JOHN WESLEY AND SAMUEL JOHNSON: 
A TALE OF THREE COINCIDENCES

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Tucked away up history's sleeve are coincidences—meshings of events that help us see the individual incidents in sharper relief. Among these is the fact that Thomas Jefferson and John Adams died on the fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence—a coincidence almost too good to be true. Less serendipitous are three coincidences linking the lives of John Wesley and Samuel Johnson, yet they are instructive because they help us see Wesley more clearly.

The first coincidence, which occurred in May 1738, shows Wesley against the background of Johnson's description of London. The second, which cannot be dated precisely, hinges on William Law's theory of the atonement and shows Wesley's ability to get to the heart of the human relationship with God. The third coincidence revolves around William Dodd's execution for forgery in 1777 and reveals how hard it is for even the greatest moral and spiritual intelligences to penetrate another human being.

Before moving ahead to examine these coincidences in the lives of Wesley and Johnson, let us look at some parallels between their lives. Both were born in England during the first decade of the eighteenth century: Wesley on June 17, 1703, at Epworth in Lincolnshire; Johnson on September 18, 1709, at Litchfield in Staffordshire.

Both Wesley and Johnson were offspring of marriages that were not especially happy. While Wesley was at Oxford, his mother wrote to him, saying among other things, "'tis an unhappiness almost peculiar to our family, that your father and I seldom think alike."1 Johnson, commenting on his parents, said: "My father and mother had not much happiness from each other. They seldom conversed; for my father could not bear to talk of his [business] affairs; and my mother, being unacquainted with books, cared not to talk of anything else."2

The fathers of both men were bookish dreamers who, making hash of their practical duties, forced their wives to count pence while they dreamed

in guineas. Samuel Wesley was a country rector who sired a large family, wrote a commentary on the book of Job, and spent time in debtor’s prison. Michael Johnson was a cathedral-town bookseller who had two sons, spent too much money in the vain hope of making a fortune, and ended up receiving charity.

The mothers of Wesley and Johnson were practical women who worried about the health of their sons, gave them their earliest schooling, and instructed them in religion. Each used the threat of hell and the promise of heaven to drive home the need for good living. Susanna Wesley emphasized that heaven or hell depends on the extinction of self-will. Sarah Johnson told her son of two places to which “inhabitants of this world were received after death; one a fine place filled with happiness called Heaven, the other a sad place, called Hell.”

Both Wesley and Johnson went up to Oxford as poor students. Wesley entered Christ Church in June 1720. Many of his letters home deal with his need for money. His mother was “greatly troubled” by his increasing debts. Johnson entered Pembroke College on October 31, 1728. He was so much poorer than Wesley that he left after thirteen months. Wesley remained to take his degree and eventually to become a fellow of Lincoln College.

Although Wesley and Johnson differed in the amount of formal education they received, each went on to become a major achiever. When Wesley died in 1791, the obituary notice in the Gentleman's Magazine declared: “Whatever may be the opinions held of his inspiration it is impossible to deny him the merits of having done infinite good to the lower classes of the people. . . . He was one of the few characters who outlived enmity and prejudice, and received in his later years every mark of esteem from every denomination. . . . His personal influence was greater perhaps than any private gentleman in the country.”

If Wesley was the spiritual leader of eighteenth-century England, Johnson was, in the words of a recent biographer, “one of the supreme moralists of modern times—one of the handful of writers who, in what they have to say of human life and destiny, have become a part of the conscience of mankind.” When Johnson died in 1784, William Gerard Hamilton said: “He has made a chasm, which not only nothing can fill up, but which nothing has a tendency to fill up.—Johnson is dead.—Let us go to the next best: There is nobody;—no man can be said to put you in mind of Johnson.”

Now, having looked at parallels between the lives of Wesley and Johnson, we will examine the three coincidences that help us see Wesley more clearly.

