

you will do this with as much freedom and loyalty as Wesley brought to the Church of England in his time. Methodism is, and always has been, an interim church: free, on its own principles, to continue its mission as a denomination (or congeries of them) or, to follow the better way and as the Spirit opens the future, to lose our ecclesiastical life in order to save our larger ecumenical soul — provided only that the larger Christian communion be grounded in Scripture, pillared by Tradition and God-given Reason, and crowned with the garlands of experienced grace. What would it avail us if we gained the whole world, denominationally, and forfeited the chance to be a vital part of a church sufficiently catholic to provide all the means of grace for all, sufficiently evangelical to hold to Christ as Lord of the church and of the world, sufficiently willing to be reformed and reforming so that no institutional development would ever become sacrosanct as such.

Like Simeon of old, I have spent a lifetime in the ecumenical temple: waiting, hoping for a sign of the recovery of that unity which God wills for us all, “that the world may believe” (since ecumenism is nothing if not evangelistic). My chances now, as I know very well, are slim. But these investments in ecumenical historiography would seem less quixotic if I could hope and believe that other Methodist historians (and their colleagues in all the other churches) might come to share this vision of a “common Christian history” whose critical study might also help turn us all away from triumphalism and denominationalism to become volunteers in the quest for a renewed and renewing world Christian community in which the Father’s Will — his manifest will for a whole human community in Christ through the Spirit might be realized and enjoyed here on earth, even as always and already it is done in Heaven. Amen.

## 3

*John Wesley, Postal Pastor**Frank Baker*

During the course of an immensely productive lifetime John Wesley probably preached between forty and fifty thousand sermons, the majority in the London area. Against his will, yet seemingly under the constant proddings of the Holy Spirit, he founded and became the alert administrator of a great Christian denomination. Through the printed word in hundreds of volumes produced in millions of copies even during his own lifetime he proclaimed a full Gospel to the ends of the earth and continues to do so. Yet we underestimate his influence if we think of him only as a remarkable author, Church founder, preacher. He was perhaps even more remarkable for the twin ministries of an itinerancy which kept him visible to most of the members of his vast spiritual empire and for the pithy letters by which he directed and inspired them when he himself could not be present with them. Although for every letter he probably preached two sermons, yet I could still claim that one of his greatest contributions to Christian piety was as a postal pastor.

His influential postal ministry may be illustrated by studying some of the themes to which he directed his hundreds of often-trimmed quill pens. Wesley was in correspondence with a multitude of people in all ranks of society. In Britain and Europe and America. For a few weeks, for many months, or for the greater part of his lifetime or theirs. The ties of blood or friendship, the varied occasions which linked him in correspondence with strangers, found expression in many different kinds of letters. Yet to some extent they were all pastoral, all variations upon one all-

pervading theme — personal religion. The Life of God in the Soul of Man. To the Rev. Samuel Walker he wrote “I have one point in view — to promote, so far as I am able, vital, practical religion: by the Grace of God to beget, preserve, and increase the life of God in the Souls of men”. When his wife in psychotic jealousy stole much of his correspondence with women and twisted excerpts to support accusations of infidelity, Wesley wrote to her “The subject of our correspondence was heart-religion, the inward Kingdom of God. You have both their letters and mine. Produce them just as they are. And if they do not answer for themselves to any competent judges, I will bear the blame for ever”. Only a few months before his death it was to this that he urged his nephew Samuel

I fear you want (what you least of all suspect) the greatest thing of all — Religion. I do not mean external religion, but the religion of the heart — the religion which Kempis, Pascal, Fenelon enjoyed: The life of God in the soul of man; the walking with God, and having fellowship with the Father and the Son. . . You are called to know and love the God of Glory: to live in eternity, to walk in eternity: to live the life which is hid with Christ in God. Harken to the advice of one that stands on the edge of eternity.

Nevertheless, although (as he frequently said) “one thing is needful” (Luke 10:42). Many other things were highly important and Wesley’s correspondents drew his attention to almost every subject under Heaven. Though some aspects of the God-guided life were discussed more frequently and stressed more urgently than others.

Wesley’s letters often reveal the preacher wrestling to introduce someone to this life of God in their soul, possibly someone of high social standing such as D’Arcy, Lady Maxwell

Christ has died for *you*; he has bought pardon for *you*. Why should not you receive it *now*? While you have this paper in your hand? Because you have ‘not done’ thus or thus? . . . O let it all go! None but Christ! None but Christ! . . . Do not wait for this or that *preparation* For something to *bring* to God! Bring Christ! Rather, let him bring *you*. Bring you home to God! Lord Jesus,

take her! Take her and all her sins! Take her, *as she is* ‘Take her *now*’. . . Let her sink down into the arms of Thy love, and cry out, “My Lord and my God!”

