

# George Bell and Early Methodist Enthusiasm: A New Manuscript Source from the Manchester Archives

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George Bell is one of the less well-known, even if one of the more notorious, of the early Methodist preachers. Bell first appears on the Methodist stage in 1761, in which year he wrote a letter to John Wesley.<sup>1</sup> From this letter we learn a little of Bell's life: he had been a corporal in the King's Life Guards and had undergone a religious experience (which Bell describes as his 'justification') in about 1758. From other sources we learn that Bell was born at Borningham, Durham (date unknown) and died in Paddington in 1807.<sup>2</sup> Little else of his life is known.<sup>3</sup>

Bell's career as a Methodist preacher was short-lived, for even if he had become active immediately after his 'justification' in 1758, his career spanned only five years. It was brought to a conclusion not, as he had expected, with an apocalyptic bang (Bell had preached that the end of the world would come on 28 February 1763), but an altogether far less dramatic whimper. The day before the expected climax to the earth's history, he was arrested for 'raising unnecessary fears in the King's subjects, for blasphemy and for holding meetings in unlicensed places'<sup>4</sup> and

<sup>1</sup> George Bell to John Wesley, 6 April 1761, *Arminian Magazine*, 3 (1780), 674–6.

<sup>2</sup> Nolan B. Harmon (ed.) *Encyclopedia of world Methodism*, 2 vols (Nashville, TN: United Methodist Publishing House, 1974), vol. 1, 248.

<sup>3</sup> What little other biographical information on Bell is available is gathered together in Kenneth G.C. Newport, 'George Bell, prophet and enthusiast', *Methodist History* (forthcoming).

<sup>4</sup> William Briggs to Charles Wesley, 5 March 1763. The letter is held in the Methodist Archives and Research Centre (hereinafter MARC) at the John Rylands University Library of Manchester, ref. DDWES 2:61.

promptly thrown into jail. Following the failed prophecy Bell slips from view. Southey suggests that Bell made no further pretence of religion, but rather turned his attention to politics, where once again he was prone to enthusiasm and a lack of restraint.<sup>5</sup>

Bell's views were extreme. As has been noted above, he argued that the world would come to an apocalyptic end on 28 February 1763 and was evidently not alone in taking this view. The precise number of those who followed him is difficult to gauge, but it was probably not insignificant. Southey, who seems to have been generally well informed on the matter, speaks of the 'considerable' agitation stirred up by Bell's predictions.<sup>6</sup> Firmer evidence comes from John Wesley, who speaks of the 'many' who were afraid on the night preceding the expected apocalyptic harvest.<sup>7</sup> John refers also to his belief that

not one in fifty, perhaps not one in five hundred, of the people called Methodists, believe any more than I do, either this or any other of his prophecies.<sup>8</sup>

Given that John is here trying to distance the Methodist movement from Bell, his willingness to admit that there might be as many as 'one in fifty' of the Methodists who do believe Bell's predictions is surely significant. It would appear then, that the number of those who followed Bell, both figuratively in what he said, and literally up the mound near St Luke's Hospital to await the coming of the Lord,<sup>9</sup> was not a small one.

Probably even more significant numbers followed Bell (and Maxfield) on the question of the possibility of attaining absolute sinless perfection. That this was Bell's view is unquestionable as is clearly evidenced by a number of primary sources. According to John Walsh, who wrote to Charles Wesley on the matter in 1762, Bell claimed that he 'could not fall from [this] perfect state, unless God himself could fall from his throne'.<sup>10</sup> The letter reproduced in full below supports Walsh's report, as indeed does Bell's own letter to John Wesley in which he speaks in unequivocal terms of his own perfection.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Robert Southey, *The life of Wesley*, rev. edn (London and New York: Frederick Warne and Co., 1889), 421; cf. *The works of John Wesley*, 14 vols (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1872; reprint, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, n.d. [hereinafter *Works*]), vol. 8, 315. See further Newport, 'George Bell'.

<sup>6</sup> Southey, *Life*, 421.

<sup>7</sup> See W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater (eds), *The works of John Wesley: journals and diaries, The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, vols 18–23 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988–95 [hereinafter J&D]), vol. 21, 400.

<sup>8</sup> *London Chronicle*, 10 February 1763 as quoted in Luke Tyerman, *The life and times of the Rev. John Wesley M.A.*, 3 vols (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1870–71), vol. 2, 461.

