

# *John Wesley and Celibacy: Evolving Visions and Commitments*

by TED A. CAMPBELL  
Southern Methodist University, Dallas  
E-mail: [tedc@smu.edu](mailto:tedc@smu.edu)

---

*This article describes John Wesley's evolving visions of Christian singleness (celibacy) and three commitments related to his changing views: a commitment to celibacy in an Oxford college; a commitment to marriage with Mary Vazeille; a de facto commitment to single life after Mary's separation from him. Protestant Churches lacked structures to support celibate commitment, structures that might have discouraged his unguarded and intimate correspondence with married women that lay behind his separation from Mary. The article asks why Protestants, although formally allowing single life, have not found ways to honour commitments to it.*

---

John Wesley (1703–91) felt a persistent calling to lead a single life of ‘unhindered devotion’ to Christ (1 Corinthians vii.32–5), following Jesus’ model of singleness and the celibates of earliest ages of Christianity. He wrote about his vision of the single life, citing these scriptural and historical precedents, and he made a formal commitment as a Fellow of Lincoln College, Oxford, to live a single life and followed that commitment for twenty-five years including the formative years of the Methodist movement.

Singleness was a difficult vocation for an eighteenth-century Protestant, although the historic universities and schools of England had maintained faculties of single men beyond the Reformation. Unlike its Catholic forebears, his Church lacked the social structures and more importantly the cultures by which Christian monks and clergy had cultivated a single life in the past. This article tracks John Wesley’s evolving visions of Christian singleness and, within these evolving visions, his two formal commitments,

All references to the *Works of John Wesley* are to the Bicentennial edition, Nashville, TN 1984–, published with various editors for individual volumes.

one to celibacy in an Oxford college, and the other to marriage within his role as a leader of an Evangelical movement. Following the failure of his marriage, he lived out an implied commitment to Christian singleness that enabled him to return to his earlier life as a single itinerant Christian. An examination of Wesley's evolving issues with singleness and marriage raises the question of whether Protestant (non-Catholic and non-Orthodox) Churches have failed to cultivate the giftedness of committed single persons.

If it seems counterfactual that John Wesley could have advocated and practised a single life given the fact of his marriage to Mary Vazeille in 1751, compare the number of years he lived as a single man with the number of years he spent living in a family setting. Add the eleven years he lived as a child with his parents and siblings in Epworth (1703–14) and twelve years or so from 1751 through to around 1763 when he lived with his wife Mary: he lived in a family home for about twenty-three of his eighty-eight years of life. The remaining sixty-five years were lived as a single man.

Consider further the periods when he did live in a family home. In the earliest period of his life, the Epworth rectory functioned as a religious community, tightly run by his mother Susanna Wesley, with a regular rota of corporate and personal prayer, study, work and personal time alone. Although there was no thought of single commitment, the family discipline under Susanna Wesley seems like a Protestant family version of a Christian community: *ora et labora*.<sup>1</sup> In the period when he was married and not fully alienated from Mary, he lived with her in London only about half of each year: in the spring he would leave London to go on his annual rotation to Bristol, sometimes travelling from there to Ireland, up to Newcastle-upon-Tyne in the summer, returning in autumn to his life in London with Mary. And although their marriage was never legally dissolved, he reverted to his single life apart from her from around 1763.

John Wesley had an idealistic, youthful commitment to celibacy grounded in a biblical and patristic vision of singleness, then a formal commitment as a single man and a Fellow of Lincoln College, Oxford, from 1726 through the early years of the Methodist revival. He revoked that

<sup>1</sup> Susanna Wesley's discipline of the Wesley household, including their daily rota of prayers, Scripture reading and study, was described in Susanna Wesley to John Wesley, 24 July 1732, *Works of John Wesley*, XXV: *Letters*, ed. Frank Baker, Nashville, TN 1989, 330–4. It is reiterated with other material in John Wesley's account of his mother's death in his *Journal*, entry for 1 Aug. 1742: *Works of John Wesley*, XIX: *Journals and diaries*, ed. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, 283–91. It is recounted again in John Wesley's 1784 sermon 'On obedience to parents': *Works of John Wesley*, III: *Sermons*, ed. Albert C. Outler, Nashville, TN 1986, 361–72. The letter was also reprinted with an introduction and critical notes in Susanna Wesley, *Susanna Wesley: the complete writings*, ed. Charles Wallace, Jr, New York–Oxford 1997, 367–76.

commitment when he resigned his Oxford Fellowship and married Mary Vazeille in 1751. But, following his separation from Mary from around 1763, he continued to live a single life and continued to publish a tract advocating the single life. One could describe his views of marriage in a very broad perspective as celibate, married and then functionally though not formally celibate. But his understandings of celibacy continued to evolve, so this article examines his evolving visions of celibacy alongside his formal commitment to celibacy, his formal commitment to marriage and his reversion to an implied commitment to celibacy following Mary's separation from him in the early 1760s.<sup>2</sup>

*Vision: the tradition of Christian celibacy*

The life of Jesus recorded in the canonical Gospels set a pattern of singleness for subsequent Christians. St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians indicated a preference for the single life, and the Revelation to St John recognised some of the Christian saints 'who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins' (Revelation xiv.4).

Early Christian communities beyond the New Testament period recognised some of their adherents as dedicated 'virgins', for example in the document incorporating second-century and third-century materials now referred to as *The apostolic tradition*.<sup>3</sup> Formal institutions of Christian monasticism developed from around the time of Constantine in the 320s AD/CE. The single life for Christians was eventually governed by rules: in the West, the rules written by John Cassian and then Benedict of Nursia; in the East, patterns of monastic life described by the Cappadocian writers and Syriac ascetic writers. Christian monastic communities developed expertise in dealing with issues of singleness, the need for intimacy and sexual desire.

John Wesley valued the celibate communities of the early Christian centuries. My earlier research showed that despite his sense of a disastrous fall of the Christian Church associated with the age of Constantine in the fourth century, Wesley continued to value some early Christian writers who were able to maintain communities committed to the pursuit of sanctity.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Professor Natalya Cherry and I are developing a biography of John Wesley following the theme of his struggle with a calling to celibate commitment within the context of the eighteenth-century Church of England.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Bradshaw (ed.), *The apostolic tradition reconstructed: a text for students*, London 2021, para. 12 at p. 19. John Wesley had access to some of the literature we now describe as the 'apostolic tradition' by way of a collection of materials edited by William Beveridge: *Synodikon, sive pandectae canonum ss. apostolorum et conciliorum ecclesia graeca receptorum*, Oxford 1672.

<sup>4</sup> Ted A. Campbell, *John Wesley and Christian antiquity: religious vision and cultural change*, Nashville, TN 1991, 49–51, 55–71.

