JOHN WESLEY ON MIND AND BODY:  
TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF HEALTH AS WHOLENESS  

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John Wesley's conscious attempt to formulate a theology for "plain people" has elicited a range of responses. In his own time Wesley was labeled an "enthusiast," one given to "ecstacies," impervious to "reason and argument." Comparable assessments have been traced into the twentieth century. More recent studies, however, have emphasized Wesley's solid theological tradition. While acknowledging that one may properly speak of Wesley as a "folk theologian," Albert Outler insists that it is useful to read Wesley with an awareness of the wide range of sources that informed his thought.

As folk theologian Wesley devoted his energies to designing "plain truth for plain people . . . abstain[ing] from all nice and philosophical speculations, from all perplexed and intricate reasonings and, as far as possible, from even the show of learning, . . ." Though claiming that he intended "in some sense, to forget all that I have ever read in my life," Wesley's writings attest to his rich and varied background. A case in point is his awareness of the numerous facets of the mind-body problem. The relationship between the mind and body—or in language more characteristic of Wesley, the union of body and soul—was fundamental to his understanding of health as wholeness. Wesley viewed his ministry as embracing the total well-being of the individual. As he explained in a letter to the young Alexander Knox, the great Physician purposes "inward and outward health."

John Wesley's involvement in health care is documented throughout his writings. Early in his ministry Wesley established a visitation program for the sick and dispensed medicine to the poor in London and Bristol. In 1747 Wesley published his collection of simple remedies under the title, Primitive Physick. He also procured an electrical apparatus by which he administered a form of therapy. In addition to these measures John Wesley

urged his readers toward a life style conductive to good health. Wesley viewed sensible regimen as the divinely appointed plan for a life of health as wholeness. 6

It is clear that Wesley's primary focus remained practical or pastoral in scope. Nonetheless Wesley's works evidence the formative influence of particular philosophical and physiological insights. His commitment to minister to the total person, an emphasis which antedates the contemporary interest in a more wholistic understanding of health, warrants an examination of those concepts critical to his view of health as wholeness. This paper will explore Wesley's attention to the mind-body problem as it relates to his concern to promote health of body and soul.

Wesley's general frame of reference was Cartesian. The influence of Descartes had ranged across the fields of philosophy and religion, science and medicine. Language and images used by Wesley to discuss the relationship of body and soul were borrowed from the Cartesian school and reflected as well the perspective of seventeenth and eighteenth century physiologies. Wesley drew upon the Cartesian machine model, referring on different occasions to the body as that "exquisite" or "curious" machine. 7 A favorite metaphor employed by Wesley pictured the body as a finely tuned instrument. From his readings in George Cheyne and James Keill, Wesley garnered physiological insights which gave support to the biblical witness that the body was "fearfully and wonderfully made" (Ps.139:14,KJV). In keeping with the Cartesian perspective, the body, like all matter, was viewed as passive. 8 That which set humankind apart was its spiritual nature or soul. For Wesley, the soul encompassed the mind or thinking principle, the affections and the will. 9

Wesley was aware of the questions inherent in the Cartesian position. Where does one locate the soul? Is it to be identified with a particular part or "all in every part?" Still further, how is the soul united to the body, "a spirit to a clod?" What is the secret, he asked, "the imperceptible chain that couples them together? Can the wisest man give a satisfactory answer to anyone of these plain questions?" 10 Here Wesley echoed concerns that had stimulated philosophical discussion since the time of Descartes.


7Wesley, Works, 7:138, also Works, 7:225.

8Wesley, Works, 6:427.

9Wesley, Works, 7:227.

10Wesley, Works, 6:343.
Two extremes defined the spectrum of the mind-body debate. On the one hand there were the materialists who viewed the individual as a machine, working by mechanistic principles. One could explain movement simply on the basis of the physiology of the body. That is, both the motion of the hand and one's resolve to move it have a physical and mechanical cause. On the other end of the spectrum, the immaterialists asserted that there could be no material cause of movement. Malebranche espoused an extreme expression of immaterialism. For Malebranche, all movement was caused by God. The individual willing an action becomes the "occasion" for God's causal activity.