<sup>9</sup> See Tyerman *Life*, vol. 2, 438.

<sup>10</sup> John Walsh to Charles Wesley, 11 August 1762; MARC ref. Early Methodist Folio (hereinafter EM) no. 134. On Bell's perfectionism see further Newport, 'George Bell'.

<sup>11</sup> *Arminian Magazine*, 3 (1780): 674–6.

The extent of this broader Bell-Maxfield perfectionist movement is somewhat easier to assess. As a movement within Methodism it clearly attracted a large number of followers, perhaps as many as 500 being involved.<sup>12</sup> According to John, 106 persons finally left the society on Maxfield's account.<sup>13</sup> How many of these also accepted Bell's prophecies is, however, impossible to judge with any degree of accuracy.

Neither, it seems, was Bell's influence restricted to London. In a letter written in 1767, John Johnson reports to Charles on the current state of the society in Dublin. Among other details, Johnson reports that 'most of those that caught *the Strange fire kindled by Bell in London*, are gone away into the world'.<sup>14</sup> It is not clear from the letter whether these individuals who have now 'gone away into the world' accepted Bell's prophecy. The perfectionist issue is, however, mentioned by Johnson explicitly in this context. Similarly, in his journal entry for 15 April 1765, John Wesley reports how he has met in Newcastle two men who are still 'following Bell'. Again this has to do with perfectionism and not the end of the world.

Despite the extremity of his views (and perhaps because of them) Bell and his followers could not be ignored by the leadership (though as emerges in the letter below, it was Briggs's view that John Wesley was not at all well suited to the task of bringing Bell and Maxfield to heel).<sup>15</sup> The threat they posed to the Methodist cause was a real one. Not only was there the obvious concern (which was later to prove well founded)<sup>16</sup> that the predictions of Bell would bring the Methodists in general into disrepute, but the internal tensions created by the movement threatened the Methodist societies' stability. Consequently it comes as no surprise to find that John Wesley spent some considerable time first assessing Bell and then, when the situation became critical, seeking

<sup>12</sup> The figure 500 appears in a letter written by William Briggs to Charles Wesley on 16 December 1762, (MARC ref. DDPR 1:12). Here Briggs refers to some '500' whom John Wesley has found in the society who claim to have reached perfection (though John does not believe that more than one in ten of them have actually attained it).

<sup>13</sup> J&D, vol. 21, 438.

<sup>14</sup> John Johnson to Charles Wesley, 3 November 1767, (MARC ref. EM 93). Johnson also mentions Bell in an earlier letter to Charles, in which he voices his fear that if things continue as they are 'Bell and his company' will destroy the work in London (John Johnson to Charles Wesley, 2 June 1763, [MARC ref EM 92]).

<sup>15</sup> According to Briggs 'Mr Madan' (i.e. Martin Madan [1726–90] the prominent Anglican evangelical and hymnwriter) went further and placed some of the blame for the whole affair on John himself. Briggs reports Madan as saying 'all this Confusion arises from Mr Wesley's encouraging so many people to believe they had attained to a state of perfection' (see Briggs to Charles Wesley, 5 March 1763, [MARC ref. DDWES 2:61]).

<sup>16</sup> Thus for example in a letter published in *Lloyd's Evening Post* on 2 March 1763 'Philodemus' comments on the Bell incident and on the basis of it denounces Methodism as 'the most destructive and dangerous system to government and society that ever was established'. John Wesley sought to counter such views in the letter he published in the *Post* on 18 March 1763. See further Tyerman, *Life*, vol. 2, 438–9.

to counter his influence. Thus, for example, in a letter written to Charles Wesley, William Briggs reports that on the evening of 27 February 1763 John Wesley had preached to the society with exceptional vigour. Indeed, on hearing this preaching Briggs had thought that it was ‘as if an Angel from heaven was speaking to the Assembly’.<sup>17</sup> On this occasion John had chosen the first seven or eight verses of Ezekiel 13 as the basis for his sermon which, says Briggs, provided ‘such words of Confutation to the wild dreams of our Brethren’ as he had never before heard.<sup>18</sup> On the evening of the earth’s predicted doom, John preached again, and again sought to reassure the congregation.<sup>19</sup>

