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Reforming the Church
Charles Wesley’s Ecclesiology
and the Role of Lay Preachers

Patrick A. Eby

Charles Wesley was known for his love of the Church of England. The extent of this commitment was reflected in his choice to be buried in the parish churchyard of St. Mary’s, Marylebone instead of in the crypt John had prepared for him behind Wesley’s Chapel. Throughout his life he continued to be committed to the liturgy of the Church of England, reading her offices daily, taking Holy Communion about once a week, and preaching from her pulpits whenever the opportunity arose. He also defended what he thought was her true theology, the theology of the early reformers as stated in the homilies. This love of and commitment to the Established Church and her ordinances made it more difficult for him to accept some of the extraordinary means that were a part of the evangelical revival. His love for the Church was not blind; in fact he was concerned about some of the challenges to her theology. These challenges, and the laxity of practice by some of her clergy led Charles to question her health. His love of the Church, and his concern for her health presented Charles with a dilemma: How could he renew or restore the Established Church, without either leaving or being driven from her doors?

In order to understand the kind of renewal Charles desired, it is important to explore the following questions. First—What type of reformation or renewal did Charles believe the Church of England needed? Second—What actions did Charles take (in concert with others) to effect this reformation? Third—How were these actions received and/or perceived by those in the Church of England? For the purpose of this study these questions will be applied to the role of the itinerant lay preachers in the evangelical revival, particularly in the early 1750s when John asked Charles to examine the lay preachers, in part because of the Wheatley affair.1

Itinerant lay preachers were seen as an important part of the Methodist movement, but were rejected by many in the Church of England. Many perceived the use of itinerant lay preachers as a partial separation. Charles Wesley’s recognition of this perception, and his fear that the extraordinary ministry of lay preaching would become ordinary, explain, at least in part, his desire to limit the role and influence of the itinerant lay preachers in the 1750s. The way Charles expressed his displeasure at the ministry of the itinerant lay preachers mirrored two contemporary criticisms. The first was Charles’s criticism of some of the

clergy of Church of England. The second was the criticism of the itinerant lay preachers by some within the Church of England.

Charles Wesley’s assessment of the need for a reformation of the Church of England in the eighteenth century may miss the mark, but to understand Charles’s actions the accuracy of his judgment is not as important as what he perceived to be the needs of the Church, and the steps he would take to meet those needs. In his *Epistle to the Reverend Mr. John Wesley*, Charles recounted what he felt were several weaknesses within the Church of England. Even in this bleak assessment of the Established Church, he still asserted his fondness of and his commitment to her. His concerns were primarily theological and practical.

Charles was concerned with the desire of some to repeal her creeds and laws, even to change her liturgy. Maybe his greatest concern was a Christology that denied the divinity of Christ. In this epistle Charles described what he saw as the “true Church,” and where that Church was to be found. He criticized a first group within the Church because they were setting aside those things, which Charles thought defined the Church. He wrote the Church would not be found in those,

Who *wou’d* her Creeds repeal, her Laws deride,
Her Prayers expunge, her Articles disown,
And thrust the Filial Godhead from his Throne.²

Charles’s assessment of a second group within the Church of England started on a positive note. This group was committed to the local parish. Unlike the first group they subscribed to the creeds, articles, and liturgy of the Church, but according to Charles, they still were lacking, because they rejected the need for faith. Charles in effect rejected this group’s soteriology, because he felt it denied experiential faith as a sign of enthusiasm.

“The Company of faithful Souls” are These,
Who strive to ‘stablish their own Righteousness,
But count the Faith Divine a Mad-man’s Dream?
Howe’er they to themselves may Pillars seem,
Of Christ, and of his Church they make no Part:
They never knew the Saviour in their Heart.³

Another theological problem with which the Church of England struggled was the role of things indifferent, or the *adiaphora*. One specific issue was the vestments controversy. Charles showed his lack of concern for these arguments, and even implied these arguments are a waste of theological breath.

² Charles Wesley, *An Epistle to the Reverend Mr. John Wesley* (London: J. Robinson, 1755), 4; henceforth cited as “Wesley” followed by page number(s).
³ Wesley, pp. 4–5.
Let Others for the Shape and Colour fight
Of Garments short or long, or black or white;
...
Copes, Hoods, and Surplices the Church miscall,
And fiercely run their Heads against the Wall.⁴

It was not only the challenges to the theology of the Church of England that concerned Charles; he also was concerned with the practices of some of her leaders. Although not a new problem, Charles was concerned with the problem of absenteeism. He portrayed this as a problem of laziness and greed.

