

JOHN WESLEY'S INTIMATE DISCONNECTIONS, 1755-1764

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During the period of the Seven Years War (1756-1763), John Wesley's two most intimate relationships fell apart. His relationship to his brother Charles had been on rocky ground since 1748 when Charles intervened to prohibit John's marriage to Grace Murray. John Wesley's 1751 marriage to Mary Vazeille "née Goldhawk" is widely recognized to have ended badly within a few years, but John's own culpability in the dissolution of this relationship has been scarcely acknowledged. The fact that both of these intimate disconnections occurred within a few years' time, and during the period of the Seven Years War, also needs to be recognized. This article examines the dissolution of John Wesley's intimate relationships with his brother Charles and with his wife Mary during a period beginning a year before the Seven Years War and extending a year beyond the conclusion of that conflict—especially by examining John Wesley's private correspondence in this period, 1755-1764. At a number of points this article utilizes information derived from the study of manuscripts not available in printed editions of the letter texts. For example, the article will refer to "endorsements" of letters, that is, comments that recipients wrote on the letters after receiving them, and it will note features such as scoring through critical words that reveal a great deal about the intimate communication conveyed in these letters but which might not appear in published editions of the letters.

John Wesley was a prolific correspondent, producing about 250 letters per year and thus more than twenty letters per month through much of his career.¹ His correspondence utilized rapidly improving postal services, an important technological and cultural development of the eighteenth century in the British Isles, commensurate with the extension of a turnpike system that had grown more elaborate and more efficient through that age.² Letter writing was itself one of the principal means by which Evangelical and pietistic movements were spreading in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,³ and for John Wesley in particular, written letters became a principal means of querying others about their spiritual experiences and of expressing his own emotional state to a very select few of his most intimate correspondents.

¹ Ted A. Campbell, "John Wesley as Diarist and Correspondent," in Randy L. Maddox and Jason E. Vickers, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to John Wesley* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010), 130-131, and see esp. the table on p. 131. I am indebted to Kevin Watson for his help in compiling some of the material in the article referred to here.

² Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England, 1727-1783* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989), 391-410.

³ W. R. Ward, *The Protestant Evangelical Awakening* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), 2.

This period was dominated politically by the Seven Years War, the conflict referred to in North American history as the “French and Indian War.” The war had huge consequences for Britain, establishing British military dominance over France and setting the stage for British mercantile and colonial expansion in the ensuing decades. Although Britain prevailed in the war, its outcome was far from secure in 1756, and many Britons feared a full-scale French invasion. John Wesley was involved in events related to the war, writing to a Member of Parliament offering to raise a company of volunteers, and reporting in the *London Chronicle* on the conditions of French prisoners held in Bristol.⁴ At one point early in the war, John Wesley wrote to his wife Mary from Ireland that he feared for both of their lives: “if we do not meet again here, we may in a better place.”⁵

The dissolution of John Wesley’s intimate relationships during the Seven Years War followed some earlier strains in his relationship with Charles. For a period of twenty-two years, from the time when Charles Wesley came up to Oxford in 1726 through 1748, the two Wesley brothers had been closest confidants to each other. Gareth Lloyd’s study of *Charles Wesley and the Struggle for Methodist Identity* (2007) shows that Charles’ earlier loyalty was to his oldest brother Samuel, but from the time of Samuel’s marriage and Charles’ coming to Oxford, Charles’ personal allegiance began to shift towards his brother John and an intense tie was formed between them.⁶ In 1729, for example, Charles had written to John, “there is no person I would so willingly have to be the instrument of good to me as you”⁷ From Oxford the two brothers traveled to Georgia, they came under the influence of Lutheran Pietists as well as Moravians, and after returning from America they had noteworthy spiritual experiences within four days of each other in May, 1738. In the early years of the revival, the two brothers acted consistently in concert with each other, and despite their very different personalities, they relied on each other and confided in each other.⁸ An expression of this bond, noted in Charles Wesley’s journal, was that the brothers had agreed since 1738, “that we would neither of us marry, or take any step towards it, without the other’s knowledge and consent”⁹

⁴ John Wesley, letter to James West, March 1, 1756, and a letter in the *London Chronicle* for October 25-27, 1759. The letter to James West is cited from the earlier edition of John Wesley’s letters edited by John Telford, *Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.* (“Standard Edition” of the Works of John Wesley; 8 vols. [London: Epworth Press, 1931], 3:165). The original manuscript is in the British Museum.

⁵ John Wesley, letter to Mary Wesley, May 7, 1756. The ms. is in the John Rylands University Library of Manchester, and is identified as “JW 5.1.55.” The letter also appeared in Telford, ed., *Letters*, 3:176-178.

⁶ Gareth Lloyd, *Charles Wesley and the Struggle for Methodist Identity* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007), 27-30.

⁷ Charles Wesley, letter to John Wesley, June, 1729; cited in Lloyd, 28.

⁸ Lloyd, 40-42.

⁹ Charles Wesley’s journal for November 11, 1748; in S T Kimbrough, Jr., and Kenneth G. C. Newport, eds., *The Manuscript Journal of the Reverend Charles Wesley, A.M.* 2 vols. (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2007), 2:559. Charles notes in this statement that he and his brother had made this agreement “as soon as he came from Georgia,” that is, in 1738.

