AN ANALYSIS OF THE SOURCE OF JOHN WESLEY'S "DIRECTIONS FOR RENEWING OUR COVENANT WITH GOD"

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The Covenant Service is thought to be one of Methodism's major contributions to the body of ecumenical liturgics. John Bishop says, "Methodism has contributed nothing more notable to the worship of the Church."  Frank Baker calls it the "most characteristic institution of the Methodist Societies."  Rupert Davies says it is the "one major contribution of Methodism to religious liturgy." Its use today among Methodists in the United States has increased, but with a format and text significantly different from the original.

Wesley had held Covenant Services for over a decade, but it was not until Lee Thomas produced an unauthorized service in 1779 that Wesley finally decided to publish one himself in 1780. The arguments for various dates for the first "recognizable" Covenant Service are summarized by David Tripp in his book, The Renewal of the Covenant in the Methodist Tradition. All of those whom Tripp cites are in agreement on two things: (1) that one such service was held in August 1755, and (2) that the form of the service evolved from the Puritan tradition.

We have chosen not to enter the "first performance controversy," but rather to participate in the dialogue around the Puritan source materials. Therefore, this article will focus on tracing the origin of John Wesley's "Directions for Renewing Our Covenant with God," identifying his preferred source documents, and reviewing some of the edited and abridged material. We begin with a general overview of the contributing factors that led to the development of the service.

Several factors contributed to Wesley's development of a covenant service: theological environment, ancestry, timing, comfortable familiarity with the literature, and need.

The theological foundation for Federal or Covenant Theology had been laid almost two centuries earlier and had been gaining in strength

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1John Bishop, Methodist Worship in Relation to Free Church Worship (Scholars Studies Press, Inc., 1975), 98.
3Rupert Davies, "The History and Theology of the Methodist Covenant Service," Theology, 64 (February 1961), 62.
and influence since the late 1500s.\textsuperscript{5} On one level, it was manifested collectively. The Scottish Presbyterians, for example, formed a covenant to fight against Roman and Anglican ecclesiastical government. The Congregationalists used a covenant in both the founding and organization of congregations and between members of a church body. On another level, Covenant Theology supported the notion of one's having a personal encounter with God. By the late 1600s, new converts, after a conversion experience, were urged to make a written and signed personal covenant with God.

A second factor influencing Wesley was ancestry. Both of his grandfathers had been nonconformists, and he had been influenced by his mother's Puritan leanings. Hunter cites evidence of Wesley's knowledge of his Puritan ancestry by Susanna's letters to her sons and by the connection between her father, Samuel Annesley, and one Richard Alleine. But, as Monk suggests, it appears that Hunter's assertion, that Wesley's reference to "our forefathers" in speaking of the Covenant Service meant only his grandfather John Westley and the Annesleys, is unlikely.\textsuperscript{6} In addition to Puritan notions that he might have learned from his mother and grandparents, Wesley had begun editing and abridging books by Puritan authors for his series \textit{A Christian Library}. Among these were several works by the "divines" Richard Alleine and his son-in-law Joseph Alleine.

It was within this historical, ancestral, and theological context that Wesley came upon the practical idea of providing a new use for words of a covenant designed for individual private use by having his societies make a personal and yet corporate covenant between themselves and God.

While most would agree that Wesley's idea was not an original one, certainly he was creative in its use. He gave "practical expression" to an old idea, says Rupert Davies.\textsuperscript{7} He met the need of a churchless band of people for outward spiritual expression.

The first clearly documented occasion for the Covenant Service was at the French Church in Spitalfields on August 11, 1755, where Wesley "had recited the tenor of the covenant proposed, in the words of that blessed man Richard Alleine."\textsuperscript{8} An examination of the literature indicates just as clearly that Richard Alleine was Wesley's primary source.

The words of the Covenant itself, which began, "O most dreadful God! for the passion of thy dear Son, I beseech thee," were prefaced by five

\textsuperscript{5}For a fuller discussion of Covenant Theology see John Von Rohr, \textit{The Covenant of Grace in Puritan Thought} (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986).
\textsuperscript{7}Davies, "History and Theology," 63.
directions and were originally the words of one Joseph Alleine. This cove-
nant formula had been distributed in several different forms.