John’s reaction to Bell was not, however, always as negative. Even as late as 8 December 1762 John had heard Bell preach and concluded that

Part of what he said was from God (this was my reflection *at the time*), part from an heated imagination. But as he did not *scream*, and there was nothing dangerously wrong, I do not yet see cause to hinder him.<sup>20</sup>

This is consistent with a letter written by John on 11 December 1762 in which he describes how he ‘removed’ a meeting from Beech Lane (no doubt the same group as that described in the Briggs letter reproduced below) to the Foundry. This he did, writes John, either to ‘*mend* them or *end* them’. John’s view is that they were mended and that though the group has done ‘some hurt’ it has also done ‘much good’. Further, John writes, ‘I trust they will now do more good, and no hurt at all’.<sup>21</sup> Thus, it seems, even as late as 11 December 1762 John Wesley’s response to Bell was still partly positive. Briggs himself refers to this equivocal response to Bell (and Maxfield) on John’s part in the letter below. Briggs had, he says, no real cause to doubt that the movement was more positive than negative for, he writes to Charles, he ‘was confident it must be innocent, whilst your dear bro’r approv’d’ (§5). Briggs goes on to note that it was his opinion (prior to attending the meeting) that ‘they mean well’ (we must note that Maxfield is again in view and that the issue is perfection not eschatological prediction), and that even ‘Mr W “affirms that great good has been done”’ (§6).

What caused the eventual change in John’s views regarding Bell is not clear in the sources, but it may well have been the emergence of the chronologically precise form of Bell’s apocalypticism. To be sure, Bell seems to have had a prophetic

<sup>17</sup> William Briggs to Charles Wesley, 5 March 1763, (MARC ref. DDWES 2:61).

<sup>18</sup> William Briggs to Charles Wesley, 5 March 1763, (MARC ref. DDWES 2:61).

<sup>19</sup> J&D, vol. 21, 400.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> John Wesley to Charles Wesley, 11 December 1762, (MARC ref. DDWES 3:18).

agenda before this date: already in late November Fletcher is referring to Bell's 'prophetic mistakes'.<sup>22</sup> However, it was perhaps not until late December 1762<sup>23</sup> or early January 1763 that this aspect of Bell's preaching came to John's attention. John was not opposed to millennialism *per se*. Indeed, it was only just over a year later that he wrote to Thomas Hartley commending the latter's presentation of his clearly millennial views. John stated

I cannot but thank you for your strong and seasonable confirmation of that comfortable doctrine: of which I cannot entertain the least doubt, as long as I believe the Bible.<sup>24</sup>

John did, however, take exception to Bell's date-setting, and it was probably this, rather than the prophetic scheme itself, that aroused his opposition. By 5 January 1763 John has a 'sufficient answer' prepared for Bell,<sup>25</sup> and three days later is publicly disowning him in print. Not only are Bell's prophecies wrong, thinks John, but also his claim to sinless perfection.<sup>26</sup>

It is within this general context, then, that the letter presented below is to be seen. The letter is remarkable, in that it gives a rare eye-witness account of raw perfectionist enthusiasm as it is manifested in the London Methodist societies of the early 1760s. The general issue of perfectionism and enthusiasm in Methodism during this period is a topic that has attracted significant debate already<sup>27</sup> and it is not the intention here to repeat that discussion. Rather, in presenting the letter below, a rare glimpse is given of perfectionism and enthusiasm as it was manifested among the Methodist rank and file. The letter is extensive and detailed and, while not unbiased, a valuable source of information which has not hitherto been noted. It was written by W. Briggs to Charles Wesley, apparently at the latter's request, for Briggs ends the first

<sup>22</sup> John Fletcher to unknown correspondent, 22 November 1762 (John Wesley would appear to be the recipient since in what is almost certainly Charles's hand there is a note on the back of the letter which reads 'Fletcher to B.'. The letter is not, in all probability, to Charles himself, since when Fletcher did write to Charles he usually did so in French). The letter is uncatalogued, but may be found in the MARC in a volume of letters entitled 'Fletcher volume' no. 20. A published version appears in the *Arminian Magazine* 18 (1795), 49–50.

