

**SARAH PERRIN (1721-1787):
EARLY METHODIST EXHORTER**

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The name of Sarah Perrin is not one that strikes an immediate cord with devotees of Methodist history. Active in the movement from its birth in the early 1740's, she makes a fleeting appearance in the published papers¹ from which it is clear that she was a friend of the brothers, particularly Charles.² She served for a time as the housekeeper at the New Room in Bristol before marrying Dr. John Jones, one of the Wesleys' most respected preachers.³ With the exception of such scraps of information, very little is known about her life or contribution to Methodism's formative years.

Perrin has never been regarded as a figure worthy of study in her own right. She is not mentioned in the standard works on early Methodist women by Paul Chilcote,⁴ Earl Kent Brown,⁵ or Dorothy Valenze,⁶ while in a recent biographical work by Paul Chilcote,⁷ she is referred to only in passing.⁸ She was in short one of the large cast of minor characters who played a small part in Methodist affairs and who then slipped from view. John Wesley

¹ For example, John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Frank Baker (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 26:107. Hereafter JWW. See also letters from Sarah Perrin to John Wesley published in *The Armenian Magazine 1778*, 218-227.

² John Wesley suggested her in 1749 as a possible candidate for marriage to Charles. JWW, 26: 639.

³ There has been confusion concerning the date of the marriage. The editors of the latest edition of JWW state that Perrin married Jones on February 8, 1749 and cite John Wesley's diary as evidence. That this is a mistake is shown by the fact that the parish register of Hayes in Middlesex records the marriage of John Jones to Elizabeth Mann on February 8, 1749, with John Wesley officiating. Jones subsequently married Perrin some time during the early 1750s. A. Barrett Sackett, *John Jones - First after the Wesleys?* (Broxton: Wesley Historical Society Publication 7, 1972), 13 and 17; JWW, 26, 639 and George Lester, "Hayes (Middlesex) and Rev. C. Manning," *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society IV* (1904), 34-35.

⁴ Paul W. Chilcote, *She offered Them Christ: The Legacy of Women Preachers in Early Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993).

⁵ Early Kent Brown, *Women of Mr. Wesley's Methodism* (Lewiston/Queenston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1983).

⁶ Deborah Valenze, *Prophetic Sons and Daughters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

⁷ Sackett.

⁸ Sackett, 17 and 39.⁹ *The Armenian Magazine 1778*, 220.

implied as much himself in a note added to one of her letters published in the 1778 issue of *The Armenian Magazine*. In this piece he both praised and dismissed her with the following words:

Sarah Perrin was for some years, my housekeeper at Bristol, and a Mother in Israel. I do not know, that her marriage increased either her usefulness, or her knowledge of God.⁹

There is, however, evidence to show that Perrin's life deserves a closer examination. She should be regarded as one of the movement's pioneering female exhorters, one of the first in a long line that in the next generation was to produce the preachers Mary Bosanquet, Sarah Crosby, and Sarah Ryan. Much of the source material that documents Perrin's contribution to early Methodism is contained within four published and 58 unpublished letters written from Perrin to Charles Wesley.¹⁰ This article is based largely on those letters.¹¹ Before turning to this evidence, it is necessary to relate what little is known of her background.

According to her memorial inscription Sarah Perrin was born in 1721. The exact date and place of birth are unknown, as is her parentage. It is evident from her correspondence that she had strong connections with the west of England,¹² particularly Bristol where she resided during the late 1740s.¹³ She also made quite regular visits to Herefordshire, Wiltshire, and London with comparative freedom of movement which suggests a relatively well off background. She was raised as a Quaker,¹⁴ which may account for her willingness to engage in public ministry. The Quakers had long accepted that women could exercise a full roll in church affairs including preaching.¹⁵ Her letters indicate that she was educated beyond what was normal for her gender and time.