Wesley's sermon 'On laying the foundation of the new chapel, near the City-Road, London' named a series of Christian saints whom he understood to be consistent with 'the religion of the Church of England' and with Methodism:

This is the religion of the primitive Church, of the whole Church in the purest ages. It is clearly expressed, even in the small remains of Clemens Romanus, Ignatius, and Polycarp; it is seen more at large in the writings of Tertullian, Origen, Clemens Alexandrinus, and Cyprian; and, even in the fourth century, it was found in the works of Chrysostom, Basil, Ephrem Syrus, and Macarius.<sup>5</sup>

In this passage Wesley grouped early Christian saints by centuries: he mentioned second-century saints (Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch and Polycarp), then 'more at large' he listed third-century saints (Tertullian, Origen, Clement of Alexandria and Cyprian), and then 'even in the fourth century' (as he said), he listed John Chrysostom, Basil the Cappadocian, 'Ephrem Syrus' and 'Macarius of Egypt', all ascetic writers who reflected the spirituality of early Christian monastic communities. The phrase 'even in the fourth century' indicates Wesley's sense that true Christian faith remained pre-eminently in celibate communities after the time of Constantine, which he saw as the beginning of the medieval degradation of Christian faith.<sup>6</sup>

The earliest Protestant Churches had done away with mechanisms for publicly and formally acknowledging the vocation of single persons, but the dissolution of the English monasteries under Henry VIII did not result in the complete elimination of monastic customs including celibacy. Four institutions were explicitly excluded from the dissolutions: Oxford, Cambridge, Eton and Winchester, and faculty members by their statutes were obliged to commitment to a single life until the nineteenth century. In addition to enforcing celibacy, these institutions continued to reflect elements of monastic common life in their patterns of communal life and in their architecture. They were closed to the public, with cloisters, classrooms, a common hall, a chapel and individual rooms or suites of rooms for students and Fellows. They kept a pattern of worship, by then following the orders for daily morning and evening prayer in the Book of Common Prayer, in their chapels.

In doing away with most monastic institutions, Protestant nations were also left without the monastic-based infrastructures for dealing with the poor and the sick that had been almost exclusively the domain of religious orders in the Middle Ages, leaving Protestant Churches as well as governments to re-develop these charitable institutions piecemeal over the next centuries. That opened the way for religious movements like Pietism and

<sup>5</sup> John Wesley, 'On laying the foundation of the new chapel, near the City-Road, London': *Works of John Wesley*, iii. 586.

<sup>6</sup> Campbell, *John Wesley and Christian antiquity*, 49–51.

Evangelicalism to take the lead in rebuilding such structures, for example the charitable institutions (*Franckesche Stiftungen*) of Halle University during the period of its early flourishing under the German Pietistic leader August Hermann Francke or the later roles ('visitors of the sick') and institutions (hospitals for the sick, a 'poor house' and provision for loans to members of the societies) that John Wesley himself developed for his Methodist followers and described in his *Plain account of the people called Methodists*.<sup>7</sup>

*Commitment: collegiate celibacy*

John Wesley's first encounter with the culture of monasticism came at the age of eleven when he was exposed to its architectures and common life in a male residential school that was part of the London Charterhouse. Though founded after the dissolution of the monasteries, the London Charterhouse had been re-established in 1611 as part of Walter Sutton's bequest and came to be called Sutton's Hospital at the Charterhouse. Sutton's institution involved two elements: a school for boys, and a home for men – referred to as 'brothers' or 'pensioners' – who were unable to support themselves in old age. Like Oxford, Cambridge, Eton and Winchester, the Charterhouse also reflected elements of monastic life in its architecture and its customs. Its earliest statutes provided that all men living in the institution including the Master and the brothers (pensioners) as well as the young scholars should be unmarried. Married candidates for the position of Master could not be considered, and some brothers (pensioners) were removed after it was discovered that they were in fact married.<sup>8</sup>

By the time John Wesley entered the Charterhouse in 1714, the restrictions against the marriage of officeholders in the institution had been relaxed. The headmaster, who had been at the Charterhouse since 1679, Thomas Walker, was married. But even though teachers could be married, the Charterhouse remained an exclusively male institution, both the school and the community of pensioners.

John Wesley came to the London Charterhouse during Walker's tenure as head of the school when he left his parents' home in Epworth in 1714. It

<sup>7</sup> For the Franckean institutions at Halle see idem, *The religion of the heart: a study of European religious life in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries*, Columbia, SC 1991, 88. On the offices and institutions described in the *Plain account of the people called Methodists*, sections xi ('visitors of the sick'), xii (hospitals for the sick), xiii (housing for poor members), xiv (schooling for children) and xv (provision for loans to member of the societies) see *Works of John Wesley*, IX: *The Methodist societies: history, nature, and design*, ed. Rupert E. Davies, Nashville, TN 1989, 274–80.

<sup>8</sup> Gerald Stanley Davies, *Charterhouse in London: monastery, mansion, hospital, school*, London 1922, 228.

would be his first experience of an exclusively male community, a community in which he would live, besides occasional trips home to Epworth, until 1720. In the school that was part of the Charterhouse, John Wesley and other ‘scholars’ lived in what had been monastic cells, ate in the monastic refectory and played ball games in the monastic cloister. He participated in a community in which younger boys were required to serve older boys and sometimes faced abuse from them, as John Wesley once complained to his mother.<sup>9</sup> It was a community that observed daily morning and evening prayers and the Lord’s Supper according to the ritual of the Book of Common Prayer, so the form of prayers that had been observed in the Epworth rectory continued in John Wesley’s experience at the Charterhouse.

The Charterhouse pensioners were men who in some cases had not been abjectly poor – they might have been clergy or ships’ captains – but they were left without means to support them in old age. On at least two occasions in his later life, John Wesley would write on behalf of men seeking support at the Charterhouse.<sup>10</sup> In this ministry to older men – something not found in medieval English universities and schools – the London Charterhouse carried on an aspect of the social services provided by medieval religious houses. Albert C. Outler once commented that John Wesley’s ministry as an itinerant preacher among working-class people had caused him to ‘de-classify himself’, that is, to remove himself from the rigid social structures of eighteenth-century England.<sup>11</sup> His interactions with the Charterhouse pensioners enhanced his capacity to relate to the poor throughout his career. As we shall see, from his early years in Oxford he and his brother Charles would choose to minister among the poor.

In the 1720s John Wesley made a formal commitment to singleness as a Fellow of Lincoln College, Oxford. The Oxford colleges were older than the London Charterhouse. They had been organised from the 1100s as a *collegium*, a gathering of monastic houses with a shared course of studies (*ratio studiorum*). The existing colleges had come under the auspices of the Church of England at the time of the Reformation, but the Reformation acts disestablishing monastic institutions made explicit exceptions for Oxford, Cambridge, Eton and Winchester where traditions of singleness in community were allowed to continue. By John Wesley’s

<sup>9</sup> Catherine Smith, ‘A boy’s-eye view of Charterhouse School’, in Cathy Ross (ed.), *Revealing the Charterhouse: the making of a London landmark*, London 2016, 140.

<sup>10</sup> John Wesley mentioned Jonathan Agutter, a Moravian whom Wesley had visited at the Charterhouse: J. Wesley to James Hutton, 9 July 1739, *Works of John Wesley*, xxv. 668. The London Charterhouse appears much later in J. Wesley to unknown recipient, Apr. 1789, where the recipient is asked to speak on behalf of John Kenton, to ‘the governors of the Charterhouse’: *ibid.* xxv. 94.

