A cluster of seven footnotes is appended to one section of John Wesley's *Plain Account of Christian Perfection*. These footnotes raise important questions, for each one countermands or qualifies a broad declaration concerning spiritual attainment that Wesley had made twenty-five years earlier. What influences produced the early statements that were subjected to later amendment? Why did Wesley change his attitude on several basic questions relating to the Christian life? What do the footnotes reveal concerning Wesley's own personality? By tracing the unfolding of Wesley's thought among the voluminous writings that he produced, it is possible to identify some of the forces that led him to relax an early stringency by the insertion of the footnotes.

*A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* is a composite of excerpts from writings that Wesley had published on the subject between 1725 and 1765. The book was first printed in 1766. Richard Green says of *A Plain Account*:

He specially aims at showing that he had preserved a consistency in his teaching from the beginning. With the exception of a few sentences, which he here corrects by foot-notes, he held and taught precisely the same doctrines for 40 years.

Wesley's stated purpose was "to show, from one period to another, both what I thought, and why I thought so." He refers at the beginning of the book to his encounter with Jeremy Taylor's *Holy Living and Dying* in 1725, then mentions the influence upon his thought of Kempis and William Law. He quotes several paragraphs from his own 1733 sermon, "The Circumcision of the Heart," and from other writings made in 1735 and 1738. Then follow, in order, excerpts from the following publications: the 1739 *Hymns and Sacred Poems*; the 1742 *Character of a Methodist*; the 1741 sermon, *Christian Perfection*; the Preface of the 1740 *Hymns and Sacred Poems*. The footnotes were attached to this Preface. Extracts from later publications follow.

These early writings bear the deep imprint of William Law's influence. J. B. Green comments that Law's *Practical Treatise on Christian Perfection* was the original means of attraction for Wesley, and states that the book remained for ten years "an anchorage

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for his restless mind and spirit." 3 When the accusation was made that Law was the parent of the Methodists, Wesley conceded, "Although this was not entirely true, yet there was some truth in it." 4 The influence of Law is evident, not only in the Preface, but in The Character of a Methodist, which, like Law's Practical Treatise on Christian Perfection, carried on its title page, "Not as tho I had already attained." Wesley's sermon, Christian Perfection, likewise took the same scripture verse as a text.

"Ascetic Rigidness"

Overton, Law's biographer, describes the Treatise as a "somewhat melancholy book," reflecting the stern, austere character of its author. 5 In the book, Law takes a gloomy view of life upon earth, and enjoins an extremely strict standard of conduct upon Christians. He emphasizes self-denial and mortification. Suffering is to be sought. The Treatise closes with chapters admonishing constant prayer, fasting and self-persecution. Whyte quotes a typical entry from Byrom's Journal to give a reflected glimpse of Law's views:

I supped too late and ate too much last night and lay too long today for an admirer of Mr. Law. 6

Both The Character of a Methodist and the Preface had evoked sharp criticism soon after their earlier publication because of the faultless pictures they drew. Wesley's "standard of Christian virtue . . . pure and exalted" was later explained and defended by Alexander Knox, a young friend of Wesley's mature years:

To realize in himself the perfect Christian of Clemens Alexandrinus was the object of his heart. . . . It was in the hope of raising himself to that coveted pitch of Christian rectitude, that he adopted the ascetic rigidness of Mr. Law. 7

Wesley freed himself only gradually from the absolutism evident in his early writings. The transition was facilitated by many critics. In 1740, the same year that the Preface appeared, Whitefield rebuked him in a well-known letter for "talking of sinless
perfection as you have done in the preface to that hymn book.”

He chided Wesley for carrying perfection “to such an exalted pitch” and for “pleading so vehemently for a sinless perfection.” In the year that his Christian Perfection was published, Wesley was attacked in a pamphlet titled, “The Perfectionists Examined: or, Inherent Perfection in this Life, No Scripture Doctrine.”

Bishop Gibson wrote a pamphlet anonymously in 1744 charging the Methodists with setting the standard of religion so high that some were led to discard it altogether, while others were led into spiritual pride. The criticism was a perennial one. Wesley was attacked in a 1760 Irish tract, Montanus Redivivus, for “requiring such degrees of perfection as are not in the power of human nature, in its present state of infirmity, to attain to.”