Sarah made her first recorded appearance on the Methodist scene in December 1740 when she wrote to Charles Wesley describing her spiritual

¹⁰ The published items are to be found in *A Collection of Letters on Sacred Subjects* (Dublin: Printed by B. Dugdale, 1784), 193-204. The manuscripts are in a folio scrapbook entitled "Letters to Charles Wesley, volume II" (hereafter "Letters to CW II"), Methodist Church Archives, John Rylands University Library of Manchester.

¹¹ The published letters are not dated and there is no indication of the identity of the correspondents beyond the use of the initials S.P. in the signature line. The internal evidence leaves no reasonable doubt that they were written by Perrin to one of the Wesley brothers, probably Charles.

¹² Reference is made to an aunt in Bradford, which in this context is probably Bradford on Avon in Wiltshire or Bradford in Somerset. Sarah Perrin to Charles Wesley, ALS, 21 November 1741, Reference "Letters to CW II," 32.

¹³ The entry in John Wesley's diary for February 25, 1741 refers to his having tea at Sister Perrin's house in Bristol. John Wesley, *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley* ed. Nehemiah Curnock (London: Epworth Press, 1916; reprint, 1960), 2: 429.

¹⁴ Sarah Perrin to Charles Wesley, ALS, July 22, 1741, Reference "Letters to CW II," 8.

¹⁵ Chilcote, 14-17.

state and the positive effect of the Wesley's ministry.¹⁶ Even at this very early stage it is interesting to note Sarah's burning desire to evangelize others. This is exemplified by the following passage:

I have considered our last conversation and I have desired to partake of the same Christian courage which I rejoice to behold in you, O may I learn to speak the truth with boldness, nay I have thought I should be willing to have less of the divine sweetness if it would please my master to give me in exchange the gift of edifying others.

Throughout her long correspondence with Charles, spanning more than ten years, Sarah was invariably respectful and deferential. This was, however, matched by considerable self confidence. She was never backward in expressing an opinion¹⁷ and from this very first letter written at the age of nineteen, she offered encouragement and advice to one of the great evangelical leaders, a man fourteen years her senior.¹⁸ For his part, Charles appears to have valued her contribution to their discussions.¹⁹ Her influence should not be overstated. Charles engaged in correspondence with many people but it would be fair to say that he respected her judgment and valued the part that she played in the life of the early Methodist societies.²⁰

From a very early date, Sarah was engaged in a public or semi-public ministry. The following passage is from a letter dated 1741, written to Charles Wesley from Leominster in Herefordshire:

Here seems to be some good stirring. Many of the Church of England meet often together to talk of things of God. They invited me to come amongst them. I have been with them several times, they seem to be united in spirit to me. I earnestly desire I may lay no stumbling block in their way but that the master... may give me words for their edification. I have no party to promote but love unfeigned, no doctrine to set up but faith in our Lord Jesus, and no religion to press them to but holiness of heart. One evening I gave them the Sermon on Salvation by Faith, they much approved of it. I read the hymn to them let the mind be in you which was also in Christ, they said it comforted them, and some of Sukey's [Susanna]

¹⁶ Sarah Perrin to Charles Wesley, ALS, December 18, 1740, Reference "Letters to CW II," 1.

¹⁷ For example, "I cannot in all things think as you do..." Sarah Perrin to Charles Wesley, ALS, July 15, 1741, Reference "Letters to CW II," 7.

¹⁸ For example, "May I venture to advise on whose experience is so far beyond mine, but what we feel any advantage from we cannot help communicating..." Sarah Perrin to Charles Wesley, ALS, January 24, 1741, Reference "Letters to CW II," 4.

¹⁹ Charles' letters to Sarah do not appear to have survived but the tone of her correspondence does not suggest any resentment on his part of her opinions.

²⁰ The fact that John Wesley suggested Sarah in 1749 as a candidate for marriage to his brother shows that Charles had more than a passing regard for her. JWW, 26: 639.