While Wesley spoke of the body as a machine, he never reduced humankind to a machine whose action could be explained fully on the basis of mechanistic principles. Wesley had followed the ongoing debate between Samuel Clarke and Leibnitz. Though Wesley differed with Clarke on particular theological issues such as the concept of the Trinity, it is clear that Wesley sided with Clarke in the debate with Leibnitz. It is less certain that Wesley's rejection of materialism meant for him a full acceptance of a Malebranche's position. Particular factors do indicate an interest in Malebranchian Occasionalism. Wesley read Malebranche's _Search After Truth_, and recommended that others do the same. Wesley also studied and abridged for _The Christian Library_, writings from John Norris, the Cambridge Platonist and student of Malebranche. In addition, it is possible to cite passages in Wesley's writings which bear the mark of Malebranche.

For Malebranche only God can be said to be the true cause of action. The natural order lacks causal agency. To accept a secondary cause as true cause of any action is tantamount to ascribing inherent powers to nature and thereby usurping the creative power that belongs only to God. In his writings Malebranche rejected the idea that anything other than God has creative power.

God created the world because He willed it: . . . and He moves all things, and thus produces all the effects that we see happening, because He also willed certain laws according to which motion is communicated upon the collison [sic] of bodies; and because these laws are efficacious, powers, or true causes in the material, sensible world; and it is not necessary to admit to the existence of forms, faculties, and real qualities for producing effects that bodies do not produce and for sharing with God the force and power essential to him.

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12Wesley, _Works_, 4:45.
13Wesley, _Letters_, 3:163, also 7:228.
As for the existing creature, Malebranche viewed its existence as its own. The creature does act. The created individual may even be said to be the natural or occasional cause of action. To speak of the individual as the occasional cause of action is to assert that the individual determines what particular course of action should follow. As Beatrice Rome explains in her study of Malebranche, the occasional cause is “not an instrument in the sense of creation or conservation, but in the sense of distributing and imparting power.” The individual’s willing a particular effect or cause of events becomes the “occasion” for the creative power of God to express itself as true cause. It follows that even the simple movement of the arm is action that is caused by God. Malebranche asserted that there could be no causal relationship between willing one’s arm to move and the fact that the arm moved. In order for the individual to be the real cause of the movement of body parts, one would need to be versed in the physiology of the body. Otherwise, the animal’s spirits could not be channeled to the appropriate muscles. In that movement of the arm occurs without an awareness of the physiology of the body, according to Malebranche, only one conclusion was possible.

For how could we move our arms? To move them, it is necessary to have animal spirits, to send them through certain nerves toward certain muscles in order to inflate and contract them, for it is thus that the arm attached to them is moved; or according to the opinion of some others, it is still not known how that happens. And we see that men who do not know that they have spirits, nerves, and muscles move their arms, and even move them with more skill and ease than those who know anatomy best. Therefore, men will to move their arms, and only God is able and knows how to move them. If a man cannot turn a tower upside down, at least he knows what must be done to do so; but there is no man who knows what must be done to move one of his fingers by means of animal spirits. How, then, could men move their arms? These things seem obvious to me and, it seems to me, to all those willing to think, although they are perhaps incomprehensible to all those willing only to sense.

Wesley’s elaboration on the biblical affirmation of God’s creative activity was reminiscent of passages from Malebranche. In his sermon, “Spiritual Worship,” Wesley wrote of “the true God [as] the only cause, the sole creator of all things.” Wesley continued:

... as the true God, he is also the Supporter of all things that he has made. He beareth, upholdeth, sustaineth, all created things by the word of his power, by the same powerful word that brought them out of nothing. As this was absolutely necessary for the beginning of their existence, it is equally so for the continuance of it: Were the almighty influence withdrawn they could not subsist a moment longer.

