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JOHN WESLEY ON CHRISTIAN PERFECTION

ALL serious students of Wesley's thought must be indebted to the Rev. George Lawton for his presentation in the last issue of the *Proceedings* (xxxiv, pp. 29-33) of the document on perfection, and the value of the article is greatly increased by the provision of a facsimile. The document is of sufficient importance to discuss at some length, in order to arrive at a more precise definition of its setting and significance.

Mr. Lawton's first question about the possibility that this is a Wesley autograph can quickly be answered. It is not in the handwriting of either John or Charles Wesley. Nor do I regard this as a matter open to reasonable doubt. To quote the document itself, "I affirm it flat and plain". It is true that similarities to Wesley's hand in the formation of some of the letters can be pointed out, as they could be if you or I had transcribed it, but the overall flow of the writing is not Wesley's, and some of the letters he never formed in this way. This is particularly true of *N*, *P*, *R* and *X*, but of other letters also, including the *W* of the signature. Nor is the unscholarly omission of capitals at the beginning of sentences, so frequent in the document itself, though corrected in the transcript, conceivable with Wesley.¹

Nevertheless, in my opinion—and from this point "opinion" commands the stage—this is certainly a document which is genuine in the sense that it conveys Wesley's words as well as his thoughts, even though not in his own hand. Whether it was a simple transcript or a compilation from more than one source; whether it was prepared by his direction, with his acquiescence, or without his knowledge—contemporary copies of Wesley documents were made

¹ There are also two minor errors in the transcript, "yt" (i.e. "that") having twice been misread, once for "the" (in question 3) and once for "this" (in question 18).

in each of these three categories—can only be matter of speculation. Nor would I care to hazard a guess, among hundreds of possibilities, about the identity of the amanuensis, except to state that he seems to have been a contemporary of Wesley—though even here an examination of the paper and ink might just possibly overturn this opinion.

Before discussing Mr. Lawton's suggestions about the nature of the document, I wish to offer three generalizations. First, it seems to me almost certain that this is a *private* document, outlining Wesley's views under the pressure of a specific situation, but not intended for publication as it stands. Secondly, the questions are propounded by an *opponent* rather than by a simple inquirer. The atmosphere of challenge colours both questions and answers. The questions appear to be overstated with some animus, especially those numbered 1, 4, 7, 14, 16 and 17. On the other hand, Wesley's answers are on the defensive rather than merely exploratory or expository, witness especially numbers 1, 4, 7 and 16; in 10, 17 and 18 Wesley turns from defence to something like attack. Thirdly, Wesley is defending not only himself but the Methodists in general. It is of some interest that although most of the answers are in the first person singular, in his reply to question 4 Wesley writes: "We humbly hope that God does not find sin in us." This is hardly the "editorial we"—which in any case he seldom used. In the first answer he combines both singular and plural as he speaks somewhat hesitantly for some of his followers: "I believe some would answer, we trust we do keep the whole law of love."

With these criteria in mind, I would argue that the latter two possibilities set out by Mr. Lawton are very unlikely, namely that the document incorporated the minutes of a formal Methodist conference, or that it provided a model series of questions and answers for Methodist use in the perfection controversy. This throws us back on to the first two suggestions—that it represents either a letter or the record of a conversation. Either of these would seem to be possible, though in each case there are "cons" as well as "pros". Certainly as it stands this is not a letter, though it could be the truncated copy of one. In this connexion one recalls Wesley's correspondence with Richard Freeman, a somewhat confused Quaker.² Strangely enough in this instance also twenty questions were propounded, and were also considerably lengthier than Wesley's laconic replies. My main objection to the letter theory is that Wesley's scrupulous economy of time would almost certainly forbid his incorporating in a private letter a lengthy series of numbered questions in addition to his own answers, naturally assuming that his correspondent would retain a copy of such a document. An open letter for publication might have been treated differently, but this does not seem applicable here. It is possible, of course, that the original

² See *Proceedings*, xxvi, pp. 114-18. The original of Wesley's letter to Freeman, dated 6th August 1779, is at Emory University, Georgia, U.S.A.

manuscript was a questionnaire prepared by Wesley's challenger, with blank spaces for his replies, similar to one which he answered in 1741.³ Or some interested person may have got hold of both questions and answers and combined them into one series, as could well have been done with the two separate items in the Freeman correspondence.