The Altars theirs, who will not light the Fire,
Who spurn the Labour, but accept the Hire,
Who not for Souls, but their own Bodies care,
And leave to Underlings the Task of Pray'r?⁵

Charles Wesley also argued the Church was no longer filled with saints, instead it was filled with those who were "Sensual, Covetous, and Proud."⁶

Charles Wesley, like his brother John, traced many of the ethical problems in the Church to pride and riches. One source of this pride and riches was the influence of the state. It was because of the influence of the state that the Church had added many "Human Appendages of Pomp and Power."⁷ It was these additions that Charles proclaimed were "Wide of the Church, as Hell from Heav'n is wide, / The Blaze of Riches, and the Glare of Pride."⁸

Charles Wesley was not only concerned with the abuses he saw in the Church, he was interested in promoting a certain distinct form of theology and practice, which he thought reflected that of the early English Reformers. Two examples from his epistle to his brother illustrate some of his interests. His soteriology focused on an assurance of faith, which worked by "humble love." Those who had this assurance would be marked by a purity of worship, which included using the means of grace and showing a reverence for the leaders of the state.

“All who have felt, deliver'd from above,
The holy Faith that works by humble Love,
All that in pure religious Worship join,
Led by the Spirit, and the Word divine,
Duly the Christian Mysteries partake,
And bow to Governors for Conscience Sake.”⁹

⁴ Wesley, p. 6.
⁵ Wesley, p. 4.
⁶ Wesley.
⁷ Wesley, p. 5.
⁸ Wesley.
⁹ Wesley. This passage is set off by quotes in the original.
He also described an ideal image of the Church. It was a pure Church, marked by piety, and both internal and external holiness.

Diffus’d her true essential Piety,
... 
Clad in the simple, pure, primeval Dress,
And beauteous with internal Holiness,
Wash’d by the Spirit and the Word from Sin,
Fair without Spot, and glorious all within.10

These challenges to the theology of the Church created a problem for Charles.11 How could he work to reform the Church and at the same time remain faithful to her? How do you challenge something, while at the same time showing it respect? Charles, like his brother John, had varied “from them [the Bishops] in some points of discipline; (by preaching abroad, for instance, praying extempore, and by forming societies;).”12 In the Epistle to his brother, Charles described these choices as becoming

Vile for her Sake, expos’d to general Scorn,
Thrust out as from her Pale, I gladly roam,
Banish myself to bring her Wanderers home.13

Although it may seem that he had turned schismatic through these extraordinary methods, he never stopped emphasizing the importance of staying in the Church. As a result of these two seemingly incompatible emphases, Charles felt he had been rejected both by the Church and the Dissenters. He wrote,

By Bigots branded for a Schismatick,
By real Schismaticks disown’d, decry’d,
As a blind Bigot on the Church’s Side:14

Through a set of questions at the end of An Epistle to the Reverend Mr. John Wesley, Charles reminded John why they had chosen to become vile.

10 Wesley, pp. 6–7.
11 This is a problem that is not unique to Charles in the Evangelical revival, but it is impossible in a paper of this scope to address more than Charles’s recognition and response to this problem.
12 Thomas Jackson, The Life of the Rev. Charles Wesley, M.A., 2 vols., vol. 2 (London: John Mason, 1841), 396–98. This quote is in a letter from Charles to John dated Sept. 8, 1785. This passage is a quote from John’s reasons against separating from the Church. Charles added to the end of the quote “[might you not add, and by ordaining?]”
13 Wesley, p. 10.
14 Wesley.
Reforming the Church: Charles Wesley and the Lay Preachers

When first sent forth to minister the Word,
Say, did we preach ourselves, or Christ the Lord?
Was it our Aim Disciples to collect,
To raise a Party, or to found a Sect?
No; but to spread the Power of Jesus' Name,
Repair the Walls of our Jerusalem,
Revive the Piety of ancient Days,
And fill the Earth with our Redeemer's Praise.15

Charles's Epistle received a response he probably didn't foresee. A treatise condemning much of what Charles wrote was published under the pseudonym Christophilus. According to Christophilus, the Methodists, and specifically Charles in this Epistle, were guilty of pride. He believed Charles was setting his private judgment above the judgment of the people God had placed in authority. According to Christophilus, by Charles's broad attack on "The company of faithful Souls," he had, taken the priesthood out of the hands of God's chosen. Charles was acting like those rebels of old who rejected the leadership of Moses and Aaron. He continued by reminding schismatics that he was "afraid they will one day find themselves in as bad a case as Korah and his company."16 Christophilus argued that true holiness was always accompanied "with true humility and charity, as well as faith that worketh by love."17 Instead of humility, the Methodists were "puffed up with spiritual pride and good opinions of themselves."18 One way the Methodists expressed this pride was in the way they attacked the leaders in the Church of England, but there was a second, equally dangerous way that they showed their pride according to Christophilus: they encouraged people to preach who had not been sent by the Established Church.19 In the end, Christophilus believed that Charles's and John's attempt to reform the Church would end in the division and destruction of the Church.