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Throughout the sermon Wesley persisted with his theme. "I would particularly remark, (what perhaps has not been sufficiently observed,) that he is the true Author of all the motion that is in the universe." Again, the point was expanded:

All matter, of whatever kind it be, is absolutely and totally inert. It does not, cannot, in any case, move itself; and whenever any part of it seems to move, it is in reality moved by something else. . . . [Ultimately, everything is] moved every moment by the almighty hand that made them.19

These quotes are illustrative of a certain affinity for Malebranche's perspective. However, the passages do not warrant the conclusion that Wesley fully embraced Malebranchian Occasionalism. The truth is that Wesley's commentary on the biblical doctrine of creation also bears the mark of Augustine.20

A cause can be made that Wesley's interest in Malebranche was interest up to a point. With Malebranche, Wesley affirmed that God is the "true Author" of all motion. However, Wesley added a qualification. "To spirits, indeed, [God] has given a small degree of self-moving power, but not to matter."21 For Wesley, this inward principle of motion, designated "soul," governs or directs the movement of the body. Wesley of course, acknowledged the involuntary nature of such bodily functions as respiration and heart beat. "They do not wait the direction of my will." But apart from these involuntary actions, Wesley observed, "I direct the motion of my whole body. By a single act of the will, I put my head, eye, hands, or any other part of my body into motion; . . . ."22

Unlike Malebranche, Wesley did attribute to humankind some active role. To be sure, Malebranche ascribed a role to the individual, but it was not causal. Wesley modified the Malebranchian notion that God alone is the cause of motion. For Wesley, it seemed that causal agency was a logical consequence of being created in the image of God.23 As a spiritual being, humankind not only directs the course of action, but is also able to initiate motion.24

While certain that the individual has been endowed with the principle of self motion, Wesley acknowledged his inability to satisfactorily explain the link between the willing of an action and the subsequent action. "I no more comprehend how I do this," admitted Wesley, "than I comprehend how the 'Three that bear record in heaven are One.'"25

24Yolton, in his work, Thinking Matter, suggests it was natural for eighteenth century thinkers to transfer causal agency from God to humankind, created in the image of God (p. 203).
You believe you have a soul connected to this house of clay. But can you comprehend how? What are these ties that unite the heavenly flame with the earthly clod? You understand just nothing of the matter. So it is: But how none can tell.26

One is tempted to observe that Wesley's commitment to "plain truth for plain people" may have precluded further speculation on this issue. His avowed practical bent, or more properly, his metaphysical reticence, in reality, reflects the influence of Locke's empirical approach. Recent Wesleyan studies have emphasized Wesley's indebtedness to John Locke. The conscious attempt to avoid "philosophical speculations" was a persistent characteristic of Wesley's thought. As Frederick Dreyer writes, "Knowledge for [Wesley] consisted not in what the mind understood but in what it experienced. Because a fact was unintelligible, it did not cease to be a knowable fact."27 This is certainly true with respect to the relationship between body and soul. He repeatedly observed, as in his sermon on "The Imperfection of Human Knowledge," that one cannot comprehend "the secret, the imperceptible chain that couples them together."28 At the same time, Wesley was well versed in what others had conjectured regarding the relationship of body and soul.

One popular theory invoked as an explanation of the link between thinking and acting was the flow of animal spirits. Animal spirits were viewed as being less material than nerves or muscles. Their so called "ethereal" quality allowed for free movement throughout the body. Descartes, in his treatise, The Passions of The Soul, had made reference to animal spirits. In article X Descrates explained that the animal spirits are the "very subtle parts of the blood" and hence "move very quickly like the particles of a flame" in and through the nerves to effect the movement of the muscles.29 Malebranche, Descartes's student, also gave extensive attention to animal spirits. Movement of the arm or any other part of the body occurs, Malebranche noted, because animal spirits inflate the appropriate muscles.30 Thinking and acting are united by a series of impressions transmitted by animal spirits from the soul through the nerves to the muscles.31

The physiology of animal spirits described by Descartes and Malebranche was prevalent throughout Britain during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It appeared in the writings of Cambridge Patonists like John Norris and John Smith, the empiricist, John Locke, anatomist,
James Keill and the physician, George Cheyne. All of these persons are studied by Wesley.\(^3\)

James Keill made passing reference to animal spirits in his work, *The Anatomy of the Human Body*. The animal spirits, Keill explained, travel out from the brain through long tubular structures described as "very fine pipes," to particular parts of the body. These spirits inflate the muscles of the body and thereby cause movement.\(^3\) The physiology of animal spirits was developed more fully by George Cheyne in his *Philosophical Principles of Religion*. Muscles consist of bundles of fibers which are "bound about by small spiral threads." Fluids or spirits, according to Cheyne, are transmitted to and from the muscle fibers through arteries, nerves and veins. The animal spirits, which are formed out of the blood, move through the nerves to the muscles in much the same manner that blood moves through arteries.\(^3\) Cheyne viewed animal spirits as "the more pure, refined, and subtile part of the blood."\(^3\) Motion results from the influence of spirits on the muscles of the body. Cheyne used the imagery of the musician striking the keys of an instrument as an appropriate model for voluntary motion.