<sup>11</sup> My recollection of a sermon given by Albert C. Outler at Wesley Memorial Church, Oxford, during the 1982 Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies.

time, the Oxford colleges were no longer tied to Catholic religious orders as they had been in the Middle Ages, but Oxford Fellows were required to be single, and they resided in college rooms and took their meals along with students in college halls. Each college maintained daily morning and evening prayer according to the Prayer Book, and at least weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper.

After leaving the Charterhouse, John Wesley matriculated at Christ Church, Oxford, on 24 June 1720, and he came to know the life of Oxford colleges very well by 1726 when he was elected a Fellow of Lincoln College. His election to Lincoln required a formal commitment to singleness in the college community, a commitment he accepted and lived with for the next quarter century. The Oxford commitment to singleness did not involve a lifetime commitment to celibacy as Catholic religious orders from the time of St Benedict had done. The Oxford commitment – required until the late 1800s – meant that if Fellows married, they were required to resign their fellowships. But a fellowship did imply a degree of renunciation of family life and identification as surrogate family for the students coming to university colleges. At least it was supposed to: one of John Wesley's criticisms of the university was that Fellows were not taking seriously their role as mentors to students.

John Wesley consistently identified himself in his writings during the first decades of the Evangelical Revival as 'Fellow of Lincoln College, Oxford', and even beyond his resignation of the fellowship in 1751, he continued to identify himself as 'Sometime Fellow of Lincoln College, Oxford'. Lincoln College gave him a response – however weak – to the claim that he had no legal ground to invade the parishes of other Anglican priests: Wesley could claim that the statutes of Lincoln – founded in 1426 to combat the Lollard heresy associated with John Wycliffe – gave its Fellows a unique 'licence' (permission) to preach anywhere in England for the extirpation of heresy. But bishops of the Church of England did not accept his claim that a medieval Catholic statute of one Oxford college gave him the right to invade the parishes of other priests by preaching within them.<sup>12</sup>

At Lincoln College, John Wesley was free to travel and to leave the college at will. Fellows could even hire someone else to take their teaching responsibilities and rent out their rooms to others, as Wesley did when he left for Georgia in 1735. But he lived for the first nine years of his fellowship in the college's exclusively male community, as he had done at the London Charterhouse. He took meals in the hall, he led worship in the college chapel and he met with students in his rooms.

Unlike a Catholic celibate, a Fellow of an Oxford college was free to converse, correspond and visit with women. In the late 1720s, just after his

<sup>12</sup> Wesley appealed to the statutes of Lincoln College in his interview with Bishop Butler, given in an appendix to *Works of John Wesley*, xix. 472.

commitment to singleness at Lincoln College, John became a close friend of the family of Robert Kirkham, whose father Lionel Kirkham was the rector of St Michael and All Angels in the Cotswold town of Stanton. John Wesley frequently visited the Kirkham family in Stanton, including Robert's sister Sarah (Sally) Chapone and a group of their friends that included Ann Granville, Mary (*née* Granville) Pendarves and, eventually, Charles Wesley. Classically trained, the group of friends corresponded with each other using a set of nicknames from ancient history: 'Cyrus' (John Wesley himself), 'Selima' (Ann Granville), 'Aspasia' (Mary Pendarves), 'Varanese' (Sarah Chapone) and 'Araspes' (Charles Wesley). Mary Pendarves on one occasion seems to have referred to John Wesley with the nickname 'Primitive Christianity', perhaps poking fun at his obsession with the ethos of early Christianity.<sup>13</sup>

Sarah Kirkham had married the Revd John Chapone in 1735, but despite her marriage, she seems to have had more than a casual relationship with John Wesley, a relationship against which Susanna Wesley had at least twice warned him.<sup>14</sup> Sarah broke off the relationship by the summer of 1730. In a letter to Mary Pendarves on 14 August of that year, John wrote that 'While I was transcribing the letters, those last moments of the goodness of my dear V[aranese], I could not hinder some sighs which between grief and shame would now and then find their way.'<sup>15</sup> We do not know how deep this relationship with Sarah might have been, but I flag the significance of John's relationship with a married woman. In fact, he poured out his soul to Mary Pendarves (also married) in a long sequence of at least twenty-two letters and received at least fourteen in return from her between 1730 and 1734.<sup>16</sup> I note this especially because, as shown in what follows, John tended to engage throughout his life in intimate sharing with married women – very often younger married women – the discovery of which by his wife would eventually lead to her separation from him.

### *Vision: patristic celibacy in the American wilderness*

After the death of their father in 1725, John Wesley and his brother Charles made their decision to join General James Oglethorpe's Georgia

<sup>13</sup> See Frank Baker's notes on correspondence within this group in *Works of John Wesley*, xxv. 231 n. 2; 246 n. 2; 247 nn. 1–2. For further insights into this circle of friends see Richard P. Heitzenrater, *The elusive Mr. Wesley*, 2nd edn, Nashville, TN 2003, 55–9.

<sup>14</sup> Susanna Wesley to J. Wesley, 29 Nov. 1726 and 31 Jan 1727, *Works of John Wesley*, xxv. 200, 209–11.

<sup>15</sup> J. Wesley to Mary Pendarves, 14 Aug. 1730, *ibid.* xxv. 246–7.

<sup>16</sup> This sequence of letters to and from Mary Pendarves is given *ibid.* xxv. 246–391.

colony in British North America. John went as a missionary of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, Charles as personal secretary to Oglethorpe. John arranged for his Oxford duties to be taken by another clergyman as surrogate. But freed from the restraints of his family and of his college responsibilities in this period, John Wesley went to Georgia with the expressed intention of living a single life. This also proved to be a critical moment in his evolving commitment to celibacy: it was no longer a hypothetical or idealistic quest. In Georgia it became a troubling reality in the flesh.

John Wesley intended to enact his own vision of primitive Christianity in Georgia.<sup>17</sup> He had arrived there with a large collection of books on early Christianity, including the Greek spiritual writings historically attributed to St Macarius of Egypt but described in contemporary scholarship as a different author identified academically as Pseudo-Macarius. Wesley loved the fifty *Spiritual homilies* deeply as evidenced by his later references to them and quotations from them.<sup>18</sup> The *Spiritual homilies* did not denigrate married life; in fact, they utilised the image of sexual love as an analogy for the spiritual life. This passage appears in the translation entitled *Primitive morality: the spiritual homilies of St Macarius the Egyptian* (1721) which Wesley carried to Georgia:

For if the love of that fellowship which is in the flesh causes a separation from father, mother, and brethren, and all things besides are thought foreign to the married couple, and if there be any reserve of affection, it is at a distance at best, whereas the full bent of its inclination is kept for her that cohabits with him. For 'For this cause' saith the scripture, 'that a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife, and these two shall be one flesh.'<sup>19</sup>

The preface to the *Primitive morality* translation made clear the monastic context of the homilies, which do refer directly to the monastic life (sometimes 'religious retirement') in some passages, such as this:

And as the merchants that go down naked into the depth of the sea, into the very grave of the water that there they may find pearls to make up the royal crown and purple with, *so do they also that devote themselves to a single life go naked out of the*

<sup>17</sup> Campbell, *John Wesley and Christian antiquity*. My work is followed on this point by Gordon Hammond, *John Wesley in America: restoring primitive Christianity*, Oxford–New York 2014.

