childbirth Linen Society is an ingenious
example. Elsewhere Mrs. Sarah Willis Stevens organized two female
societies, the first in Bristol and a second on the isle of Jersey. Her
associations collected money for the relief of sick women in hospitals and
prisons.28

I turn now to the roles which women played within the Methodist
societies. The Wesleyan organization formed a pyramid, ranging from
classes and societies to the circuits and Conference. The most important
rung on the Methodist ladder was the bottom rung, the classes. These were
neighborhood "cells," numbering a dozen persons or so, which met once
a week in private houses.29 The classes were composed of persons seeking
the gifts of faith and justification or striving to increase the faith which
they had already received.

Some of the classes included both men and women; others were groups
for one sex only. Each class had an official Leader.30 Either a woman or
a man could conduct a mixed class. Usually men led all-male classes and
women, all-female classes.31 Wesley observed that some women refused
to meet with a man, although they were willing to join a class of females,
under the leadership of a woman.32

These house meetings developed in ways which Wesley did not an­
ticipate. In theory, the classes were formed and the leaders were chosen
by the preachers stationed in the circuits.33 In practice, however, a zealous
woman might take the initiative and assemble a class under her
leadership.34 If the class flourished, it could become the core of a new
society and be added to the circuit preaching plan. Another example: In
addition to the classes for Christian conversation, prayer meetings might
be conducted in private houses. Some of the time women organized and
led these exercises.35 I have the impression that prayer meetings, for the

28Coles, 106. One may infer that the societies raised money for this purpose, since each one
appointed a Steward. Among Methodists, stewards usually handled financial matters.
29David Hempton, "Methodism in Irish Society, 1770–1830," Transactions of the Royal
Historical Society, 5th series 36 (1986): 120–21. Hempton is writing about Ireland, but his
comments apply to England as well.
30The duties of the class leader are described in The Nature, Design, and General Rules of
the United Societies (JWW, 8:270).
31Watson, 94, 95. Mrs. Hainsworth of Rakefoot (near Rossendale) is an example of a woman
leading a men's class (cited by Chilcote, 71).
32JWL, 6:383. This citation is confusing, since Wesley wrote "society" when he meant "class."
33Watson, 95, 98.
34Alice Cross, for example (Malmgreen in Obelkevich, Roper and Samuel, 57–58).
35Chilcote, 92.
most part, were beyond the control of the itinerants. Yet the meetings were indispensable; they were important means of recruiting new members. Mary Bosanquet, for instance, noted that hundreds of persons came to them, individuals "who would not go near a preaching-house."  

According to Methodist polity, theological and administrative matters were settled by a group of men, the Conference, and ultimately by Wesley himself. Although women were excluded from the Conference, they were able to influence the process of policy-making and sometimes to compel the reversal of decisions taken earlier. Two examples will illustrate this generalization.

Wesley reserved to himself the right of stationing the itinerant preachers in their circuits. He intended to appoint Adam Clarke, the one scholar which eighteenth century Methodism produced, to the Leeds circuit. Sarah Crosby, Ann Tripp, and other women protested. Wesley yielded to their wishes and put Clarke down for Halifax. He was no more acceptable, however, to the Halifax women. They said he "was learned but he was dull." Clarke was eventually appointed to the Bristol Circuit. 

An outstanding example of the way in which Wesley reversed himself is the matter of women preachers. Wesley hated to admit that he ever changed his mind. He insisted that the Methodists do not allow women to preach, citing I Corinthians 14:34, "Let your women keep silence in the churches, for it is not permitted unto them to speak." Wesley was compelled, however, to withdraw from this position, step by step, although he tried to disguise his retreat by making fine distinctions.

Sarah Crosby is said to be the first woman "preacher," although Wesley did not describe her as such. In 1761 Mrs. Crosby was inspired to address a crowd of two hundred persons in Derby. Then she bethought herself to secure Wesley's authorization for this irregular step. Wesley allowed Sarah to testify concerning her religious experience and to read to the congregation and comment upon a sermon or a passage from his New Testament Notes. Mrs. Crosby began to travel from place to place; she succeeded in attracting large and attentive audiences. In 1769, Wesley

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36 Wesley was worried that the prayer meetings might interfere with the classes (JWL, 6:324). If the itinerants were in control of the situation, they could have prevented this from happening.


39 Chilcote, 201.


41 JWL, 6:290–91.


43 JWL, 4:133.
went further. He permitted Sarah to exhort the congregation, but he warned her, "Keep as far from what is called preaching as you can: therefore never take a text; never speak in a continued discourse without some break, about four or five minutes." In 1771, Wesley went further still. He advised Mrs. Crosby to use a scripture passage as the basis of her address. Even so, this was not "preaching," in Wesley's estimation, but "speaking." Eventually he granted the point that God has given to certain women an extraordinary call to speak in public. Wesley still refused to describe their efforts as "preaching," but the general public couldn't tell the difference.

To summarize: Wesley intended to narrow the social distance between the men and women who belonged to the Methodist societies. He taught them to think of one another as "friends" and as "brothers" and "sisters" in Christ. Wesley preached an activist ethic. He encouraged women to assume public roles which they had rarely played before. As they developed self-confidence, Methodist women began to assert themselves and came to influence the administration of the United Societies.

44 JWL, 5:130.
45 JWL, 5:257.
46 See the exchange of correspondence between Mary Bosanquet and Wesley (History of The Methodist Church in Great Britain, 4:168-71 and JWL, 5:257); on Mrs. Crosby, see JWL, 6:290-91.
47 See the Kentish Herald's report of the sermon which Mary Barritt Taft, "a female preacher," delivered to the Canterbury society (Chilcote, 233-34).