Such criticism led to the scaling down of Wesley's views and made him more cautious in choosing lines to defend. In 1762 he wrote,

The perfection I believe and teach . . . is consistent with a thousand nervous disorders . . . To set perfection too high (so high as no man that we ever heard or read of attained) is the most effectual (because unsuspected) way of driving it out of the world.

Tyerman attributes the publication of A Plain Account to the fact that Wesley "had to enforce and to defend his doctrine of Christian perfection, a doctrine imperfectly understood and bitterly assailed." The need for clarification was expressed by Fletcher in a letter to Wesley written early in 1766:

I think we must define exactly what we mean by the perfection which is attainable here. In so doing, we may, through mercy, obviate the scoffs of the carnal, and the misapprehension of the spiritual world, at least, in part.

However, A Plain Account was "really historical, rather than doctrinal and is intended to show, that Wesley's present views were

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9 Ibid., p. 576.
10 Ibid., p. 582.
12 Ibid., p. 454.
13 Ibid., II, p. 374.
14 John Telford. The Letters of John Wesley. (London: Epworth Press, 1931) IV, p. 188.
15 Tyerman, op. cit., II, p. 593.
16 Ibid., p. 563.
substantially the views which he had held for the last forty years." 17 At the same time, during the period spanned by the book, his views had changed, as he acknowledged in 1768: "During the latter part of this period I have relinquished several of my former sentiments." 18 Wesley's dilemma was how to make the book convey his doctrinal consistency toward Christian perfection, and still reflect the changes in his views that twenty-five eventful years had wrought. The footnotes that qualified and limited his earlier absolutes were the answer.

"Stoical Insensibility"

The seven footnotes being examined are all attached to a long paragraph extending from page 28 to page 30 in the first edition of A Plain Account. The first footnote refers to "ease in pain":

They are freed from self-will, as desiring nothing but the holy and perfect will of God: not supplies in want, not * ease in pain . . . ." 19

This statement led Thomas Church in 1744 to charge Wesley with "a stoical insensibility," carried to "the very height of extravagance and presumption." Wesley had cited the testimony of two persons who professed to have such an experience. 20 His defense was weak, for he had generalized broadly from two examples. His footnote now acknowledges,

This is too strong. Our Lord Himself desired ease in pain. He asked for it, only with resignation: Not as I will, I desire, but as Thou wilt.

Church's 1744 charge of "stoical insensibility" must have made a deep impression upon Wesley. In a letter that he wrote in 1774, he reflects a marked change of mind toward the stoicism described by Clement of Alexandria in his description of a perfect Christian:

Many years ago, I might have said, but I do not now,
Give me a woman made of stone,
A widow of Pygmalion.
And just such a Christian, one of the Fathers, Clemens Alexandrinus, describes: But I do not admire that description now as I did formerly. I now see a Stoic and a Christian are different characters; and at sometimes I have been a good deal disgusted at Miss Johnson's apathy.

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17 Ibid., p. 593.
18 Letters, V, p. 358.
20 Letters, II, p. 263.
* In this and following sections, an asterisk will indicate the position of the siglum for each footnote in Wesley's first edition of A Plain Account.
That letter was one of a series in which Wesley continued to deprecate a stoical attitude: "I desire no apathy in religion; a Christian is very far from a Stoic." In the sermon, "On Patience," published in the *Arminian Magazine* in 1784, some of the same words reappear:

Patience... is not apathy or insensibility. It is the utmost distance from stoical stupidity.

"Wanderings of Thought"

The second footnote follows mention of evil thoughts and wanderings in prayer:

They have *no thought of anything past or absent, or to come, but of God alone. In times past they had wandering thoughts darted in, which yet fled away like smoke; but now that smoke does not rise at all.

The footnote reads, "This is far too strong. See the sermon on Wandering Thoughts."

Sugden believes that "Wandering Thoughts" was published in 1761, and that Wesley wrote it to counteract some of his own earlier statements. Tyerman notes that the sermon was of the utmost importance in checking the fanaticism of London Methodists, who were professing a third blessing, sanctification of the mind. He quotes the testimony of one seeker:

Useless, unedifying thoughts pass through, though they do not lodge in, my mind. Therefore, I judge I have not received the blessing which others have.

