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Charles Wesley and the Lay Preachers: Reformation without Schism

Charles Wesley's love for the Church of England made it more difficult for him to accept some of the extraordinary means that were a part of the evangelical reformation. Because of his great love and commitment to the Established Church, he wanted to see her healthy, but He felt her health was threatened by changes in theology and by the laxity of practice by some of her clergy. The question he faced was how to bring change and renewal without either leaving or being driven from the Church. The following questions help to reveal the balance Charles tried to have between his love and commitment to the Church and his desire to see her reformed. First, what type of reformation 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 action received and/or perceived by those in the Church of England? For the purpose of this paper I would like to apply these questions more narrowly to the role of the lay preachers in the evangelical revival.

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 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, least in part, his desire to limit the role and influence of the lay preachers in the 1750's. By the 1750's, lay preachers were guilty of some of the same abuses for which Charles had criticized members of the Church of England clergy. Charles also reflected some of

the same criticisms of the lay preachers that were being expressed by the Church of England clergy.

Whether John and Charles Wesley's assessment of the need for a reformation of the Church of England in the eighteenth century was correct or not is not as important as what they perceived was the needs of the Church, and the steps they would go to meet that needs. In his *Epistle to the Reverend Mr. John Wesley*, Charles recounted what he felt were several weaknesses within the Church of England. Although his appraisal of the health and vitality of the Church of England was very bleak, he still asserted his fondness of and committed to her. His concerns could be divided into two main categories. He had both theological and practical concerns.

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. Charles writes this epistle in part to describe what he saw as the true Church. Where could that true Church be found? He wrote that 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.¹

Charles portrayed a second group within the Church in a more positive light. This group was committed to their local parish. 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.

“The Company of faithful Souls” are These,
Who strive to ‘stablish their own Righteousness,

¹ Charles Wesley, *An Epistle to the Reverend Mr. John Wesley* (London: J. Robinson, 1755), 4.

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.²

A third theological problem for Charles was the constant struggle over things indifferent. One specific issue was the vestments controversy.

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*.³

Charles also had concerns with the practice of the some of the leaders of the Church. Although not a new problem, Charles was concerned with the problem of absenteeism. He portrayed this as a problem of laziness and of 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 Talk of Pray'r?⁴

Charles Wesley also said the Church was no longer filled with saints, instead it was filled with those who were "Sensual, Covetous, and Proud."⁵

Charles Wesley, like his brother traced many of the ethical problems in the Church to pride and riches. One source of the pride and riches found in the Church was the influence of the State. Because of the State, the Church had added many of these "Human Appendages of Pomp and Power."⁶ It was these additions that Charles

² Wesley, 4-5.

³ Wesley, 6.

⁴ Wesley, 4.

⁵ Wesley, 4.

⁶ Wesley, 5.

proclaimed were “Wide of the Church, as Hell from Heav’n is wide,/ The Blaze of Riches, and the Glare of Pride.”⁷

It was not only the abuses that concerned Charles Wesley. He was interested in promoting a certain theology and practice. Two examples from his epistle to his brother illustrate this interest. 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.⁸

He also described his ideal image of the Church. It was a pure Church, marked by piety and holiness, a holiness which marks were more internal than external.

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.⁹

The problem that Charles, and some of the other leaders of the evangelical revival faced, was how to reform the Church and yet remain faithful to her. Charles like his brother John had varied “from them [the Bishops] in some points of discipline; (by

⁷ Wesley, 5.

⁸ Wesley, 5.

⁹ Wesley, 6-7.

preaching abroad, for instance, praying extempore, and by forming societies;).”¹⁰ In the *Epistle* 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.¹¹

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 emphasizes, both the Church and the Dissenters rejected him, at least in part. He wrote,

By Bigots branded for a Schismatick,
By real Schismaticks disown’d, decry’d,
As a blind Bigot on the Church’s Side:¹²

At the end of his *Epistle*, Charles, through a set of questions reminded John why they had chosen to become vile.

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.¹³

One response to Charles’s *Epistle* was a treatise published under the pseudonym Christophilus. According to Christophilus, the Methodists, and specifically, Charles in

¹⁰ 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?)”

¹¹ Wesley, 10.

¹² Wesley, 10.

¹³ Wesley, 11.

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 in the Church. 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."¹⁴ Christophilus argued that true holiness was always accompanied "with true humility and charity."¹⁵ Instead of humility, the Methodists were "puffed up with spiritual pride and good opinions of themselves...."¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ In the end, Christophilus believed that Charles 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

¹⁴ 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), 7.

¹⁵ Christophilus, 7.

¹⁶ Christophilus, 7.

¹⁷ Christophilus, 11.

schism.”¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ This rash criticism did not promote reformation, instead it brought polarization. Kirkham also showed how they undermined or rejected the Church’s discipline by appointing lay preachers.²⁰ Some even began referring to John Wesley as a Bishop because he appointed lay preachers, and also because he ‘excommunicated’ backsliders. John was also criticized for issuing “what amounted to an episcopal pastoral letter.”²¹ Kirkham summarized the activities that caused the Methodist to be branded as schismatics. They included,

Field preaching, the use of extempore 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 watchnight services....²²

In the midst of these criticisms, there were still some in the Church of England who saw the value of Methodism. One example of this was Richard Hardy. In the early 1760’s he argued that the Methodist had completed their reform of the Church. 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 lay preachers.²³

¹⁸ Donald Henry Kirkham, “Pamphlet Opposition to the Rise of Methodism: The Eighteenth-Century English Evangelical Revival Under Attack” (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1973), 236.

