

THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF JOHN AND CHARLES WESLEY TO THE SPREAD OF POPULAR RELIGION

SAMUEL J. ROGAL

For nearly sixty years, John and Charles Wesley attempted to loosen the rigidity of England's state religion by laboring on behalf of primitive Christianity and practical church reform. For John Wesley, the success of Methodism in England and America depended upon organization—a structure built upon power, spirit, doctrine, and discipline. His brother Charles, in turn, furnished the poetic vehicles upon which to explicate the spiritual revival of the middle and late 18th century: the simple diction and imagery, lucid construction, resonant lines, and clear metaphor that could easily be understood by a large number of people representing all ranks and levels of eighteenth-century social and cultural life. Together, the Wesleys prepared their followers and their ideological progeny for the social, economic, political, and theological rejuvenations that would come in the following century.

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ONE way to understand the contributions of Wesleyan Methodism to the spread of popular religion in England during the 17th and 18th centuries is to recognize the inability of the Church of England to consider the value (to both church and state) of change and reform. Several of the problems leading to the loss of Charles Stuart's head in 1649 had not been solved to the satisfaction of all persons and parties by the beginning of the American Revolution. Indeed, John Milton complained in 1637 that

The hungry sheep look up, and are not fed,
But, swoln with wind and the rank mist they draw,
Rot inwardly, and foul contagion spread;

Besides what the grim Wolf with privy paw
Daily devours apace, and nothing said.¹

His remark served to turn the attention of at least one Hanoverian Anglican, John Wesley, to the specific needs of certain among his flock.

In mid-spring 1779, Gilbert White (1720–1793)—the curate of Selborne, Hampshire—saw fit to record a remarkable observation:

A cock *flamingo* weighs, at an average, about four pounds . . . and his legs and thighs measure usually about twenty inches. But four pounds are fifteen times and a fraction more than four ounces, and one quarter; and if four ounces and a quarter have eight inches of legs, four pounds must have one hundred and twenty inches and a fraction of legs²

The example reveals that although White was ordained as an agent of God and as an officer of the Church of England to minister to man, he chose instead to devote considerable of his time to the more fascinating creatures of natural history.

However, the curate of Selborne stood cassock to mantle with a large number of his colleagues who had difficulty filling the void between one communion and the next and between those rare occasions that seemed to demand original and thought-provoking sermons. Bishop Richard Hurd found satisfaction pursuing the principles of literary criticism, philosophy, chivalry, romance, and the texts of Horace, Addison, and William Warburton. Laurence Sterne, although first a vicar of Sutton on the Forest, then of Stillington, and in between a prebendary of York, realized greater intellectual profit from his fictional chicanery than from any meaningful pulpit exercise. Bishop Joseph Butler held enough ecclesiastical offices to last several lifetimes, but his immediate concerns inclined toward abstract matters of ethics and morality which effectively served to insulate him from the mundane problems of human suffering. George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne, although once disturbed by the social corruption and disorder brought about before and after the South Sea Bubble, managed to ease his distress upon the winds of such intellectual designs as a college in Bermuda for the Christian civilization of America, the religious interpretation of nature, books for American colleges, and philosophical reflection on the virtues of tar water.

¹ *Lycidas*, lines 125–29 in Merritt Y. Hughes, ed., *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose* (New York: Odyssey, 1957) 123–24.

² Gilbert White, "The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne," in *A Collection of English Prose, 1660–1800*, ed. Henry Pettit (New York: Harper and Row, 1962) 583.

The list may be expanded to include a corps of second-line churchmen with similar interests. Richard Burn, for fifty years the vicar of Orton, was more concerned with the nuances of ecclesiastical and civil law than for the rights and privileges of his parishioners. Stephen Hales, the perpetual curate of Teddington, advocated ventilation, distillation of sea water, meat preservation, and vegetable physiology. William Stukeley, who took orders at age forty-one and became a London rector at age sixty, never allowed either act to interfere with his erratic speculations in archaeology and antiquity. Jethro Tull, the cleric-farmer of Oxfordshire and Berkshire, was obviously more concerned with cultivating his parishioners' fields than their minds or souls and proved to be one of the notable agricultural innovators of the age.