The first is in one of two books published by Joseph’s father-in-law, 
Richard Alleine. It is a trilogy, of which the first part has the same name 
as the book title—*Vindiciæ Pietatis*; the second part is entitled “The Godly 
Man’s Portion”; and the third part is called “Heaven Opened.” We will 
refer to this book in its entirety as Text 1. In Chapters 14 through 17 of 
the third part, “Heaven Opened,” Richard Alleine included his son-in-law’s 
 writings. This section was purportedly written by Joseph while he was 
incarcerated and was originally distributed by Alleine as “A Synopsis of 
the Covenant” before being included in “Heaven Opened.” Joseph’s widow, 
Theodosia, writes the following in an account of her husband’s imprison-
ment:

> My husband ... made a little book entitled *A Call to Archippus*, to stir his non-
> conforming brethren to be diligent. ... And because he could not go to his flock,
> he had prepared for them, “The Synopsis of the Covenant,” which was after placed
> into one of my father’s books.9

The second Richard Alleine work that included Joseph’s covenant 
was in the first part of the trilogy mentioned above. This section was also 
published separately as a book of sermons, *Vindiciæ Pietatis: or a Vin-
dication of Godliness*, which we will henceforth refer to as Text 2.

In both texts, after a sermon on John 1:47, there is a section called 
“The Application of the Whole.” This part discusses the nature of con-
version and the need to be in covenant with God. Here we again find 
Joseph’s covenant, but in a different setting, as Richard quotes Joseph’s 
words just as they are found in the fourth book we examined. The cove-
nant is found in Direction X of Joseph’s posthumous best-seller, *An 
Alarme to Unconverted Sinners*. Charles Stanford details a list of Joseph 
Alleine’s works which includes a folio entitled “Directions for Covenant-
ing with God,” written between 1655 and 1661.10

Therefore, the covenant was included in at least five different works.11 
They are (1) “Heaven Opened” (Text 1), (2) *Vindiciæ Pietatis* (Text 1 and 
Text 2), (3) Joseph Alleine’s folio “A Synopsis of the Covenant,” (4) Joseph 
Alleine’s *An Alarme to Unconverted Sinners*, and (5) Joseph Alleine’s folio 
“Directions for Covenanting with God.” Here is how they differed:

In the third part of Text 1, “Heaven Opened,” Joseph’s words from 
the “Synopsis” as quoted by Richard reveal the profound impact marriage

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York: Robert Carter, 1840), 75.

and Hodder, 1861), 393.

11 Tripp also indicates evidence of a “Covenant Prayer” circulated separately with rules for 
self-examination.
had on Joseph’s life. He likened the Covenant to a marriage contract with God.

Come then, sinner; what sayest thou? ... Let me espouse thee to this one Husband ... . Consider therefore, and let thy heart, lying prostrate before the Almighty, come in and make answer to these demands, which from him, and in his great and dreadful name, I make unto thee.\textsuperscript{12}

He then elaborated on three questions:

I. Wilt thou have Jesus for thy Husband? ... II. Wilt thou take him for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer? ... III. Wilt thou forsake all others? ... IV. Wilt thou cleave unto Christ from Henceforth unto death?\textsuperscript{13}

Each of these questions is illuminated, and then comes the climax:

Thy Lord hath given his consent already; view the handwriting, the whole New Testament ... . What sayest thou? Dost thou consent? Shall thy heart come in and put to thy hand, and subscribe for thee, "I will"\textsuperscript{14}

After this follows the covenant, which is to be signed by the convert.

In \textit{Vindiciae Pietatis} (Texts 1 and 2) Richard again uses Joseph’s Covenant formula but quotes him, not from “Synopsis” with its wedding imagery, but from \textit{An Alarme to Unconverted Sinners} or its source.