Perhaps even more frequently he urged his faithful followers to seek “The second blessing”, to “go on to perfection” — a phrase which occurs scores of times, especially in challenging letters to his preachers: “Never be ashamed of the old Methodist doctrine. Press all believers to go on to perfection. Insist everywhere on the second blessing as receivable in a moment, and receivable now, by simple faith”.

In his letters Wesley displayed the Pastor, however, far more than the evangelical preacher. An intelligent as well as concerned spiritual counsellor, he realised the full significance of this ministry by correspondence. Telling one of his inquirers “If no other end be answered by your writing, it may be an ease to your own mind. And we know not but God may apply to your heart a word written as well as a word spoken”. In memorable phrases he often summarized the Christian way, the Christian hope “Keep close to your rule, the Word of God, and to your guide, the Spirit of God; and never be afraid of expecting *too much*”. He prescribed for inquirers various religious exercises “It might be of use if you were to read over the first volume of *Sermons* seriously and with prayer. Indeed, nothing will avail without prayer. Pray, whether you can or not. When you are cheerful, when you are heavy. Pray: with many or few words, or none at all: You will surely find an answer of peace. And why not now?” His pleading advice might be prefaced by a diagnosis of the spiritual problem.

From the time you omitted meeting your class or band you grieved the Holy Spirit of God. . . I exhort you for my sake (who tenderly love you). For God’s sake. For the sake of your own soul. Begin again without delay. The day after you received this. Go and meet a class or a band. Sick or well, go! If you cannot speak a word, go: and God will go with you. You sink under the sin of omission! My friend, my sister, go! Go whether you can or not.

He discussed their spiritual ailments in careful detail

The difference between heaviness and darkness of soul (the wilderness state) should never be forgotten. Darkness (unless in the case of bodily disorder) seldom comes upon us by our own fault. It is not so with respect to heaviness, which may be occasioned by a thousand circumstances, such as frequently neither our wisdom can foresee nor our power prevent.

Mrs Eliza Bennis complained "The inconstancy of my mind is a continual cause of grief to me". Wesley replied

As thinking is the act of an embodied spirit, playing upon a set of material keys, it is not strange that the soul can make but ill music when her instrument is out of tune. This is frequently the case with *you*; and the trouble and anxiety you then feel are a natural effect of the disordered machine, which proportionably disorders the mind.

As with other correspondents, however, he had to return to the same problem more than once, reassuring her "There may be ten thousand wandering thoughts and forgetful intervals, without any breach of love".

Too frequently for Wesley's comfort his calling as a faithful pastor necessitated ministering a rebuke. He wrote to a prosperous merchant condemning not only his love of money but his indulgence in "jesting and foolish talking", and continuing

I fear another hindrance is a kind of natural fickleness and inconstancy of temper. Perhaps it is peculiarly difficult to you to be long at one stay, to retain any impression for any length of time. How often have I known you deeply moved! But did it not pass away as a morning cloud? O that God may stablish your heart in Grace! That you may count all things loss, so you may win Christ!

Similarly Wesley warned a young lady who was preening herself as a writer

My dear maiden, beware of pride! Beware of flattery! Suffer none to commend you to your face. Remember,

one good temper is of more value in the sight of God than a thousand good verses.

Wesley was sensitive to people's temperaments and true needs, however, and therefore undertook the unpleasant task of chiding with great caution so that he cannot have been unduly surprised when the chastised merchant replied with a letter reeking of penitence. He urged others to be equally careful in administering rebuke, writing to Thomas Rankin "I am sorry for poor Tommy Rourke. . . He has much more need of comfort than of reproof. His great danger is despair". He found it far more congenial to offer consolation in distress and sorrow, or practical advice in building a healthy body, a cultured mind, happy human relationships.

Wesley's letters abound in health hints. Typical was his laconic advice to Lady Maxwell "I believe medicines will do you little service; you need only proper diet, exact regularity, and constant exercise, with the blessing of God". The diets he prescribed might be approved today: eating meat in moderation, fruit and vegetables in abundance, and for "the flux" (diarrhoea) a light diet with milk puddings, toast and lemonade. He told his niece Sally that like many people she suffered from an unrecognized ailment — "intemperance in sleep" and went on

after all the observations and inquiries I have been able to make for upwards of fifty years, I am fully persuaded that men in general need between six and seven hours' sleep in four-and-twenty, and women in general a little more — namely, between seven and eight. . . I advise you, therefore, from this day (forward) . . . to take exactly so (much) sleep as nature requires, and no more.

Exercise he constantly urged on the sedentary, such as the young candidate for Holy Orders, Samuel Furly "You must, absolutely must, find time for exercise. otherwise you are penny wise and pound foolish. For one fit of sickness will cost you more time than you have saved in several years."