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3Ibid., p. 16.
4Quoted in Stanley Ayling, John Wesley (Cleveland: Collins, 1979), p. 322.
5Bate, op. cit., p. 277.
6Ibid., p. 599.
The First Coincidence—May 1738

The first coincidence took place in May 1738. On the 12th, Johnson published *London*, a poem dealing with the moral decay of the city that held him in thrall. On the 24th, Wesley went to a little prayer meeting in London's Aldersgate Street and was changed from a rather prissy worrier about his own salvation into a passionate warrior for the salvation of others.

For his *London*, Johnson took Juvenal’s Third Satire with its biting commentary on Roman urban life and its call for purer living and, following and improving upon a course being pursued by Alexander Pope and other poets, applied it to London in the days of Prime Minister Robert Walpole. But Johnson’s *London* is more than a brilliant imitation. It is a critique of the morals of his nation’s capital in the late 1730s. As such it reveals why England needed a man passionately committed to changing lives—such a man as Wesley became twelve days after Johnson published his poem.

Of London in 1738, Johnson writes:

> Here malice, rapine, accident, conspire,
> And now a rabble rages, now a fire;
> Their ambush here relentless ruffians lay,
> And here the fell attorney prowls for prey;
> Here falling houses thunder on your head,
> And here a female atheist talks you dead.  

Johnson pictures Londoners as debauched by masquerades. Their behavior has turned English honor into a jest. Their degeneracy is such that true human worth does not receive even “the cheap reward of empty praise.” This is the outcome, Johnson thinks, of Londoners, who are devoted “to vice and gain,” considering honesty and sense disgraceful. Government pensions cause toadies “to vote a patriot black, a courtier white.” There is no place in the city for those who are startled by theft or who blush at perjury. But there is ample room for those who dote on the leaders of fashion, imitating their “taste in snuff,” their “judgment in a whore.”

Some of Johnson’s most powerful lines deal with the way London’s merchants and courtiers make poverty a crime and a joke:

> All crimes are safe, but hated poverty.
> This, only this, the rigid law pursues,
> This, only this, provokes the snarling muse.
> The sober trader at a tatter’d cloak,

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9Ibid., p. 49, line 36.
10Ibid., lines 37 and 44.
11Ibid., p. 50, line 52.
12Ibid., p. 55, line 149.
Methodist History

Wakes from his dream, and labours for a joke;
With brisker air the silken courtiers gaze,
And turn the varied taunt a thousand ways.
Of all the griefs that harrass the distress'd,
Sure the most bitter is a scornful jest;
Fate never wounds more deep the gen'rous heart,
Than when a blockhead's insult points the dart. 12

Blockheads, traders and silken courtiers bought Johnson's poem. A second edition was called for within a week. Such a response may be a tribute to Johnson's choice of words—cut them and they bleed. But also it may indicate that a tide was beginning to flow, a tide of eagerness for reform, a tide of readiness to respond to the right moral and spiritual messenger.

The man who would become that messenger was pacing the streets of London and fretting about his spiritual temperature during the days when Johnson's poem was the talk of tea table and tavern. And less than a week after the appearance of London's second edition, he attended a Moravian Bible study and prayer meeting in a private home in Aldersgate Street. There, while someone was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans, John Wesley felt his heart strangely warmed. About this moment he wrote: "I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death." 13

The predicament of Wesley before Aldersgate is aptly described by Robert Frost in a poem about the divine mercy. Wesley

... lacked the courage in the heart
To overcome the fear within the soul
To go ahead to any accomplishment. 14

Before May 24, 1738, Wesley was committed to the Christian faith but lacked the certain special something that turns a devout person into a dynamic one. Once his heart was warmed, Wesley ceased to be a spiritual introvert, turned outward, and ignited spiritual fires in others.

The fires sparked by Wesley's preaching soon were cauterizing the moral wounds described by Johnson. So it is a coincidence of no little significance to the Methodist historian that a forceful description of eighteenth-century England's moral problem appeared during the same month when Wesley became a spiritual dynamo capable of generating sufficient energy to overcome moral decay.