<sup>18</sup> John Wesley quoted a passage from the *Spiritual homilies* in his sermon on 'The Scripture way of salvation': *Works of John Wesley, II: Sermons*, ed. Albert C. Outler, Nashville, TN 1985, 158.

<sup>19</sup> ['Pseudo-Macarius', historically known as 'Macarius of Egypt'], *Primitive morality: the spiritual homilies of St Macarius the Egyptian* (translator and editor unidentified), London 1721, homily 4, pp. 129–30, my emphasis. I have revised capitalisation and punctuation to conform to modern use in this and the following quotation from the *Spiritual homilies*.

world, and descend into the depth of the sea of sin and into the abyss of darkness, and from those deeps do they take and bring up precious stones proper for the crown of Christ, for the heavenly church, for the new world, for the city of light, and for the angelical community.<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps above all it was the call to complete renunciation of the world in the *Spiritual homilies* that inspired John Wesley to contemplate a single life of uncompromised devotion to God.

John Wesley went to Georgia with the intention of living a single life following the patterns of the single ascetic saints of the Early Church, as Geordan Hammond has demonstrated. In a letter addressed to John Burton on 10 October 1735, when Wesley was already aboard the *Simmonds*, three days before setting sail for Georgia, he laid out his inner motives for the Georgia venture. He expressed 'the hope of saving my own soul, ... to learn the true sense of the gospel of Christ by preaching it to the heathens'. And moreover, he hoped to avoid 'the lust of the flesh': 'where I see no woman but those which are almost of a different species from me, to attain such purity of thought as suits a candidate for that state wherein they neither marry nor are given in marriage but are as the angels of God in heaven'.<sup>21</sup>

The early Christian monks headed to the Egyptian desert; John Wesley set out for Georgia in the hope that his encounter with native peoples in a primitive environment would be conducive to the single life of holiness he envisioned. This is consistent with a note that the brothers had agreed immediately after their return from Georgia, 'that we would neither of us marry, or take any step towards it, without the other's knowledge and consent'.<sup>22</sup>

This agreement was to bedevil John not only in 1748 when he contemplated marriage to Grace Murray and in 1751 when he married Mary *née* Goldhawk Vazeille, but also during his time in Georgia when, counter to his expectations, he did find women other than 'those which [were] almost of a different species' from himself. Among several other English women with whom he spent considerable time, he found Sophia Christiana Hopkey. He revealed to Sophia his intentions to live a single and simple life, and he read to her not only Scripture passages but extracts from William Law's *Serious call to a devout and holy life* and even portions of the *Spiritual homilies* attributed to Macarius of Egypt.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. homily 15, pp. 250–1, my emphasis.

<sup>21</sup> J. Wesley to the Revd John Burton, 10 Oct. 1735, *Works of John Wesley*, xxv. 439–40. See also Hammond, *John Wesley in America*, 173.

<sup>22</sup> This is recorded in Charles's manuscript journal, entry for 11 Nov. 1748, *The manuscript journal of the Rev. Charles Wesley, M.A.*, ed. S. T. Kimbrough and Kenneth G. C. Newport, Nashville, TN 2007, 559.

In his private manuscript Georgia journal, John Wesley described his struggle for self-control during five nights on an uninhabited island when he slept next to Sophia under a sail with their small boat's crew:

I can never be sensible enough of the exceeding goodness of God, both this night and the four following, all which we spent together, while none but the All-seeing Eye observed us. To him alone be the praise that we were both withheld from anything which the world counts evil. Yet I am not thereby justified, but must justify God for whatever temporal evils may befall me on her account. What though I was innocent of the great offence? Yet as Cyprian observes on almost a parallel occasion, '*certe ipse complexus, ipsa confabulatio et osculatio, quantum dedecoris et criminis confitemur!*' ['Assuredly the fact of lying together embracing and kissing constitutes a confession of unseemly misbehaviour.']<sup>23</sup>

He confessed in his journal that he 'could not avoid using some familiarity or other which was not needful. Sometimes I put my arm around her waist, sometimes took her by the hand, and sometimes kissed her'. He resolved to cease this behaviour, but ten days later, 'as we sat together, I took her by the hand (though I was convinced it was wrong) and kissed her once or twice. I resolved again and relapsed again several times during the five or six weeks following'.<sup>24</sup>

His obvious attraction to Sophia surprised him and challenged his determination to keep his commitment to a single life of 'unhindered devotion' to Christ. He also described his depth of depression after learning that she had married the Georgia settler William Williamson.<sup>25</sup> Hammond points out that John's relationship with another Englishwoman in Georgia, Margaret Bovey, was 'equally as close as with Sophia Hopkey', and suggests that John Wesley may have been preparing both women to work with him in restoring the ancient office of deaconess.<sup>26</sup>

Put together his disappointments – not only with Sophia and perhaps with Margaret, but also with himself and quite likely with God – and the story should follow that he turned from his catholicising ways, embraced the heartfelt faith he witnessed among the Moravians, pursued marriage with someone else and lived happily ever after. But a conversation with Moravian settlers in Georgia gave John Wesley a way of understanding the New Testament call to singleness and holiness that would keep open

<sup>23</sup> J. Wesley, Georgia manuscript journal, entry for 25 Oct. 1736, *Works of John Wesley*, XVIII: *Journals and diaries*, ed. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, Nashville, TN 1988, 436. Ward and Heitzenrater identify the quotation as from Cyprian of Carthage's letter to Pomponius, para. 3.

<sup>24</sup> J. Wesley journal, entries for 1, 20 Nov. 1736, *ibid.* xviii. 442.

<sup>25</sup> J. Wesley journal, entry for 4 Mar. 1784, *ibid.* xviii. 176, and Georgia manuscript journal, 8–10 Mar. 1737, xviii. 483–7.

<sup>26</sup> Hammond, *John Wesley in America*, 137–8 and n. 152.

the option of celibate commitment for himself and his later Methodist followers. He was not yet willing to give that up.

John and Charles Wesley returned to England in 1738. Both remained in close contact with London Moravians, and both experienced the sense of forgiveness that Moravians had treasured: on Pentecost Sunday for Charles Wesley, and three days later for John. John soon separated Methodist groups under his leadership from Moravian societies due to their 'stillness' teaching, recognised by Moravians within a few years as a distortion of their teachings in the anomalous period they would call the 'sifting time'. Under the influence of English Moravians and in the heady early years of the Evangelical revival, John Wesley renewed and refined his understanding of his celibate vocation, a critical moment in his commitment to Christian singleness.

### *Evolving vision: celibacy, marriage and the Evangelical movement*

The next few years were given over to John's newly-acquired practice of parish-invading preaching, following the pattern set by Howell Harris in Wales and George Whitefield in England, and his organisation of early Wesleyan societies.<sup>27</sup> In 1743 he published the *General rules of the united societies*, laying out a common set of expectations for members of societies in London, Bristol and Newcastle, and the classes that were organised under them.<sup>28</sup>

Wesley had asked Moravian leaders in Georgia, 'Is celibacy a state more advantageous for holiness than marriage?' The Moravians responded, 'Yes, to them that are able to receive it.'<sup>29</sup> Wesley would later utilise this interpretation of Jesus' words in Matthew xix.11 as a basis for his understanding of which Christians might be uniquely called to singleness.<sup>30</sup> This implied a revised vision of Christian singleness, according to which the single life is a distinct gift 'to them that are able to receive it'.

