SETTING PERFECTION TOO HIGH: JOHN WESLEY'S CHANGING ATTITUDES TOWARD THE "LONDON BLESSING"

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I

Either in 1761 or 1762, Wesley preached a sermon on Wandering Thoughts in which he dismissed the expectation of deliverance from wandering thoughts in this world as praying "for impossibilities and absurdities." Wandering thoughts were inevitable in a world where Christians were exposed to the incessant assaults of evil spirits, the provocation of hostile people, and the mechanical operation of the senses upon the mind. Nevertheless, in only the fourth edition of the Arminian Magazine of 1781, he published no fewer than sixty letters he had received from fifteen correspondents in the course of 1761 on the subject of deliverance from wandering thoughts. The aim of this article is to look at the reasons for Wesley's apparent change of mind on the subject. As we trace the story behind Wesley's change of mind we shall discover that Wesley alternated between accepting the possibility of an undistracted mind fixed on communion with God, and rejecting the possibility, before ending with his original rejection of an undistracted mind.

II

The "London Blessing" was the perfecting of perfection. It is the name I have chosen to give to the claim made by a small minority of London Methodists in 1761 to have had their minds sanctified so completely that there was no place in them for wandering thoughts. At a prayer meeting held on Thursday, April 3, 1761 a Mrs. Jay confessed to having been disturbed by wandering thoughts since March 7; but during the prayer meeting she was "caught up into the third heavens [sic]" where her soul lay prostrate before the Lord and she cast her crown at His feet. Several weeks later she was testifying that since then her mind was so stayed on Him that she was kept in perfect peace. John Fox, although he was conscious of being saved from sin and of loving God with all his heart, was aware that his mind was not always stayed on God. He wanted the further blessing of an undistracted mind. His deliverance came when he saw that this blessing of a mind constantly fixed

2Letter CLXXIV, Arminian Magazine 1781, 442.
on God was received by simple faith. He began to pray continually for an
increase of faith: "And it was not long before his soul was brought as into the
immediate presence of God, who from that hour did every moment keep his
heart and his mind also." 3

III

Some of those who underwent the experience called it "loving God with
all their minds." Others regarded it as "a farther degree of Faith, enabling
them always to stay their minds upon God." Thus a Mr. Marston testified on
Friday, April 10, 1761,

Ever since I received a clean heart, I was convinced that I wanted a further power, in order
to stay my mind constantly on God. And a few days since, as I was walking, I said, 'Lord,
I want to have my mind always so deeply fixt that nothing may hinder me a moment.' He
replied, 'If thou canst believe, it shall be according to thy faith.' I replied, 'Lord, I do
believe.' And since then my soul goes out to God continually: nor does anything I do, or
meet with, hinder my intercourse with Him. 4

In seeking the experience, however, they referred to it as "the blessing." A Mrs. Cayley bewailed the fact that in the same instance God sanctified her
heart, "God offered me the blessing, but I let it go, I cannot believe." 5 Hence
my use of the title the "London Blessing."

There is a complication. Wesley called the experience of entire sanctifi-
cation "the second blessing." On February 14, 1761 he informed Sarah
Crosby that the work of God was going on mightily in London. Within the
space of five weeks six in one class had "received remission of sins and five
in one band received a second blessing." 6 In June, 1766 he urged Charles to,
"Press the instantaneous blessing." On April 3, 1772 he instructed Samuel
Bardsley, "Insist everywhere on the second blessing as receivable in a
moment, and receivable now, by simple faith." 7 In 1772 he urged Jane
Salkeld, a school mistress in Weardale, "Exhort all the little ones that believe
to make haste and not delay the time of receiving the second blessing...
This led Luke Tyerman to propose that the London Society looked for "a third
blessing; not only sanctification of the heart, but of the mind; and speak of
them as distinct acts, experienced at different times, though both obtained by
faith." 8 The complication is that the London Methodists may have reserved
the use of the term "blessing" for the sanctification of the mind, on the

3 Letter CLXXIV, 334.
4 Letter CLXXIV, 335.
5 Letter CLXII, Arminian Magazine 1781, 278.
7 Telford, Letters V, 16.
8 Telford, Letters V, 315.
9 Telford, Letters V, 333.
10 L. Tyerman, The Life and Times of John Wesley, Volume II (London: Hodder and Stoughton,
1876), 422.
grounds that sanctification was not entire until the mind was delivered from wandering thoughts. Hence, Wesley accused the more extreme of them as vehemently maintaining "that none are perfected in love unless they are so far perfected in understanding that all wandering thoughts are done away; unless not only every affection and temper be holy, and just, and good, but every individual thought which arises in the mind be wise and regular." In that case, what Wesley claimed was entire sanctification was, for them, only the experience of a lower level of perfection associated with what Wesley called the full assurance of faith.