Designe's²¹ letters to me I believe has been of service.²²

Sarah's actions are striking in a number of respects. She spoke by invitation on matters of faith to an Anglican audience despite her gender and the fact that she was herself not of the Church of England. The specific context in which she labored is unclear. The Leominster group may have been a religious society of the type that elsewhere was providing the Wesleys with an organizational framework,²³ or it might have been a purely informal gathering in response to local conditions.

The precise nature of Sarah's outreach is also open to interpretation. The reference to her giving her listeners the sermon on salvation by faith is intriguing as it could be used to support the argument that she was preaching. What is more likely however is that she was either reading from a published text or distributing copies. Both Wesley brothers preached on salvation by faith and John had published his sermon on the theme as early as 1738.²⁴ It might also have been a reference to the Anglican Homily on Salvation by Faith. What is clear however is that Sarah was supplementing the prepared text with her own experiences to press her listeners on to "holiness of heart." She should, therefore, be considered as one of the first Methodist exhorters, an exact contemporary of men like Thomas Maxfield and John Cennick. It is also important to note that in 1741 Leominster had yet to be visited by the Wesleys or their associates. Sarah Perrin at the age of twenty was in effect a pioneer of the Methodist cause in the area.

It is important not to read too much into such evidence. Sarah's male counterparts like Thomas Maxfield were speaking openly at about this time to mixed congregations and in the open air. It does not appear that Sarah was working in such a broad or visible context which is one reason why her contribution has been largely forgotten. However, in her efforts we can see the first flowering of a female ministry that was to pave the way for the generation.

The Leominster episode was not an isolated occurrence. This is illustrated by the following passage from a letter written in May 1741 from the London district of Southwark:

I begin to find much openness in declaring my state to others when I think it may be of any service. For call it confessing or what you

²¹ Susanna Designe (b.1712) was born of French parentage near the Isle of Ely. After her marriage, she moved to Bristol with her husband and opened a private school in her own home. (Biographical information kindly provided by Thomas Albin).

²² Sarah Perrin to CW, ALS, 1741, Reference "Letters to CWII," 5.

²³ Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 27-31.

²⁴ JWW, ed. Albert Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 1:116.

please, I verily believe sincere religious people in all ages and under all denominations whilst they have been seeking the Kingdom of Heaven together have found great freedom to communicate their trials and experiences one to another and it has somewhat pleased God to benefit their souls....²⁵

Perrin was clearly not only exhorting but also testifying her faith, two closely related activities that were specifically identified by Paul Chilcote as waypoints on the path towards a female preaching ministry.²⁶

Additional evidence of Perrin's early outreach can be found in the following letter, which is unfortunately undated but which may be tentatively place by internal evidence at an early stage in Sarah's involvement with the Wesleys.²⁷

Several of our friends have agreed to meet together, on purpose, to declare our experiences freely to each other. Last third day, I felt a great reluctance to go, hearing a Papist and several strangers were to be there on my account.... I besought the Lord ... he gave me power to declare fully and simply, his dealing with me; and I have cause to believe his blessing attended it....

The next evening I went to a society of churchmen which is kept in a shoemaker's house. They read and prayed and then concluded with singing. When they had done, I read a letter of [Susan Designe's] to them, and gave them a sermon on Perfection. Some of them are very loving to me, but others are bigoted against the Quakers, and (I believe) think I have some design upon them. But I can truly say, I have no party to set up; I have no desire to promote anything amongst them, beside holiness....²⁸

In February, 1744 at John Wesley's invitation Sarah took on the duties of housekeeper at the New Room in Bristol.²⁹ This post was not as menial as the title would suggest;³⁰ in addition to having oversight of the accommoda-

²⁵ Sarah Perrin to CW, ALS, May 2, 1741, Reference "Letters to CW II," 6.

²⁶ Paul Wesley Chilcote, "John Wesley and the Women Preachers of Early Methodism." (Duke University Ph. D. thesis, 1984), 122-141.

²⁷ Sarah refers in the opening paragraph to her gratitude that God had brought about their acquaintance. This is the kind of observation that one would expect at an early stage in a relationship. Also, the activities that Sarah describes and the context in which she was working is very similar to that of other letters from the early 1740s.