12Ibid., p. 56, lines 159-169.
The Second Coincidence—William Law

The second coincidence hinges on the devotion of Wesley and Johnson to the writings of William Law, especially *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, which was read by Johnson in 1729 and by Wesley probably in 1730. Law directed this book against those who were "strict as to some times and places of devotion, but when the service of the church is over, they are but like those that seldom or never come there." And he called for a piety that would make an obvious difference between Christians and non-believers.

Johnson records his reaction to Law's *Serious Call*: "I took up Law's 'Serious Call to a Holy Life,' expecting to find it a dull book, (as such books generally are), and perhaps to laugh at it. But I found Law quite an overmatch for me; and this was the first occasion of my thinking in earnest of religion, after I became capable of rational enquiry."16

Wesley was so impressed by Law's thinking that on July 13, 1732, he wrote to him, and on July 31 had a lengthy interview with him in his home at Putney. Two years later, Wesley turned to Law for counsel, writing, "I must earnestly beg your immediate advice in a case of the greatest importance"—that of a young man who had been awakened to a serious practice of religion by Law's writings but who now was not even able to pray.

Both Wesley and Johnson then were influenced in general by William Law, although only Wesley developed a personal relationship with him. Where they coincided, however, was in their reaction to what was, or what they took to be, Law's interpretation of Christ's atonement. In *A Serious Call* Law asks why Paul gloried in the cross of Christ. "Is it because Christ had suffered in his stead, and had excused him from suffering? No, by no means. But it was because his Christian profession had called him to that honour of suffering with Christ, and of dying to the world under reproach and contempt as He had done upon the cross." Whether or not Law consistently advocated an exemplary doctrine of the atonement is a question for theological critics of his writings to answer. What is clear to the historian is that both Wesley and Johnson thought Law believed a strong emphasis on the vicarious sacrifice of Christ would diminish the importance of what humans must do for themselves.

Nearly forty-five years after Johnson's first reading of Law, he was still speaking about the atonement in terms that, with Johnson's own characteristic twist, are reminiscent of Law. "I spoke of the satisfaction of

Christ," writes James Boswell in his journal of the tour he made with Johnson through Scotland. Johnson replied that it was "his notion... that it did not atone for the sins of the world. But by satisfying divine justice, by showing that no less than the Son of God suffered for sin, it showed to men and innumerable created beings the heinousness of sin, and therefore rendered it unnecessary for divine vengeance to be exercised against sinners, as it otherwise must have been."19

For Johnson until sometime after 1773, Christ's death on the cross was an event that opened sinners' eyes to "the heinousness of sin," thereby motivating them to make self-atonement for sin, reform their living and escape divine punishment. This understanding had deep roots in Johnson. As a child, he had what has been called "a powerful sense of self-demand, a feeling of complete personal responsibility."20 He believed that it was up to him to overcome his physical limitations and make something of himself. Later, he concluded that he must work out his own salvation with fear and trembling. Hence, he was ready to underscore in Law's writings any hint that a strong emphasis on the vicarious sacrifice, by which Christ takes on the sins of humankind, diminishes the importance of what humans must do for themselves. He held that we must make atonement, following the example of Christ, for our own sins. And he insisted that we can never be certain we have done enough; that we must stay afraid deep in our souls that our very best sacrifice may not be acceptable to God.

This notion of remaining afraid that one's best would never be good enough for God was a sharp spur to moral living. Nevertheless, it was based on a fear that lacked the power to overcome fear. There was nothing in it on which finally the heart could repose and be at home with God. W. Jackson Bate refers to "the Christian ideals of self-surrender, resignation, and 'reposal upon God'" as being in conflict with Johnson's need "to take whatever steps he himself could take independently."21 So for most of his life Johnson found it impossible to keep his resolution "to consider the act of prayer as a reposal of myself upon God and a resignation of all into his holy hand."22 Not until the year of the Declaration of Independence did Johnson yield himself to God through faith in the sacrifice of Christ. Then his fear of not being able to make self-atonement for his sins was overcome, and he found peace.