<sup>23</sup> John's attitude to Bell seems to have hardened on hearing him speak on 22 December 1762, at which time, John says: 'I heard George Bell once more, and was convinced he must not continue to pray at the Foundery. The reproach of Christ I am willing to bear, but not the reproach of enthusiasm, if I can help it' (J&D, vol. 21, 400–1). This 'conviction' was evidently put into practice. In a letter to Charles Wesley written on 19 January 1763 (MARC ref. EM 29), J. Butcher reports that John had forbidden Bell to speak at the Foundery (though in fact word has gone out that he will do so that very night).

<sup>24</sup> John Wesley to Thomas Hartley, 27 March 1764, *Arminian Magazine*, 6 (1783), 498–500.

<sup>25</sup> John Wesley to Charles Wesley, 5 January, 1763, MARC ref. DDWES 3:17 (*Works* vol. 12, 122–3).

<sup>26</sup> *London Chronicle*, 8 January 1763 (quoted in Tyerman, *Life*, vol. 2, 460).

<sup>27</sup> Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable enthusiast: John Wesley and the rise of Methodism* (London: Epworth Press, 1989), 333–42.

part of his report with the words 'Thus, dear Sir, I have fulfilled your request and hope you will never lay upon me such another cross as to go to such another meeting'. Later in the letter Briggs adds

Dear Sir, don't you think I have vastly exceeded my commission? You desired I would see & hear & tell you all but you little expected such a tedious answer to your short epistle (§34).

It would seem, then, as though Charles was actively seeking information on the Bell-Maxfield movement and requested Briggs to attend one of their meetings and report back. The result is the highly informative letter presented below.

In transcribing the letter the original spelling and punctuation have been kept. The use of upper-case letters has, however, been modernized. Words which are not clear in the text are indicated by [?].

London Oct. 28th 1762

Revd and very Dear Sir

1. Your obliging favour of the 18th Inst. I received last Tuesday evening. There is the appearance of its having had a wafer; but it came to me without the least fastening.
2. It is utterly out of my power at present to inspect into the conduct of our younger brethren; and if I was free for such a service, I believe I should not be thought a proper person to be employd in it.
3. I live retired from all concerns but how to work out my own salvation & to promote the present & eternal welfare of my dear family: yet, from my heart do I long for & rejoyce in the prosperity of our Jerusalem; and whatever is a reproach to her I lament & pray may be removd.
4. You may think it strange; but so it is in fact, altho I live in the midst of the elevated in heart, I have conversd with none of them & have been at none of their meetings till last night
5. I have heard strange things; but hopd in general, that greater good was done than hurt, & was confident it must be innocent, whilst your dear bro'r approvd. I knew it was impossible for me to act if I saw any thing amiss & was convincd I could be little benefitted were I to attend their meetings, from only hearing Mr Maxfield at the Foundry. From these or the like considerations, I have kept myself from all disputes or any ways interfering in the present new schemes — and for my thus living in a peaceable retirement, I found no condemnation.
6. I have often wishd for an opportunity of being at a meeting, that I might be able to give my judgement about the spirit of it: for till I had heard for myself, I had no disposition but to receive every report with good allowance for prejudice, mistake etc in the relater & coud never offer my advice farther than "hope the best. They mean well. And Mr W affirms that great good has been done".