A passage in the preface to an early collection of *Hymns and sacred poems* (1739), issued jointly by John and Charles Wesley in this period, could be taken to imply a thorough rejection of monastic or single Christian life. The Wesleys' preface notes that they had been deceived by mystical writers whom they faulted for advocating 'solitary religion'. The Wesleys'

<sup>27</sup> On John Wesley's parish-invading preaching in this period see Ted A. Campbell, 'A day in the life of John Wesley: 2 Apr. 1739', *Methodist Review* xv (2023), 1–17.

<sup>28</sup> The first publication of the General Rules in 1743 was under the name of John only; Charles's name was added in later publications.

<sup>29</sup> J. Wesley, Georgia manuscript journal 2, entry for 31 July 1737, *Works of John Wesley*, xviii. 532.

<sup>30</sup> In Wesley's *Thoughts upon marriage and a single life*, Bristol 1743, and *Thoughts on a single life*, London 1765. See below on each of these.

stinging rebuke to this was: 'Directly opposite to this is the Gospel of CHRIST. Solitary religion is not to be found there. "Holy solitaries" is a phrase no more consistent with the Gospel than holy adulterers. The Gospel of CHRIST knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness.'<sup>31</sup>

But despite its appearance, this was not directed against a dedicated single Christian life or against monasticism in general: it denounced the practice of anchoritic but not coenobitic monasticism, that is, it denounced the practice of monks who attempted to live apart from monastic communities (*koinobia*) in which monks lived a common life (*koinos bios*) together under a rule. The Methodist pattern of life governed by the Wesleys' *General rules* (1743) would lay out their own vision of a shared or 'common life'.

In the same year that he first published his *General rules*, John Wesley published *Thoughts upon marriage and a single life*, a twelve-page tract of which he issued a second edition in the same year.<sup>32</sup> It elaborates the insights on singleness that had been seeded by the Moravians in Georgia. Attempting to clear himself of the accusation that he held singleness as a superior calling for Christians, he spent eight paragraphs arguing that marriage is an appropriate vocation for a Christian, and then two paragraphs rejecting the Catholic claim that a celibate vocation was an act of supererogation, an act performed beyond what God strictly requires for salvation.<sup>33</sup>

But having rejected the notion of celibacy as an act of supererogation, John Wesley went on to argue (paras 10–14) that there is New Testament evidence for the appropriateness of a single life, and here he echoed the conception of celibacy that he had heard from the Moravians in Georgia, the claim that – as he put it in this tract – celibacy was for 'a particular class of men', those who according to Jesus' teaching were 'able to receive it' (Matt. xix.10–12, my emphasis). He took those words to mean those who have a special calling from God to be single and to whom God gives a special gift of grace to assist them in this calling: 'they to whom continence is given; they who having this gift of God can avoid fornication'. Here Wesley also invoked Paul's exhortation to singleness in 1 Cor. vii.<sup>34</sup>

With this basis, John Wesley went further (para. 15) to ask the reader, 'Art thou called then' to a single life in which one can 'follow the Lord

<sup>31</sup> J. Wesley and Charles Wesley, *Hymns and sacred poems*, London 1739, preface at p. viii.

<sup>32</sup> J. Wesley, *Thoughts on marriage and a single life*, Frank Baker, *Union catalogue of the publications of John and Charles Wesley*, 2nd rev. edn, Stone Mountain, GA 1991, 47.

<sup>33</sup> J. Wesley, *Thoughts on marriage and a single life*, 1st edn, 1743, paras 1–10 at pp. 2–7.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* paras 10–14 at pp. 7–10.

without distraction?’<sup>35</sup> Wesley warned further that even if one is called but is already married, one should not abandon one’s wife to pursue celibacy. But if one is called and one’s wife has died, then one should not marry again. Wesley’s final exhortation in the tract (para. 16) is that those called to this special gift of God must not deny it.<sup>36</sup>

The call to a single life became a part of the larger culture of renunciation of worldliness in early Methodism: the call was for entire sanctification, loving God with all of one’s heart, mind, soul and strength, and that implied renunciation of everything that could stand in the way of complete devotion to God. Writing on the subject of dress, for example, John Wesley reasoned that ‘every shilling which you needlessly spend on your apparel is, in effect, stolen from God and the poor!’<sup>37</sup> Methodists were those who had renounced worldly comforts, and ‘for those who could receive it’, this meant renunciation of marriage and family life. Many early Methodist leaders like Francis Asbury were able to make a life profession of singleness for the sake of their calling. Others, like Mary Bosanquet and Sarah Ryan and the community they formed in Leytonstone, were able to commit themselves to singleness in community until they married.

### *Commitment: John Wesley’s marriage*

Within eight years of publishing *Thoughts upon marriage and a single life*, John Wesley married, and yet his marriage did not end the evolution of his visions and commitments to singleness and marriage. In 1748 and 1749 John Wesley drew up two contracts of marriage with Grace (*née* Norman) Murray, a contract *de futuro* (in 1748) promising to marry her in the future, and then a contract *de praesenti* (in 1749) which was in fact a marriage contract. This led Frank Baker to describe Grace Murray as ‘John Wesley’s first wife’, though it seems clear that Grace had not consented to the terms of the marriage contract – apparently because John Wesley had not yet proposed them to her – and the union was not solemnised. Within the same period, Charles had married Sarah Gwynne, and despite John’s qualms about whether it would distract from Charles’s preaching as a Methodist itinerant – and it did – John consented to their marriage and performed the service.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. para. 14 at pp. 10–11.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. para 16 at at pp. 11–12.

<sup>37</sup> J. Wesley, sermon ‘On dress’, 14, *Works of John Wesley*, iii. 254.

<sup>38</sup> John’s concerns about the effect that Charles’s marriage would have on Charles’s willingness to itinerate were expressed after Charles refused to itinerate in Cornwall: J. Wesley to Charles Wesley, 17 July 1755, *Works of John Wesley*, XXVI: *Letters*, ed. Ted. A. Campbell, Nashville, TN 572–3. The concluding sentence of the letter in plain text is, ‘Then I will go to Cornwall myself, that is all’, but John Wesley added in

That being done, Charles Wesley then proceeded to intervene in John's plans to marry Grace Murray, and in late September of 1749 Charles arranged for Grace's marriage to one of Wesley's preachers who had also courted her, John Bennet. Murray and Bennet were married in Charles's presence on 3 October 1749. When John heard of it, he fell again into the same kind of depression he faced after breaking off his relationship with Sophia Hopkey, and yet once again the decision appears to have been his own because he had not convinced Grace to consent to the marriage he had proposed.