In "Wandering Thoughts," Wesley recognizes that many persons have been distressed because of the teaching that all such distractions are done away. In explaining his views, Wesley made use of a concept advanced for his time, described in present-day language as psychophysiologic relationships. Wesley used the expression, "the natural union between the soul and the body." Thoughts that simply wander from the particular point we have in hand

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21 Ibid., VI, pp. 129, 133.
22 *Works*, VI, p. 486.
25 Ibid., p. 420.
"are no more sinful than the motion of blood in our veins, or of the spirits in our brain."

Let but the blood move irregularly in the brain, and all regular thinking is at an end . . . And is not the same irregularity of thought, in a measure, occasioned by every nervous disorder? . . . So does "the corruptible body press down the soul" . . . even in a state of perfect health.26

Another rather advanced concept used in "Wandering Thoughts" was the association of ideas. Wesley doubtless derived the principle from Locke's Essay Concerning Human Understanding, written in 1690. The expression, "the association of ideas," first occurs in Wesley's writings in 1745, in a letter from James Erskine, who attributes the term to Locke.27 Wesley had earlier referred to Locke in a letter to his father.28 In 1781 Wesley wrote a critique of Locke's Essay, and published a chapter, "Of the Association of Ideas," in Arminian Magazine during 1783 and 1784. This paragraph expounds Locke's concept:

Some independent Ideas, of no alliance to one another, are by education, custom, and the constant din of their party, so coupled in their minds, that they always appear there together, and they can no more separate them in their thoughts than if they were but one Idea, and they operate as if they were so.29

Wesley makes application of the principle in "Wandering Thoughts":

How many wanderings of thought may arise from those various associations of our ideas which are made entirely without our knowledge, and independently on our choice! How these connexions are formed, we cannot tell; but they are formed in a thousand different manners. Nor is it in the power of the wisest or holiest of men to break those associations . . . 30

Hence, he concludes, when wandering thoughts "spring from the casual, involuntary associations of our ideas," they are "perfectly innocent." To pray for deliverance from wandering thoughts occasioned by the body, is in effect to pray that we may leave the body, as if we should pray to be angels and men at the same time.

26 Sugden, op. cit., p. 183.
29 Arminian Magazine, VII, p. 201, 1784.
"English Malady"

The third footnote is attached to the statement, "They have no Fear or Doubt, either as to their state in general, or as to any particular action." In the same year that the Preface was published, Benjamin Ingham had offered spiritual counsel to Wesley in a long letter that stated:

... Justified persons are meek, simple and childlike; They have doubts and fears; they are in a wilderness state. 31

A month later, Wesley wrote in his journal,

I took occasion to describe that wilderness state, that state of doubts, and fears, and strong temptation, which so many go through, though in different degrees, after they have received remission of sins. 32

The sermon, "The Wilderness State," that was eventually published had as its text John 16:22, "Ye now have sorrow." After sinners are justified freely, Wesley wrote, many of them wander out of the good way and come into a "waste and howling desert," where they are tempted and tormented. They lose faith, love and joy, after which doubt returns. "And these doubts are again joined with servile fear, with that fear which hath torment." 33

To complement this sermon, Wesley later wrote "Heaviness through Manifold Temptation." Both were published in the same volume in 1760. In the first sermon Wesley treats "sorrow" as darkness, by which he signifies a loss of the sense of God's presence because of neglect or sin. The second sermon is based upon 1 Peter 1:6, where the cognate word is translated "heaviness." Here Wesley discriminates between darkness and heaviness, the latter being easily recognizable as depression.

This heaviness may sometimes be so deep as to overshadow the whole soul ... it may likewise have an influence over the body ... deep and lasting sorrow of heart may ... lay the foundation of such bodily disorders as are not easily removed: and yet, all this may consist with a measure of that faith which still worketh by love. 34

Wesley recorded in his journal many instances of depression similar to his own following conversion, and came to recognize that be-

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31 Tyerman, op. cit., I, p. 306.
34 Ibid., p. 267.
lievers may be subject to depression without any consciousness of having brought it about by sin.  