The Covenant is found in Chapter VI, Direction X of the \textit{Alarme}, and is prefaced by five directions. The wedding motif is not as prominent except at the height of the covenant prayer:

I do here with all my power accept thee, and take thee for my Head and husband, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, for all times and conditions, to love, honour and obey thee before all others, and this to the death.\textsuperscript{15}

All of Direction X, including the five directions, is quoted by Richard Alleine and introduced as

... an excellent form of words composed for the help of weaker Christians ... I do with much zeal and great hope of good success for the establishing of souls in holiness and comfort, commend it to the use not only of young converts, but of the more grown christians that have not experienced this or the like course.\textsuperscript{16}

Richard Alleine here suggests that Joseph’s covenant for new converts can also be used as a renewal or for those in the church who have not had a conversion experience. This is significant not only because it might have given Wesley the novel idea of using the covenant as a renewal


\textsuperscript{13}\textit{Ibid.}, 348.

\textsuperscript{14}\textit{Ibid.}, 351.

\textsuperscript{15}Joseph Alleine, \textit{An Alarme to Unconverted Sinners, in a Serious Treatise} (London: Nevil Simmons, 1672), 134; and Richard Alleine, “Heaven Opened,” Text 1, and \textit{Vindiciae Pietatis: or a Vindication of Godliness} (London, 1664), Text 2, 205.

\textsuperscript{16}R. Alleine, Text 1 and 2, 201.
service, but also because, as we shall later see, this passage further demonstrates how much Wesley relied on Richard and not Joseph. We continue, now, the debate on the source of the words to Wesley's Covenant Service, using his “Directions for Renewing Our Covenant with God” as our guide.

What has been said about the source of these words that form the Covenant Service? Monk indicates that it is on Joseph Alleine's work, *An Alarme to Unconverted Sinners*, that Wesley relied in developing his Covenant Service. He cites both Wesley's journal entry of April 13, 1757, in which Wesley “read over and enlarged upon Joseph Alleine's 'Directions for a Thorough Conversion to God,'” and a letter to Samuel Furly in which he recommends *both* the “Directions” and Richard Alleine's work, as evidence. Monk believes that “these references testify that the work [Joseph Alleine's *Alarme*] was one of those which Wesley regularly used as instructive material.”

17 Tripp, following a similar line, says:

Wesley adopted for use on such occasions [renewing the covenant] a form of prayer composed by the Puritan minister Joseph Alleine . . . with lengthy directions composed to accompany it by his father-in-law Richard. 18

On the other hand, Rupert Davies attributes the words of Wesley's “Directions” to Richard Alleine but only indicates that Richard quotes Joseph for the Covenant. 19 Hunter, while not identifying the source, does recognize that the words in “Heaven Opened” are not the same as the words in Text 2.

Finally, Frank Baker indicates that the origins can be traced to Richard Alleine's *Vindiciae* but does not indicate the difference between “Vindiciae,” the first part, and “Heaven Opened,” the third part. 20

It is our contention that Wesley's primary source was Richard Alleine's *Vindiciae Pietatis* as written in Text 2 and the first part of Text 1 for the following reasons:

First, Wesley said so. His journal reads, as was previously stated, that he “recited the words of that 'blessed man Richard Alleine.'” Certainly there is evidence indicating John Wesley knew that Richard had quoted Joseph. The important thing here is that we find that Wesley usually referred to the “Covenant Service” as being (or including) the words of Richard, and only rarely did he identify the words as being Joseph's.

Second, in comparing all the texts, Wesley’s “Directions for Renewing Our Covenant,” Richard Alleine's *Vindiciae Pietatis* (Texts 1 and 2) and “Heaven Opened,” and Joseph Alleine's work, *An Alarme to Unconverted Sinners*, we observe that the only common ground among them

19 Davies, “History and Theology,” 63–64.
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is the actual Covenant form beginning with “O most dreadful God” and ending before the “Author’s Advice.”

“Heaven Opened” stands alone with just the Covenant prayer. Both the Vindiciae Pietatis texts and Wesley’s “Directions” have the Covenant prayer, the five directions, and the “Author’s Advice,” all of which are found in the Alarme. Moreover, Wesley’s “Directions” are 23 pages in length. The portion which can be directly traced to Joseph Alleine does not begin until page 17, making it only 26% of the whole. Only the actual Covenant and the five brief directions preceding it can be attributed to Joseph Alleine.