Wesley drew a distinction between the assurance of faith given at justification and the full assurance of faith given at entire sanctification. The former made a person into a Christian while the latter was the true faith which brought "salvation or victory over sin" and implied "peace and trust in God through Christ." It was "the seal of the spirit, the love of God shed abroad in [one's] heart, and producing joy in the Holy Ghost 'joy which no man taketh away, joy unspeakable and full of glory.' " Thus, a certain JCM could testify,

> From the time Jesus cleansed my heart from sin, I was ever happy in his love; though, at times, I was much tempted. . . . to deny the work of God, not to believe I was sealed with His spirit. I cried earnestly to the Lord, that, if it was not done yet, He would do it; and on Easter Monday, at chapel . . . . He showed me, He had made with me an everlasting covenant. I knew then my soul was sealed in heaven with the blood of Jesus.

This is Wesley's full assurance of faith. JMC continues, "From this time, I never found a doubt that God had taken away the root of sin" which is what Wesley means by entire sanctification. "But yet, as the light shined clearer, I saw many things lurking in my soul. I wanted to have my whole mind, and to have all my thoughts, fixed on God." JMC then goes on to describe the struggle to overcome the wandering thoughts Satan injected into his mind until,

> On April 30, for near two hours, my cry was, 'Let my whole mind be fixed on Thee! I trust to Thy faithfulness, to keep my mind as Thou hast kept my heart. I will believe, and according to my faith it shall be unto me.' At first, indeed, this faith was weak; but it grew stronger and stronger . . . . I am enabled to stand on my watchtower, and to keep the eye of my soul continually fixed on the Lamb of God."

Wesley, himself, at one stage, was inclined to dismiss the matter of terminology as irrelevant as long as people experienced the desired changes. On November 29, 1761 he wrote, "We had a comfortable love-feast, at which several declared the blessings they had received lately. We need not be careful by what name we call them, while the thing is beyond dispute." Wesley's wording indicates the strong possibility that for a time in 1761 Wesley actually accepted the reality of the claims to an entirely sanctified mind free from wandering thoughts. On September 8 and November 12, 1761 he wrote to Grace Walton and Sarah Ryan in exactly identical terms asking them, among

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11Outler, Volume 2, 126.
12Letter CLI, Arminian Magazine 1781, 110-111.
other things, if they had the full assurance of faith, if they subjected themselves to self-examination, and if they had a constant sense of unbroken communion with God. He concluded the interrogation by asking, "Is your mind always stayed on God? Do your thoughts never wander from Him in prayer, in business, or in travelling?" Wesley's favorable attitude toward the possibility of an entirely sanctified mind was to change due to unacceptable developments in the nature of the London revival.

IV

The first signs of the London revival were seen at Brentford in January 1760, but the revival appears to have begun in earnest in December 1760. West Street Chapel was so packed on Sunday, December 21 that "many were obliged to go away, finding it impossible to get in." On Friday, February 13, 1761 which was a general fast day, all the London Methodist chapels were "thoroughly filled with serious hearers." At noon, on Friday, February 27 Wesley met "about thirty persons who had experienced a deep work of God." He "appointed an hour for meeting them every week." On the following Sunday, March 1 there was a love-feast at which, "many of our brethren spoke plainly and artlessly what God was doing for their souls . . . many were strengthened and comforted." On Friday, March 6 Wesley met the entirely sanctified for the second time. Their numbers had increased to about 45 because 15 or 16 had received "the blessing" during the week.