7. Your letter raised me into resolution. I made no hesitation, tho' it truly was a great cross.
8. I took the first opportunity after I received your admonition, which was last night. I earnestly prayd that I might do & receive no hurt. I went disposed to rejoyce in every thing good, & expected to meet only my brethren farther advanced in the school of Christ than myself. In short, I had nothing but love & goodwill & a kind of reverence towards them.
9. I have "now seen with my own eyes & heard with my own ears", what I am afraid I shall give you but a very faint idea of & that the rather[?] because I will keep myself to simple narrative, without any exaggeration.
10. The meeting is in Beach Lane. I was let in by an old woman & found a crowded audience singing with great alacrity. Amidst the croud, at the farther end under the pulpit, I saw an hand waving<sup>28</sup> about & soon found it was Mr Bell giving out the hymn. After the hymn he spoke a few minutes to explain the intent of their meeting, which he affirmed to be with a view to awaken those asleep in sin, whom curiosity should bring in; to offer milk to babes, strong meat to the strong & that all might come up to a state of perfection.
11. He next prayd, & soon ran into such an extraordinary strain, screaming in such a violent manner to compel a blessing upon the present meeting, that he seemed to be in a rapture & in fact as one raving with agony. I could not help thinking of the *Sybyl* describd in Dryden's *Virgil* & was under apprehensions of seeing him fall down with foaming mouth, wild eyes & uplifted hair, deliver a prophecy; these were my foolish apprehensions but in a moment was relieved by his voice sinking[?] into a calm & familiar reasoning with God, why he ought not to be denyd his supplication.
12. In the midst of his rhapsody, he fell into an hymn, which brought on an universal shout of singing. After some time spent in singing such expressions of their perfection & union with God as I never before heard of, he again ran into a kind of talk[?] about the priviledges enjoyd by those who had clean hearts — and in the midst of his discourse he fell into a prayer again with most surprizing familiarity & vociferation, screaming for some token of almighty power to work the mighty change in those present and adoring that goodness which had redeemd so many from all sin, giving them an assurance that they should never fall by taking away the occasions of stumbling.
13. In the midst of this vehement supplication & praise, they fell into singing the glorious state of being free from sin.
14. Mr Bell being pretty well spent, Mr Mxd stood up & with great solidity & propriety explained the intent of their meeting & assured us they had no other scheme in view than to promote the work of God & to bring souls up to a state of perfection. He exhorted us not to be offended if high things were spoke of & admonished every one not to sing words that he could not utter with a safe conscience. What he said was truly serious & much to the purpose. My heart melted to see so worthy a man in such wild company. He from exhorting suddenly fell into a prayer which was not so solid as his

<sup>28</sup> At this point in the text Briggs has added an insertion at the foot of the page which reads: 'The speaker stood amongst the crowd without distinction'.

exhortation. He ran into loud, familiar & rhapsurous expressions & in a strain (tho' not so shocking as Mr Bells) bold & commanding. From prayer he ran into singing & after the hymn was done a short silence ensued, when a zealous man in the gallery began with a becoming accent to find fault with what had been said. Mr Bell immediately forbade him to speak, which made the man raise his voice, as much as to say he woud be heard, crying out blasphemy & lies! The congregation fell to singing & soon drownd the opposer's voice. When the hymn was done the man began again with, if we say that we have no sin etc & another below bawled out in the same strain. Singing was the only remedy. Whilst singing the opposers & some of the brethren kept arguing & such a bustle there was that I thought they were fighting but I believe it was only their eager shuffling among the crowd to get at the speech of each other. The opposers were Tabernacle brethren<sup>29</sup> (so it is said) & the opposed made no impression. After this Mr Mxd warmly prayd for those who opposed this work of God, the zealot in the gallery calld out "Sir, it is false. I do not oppose the work of God, but these blasphemies. Ye blaspheme. Ye dishonour God! etc". Mr Mxd prayd the more vehemently & his friends echoed with clamourous amens that nothing coud be heard distinctly. In his prayer Mr Mxd spoke of the opposers being under the influence of the grand Enemy. The friend above cryd out "You lye[?] to God, Sir, I am a Child of God & have been so these 20 years".

15. In short the wildness on one side, the rage of the other & uproar of all made it a scene of the most diabolical frenzy; and finding my soul much oppressd with sorrow & my poor weak head affected with the uproar, I quitted the place before it was half done & found a crowd in the street laughing us to scorn!

16. Thus Dear Sir, I have fulfilld your request & I hope you will never lay upon me such another cross as to go to such another meeting! Coud I recollect some of the expressions that were usd in the exhortations & prayers, they woud astonish you, as they did me; but I was obliged to keep my soul in an humble praying frame, lest I shoud be infected by the contagion & therefore rather studyd to forget every thing that was said than remember it. In fact I can give you but a faint idea of what passd; tho the simple truth above related must greatly affect you — and I will not add to your present trouble any farther, after begging your permission to make the following short observations:

17. 1. The meeting itself in such a manner & upon such an occasion is very absurd & unscriptural.

Coud any thing be more absurd than our common bands<sup>30</sup> meeting amongst all sorts of hearers? Nothing can be more innocent & scriptural than brethren unfolding to one another their different experiences. To those who have a real work of God upon their souls & find themselves still liable to vary from temptations within & without, such kinds of intercourse must be extremely edifying: but what can be said of these brethren to meet in a mixt multitude to talk of the highest attainments in the Christian race?