He must have been familiar with Dr. George Cheyne’s book, The English Malady, subtitled, “A treatise of nervous diseases of all kinds, as spleen, vapours, lowness of spirits, hypochondriacal, and hysterical distempers, &c.” Wesley’s own “Thoughts on Nervous Disorders” is subtitled, “Particularly that which is usually termed lowness of spirits.” His treatise also describes depression as “spleen, or vapours,” and makes reference to Dr. Cheyne. Wesley’s rules for health in Primitive Physic are said to be “chiefly transcribed from Dr. Cheyne.” He himself had consulted “the learned and ingenious Dr. Cheyne” and attributed his own lifetime habits of temperance to the reading of one of Dr. Cheyne’s books.

The “Museum manuscript” indicates that Wesley was severely depressed following the marriage of Grace Murray, just as he had been following the engagement and marriage of Sophia Hopkey. In the very year that A Plain Account was published, John wrote the memorable letter to Charles (partly in cipher) from Scotland, in which he again denied loving God, and described himself as “only an honest heathen.”

Charles Wesley, too, was frequently beset by depression—a “morbid hankering after death . . . a lifelong trait, for which his wife in later years had to take him to task.” Through his own suffering and that of his brother caused by “the English malady,” and through serving as spiritual counselor to thousands, John came at length to recognize that Christians cannot expect immunity to depression:

As long as we dwell in a house of clay, it is liable to affect the mind; sometimes by dulling or darkening the understanding, and sometimes more directly by damping and depressing the soul, and sinking it into distress and heaviness. In this state, doubt or fear, of one kind or another, will naturally arise.
So the unqualified ideal of 1740, "They have no fear or doubt," is brought down to earth with the 1766 footnote, "Frequently this is the case, but only for a time."

"No Need to Reason"

The next two footnotes are appended to sentences that seem to obviate the exercise of reason.

The "unction from the Holy One" teacheth * them every hour what they shall do and what they shall speak. Nor, therefore have they any * need to reason concerning it.

This statement soon prompted the charge of "enthusiasm in the highest degree" 46 against the Methodists. Wesley was accused of claiming the direction of God's Spirit as a principle superior to reason and argument. 47 He made a general defense of his position in An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, published in 1743. Pointing to the use of reason by Jesus and Paul, Wesley wrote:

We therefore not only allow, but earnestly exhort all who seek after true religion, to use all the reason which God hath given them. 48

Wesley replied in 1745 to the charges that Thomas Church had published in the preceding year. In A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, he denied that "the unction from the holy One" refers to a special effusion for inspired teachers of old. "It is no enthusiasm," he affirmed, "to teach that 'the unction from the Holy One' belongs to all Christians in all ages." 49 He claimed "no other direction of God's Spirit than is common to all believers." 50 Years later, he demonstrated from the Homilies that the operations of the Holy Spirit that he describes are "clearly maintained by our own Church." 51 Nevertheless, the footnote to this sentence acknowledges, "For a time it may be so: but not always."

As for reason, far from being an enthusiast who renounces it, Wesley declared himself "ready to give up every opinion which I cannot by calm, clear reason defend." 52 Rather than "discard

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46 Ibid., II, p. 204.
49 Ibid., p. 91.
51 Ibid., IV, p. 381.
52 Ibid., p. 333.
reason from the service of religion,” he continually employs it “to distinguish between right and wrong opinions.”

Thomas Church charged Wesley with enthusiasm, which he defined as “a false persuasion of an extraordinary divine assistance” that leads to conduct supposing such assistance. Among specific examples, he accused Wesley of applying Scriptures to himself “without attending to their original meaning or once considering the difference of times and circumstances.” Church specifically criticized Wesley’s use of casting lots or “opening the Bible,” since “reason is thus, in a manner, rendered useless.” Wesley’s reply was, “No; we had used it as far as it could go.” He cited eight occasions for casting lots described in his journal, the latest in 1741, and justified the procedure by asserting that his uncertainty had thereby been removed so that he went on his way rejoicing. He admitted that casting lots is a Moravian custom, but one “approved by their divines,” and “not by them accounted enthusiasm.” He denied either consulting Scripture or using lots “till I have considered things with all the care I can.” Wesley’s journal did not fully reflect the use of the lot in the Fetter Lane period:

It is noteworthy that when Wesley came to prepare the briefer account for permanent publication through the press, by which time he had drawn away from his Fetter Lane friends, he omits the references to the use of the lot on all sorts of occasions, which abound in the letters.

