

## John Wesley and John Bousell

JOHN BOUSELL was a religious freelance of the eighteenth century whose writings Joseph Smith included in his *Descriptive Catalogue of Friends' Books*—though apparently with some misgivings. His main affinity was undoubtedly with the Friends, though the *General History of Norfolk* quoted by Smith mentioned that he “rendered himself very conspicuous in the Religious world, as he entertained opinions in a great measure peculiar to himself, and which bordered upon Fanaticism.” He was apparently a leather-cutter of Norwich, where he “lived a very abstemious life” for over twenty years, though he is also described as “of Deepham”. His wife appears to have been a member of the Society of Friends, dying on the 16th of the 11th month, 1780, her burial being recorded in the Norfolk Burial Registers.

After his wife's death, Bousell felt moved to a career of spiritual reform, the first object of his enthusiasm being the Baptists of Norwich, to whom in 1787 he addressed *The Ram's Horn Sounded Seven Times*, signing himself “John Bousell, a Disciple of Jesus Christ, and an Offspring of the Primitive Quakers.” His next publication widened its range. It was entitled

*The Trumpet of the Lord Sounded upon the Mountains of those Merchants of Babylon, that have taken upon them to be Teachers to the Congregations under the name of Protestants, Presbyterians, Independents, and Baptists . . . With a Message from the Word of the Lord unto the People called Quakers, showing the primitive and present state of that Society; and an Epistle to the Methodists.*

This pamphlet, published in 1789, sold by booksellers in London, Norwich and Yarmouth, was signed “John Bousell, of the City of Norwich, a Disciple of Jesus Christ, and a Dissenter from the People called Quakers,” a title by which he also described himself in later books.

It is with Bousell's *Trumpet of the Lord*, especially its “Epistle to the Methodists,” that we are now concerned. Having already tried unsuccessfully to reform Methodism personally, Bousell sent a copy of his pamphlet to John

Wesley himself, accompanied by a long and rather wearisome letter, of which it will be sufficient to give characteristic extracts :

October 14, 1789.

Dear Friend John Wesley,

With this I present thee with a pamphlet for thy perusal : if thou art persuaded it is dictated by the Master, receive it as from him. Look not at the instrument ; at the meanness of the vessel by which our heavenly Father conveys us food. I doubt not but thou hast been an instrument in thy Master's hand, of good unto the inhabitants of this nation, in awakening many thousands out of a state of lethargy : go on in the name of the Lord, and may his blessing attend thee, and the Angel of his presence encamp round about thee, and accompany thee through this vale of tears ! And, when thy earthly habitation of clay shall be dissolved, may thy soul be translated into those regions of immortal bliss, where the morning stars sing together, and the Sons of God shout aloud for joy !

I am free to inform thee, my friend, that from my childhood I have been seeking a city called Jerusalem. . . . O that I might gain an entrance in at the gate of the Holy City, . . . and eat of the heavenly fruit of paradise, and live for evermore ! And may thou, my friend, partake with me, may we drink together of the streams of that pure river which proceedeth from the throne of God, clear as crystal ! . . . And may thou, my ancient friend,<sup>1</sup> for whom I feel a sincere regard, pray unto the Lord the fountain of light and wisdom, to direct thy steps in righteousness. . . . May the Lord anoint thy head with holy oil, and cause thy cup to run over ; . . . may my God teach thy hands to war, and thy fingers to fight against the enemies of his holy kingdom : and may thou be instrumental in his hands, in bringing the children of men unto the mountain of the Lord. . . .

If mankind were to hear and obey the voice of the Spirit of God, they need not the teachings of men. If the sheep of the Lord's pasture hearken and obey the voice of the good Shepherd and follow him ; he will lead them into the green pastures . . .

I write not these things, my friend, under an apprehension thou art a stranger unto them, but to stir up the gift of God in thee that thou mayest be exercised under the influence of this divine gift, in forming a people that may live to the praise and glory of God. Remember, the great Apostle Paul saw that after his departure, grievous wolves would creep in, not sparing the flock. O that all who profess themselves Ministers of Christ might move under the constraining influence of pure disinterested love ! . . . In that love that is without dissimulation, I salute thee, and bid thee farewell in the Lord, a travailier for the prosperity of Sion,

John Bausell.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Wesley was then eighty-six.