What the brothers do not seem to have comprehended at that point is that a bond of intimacy leading to marriage would overshadow the bond that had led the two of them, a decade before, to this pact. The earlier relationship between the brothers had already begun to unravel in 1748 when John became engaged to Grace Murray and Charles intervened to prevent their marriage. John had acted without consulting his brother in this matter, and he had already forged a bond of friendship, confidentiality, and intimacy in conversation with Grace that had, whether he realized it or not, supplanted the relationship he had earlier shared with his brother. Charles' actions in preventing John's marriage to Grace Murray were no doubt undertaken with their earlier agreement in mind, but his actions began to drive a wedge between the brothers. Charles Wesley married Sarah Gwynne in April, 1749, and John overtly consented to their marriage, although shorthand entries in Charles' journal reveal that his brother had deep misgivings about it.¹⁰ John married Mary Vazeille, the widow of London merchant Anthony Vazeille, in February, 1751, without consulting his brother, and Charles openly expressed his opposition to their marriage.¹¹

John Wesley's Intimate Disconnection from Charles Wesley, 1755-1760

Despite these earlier divisions between John and Charles Wesley, they continued to work closely together in the Methodist movement until the years 1755 and 1756, when Charles ceased itinerating under John's direction. At the time of Charles' marriage in 1749, John Wesley had worried that Charles would no longer be able to carry out his work as an itinerant preacher. Charles secured Sarah's permission to promise to John that his itinerant work would not abate as a result of their marriage. But by 1755, Charles Wesley had come to have serious doubts about the fitness of many of the Methodist preachers, and he especially objected to sniping against the Church of England on their part. Charles Wesley would also express reservations about whether lay preaching was in conformity with the canons of the Church of England and the laws of the realm. By 1756, Charles had decided that he wanted to settle down with Sarah and cease itinerating.¹² This would lead to a continuing *de facto* division of the Methodist movement into those who followed John's model of itinerant ministry and eventually ended up in separate Methodist denominations and those under Charles Wesley's leadership who remained in canonical conformity to the Church of England, a group later identified as "Church Methodists."¹³

Charles' decision to cease itinerating was followed by a cessation of correspondence between the two brothers. Frank Baker's meticulous, hand-written ledgers of letters and references to letters in the period between July 16, 1755, and June 23, 1760, has one reference to a letter from John to

¹⁰ Kimbrough and Newport, 92-93.

¹¹ Lloyd, 89-109.

¹² Lloyd, 158-161

¹³ Lloyd., 180-233.

Charles in November, 1756, but that letter has not survived. Baker's separate database of in-coming letters to John Wesley shows several letters from Charles Wesley to John Wesley in 1756, but none at all between November 16, 1756, and March 2, 1760.¹⁴ In this period of three and a half years there is absolutely no surviving correspondence or even references to correspondence between the two brothers.

The last known letter from John Wesley to Charles Wesley in 1755, goes some way towards explaining the breach. Charles never actually wrote to John and indicated that he would not itinerate. John had asked him to go to Cornwall as John had asked him to itinerate in many places in the past, and this time Charles simply had not gone. The letter from John Wesley of July 16, 1755, first berates Charles for his "gross bigotry" in rejecting the work of Methodist preachers who "differ from you as to church government." The concluding sentence of the letter in plain text is, "Then I will go to Cornwall myself, that is all." But John Wesley added in shorthand a further caustic comment, "For a wife and a partner I may challenge the world! But love is rot. Adieu."¹⁵

Two surviving letters from Charles Wesley to John Wesley after this, letters from mid-year and later 1756, do not indicate a serious breach of communication: Charles wrote John on August 6 about routine matters facing the Conference.¹⁶ On October 21, he wrote John expressing his concerns about the qualifications of preachers and also indicated that he would devote his energies to stopping "strife and division" among the preachers:

Ought any new Preacher to be received before we know that he is grounded, not only in the doctrines we teach, but in the discipline also, and particularly in the communion of the Church of England? . . . If we do not insist on that *στοργή* [familial affection] for our desolate mother as a pre-requisite, yet should we not be well assured that the candidate is no enemy to the Church?

Is it not our duty to stop Joseph Cownley, and such like, from railing and laughing at the Church? Should we not now, at least, shut the stable-door? The short remains of my life are devoted to this very thing, to follow our sons (as Charles Perronet told me we should you) with buckets of water, to quench the flame of strife and division, which they have or may kindle.¹⁷

There was, as mentioned above, a reference to a letter from John Wesley to Charles dated November 4, 1756, but we do not know what it said. On November 16, 1756, Charles wrote the last letter to John Wesley before their long break in communication. It was a letter that began with a query about one of John Wesley's *Notes on the New Testament*, which Charles Wesley

¹⁴ Baker's ledgers are kept at Duke Divinity School.

¹⁵ John Wesley, letter to Charles Wesley, July 17, 1755; in Frank Baker, ed., *Letters Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*; 2 vols. numbered as 25 and 26 in the series (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980-1982), 26:572-573.

¹⁶ Charles Wesley, letter to John Wesley, August 6, 1756. A shorthand manuscript in the John Rylands University Library in a series of volumes of Charles Wesley's correspondence, 2:13, transcription by Frank Baker.

¹⁷ Charles Wesley, letter to John Wesley, October 21, 1756, recorded in Charles Wesley's journal for that date; in Kimbrough and Newport, eds., *Manuscript Journal*, 2:640.

was apparently condensing or revising or editing at that time. But most of this rather long letter has Charles bitterly complaining about one of the preachers, Edward Perronet, who had written a book entitled *The Mitre* attacking the Church of England and advocating that the Methodists separate from the Church. Charles' letter of November 16, 1756, is an impassioned appeal to John for unanimity between the brothers in dealing with the threat that Perronet posed. The conclusion of the letter shows no bitterness and seems to presume cordial relations: "Sally writes in love to you. I am half choked with a cold; yet setting out for the country. Farewell."¹⁸ John Wesley apparently agreed with Charles on this matter, because he attempted to buy up all the copies of Edward Perronet's book that he could find. But the period of three and a half years' silence between the brothers ensued.

