

CHRIST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
History Series: The History of John Wesley and the Methodist Church
Compiled by John H. Evans

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PART 20: DANGERS AND DIFFICULTIES (CONTINUED)

In this installment we recount the very awkward courtship and marriage of Wesley. Recall that Wesley had had several previous romantic encounters, the latest being the disastrous one with Sophia Hopkey in Georgia. In 1743 Wesley published his *Thoughts on Marriage and Celibacy*, the latter being the preferable. However, a discussion at the conference in June 1748 modified his opinion.

In August 1748 Wesley had taken ill at Newcastle-on-Tyne and was nursed for four days by one Grace Murray. Grace was in charge of the orphanage that the Methodists had built there. She was the widow of Alexander Murray, a sailor drowned in 1742. Wesley proposed marriage and she agreed. He took her with him on a mission through several shires (counties) and left her at Cheshire with one of his preachers, John Bennet. In just a couple of days, though, she and Bennet became engaged. Wesley convinced her that the engagement was not binding and in April 1749 he took her with him to Ireland. Before they left Dublin in July 1749 a formal marriage contract was signed.

Back in England and traveling with Wesley, Grace resumed correspondence with Bennet in a groundless fit of jealousy over one Molly Francis. Wesley sought to convince Grace that she loved Wesley best and on September 7, 1749 Wesley wrote to Bennet claiming Grace as his! (This is embarrassing!) Wesley even sent a copy of the letter to his brother Charles, who became very alarmed and enlisted the aid of Whitefield to interfere at once. The marriage contract that had been signed in Ireland was renewed before witnesses on September 20, 1749. Yet, in spite of this, Grace married Bennet on October 3, 1749 at St. Andrews in Newcastle. Wesley met them on October 6 and, hurt and disappointed, did not see Mrs. Bennet again until 1788. Mr. Bennet died on May 24, 1759. (Mozart, who was active during the last part of Wesley's life, could have made a good comic opera out of this; though, of course, the whole ordeal is tragically sad!)

Having decided to marry, Wesley wasted no time in acting on his decision and he chose as his new wife Mary Vazeille, the widow of a London merchant named Anthony Vazeille. Mary was seven years Wesley's junior and had four children, the youngest of which was under five years of age. Mary also had a fortune of 3,000 pounds (a huge amount — several hundred thousand dollars in today's money) in which she had a life interest in half.

On February 9, 1751 a marriage settlement was executed. Unfortunately, on February 10 Wesley slipped on some ice, which resulted in a very badly sprained ankle. Charles Manning, vicar of Hays, Middlesex, claims that Wesley continued to preach several times on his knees before being married to Mary on February 18, 1751.

Mary agreed that Wesley should not relax his work and so she accompanied him on his journeys for four years. Wesley's ways were trying and he was naive in many ways (especially concerning women) and, as Mary was short tempered, a rift was inevitable. Wesley corresponded with many women involved in the Methodist movement and so jealousy crept in. Perhaps knowing women better than Wesley did in his innocence, Mary was very zealous about her position as his wife. The serious break began in 1755 when Mary opened some of Wesley's letters. According to a testimony by Hampton, a violent

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scene ensued and Mary dragged Wesley by the hair! Wesley continued to travel (perhaps more than before!), letters were exchanged, and he did make her his legatee. Even so, in 1771 Mary left Wesley to live with her married daughter in Newcastle. She returned to Wesley in 1772 (I've wondered if her son-in-law had anything to do with this!) and took part in his work until leaving for good in 1776. (Maybe Wesley made a declaration of independence!) In her will dated September 4, 1779 Mary left Wesley "a gold mourning ring, in token that I die in love and friendship towards him." She died on October 8, 1781.

I hope you don't think that my above comments belittle the seriousness of the events. Wesley probably should not have married. He was in the grip of a spirit and was monomaniacal about doing what it demanded of him, leaving little or no room for domestic matters. He was innocent regarding the psychology of women and was a charismatic figure of the type that attracts groupies. More so, Wesley's work necessitated private discussions and correspondence with women involved in the movement. None of this invalidates the work that Wesley did.