Whether or not Law's references to something like an exemplary doctrine of the atonement are dominant enough in his writings to make him responsible for Johnson's dilemma, is something for theologians to settle. What is clear is that Johnson, finding tones within Law's works that struck

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20Bate, op. cit., p. 8.
21Ibid., p. 376.
22Quoted in ibid., p. 409.
responsive psychological chords within himself, was a long time coming to heartfelt trust in God; and Wesley, just days before his heartwarming experience, accused Law of failing to advise him "to seek first a living faith in the blood of Christ." 23

Wesley wrote to Law twice during May 1738. In his letter of the 14th, he said: "For two years (more especially) I have been preaching after the model of your two practical treatises. And all that heard have allowed that this law is great, wonderful, and holy. But no sooner did they attempt to follow it than they found it was too high for man, and that by doing the works of this law should no flesh living be justified." 24 These words are an apt description of Johnson's prolonged religious difficulty—a difficulty that Wesley lays at Law's door by asking: "Why did I scarce ever hear you name the name of Christ? Never, so as to ground anything upon faith in his blood?" 25

William Law answered Wesley's letter on May 19, saying that "you never was with me for half an hour without my being large upon that very doctrine which you make me totally silent and ignorant of." 26 Following this general disclaimer, Law asserts that he has governed all his writings by "two common, fundamental, unchangeable maxims of our Lord, 'Without me ye can do nothing'; 'If any man will come after me, or be my disciple, let him take up his cross and follow me.' If you are for separating the doctrine of the cross from following Christ, or faith in him, you have numbers and names enough on your side, but not me." 27

Wesley was not satisfied with his answer from Law. So on the 20th he told him bluntly, "Those two maxims may imply but do not express that third, 'He is our propitiation, through faith in his blood.' " 28 And Wesley insisted that the main question was whether Law "ever advised me, or directed me to books that did advise, to seek first a living faith in the blood of Christ." 29

To Wesley's attack Law replied, probably on the 22nd, noting: "You say the two maxims I mention may imply, but do not express, 'He is our propitiation, through faith in his blood.' Is not this, therefore, a mere contest about words and expressions? When I refer you to these two maxims or texts of Scripture, will you confine me to them alone? Does not my quoting them necessarily refer to every part of Scripture of the same import? When Christ says, 'Without me ye can do nothing;' when the Apostle says, 'There is no other name given under heaven by which we can be saved;' when he says, 'We are sanctified through faith in his blood,' and

23Baker, op. cit., p. 546, line 16.
24Ibid., pp. 540f., lines 10ff.
25Ibid., p. 541, lines 22f.
26Ibid., p. 543, lines 42ff.
27Ibid., p. 544, lines 14ff.
28Ibid., p. 547, lines 12ff.
29Ibid., p. 546, lines 15f.
'through faith in him,' is there anything here but a difference of words, or one and the same thing imperfectly and only in part expressed?"30

Whatever one may conclude about this exchange of letters and the accuracy of the charges Wesley leveled against Law, the acuteness of Wesley's insight into the plight of humans struggling for spiritual assurance is indisputable, especially when his words are heard above the bass notes of Johnson's more than forty years of striving to atone for his own sins. Whether Wesley was right in charging Law with espousing an exemplary doctrine of the atonement is open to debate, but there is no question about his sensitivity to the failure of such a doctrine to offer any hope to those who, after striving to walk in the footsteps of Christ, find themselves ineluctably guilty of stumbling and straying. Wesley went right to the heart of the matter, recognizing that in order to repose oneself upon God, one must unfeignedly believe that Christ has "taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."

Therefore, the second coincidence in the lives of Samuel Johnson and John Wesley reveals that even if Wesley was unfair to William Law, he possessed an uncanny talent for cutting through all that might keep a soul from finding peace with God. By seeing Wesley's letters to Law against the background of Johnson's long struggle with self-atonement, we catch a glimpse of what Wesley might have been like if nothing had happened to him on May 24, 1738. Like Johnson, he might have been a man of uncompromising integrity, a man committed to moral living, a man capable of turning a trenchant phrase, but a man unable to repose his whole being on God.