<sup>29</sup> The 'Tabernacle Brethren' were worshippers at Revd George Whitefield's Tabernacle chapel in Moorfields, built in 1741. The congregation would have been Calvinist in their theology and therefore opposed to perfectionism in even a mild form.

<sup>30</sup> The 'Common bands' were one of the select groups of the society. They consisted of committed Methodists who met together for intimate prayer and spiritual conversation, and would therefore have felt uneasy concerning large public meetings of this kind.

The state itself should be treated of with great humility amongst one another; yet here are a number who with a confidence savouring of presumption, spake of this last great operation of the spirit, as if the most common lesson in the School of Christ! Where can they find any scripture to support such a practice?

18. 2. If one may presume to judge a tree by its fruits, the manner of this meeting is inconsistent with every scriptural idea of the truth that is in Jesus.
19. Mr Bell's common discourses at this meeting was low & insipid however loud & vehement. There does not seem to be the least depth or weight in the truths which he delivered. They are superficial in themselves & delivered with an air of superiority that necessarily occasions disgust. But when his vociferation comes on it is horrible beyond expressions! I thought I could distinguish a straining agony to raise himself to an admirable pitch[?]. It was all so forced & unnatural, that I could not esteem it so much as preternatural: supernatural it could not be if holy writ has left us any rule to judge divine interposition!
20. However, I must suppose that this kind of address to have an effect upon some, as many seemed to labour with echoing groan for groan: and from the observation of many years, we are assured that the most noisy outrage[?] is seldom the fruit of a deep conviction.
21. The manner & matter of Mr Bell's prayer was loud, familiar, peremptory & often extravagant — if not bordering upon audacity & blasphemy. It is horrible beyond expression, when a poor creature can talk to the almighty with less respect than to an earthly magistrate. I might have said *seemingly talk so*; for so it really *seems* but I hope they had more humility & reverence in their hearts than their expressions implyd. Not one word dropt that they thought meanly of themselves!
22. In short, from what I have seen of his letters & what I have now heard myself, I cannot but esteem Mr Bell ripe for the most unscriptural extravagancies. I expect to hear of his prophecying, denouncing judgements & calling himself one of the witnesses. I hope he is honest at heart; but to me he appeared to be acting a part, whether out of vanity or mere delusion, I am not able to determine. But whoever is unhappily led by his spirit, will, I am persuaded, find cause to repent before God & their brethren or sink into such a willful blindness as must be fatal in the end.
23. Mr Maxd did not seem to be so swallowd up in rhapsodies: as I said before he spoke well at first; but in his prayer flew into expressions unbecoming his character. For[?] many months I have been utterly in the dark what he was aiming at in his preaching at the chappels & Found[r]y. The general tenure of his discourses seemd to proclaim a God all mercy, therefore sin was as nothing before him: all powerful, therefore we might *now* be justified & sanctified. He seems to have lost all idea of a state of conviction; he makes light of the justified state & with vehement solititude[?] insist upon it that we may *NOW* believe & be sanctified without any previous experience. His vehemence is taken for power & this power works on some to crye out in an agony for the promised blessing. Yet after all I hope he has been blessed to some tho to me (who esteem him sincerely) he genuinely is as the sounding brass.

24. 3. The consequence of last night's meeting was shocking.

And I think it could not be otherwise. Such strange discourses, prayers & hymns in such a congregation could not be attended with any pleasing affect. It is true the zealot against, was more angry than the zealots for perfection: but the point is not a subject for publick debate. The subject itself is venerable & ought to be treated with great respect. If the subject itself was allowable in a private meeting; yet Mr Bells manner of managing it was deplorable & was worthy of reproof. It cannot be but the like meetings will breed the like confusion.

26. 4. The Conduct of these brethren are a just reproach to our Society, not only amongst those that are without; but the sincerely devout in all societies.

27. We have long been reproached for our peculiar attachment to Christian verity & virtue. This reproach has been & still is honourable. But our principles & discipline had nothing in them from the beginning, that had the least tendency to promote enthusiasm. Our love to God & one another; our indifference to worldly pursuits & joys — our zeal for the honour of God in his ordinances, were the great stumbling blocks of unenlightened minds. Such offences real Christianity ever occasioned & must do so whilst it remains upon earth. But this kind of rhapsody & wild ranting can never be from the spirit of Christ & therefore must be a grievous offence to every serious mind who wishes well to religion.