Wesley gave the credit for the success of the revival to the "fervent effectual prayer" of the number of "good men in the congregations then assembled." These good men included Joseph Guilford, a former travelling preacher who had located in London following a second marriage and George Bell, a former sergeant in the Life Guards who was "a man of piety, of deep communion with God, and of extraordinary zeal for the conversion of souls." Wesley left London on Monday, March 9 and did not return until Saturday, October 31, 1761. One of the members of the Friday group was a certain Mrs. M.W. We can catch a glimpse of how the revival proceeded during Wesley's absence through some letters she wrote to Wesley. On Wednesday, March 11 she was visited in her home by "Mr. Guilford and some others . . . He asked if I thought the Lord was ready to bless me? I told him, 'I know He is waiting for me' then desired we might go to prayer directly. I found the power to throw my whole soul upon the Lord. And He supported me, and brought me through Jordan.' The same day her maid Betty "and

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Ward & Heitzenrater, Volume 21, 303.
C. Atmore, The Methodist Memorial (Bristol, 1801), 170.
Letter CLV, Arminian Magazine 1781, 53.
another in my house, found remission of sins." The following day her other maid, Jenny, returned from London, and through the prayers of Mrs. M.W. "became a fool for Christ's sake." This seems to imply that Jenny was entirely sanctified because Betty became jealous of Jenny and "began praying the more earnestly for herself: and the Lord gave her the blessing. Then were our mouths filled with laughter, and our souls with love and praise." At this stage of Mrs. M.W.'s religious development "the blessing" refers to entire sanctification. The next day, Friday March 13, M.W. began to pray for her daughter Harriot: "The girl felt her sins forgiven. Afterwards she cried out, 'Now, Lord, give me a clean heart: bring me also through Jordan.' The Lord heard: she soon praised him for deliverance from sin." Later in the day Mrs. M.W.'s son returned from London and was justified (unlike his sister he was still crying aloud for a clean heart on May 30). Mrs. M.W. then "sent for one who had been seeking God twenty years: and the Lord justified him also."¹⁹

Mrs. M.W.'s house became a centre of revival activity. On April 18 she informed Wesley:

I dare not number the souls that have been blest under the prayers of such a wretch as I am, nor under my favoured roof . . ., Strangers continually come and desire me to pray with them: which I do, after I am convinced they are serious. In less than fifteen minutes the Lord justified three, who all rejoiced with loud cries of deliverance. Two more received pardon three days after. Scarce a day passes without fresh instances of the goodness of God, so that we stand and gaze upon each other, with tears starting in our eyes, and with praises that our mouths cannot utter.²⁰

Towards the end of April Mrs. M.W. called on her mother in London, "I went to prayer with my mother, and the Lord justified her. Her maid came to our house, longing for Christ: and God revealed him in her."²¹

At some time between March 13 and April 2, 1761 Mrs. M.W. became conscious of lacking "the blessing given to others, of having their minds continually stayed on God. I cried mightily for it: and for Christ's sake it was given me. This mercy confirmed the other."²² This testimony suggests that some in the London Society regarded an undistracted mind as a third blessing.

In the case of Mrs. M.W. we can see the good points of the London revival, the emphasis on entire sanctification as an immediate, instantaneous work of God in response to simple faith, the confidence of God and zeal for souls, and a life devoted to God and spent in doing good. As the revival progressed several displeasing features began to develop associated with the leadership of Thomas Maxfield and George Bell. Apparently they began to claim,
“man may be as perfect ‘as an angel’; that he can be absolutely perfect; that he can be infallible, or above being tempted; or that the moment he is pure in heart he cannot fall from it.” When his fellow preachers disagreed with him Maxfield reacted aggressively by accusing them of persecuting him, and of not being genuine Christians because they were not perfected in his sense of the word. Maxfield and his followers gave rise to fears they were planning a secession by giving attendance at their prayer meetings priority over attendance at those meetings which the rules of their society or their office required them to attend.23

Nevertheless, when Wesley returned to London on Saturday, November 1, 1761 he found the same spirit of revival animating the London society as when he had left on March 9. More and more were being convinced, converted to God, and built up day by day “notwithstanding the weakness of the instruments by whom God was pleased to work.”24 One of these weak instruments, George Bell, created a sensation by healing a young woman called Mary Special who had suffered from lumps in her breasts, at a Friday prayer meeting held in Daniel Owen’s house on December 11, 1761.25

The beliefs and activities of Maxfield and Bell and their followers were a source of growing concern to Wesley. The day following his return to London he had commenced a course of sermons on Christian Perfection.26 On December 21 he wrote “Farther Thoughts on Christian Perfection.”27 On December 29 he called a meeting of all parties concerned to remove some misunderstandings. Thomas Maxfield refused to attend the meeting, but he did assist Wesley in administering the sacrament to over 2,000 people at Spitalfields on January 1, 1762. Wesley treated the situation with great caution, “the enemy was not wanting in his endeavors to sow tares among the good soil,” wrote Wesley, who was reluctant to “use violence, lest in plucking up the tares I should root up the wheat also.”