The Third Coincidence—William Dodd

The third coincidence in the lives of Wesley and Johnson revolves around the case of William Dodd, a royal chaplain and the Liberace of London preachers. Dodd wore a perfumed silk robe in the pulpit and flashed a large diamond ring. The walls of his country house were covered with paintings by Titian, Rembrandt and Rubens. To pay for such luxuries, he borrowed more and more heavily until, finding himself unable to meet the demands of his creditors, he forged the signature of the Earl of Chesterfield to a bond for forty-two hundred pounds. Dodd had been the earl's tutor, so he expected him to forgive his treachery if, when the bond fell due, he could not repay the money. But the unforgiving earl brought charges and Dodd was condemned to death.

In his extremity Dodd turned to Wesley and Johnson for help. Although Dodd and Wesley were not personally acquainted, they had exchanged letters in the 1750s on the question of whether a Christian sins. Wesley maintained that it is possible for a Christian not to sin as long as the Christian clings to God. Dodd said that Christians go on sinning as

30Ibid., p. 548f., lines 28ff.
long as they live. Wesley replied that Dodd was setting the standards too low, thereby encouraging people to be indifferent to moral living.

Dodd had less contact with Johnson than with Wesley; according to Johnson, they met once. But Dodd knew Johnson, of course, by his reputation as London’s foremost man of the pen. Therefore, Dodd wrote and asked Johnson to ghostwrite his petitions for mercy. Johnson agreed, writing, in addition to letters to prominent persons, Dodd’s request for royal clemency. When these appeals proved fruitless, Dodd asked Johnson for a sermon to preach to his fellow convicts. Johnson complied, composing what is known as “The Convict’s Address to his Unhappy Brethren,” which Dodd delivered to his fellow Newgate convicts on June 6, 1777.

In this sermon Johnson makes clear that between 1773 and 1777, he had come to believe in the substitutionary doctrine of the atonement. The precise moment seems to have been Easter 1776, for Johnson’s diary entry for that day reads: “When I received, some tender images struck me. I was so mollified by the concluding address to our Saviour that I could not utter it.”31 The words Johnson could not bring himself to utter are: “O Lord, the only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ; O Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father, that takest away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us.”

What happened to Johnson during the Easter Eucharist was the outcome of years of pondering the meaning of Christ’s death on the cross—ponderings influenced by Samuel Clarke’s sermons on the expiatory doctrine of Christ’s sacrifice. So he seized the opportunity afforded by Dodd’s request for a sermon to speak about his own newly found faith in Christ. In previous sermons ghostwritten for other preachers, Johnson had not dealt with the atonement, no doubt because he would not write for others what he did not himself believe.

Now, in May 1777, because Johnson had come to believe in the substitutionary atonement, he gave this definition of faith: “Faith is a full and undoubting confidence in the declarations made by God in the holy Scriptures; a sincere reception of the doctrines taught by our blessed Saviour, with a firm assurance that he died to take away the sins of the world, and that we have, each of us, a part in the boundless benefits of the universal sacrifice.”32 Johnson’s own recently found confidence in God’s forgiveness is here made clear, but how did he view the man for whom he wrote these words? Did his coming to a faith similar to Wesley’s cause him to see Dodd as Wesley saw him? Not at all. Johnson suspected Dodd of cant, while Wesley believed him sincere.

Wesley records in his journal that while Dodd was in prison, he sent for him. Wesley ignored the first and second messengers because, he says,

31Quoted in Quinlan, op. cit., p. 148.
he was certain Dodd’s case was hopeless and therefore it would be “lost labour” to appeal for clemency on his behalf. But when the third messenger said he would not leave until Wesley accompanied him, Wesley visited Dodd, who spoke of “nothing but his own soul, and appeared to regard nothing in comparison of it.” Dodd did not ask Wesley to write appeals for him. He did not engage in small talk. All he did was speak about the state of his soul. That being the case, Wesley, “agreeably disappointed,” paid Dodd two more visits, one just two days before his execution. And Wesley came away from each interview with the impression that Dodd was entirely sincere in his professions of repentance, that he was “calmly giving himself up to whatsoever God should determine concerning him.”