What emerges even from this short list of sensational examples is the image of a church suffocating from the fumes of its own social apathy. While the lesser clerics rummaged through their studies and laboratories, the intellectuals at the highest levels on the ecclesiastical hierarchy chanted the same theological formulae for survival in this world and for successful passage into the next. No less a figure than John Tillotson, by far the best pulpit rhetorician of the period, could easily fall victim of his own cant. "There is a certain kind of temper and disposition," he announced to William and Mary in October 1692 on the occasion of the British naval victory at La Hogue the preceding May, "which is necessary and essential to happiness, and that is holiness and goodness, which the very nature of God; and so far as any man departs from this temper, so far he removes himself and runs away from happiness."³ Such an oversimplistic appraisal of mankind's chances for spiritual survival held, according to J. H. Plumb, little "appeal to the men and women living brutal and squalid lives in the disease-ridden slums of the new towns and mining villages. They needed revelation and salvation."⁴ For more than half of the eighteenth century, the Wesleys's missionary labors, seasoned heavily with their own prose and poetry, would unsettle the dust that had been gathering upon the stiff facade of England's state religion by eagerly dispensing primitive Christianity and practical church reform.

An assessment of John and Charles Wesley's contribution to the spread of popular religion begins with the broadest possible view of British Methodism. A host of organizational innovations took hold in

³John Tillotson, "Sermon XLI. A Thanksgiving Sermon for the Late Victory at Sea," in *English Prose and Poetry, 1660-1800*, ed. Odell Shephard and Paul Spencer Wood (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1934) 186.

⁴J. H. Plumb, *England in the Eighteenth Century* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1950) 44-45.

18th-century Britain, gained momentum and maturity during the early days of the 19th-century evangelical revival, and proved, toward the end of Victoria's reign, the very means by which Methodism launched itself into the highest echelons of world Protestantism. Wesleyan Methodism survived the 18th century because its founder and leader, John Wesley, understood the value of organization—into bands, classes, societies, and circuits. And he realized that in order for a theological organization to succeed, it had to reach out to the people and satisfy the human condition before it could even pretend to cope with matters of the heart and spirit. Thus, John Wesley established a lending society to circumvent the English usury laws. He organized a medical clinic at Bristol, wrote a practical treatise on how to attain and maintain good health, and dispensed electricity for medical purposes. He distributed books for intellectual, political, and theological motives; he even functioned as the editor, the critic, the moral censor of his followers' literary habits. When the number of ordained ministers sympathetic to Methodism proved insufficient for the societies' needs, he trained lay preachers—both men and women—and even provided a school outside Bristol to educate their children. Behind him came the poet laureate of Methodism, his younger brother Charles, perhaps the progenitor of English Protestant hymnody, scattering sacred songs (almost nine thousand of them) into the neat furrows plowed by the elder Wesley's sharp instruments of regularity and cultivated by his own natural inclination to reduce the complexities of human misery and misfortune to simple solutions.

For John Wesley, the terms *power*, *spirit*, *doctrine*, and *discipline* became synonymous with organization. In 1786 he wrote:

I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid, lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this undoubtedly will be the case, unless they hold fast . . . the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out.⁵

For Methodism to take hold firmly among the people and to have a lasting effect upon the Church of England, it had to function as an organization. It simply could not achieve an end as an informal group, a noisy crowd, or a destructive mob. Furthermore, if the organization were to have meaning, it had to formulate and publicize its doctrine and its rules, it had to record its history and its principles, it had to enunciate its positions on various social, political, theological, and practical issues, and it had to report the actions of its leaders and the discussions on present and future positions.

⁵"Thoughts upon Methodism," in *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley, M.A.*, ed. Thomas Jackson (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1829–1831), XIII. 258.

Out of the need for publicity, and especially the need to spread the evangelical message to as many people as possible, a considerable quantity of poetry and prose arose which was related directly to the organization which was known, unofficially but popularly, as Wesleyan Methodism. Almost immediately after the formation of the earliest societies in Bristol and London, John and Charles Wesley sensed that doctrinal alternatives and emotional appeal would not be enough to gain and keep converts. The masses needed to be molded into workable groups—bands and classes; they required constant supervision, leadership, and discipline—stewards and lay preachers; they needed advice in almost every aspect of the new venture that would eventually spread primitive Christianity throughout England and beyond. All of that, and more, John Wesley supplied: he explained, he exhorted, he provided variations on similar themes, he spelled out his demands—much in the same manner as the apostles Paul and John had spelled out theirs. To Methodists scattered all over Great Britain, the highways to repentance and salvation were clearly paved with the literature of their founder and leader.