And the only conception we can form of voluntary motion is, that the Mind, like a skillful Musician, strikes upon the Nerves which conveys Animal Spirits to the Muscle to be contracted, and adds a greater Force than the natural to the nervous Juices, where of it opens Passage into the Vesicles of which the Muscular Fibres consist, which it could not have done by its natural Power.\(^3\)

In a later work, *The Natural Method of Cureing the Diseases of the Body, and the Diseases of the Mind*, Cheyne moved away from the more popular animal spirit physiology to espouse a vibration theory of motion.\(^3\) Here Cheyne anticipated Hartley's position as detained in his *Observation on Man*. Hartley believed that external objects cause vibrations on the surface of the nerves and in the brain. These vibrations of very infinitesimally small particles within the brain, oscillating like a pendulum, are, according to Hartley, the instruments of motion.\(^3\)

Passing references to animal spirit physiology as well as a vibration theory of motion appear in Wesley's writings. In two instances in the ser-

\(^3\)See Boshears, "John Wesley, the Bookman: A Study of His Reading Interests in Eighteen Century."


\(^3\)Yolton, *Thinking Matter*, p. 179.

mon, "Wandering Thoughts," Wesley made allusion to the influence of "spirits." The context indicates that Wesley meant "spirits" to be animal spirits. He observed that one cause for "wandering thoughts" was "hurried and agitated spirits." Wesley warned his reader, "Yea, let only the spirits be hurried and agitated to a certain degree, and a temporary madness, a delirium, prevents all settled thought." This passage paralleled Malebranche's observation that animal spirits can be "strongly agitated" by a high fever or some violent passion. Malebranche noted that on such occasions one imagines what is not there. Wesley also emphasized the difficulty one has in managing one's thoughts. The imagination, Wesley observed, "carries us away hither and thither, whether we will or no; and all this from the merely natural flow of the spirits, or vibration of the nerves." Here Wesley referred to two popular physiological theories of the day, the transmission of animal spirits and Hartley's vibration theory. The two positions were mentioned again in Wesley's essay, "A Thought on Necessity." In the second part of this lengthy essay, Wesley returned to the two physiological theories. Wesley cited "the late ingenious Dr. Hartley" as the author of the vibration theory. Wesley noted, however, that "other great men totally disapproved of the doctrine of vibration," opting for the movement of animal spirits.

On another occasion Wesley assumed an animal spirit physiology. In his sermon on "What is Man," Wesley observed it is "highly probable" that there would be no circulation of the blood throughout the body apart from "this very fine fire we are speaking of." The pumping of the heart alone is not adequate "to propel the blood from the heart through all the arteries," Wesley explained. "This can only be effected by the ethereal fire contained in the blood itself, assisted by the elastic force of the arteries through which it circulates." In a separate writing Wesley noted that the ethereal fire is "vulgarly called animal spirits."

These selected passages reflect Wesley's awareness of animal spirit physiology. Wesley presupposed the assistance of animal spirits in particular physiological functions. Also he noted the relationship between animal spirits and mental activity. In the final analysis, however, Wesley resisted the temptation to identify animal spirits as the vital link between the material and immaterial. This knowledge falls beyond the limits of human understanding.

How is the soul united to the body? A spirit of a clod? What is the secret imperceptible chain that couples them together? Can the wisest of men give a satisfactory answer to any one of these plain questions?

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While it was impossible to unravel the mystery of the interrelationship, Wesley believed, experience evidenced the union of body and soul.

Run only a thorn into your hand; immediately pain is felt in your soul. On the other side, is shame felt in your soul? Instantly a blush overspreads your cheek. Does the soul feel fear or violent anger? Presently the body trembles. These are . . . facts which you cannot deny; nor can you account for them.

For Wesley the point called for extended elaboration.