In addition to suggestions about regimen, however, Wesley did echo his *Primitive Physic* in ordering cures for scores of specific ailments: For Colic, Gall-Stone, Gout (a Wesley family complaint), Hoarseness, The Itch, Mortification, Nettle Rash, and Scorbutic Sores to name a few. Usually diet, medicine, and exercise were

combined in his prescriptions, as in this to Mrs Christian

The gravel may be easily prevented by eating a small crust of bread the size of a walnut every morning, fasting. But your nervous disorders will not be removed without constant exercise. If you can have no other, you should daily ride a wooden horse, which is only a double plank nine or ten feet long, properly placed upon two trestles. This has removed many distempers and saved abundance of lives. I should advise you likewise to use nettle tea (six or eight leaves) instead of foreign tea for a month, and probably you will see a great change.

Another aspect of Wesley's pastoral concern which shows up frequently in his letters is his enthusiasm as an educator. He served as a private correspondence tutor for several young men and women offering them advice on methods of study, the reading of specific books and even a five-year course of study. This he urged them to follow faithfully, because, as he told Joseph Benson "When I recommend to anyone a method or scheme of study, I do not barely consider this or that book separately, but in conjunction with the rest," adding "and what I recommend, I *know*: I know both the style and the sentiments of each author, and how he will confirm or illustrate what goes before, and prepare for what comes after." His guidance for young ladies was a little less rigid. And he wrote to his niece Sally "Might not you read two or three hours in the morning, and one or two in the afternoon? When you are tired with severer studies, you may relax your mind by history or poetry". He was especially concerned that his preachers should develop their minds. To John Trembath he wrote

What has exceedingly hurt you...is want of reading...hence your talent in preaching does not increase...It is lively, but not deep; there is little variety; there is no compass of thought. Reading only can supply this, with meditation and daily prayer...O begin! Fix some part of every day for private exercises...Whether you like it or no, read and pray daily. It is for your life; there is no other way: Else you will be a trifler all your days, and a pretty, superficial preacher.

People wrote to Wesley about the perplexities of human relationships in general. And he proved a faithful pastor in seeking to reconcile those who were estranged, such as Jasper Winscom and his son: "You may say, "Well, what would you advise me to do now?" I advise you to forgive him. I advise you to lay aside your anger (it is high time), and to receive him again (occasionally) into your house. For you need forgiveness yourself; and if you do not forgive, you cannot be forgiven!" The relational problems with which Wesley found himself confronted most frequently seem to have been those of courtship and marriage. He wrote to one young lady "Nothing under heaven is so critical and so dangerous as what is commonly called, "The time of courtship". But God is able, even now, to cause all graces to abound, and to perfect his strength in your weakness". He laid down one basic rule: Parental obedience. He stated that if a preacher "married a person without the consent of her parents he would thereby exclude himself out of the Methodist connexion". He was therefore ready to intervene when a local preacher ventured on this slippery ground

I was much concerned yesterday when I heard you were likely to marry a woman against the consent of your parents. I have never, in an observation of fifty years, known such a marriage attended with a blessing. I know not how it should, since it is flatly contrary to the fifth commandment. I told my own mother, pressing me to marry, "I dare not allow you a *positive* voice herein; I dare not marry a person because you *bid* me. But I must allow you a negative voice: I will marry no person if you *forbid*. I know it would be a sin against God."

He himself expressed his judgement on the choice of prospective partners. "I believe J(ohn) D(ownes) is thoroughly desirous of being wholly devoted to God, and that (if you alter your condition at all) you cannot choose a more proper person". Sometimes he corresponded with both man and woman about their proposed marriage, occasionally in the same letter.

When Wesley, as a Father in God, did frown on a proposed marriage, and the match was broken off, he remained deeply concerned to heal the resulting wounds, even praising the benefits of a single life, upon which he had published a pamphlet. His first

extant letter to Ann Bolton began

My dear Sister. The best and most desirable thing of all is that you should live and die wholly devoted to God, waiting upon him without distraction... An whole burnt sacrifice of love. If you have not steadiness and resolution for this, the next thing to be desired is that you marry a man of faith and love, who has a good temper and a good understanding. The temptation you are now in was perhaps the most dangerous one you ever had in your life. God deliver you from that almost certain destruction which attends the being unequally yoked to an unbeliever.

After an intervening personal conversation he wrote again

It was not a small deliverance which you had in escaping the being joined to one who was not what he seemed. If he had acted thus after you was married, it would almost have broke your heart. See how the Lord careth for you! Surely the hairs of your head are all numbered.