²⁸ *A Collection of Letters on Sacred Subjects*, 203.

²⁹ "before your brother left Bristol he told me he thought it was the will of God I should be wholly at the Horsefair, I sought by prayer to know the mind of the Lord and I had a hope given to me it would be blessed both to myself and others... I think it my duty to try for a time..." Sarah Perrin to CW, ALS, February 18, 1744, Reference "Letters to CW II," 36.

³⁰ Two other famous female Methodists Sarah Ryan and Grace Murray also served as housekeepers in Bristol and Newcastle respectively.

tion for the brothers and their preachers, the housekeeper also exercised some measure of spiritual responsibility, helping to ensure that the New Room was "a house of faith."³¹ Sarah took this charge very seriously³² and there is a suggestion in a letter of April 1744 that her ardent desire to promote the work of God was not well received in all quarters:

I have stronger assurances I am in the place my Master has appointed for me. I would feign to do his will in all things... may the God whom I desire to serve give me wisdom... that I may be a stumbling to none and may you have comfort in me and rejoice in your labour of love for my soul. I believe some had rather I was not here, others are glad. Neither of it has any effect upon me....³³

Perrin's letters written during her time as housekeeper are full of details not just of her own spiritual strivings, but of her efforts to help others through prayer and counselling. She was also a keen visitor of the sick³⁴ and an occasional but constructive critic of the abilities and characters of male itinerants.³⁵ When occasion demanded, she was not afraid to take on a more active role in organizing worship in the face of opposition. The following passage is from a letter written during a visit in 1745 to an unspecified place away from Bristol:

I find great comfort in having friend [Ann] Vigor with me and as much freedom in meeting the society here as a class or band in Bristol and we have agreed as many of us as can to meet every evening whilst we stay here to worship the God of our fathers after the way which they call heresy. The enemy strives to prevent our meeting at one place and another place but as our friend George Fox used to say the power of God is over all.

If you have leisure we should take it as a favour if you would send a hymn of two suitable for those who are seeking the Lord for we have but one hymn book among us.³⁶

In June 1750 Sarah visited Leominster and sent the following account of her activities to Charles. This is worth quoting at length for the extremely

³¹ Sarah Perrin to CW, ALS, February 18, 1744, Reference "Letters to CW II," 36.

³² "We have no hard thoughts I believe of each other in the house. Peace and concord is amongst us and I trust will abide with us and Brother Capiter I believe improves in his talents, but fervency of zeal is wanting. We seek but to not strive." Sarah Perrin to CW, ALS, 1744, Reference "Letters to CW II," 39.

³³ Sarah Perrin to CW, ALS, April 1744, Reference "Letters to CW II," 41.

³⁴ For example, Sarah Perrin to CW, ALS, July 18 1745, Reference "Letters to CW II," 50.

³⁵ For example, Sarah Perrin to CW, ALS, November 4 1751, Reference "Letters to CW II," 57.

³⁶ Sarah Perrin to CW, ALS, September 1745, Reference "Letters to CW II," 51.

vivid picture it provides of one of the first female Methodist exhorters at work:

This week I have made several appointments to meet a few people. Since I came back I have not been idle. Last week I missed meeting only two nights. You had need to pray for wisdom for me. They increase that come to hear and sure there never was a weaker instrument used in the work.

Till last Sunday for the sake of privacy we always met up two pairs of stairs. The room was so excessive hot and for convenience I ventured on Sunday evening in the lower room but when I rose up from prayer and saw the room full of people, the enemy buffeted... immediately I found power to look up to him and cast my care upon him and he gave me utterance more than an hour. I exhorted them to repentance and to come to the knowledge of God by the remission of sins. A solemn awe was over them and though some came on purpose to make game, the Lord prevented and we departed in peace.