<sup>2</sup> So spelt in *Arminian Magazine*, 1792, where this letter is given in full.

This rather wordy introduction leads Bousell to what seems to have been the main point of his letter, enshrined in the postscript :

P.S. I am at present separated from all Society. I can see no people I can join in religious fellowship with. I have had two meetings with thy people at North Walsham to comfort ; but was refused the like opportunity last week. The excuse my friend C—made was, it was contrary to thy Rules. I hope thou makest no Rules contrary to the Gospel Rule, to do by others as thou wouldst be done unto : I hope better things of thee. I attempted this summer to speak after the Minister had done in the Tabernacle at London, but they pulled me down. I write these things that thou mayest be instrumental in promoting a more noble liberal conduct among thy people.<sup>1</sup>

I should be glad to see thee with any of thy friends, and if thou feel freedom to have a meeting at my house, it is open to receive thee : and if thou conclude upon it, please to let me know, and I will by divine permission give notice of it next week. I have thought, if thou and those that minister in the word and doctrine among thy people wait upon God to be endued with wisdom and power from him to feed the flock, his blessing will attend you ; but if the Preachers move in their own will and wisdom, the Lord will set them aside, and raise up others to bear testimony to his great power, goodness and love ; for he will have a people that shall worship him under the influence of his own Spirit. These he will own with his presence. Those that honour God he will honour.

John Wesley was usually a man of few words, and in a few words he answered Bousell, prudentially ignoring both complaints and invitation. He replied :

I believe what you say, or write, proceeds from a real desire to promote the glory of God by the salvation of men : Therefore I take in good part all you say, and thank you for your letter to me. Your advice is good as to the substance of it ; little circumstances I do not contend for.

I likewise approve the exhortation, in your printed Treatise, to the people called Methodists. It is quite consistent with what I am saying to them day by day, in private as well as in public : A great number of them have the form of godliness ; but I am jealous over them for fear they should stop there, and imagine they are safe in the form without the power. "In earth, in paradise, in heaven, our all in all is love." Without this we know all religion is a shadow. The Lord fire your heart with this ! So prays

Your affectionate brother,

J. Wesley

<sup>1</sup> Bousell was not then aware that Wesley had no control over Whitefield's Tabernacle in London.

This correspondence was apparently prepared by Wesley himself for publication in his *Arminian Magazine*, though it did not appear there until 1792, after his death. In the number for August of that year a short extract from Bousell's *Epistle to the Methodists* was given, concluding :

Brethren, I know but little of you, but have sometimes found love in my heart toward you. It is in that love that I now write these things. I must now leave you to the Lord.

A foot-note explained that "This was written several years ago ; since that time the Author has been more acquainted with the people called Methodists." Just how well he came to know Methodism we cannot say. Certainly the Methodists of to-day do not recall the name of John Bousell, and when the Standard Edition of *The Letters of John Wesley* was in preparation this correspondence was strangely overlooked.

FRANK BAKER

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A contemporary Friend's views on John Wesley are illustrated in the Rev. Frank Baker's article, entitled *John Wesley and a Quaker mystic* [Richard Freeman], in the September, 1948, issue of the *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society*, vol. 26, pt. 7, 114-18. "Copies of Queries sent by R. Freeman of Yeovil to John Wesley, with the Answers, 1779. Literatim & Verbatim," the document there reproduced, was drawn up by Morris Birkbeck, and is now in Friends' Reference Library. According to Birkbeck's commentary on the correspondence, Richard Freeman was "a moral man, but full of strange Whimsies" and much affected by his reading of mystical writers. This is supported by the character of the twenty queries, to which Wesley sent an answer in full, with intent (according to Birkbeck) to gain a fictitious victory over the Quakers. In Birkbeck's words [Wesley's] "hatred of the Quakers was the motive . . . because the most respectable, truly religious & valuable part of his Converts frequently left him & joined to them (as he has been known *weakly* to acknowledge)."