On the whole I incline to the view that this is a record of one of Wesley's interviews, comparable to the famous one with Bishop Butler found among Wesley's papers, or those with the Chicasaw Indians and with Count Zinzendorf, which he himself published in his *Journal*.⁴ Somewhat difficult to reconcile with this view, however, is the comparative lack of logical connexion between a number of the queries, which would seem to favour a prepared set of questions (whether written or spoken) rather than a genuine conversation.

As Mr. Lawton shows, the general setting of the document is in the third quarter of the eighteenth century, before the death of Whitefield in 1770, and probably about 1763. I think that we can pin-point the time more accurately than this, especially by means of the clue of question 19: "Mr. Bell says 'He shall never die'. Do you believe him?"—to which Wesley simply answers "No." Clearly the notorious George Bell is referred to, and to me it also seems certain that at this time the questioner regarded him as one of Wesley's followers—an assumption not challenged by Wesley. The likelihood is, therefore, that the exchange took place after Bell's professed experience of sanctification in March 1761 and before 28th February 1763, which according to Bell was to have been the end of the world—earlier that month he had separated from Wesley.⁵

We can indeed narrow the limits still more, confining the document to the year 1762, which Wesley described in his *Short History of the People called Methodists* as "from the beginning to the end . . . a year never to be forgotten", bringing him "more care and trouble in six months, than in several years preceding".⁶ It was a year of revival, and therefore of spiritual peril. On 5th February he warned London Methodists "of the enthusiasm which was breaking in, by means of two or three weak though good men, who, from a misconstrued text in the Revelation, inferred that they should not die."⁷ One of these was surely George Bell. Wesley left London in March, spent the summer in Ireland, and saw London again for a few days only in August. The *Plain Account of Christian Perfection* shows that the cult of immortality had developed into spiritual chaos during his absence:

³ John Whitehead: *Life of the Rev. John Wesley* (1796), ii, pp. 144-6; cf. Wesley's *Works* (ed. T. Jackson, n.d.), xiii, pp. 509-11.

⁴ Whitehead, *op. cit.*, ii, pp. 118-21; *Standard Journal*, i, pp. 248-50; ii, pp. 487-90.

⁵ Luke Tyerman's *Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley*, ii, pp. 431-41, provides a useful summary of Bell's career.

⁶ *Works*, xiii, p. 353; *Journal*, iv, p. 452.

⁷ *Journal*, iv, p. 486.

Two or three began to take their own imaginations for impressions from God, and thence to suppose that they should never die; and these, labouring to bring others into the same opinion, occasioned much noise and confusion. Soon after, the same persons, with a few more, ran into other extravagances. [He added:] At my return to London, in autumn, some of them stood reprov'd; but others were got above instruction.⁸

His *Journal* for 20th August claims that he "pointed out to those who had more heat than light the snares which they had well nigh fallen into", and describes how on the following day he came to a satisfactory reckoning with Thomas Maxfield. Lulled into a false sense of security, he left for Bristol and the West, but returned to an even worse situation at the end of October.

It is apparently to this interval in the autumn of 1762 that Wesley refers in the continuation of the passage quoted above from the *Plain Account*, though it may take in November as well:

Meantime, a flood of reproach came upon me almost from every quarter: from themselves [i.e. the "enthusiasts"], because I was checking them on all occasions; and from others, because, they said, I did not check them.