A year and four months after Charles's happy marriage to Sarah Gwynne, on 2 February 1751, John informed Charles that he planned to marry, though he did not immediately tell Charles whom he intended to marry. Charles's reaction, recorded in his manuscript journal, seems incongruously emotional:

*Saturday February 2.* ... I was thunderstruck, and could only answer he had given me the first blow, and his marriage would be the *coup de grace*. Trusty Ned Perronet followed, and told me the person was Mrs Vazeille! One of whom I had never had the least suspicion. I refused his company to the chapel, and retired to mourn with my faithful Sally. Groaned all the day, and several following ones, under my own and the people's burden. I could eat no pleasant food, nor preach, nor rest, either by night or by day.

*Sunday, February 3.* Gave the Sacrament, but without power or life. No comfort in it, no singing between, no prayer after it.<sup>39</sup>

Charles's manuscript journal confirms his enormous grief and that of the London Methodists over the next two weeks. On Sunday 17 February he noted that the congregation at the Foundery 'wept and made supplication'. Later that day at the Foundery he 'heard my brother's lamentable apology, which made all of us hide our faces'. That apparently referred to John's announcement of his intention to marry and his reasons for doing so. Charles Wesley continued: 'Several days afterwards I was one of the last that heard of his unhappy marriage.'<sup>40</sup>

John's marriage to Mary signalled a clean break from his longstanding commitment to live a single life with Charles as his *amicus spiritualis*, his *anam cara*. Even so, it is difficult to comprehend the depth of Charles's consternation and grief at John's marriage to Mary, and the grief and consternation of the Foundery community as well. They seem to have regarded the proposed marriage to Mary Vazeille as a violation of an unspoken contract

shorthand a further caustic comment: 'For a wife and a partner I may challenge the world! But love is rot. Adieu.'

<sup>39</sup> C. Wesley, manuscript journal, entry for 2–3 Feb. 1749, *Manuscript journal of the Rev. Charles Wesley, M.A.*, ii. 602.

<sup>40</sup> C. Wesley manuscript journal, entry for 17 Feb. 1749, *ibid.* ii. 603.

by which John had committed himself entirely to the Wesleyan Evangelical communities.

Charles and John had previously continued to talk about John's marriage, and Charles had written in his manuscript journal, on 3 June 1750, 'Weighed down all day by my brother's threatenings to marry. O why did he ever preclude himself from it? Why did he publish his rash book against it?'<sup>41</sup> So John's proposed marriage in 1751 could not have surprised him. Charles could be melodramatic, but his reaction on 2–3 February 1751 seems out of the scope even of his wide range of emotional reactions. It was as if Charles and the Foundery community perceived the end of Methodism, that the whole movement would die if John married. John's own fear about Charles's marriage was that Charles would cease to itinerate, which in fact came to pass after a few years. But Charles's reaction was not at all commensurate, and even though Charles and Sarah would be reconciled to John and Mary and would take Mary as their own friend within a few weeks, Charles seemed to have believed at this point that John's marriage would end his brother's intense activity for the Methodist movement. That proved to be true in Charles's case but, as we will see, not in John's.

John had obviously made up his mind to marry Mary Vazeille, and by Saturday 9 February he had drawn up a contract that was in effect a prenuptial agreement that John would not have access to Mary's money, and that she would not be responsible for his debts.<sup>42</sup> And despite a fall on London Bridge resulting in injuries on the next day, he was not to be deterred this time. He married Mrs Vazeille at her home on Threadneedle Street, probably on Monday 18 February 1751.<sup>43</sup> In June he formally resigned his Fellowship at Lincoln College *via* a Latin letter that remains pasted into the college's register book.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>41</sup> C. Wesley manuscript journal, *ibid.* ii. 595.

<sup>42</sup> Frank Baker's note on J. Wesley to Ebenezer Blackwell, who had served as his lawyer, 5 Mar. 1751, *Works of John Wesley*, II: *Sermons*, Nashville, TN 1985, 450 n. 15.

<sup>43</sup> Luke Tyerman asserted that the Revd Charles Manning, Vicar of Hayes, Middlesex, performed the service: *The life and times of the Rev. John Wesley, M.A., founder of the Methodists*, London 1870–1, ii. 101.

<sup>44</sup> J. Wesley, manuscript letter pasted in the Lincoln College record book: 'Ego Johannes Wesley Collegii Lincolnensis in Academia Oxoniensi Socius, quicquid mihi juris est in praedicta Societate eiusdem Rectori & Sociis sponte ac libere resigno: Illis universis et singulis perpetuam pacem ac omnimodam in Christo felicitatem exoptamus. / Johannes Wesley / Londini / Kalendis Junii / Anno Salutis Millesimo Septingentesimo Quinquagesimo Primo.' ['I John Wesley, a Fellow of Lincoln College in the University of Oxford, do freely and of my own will resign to the Rector and fellows of the same whatever is lawfully mine in the aforementioned fellowship. To each and every one of them we wish eternal peace and every happiness in Christ. / John Wesley / London / June 1, 1751' (my translation)]: Lincoln College Archive, *Novum Registrum* 1.

Threadneedle Street, the location of the Bank of England in the centre of the British financial industry, was an appropriate place for a merchant such as Anthony Vazeille to have lived. In fact, Threadneedle Street had a Huguenot chapel a few blocks from the Bank, the church where Anthony and Mary Vazeille had worshipped. An eighteenth-century print depicting that church shows a multi-story townhouse next door to the chapel, giving us an image of how the house where John and Mary lived might have appeared in their time. A plaque in Threadneedle Street marks the site of Lloyd's Coffee House, a popular gathering place between 1691 and 1785 and directly across the street from the French chapel in John and Mary's time.

The degree of John's affection for Mary can be seen in some of his early letters to her. He referred to her regularly as 'my dear' or 'my dear Molly' or 'my love', and he almost always signed his letters to her as 'your affectionate husband'. But the serious subjects of his letters, after recounting chit-chat about where he was travelling and how he was received, tended to be about what books or writing projects he was working on, and then very specific details about financial matters he had placed in Mary's hands and on which he solicited her advice. He revealed very little of his soul, his inward conflicts or his doubts to her.<sup>45</sup> That might not have been such a problem, except that he did reveal those inward thoughts and emotions to his brother Charles and, after 1756, as we shall see, to a select group of younger married women.

After his marriage, John kept his rooms at the Foundry, and between 1751 and about 1761 he seems to have lived both in Mary's home in Threadneedle Street with her four children and domestic servants and also in his rooms at the Foundry on Windmill Hill, a block from City Road. Although he wrote letters to Mary at Threadneedle Street, no correspondence addressed to John Wesley at Threadneedle Street appears in his wide range of letters that continued to be addressed to him at the Foundry. In the late 1750s through 1761, John Wesley wrote to Mary at (or 'in care of') the Foundry, since she had come to serve as a business manager for the book-publishing enterprise.<sup>46</sup> When he was in London, then, he had the option of staying in either location and we must imagine him moving between the Foundry, Threadneedle Street and

<sup>45</sup> Ted A. Campbell, 'John Wesley's intimate disconnections, 1755–1764', *Methodist History* li/3 (Apr. 2013), 185–200.