The formal unveiling of eighteenth-century British Methodism occurred in London on Sunday, 11 November 1739, when John Wesley preached the first sermon at the newly acquired King's Foundry, Windmill Street, Moorfields. By far the most significant event of the Methodists' tenure in that reclaimed armory occurred during 25–29 June 1744 at the convening of the first annual Conference. Wesley instituted those conferences not for the purpose of listening to endless debate on vague theological issues, but to solidify basic doctrine and to establish administrative procedure. Those in attendance were preachers whom John Wesley specifically invited. He not only determined who would and who would not participate, but the decisions on substance and form were his alone. In fact, only John Wesley could convene a Methodist conference. The meetings themselves were structured on a question-answer format and became known as *conversations*. Again, Wesley's authority prevailed: he answered the questions and set down the resolutions to problems.

The conversations—because they concerned issues of authority, administration, and discipline—were published in various series, of which two may be considered here: *Minutes of Some Late Conversations between the Revd. Mr. Wesleys and Others* (1749) and *Minutes of Several Conversations between the Rev. Mr. Wesley and Others* (1789).⁶ The first series, known as the "Doctrinal Minutes," summarized the conversations at the English conferences from 1744

⁶Since Charles Wesley had died in March 1788, this was the first edition that did not include a reference to his name in the title. Further, the 1789 volume—the sixth edition—was the last *Minutes* published during John Wesley's lifetime.

through 1747. The Wesleys, in company with four of their preachers, proposed to consider "1. What to teach; 2. How to teach; and 3. What to do; that is, how to regulate our doctrine, discipline, and practice."⁷ With regard to doctrine, they confronted such subjects as *justification*—"To be pardoned and received into God's favour"; *faith*—"a divine, supernatural . . . of things not seen. . . . It is a spiritual sight of God and the things of God"; *sanctification*—"To be renewed in the image of God, in righteousness and true holiness."⁸ The Conference of 1744 came to an end with a strong statement of affirmation in the Church of England: "We are persuaded the body of our hearers will even after our death remain in the Church, unless they be thrust out."⁹ Had the group been able to look ahead fifty years, its members would have found themselves to have been poor prophets indeed.

The Conference of August 1745 at Bristol reviewed the substance of the preceding session and again attacked the issues of justification and sanctification, whereas the conversations of the next years include such definitions as *sincerity*—"Willingness to know and to do the whole will of God." Of greater interest, in 1746, was the question, "Wherein does our doctrine differ from that we preached when at Oxford?" The answer came back, "Chiefly in these two points. (1.) We knew nothing of that righteousness of faith, in justification; nor, (2.) Of the nature of faith itself, as implying consciousness of pardon." Drawing heavily upon NT evidence, the conversations of 16–17 June 1747 at the Foundery take up the question of differences between Methodist and Dissenting doctrines, specifically in the areas of justification and sanctification. "What, then," reads the key question, "is the point wherein we divide?" The answer again comes forth in very positive and assertive terms: "It is this: Whether we should expect to be saved from all sin before the article of death."¹⁰

The attempt to formalize Methodism and spread it out among the general public becomes even more obvious in the "Large Minutes" of 1789 which contain over seventy questions on discipline. Unlike the "Doctrinal Minutes" which are concerned with complex and often abstract theological problems, the *Minutes* of 1789 focus upon organizational and historical questions such as: "What was the rise of Methodism, so called?"; "Is field-preaching unlawful?"; "How may the leaders of the classes be made more useful?"; "Can anything further be done, in order to make the meetings of the classes lively and profitable?"¹¹ More importantly, there was the very serious

⁷"Minutes of Some Late Conversations," in *Works*, ed. Jackson, VIII. 275.

⁸"Minutes," in *Works*, ed. Jackson, VIII. 275, 276, 279.

⁹"Minutes," in *Works*, ed. Jackson, VIII. 281.