John Wesley's Intimate Disconnection with Mary Wesley, 1758-1760

It was precisely in the period of this silence of communication between John and Charles Wesley that John faced another intimate disconnection, in this case with his wife Mary. Existing historiography lays the blame for the unraveling of John's marriage to Mary Vazeille almost entirely at the feet of Mary Wesley. The following excerpt from the 1974 *Encyclopedia of World Methodism* is representative:

Granted that he [John Wesley] could give no woman that all-absorbing attention that had already been given to God, the springs of his genuine affection were dried up by his wife's perverseness, which was probably worsened by a streak of mental unsoundness, and it remained for him only to show what infinite stores of fortitude and forbearance he possessed.¹⁹

Earlier correspondence between John and Mary, and comments to others (such as Charles) revealed a certain depth of intimacy or at least fondness between the two. But this period was short-lived and by 1756 the letters from John Wesley to Mary reveal little of intimacy. He continued to refer to her as "my dear," or "my dear Molly," occasionally, "my love," and he typically signed his letters as "your affectionate husband," but these terms, with the possible exception of "my love," were not unusual in his correspondence, and the contents of his letters to her from this point amount to recollections of his itinerary, like the material in his published *Journal*, and extended discussions of business matters with requests to Mary to look after matters in London. In fact, reading John Wesley's letters to Mary in the years 1756 and 1757, one is struck by how similar they would seem to letters to one's business manager.

A letter from John Wesley to his wife Mary, written from Lewisham, and dated January 7, 1756, is typical of his correspondence with Mary in this

¹⁸ Charles Wesley, letter to John Wesley, November 16, 1756; a manuscript in the John Rylands University Library of Manchester identified as "DDWes 4-84."

¹⁹ Maldwyn Edwards, article on "Vazeille, Mrs. Mary" in Nolan B. Harmon, general editor, *Encyclopedia of World Methodism* 2 vols. (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1974), 2:2416.

period:

When I saw you, my dear, I did not expect to have so large a demand made so suddenly upon me. I shall be puzzled to answer it without coming to town on purpose, which I am unwilling to do before I have finished the Address. I desire you would give John Spencer (taking his receipt) or Brother Atkinson (unless you choose to pay Mr. Davenport yourself) what note-money remains in your hands. Unless you can help me out for a month or two, I must borrow some more in town. If you can, you will do it with pleasure. My dear, adieu.²⁰

Four months later, (May 7, 1756), John Wesley wrote to Mary from Waterford in Ireland and his letter strikes a similar tone:

My Dear Molly

From Portarlington we rode (twenty miles, as they call it) in about eight hours to Kilkenny. There our brethren in the army received us gladly, and opened a door which none were able to shut. Yesterday in the afternoon (through heavy rain; but it was nothing to me) we came hither. Here is a poor, shattered society, who have been for these seven years tearing one another in pieces

From time to time, my love, you should tell me all you know concerning public affairs: for it is hard to depend on the authority of the newspapers for the truth of anything

Pay the printers yourself; that is the sure way, unless Jo. Spencer gives you his account, as I have written. I hope H. Brown will do everything you bid him. Else you must send him home. I have wrote to Mr. Blackwell from Dublin. Peace be with your spirit!²¹

Commentators have noted that John Wesley sometimes displayed a surprising lack of feeling toward other persons, and one might be tempted to attribute John Wesley's business-like correspondence with his wife in these cases as an instance of this more general emotional hardness. Or one could say that this was not yet the Victorian era and marriages were, after all, business propositions. The seventeenth-century poet Thomas Traherne had written:

Second to friendship, and very like it is the allurement of marriage . . . I call marriage second to friendship, because therein, though a man does communicate fortunes and estates, yet he is not bound to communicate his thoughts, a reservation of which is the destruction of friendship. A man may marry a wife for other ends than that of her being his counselor. Nor does he need to approve himself in all his actions to her imagination.²²

²⁰ John Wesley, letter to Mary Wesley, January 7, 1756; a manuscript in Bridwell Library, Southern Methodist University, identified as "JWesley 7 January 1756"; also in Telford, ed., *Letters*, 3:154. In this and subsequent letters (from January, 1756, and forward) I have modernized punctuation and capitalization of the letters in accordance with the editorial policy of the Wesley Works Editorial Project. Letters prior to January, 1756, have already been published in the Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley, and are cited as they appear in that edition.

²¹ John Wesley, letter to Mary Wesley, May 7, 1756; a manuscript in the John Rylands University Library of Manchester identified as "JW 5.1.55"; also in Telford, ed., *Letters*, 3:176-178.

²² Thomas Traherne, from a ms. in Lambeth Palace Library, Ms. 1360, Folio 5r, probably written in the mid-1660s. I am grateful to Ms. Julia Smith for this reference. I have modernized the capitalization and punctuation of the passage consistent with the ways in which I have modernized capitalization and punctuation in Wesley letters.

So perhaps it is true that it was not regularly expected even in John Wesley's age for a man to take his wife as his intimate partner in discussion or correspondence. But what might an eighteenth-century wife think about a husband who became an intimate correspondent with other women? John Wesley's private letters show that he had in fact become very intimate in conversation and in correspondence with a few younger married women associated with Methodist societies.