He reveals an awareness of the questionable nature of the practice when he writes, “Let me not be accounted superstitious” as he records the pre-Bristol openings of scripture.

Whitefield also rebuked Wesley for using the lot. In September, 1740, he wrote, “Oh that you would be more cautious in casting lots!” Three months later, in a widely circulated reply to Wesley’s sermon against predestination, “Free Grace,” Whitefield told the world about the “wrong lot” that Wesley sent him, which would have cancelled Whitefield’s trip to America if he had followed it. He concludes that Wesley is “much mistaken” and that he is “tempting God, by casting a lot.” In October, 1741, Whitefield

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53 Ibid., p. 347.
54 Ibid., II, p. 245 ff.
59 Tyerman, op. cit., I, p. 317.
60 Whitefield, op. cit., p. 573.
apologized for his breach of confidence. "It was wrong in me to publish a private transaction to the world." 

Wesley published the sermon, "The Nature of Enthusiasm," in 1750, to answer often repeated charges that the Methodists were enthusiasts. Sugden believed that Wesley's silence in this sermon on the use of lots justified the conclusion that he had come to recognize the superstitious nature of the practice. Wesley even went too far in elevating reason in this sermon, in Sugden's opinion:

But how many impute things to Him, or expect things from Him without any rational or scriptural ground! Such are they who imagine, they either do or shall receive particular directions from God, not only in points of importance, but in things of no moment; in the most trifling circumstances of life. Whereas in these cases God has given us our own reason for a guide; though never excluding the secret assistance of his Spirit.

In a later paragraph Wesley allows that a particular providence does extend to all persons and all things.

The attitude that prevailed in Methodism in later years toward these practices may be seen in Adam Clarke's denunciation:

Wherever you go, discountenance that disgraceful custom (properly enough termed) Bibliomancy, i.e., divination by the Bible. I need scarcely observe, that this consists in what is called sipping into the Bible, taking passages of Scripture at hazard, and drawing indications thence concerning the present and future state of the soul. This is a scandal to Christianity.

Wesley's early attitude expressed in a letter to his mother reflected the rationalism of his time: "Faith must necessarily at length be resolved into reason." But another letter written four months later describes a change of mind:

I am, therefore, at length come over entirely to your opinion, that saving faith (including practice) is an assent to what God has revealed because He has revealed it and not because the truth of it may be evinced by reason.

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61 Tyerman, op. cit., I, p. 351.
63 Sugden, op. cit., II, p. 95.
65 Letters, I, p. 23.
66 Ibid., p. 25.
Wesley's no-need-to-reason statement in the 1740 Preface reflects his rebound from the intellectualism of the established Church into the mysticism of Law and Boehme. He was soon to turn from that extreme toward the balanced position expressed in "The Case of Reason Impartially Considered." There he seeks the "medium between these extremes,—undervaluing and over-valuing reason." 

By the due use of reason we come to know . . . what it is to walk as Christ walked . . . in all the duties of common life, God has given us our reason for a guide . . . You who undervalue reason . . . Acknowledge "the candle of the Lord" which he hath fixed in our souls for excellent purposes . . . You, likewise, who over-value reason. Why should you run from one extreme to the other? Is not the middle way best? 68

It was "the middle way" that dictated the footnote, "Sometimes they have no need [to reason]; at other times they have."

"Freed from Temptation"

The Preface turns next to the subject of temptation:

They are, in one sense, freed from temptation: for though numberless temptations fly about them, yet they * trouble them not.