Wesley was away from London between January 2 and October 30, 1762. During his absence Bell introduced a new element into the London revival. The case of Mary Special seems to have given Bell the belief that he had been given the gift of healing as part of his role to be one of the witnesses to the imminent end of the world. He and his followers began to believe that they would never die. His prayer meetings became more hysterical. Eventually Bell prophesied that the world would come to an end on February 28, 1763.28 Thomas Maxfield seems to have distanced himself from Bell’s

23A full description of the good and bad points of Maxfield’s revivalism is provided by Wesley in Ward & Heitzenrater, Volume 21, 394–397 & A. C. Outler, John Wesley (Oxford, 1964), 298–305.
24Ward & Heitzenrater, Volume 21, 345.
26Ward & Heitzenrater, Volume 21, 343.
27Ward & Heitzenrater, Volume 21, 345.
prophecies because he retained the respect of the Methodist people and preachers to the end of his life if Charles Atmore's memorial of him is an indication of the esteem in which he continued to be held.29

On his return to London Wesley began to visit the classes on November 8, 1762 and was confronted by many "hot spirits" of whom "some were vehement for, some against, the meetings for prayer which were in several parts of the town."30 At Joseph Guilford's house in Beech Lane he experienced for himself the reasons for the hostility towards the prayer meetings. The one at Beech Lane was "like a bear garden; full of noise, brawling, cursing, swearing, blasphemy and confusion."

The controversy between Wesley and Maxfield and Bell came to a head between January 7 and February 5, 1763. Wesley met with Bell on January 7 in what proved to be an abortive attempt to "convince him of his mistakes."31 On January 25 a Mrs. Coventry, who was an intimate friend of Maxfield, stormed into a meeting at which Wesley was present to throw down "her class ticket, with those of her husband, daughter and servants" with the words, "Sir, we will have no more to do with you; Mr. Maxfield is our teacher." On February 4 George Bell returned his class ticket, saying, "Blind John is not capable of teaching us; we will keep to Mr. Maxfield."32 The following day Thomas Maxfield ceased to meet in class.33

V

The controversy with Maxfield and Bell discredited the doctrine of Christian Perfection within Methodism. Wesley did not succeed in persuading the majority of his preachers or the Methodist people of the validity or value of the experience of entire sanctification. At the height of the revival in 1762 he complained, "The more I converse with the believers in Cornwall, the more I am convinced that they have sustained great loss for want of the hearing the doctrine of Christian perfection clearly and strongly enforced."34 Wesley was dismayed to find at Yarm, in June, 1763 that "the good doctrine of Christian perfection had not been heard of there for some time. The wildness of our poor brethren in London has put it out of countenance above two hundred miles away."35 In 1764 Wesley wrote to Charles: "The frightful stories wrote from London had made all our preachers in the North afraid even to mutter about perfection."36 In 1768 he was so conscious of fighting a losing

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29Atmore, Methodist Memorial, 266-269.
30Ward & Heitzenrater, Volume 21, 397-398.
31Ward & Heitzenrater, Volume 21, 402.
32Ward & Heitzenrater, Volume 21, 403.
33Ward & Heitzenrater, Volume 21, 403-406 & 408-411.
35Ward & Heitzenrater, Volume 21, 415.
36Telford, Volume IV, 245.
battle that he asked his brother Charles, "Shall we go on asserting perfection against all the world, or shall we quietly let it drop?" 37 He came back strongly, however, at the Conference of 1769 to press home the value of insisting on the experience of instantaneous sanctification before the moment of death. Wesley stressed that the value of the hope of instantaneous, entire sanctification lay in the incentive it gave to pursue gradual change more earnestly and continuously. 38 Wesley failed to carry his preachers and his people with him. In 1772 he admitted, "I find almost all our preachers in every circuit have done with Christian perfection. They say they believe it; but they never preach it, or not once in a quarter."