The most problematic of these relationships with younger women was with Sarah Ryan, whose reputation for sexual infidelity prior to her conversion was widely known. She was rumored to have been married to one man, then married another man, then had an affair with a third man, and all of this without having legally dissolved her first marriage. Despite all of these accusations, John Wesley made Sarah Ryan the housekeeper of Kingswood School in August, 1757. According to an unpublished manuscript, "Life of Mrs. Sarah Ryan," written by Mary Bosanquet Fletcher, now in the Fletcher-Tooth collection at the John Rylands University Library, Sarah Ryan had originally tried to befriend Mary Wesley, and in doing so revealed to Mary some of the details of her pre-conversion lifestyle. But Mary Wesley was not pleased with John's choice of Sarah Ryan as housekeeper for the Bristol School. According the biography of Sarah Ryan written by Mary Fletcher, then, the following event occurred during the Conference of Methodist preachers in late 1757 in Bristol,

One day during the Conference, as she was (according to her place as housekeeper) serving at the head of the table where, I suppose, sixty or seventy preachers were sitting, Mrs. W—came out of a room which opened onto the hall, and standing by the table, she said, "See that whore who is serving you! She hath three husbands now alive!" With all the depreciating things she could say, as she was going on, Sister Ryan set down in a chair which stood near her, with her eyes shut²³

What John Wesley's private letters to Sarah Ryan reveal is no overt sexual infidelity, but rather, they reveal a depth of spiritual intimacy that is simply unmatched by anything in John Wesley's correspondence with his wife. On November 8, 1757, John Wesley wrote to Sarah Ryan giving her a set of family rules to govern her work at Kingswood. This letter did not reveal any particular intimacy but simply encouraged her to rely on divine grace:

You have no experience of these things, no knowledge of the people, no advantages of education, not large natural abilities, and are but a novice, as it were, in the ways of God! It requires all the omnipotent love of God to preserve you in your present station.²⁴

²³ Mary Bosanquet Fletcher, "The Life of Mrs. Sarah Ryan, As Told Out Of Her Own Mouth," a manuscript in the Fletcher-Tooth Collection in the Methodist Archives, John Rylands University Library of Manchester, box 24, folder two. In this sequence of papers, this page is numbered 35. The story of Sarah Ryan's telling Mary Wesley about her earlier life is at the bottom of the previous page.

²⁴ John Wesley, letter to Sarah Ryan, November 8, 1757; the earliest version of this letter was published in Thomas Jackson, ed., *The Works of the Reverend John Wesley, A.M.* 14 vols. (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1873), 12:201-203; also in Telford, ed., *Letters*, 3:240.

A little more than two months later, on Friday, January 20, 1758, John Wesley wrote to Sarah Ryan, asking at first a series of questions about the state of her soul. These were the kind of questions that Wesley frequently asked of his correspondents, for example, "How did you feel yourself under your late trial? Did you find no stirring of resentment, no remains of your own will . . . ?" Wesley then bared some more intimate thoughts:

The conversing with you, either by speaking or writing, is an unspeakable blessing to me. I cannot think of you without thinking of God. Others often lead me to Him; but it is, as it were, going round about: you bring me straight into His presence. Therefore, whoever warns me against trusting you, I cannot refrain, as I am clearly convinced He calls me to it.²⁵

We could guess who it was that warned John Wesley against trusting Sarah Ryan. But Wesley left the letter to Sarah in his coat pocket, as yet unsealed. This led to Mary Wesley's intercepting this very letter, as John revealed in a letter to Sarah Ryan a week later, on Friday, January 27, 1758:

My Dear Sister

Last Friday, after many severe words, my wife left me, vowing she would see me no more. As I had wrote to you the same morning, I began to reason with myself, till I almost doubted whether I had done well in writing or whether I ought to write to you at all. After prayer that doubt was taken away. Yet I was almost sorry that I had written that morning. In the evening, while I was preaching at the chapel, she came into the chamber where I had left my clothes, searched my pockets, and found the letter there which I had finished but had not sealed. While she read it, God broke her heart; and I afterwards found her in such a temper as I have not seen her in for several years. She has continued in the same ever since.²⁶

Was it God who broke Mary's heart, or was it John Wesley himself? Mary Wesley could not have failed to recognize the difference in tone from the way in which her husband typically wrote to her, that is, she must have recognized that he expressed a conversational intimacy with Sarah Ryan that he did not share with Mary.

Later in 1758, John Wesley seems to have believed Sarah Ryan's claim that she had experienced the "entire sanctification" about which Wesley had frequently spoken as the goal of the Christian life. As he defined it, this meant not an absolute "perfection," but perfect love for God. In November, 1758, responding to a series of queries from John, Sarah wrote a detailed account of her religious experience. On November 12, Sarah wrote, "God did *testify* that He had saved me from all sin when He said *I will sweep away thy sin with the bosom of destruction. I felt and believed*, and the evidence re-

²⁵ John Wesley, letter to Sarah Ryan, January 20, 1758; published in the *Arminian Magazine* for April, 1782, 214-215; also in Telford, ed., *Letters*, 4:3-4.