Although the primary emphasis of this statement is that temptations do not trouble, the wording was sufficiently ambiguous to evoke the charge that Wesley was teaching "freedom from temptation." He had, in fact, never claimed immunity from temptation for Christians. His 1741 sermon, Christian Perfection, was explicit on this point:

Christian perfection, therefore, does not imply (as some men seem to have imagined) an exemption either from ignorance, or mistake, or infirmities, or temptations. 69

When he was confronted with the accusation, he made a flat denial to the Bishop of London in 1747. 70 He also refuted the charge in Farther Thoughts on Christian Perfection in 1763. The sermon, "On Temptation," argues not only that temptation is inevitable, but that it may even be occasioned by those who are perfect in love. Their "little improprieties . . . may try all the grace you have." 71

67 Works, VI, p. 352.
68 Ibid., pp. 355, 359, 360.
69 Sugden, op. cit., II, p. 156.
70 Letters, II, p. 280.
71 Works, VI, p. 479.
As for the statement that temptations "trouble them not," the footnote offers an emphatic amendment: "Sometimes they do not; at other times they do, and that grievously." Between the extremes represented by these two statements, there was a marked transition in Wesley's attitude, from an austere and perfectionistic expectation, to a warm and sympathetic understanding of temptation in the Christian life. This mellowing of outlook was the product of working at close range with burdened people. In 1749, after he had spent two days in Ireland counseling "all who were weary and faint in their minds," Wesley wrote in his journal,

Most of them, I found, had not been used with sufficient tenderness. Who is there that sufficiently weighs the advice of Kempis, Noli duriter agere cum tentato? "Deal not harshly with one that is tempted." 73

Persons who come into "the wilderness state" where "they are variously tempted and tormented" have a right to "the tenderest compassion." 73

Wesley's later expositions of temptation stand in marked contrast to the ingenuous comment of the Preface, "They trouble them not." "Satan's Devices" are numberless as the stars of heaven, or the sand upon the seashore. 74 The body is liable to weakness, sickness and disorders of a thousand kinds, with its inconceivably minute fibers, "the innumerable multitude of equally fine pipes and strainers, all filled with circulating juice!"

And will not the breach of a few of these fibers, or the obstruction of a few of these tubes, particularly in the brain, or heart, or lungs, destroy our ease, health, strength, if not life itself? Now, if we observe that all pain implies temptation, how numberless must the temptations be which will beset every man, more or less, sooner or later, while he dwells in this corruptible body! 75

Considering the weakness of understanding and the inaccuracy of apprehension, even of Christians, and the way they are outnumbered by the enemies of God, "how must a good man be tempted in the midst of this evil world!" 76 In the end, he concludes that "manifold temptations, and heaviness, more or less, are usually the portion of His dearest children." 77

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72 Journal, III, p. 397.
73 Sugden, op. cit., II, p. 246.
74 Ibid., p. 192.
75 Ibid., p. 478.
76 Works, VI, p. 477.
77 Sugden, op. cit., II, p. 278.
"The Witness in Themselves"

The final footnote in this group is appended to a statement describing a three-fold cluster of spiritual graces—peace, joy, and the witness of the Spirit.

Their peace, flowing as a river, "passeth all understanding," and they "rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory." For "they are sealed by the Spirit unto the day of redemption"; having the witness in themselves, that "there is laid up for them a crown of righteousness, which the Lord will give" them "in that day."

Wesley's first confrontation with "the witness of the Spirit" as a personal issue was in 1736 when he met Spangenberg in Georgia. The Moravian leader asked Wesley, "Have you the witness within yourself?" Wesley records in his journal, "I knew not how to answer." After he returned to London, Wesley passed from this initial perplexity through a period of skepticism concerning Böhler's "new gospel"—the possibility of dominion over sin and the achievement of constant peace from a sense of forgiveness.

...I disputed with all my might, and laboured to prove that faith might be where these were not; especially where that sense of forgiveness was not...But I felt it not.79

In his May 24, 1738 Aldersgate experience, Wesley found peace but not joy. On May 25 he wrote in his journal, "But this I know. I have now peace with God." On May 26 his entry stated, "My soul continued in peace, but yet in heaviness." On May 27, he mentioned his "want of joy" and on May 28 he recorded, "I waked in peace but not in joy." On October 30 he wrote to his brother Samuel:

The seal of the Spirit, the love of God shed abroad in my heart, and producing joy in the Holy Ghost...this witness I have not; but I wait patiently for it...Those who have not yet received joy in the Holy Ghost, the love of God, and the plerophory of faith (any or all of which I take to be the witness of the Spirit with our spirit that we are the sons of God), I believe to be Christians in that imperfect sense wherein I may call myself such.80