The Epworth document seems to represent one of these latter attacks, criticizing Wesley for defending Maxfield and Bell and their supporters. When Wesley returned to London on 30th October one of the first things he did was to prepare a candid critique of Maxfield's theology and conduct—which Maxfield resented.⁹ The second was to hear Bell on several occasions for himself, finally arriving at the decision, on 22nd December, that Bell "must not continue to pray at the Foundery", to which Bell responded by withdrawing from the Methodist society on 4th February 1763.¹⁰

That the Epworth document belongs to the closing months of 1762, before Wesley broke with Bell, seems to be confirmed by its apparent relationship to another document quoted in the *Plain Account*, entitled "Queries, humbly proposed to those who deny perfection to be attainable in this life".¹¹ This Wesley places after Bell's beginning to prophesy the end of the world but before the death of Jane Cooper, which took place towards the end of November. The queries were written by "a plain man" (possibly Wesley himself) in answer to some questions published by those who opposed Christian perfection on account of Bell's extravagances. Some of these twenty-two queries either echo or are echoed by the Epworth document. The first asks: "Has there not been a *larger measure* of the Holy Spirit given under the Gospel than under the Jewish dispensation?"—which is challenged by question 17 of the Epworth document. Among the queries implying the possibility of human sinlessness, at least in the sense of a temporary experience of perfect love, the most interesting for our purpose is the seventeenth: "Do

⁸ *Works*, xi, pp. 406-7.

⁹ *Journal*, iv, pp. 535-8.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, iv, pp. 539-42; v, pp. 4-5.

¹¹ *Plain Account* (1766), pp. 85-8; cf. *Works*, xi, pp. 408-9.

you sincerely *desire* to be freed from indwelling sin *in this life?*", which is echoed by question 11 of the Epworth document.

Far more remarkable, however, are the likenesses between the Epworth document and Wesley's *Farther Thoughts upon Christian Perfection*, published in 1763 and later incorporated in the *Plain Account*. In this Wesley sets out more fully and in the more self-conscious manner befitting publication a number of the points roughly sketched in the manuscript dialogue, including that of sinless perfection (question 7). The point about the repealing of the Adamic law (question 8) is debated at some length. Wesley's answer to the related request for further clarification (question 9) turns up almost word for word in a footnote added in 1773 to the appropriate passage in volume xxiv of Wesley's collected *Works*: "I mean, it is not the condition either of present or future salvation." This almost looks as if when preparing the *Farther Thoughts* section of the *Plain Account* for his *Works* Wesley checked this (and perhaps other related documents), and said to himself: "Yes, probably a footnote along these lines would make the matter even clearer." He did not, however, take any steps to add this footnote to the separate editions of the *Plain Account* which he continued to publish.¹² Question 10, about distinguishing temptation from sin, also appears in similar form, though considerably expanded.¹³ So does question 11, introduced thus: "But how do you *know*, that you are sanctified, saved from your inbred corruption?" The answer is once more provided by a reference to 1 John iv. 13: "By the Spirit that he hath given us".¹⁴

This is not the place for a full analysis of the Epworth document, nor for a detailed comparison with its possible predecessor and probable successor. It seems to me, however, that we can with some reason claim that it represents a controversial exchange in the closing months of 1762 between Wesley and one of the many persons who attacked his moderate stand on the doctrine of Christian perfection, brought into disrepute by the excesses of George Bell and company. As such it is of real importance as another link in the chain of evidence revealing the undoubted development of Wesley's views on this doctrine, which in later years he described as "the grand depositum which God has lodged with the people called Methodists; and for the sake of propagating [which] chiefly He appeared to have raised us up."¹⁵

FRANK BAKER.

¹² *Plain Account* (1766), pp. 98-100; *Works* (1773), xxiv, p. 81 (cf. Jackson edn., n.d., xi, pp. 414-15).

¹³ *Plain Account*, pp. 108-9; cf. *Works* (Jackson edn.), xi, p. 420.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 109; cf. *Works* (Jackson edn.), loc. cit.

¹⁵ *Standard Letters*, viii, p. 238.

The first issue of the new volume of *Cirplan* comes to us in a new shape and size, which makes for easier handling. This number contains, among other items, an index of the first two volumes of *Cirplan* and an article by Mr. Frank Tice on early plans of the Cambridge PM circuit.