Less than ten years later he was again emphasizing the same point to the same person

God has lately delivered you out of imminent danger, that of being unequally yoked with an unbeliever. That he is so now will admit of no dispute. And it is not plain that ever he was otherwise... And now, instead of praising God for your great deliverance, you are reasoning against him, as (if) it were no deliverance at all!... My Nancy, arise and shake yourself from the dust! You have acted wisely and faithfully. God has heard your prayer; and he is well pleased with the sacrifice you have made. Admit no thought to the contrary.

Far less attention seems to have been devoted (as was the custom of that age) to problems within marriage — with which Wesley himself was not unacquainted. But examples are present, and although in general Wesley courteously withdrew from the scene when a female correspondent married, there were exceptions, such as that of Jane Hilton, through whom he continued to assist

both partners in building a happy home in Beverley after she became Mrs Barton.

During his middle and later years a large proportion of Wesley's letters were concerned with the well-being of his societies. In large measure the administration of these was delegated to their lay officers. The Band-leaders, the Class-leaders, the Stewards, under the oversight of the preachers stationed in each circuit, or group of societies. To Miss March, a Band-leader, for instance, he wrote about the small fellowship group under her oversight

As to your band, there are two sorts of persons with whom you may have to do — the earnest and the slack. The way you are to talk with the one is quite different from that... with the other. The latter you must *search*, and find out why they are slack; exhort them to repent, be zealous, do the first works. The former you have only to encourage, to exhort to push forward to the mark, to bid them grasp the prize so nigh! And do so yourself.

The preachers, of course, were of key importance and Wesley tried to keep in touch with all of them personally and seems to have made a point of writing to the senior preacher, or *Assistant* in each circuit, at least annually. As we have seen, by means of his letters he guided his preachers' studies and their matrimonial ventures. He also sent them books and advanced them money. He advised them on their preaching, especially along the lines of a letter to Thomas Rankin "Likewise, be temperate in speaking — never too loud, never too long". While he urged some to work harder, he advised others to ease off, warning them

We must not offer murder for sacrifice. *We are not at liberty to impair* our own health in hopes of doing good to others.

He also insisted that they must give careful attention to discipline

If a man preach like an angel, he will do little good without exact discipline.

Very occasionally he stepped in with his personal authority to bolster their own in a troublesome situation, somewhat like a

headmaster dealing in his study with an unruly pupil long suffered by an almost despairing teacher.

In his later years Wesley's vision of God's task for the Methodists became ecumenical. He realized that it was hardly possible to send any more preachers to America until the *troubles* were over.

But in 1784 he sent vicarious ordination, a revised Book of Common Prayer, and his blessing, in a pastoral letter ending

As our American brethren are now totally disentangled both from the State and from the English hierarchy, we dare not entangle them again, either with the one or the other. They are now at full liberty wherewith God has so strangely made them free.

Constantly, however, he sought to tighten the bonds between Methodists in the United States, in British North America and in the United Kingdom, and within a month of his death went beyond even this, exhorting Ezekiel Cooper in America

See that you never give place to one thought of separating from your brethren in Europe. Lose no opportunity of declaring to all men that the Methodists are one people in all the world.

It is an amazing thing to realise that even during his eighties Wesley continued to be active in his travelling and preaching, and became even more busied in his pastoral role as letter-writer. Two of his basic principles, made known through his letters during these late years, did not ease his burden "I generally write to all that desire it, though not often in many words" As a result Henry Moore wrote: "Mr Wesley had many correspondents; and it often surprised his friends that he could answer one-fourth of the letters he received". Well over half of Wesley's extant letters were written after he had reached the age of 70. Undoubtedly this was in part because a somewhat larger proportion of his later letters were preserved by eager devotees, and because improved postal services had led to a general increase in letter writing. The major factor governing this great increase during his later years, however, was surely the demands made upon Wesley's pastoral concern by a rapidly growing Methodist community, combined with his phenomenal vigour. Even during the last two months in London

before his death he corresponded with more people and wrote more letters than are noted for the first ten years of his letter writing life! His last word in one of these, before the closing greetings, was "I hope I shall not live to be useless". Perhaps the very last, written less than a week before his death, voiced a rousing challenge to William Wilberforce, "Go on, in the name of God, and in the power of his might, till even American slavery (the vilest that ever saw the sun) shall vanish away before it". Even a superficial study of John Wesley's letters shows that indeed he did not "live to be useless".

#### *Editorial Note*

All the letters referred to in this paper are contained in *The Works of John Wesley*, edited by the author of this paper, Dr Frank Baker. The first volume of the Letters of John Wesley (Volume 25 in the *Works*) has recently been published by Clarendon Press, Oxford. This contains the letters of John Wesley 1721-1739. Five other volumes of letters are being published. These are portion of a planned 34 volume edition of Wesley's works, known as *The Oxford Edition of Wesley's Works*.