Tyerman acknowledges that "the whole affair is puzzling" and

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78 *Journal*, I, p. 151.
blames Wesley’s confusion upon his undiscriminating acceptance of some of the “foolish statements” of the Moravians.81

By the witness of the Spirit, Wesley understood “an inward impression on the soul, whereby the Spirit of God immediately and directly witnesses to my spirit, that I am a child of God.”82 This is to be distinguished from, and not swallowed up by the rational testimony of our own spirit.83 The witness of the Spirit is direct testimony; the witness of our own spirit is indirect, consisting of the testimony of a good conscience and a good life.84 Wesley did not “exclude nor despise” that logical evidence, but found it far different from the witness of the Spirit.85

In 1740, Wesley’s declaration concerning peace, joy, and the witness of the Spirit was published in the Preface. It was inevitable that the claim of “an inward impression upon the soul” would be identified as enthusiasm and would arouse opposition. Wesley soon found himself on the defensive. In the years that followed, he continued to promulgate the doctrine, but progressively made broader allowance for exceptions.

In The Principles of a Methodist, Wesley affirmed that a man has peace with God the moment he is justified, but conceded that the full assurance of faith which excludes all doubt and fear may be delayed.86 This essay carries the date of 1740 in the Works, but was apparently not published until 1742.87 In the 1744 conference the question was asked, “Does anyone believe who has not the witness in himself ... ?” The answer was, “We apprehend not.”88 In 1745, a similar question was raised: “Is a sense of God’s pardoning love absolutely necessary to our being in his favour? Or may there be some exempt cases?” The answer: “We dare not say there are not.”89 In 1745 Wesley wrote to “John Smith,”

I do not deny that God imperceptibly works in some a gradually increasing assurance of his love; but I am equally sure He works in others a full assurance thereof in one moment.90

He goes on to assert personal acquaintance with more than twelve or thirteen hundred persons who “know the day when ... His

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81 Tyerman, op. cit., I, p. 194.
82 Sugden, op. cit., II, p. 345.
83 Ibid., I, p. 204.
84 Ibid., p. 219.
85 Letters, II, p. 60.
86 Works, VIII, p. 371.
87 Richard Green, op. cit., p. 23.
88 Works, VIII, p. 276.
89 Ibid., p. 282.
90 Letters, II, p. 46.
Spirit first witnessed with their spirits ...” In 1747, the conference acknowledged that there may be some exempt cases. Wesley shows how far he had modified his view in a letter to Lady Maxwell in 1765:

It may please God to give you the consciousness of His favor, the conviction that you are accepted through the Beloved, by almost insensible degrees like the dawning of the day! . . . Be this given in an instant, or by degrees, hold it fast.

In 1767, a year after A Plain Account was published, Wesley wrote Discourse II of “The Witness of the Spirit.” Here the unforeseeable nature of the witness is clearly stated:

Neither joy nor peace is always at one stay; no, nor love; as neither is the testimony itself always equally strong and clear.

In 1768, in his letter to Dr. Rutherforth, Wesley declares that “a consciousness of being in the favor of God . . . is the common privilege of Christians . . . yet I do not affirm there are no exceptions to this general rule.”

For decades, Wesley had been reproached by his fellow churchmen for holding an unattainable standard. Now, as he tries to bring the ideal within reach by marking down its lofty demands, he comes to terms with the slow pace of spiritual advance and acknowledges that the goal must still be distant for some: “Many of them have not attained it yet.”

Liberating Footnotes

Why did Wesley add the footnotes? They were present in the first edition of A Plain Account published by William Pine at Bristol in 1766. His tracts had been attacked and condemned. They had brought down upon Wesley reproof from some of the bishops of his church. Now as he makes selections for another round of publication, he builds in safeguards that anticipate further criticism to come. He adds the footnotes to the Preface, and he introduces the excerpt from The Character of a Methodist with the statement, “In this I described a perfect Christian,” and calls attention to its original title-page disclaimer, “Not as though I had already attained.”