I bring out one instance more: At the command of your soul, your hand is lifted up. But who is able to account for this? For the connexion [sic] between the act of the mind, and the outward actions? Nay who can account for muscular motion at all; in any instance of it whatever?46

Wesley's empirical persuasion is unmistakable. He accepted the interrelationship of the body and soul as fact without attempting to probe the manner of their union. This remained a mystery. At the same time, the empirical reality, that is the union of body and soul, was fundamental to Wesley's concept of health as wholeness. In language reminiscent of Cheyne's musician metaphor, Wesley explained, "an embodied spirit cannot form one thought but by the mediation of its bodily organs." Thinking is not "the act of pure spirit, but the act of spirit connected with the body, and playing upon a set of material keys." The quality of music is directly related to the "nature and state of the instrument." Consequently, Wesley observed, "if these instruments, by which the soul works, are disordered, the soul itself must be hindered in its operation. Let a musician be ever so skillful, he will make but poor music if his instrument is out of tune."47

In keeping with its literal meaning Wesley viewed health as wholeness or "well-working."48 Wesley's reading of seventeenth and eighteenth century physicians had greatly influenced his perspective on health. Dr. Thomas Sydenham, in the preface to his Works, contrasted a "sound" and "morbid" state of the body. A sound body, as explained in a footnote, is marked by "a free and regular circulation, a just mixture and proportion of the blood and juices, the due tone and motion of the solids, and a perfect exercise of the vital animal functions."49 In short, somatic health means a well-working system. George Cheyne mirrored Sydenham's view. A healthy body depends upon the free passage of fluids through

44Wesley, Works, 11:517.
45Wesley, Works, 6:343; also Works, 13:497.
46Wesley, Works, 6:203.
47Wesley, Works, 7:347.
the various tubes and vessels within the body. Any obstruction of the free vascular movement will result in disease.\textsuperscript{50}

Wesley's summary description of the body in a state of health indicates an awareness of the accepted medical parlance. In his sermon, "On the Fall of Man," Wesley pictured humankind before the Fall. His intent was theological, but the language used was the language of medical physiology.

But how fearfully and wonderfully wrought into innumerable fibres, nerves, membranes, muscles, arteries, veins, vessels of various kinds! And how amazingly is this dust connected with water, with inclosed, circulating fluids, diversified a thousand ways by a thousand tubes and strainers! Yea, and how wonderfully is air impacted into every part, solid, or fluid, of the animal machine; air not elastic, which would tear the machine in pieces, but as fixed as water under the pole! But all this would not avail, were not ethereal fire intimately mixed both with this earth, air, and water. And all these elements are mingled together in the most exact proportion; so that while the body is in health, no one of them predominates, in the least degree, over the others.\textsuperscript{51}

A similar theme can be seen in the sermon, "The Image of God." The original state of humankind, Wesley noted, was one of life in a body prepared for immortality. The body was incorruptible in all its parts. Consequently the "juices" moved freely throughout the body. The point seems to be that initially the body as a whole functioned without resistance. It was a free, well-working system. As for what followed Wesley could only surmise. He suggested "as probable" that the eating of the forbidden fruit released in the body particles which began to "adhere to the inner coats of the finer vessels." Strictures within the vessels laid "a foundation for numberless disorders in all parts of the machine," and signaled the inevitable process of death.\textsuperscript{52}

The physiological insights expressed in the sermon, "The Image of God," by Wesley's own admission, were based more on conjecture than on Scripture. Nonetheless, they are illustrative of Wesley's view of health. Somatic health means a well-working system. The perfect model or expression of health would be Adam before the Fall, a balanced, harmonious, human organism designed for immortality. Since the Fall, the wholeness to be realized is wholeness within the limits of mortality. Within these bounds, however, a well-working system is the hallmark of somatic health.

For Wesley, the healthy body was critical to the individual's emotional well-being. As Wesley quoted on numerous occasions, a "corruptible body presses down the soul."\textsuperscript{53} In the present state of human existence,
when one part of the body is disordered, the total person suffers. Wesley commented, "If but one of these slender threads, whereof our flesh is made up, be stretched beyond its due proportion, or fretted by any sharp humour, or broken, what torment does it create!" It is a matter of the soul sympathizing with the body. Even when our bodies are functioning reasonably well, care must be taken "to answer their necessities, to provide for sustenance, to preserve them in health and to keep them tenantable, in some tolerable fitness for our soul's use." In short the body must be kept finely tuned for the good of one's total being.