¹⁰"Minutes," in *Works*, ed. Jackson, VIII. 288, 290, 294.

¹¹"Minutes," in *Works*, ed. Jackson, VIII. 300–301.

problem of reaching down to those levels of British society that had been neglected by organized religion:

Indeed, you will find it no easy matter to teach the ignorant the principles of religion. So true is the remark of Archbishop [Henry] Usher: "Great scholars may think this work beneath them. But they should consider, the laying of the foundation skilfully, as it is of the greatest importance, so it is the masterpiece of the wisest builder. And let the wisest of us all try, whenever we please, we shall find, that to lay this groundwork rightly, to make the ignorant understand the grounds of religion, will put us to the trial of all our skill."¹²

Wesley added to Usher's advice by urging his own preachers to visit the homes of the so-called ignorant, to talk with each family member individually, and to pay particular attention to the children.

At one point, the 1789 *Minutes* become almost a general "how-to-do-it-manual" to assist Methodist preachers in dealing with simple problems among common people. In response to a question on how to remedy "Sabbath-breaking, dram-drinking, evil-speaking, unprofitable conversation, lightness, expensiveness or gaiety of apparel, and contracting debts without due care to discharge them," Wesley directs the interrogator to his various "Words" and "Advices," a series of essays that focuses on each of these issues. Other points concerning the office of preacher have to do with defining that office, identifying the functions of minister's helper and band leader, and spelling out the specific rules by which all leaders are governed: "A Methodist preacher," announced Wesley, for the benefit of those whom he had enlisted and those who planned to join his ranks, "is to mind every point, great and small, in the Methodist discipline! Therefore you will need all the sense you have, and to have all your wits about you!"¹³

Naturally, there would rise challenges to John Wesley—questions directed to his leadership as well as to his doctrine. However, he seemed to have anticipated those; his responses, as they appear in the 1789 *Minutes*, are direct statements that reveal the extent of his authority. Thus, his responsibility, as leader of the British Methodists, is

... a power of admitting into, and excluding from, the societies under my care; of choosing and removing Stewards; or receiving or not receiving Helpers; of appointing them when, where, and how to help me; and of desiring any of them to confer with me when I see good. And it was merely in obedience to the providence of God, and for the good of the people, that I first accepted this power, which I never

¹²"Minutes," in *Works*, ed. Jackson, VIII. 305.

¹³"Minutes," in *Works*, ed. Jackson, VIII. 308, 310.

sought; so it is on the same consideration, not for profit, honour, or pleasure, that I use it at this day.¹⁴

The problems stemmed from Wesley's critics, both in and outside of Methodism, who saw his authority as a violation upon their religious and civil freedoms—the very freedoms that British Methodism sought to restore and to defend. “It is nonsense,” exclaimed an irritated John Wesley, “. . . to call my using this power, ‘shackling free-born Englishmen.’ None needs to submit to it unless he will; so that there is no shackling in the case. Every Preacher and every member may leave me when he pleases. But while he chooses to stay, it is on the same terms that he joined me at first.”¹⁵

The subjects of the various *Minutes* consider a wide range of what could be termed “popular religion”: preaching, singing, reading, admission of preachers, provision for preachers' widows, circuits, schools, rules, finances, Calvinism, Anglicanism. The tone of those documents is forceful, with the answers set down in crisp, factual commands. But John Wesley, no matter what the context, always found the time to exhort his preachers and his immediate followers, to transfuse the exhaust from his highly propelled confidence: “Now promote, as far as in you lies, one of the noblest charities in the world. Now forward, as you are able, one of the most excellent designs that ever set down in this kingdom.”¹⁶ Interestingly, the various *Minutes* were published and distributed throughout the societies; thus, as part of the scheme to take advantage of every possibility to reach the largest audience, Wesley managed to transform a basically cold, businesslike document into another of his strictly human explications of British Methodism.