²⁶ John Wesley, letter to Sarah Ryan, January 27, 1758; published in the *Arminian Magazine* for May, 1782, 268-269 (though the latter page number is incorrectly identified on the page as "299"); also in Telford, ed., *Letters*, 4:4-5.

mained and is more clear [*sic*] than ever."²⁷ This letter reveals that Sarah had internalized the ways in which John Wesley spoke about entire sanctification and the role of the affections, and thus imitated John Wesley's own characteristic ways of speaking. She comes across, then, as a Wesley groupie, a very intelligent one, and one who gave John Wesley exactly what he expected a converted sinner-become-saint to be and do and say. The contrast between her piety and Mary Wesley's lack thereof—in her husband's eyes at least—must have loomed large in John Wesley's experience in this time.

John Wesley never recognized or at least never acknowledged the harm he had done to his wife. In a series of letters back and forth he accused her of stealing his private property (his letters to and from Sarah and others) and he offered a growing list of other grievances. The following letter to Mary, written on April 9, 1759, summarizes some of these grievances:

My dear Molly

I must write once more. Then, if I hear nothing from you, I have done.

About a year ago, while I suspected nothing less, you opened my bureau and took out many of my letters and papers

Your pretence was that I conversed with Sister Ryan and Crosby. I know it was only a pretence

Notwithstanding this, you wrote me two loving letters. (I hope, not with a design of reading them to other people; which I shall not suspect if you assure me you have not read or shown them in part or in whole to any one.) . . .

Wishing you the blessing which you now want above any other, namely, unfeigned and deep repentance, I remain,

your much injured yet still affectionate Husband,

JWesley²⁸

Four months later, on October 23, 1759, he wrote to Mary and again rehearsed the same list of offenses, adding some "advices." He concluded, "These are the advices which I now give you in the fear of God and in tender love to your soul. Nor can I give you a stronger proof that I a[m], your affectionate Husband."²⁹

Less than a year later he wrote a further letter in which, in addition to naming Mary's faults again, he tried to tell Mary why he loved her. This is perhaps the most revealing of all these letters, because the case he made is so far from convincing:

I still love you for your indefatigable industry, for your exact frugality, and for your uncommon neatness and cleanliness, both in your person, your clothes, and all things round you. I value you for your patience, skill, and tenderness in assisting the sick. And if you could submit to follow my advice, I could make you an hundred times more useful both to the sick and healthy in every place where God has been pleased

²⁷ Sarah Ryan, transcript (in John Wesley's hand) of a reply to John Wesley dated November 12, 1758; a manuscript in the Methodist Archives, John Rylands University Library of Manchester identified as "JW 4.63."

²⁸ John Wesley, letter to Mary Wesley, April 9, 1759; a manuscript in the John Rylands University Library of Manchester identified as "JW 5.1.60"; also in Telford, ed., *Letters*, 4:61-62.

²⁹ John Wesley, letter to Mary Wesley, October 23, 1759; in Telford, ed., *Letters*, 4:74-78.

to work by my ministry.³⁰

This was going nowhere. In fact, from the time Mary Wesley intercepted the letter from John Wesley to Sarah Ryan in January, 1758, whatever vestiges there had been of an intimate relationship between them had dissolved. As indicated above, Methodists and other historians would later paint a monstrous portrait of Mary Wesley, but the private letters show that John had in fact betrayed the relationship of intimacy he had, however briefly, with her.

Mary can hardly be expected to plead her case now, since she explicitly asked John to destroy her letters after he received them. He did; and subsequently none of her letters to John in this period have survived. For Mary, John's betrayal of intimacy warranted separation. For his part, John never seems to have recognized or at least to have acknowledged a betrayal of confidence and intimacy as a violation of the contract of marriage. As his letters expressed it repeatedly, it was all about his rights to his property and the obedience his wife owed him:

This must be your indispensable duty, till 1. I am an adulterer; 2. you can prove it. Till then I have the same right to claim obedience from *you* as you have to claim it from Noah Vazeille [her son]. Consequently every act of disobedience is an act of rebellion against God and the King as well as against,

Your Affectionate Husband,
John Wesley³¹

The manuscript of this letter shows that in this case he deliberately scored through the word "Affectionate."

An Uneasy Rapprochement with Charles, 1760-1763

It was in the same year, 1760, just at the time when John Wesley's relationship with Mary was falling apart, that correspondence between John and Charles Wesley appeared again. Charles wrote to John twice within the span of five days in March of that year, and John responded in June with a letter asking for Charles' help with publications. The beginning of the letter shows that they had been out of touch:

Where you are I know not, and how you are I know not; but I hope the best. Neither you nor John Jones has ever sent me your remarks upon that tract in the late volume of Sermons. You are not kind. Why will you not do all you can to make me wiser than I am? Sam. Furdy told me his objections at once; so we canvassed them without loss of time. Do you know what is done, anything or nothing, with regard to the small edition of the *Notes*?³²

It is particularly interesting that John Wesley asked about Charles Wesley's

³⁰ John Wesley, letter to Mary Wesley, July 12, 1760; a manuscript in the John Rylands University Library of Manchester identified as "JW 5.1.62"; also in Telford, ed., *Letters*, 4:101-102.

³¹ John Wesley, letter to Mary Wesley, March 23, 1760; a manuscript in the John Rylands University Library of Manchester identified as "JW 5.1.61A"; also in Telford, ed., *Letters*, 4:89.