Johnson’s attitude toward Dodd parallels Wesley’s in one respect but differs in others. Like Wesley, Johnson thought from the beginning that appeals for mercy were useless. Nevertheless, he went ahead to draft such appeals, using the argument that the cause of religion would not be served by making a public spectacle of a clergyman-forgery. Instead of allowing Dodd to be executed, Johnson urged the king to banish him to some remote colony where he would lack the luxuries he loved and where he would get what he deserved, namely, to be forgotten. Johnson was clear about why he did what he did for Dodd. He was trying to keep religion from being brought into disrepute by the sight of a doctor of divinity dangling from the public gallows. But as far as Dodd the person was concerned, Johnson suspected him of feigning belief in what he said in the pulpit, just as he had forged a signature in his business dealings.

For Johnson, the former crime, canting, was as despicable as the latter, forging; both appropriated something belonging to another. In his Dictionary Johnson defined *cant* as “a whining pretension to goodness, in formal and affected terms;” he defined a *canter* as one who talks “formally on religion, without obeying it.” And it seemed to Johnson that both definitions could be illustrated by Dodd. Ten months after Dodd was executed, James Boswell called Johnson’s attention to a little book, *Thoughts in Prison*, in which appeared what was purported to be a prayer for the king written by Dodd on the night before he was hanged. Johnson looked intently at the prayer and asked: “What evidence is there that this was composed the night before he suffered? I do not believe it.” Boswell says that Johnson then read the prayer aloud and turning to him, said: “Sir, do you think that a man, the night before he is to be hanged, cares for

34 Ibid., Vol. 4, Journal, p. 93.
the succession of a royal family?—Though, he may have composed this prayer then. A man who has been canting all his life, may cant to the last.—And yet, a man who has been refused a pardon after so much petitioning, would hardly be praying thus fervently for the King.”

Johnson saw several ways of interpreting what was alleged to be Dodd’s prayer for the king on the night before his execution. First, Dodd might have written the prayer earlier as part of his campaign to win a pardon, in which case he certainly did wish the king well, if for no other reason than because his life depended upon the royal will. Second, Dodd might have composed the prayer the night before he died. If so, then there were, to Johnson’s mind, two possible ways of understanding Dodd’s motives. Either he was pretending to goodness and piety, as Johnson thought he had done for years in the pulpit; or he had found at last such repose in God that he could pray in all sincerity for the king who had refused to spare his life.

Wesley, on the other hand, did not share Johnson’s nagging ambiguity about Dodd’s sincerity. “I should think” he said, “none could converse with him without acknowledging that God is with him.” Who was right about Dodd, Wesley or Johnson? Wesley had the advantage of talking with Dodd several times during the final weeks of his life. Johnson had the advantage of being a literary critic of rare distinction. Did Johnson pick up from Dodd’s written words a hint of cant that Wesley missed in the person? Or did Wesley detect a change in Dodd, one that made him capable of praying wholeheartedly for the king on the night before he died? Was Wesley’s heart taken in by a man who knew what Wesley would be looking for in a prisoner, namely, signs of penitence and experiential awareness of divine forgiveness? Or was Johnson’s head too dubious of the possibility of a man, who had “been canting all his life,” ceasing to dissemble on the brink of extinction? We cannot answer with assurance, but we can note weaknesses in both Johnson and Wesley that might have caused them to be mistaken in evaluating Dodd.

Back in 1738, when Wesley broke with William Law on the matter of “a living faith in the blood of Christ,” Wesley argued for an understanding of Christ’s sacrifice that would satisfy the heart. In the course of doing so, he cried down the head, speaking of “that speculative, notional, airy shadow which lives in the head, not the heart.” Wesley was clear about the danger of the mind playing with such notions as the necessity of being moved by Christ’s death to acknowledge the heinousness of sin and make one’s own atonement for it. Giving too much emphasis to the intellect could lead, Wesley believed, to years of uncertainty about one’s acceptance by God, the very thing that happened to Samuel Johnson. But clear as Wesley was about the Judas-nature of the head, was he equally clear

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37 Ibid.
38 Zondervan, Works, Vol. 4, p. 103.
39 Baker, op. cit., p. 541, lines 30f.
about what Johnson termed "the treachery of the human heart"? Did Wesley ever peer into what William Butler Yeats calls "the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart"? William Law doubted it.