<sup>46</sup> In the fourteen volumes of Jackson's edition of John Wesley's works, there is only one reference to Threadneedle Street, being in his journal for Saturday 16 Feb. 1751 where, still suffering from his injury on London Bridge, 'I removed to Threadneedle-Street.' His journal mentioned nothing of his marriage to Mary Vazeille: *Works of John Wesley*, XX: *Journal and diaries*, ed W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, Nashville, TN 1991 379.

the West Street Chapel where he and Charles conducted Sunday services until they moved to the City Road Chapel in 1778.

But John Wesley was not in London during many months in the years following his marriage to Mary. In fact, less than a month after his marriage, Wesley set out for Bristol, returned for a few days to London and then itinerated throughout England with returns to London for a few days. And in succeeding years the frequency of his returns to London decreased, leading to a general pattern in which he would set out from London in March or April, travel to Bristol and from there in some years to Ireland, on to the north of England in the summer, returning to London in the fall.

He was not regularly with his wife. She did not like to leave her children and household to travel with him and she preferred the comfort and regularity of Threadneedle Street. He spent much of his time – even in London – in his Methodist venues apart from her, following the pattern he had set from the earliest days of the revival. This means that, despite Charles's fears, John was able to carry on his vigorous schedule of activity despite his marriage.

*An implied commitment: renewed single life*

John Wesley's marriage eventually unravelled, and it comes as no surprise that he returned to his life as a single man. There is evidence of broken relationships between John and Charles and between John and Mary from 1755. These broken relationships coincided with the early years of the Seven Years War and in fact John appears to have entirely ceased correspondence with his brother Charles between November 1756 – when the war began – and June 1760.<sup>47</sup>

John's separation from Mary resulted from her discovery of spiritually intimate letters that John had written to other women beginning in 1755, typically younger married or widowed women such as Sarah Ryan, provoking Mary's anger and accusations of hypocrisy from Methodism's detractors.<sup>48</sup> John pleaded that it was his right as a spiritual guide to engage in such intimate correspondence and conversations. His letters to these women reveal a behaviour that could not have been allowed in the settled cultures and institutions of Orthodox or Catholic monasticism, but those cultures and institutions had been eliminated from the Church of England at the Reformation.

<sup>47</sup> Campbell, 'John Wesley's intimate disconnections, 1755–1764', 187–9.

<sup>48</sup> See especially John's two letters to Sara Ryan a week apart, on Friday 20 Jan. 1758 and Friday 27 Jan. 1758: *Arminian Magazine* (Apr. 1782), 214–15. See also Campbell, 'John Wesley's intimate disconnections, 1755–1764', 192.

By the time the Seven Years War ended in 1763, John and Mary were living separately from each other, though they remained in communication up to October 1778, three years before Mary died. Two of John's letters in the 1760s show that he and Mary were planning to meet.<sup>49</sup> Mary continued to act as business manager at the Foundery, and they conversed about matters related to publishing and book-selling. Mary had asked John to destroy her letters after reading them, but one of the letters that survives from Mary to John from April 1774 deals with business affairs and concludes, 'I am your affectionate wife, Mary.'<sup>50</sup> On the other hand, some of John's letters in the 1760s and 1770s retained the bitter tone of his letters in the late 1750s: one particularly angry letter in July 1774 laid out his case against Mary, accusation by accusation.<sup>51</sup> Yet in other letters, he carried on correspondence about business and family matters, often signing himself as 'Your affectionate husband',<sup>52</sup> and often referred to her in chit-chat to friends, like a note to Charles including some shorthand phrases including, 'My wife continues in an amazing temper! Miracles are not ceased! Not one jarring string',<sup>53</sup> and a postscript to Christopher Hopper in 1773, 'My wife sends her love; she has her old companion the gout.'<sup>54</sup>

After Mary separated *de facto* from him, John Wesley returned to writing about the single life. In 1765 he produced a twelve-page tract, *Thoughts upon a single life*. His view of celibacy was about the same as his earlier *Thoughts upon marriage and a single life* (1743). He began by acknowledging the appropriateness of marriage for Christian believers as he had done before (paras 1–3), and again made the New Testament case for a single life for those 'who can receive it', that is, who had a special gift of continence that would enable them to avoid sexual temptation (paras 4–5). But his 1765 tract dwelt in much more detail on the advantages of the single life: to be able to live without worldly concerns, troubles and distractions, without loving one created being above all others, to have the graced ability to conquer natural desires, time to improve oneself and to give all one's worldly substance to God (paras 6–8).

<sup>49</sup> J. Wesley to Elizabeth Woodhouse, 15 June 1766: 'From there I purpose going to Whitehaven, and so round to Newcastle upon Tyne (where my wife is)': *Works of John Wesley*, XXVIII: *Letters*, ed. Randy Madox, 19–20; J. Wesley to Lady Darcy (Brisbane) Maxwell, 6 May 1766: 'On the 24th instant I hope to be at Edinburgh with my wife and daughter', xxviii. 17–18.

<sup>50</sup> Mary Wesley to J. Wesley, Apr. 1774 (which day is unclear), in MARC DDWF 11/1.

<sup>51</sup> J. Wesley to M. Wesley, 15 July 1774, *Works of John Wesley*, XXVII: *Letters*, ed. Ted A. Campbell, Nashville, TN 2015, 189.

<sup>52</sup> For example, J. Wesley to M. Wesley, Bristol, 18 May 1774, *Letters of John Wesley*, ed. John Telford, London 1931, vi. 87.

<sup>53</sup> J. Wesley to C. Wesley, 9 Oct. 1766, MARC DDWes 3/2.

<sup>54</sup> J. Wesley to Christopher Hopper, 7 Oct. 1773, *Letters of John Wesley*, vi. 48–9.

In this 1765 tract he wrote much more specifically about the problems facing a married person, showing that he now had first-hand knowledge of these problems. He wrote, for example, of the unavoidable issues, 'a thousand nameless domestic trials, which are found sooner or later in every family, such as having sickly, or weak, or unhappy, or disobedient children' who, unlike hired servants, one could not simply put away (para. 6), although in John Wesley's unique arrangement with Mary and her children, he could in fact go away at will to the Foundery or to West Street Chapel and he left London altogether for months at a time. His life with Mary and her family does not seem to have diminished his enthusiasm for the single life. Quite the opposite.

In the late 1770s, John Wesley developed a new chapel and a house on City Road that consolidated his previous work at the Foundery and at West Street Chapel in London. Just as the rooms at the Foundery had done, the house on City Road offered rooms to travelling male preachers who formed a community of itinerants with a view out of the upper windows onto the grave of Susanna Wesley in Bunhill Fields.

Mary Wesley died on Monday 7 November 1781. John was away from town and was not informed of her death until Friday of that week. For this date, he wrote in his journal: 'Friday 11, I came to London and was informed that my wife died on Monday. This evening she was buried, though I was not informed of it till a day or two after.'<sup>55</sup>

Mary was buried in the churchyard of St Giles Camberwell, and there is no surviving marker for her. By her support for John and her own work in the Methodist publishing enterprise in London, she made a substantial contribution to early Methodism. But Methodist tales about Mary's wickedness towards John, including claims of her beating him and tearing out his hair, left little room for her to be honoured as one of the saintly women of Methodism.<sup>56</sup> She lies there in the Camberwell churchyard unmarked, uncelebrated.