Christophilus was not alone in his criticism of the Methodist movement. Donald Kirkham listed several attacks made on the evangelical revival. In his chapter on "The Church in Danger," he listed five main criticisms of the Methodist movement: "the Methodists were contemptuous of the clergy, they altered the Church's doctrine, they depreciated the liturgy, they rejected the Church's discipline, [and] they engineered schism."20 According to Kirkham, Whitefield was the rashest in his criticism of the clergy, although John Wesley and the lay preachers were also guilty of criticizing the clergy.21 This rash criti-

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15 Wesley, p. 11.
16 Christophilus, A Serious Inquiry whether A late Epistle from the Rev. Mr. Charles Wesley to the Rev. Mr. John Wesley be not . . . . ([London?): Printed for the Author, 1755), p. 7.
17 Ibid., p. 7.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid., p. 11.
21 Ibid., p. 237.
cism did not promote reformation, instead it brought polarization. Kirkham noted that the criticism of Christophilus—that Charles and John had undermined or rejected the Church’s discipline by appointing lay preachers—was endorsed by several opponents of the Methodists. Some even began referring to John Wesley as a bishop because he appointed lay preachers and “excommunicated” backsliders. John was also criticized for issuing “what amounted to an episcopal pastoral letter.” Although Kirkham says these things about John, some of the same criticisms may apply to Charles’s ministry, especially during the early years of the revival.

Kirkham summarized the activities that caused the Methodists to be branded as schismatics. They included: Field preaching, the use of extemporaneous prayers and sermons, itinerancy, the establishment of societies, the formation of bands and classes, the use of lay preachers, the erection of meeting houses, the innovation of love feasts and watch night services.

Even in the midst of these criticisms, there were still some in the Church of England who saw the value of Methodism. One example was Richard Hardy. In the early 1760s he argued that the Methodists had completed their reform of the Church and he was concerned about the continued use of itinerant lay preachers. He believed that the next step the Methodists should take, in order to protect the gains of the reformation and to prevent a schism, was to recall or suppress the itinerant lay preachers.

From this brief study, the following problems or concerns were stated in criticism of either the clergy of the Established Church, or in the Church’s criticism of the Methodist movement. Each thought the other was guilty of pride and a poor theology. The clergy of the Established Church were criticized for being lazy, greedy, sensual, covetous, and too attached to riches. The Methodists were accused of attacking the leaders in the Church of England, of using lay preachers, and of the use of many other extraordinary means. As I have already noted, Charles Wesley’s interaction with the itinerant lay preachers mirrored the disapproval he had of some in the Church of England, specifically the questions he expressed about their character. He also shared some of the concerns the Church of England clergy had with the Methodist movement. How exactly did Charles express these concerns?

Some of his concerns can be seen in a manuscript called The Preachers: 1751. This manuscript includes notes from Charles’s trip in July and August of 1751 in which he examined some of the preachers. It also includes a section enti-

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22 Ibid., p. 249.
23 Ibid., p. 254.
24 Ibid., p. 254.
25 Richard Hardy, A Letter from a Clergyman, to One of His Parishioners, Who Was Inclined to Turn Methodist . . . . (London: Printed for the Author, 1763), pp. 85–86.
tled "Hints for Conversation, out of my Br[other]'s Letters." In this section, Charles recorded excerpts from some of his brother's letters. Below each excerpt he put a question to ask John. In response to John noting that Charles Skelton and J. Cownley were railing against the Church more often, and with more bitterness, Charles wrote,

What assurance can we have that they will not forsake it, at least when we are dead? Ought we to admit any man for a preacher till we can trust his invariable attachment to the Church? 

Another major concern for Charles was to limit the number and influence of the itinerant lay preachers. The difference with John over the lay preachers was not limited to whether the grace or the gifts of the lay preacher was more important. Charles was concerned with the very role of the lay preacher. John was interested in staffing the societies; Charles wanted itinerant lay preachers whose extraordinary ministry would be temporary, ending when they had sparked a reformation in the ordinary ministers of the Church. If a lay minister desired a more permanent ministry they should pursue ordination in the Established Church. In notes from his examination of the preachers in 1751, Charles made it clear that most of the preachers he had interviewed needed to go back to work. He wrote, "The most effectual the only way (in my Judgment) [to avoid schism] is TO SET THEM TO WORK AGAIN. All of them, I mean, excepting a few, whom we can entirely trust." He expressed these concerns in a much more measured tone with his brother at this time. Later in his life, Charles's poetry dealing with lay preachers and ordination becomes much more abrasive. As his brother pushed for more lay preachers at this point in time, Charles questioned the qualifications of those they already had. In his Hints he wrote, "Should we

26 MS The Preachers, 1751. Presently in the MARC. The “Hints for Conversation, out of my Br[other]'s Letters” from this manuscript are included in Frank Baker, ed., Letters II: 1740–1755, The Works of John Wesley, vol. 26 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), pp. 470–481. Henceforth this section of the manuscript will be referred to as Hints in the text, and cited from Baker, ed., Letters II: 1740–1755. A section written in shorthand and a section with notes written in another hand are included in MS The Preachers, 1751.