Third, Wesley closely follows Richard Alleine’s Vindiciae, beginning with the section “Application of the Whole.” When Richard begins his quote of Joseph’s Direction X from the Alarme, he introduces it with these words:

Providence hath lately brought to my hand the advice of a dear Friend and faithful Labourer in the work of the Lord about this matter, together with an excellent form of words composed for the help of weaker Christians. 21

Wesley in turn, on page 17, neither paraphrasing nor adding to Richard’s words, wrote as follows:

Providence hath lately brought to my hand the advice of a dear Friend and faithful Labourer in the work of the Lord about this matter, together with an excellent form of words composed for the help of weaker Christians. 22

These words are a direct quote of Richard Alleine as Richard introduced in his text the words of Joseph Alleine. So, in effect Wesley was here clearly quoting Richard Alleine quoting Joseph Alleine.

Fourth, Wesley’s pattern of editing and abridging reveals a bias toward Richard Alleine. When all the works of the Alleines and Wesley are examined together, we find that while Wesley did omit a few things that Richard Alleine included, he never included anything omitted by Richard. Had he done so it would indicate use of Joseph’s writing as a source.

Fifth, Wesley preferred Richard’s word patterns. Consider the following, which is the second part of the first direction preceding the Covenant statement. Joseph says:

In considering distinctly all the terms or conditions of the Covenant, expressed in the form hereafter proposed . . . 23

Richard Alleine says:

In considering distinctly all the terms or conditions of the covenant, as they have been laid before you, in the Directions already given you . . . 24

21R. Alleine, Texts 1 and 2, 201.
23J. Alleine, 132.
John Wesley says:

In considering distinctly all the conditions of the Covenant, as they have been laid before you.\textsuperscript{25}

It seems that Wesley more closely follows Richard than Joseph.

Finally, we take a brief look at some of the materials in order to see how personality, doctrine, and style are revealed in the writings of the Alleines and used by Wesley. In a biography of Joseph written by his widow, Theodosia Alleine, and Richard Baxter, the writer of the second preface to the 1840 edition, emphasizing the importance of Mr. Alleine, pointed to some real or perhaps perceived doctrinal differences with John Wesley in the following manner:\textsuperscript{26}

Richard Baxter, says of him . . . “And many have much reading and plentiful materials for learning, who yet were never truly learned. . . . But so was it not with this our brother. . . . How clearly and solidly doth he resolve the great questions which he speaketh to, as one that had theology, not in his books only but in his head and heart!” . . . The late Rev. John Wesley, a man every way qualified to judge in this matter, has given the following character of them [letters] which is the more to be relied upon, for disinterestedness and impartiality, on account of the known difference of sentiment between him and Mr. Alleine, in some peculiar points of doctrine.\textsuperscript{27}

William Orme characterized Joseph’s style as having “a forbidding sternness in it. Full of the ‘terrors of the Lord,’ it is calculated to frighten rather than persuade.”\textsuperscript{28} Orme compared Joseph with Richard Baxter, but one could also make that comparison with Richard Alleine.

Compare Joseph’s words in \textit{Alarme}, Chapter 2, “The Nature of Conversion”:

God finds nothing in a man to turn his heart, but to turn his stomach; enough to provoke his loathing, nothing to provoke his love. Look back upon thyself. . . . Open thy Sepulchre. . . . Behold thy putrid Soul. . . . O stench unsufferable.\textsuperscript{29}

with Richard’s in Chapter IX of “Heaven Opened”:

Love is a natural affection. The love of God is the soul’s clasping or closing with the Lord. It is the expansion, or going out of the heart in its strength after God.\textsuperscript{30}

Monk indicates that Wesley emphasized the promises of salvation rather than “the fiery torments of hell.” It would seem that Richard would

\textsuperscript{25}Wesley, “Covenant Service,” 17.
\textsuperscript{26}The first preface was written by Alexander Duff. Since the second is unsigned, its authorship is unclear.
\textsuperscript{27}T. Alleine and Baxter, ix.
\textsuperscript{29}I. Alleine, \textit{Alarme}, 17.
\textsuperscript{30}R. Alleine, Text 1, “Heaven Opened,” 180.
be more to Wesley's liking. But since Wesley copied Richard Alleine, it makes the omissions more important.