28. 5. What remedy can wipe off the reproach?

29. Your dear Bro'r is not very well qualified to govern those who will not be governd.

30. His tender regard for the good of souls will make him bear with some evil where he thinks there is much good. Had he been at the meeting last night, he must have done violence to his conscience if he had not immediately calld a solemn society[?] & renounced the promoters[?] of such indefensible extravagancies. But now he will hear all from second hand & if from themselves, no doubt, but he will lay the blame upon the opposers.

31. If I might presume to advise it should be, that a few select men & women who encourage this meeting & a few who disapprove of it, should meet yr brother upon the subject. Let him hear both sides & then let him judge in the name of God without fear & act with resolution.

32. If the brethren are right, let them be encouraged, without censuring those who cannot join with them; but if their scheme is big with such kind of rant as the French Prophets & likely to prove[?] a reproach to every thing serious, the brethren should be admonishd & if they submit not to wholesome counsel, our Bishop should declare solemnly, "I can take no further care of your souls!"

33. But I would rather hope they will be advisable, if not to study the meek & lowly truths; yet at least to give over proclaiming their warm & lofty experiences to such a mixt multitude. If not, & our dear ministers connive at their conduct, the reproach will naturally fall upon them, tho they in all things labour to be worthy of a well done both from God & good men.

34. Dear Sir, don't you think I have vastly exceeded my commission? You desired I would see & hear & tell you all; but you little expected such a

tedious answer to your short epistle. If I have exhausted your patience; forgive me. I mean to oblige — to thee O father of mercies do I appeal that I mean not to injure my brethren! If my ignorance has led me into nonsense, it cannot, I think, be imputed to malevolence, I write freely; but I think with candour — and if I do no good, I hope I shall do no hurt. You will easily prevent my letter from doing hurt, by burning it; but if it can do any good, I am so conscious that I have advised nothing but what it strictly true, that I have no objection to your shewing it any one.

35. I write in a hurry & have no time to write a fair copy, which I hope will be a sufficient apology if you meet with any thing not fully expressed or legibly wrote.
36. I write all my thoughts to you in hopes something may rebound to your dear brother; but nothing *I* can say to him will have any weight. He loves me for what I was; not for what I am: but I ever did & ever shall love him with the sincerest veneration.
37. I will not begin another half sheet. We all in my little house unite in sincere love to you & yours. My dear mother is much as usual. Pray for us & believe me ever your most obligd & affectionate

W Briggs

The letter printed above contains a rare, valuable and first-hand account of the Methodist enthusiasm as it was experienced in early 1760s London. What Briggs describes is a movement significantly affected by the preaching of Maxfield and Bell. The well-attended meeting described is not only enthusiastic, but borders on the chaotic. The voice of those who object to what is being said is drowned amid the rapturous singing of the others and so heated is the exchange of views that to the onlooker it appears as if the parties have come to physical blows. John Wesley is not able, in Briggs's view, to control the situation. This is a popular movement which is operating independently of (and even defying) the official leadership.

Over the course of the next few months the situation was to worsen and the faction become even more serious and still John Wesley seemed reluctant to act. Only at a relatively late stage, perhaps after Bell had set a definite date for the end of the world, did John at length take steps to try to restore order and protect the name and integrity of the Methodist people. Indeed, one might even argue that it was John's good fortune that Bell did set a date, for by so doing he signed his own prophetic death warrant and brought about his own downfall; on this issue at least, 'Pope John' himself appears to have spoken with a very ineffective voice.

This letter also highlights further the wealth of material yet to be unearthed among the manuscript materials held in the Methodist Archives at the John Rylands University Library of Manchester. The letter is found in a volume of materials which has only very recently been catalogued (MARC ref. DDPR 1/10) and

the same volume contains a further 103 items, almost all being letters addressed to Charles Wesley. The materials deal with a variety of topics ranging from the domestic violence suffered by Mary Midgely<sup>31</sup> to an extended description of Charles Wesley's preaching written by Joseph Williams.<sup>32</sup> It is true that the document reproduced above is relatively long and that its descriptive genre makes it worthy of particular note by the historian of the Methodist tradition, but in neither of these characteristics is it unique among the collection. Even on the George Bell/Thomas Maxfield affair there are a number of further letters in the archive that have not so far been brought to the surface. There is no space to deal with these here. We might note further in passing, however, the very long and informative letter of John Walsh to Charles Wesley written 11 August 1762,<sup>33</sup> a source to which brief reference has been made above.<sup>34</sup> In this letter Walsh reports not only Bell's views on sinless perfection, but also those on the millennium, his ability to heal, and even to raise the dead.<sup>35</sup> Similarly a further letter from Briggs to Charles dated 10 March 1765, which deals again with the defection of some 'perfect priests', warrants further investigation.<sup>36</sup>

