

**Another Glimpse of
The Divergent Wesley Brothers**

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Charles Wesley had long been a critic of how broadly his brother John used lay preachers, as well as other practices that portended a split from the Church of England. Thus John's decision in 1784 to ordain two of his lay preachers, Thomas Vasey and Richard Whatcoat, for the Methodists in North America provoked immediate critical reflections by Charles. These included ten verse items in a notebook volume that Frank Baker designated MS Ordinations.

The first nine poetic diatribes in MS Ordinations express Charles's challenge to John's authority for and wisdom in performing the ordinations (as well as taking swipes at Thomas Coke). But the connection of the tenth item to this situation seems indirect at best:

X.

We hear a Romish Founder say
“Cast—not your sins, but—shoes away¹”:
Another bids, in whining note,
“Strip off the buttons from thy coat”:
A Third adorns the Sisters shapes
With jackets, and their head with Caps:
But the supreme Reformer cries
“Your Wrists, and Elbows circumcise!”¹

This suspicion was confirmed when I discovered recently another version of the poem, in the hand of Sarah (Gwynne) Wesley, among a set of papers that had belonged to Adam Clarke.² The heading of this copy describes the occasion of this slightly shorter version as Charles' reaction to reading the rules that John wrote for the Methodist bands.

**Mr. Charles Wesley improm[t]u
on Seeing the Band Rules written
by his Brother John Wesley**

We hear a Romish Founder say
Cast not your Sins but Shoes away
Another cries with whining note
Strip off the Buttons from your Coat
But our supreme Reformer cries
Your Wrists, and Elbows circumcise³

¹MS Ordinations, 10; as transcribed on the site of the Center for Studies in the Wesleyan Tradition: See <http://divinity.duke.edu/initiatives-centers/cswt/wesley-texts/manuscript-verse>. The poem was first published in volume 3 of *The Unpublished Poetry of Charles Wesley*, eds. S T Kimbrough Jr and Oliver A. Beckerlegge (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1992), 93

²Adam Clarke Papers, Box 2, folder 1, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Duke University, Durham, NC.

³A transcription of this version of the poem is now included in the file “Assorted Looseleaf Manuscript Verse” on the CSWT website.

To make Sarah's heading more precise, this six-line version of the poem is reacting not to the "Rules of the Band Societies," as drawn up Dec. 25, 1738, but to the "Directions given to the Band Societies" dated Dec. 25, 1744.⁴ These directions include exhortation against wearing "needless ornaments" like rings, necklaces, ruffles, and the like. It is not clear whether Charles's critical response was penned at the time the Directions were issued, or at some later occasion on seeing them. But the response itself shows that Charles diverged from John on the ideal of "plain dress," and the implicit critique of the upper class that it reflected.

Charles's inclusion of an enlarged version of the poem in MS Ordinations rendered it a more general criticism of John's independent authoritarian pronouncements and acts.

⁴See *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984ff), 9:77–79.