Richard Alleine's contribution to the Covenant Service contains innumerable scriptural references. Bishop points out, "It is the Bible that forms the ultimate background of this service." And, while Bishop cites the biblical references that gave "scriptural warrant" to Wesley—who was *homo unius libri*, surprisingly Wesley omits the majority of the scriptural references, including the "Witch of Endor" illustration. This omission makes the passage more difficult to understand. In section 1 Wesley wrote these words:

Sin hides itself from the Sinner's eyes, and all its vileness and deformity. But the Spirit of God plucks off the mantle, and makes Sin appear to be sin . . . .

It is only after reading Alleine's copy that one understands.

Sin hides itself from the Sinner's eyes, and all its vileness and deformity; or if it come in sight, it presents itself to the sinners as the Witch of Endor brought up the Devil before Saul in Samuel's Mantle: It shews itself as the sinners god; look how many sins evil men have, so many gods, they have rising up to them. Their sins are their god; the gods that feed them, they make a living of their sins; the gods that comfort and refresh them, they take pleasure in iniquity; the gods that shelter them and hide them, they strengthen themselves in their wickedness; But the Spirit of Sin makes all the Sinner's gods appear to be so many Devils.

Finally, there is a subtle but significant change on page 8 of Wesley's "Directions." John Wesley wrote:

And now, being brought to this distress, to this utter loss, his despair drives him to the only door of hope that is left open. Then Christ will be *acceptable* when he sees none but Christ can help him.

Alleine's words in Text 2 are:

And now, being brought to this distress . . . his despair drives him to the only door of hope that is left open. Then Christ will be *accepted*, when he sees none but Christ can stead him.

Not as surprising is Wesley's omission at the end of the Covenant as follows:

Only because through the frailty of my flesh, I am subject to many failings. I am bold humbly to protest, that unallowed miscarriages contrary to the settled bent and resolution of my heart shall not make void this covenant. [In all texts of both Joseph and Richard Alleine.]

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33 R. Alleine, Text 2, 192.
34 Wesley, "Covenant Service," 8.
35 R. Alleine, Text 2, 193.
In American Methodism all that remains of Joseph's words as found in Richard's writings is: "And the covenant which I have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen." Joseph's five directions and his Covenant have been excised, and all else belongs to Richard. Perhaps the followers of Methodism, like its founder, have instinctively gravitated to Richard and not Joseph. It is not Joseph's "O most dreadful God" that has withstood the ravages of time stretching out across two centuries to seize us, but other words, words that ring with the sincere cry of one giving oneself up in love rather than fear.

Some time ago a group of pastors from two United Methodist conferences gathered at a resort in the hills, a preachers' retreat. At the close of their time together they held the Covenant Service.

The printed page revealed a program that alternated between the rigid formality of high church and the fluid reality of their sin. And when the ups and downs required by hymns and prayers had been completed, the word read, and the preaching—such as it was—done, they stood together, as countless numbers before them had done, to read the words of the Covenant.

"Christ has many services to be done," intoned the leader as he read on until reaching the sacred testament:

... let us now, in sincere dependence on his grace and trusting in his promises, yield ourselves anew to him. ... We are no longer our own, but thine. 36

And through the room there rang out the rich deep voices of the many and the sweet softer resonance of the few, words lifted up to God:

I am no longer my own, but thine. Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt; put me to doing, put me to suffering; let me be employed for thee or laid aside for thee, exalted for thee or brought low for thee; let me be full, let me be empty; let me have all things, let me have nothing; I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal. 37

There was a complete giving up of self. These men who had been taught to be strong and independent, these women who had to fight harder and be tougher, together submitted to the One who called them by name. Each one received from another the bread of life and the cup of salvation with solemnity and joy.

There is a resurgence in the use of the Covenant Service today, because we, like those in Wesley's societies, need something—a new commitment to a holy God.


37 Ibid.