³² John Wesley, letter to Charles Wesley, June 23, 1760; a manuscript in the John Rylands University Library of Manchester identified as "DDWes 3/12"; also in Telford, ed., *Letters*, 4:99-100.

editing of the *Notes*, since the last letter Charles had sent to John in November, 1756, had begun with a query about his edition of the *Notes*. Later in the letter John would recount to Charles some of the accomplishments of the most recent annual Conference. This is because Charles attended the Conferences only on two or three occasions after 1755. Thus a little more than a year later, John Wesley wrote an account of the happenings at the conference of 1761 for his brother.³³

In this period John made clear in correspondence with Charles that although he preferred to remain and work within the Church of England, the revival—which he typically called “the work of God”—would take precedence. In the same letter quoted above, he wrote, “If we do not exert ourselves, it may drive us to that bad dilemma, leave preaching, or leave the Church. We have reason to thank God it is not come to this yet.”³⁴ In September of that year he wrote to Charles utilizing his typical distinction between “ordinary” means of grace that he associated with the Church of England, and the “extraordinary” means he associated with the Methodist revival:

I care not a rush for ordinary means (only that it is our duty to try them). All our lives and all God’s dealings with us have been extraordinary from the beginning. We have all reason, therefore, to expect that what has been will be again.³⁵

That is to say that in John’s view, their focus was to be on the “extraordinary” work of the revival, but Charles was consistently uncomfortable with the prospect of functioning outside of the established Church. A year later, John wrote to Charles,

I do not at all think (to tell you a secret) that the work will ever be destroyed, Church or no Church. What has been done to prevent the Methodists leaving the Church you will see in the *Minutes* of the Conference I have done at the last Conference all I *can* or *dare* do. Allow me liberty of conscience, as I allow you.³⁶

In the years 1762-1763, many members of the Wesleyan societies, including Thomas Maxfield, had begun to claim that they had experienced entire sanctification. Charles was dubious of any such claims; John was much more inclined at least to allow the possibility of entire sanctification before death. In a series of letters to Charles between December 23, 1762, and March 6, 1763, John Wesley sought, on the one hand, to acknowledge the problems that the “enthusiasts” had caused, and at the same time, on the

³³ John Wesley, letter to Charles Wesley, September 8, 1761; a manuscript in the John Rylands University Library of Manchester identified as “DDWes 3/15”; also in Telford, ed., *Letters*, 4:161-162.

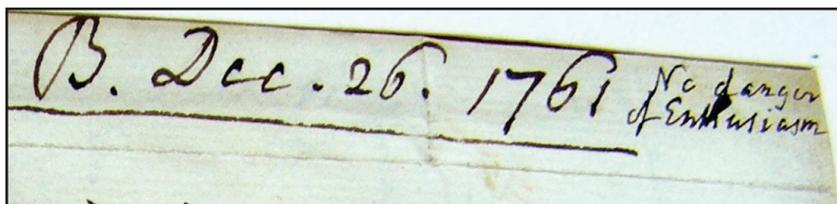
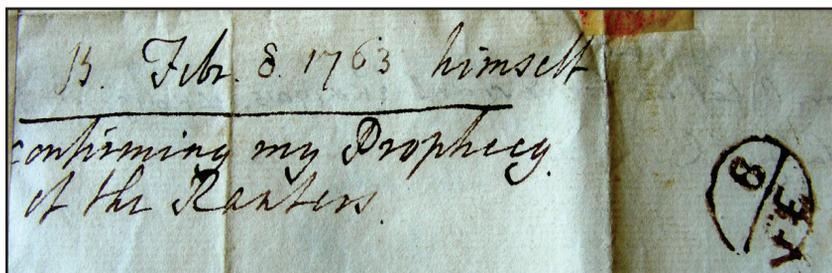
³⁴ John Wesley, letter to Charles Wesley, September 8, 1761.

³⁵ John Wesley, letter to Charles Wesley, September 28, 1760; a manuscript in the John Rylands University Library of Manchester identified as “DDWes 3/14,” also in Telford, ed., *Letters*, 4:108.

³⁶ John Wesley, letter to Charles Wesley, September 8, 1761; a manuscript in the John Rylands University Library of Manchester identified as “DDWes 3/15”; also in Telford, ed., *Letters*, 4:161-162.

other hand, he sought to allay some of Charles' fears about the possibility of entire sanctification in this life.³⁷

Charles Wesley's reactions to many of these developments are revealed not only in his own letters in response to John, but also in his endorsements of John's letters. These read as clever asides revealing his reactions in just a few short words. In his endorsement of a 1761 letter in which John tried to explain what good there may have been in those Methodists associated with Thomas Maxfield, Charles quipped in his endorsement, "No danger of enthusiasm."³⁸ To another letter in which John tried again to show the good of his preachers, Charles wrote, "palliating."³⁹ To a letter from John finally admitting that the Maxfield group was causing a schism, Charles wrote, "himself confirming my Prophecy of the Ranters"⁴⁰ (see below).

Charles Wesley's endorsement of a letter from his brother John, dated 26 December 1761 (top), has the sarcastic summary, "No danger of enthusiasm." His endorsement of a letter from John, dated February 8, 1763 (bottom), has "himself confirming my Prophecy of the Ranters." The latter carries a date stamp "8 FE" In both cases, "B." means "Brother" (i.e., John).

³⁷ John Wesley, letters to Charles Wesley, December 23, 1762, a manuscript in the John Rylands University Library of Manchester identified as "DDWes 3/19," also in Telford, ed., *Letters*, 4:198-199; January 5, 1763, in Telford, ed., *Letters*, 4:199-200; February 8, 1763, a manuscript in the John Rylands University Library of Manchester identified as "DDWes 3/20," also in Telford, ed., *Letters*, 4:201-202; March 6, 1763, a manuscript in the John Rylands University Library of Manchester identified as "DDWes 3/22," also in Telford, ed., *Letters*, 4:203-204.

³⁸ Charles Wesley, endorsement to a letter from John Wesley, December 26, 1761, a manuscript in the John Rylands University Library of Manchester identified as "DDWes 3/16," also in Telford 4:166.

³⁹ Charles Wesley, endorsement to a letter from John Wesley, December 23, 1762, a manuscript in the John Rylands University Library of Manchester identified as "DDWes 3/19," also in Telford 4:198-199.

⁴⁰ Charles Wesley, endorsement to a letter from John Wesley, February 8, 1763, a manuscript in the John Rylands University Library of Manchester identified as "DDWes 3/20," also in Telford 4:201-202.

By 1764, John Wesley's letters to Charles Wesley resumed some of the topics typical of earlier letters, details about the schedule of preachers, comments on the rise of Sandemanian teaching, work on their publications, and narratives of the pious deaths of Methodist saints.⁴¹ On January 11, 1765, John wrote to let Charles know that he and the Conference had ejected preachers who had purchased ordinations from the dubious character who claimed to be Bishop Erasmus of Arcadia in Crete.⁴² But in his letters of 1764, there were hints that Charles was threatening to cut off communication with John. On May 25 of that year, John wrote, "Is there any reason why you and I should have no farther intercourse with each other? I know none; although possibly there are persons in the world who would not be sorry for it."⁴³ In December of that year, he wrote to Charles, "I think verily there is no need that you and I should be such strangers to each other. Surely we are old enough to be wiser."⁴⁴

John and Charles Wesley did not break off communication with each other, but their correspondence never had the personal intimacy that it had between the 1720s and the 1740s. Charles had happily found his own confidante in his wife Sarah. If John had ever had a chance of that, he had lost it.

Conclusion

Perhaps the intimate disconnections of the late 1750s and the early 1760s allowed John Wesley to understand more of the weaknesses of his fellow humans. In 1762, he wrote to his younger friend Samuel Furly: "The longer I live the larger allowances I make for human infirmities. I exact more from myself and less from others. Go thou and do likewise!"⁴⁵ John continued to have close friends in Samuel Furly and Ebenezer Blackwell, and there is a great deal of correspondence between them in latter years. He was able to confide in them, though at points he suspected that Mary had drawn at least Ebenezer Blackwell over to her side. But John also continued, throughout his career, to enter into intimate correspondence with younger married women, including Sarah Ryan, Sarah Crosby, and later Ann Bolton. In 1764, he wrote to Sarah Ryan, "I am glad that you wrote, and write so freely. There

⁴¹ John Wesley, letters to Charles Wesley, March 1, 1764, a manuscript in the John Rylands University Library of Manchester identified as "DDWes 3/23," also in Telford, ed., *Letters*, 4:230; May 25, 1764, a manuscript in the John Rylands University Library of Manchester identified as "DDWes 3/24," also in Telford, ed., *Letters*, 4:245; and a letter to the Mayor and Corporation of Bristol with an accompanying note to his brother Charles, December 20, 1764, a manuscript in the John Rylands University Library of Manchester identified as "DDWes 3/25," also in Telford, ed., *Letters*, 4:279-280.

⁴² John Wesley, letter to Charles Wesley, January 11, 1765, in Telford, ed., *Letters*, 4:287-288.

⁴³ John Wesley, letter to Charles Wesley, 25 May 1764, a manuscript in the John Rylands University Library of Manchester identified as "DDWes 3/24," also in Telford, ed., *Letters*, 4:245.

⁴⁴ John Wesley, letter to Charles Wesley, 7 December 1764, in Telford, ed., *Letters*, 4:275-277.

⁴⁵ John Wesley, letter to Samuel Furly, January 25, 1762, a manuscript in the John Rylands University Library of Manchester identified as "JW 3.20," also in Telford, ed., *Letters*, 4:168-169.

needs be no reserve between you and me."⁴⁶ Four years later (in 1768) Sarah Ryan died, and Charles Wesley preached at her funeral.

When John was briefly reconciled to Mary in the 1770s, his letters to her show that he had fallen back into the same kind of business-oriented correspondence with her as before. So in 1774, he wrote to Mary from Edinburgh,

My dear love,—I am just now come hither from Glasgow and take this opportunity of writing two or three lines. I desire you would let Mr. Pine have an hundred pounds of that money which is in your hands, provided he gives you his full account first; which I must beg of you to send to London to John Atlay, together with fifty pounds for Mr. Nind, the paper-maker, and fifty pounds for Robert Hawes. There is no use in letting the money lie dead.⁴⁷

But he had not given up engaging in deeply personal correspondence with younger married women. Just five days earlier he had written to Ann Bolton (whom he calls "Nancy" in the following quotation), a married woman just about half his age, "I think few love you better than, my dear Nancy, / Yours affectionately, / [JWesley]."⁴⁸ In the next year he wrote to her,

I have narrowly observed you for several years; I have read you over with a lover's eye, with all the friendly jealousy I could . . . And if I have sometimes thought your affection to *me* was a little cooler than formerly, I could not blame you for this; I knew something of myself, and therefore laid the blame where it was due. And I do not desire you to love me any farther than it is

[. . .] a scale

whereby to heavenly love thou may'st ascend.⁴⁹

He had quoted the same line from *Paradise Lost* to another woman several years before.

After his wife's death, John Wesley published in *The Arminian Magazine* a number of the letters written to him by Sarah Ryan, Sarah Crosby, Ann Bolton, and other women correspondents. He did this in the hope that he might be spared some of the rumors that were flying about his correspondence with them. But in very few cases do we have manuscripts of these letters by which we can be assured that the way in which he printed them in *The Arminian Magazine* was in fact the way in which he had received them.

Confidentiality and intimacy were critical issues for the early Methodist movement. Becoming part of a small and intimate community was part of the attraction of early Methodist societies, especially as people were moving from the countryside, where they had webs of social connections extending to generations, to new industrial cities and suburbs, where they were not likely to have such social connections. And Methodism was a "religion of the

⁴⁶ John Wesley, letter to Sarah Ryan, March 25, 1764, in Telford, ed., *Letters*, 4:232-233.

⁴⁷ John Wesley, letter to Mary Wesley, May 18, 1774, in Telford, ed., *Letters*, 6:87.

⁴⁸ John Wesley, letter to Ann Bolton, May 13, 1774; in Telford, ed., *Letters*, 6:85. I am indebted to the Rev. Page Thomas for a great deal of information on Wesley's correspondence with women in the later decades of Wesley's life.

⁴⁹ John Wesley, letter to Ann Bolton, November 26, 1774, in Telford, ed., *Letters*, 6:190-191.

heart,” as John Wesley himself expressed it.⁵⁰ The very first item in standard collections of John Wesley’s sermons is his sermon on “Salvation by Faith,” preached at the University Church of St. Mary the Virgin on June 11, 1738. In it, Wesley borrowed a line from one of the Anglican homilies, explaining that the devils themselves *know* that Jesus is “the holy one of God,” but they nevertheless lack the proper *affection* that would constitute true Christian faith. He pleaded, then, that true Christian faith is “not a train of ideas in the head, but a disposition of the heart.”⁵¹ The Methodist movement consistently cultivated heart-felt repentance, faith, and love for God. The sharing of one’s religious experiences, through societies, classes, bands, testimonies, and correspondence, became a central feature of Methodist culture.

One of John Wesley’s gifts—and in a sense his curse—was the “credulity” of which Charles accused him on more than one occasion. Translated differently, however, “credulity” meant that John was a leader who deeply believed the ordinary folk, “plain people,” as he called them, who were part of the Methodist movement. He had cultivated an alertness to popular religious culture to which Charles and most of his peers never pretended. And this very credulity seems to have made him especially vulnerable to claims that to others seemed like madness or “enthusiasm,” like the claims of a converted sinner who said that she had in fact become a saint by divine grace through John Wesley’s agency.

The attempt to explain John Wesley’s relationships with women has tempted many interpreters. In the 1930s, G. Elsie Harrison applied a Freudian analysis to the topic, seeing in John Wesley an Oedipal attachment to his mother that prevented his having mature relationships with other women.⁵² Specific details of John Wesley’s relationships really are suspicious: for example, the fact that it was consistently younger married women whom he engaged in intimate correspondence. But it has proven difficult for historians to apply psychological and other theories to historic individuals with confidence, since theoretical frameworks, at least prior to the 1970s, tended to presuppose a universality of application across cultural and historical frontiers that is now deeply suspect, and it has also proven difficult to ascertain precisely the historical evidence that could verify or falsify broader theories or schemes.

The fact that these relationships unraveled in a time of war might be significant. A time of war or crisis, and the period leading up to such a crisis,

⁵⁰ Ted A. Campbell, *The Religion of the Heart: A Study of European Religious Life in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Columbia, SC: U South Carolina P, 1991), 1. One instance of the phrase appears in John Wesley’s *Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, Part II: IV:1; in Gerald R. Cragg, ed., *The Appeals to Men of Reason and Religion and Certain Related Open Letters* (Oxford [later “Bicentennial”] Edition of the Works of John Wesley (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1975), 11:250.

⁵¹ John Wesley, Sermon on “Salvation by Faith,” I:1-2; in Albert C. Outler, ed., *Sermons* (Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley) (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984) 1:119-120. The reference is to the Anglican Homily “Of Salvation,” Part III.

⁵² G. Elsie Harrison, *Son to Susanna: The Private Life of John Wesley* (Nashville: Cokesbury Press, 1938).

can be times when customary restraints are relaxed and people are inclined to feel that ordinary rules do not apply. Changes that might have been years in the making sometimes come into the open during a time of crisis. Could it be that a sense of impending crisis led John and Charles Wesley to relate to each other and to others differently than they had in the past? John and Charles, moreover, had acted as moral guides to each other. Once their relationship had frazzled in 1756, might it be that John no longer sensed the responsibility to Charles he had felt in the past, and might this could go some ways towards explaining his then engaging in correspondence and conversation that came to the verge of a betrayal of his relationship to his wife, if not in fact passing that verge?

The evidence of John Wesley's private letters allows us to say a few things with confidence. John Wesley and his brother Charles had taken each other as intimate confidants through a long period of their early adult life, a twenty-two year period from 1726 through 1748. Charles' example shows that this did not preclude the possibility of forging a deep bond with another person, in his case with his wife Sarah. But for John Wesley, forging such a new bond of intimacy proved to be deeply problematic. After his disconnection with Charles, John seems to have shared such a bond with Mary but only for a brief period. His *rapprochement* with Charles was just that, never a deep or intimate friendship. His intimate correspondence with younger women was kept at a certain distance, geographically and with respect to their marital status. John Wesley's gift and curse thus left him alienated from his peers and yet never really one of the "plain people" to whom his movement appealed.