As with "outward" or somatic health, Wesley also viewed "inward" health in terms of wholeness or well-being. It is a state of emotional stability, balance, or equilibrium. The converse of inward wholeness, for Wesley, would be "lowness of spirits," or depression. In his essay on nervous disorders, Wesley suggested that what is sometimes termed nervous disorders is nothing more than the "hand of God upon the soul" resulting in the individual being dissatisfied with the things of this world. There are also nervous disorders which are physical by nature. The type of nervous disorder Wesley proposed to address in the essay, "Thoughts on Nervous Disorders," were those characterized by "lowness of spirit." Wesley's description of feeling "low spirited" is enlightening.

Does not this imply, that a kind of faintness, weariness, and listlessness affects the whole body, so that he is disinclined to any motion, and hardly cares to move hand or foot? But the mind seems chiefly to be affected, having lost its relish of everything, and being no longer capable of enjoying the things it once delighted in most. Nay, everthing round about is not only flat and insipid, but dreary and uncomfortable. It is not strange if, to one in this state, life itself is become a burden; yea, so insupportable a burden, that many who have all this world can give, desperately rush into an unknown world, rather than bear it any longer.

This summary statement reflects, by way of contrast, Wesley's more wholistic understanding of health. The opposite of being "low-spirited" is completeness, wholeness, being at peace with oneself. If there is no peace, then one's health is in jeopardy. The emphasis is consistent throughout his writings. In the preface to *Primitive Physick* Wesley appended a few "Plain Easy Rules," which he adapted from Dr. George Cheyne. Wesley echoed Cheyne, "The passions have a greater influence on health, than most people are aware of it." Until the passions or emotional concerns are brought under control, the use of medicine will be to no avail. In his *Journal* entry for May 12, 1759, Wesley cited a case which supported his conviction.

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Reflecting today on the case of a poor woman who had continual pain in her stomach, I could not but remark the inexcusable negligence of most physicians in cases of this nature. They prescribe drug upon drug, without knowing a jot of the matter concerning the root of this disorder. And without knowing this, they cannot cure, though they can murder the patient. Whence came the woman’s pain (which she would never have told had she never been questioned about it)? From fretting for the death of her son. And what availed medicines while the fretting continued? Why, then, do not all physicians consider how far bodily disorders are caused or influenced by the mind, and in those cases which are utterly out of their sphere, call in the assistance of a minister; . . . .

Wesley expressed a similar concern in the sermon, “Heaviness through Manifold Temptation.” Depression, he warned, tends to debilitate the body. Indeed, “deep and lasting sorrow of heart may . . . sometimes weaken a strong constitution, and lay the foundations for bodily disorders as are not easily removed.” The emotions, which Wesley commonly called passions, must be kept within “due bounds.” Experience seems to show, noted Wesley, “that violent and sudden passions dispose to, or actually throw people into acute diseases.” While the physician in time may treat the disease, “Calming of the Passions,” as Cheyne stressed, “is the Business, not of Physick, but of Virtue and Religion.” Wesley could not have agreed more. “The love of God, as it is the sovereign remedy of all miseries, so in particular it effectually prevents all bodily disorders the passions introduce, . . . and by the unspeakable joy and perfect calm serenity and tranquility it gives the mind, it becomes the most powerful of all the means of health and long life.”

It remains to Wesley’s lasting credit that he stressed the interrelationship of physical and psychic or emotional well-being. It was not that Wesley equated health of body and health of soul. Rather, healing and health must be viewed comprehensively. Healing and health touch the individual at every level of human existence. In an essay on issues common to medicine and theology, Kenneth Vaux writes of the multi-dimensional nature of healing. Even at the most basic level of actualization of health is a psychosomatic event. Wesley understood and expressed this principle. Mind and body work together in the healing process. When the mind is in a state of disease, healing is thwarted. Health as wholeness is realized and preserved through the appropriate practice of sensible regimen and the faithful use of “that old unfashionable medicine, prayer.”

60Wesley, Works, 6:94.
61Wesley, Works, 14:316.
63Wesley, Works, 14:316.
65Wesley, Works, 14:313,314.