¹⁹ Kirkham, 237.

²⁰ Kirkham, 249.

²¹ Kirkham, 253-54.

²² Kirkham, 254.

²³ Richard Hardy, *A letter from a clergyman, to one of his parishioners, who was inclined to turn Methodist...* (London: Printed for the Author, 1763), 82.

From this brief overview the following problems or concerns were stated in criticism of either the clergy of the Established Church, or in the Churches 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. Charles Wesley's interaction with the lay preachers mirrored both the disapproval he had of some the Church of England clergy, and the concerns that the Church of England clergy had with the Methodist movement.

The most important thing for Charles was a commitment to stay in the Church of England. In one section of a manuscript called *The Preachers: 1751*, Charles recorded excerpts from some of his brother's letters. Below each excerpt he put a question to ask John. He headed this section of the manuscript "Hints for Conversation, out of my Br[other]'s Letters."²⁴ 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?²⁵

Another major concern for Charles was to limit the number and influence of the 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. It was the very

²⁴ *The Preachers, 1751*. Presently in the MARC; hereafter cited as MS *Preachers*. See also Frank Baker, ed., *Letters II: 1740-1755*, The Works of John Wesley, vol. 26 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 470-81.

²⁵ Baker, ed., 470.

role of the lay preacher that was in question for Charles. John's concern was the staffing of the societies;²⁶ Charles's concern was to have lay preachers who would support the reformation in a temporary way. If a more permanent ministry was desired the lay preacher should move to ordination in the Established Church.²⁷ In notes from his examination of the preachers in 1751 Charles made it clear that most of the preachers 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."²⁸ In dealing with his brother he took a milder tone. As his brother pushed for more lay preachers, Charles questioned the qualifications of those they already had. In his *Hints* he wrote, "Should we not first regulate, reform, and bring into discipline, the preachers we *have*, *before* we look for more?"²⁹ 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*?"³⁰ During this time Charles send a letter to Lady Huntingdon that was intercepted by John. In it Charles noted that one of the reasons he was involved in

²⁶ In a letter dated Aug 8, 1751, John told his brother, "We *must* have forty itinerant preachers, or drop some of our societies." Baker, ed., 473. Later in a letter to John Downes(?) he 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." Baker, ed., 476.

²⁷ Charles Wesley helped some preachers to make this move. See John Lenton, "Charles Wesley and the Preachers," in *Charles Wesley: Life, Literature & Legacy*, ed. Ted A. Campbell and Kenneth G. C. Newport (London: Epworth, 2007), 101.

²⁸ MS *Preachers*. Emphasis is original.

²⁹ Baker, ed., 472.

³⁰ Baker, ed., 471.

purging the preachers was to break John's power over the preachers, and to limit his authority.³¹ Was Charles in both of these instances trying to limit the role of both John and of the lay preachers because he felt that appointing preachers was an episcopal responsibility, and that by John appointing lay preachers he was setting himself up as a Bishop?

A third concern was the character of the preacher. Were they lazy? Were they proud? Did they see entering the ministry as a way to gain respect? Charles's attitude to some of the preachers his brother had appointed can be found clearly stated in a journal entry omitted by Jackson.

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.³²

According to Richard Heitzenrater this was not a new complaint for Charles, he had complained about the inadequacies of the lay preachers since about 1741.³³ One of the major problems that both John and Charles agreed on was that many preachers would not work (of course their idea of what constituted a full days work may seem excessive to some of us today). John noted how idleness, what he called 'absolute idleness', had damaged the work in Ireland. Because of this fear that the 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,

³¹ Baker, ed., 479.

³² Kenneth G. C. Newport and S T Kimbrough Jr., eds., *Charles Wesley's Manuscript Journal* (Nashville: Kingswood, 2007 (forthcoming)), Wednesday, June 12, 1751.

³³ Richard P. Heitzenrater, "Purge the Preachers: The Wesleys and Quality Control," in *Charles Wesley: Life, Literature & Legacy*, ed. Ted A. Campbell and Kenneth G. C. Newport (London: Epworth, 2007), 488.

which they had formerly spent working. John summarized 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.”³⁴ Charles responded to the idleness of the preachers and the suggestion that they go back to their trade by suggesting that that was the only way to solve the problem. He wrote, “Has God not shown us both the disease and the remedy?”³⁵ One lay preacher with this problem who was confronted by Charles Wesley was Michael Fenwick. Charles recorded the following about his conversation, “I talked closely with him, utterly averse to working, and told him plainly he should either labour with his hands or preach no more.”³⁶

Charles’s work with the lay preachers is a clear example of how Charles tried to balance a commitment to the church with a desire to see her reformed. Because lay preaching was seen as a partial separation, Charles worked to limit their role and influence. It seems probable, that one of the reasons that Charles withdrew from working with John in leadership of the Methodist movement, was because he felt the what began as a extraordinary ministry, the use of lay preachers, had become ordinary. In the end, Charles felt that this move would lead not to reformation, but to schism.

³⁴ Baker, ed., 473.

³⁵ Baker, ed., 473.

³⁶ Baker, ed., 473.

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