Charles proved to be no less an able or willing explicator of the movement as he pursued his attempts to tune the vocal cords of Methodism to the spiritual revival of the 18th century. Not every one of his poems evidences the same degree of quality, but when viewed in the general light of congregational hymnody, the entire canon does convey the intensity of the poet's deep, personal religious feeling. Few subjects escaped Charles Wesley's notice: his own religious conversion and marriage; domestic upheavals from panics, earthquakes, religious riots, and rumors of foreign invasion; festivals of the Church of England and doctrines of the faith; scenes from and paraphrases of the Testaments; deaths of friends; the education of children; and the effects of local surroundings upon inhabitants of remote areas. Charles Wesley could easily capture

¹⁴“Minutes,” in *Works*, ed. Jackson, VIII. 312.

¹⁵“Minutes,” in *Works*, ed. Jackson, VIII. 313.

¹⁶“Minutes,” in *Works*, ed. Jackson, VIII. 334.

those subjects, experiences, and occasions for congregational worship because he could easily maneuver the instruments necessary to shape the popular English hymn; simple diction, lucid construction, resonant lines, emphasis upon and repetition of plain Gospel truth, and poetic images that could be understood by a large number of people representing all ranks and levels of 18th-century British society. As was the case with his older brother, Charles Wesley spent little time contemplating and transmitting abstract themes. Instead, he articulated the language of the personal and the concrete to reflect the experiences of thousands of believers and at least an equal number of those who struggled to believe. Observe, as one representative example of Charles Wesley's purpose and method, his attempts to reach the hearts and the minds of young worshipers.

Throughout the 18th century, hymns written expressly for or directed to children principally served as complements to the pedagogical process rather than as parts of church liturgy. Until after mid-century, Isaac Watts' *Divine Songs Attempted in Easy Language for the Use of Children* (1715) led the field. Basically, the poetry of Watts, the Nonconformist minister of Stoke Newington, bypassed the solemnities of mature religious thought and emphasized instead the aspects of spiritual delight and moral profit. Although Watts wrote some excellent poetry, it accomplished little, theologically, beyond the versification of Puritan moral teaching. Notice, for instance, these lines from "Whene'er I take my walks abroad":

Not more than others I deserve,
 Yet God hath giv'n me more;
 For I have food while others starve,
 Or beg from door to door.¹⁷

Almost fifty years after the first edition of Watts' *Divine Songs*, Charles Wesley published his *Hymns for Children* (Bristol: E. Farley, 1763). Of the 105 poetic pieces, five were directed (by virtue of a section heading) to girls, while an additional twenty-five appeared under a section entitled "Hymns for the Youngest." In general, Wesley intended to continue Watts's design of communicating both the sound and the sense of the verses to the level of the juvenile mind. However, as he lost sight of that intent, a large number of the hymns actually focus upon problems reserved for the mature intellect—

How then ought I on earth to live,
 While God prolongs the kind reprieve,
 And props the house of clay!

¹⁷Isaac Watts, *Divine and Moral Songs, attempted in Easy Language for the Use of Children* (London: M. Lawrence, 1715) 15.

My sole concern, my single care,
 To watch, and tremble, and prepare
 Against the fatal day!
 No room for mirth or trifling here,
 For worldly hope, or worldly fear,
 If life so soon is gone;
 If now the judge is at the door,
 And all mankind must stand before
 Th' inexorable throne!¹⁸

What happened to change the direction from Watts's purpose for children's hymnody may best be determined by looking at the preface to John Wesley's revision of his brother's 1763 volume, published in late March 1790:

There are two ways of writing or speaking to children [wrote eighty-seven year-old John Wesley]: the one is, to let ourselves down to them; the other, to lift them up to us. Dr. Watts has wrote in the former way, and has succeeded admirably well, speaking to children as children, and leaving them as he found them. The following hymns are written on the other plan: they contain strong and manly sense, yet expressed in such plain and easy language as even children may understand. But when they do understand them, they will be children no longer, only in years and in stature.¹⁹

The final sentence indicates clearly, at least as concerned the elder Wesley, the relationship between hymnody and pedagogy in Methodist thought and practice.

The specifics of that relationship can be viewed also in Charles Wesley's dedicatory hymn for the opening of Kingswood School, "Come, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost." The poet begins by asking that "The sacred discipline be given,/To train and bring them up for Heaven." The training process itself is to be governed by the unification of knowledge and piety:

Learning and holiness combined,
 And truth and love, let all men see,
 In these, whom up to Thee we give,
 Thine, wholly Thine, to die and live.²⁰

In three other hymns—entitled, simply, "Before School," "In School," and "After School"—Charles Wesley captured the essence of his brother's concerns about the education of youth. His singers ask for

¹⁸*The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley*, ed. George Osborn (London: Wesleyan Methodist Conference Office, 1868–1872), VI. 432.