The controversy over Christian perfection also damaged Wesley's confidence in the possibility of having the mind as entirely sanctified as the heart. As we have seen, he returned to London in November 1761 disposed to accept the claims of people like Mrs. M.W. that their minds had been delivered from wandering thoughts only to preach his sermon on wandering thoughts in 1762. Wesley, however, seems to have gradually recovered his confidence in the possibility of having the further blessing of a mind stayed continually on God. After all, he had admitted that the Friday meeting with the entirely sanctified, "whether they are saved from sin or no, they are certainly full of faith and love, and they are peculiarly helpful to my soul." 39 He even appears to have admitted to them that he was a stranger to the further blessing they claimed to have received, and that he entertained wistful hopes of emulating their example in obtaining it. Only such an admission can explain the impassioned plea of a certain Miss B on May 25, 1761 for Wesley to,

> Fly, every moment to your ark. I know the Lord is nigh to bless you. Cast yourself again and again, on the precious blood that flowed so freely for you! Claim your saviour! He is all your own: he hath given himself for you! Yea his very life he did not with-hold, but bought your holiness with blood divine. 40

Wesley could not lightly disown his deepest spiritual yearnings of 1761.

Another reason for Wesley's recovery of confidence may have been his consciousness that God uses unworthy people to produce good work on His behalf. Wesley numbered himself among such unworthy people. On June 27, 1766 he wrote to his brother Charles: "And yet this is the mystery. I do not love God. I never did. Therefore I never believed in the Christian sense of the word. Therefore I am only an honest heathen. . . . And yet to be so employed of God! Surely there was never such an instance from the beginning of the world." 41 Thomas Maxfield was another such unworthy person. In a letter to

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3Quoted Watts, *The Dissenters*, 434.
3Ward & Heitzenrater, Volume 21, 309.
4Telford, Volume V, 16.
Charles on December 23, 1762 Wesley described Maxfield as, “so inimitably wrong-headed, and so absolutely unconvincable! And yet (what is exceeding strange) God continues to bless his labours.” The association of the experience of an undistracted mind with the unacceptable aspects of Thomas Maxfield’s revivalism, therefore, was not a handicap to accepting the experience as a valid work of God.

Then there was Joseph Guilford in whose house in Beech Street one of the notoriously undisciplined prayer meetings was held. To begin with he was “exceedingly opposed” to the experience, but at the prayer meeting in which he expressed his opposition most strongly, the unyielding testimony of those he opposed constrained him to pray, ‘‘Lord if there be such a blessing, I am as ignorant of it as this table.’ Yet he cried mightily, and after he had wrestled some time, the Lord gave it to him.” When Maxfield and his followers separated themselves from the London Society, Guilford remained faithful to Wesley. At his funeral service in June, 1777 Wesley described him as, “a holy man and a useful preacher. Scarcely never before did a man of so weak talents do so much good! He died as he lived, in the full triumph of faith, vehemently rejoicing and praising God.”

Charles Atmore describes the manner of Joseph Guilford’s death thus:

On the Saturday before he died, he got out of bed, and desired his wife to join with him in prayer: when he prayed in a most fervent manner; particularly for the prosperity of Zion. His wife, being fearful that through the extreme weakness of his body, he would exhaust himself too much, requested him to desist for a time; but he replied, ‘Let me alone; for I never had such sweet communion with Jesus before—I see the heavens opened, and I shall soon join that glorious company above.’ When he lay down in bed, he sung an anthem, wherein are these words, in thy presence is life: heaviness may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning. His soul was so swallowed up in God, that he got no sleep the whole night. In the morning he arose, and was remarkably cheerful; he ate his breakfast with a good appetite, and repeated several verses of a hymn. He then, with eyes lifted up to heaven, leaning on his wife’s shoulder, walked across the room; and said, “As the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, there is but a step between me and death: and instantly, without sigh or groan, he resigned his happy spirit into the arms of his beloved Saviour.”