The precaution was soon justified. In the very year that A Plain Account was published, Wesley invoked both statements to answer the criticism of Dr. Dodd. In a letter to Lloyd’s Evening Post, he

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91 Works, VIII, p. 293.
92 Letters, IV, p. 308.
94 Letters, V, p. 358.
explained that the image of a Christian in *The Character of a Methodist* was an idealized portrait that he had written in imitation of Clement, whose picture of a perfect Christian he had once admired. He explicitly disavowed having attained the character he had drawn, citing the title-page disclaimer.95

To look upon the addition of the footnotes simply as a tactical operation does not do full justice to Wesley's motives. While the footnotes doubtless blunted or discouraged the attack of critics, they also manifested Wesley's willingness to abandon or revise an extreme position. Following the 1820 publication of Southey's *Life of Wesley*, Alexander Knox wrote a spirited defense that was included in an 1846 edition of the *Life*. There Knox refers to the footnotes:

> It is a fact, then, that in one stage of Mr. Wesley's course, he carried the doctrine of religious perfection to such an extreme as to call forth his own subsequent censure and retractation. In a preface to a volume of hymns, he appended notes for the purpose of disavowing several of his former positions.96

"That excess," Knox goes on to say, "arose from following too implicitly the overcharged, though still beautiful, draught of a perfect Christian by Clemens Alexandrinus."97 Wesley's change of attitude toward Clement's ideal has already been noted. Thus, a second function of the footnotes was to record the movement of Wesley's own thought. Knox described that change of mind in these words:

> Experience and reflection led him, in some important instances, to acknowledge the excess, and to correct the severity, of his former doctrinal conceptions.98

But the footnotes represent still more than a defense against attack and a change of mind. Some of the criticism had embodied the same complaint that Wesley had expressed to William Law in 1738: "This is a law by which a man cannot live."99 He acknowledged as much in 1759 in responding to John Downes:

> The truth is, we have been these thirty years continually reproached for . . . making the way to heaven too strait, with being ourselves "righteous overmuch."100

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95 Ibid., p. 43.
96 Ibid., op. cit., p. 454.
97 Ibid., p. 460.
98 Ibid., p. 433.
99 Letters, I, p. 239.
100 Ibid., IV, p. 330.
Wesley’s response to that protest reveals in him an empathy that Law did not have.

One of Law’s commentators has observed,

William Law’s strength lay in his refusal to adapt morality to circumstances; his weakness lay in his inability to relate morality to circumstances . . . It is Law’s fate to alienate some of those whom he would wish to help, because of his slowness in making allowances.\footnote{103}

Wesley’s Preface reflected the unyielding austerity of Law, but the footnotes he added twenty-five years later “made allowances” by tempering the severity of its earlier demands. In the same year that A Plain Account was published, John reproved his own brother for maintaining a too-lofty conception of Christian perfection:

I wonder you do not in this article fall in plumb with Mr. Whitefield. For do not you as well as he ask, “Where are the perfect ones?” I verily believe there are none upon earth, none dwelling in the body . . . I still think to set perfection so high is effectually to renounce it.\footnote{103}

Southey, in his Life of Wesley, stated that “as [Wesley] grew older, cooler, and wiser, he modified and softened down” the doctrine of Christian perfection, “so as almost to explain it away.”\footnote{103} Knox agreed that Wesley moderated the doctrine, but denied that he “almost explained it away.” Rather, he preferred to believe that Wesley returned to a view countenanced by the ancient Fathers and the most eminent divines of the Church of England.\footnote{104}

The footnotes, most of all, are the product of compassion, as Wesley tries to bring the likeness of a Christian from the remote ideal and the harsh absolutes of the Preface down into realizable human dimensions, where infinite diversity prevails, and where the achievement of maturity is painfully slow. Each amendment is the precipitate of a reaction between Wesley’s early concept of the ideal, and his mature acceptance of the realities of human personality. Having suffered himself under the tyranny of an overly-demanding perfectionism, Wesley tried to save his followers from a similar bondage by the liberating footnotes.

\footnote{102}{Letters, V, p. 20.}
\footnote{103}{Southey, op. cit., II. p. 85.}
\footnote{104}{Ibid., p. 455.}

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