In 1785, at the age of eighty-two, John Wesley offered a final 'Thought on marriage'.<sup>57</sup> It was simply a 'thought', not even a tract, just three pages of print. He wrote about his own experience, he said, and he addressed his 'Thought' to men (not women), men who had once experienced the

<sup>55</sup> J. Wesley journal, entry for 11 Nov. 1781, *Works of John Wesley*: XXIII: *Journal and diaries*, ed. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, Nashville, TN 1995, 225.

<sup>56</sup> See, for example, the article on Mary Wesley in the 1974 *Encyclopedia of world Methodism*, which refused to acknowledge her as Mary Wesley and instead listed her under the name of her previous husband Anthony Vazeille. It described 'her perverseness, which was probably worsened by a streak of mental unsoundness': Maldwyn Edwards, 'Vazeille, Mrs. Mary', in Nolan B. Harmon (ed.), *Encyclopedia of world Methodism*, Nashville, TN 1974, ii. 2415–16.

<sup>57</sup> J. Wesley, 'A thought on marriage', Lisburn, Northern Ireland, 11 June 1785, *Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson, London 1831, xi. 545–7.

assurance of pardon, but found themselves lacking it and might be tempted to think that by marrying a woman they could recover their previous happiness in God. His advice: Don't do it. At least, don't do it for that reason. He advised men who found themselves lacking the assurance of pardon to return to Christ and find that assurance they had before. Marriage would not guarantee that.

Consistent with his earlier philosophy of celibacy, John did not deprecate marriage, but he did warn that marriage could be 'entered into unadvisedly' and he warned men against it. He says that he spoke from his own experience: he seems to have finally come to the realisation that he had in fact married Mary Vazeille unadvisedly. It was a matter on which he had heard plenty of advice from his spiritual guide, his brother Charles, and he had refused to accept that advice.

John Wesley's experience, perhaps especially his almost natural reversion to a single life after his marriage failed, suggests that he functioned well apart from married life. Concluding a review of John Wesley's relationship with Mary based on their correspondence, Kenneth Collins wrote that Wesley's 'celebration of virginity' reflected 'a seriousness and a diligence which should have been left to prosper in a celibate state'. Stating the matter even more pointedly, Collins concluded that 'John Wesley should have never married.'<sup>58</sup>

An examination of John Wesley's evolving views of celibacy alongside his commitments to celibacy, then to marriage, then to an implied celibate lifestyle bears out Collins's conclusion. But the Church of England in Wesley's age lacked structures to hold men or women accountable for a celibate life, as is still the case in most Protestant (non-Catholic and non-Orthodox) Churches. John had given up corresponding with Charles as a spiritual guide in the period of the Seven Years War, the same period during which he was also increasingly alienated from Mary. He could not see the danger in ungarded confidential correspondence with married women that originated in his correspondence with the Cotswold circle in spite of his own mother's warning and in spite of the fact that, later in his life, John Wesley saw and warned Methodists against spiritual dangers lurking at every turn. A community of experience and expertise might have allowed him a degree of good counsel to pursue the life for which he seemed otherwise gifted.

Despite his evolving visions of a single life, Wesley had come to a fairly consistent theology of celibate commitment: that it is, in more modern terms, a *charism*, a spiritual gift given to some believers. The Second Vatican Council described celibacy as 'that precious gift of divine grace which the Father gives to some men (cf. Mt. xix.11; 1 Cor. vii.7) so that by virginity, or celibacy, they

<sup>58</sup> Kenneth J. Collins, 'John Wesley's relationship with his wife as revealed in his correspondence', *Methodist History* xxxii/1 (1993), 4–18, quotations at pp. 17, 18.

can more easily devote their entire selves to God alone with undivided hearts'.<sup>59</sup> But John Wesley never seemed to think it important that a celibate calling should involve a formal or public act of commitment in a community that would hold one responsible for one's commitment as to a marriage vow. It would have helped him to have a community, including spiritual mentors, to which he was responsible for his commitment to singleness. He made himself accountable only to himself.

It was not until the Oxford Movement of the nineteenth century that Anglicans began to develop religious communities involving celibate commitments. Women's orders originated between 1841 and 1855, and an order for men, the Society of St John the Evangelist (the Cowley Fathers), in the Oxford industrial suburb of Cowley in 1866.<sup>60</sup> Since that time, Anglican religious communities have flourished throughout the world. Most of them require a celibate commitment, and many are patterned after Catholic traditions of Western monasticism.

John Wesley, Francis Asbury and early Methodist women including Mary Bosanquet and the community of single women she formed in Wesley's time all set examples of Christian singleness. Their Methodist followers were less enthusiastic in their support of a dedicated single life. Some Methodist churches did fulfil Wesley's aspiration to revive the ministry of deaconesses with a commitment to single life together in communities while serving in deaconess ministries. Inspired by a Lutheran motherhouse of deaconesses in Germany in 1836, the American Methodists Lucy Rider Meyer and Jane Bancroft Robinson organised competing models of deaconess work in the United States from the 1880s, some of which became part of the formal structure of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Both of them wrote books on deaconesses in Christian history, and the patterns they developed inspired the development of deaconess work among British (Wesleyan) Methodists in the late 1800s.<sup>61</sup>

Protestant communities beyond Anglicanism have seldom recognised the commitment to a single life blessed publicly as marriages are blessed.

<sup>59</sup> *Lumen gentium* para. 42, in Walter M. Abbott (ed.), *The documents of Vatican II*, New York 1966, 71–2.

<sup>60</sup> See *Religious communities in the American Episcopal Church and in the Anglican Church of Canada*, West Park, NY 1945, 18–20.

<sup>61</sup> Lacey C. Warner, 'Methodist Episcopal and Wesleyan Methodist deaconess work in the late 19th and early 20th centuries: a paradigm for evangelism', unpubl. PhD diss. Bristol 2000; Priscilla Pope-Levison, 'A "thirty year war" and more: exposing complexities in the Methodist deaconess movement', *Methodist History* xlvii/2 (2009), 101–16. See also Lucy Rider Meyer, *Deaconesses, biblical, Early Church, European, American: with the story of the Chicago Training School, for City, Home and Foreign Missions, and the Chicago Deaconess Home*, 2nd rev. and enlarged edn, Chicago 1889. I am indebted to Priscilla Pope-Levison for information on her comprehensive work in progress on Methodist deaconess work.

They have not developed a sense of the single life as a distinct charism, a spiritual gift, and lacking this, they have not nurtured a culture of recognising and supporting single life as a divine calling.<sup>62</sup> John Wesley's evolving visions and commitments to Christian singleness suggest that Protestant communities may be missing a crucial element of historic Christian communities reflected in the Christian Scriptures: to honour and bless and celebrate those whom God has called to a single life of Christian service, just as Churches honour and bless and celebrate those whom God has called to a married life of Christian service.

<sup>62</sup> The giftedness of people devoted to a single life has been recognised and supported in some instances beyond religious communities. In the period of the Depression in the United States, many school boards offered 'teacherages', houses for single teachers.