The collection held at the John Rylands Library is particularly rich in MS sources, which include personal letters, manuscript notebooks, sermons and journals. Such material is invaluable to the historian for it is able to give some significant insight into what was happening on the ground rather than relating only to the relatively academic circles of the published elite. Such MS materials have not, unlike their published counterparts (Charles Wesley's journal is a good example),<sup>37</sup> gone through an editorial filter, and hence are better able to give a picture of early Methodism as it was practised on a popular level. The movement is not unified and not only suffers attacks from without, but is also

<sup>31</sup> MARC ref. DDP 1:32.

<sup>32</sup> MARC ref. DDP 1:92. The description comes in the form of a letter which Williams intended to send to the *Gentleman's Magazine* and sent with a covering letter to Charles Wesley. It was never published in the *Gentleman's Magazine*. The letter is an extract made by Williams of part of his own diary. A slightly more substantial extract from the diary, which includes the account of Williams's meeting with Charles, was published by Geoffrey F. Nuttall in 1980 ('Charles Wesley in 1739. By Joseph Williams of Kidderminster', *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society*, 42[1980], 181-5). However, Nuttall was clearly not aware that the later letter to Charles (now DDP 1:92) had survived (see Nuttall, 'Charles Wesley', 181 n. 1).

<sup>33</sup> MARC ref. EM 134.

<sup>34</sup> Above, n. 10.

<sup>35</sup> Further, but still very brief, reference to this letter is made in Newport, 'George Bell', where further discussion of Bell's attempt to restore sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf and life to the dead are also discussed. On early Methodist healing in general see Henry D. Rack, 'Doctors, demons and early Methodist healing', *Studies in Church History*, 19 (1982), 137-52.

<sup>36</sup> MARC ref. DDP 1:13.

<sup>37</sup> See below, n. 38.

affected by tensions within. Its leader comes under significant criticism for being weak in the face of controversy and has to mount a damage limitation exercise as a result of allowing the situation to develop past the point of no return. In the writing of Methodist history such sources deserve much more attention than they have hitherto been given.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>38</sup> This is not the place in which to enter into an extended discussion of this point. However, it is probably worth noting in passing one example. The most recent biography of Charles Wesley (T. Crichton Mitchell, *Charles Wesley: man with the dancing heart* [Kansas City: Beacon Press, 1994]) appears to make no reference whatsoever to the Methodist Archives in Manchester. This is rather odd, since most of the surviving primary material is located there. Mitchell does of course have access to the poetic corpus, almost all of which is now in print (though what Charles wrote was not always the same as that which appeared in the published form), and he makes use also of the relatively small percentage of Charles's letters which are printed either in full or in part by Jackson and Baker (Thomas Jackson, *The life of the Rev. Charles Wesley, M.A.*, 2 vols [London: John Mason, 1841], vol. 2, 167–286; Frank Baker, *Charles Wesley as revealed by his letters* [London: Epworth, 1948]). The printed form of Charles's journal is also available to him. These published materials, however, tell only part of the story. Most of Charles's letters (both those to and those by him) remain unused (and many uncatalogued) in the Manchester Archives and Jackson's edition of the journal is highly defective and omits many of the more sensitive passages (as comparison of Jackson's text with the MS [MARC ref. DDCW 10:2] will show). There are also the MS sermons and other materials in the MARC which appear to have been left untouched by Mitchell. While it would perhaps be unfair to criticize Mitchell for failing to take fully on board all of the material in the Manchester Archives, a collection which is, as has been said, vast, and still partly inaccessible, he has left himself open to such criticism. On the opening page of his introduction Mitchell states that it is his desire 'to coax Charles out from that shadow [of his brother] insofar as the records allow' (*Charles Wesley*, 11). One cannot help but think that the desire would have had a greater chance of being fulfilled had those 'records' been consulted.