What can we say to this? Your prayers reached the throne of God. In answer to them he has raised me from the gates of death and you requested of him to make me of use in the work and must not I leave it unto him in what way and take every opportunity he gives me confess his holy name of all persons in the world. I have ever seen myself the most unfit to exhort having neither mouth nor wisdom, yet several times of late I could not refrain. Last Sunday... whilst I was at the Quakers' meeting the spirit groaned within me with desires for their salvation, I found I must either utter my petitions to God for them or grieve his spirit. I obeyed his voice and but two persons kept their seats. Several afterwards said they joined in their heart with me and they felt what spirit it proceeded from.

I write thus at large that you may know how to advise and to pray for me. Whilst I was at Ludlow I could not meet with those only that are under your care, some others would come and I hope not altogether in vain....³⁷

This previously unpublished account contains the earliest known use by a Methodist woman of the specific term exhorting to describe her personal ministry. It is interesting to note the parallel between Sarah's defense of her irregular activities and John Wesley's justification in 1771 of Mary Bosanquet's preaching on the grounds of her "extraordinary call."³⁸ Sarah might have referred to herself as a "weak instrument" but it is clear that she carried herself with such confidence and conviction that her words made as powerful an impression on her listeners as the best of the male itinerants.

³⁷ Sarah Perrin to CW, ALS, June 12, 1750, Reference "Letters to CW II," 55.

³⁸ John Wesley to Mary Bosanquet, June 13, 1771.

Charles Wesley was under no illusion about what Sarah was doing. He annotated the letter with the following words "S Perrin. Prophesying!" which term was often synonymous with exhorting.³⁹ This ambiguous comment can be interpreted in different ways but it would be fair to say that her activities did not appear to be an uncomfortable subject between them. Indeed, Sarah stated specifically that Charles himself prayed that she might be made useful in the work. It is also worth pointing out that on the occasion in 1741 of Sarah giving the sermon upon salvation by faith,⁴⁰ Charles's annotation on the letter consisted simply of her name. It would appear that Charles was at least tolerant of his friend's ministry.

It is important to place Sarah's activities in the context of what was officially acceptable to John Wesley as the supreme leader of the Methodist movement. The Minutes of the 1746 Conference contain the following prohibition:

1. Let none exhort in any of our Societies, without a note of recommendation from the Assistant.
2. Let every exhorter see that this is renewed yearly.
3. Let every Assistant rigorously insist upon this.⁴¹

It is not made clear in the letter of June 1750 if Sarah exhorted in a formal Methodist meeting. The emphasis in the letter appears to be on informal gatherings of society members and any others interested in attending.⁴² It is possible therefore that Sarah avoided infringement of the letter of the 1746 rule, although it should also be said that Wesley's referral to exhorting "in any of our Societies" could be read as encompassing any type of Methodist meeting. It is nevertheless certain that Sarah was in spirit at least quietly ignoring Wesley's authority when she felt constrained to do by the Holy Spirit and that she felt no discomfort in alerting Charles Wesley to the fact.

Extant letters from Sarah Perrin to Charles Wesley peter out after the middle of the 1740s. Fifty-one of the fifty-eight manuscript items are dated between 1740 and 1745, six survive between 1749 and 1751 and there is one bearing a date of 1773 in a Charles Wesley annotation, although there is considerable doubt that this is the date when the letter was actually written.⁴³

³⁹ Chilcote refers to the "striking similarity" between prophesying and exhorting. Chilcote, "John Wesley and the Women Preachers of Early Methodism," 112n.

⁴⁰ Sarah Perrin to CW, ALS, 1741, Reference "Letters to CW II," 5.

⁴¹ *Minutes of the Methodist Conferences from the first held in London by the late Rev. John Wesley, A.M. in the Year 1744* (London: Methodist Conference Office, 1812), 1: 30.

⁴² For example, "While I was at Ludlow I could not meet with those that are under your care, some others would come and I hope not altogether in vain." Sarah Perrin to CW, ALS, June 12, 1750, Reference "Letters to CW II," 55.

