Methodism was born into a time of transition and conflict. In England, the very fabric of society had been torn, as the agriculturally based society gave way to a new industrial economy. Men, women and children were leaving rural farms and joining the urban workforce, a transition that meant long hours at hard labor in sweatshops. Of course, these changes were not limited to England. This economic revolution swept across Europe through the 18th Century and left many social and political institutions either shaken or buried in its wake.

While this industrial revolution pushed forward in Europe, unrest had begun to stir across the Atlantic Ocean in the colonies of America, as well. Issues of economic and social justice had fueled the flames of unrest in Europe. These same issues would also lie at the heart of the bitter conflict that was gripping the American colonies.

Two issues, in particular, had begun to dominate the thought of many leaders in this new land, which was still struggling with its own self-identity: independence and slavery. The relationship between America and Mother England was strained. The colonists were increasingly adamant about the need to govern their own affairs. By the latter part of the century, "freedom" would be the rallying cry that would unite colonists. These early American leaders dreamed of a country where individuals would be free to determine their own destinies. But this vision did not incorporate all individuals. Slaves, who had been transported against their will to serve on farms and plantations throughout America, were excluded from this promise of liberty.

For John Wesley, the issues of American independence and slavery were difficult to reconcile. Of course, both the colonists and the opponents of slavery were calling for liberty. However, Wesley never felt the same compassion for the plight of the colonists as he did for the slaves. Accordingly, he was forced to search for a way logically and coherently to balance his support for the cause of freedom for the slaves against what would develop into outright opposition to the calls for independence in America.

I

As tensions flared along the western shores of the Atlantic, John Wesley felt compelled to offer advice to his representatives in America concerning both slavery and political independence for America. As concerned the issue of freedom for the slaves, Wesley was an early and consistent proponent. He spoke boldly about the inhumanity of slavery and promoted the release of those held in bondage. In one tract, he wrote of the American slaves, "Give liberty to whom
liberty is due, that is, to every child of man, to every partaker of human nature. ... Away with all whips, and chains, all compulsion!” For Wesley, the issue was simple. All members of the human race could, through God’s grace, be justified and redeemed. God had modeled for us a society in which no individual should be denied basic human liberties, including the African slaves.

Wesley's position regarding slavery took root during his own service in the colony of Georgia between 1735 and 1738. Following his return to England, his exposure to slavery as practiced in the colonies prompted him to engage in vigorous study of African culture and the practice of slavery. His study led him to write at length about the individual societies in Africa that had been raided to satisfy the demand for slaves. In fact, his 1774 review concerning the culture of the area that comprised Senegal, a primary point of origin for slaves, was quite complimentary of this African land and its residents. Wesley wrote:

Their government is easy, because the people are of a quiet and good disposition, and so well instructed in what is right, that a man who wrongs another is the abomination of all. They desire no more land than they use, which they cultivate with great care and industry. ... They not only support all that are old; or blind, or lame among themselves, but have frequently supplied the necessities of the Mandingos, when they were distressed by famine.

Despite Wesley's strong opposition to slavery, his position was not shared by all the early Methodists. George Whitefield, who succeeded Wesley in the New World, actually became a slaveholder himself, owning 50 slaves when he died in 1770. Whitefield and Wesley were able to maintain their divergent positions on slavery due to fundamental theological differences. Unlike Wesley, Whitefield had embraced many of the core theological teachings of Calvinism, including the doctrines of predestination, limited atonement, and unconditional election. Accordingly, for Whitefield, salvation was not within every person’s grasp, but was a state afforded only to the elect, who had been chosen from the beginning of time. Accordingly, the adherents of Calvin's theology of salvation could easily rationalize the exclusion of entire groups of people from the benefits of liberty on this earth and heavenly rewards in the life after physical death. