



DISCOVERY

Edited by
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Another Wesley Letter

I sometimes wonder how many hitherto unpublished letters of the Wesleys I have discovered and published in this section of *Methodist History*. I know there are a number, and I am happy to be able to add another letter to the growing list through the kindness and help of my good friend Charles A. Green who is the owner of this letter from John Wesley to Hannah Ball.

After I learned that Green owned this letter, I not only asked him for permission to publish it, but also asked him if he would annotate the letter to place it in its proper perspective. This he kindly consented to do, for which I am grateful both for myself and the readers of *Methodist History*. But a word first about Charles Green, himself.

Charles A. Green is a clergy member of the Southern New Jersey Conference and serves as Chairperson of its Commission on Archives and History. He is appointed as Associate Pastor of the Eddystone-Upland Charge, Eastern Pennsylvania Conference. He is a graduate of Houghton College (B.A.), Harvard Divinity School (S.T.B.), and Princeton Theological Seminary (Th.M.). He is a life member of the Wesley Historical Society, a charter life member of The Charles Wesley Society, a charter member of The Historical Society of The United Methodist Church, and a life member of the Historical Society in the Southern New Jersey Conference. His interest in Methodist history and the Wesleyan heritage goes back to his youth. He is constantly adding to his collection of Methodist hymnals, Methodist historical materials, and items relating to the Wesleys. He has presented programs on John Wesley, Charles Wesley, Methodist hymns, and Methodist heritage to local congregations and district gatherings.

An Unpublished Letter of John Wesley To Hannah Ball, March 29, 1769 with commentary by Charles A. Green

There is no entry in John Wesley's *Journal* for March 29, 1769, the Wednesday after Easter Day (see the Standard Edition, ed. Curnock, Vol. 5, p. 307). Entries for the several previous and following days clearly place

him in Ireland, however, and now we know that he was in Dublin that Wednesday and that he spent part of the day answering some correspondence. Of Wesley's correspondence, Thomas Taylor (1738-1816) said: "Consider again, the multitude of letters upon every subject, which he received, to the amount, sometimes of ten or twelve shillings a day in postage; these letters were to read, and he seldom let any go without answer till his sight failed him" (Taylor, *A Funeral Sermon . . . March 10, 1791*, 19). The reference to the amount of postage reflects the fact that the recipient of correspondence paid the postage. Of the multitude of letters that Wesley wrote, he wrote three times as many to women as to men (Maldwyn Edwards, *My Dear Sister*, 13).

Among the women with whom Wesley corresponded was Hannah Ball (1733-1792). Note that she was 30 years younger than he. But over a period of a quarter of a century the two carried on a correspondence, in which he inquired about Sunday Schools and encouraged Hannah in her work with them, and in which he also gave her instructions for building a new chapel at High Wycombe: "It seems the time is come that you are to have a more commodious preaching-house at High Wycombe. I will give you a plan of the building myself; and employ whom you please to build" (March 13, 1777; *Letters*, Standard Edition, ed. Telford, Vol. 6, 258).

Hannah Ball is best known, however, for her pioneer work in establishing a Sunday School at High Wycombe. Her work preceded the more famous work of Robert Raikes (1735-1811) by some eleven years; his first school was opened in 1780, and hers was opened in 1769 (see *The Dictionary of National Biography*, *ad loc.*). In what Maldwyn Edwards described as "one of her first letters to John Wesley (1770)" (*My Dear Sister*, 76), she tells of the Sunday School: "The children meet twice a week, every Sunday and Monday. They are a wild little company, but seem willing to be instructed. I labour among them, earnestly desiring to promote the interest of the Church of Christ" (December 16, 1770; *Letters*, Vol. 5, 218). In his reply Wesley says: "Go on steadily doing and suffering the holy and acceptable will of God. It pleases Him sometimes to let us sow much seed before there is any visible fruit" (January 24, 1771; *Letters*, Vol. 5, 218).

Had she consulted with him before she opened the Sunday School? It seems reasonable to suppose that she had, and it seems likely that he might have told her, "I have no objection to doing any thing (not Evil) when we feel a strong impression to do it. But it would be wrong to omit or delay doing any good thing, because we do not feel such an impression." We are now squarely on the shaky ground of conjecture, but this much we can say for certain: Hannah Ball apparently did write to Wesley in 1769 and did ask his advice about proceeding with some project; and John Wesley replied in the words just quoted. This was the year in which she opened her Sunday School. Whether her request for advice was about

opening the Sunday School or not is a matter of conjecture, but it is certainly a possibility, and *perhaps* we now have Wesley's first reaction to her proposal.

This unpublished letter from John Wesley to Hannah Ball, written from Dublin on Wednesday, March 29, 1769, also expressed Wesley's view on Christian perfection and offered some encouragement in this doctrine, even in the face of "intricate Questions about Perfection." Whether this comment is in response to some questions arising out of the difference between John and Charles on the nature of Christian perfection, we cannot say. We do know that their differences had become exacerbated with the publication of *Short Hymns* in 1762 and that John had written in response to those differences over a period of several years. Quotations from two letters will suffice to illustrate this point. "I want you to be all love. This is the perfection I believe and teach. . . . Take care you are not hurt by anything in the *Short Hymns* contrary to the doctrines you have long received" (To Dorothy Furly [later Mrs. John Downes, ca. 1731-1807, sister of Rev. Samuel Furly], September 15, 1762; *Letters*, Vol. 4, 188-189). "Is there or is there not any instantaneous sanctification between justification and death? I say, Yes; you (*often seem to*) say, No" (To Charles Wesley, February 12, 1767; *Letters*, Vol. 5, 41) Could it be that this letter of 1769 is yet another of John Wesley's attempts to defend his doctrine? He tells Hannah: "Pure Love is all you want; Uninterrupted Love, filling & ruling the Heart." And his pointed question to her—and to us—is, "Do you feel no Temper contrary to Love? And had you ever, or have you now, a Witness of this in your soul?"

The authenticity of this letter has been verified by Drs. Frank Baker and Kenneth E. Rowe. The complete letter, never before published, follows:

Dublin
March 29, 1769

My Dear Sister

You may still direct [correspondence] to me at the Foundery. I have no objection to doing any thing (not Evil) when we feel a strong impression to do it. But it would be wrong to omit or delay doing any good thing, because we do not feel such an impression. Still our general, invariable rule is, "As we have time, let us do good unto all men."

Undoubtedly you have abundant reason to praise God for what he has done. But do you believe, he has enabled you, to love Him with *all your heart*? Do you feel no Temper contrary to Love? And had you ever, or have you now, a Witness of this in your soul? If so, let not any one puzzle or perplex you, with intricate Questions about Perfection. Pure Love is all you want; Uninterrupted Love, filling & ruling the Heart. This is the Substance; but there may be a thousand Degrees therein, rising one above another. And accordingly, there is a continual room for Growth, in this, as well as every other fruit of the Spirit. I am,

My Dear Sister,
Your Affectionate Brother
J Wesley