In October, 1771 Wesley had written to Philothea Briggs of a higher life of continual prayer which was, “such an open intercourse with God, such a close, uninterrupted communion with Him, as Gregory Lopez experienced, and not a few of our brethren and sisters now alive.” It is not too fanciful to number Joseph Guilford among those to whom Wesley was referring, and the manner of his death would have reinforced Wesley’s willingness to reassess the experience of an undistracted mind.

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42 Telford, Volume IV, 199.
44 Letter CLXXIV, Arminian Magazine 1781, 444.
44 Atmore, Methodist Memorial, 170.
45 Atmore, Methodist Memorial, 170–171.
46 Telford, Volume V, 280.
Besides God's willingness to use unworthy people to produce good works, and the testimony of consistent sanctified lives like that of Joseph Guilford's, there was Wesley's extended understanding of Philippians 4,7.—καὶ ἡ εἰρήνη τοῦ Θεοῦ, ἡ ὑπερέχουσα πάντα νοοῦ, φρονήσει τας καρδίας ὑμῶν καὶ τα νοηματα ὑμῶν εν Χριστῷ Ιησοῦ. Wesley's normal tendency was to emphasize the peace of God as that incomprehensible tranquility of spirit which preserves the purity and vigor of the Christian's affections centered in the heart and mind. The genuine fruit of this peace, therefore, was all inward and outward holiness. In 1768, however, in his sermon on "The Good Steward," he suggested, "νοηματα might be rendered 'thoughts,' provided we take that word in its most extensive sense, for every perception of the mind, whether active or passive." In October, 1771 he wrote to Philothea Briggs of "An higher degree of that peace which may well be said to pass all understanding will keep not only your heart, but all the workings of your mind (as the word properly signifies), both of your reason and your imagination, from all irregular sallies." Wesley's high estimation of the role of peace in promoting and preserving sanctification in both its higher and lower levels would have inclined him to look favorably on the testimony of a man like Daniel Carney. On Friday, April 3, 1761 Carney described how, when he was happy in God, his eye would often wander to look at his child or something else. He began to pray earnestly for deliverance from this evil until he was constrained to plead "one morning . . . , that promise, Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on Thee. I said, Why not now Lord? Thou canst give it to me now! Immediately it was given to me according to my faith. I have found no wanderings since."

In March, 1781 Wesley began to correspond with Ann Loxdale, the future wife of Thomas Coke. He was captivated by her spirituality and confessed, "I cannot tell that I ever before felt so close an attachment to a person I had never seen." In June, 1781, in the midst of his republication of the letters concerning the sanctification of the mind in The Arminian Magazine, he admitted to her, "It is certainly possible to have your mind as well as your heart continually stayed upon God. This you did experience for some time, and you should be continually expecting to receive it again." The same positive note was struck in his sermon "On the Death of John Fletcher," delivered in 1785 when he said of the peace of God:

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4 Telford, Volume V, 280.
5 Letter CLXV, Arminian Magazine 1781, 334.
5 Telford, Volume VII, 59.
5 Telford, Volume VII, 67.
it is an unspeakable calmness and serenity of spirit, a tranquillity in the blood of Christ, which keeps the soul of believers, in their latest hour, even as a garrison keeps a city; which keeps not only their hearts, all their passions and affections, but also their minds, all the motions of their understanding and imagination, and all the workings of their reason in Christ Jesus.

VI

In 1783 Ann Loxdale, against Wesley’s advice, entered into a disastrous engagement which, by 1785, had ruined her spiritual life. This unfortunate event coincided with the death of John Fletcher and may have served to revive Wesley’s fears about the excesses of Maxfield and Bell and their more fanatical followers, for in December 1786 he warned Samuel Mitchell of setting the claims for entire sanctification too high: “Many in England have thought they attained to something higher than loving God with all their hearts, But this all came to nothing. It is a snare of the Devil.”

In his final thoughts on the subject, expressed in his sermon, “Heavenly Treasure in Earthen Vessels,” Wesley repeated what he had said in his sermon on wandering thoughts. Wandering thoughts are the means employed by God “to humble man, to make and keep him little and poor, and base and vile in his own eyes.” Better to “Trust in the Lord Jehovah, for in Him is everlasting strength!” than to be the victim of unbridled enthusiasm.

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50Outler, Volume 3, 613–614.
51Telford, Volume VII, 295.
52Telford, Volume VII, 358.