¹⁹*Poetical Works*, VI. 370.

²⁰*Poetical Works*, VI. 407–8.

“an humble, active mind,/From sloth and folly free,” trained to learn “The lessons of Thy love.” They search for useful knowledge in combination with the ability to “Live to His glory, and declare/Our heavenly Teacher’s praise.”²¹

What we view in the 1763 *Hymns for Children*, then, really turn out to be divine songs for young students. In 1715, Watts had identified his singers as little boys and little girls (even as “little bees,” in one instance); Charles Wesley, however, although not totally unconcerned about youth, does not appear restricted to those whose age identifies them as children. Childhood, for the Wesleys, focused upon that necessary vacuum between birth and maturity; the real issue was, simply,

When, dear Lord, ah! tell us when
Shall we be in knowledge men;
Men in strength and constancy,
Men of God, confirm’d in Thee?²²

Thus, the hymns for children stood as examples of what John Wesley would term *practical poetry*, verse essential in assisting the largest possible number of Methodist youth to formulate their earliest inquiries about *practical* Christianity. For John Wesley, as the Methodist leader most concerned with and responsible for the education of all Methodist children, his brother’s poetry could do no more. For Charles Wesley, those same hymns served as the initial aspects of his larger poetic scheme: the call to all the citizens of his nation and to the members of his nation’s Church to express their demand for a new and everlasting spiritual day:

Britons, arise with one accord,
And learn to glory in the Lord!
The Lord, from whom salvation came,
Doth justly all your praises claim:
With humble heart and thankful voice
Rejoice aright, to God rejoice.²³

The eventual success of Wesleyan Methodism, then, came about because John Wesley determined (following the unsettling period of his Georgia mission, his journey to Nicholas von Zinzendorf and the Moravians, and his religious conversion at Aldersgate) to give his attention to the specific theological and social issues that the Church of England had ignored for so long. After all, was he not an officer of

²¹ *Poetical Works*, VI. 421–22.

²² *Poetical Works*, VI. 403.

²³ *Poetical Works*, VI. 181.

that very Church, as well as his father and two brothers? John Wesley's grand venture grew out of the essence of Christian purpose as revealed to him in Scripture wherein men first "found it needful to join together, in order to oppose the works of darkness, to spread the knowledge of God their Saviour, and to promote His kingdom upon earth."²⁴

To accomplish that purpose, the Christian Church (or at least Wesley's concept of the earliest version of that institution) came forth to save souls, to assist Christians in working out the issues of salvation, to save persons from present and future misery, to overthrow Satan, and to establish the kingdom of Christ. Therefore, according to the founder and leader of the Methodists, the Church of England, despite the dark shadows of regal whim and princely pettiness that clouded its origin,

... united together for this very end, to oppose the devil and all his works, and to wage war against the world and the flesh, his constant and faithful allies. But do they, in fact, answer the end of their union? Are all who style themselves "Members of the Church of England," heartily engaged in opposing the works of the devil, and fighting against the world and the flesh? Alas, we cannot say this. So far from it that a great part, I fear the greater part of them, are themselves the *world*,—the people that know not God to any saving purpose; are indulging, day by day, instead of "mortifying the flesh, with its affections and desires"; and doing, themselves, those works of the devil, which they are peculiarly engaged to destroy."²⁵

To solve the problem, John Wesley committed himself to the spread of popular religion throughout England. By the time of his death on 2 March 1791, he had convinced at least 58,218 persons in England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland that they could and would be saved. In the process, he had created a warm climate of theological salvation in an age dominated by cold reason. More than any other person, group, or institution in 18th-century Britain, John and Charles Wesley prepared their followers and their ideological progeny for the social, economic, and political rejuvenation of the following century.

²⁴John Wesley, *Sermons on Several Occasions*, ed. Thomas Jackson (New York: Carlton and Phillips, 1854) I. 457.

²⁵Wesley, *Sermons*, I. 458.