28 In a letter dated Aug 8, 1751, John told his brother, “We must have forty itinerant preachers, or drop some of our societies.” Ibid., p. 473. Later in a letter to John Downes(?), John admitted that his brother was right to focus on the quality of the preachers instead of filling societies. He wrote, “I see plainly, the spirit of Ham, if not of Korah, has fully possessed several of our preachers. So much the more freely and firmly do I acquiesce in the determination of my brother that it is far better for us to have ten, or six preachers who are alive to God, sound in faith, and of one heart with us, and with one another, than fifty of whom we have no such assurance.” Ibid., p. 476.


30 MS The Preachers 1751. Emphasis is in the original. Capitalized words are printed in block letters instead of Charles’s usual cursive style.
not first regulate, reform, and bring into discipline, the preachers we have, before we look for more?”31 In the Hints, he also questioned the very practice of sending preachers. He asked, “How far do, or ought we to, send men to preach? How does this differ from ordaining?”32 It was during this period that Charles sent a letter to Lady Huntingdon that was intercepted by John. In it Charles noted that one of the reasons he was involved in purging the preachers was to break John’s power over the preachers, and to limit his authority.33 Was Charles in both of these instances, i.e., in attempting to break the power of John and in his purging of the pastors, trying to limit the role of both John and of the lay preachers because he felt appointing preachers was an Episcopal responsibility, and that John by appointing lay preachers had set himself up as a bishop? This is a criticism he will spell out with clarity after John ordains Coke in 1784.

So easily are Bishops made
By man’s, or woman’s whim?
W[esley] his hands on C[oke] hath laid,
But who laid hands on Him?34

The lay preachers only pushed for ordination after they failed to receive permission from John to administer the Lord’s Supper. If Charles was aware of their desire in 1751 when he examined the lay preachers, he does not mention it in his notes; but in 1755, when Charles and Edward Perronet took the lead in requesting permission to administer the Lord’s Supper, Charles leveled one of the same charges he leveled at the lay preachers in 1751; they were being arrogant.35

A third concern for Charles was the character of the lay preachers. Some were lazy. Some were proud. Some saw entering the ministry as a way to gain respect. Charles’s attitude toward these types of preachers, which his brother had appointed, can be found clearly stated in a journal entry omitted in Jackson’s edition of the Journal.

Spoke kindly to Jo. Hewish and got from him his Book and Licence to preach. I wish he were the only worthless, senseless, graceless man to whom my brother had given the same encouragement under his hand.36

32 Ibid., p. 471.
33 Ibid., p. 479.
According to Richard Heitzenrater this was not a new complaint for Charles; he had complained about the inadequacies of the lay preachers since about 1741.\textsuperscript{37} Both John and Charles agreed that one of the major problems facing them was that many preachers would not work (of course their idea of what constituted a full day's work may seem excessive to some of us today). John noted how idleness, namely, "absolute idleness," had damaged the work in Ireland. Because he feared some of his preachers were idle, John wanted Charles to ask them how they spent their day. If they were idle, Charles should suggest that they either return to their trades or spend the same amount of time reading they had formerly spent working. John stated his disappointment with lazy preachers, "If our preachers do not or will not spend all their time in study and saving souls, they must be employed close in other work, or perish."\textsuperscript{38} Charles responded to the idleness of the preachers by suggesting that the only way to solve the problem was for them to go back to their trade, which would result in their ceasing to itinerate, but not necessarily keep them from preaching locally. He wrote, "Has not God showed us both the disease and the remedy?"\textsuperscript{39} Charles confronted Michael Fenwick, a lay preacher who was lazy. Charles recorded the following reflections on his conversation with Fenwick, "I talked closely with him, utterly averse to working, and told him plainly he should either labour with his hands or preach no more."\textsuperscript{40}

Charles's work with the lay preachers is a clear example of how he tried to balance a commitment to the Church with a desire to see her reformed. At times Charles saw the benefit of lay preaching, but when it seemed to him to be leading to separation, he worked to limit the role and influence of the itinerant lay preachers. It seems probable, that one of the reasons that Charles withdrew from working with John in leadership of the Methodist movement in the 1750s was he felt that what began as a extraordinary ministry, the use of itinerant lay preachers, had become ordinary. In the end, Charles felt that the continued use of itinerant lay preachers would not lead to a reformation of the Church of England, instead it would lead to the Methodists leaving the Church of England, which would weaken her health and strength.

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\textsuperscript{37} Heitzenrater, p. 488.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid.
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