⁴³ The letter itself is not dated except by Charles' annotation, which may have been added years later. In favor of an earlier date is the fact that Sarah uses her maiden name despite the fact that she married John Jones in the early 1750s. Also, there is no reference to either of their respective partners which would be unusual as Charles knew John Jones well and Sarah had also been on friendly terms with Charles' wife.

The explanation for this break in the correspondence probably lies in the fact that both married; Charles to Sarah Gwynne in 1749 and Sarah Perrin to Dr. John Jones in the early 1750s. The couples were both resident in Bristol from 1752-1758⁴⁴ and this physical proximity coupled with the close working relationship between the two men would have negated the need to correspond. Casual observations in other letters indicate that the couples remained on friendly terms throughout this decade.⁴⁵

In 1758 John Jones and Sarah moved to London where he appears to have had charge of the Methodist society.⁴⁶ At the end of the 1760s, Jones severed his connection with the Methodists and in March 1770 was ordained into the Anglican ministry.⁴⁷ He took up a curacy in the Essex parish of Harwich and by 1780 had become the Vicar. Despite leaving the Methodists, Jones remained on friendly terms with Charles Wesley. The two corresponded and regards to and from Sarah were passed between them as a matter of routine,⁴⁸ but with little in the way of further information. Were it not for the earlier series of correspondence, the existence of the once close friendship would largely be lost.

Virtually nothing is known of Sarah's life after her marriage outside of the framework provided by the bare record of her husband's ministry. It is probable that she continued to act as a class or band leader during the years of their Methodist involvement, as this would have been usual for a preacher's wife. It is impossible to determine if she was able to continue the more extensive ministry of her earlier years. Sarah Perrin, the one-time Quaker and fearless Methodist exhorter, ended her days as a Vicar's wife on 29 March 1787.⁴⁹ She outlived her husband by six months.

Sarah Perrin is one of the forgotten heroines of early Methodism. At a time when any suggestion that women could play an active role in the church was often greeted with derision or outright hostility, she was at the forefront of the feminine contribution to the revival's formative years. Despite her youth, she earned the respect of the Wesley brothers and should be regarded as one of the first of Methodism's "Mothers in Israel." Moreover, the detailed personal record of her ministry adds substance to an often-shadowy picture. It is accepted that women played a key role in the spread of Methodism, but too often the evidence for the 1740s is preserved only in 19th century works of local history or haphazardly preserved remi-

⁴⁴ Charles and Sarah made their home in Bristol shortly after their marriage while John Jones was the senior Wesleyan itinerant in Bristol. Sackett, 16-21.

⁴⁵ For example, Charles Wesley to Sarah Wesley, ALS, February 13, 1759, Reference DDCW 7/102, Methodist Church Archives, John Rylands University Library of Manchester.

⁴⁶ Sackett, 22.

⁴⁷ Sackett, 33.

⁴⁸ For example, John Jones to Charles Wesley, ALS, June 17, 1780, Reference DDP 1/94, Methodist Church Archives, John Rylands University Library of Manchester.

⁴⁹ Sackett, 39.

niscences.⁵⁰ Valuable as such sources are, they are no substitute for the personal papers of a woman like Sarah Perrin. Her letters provided an invaluable insight into dimly explored areas from the different perspectives represented by non-Anglican converts to the way that individuals were guided by the Wesleys but not dominated by them. Of particular significance is the fact that the Sarah Perrin-Charles Wesley correspondence shows at a very early date the paths that were being explored with regard to the place of women within the movement. The names of Mary Bosanquet, Sarah Ryan, and Sarah Crosby have rightly received considerable attention, but consideration should also be given to pushing the boundaries of research to include trailblazers like Sarah Perrin and others whose identities have yet to be discovered.

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⁵⁰ For example, it would appear from his footnotes that Chilcote when considering the 1740s in his seminal Ph. D. on early Methodist women was heavily reliant on secondary or primary sources recalling events of many years previously. Earl Kent Brown and Leslie Church both concentrated on the period after 1760 when considering the question of female exhorters and preachers.