When Law replied to the letter in which Wesley spoke about the treachery of the head, implying that Law had fallen prey to it, Law remarked: "The head can as easily amuse itself with a 'living and justifying faith in the blood of Jesus' as with any other notion; and the heart which you suppose to be a place of security, as being the seat of self-love, is more deceitful than the head." Did Wesley grasp Law's point? Did he recognize then or later that his emphasis on the heart might make him particularly susceptible to cant—to the person who knew that Wesley liked to hear about warmed hearts and therefore talked to him, as William Dodd did, about "nothing but his own soul"? There is no way to answer this question with certainty, but because Johnson—a man whose insights into human nature were at least as clear as Wesley's—was ambiguous about Dodd's sincerity, we must entertain the possibility that Wesley was taken in by the Liberace of London pulpiteers.

It is also possible, however, that Johnson, for all his insight into "the treachery of the human heart," was too eager to think ill of Dodd because of his own unsatisfied desire for acclaim. Boswell reports that "Johnson disapproved of Dr. Dodd's leaving the world persuaded that 'The Convict's Address to his Unhappy Brethren,' was of his own writing." This reaction struck Boswell as being uncharacteristic of Johnson because, when Johnson had ghostwritten sermons for others, he always insisted they make a copy in their own hand so that his draft could be destroyed—thus eliminating any evidence, other than that of style and forcefulness of thought, of his authorship. So why, Boswell wondered, did Johnson feel Dodd should have admitted that Johnson wrote The Convict's Address for him? All Johnson gave him by way of answer was that Dodd got the sermon from him "to pass as his own, while that could do him any good"—with the implication being that once the sermon had failed to help Dodd obtain clemency, Dodd should have announced Johnson's authorship as a way of showing the world that he had finally gained integrity. But did Dodd's silence trouble Johnson because of what it said about Dodd or because of what it did not do for Johnson? Once more, as in the case of Wesley, we cannot answer with assurance. Nevertheless, we may consider the possibility that Johnson's heart was treacherous enough to cause him to yearn for a beam of Dodd's limelight to fall on him.

42Baker, op. cit., p. 545, lines 6ff.
44Ibid.
Therefore, the Dodd coincidence reveals that even the greatest moral and spiritual intelligences cannot probe the depths of another human being without the possibility of being mistaken. Both Johnson and Wesley appear less Olympian in the presence of Dodd. Either one of them may have been right, but both of them could not have been right about Dodd. And when we see two such perspicacious interpreters of the human condition differing in their interpretations of the same person, we gain information useful in understanding each of them. As Methodist historians, however, we are particularly interested in John Wesley. So it is the light shed on him by Johnson and Dodd that helps us see him more clearly. We notice that his judgments were ones that could be questioned by another man of equal intellectual power and moral insight.

This final angle from which to view Wesley, provided by the third coincidence in the lives of Johnson and Wesley, is essential if we are to keep our picture of him in focus. The first coincidence shows him becoming the Christian leader demanded by his times. The second points to his remarkable ability for brushing aside anything that might tend to keep a human soul from finding peace with God. The third corrects any tendency to assume that he was always right. It does this by showing that he could very well have been mistaken with regard to Dodd—mistaken because his heart, warmed though it was, may have remained treacherous.

Coincidences aid the historian by showing how two persons were reacting to the same set of circumstances or the same person. What May 1738 meant to Wesley is comprehended better when examined in terms of what it meant to Johnson. Wesley’s letters to William Law take on a new significance—one less unfavorable to Wesley—when read against the background of Johnson’s long struggle with a doctrine of the atonement he may have drawn from Law. And any attempt to use Wesley in support of the case that a warmed heart guarantees right human judgments will founder on the shoals of Dodd.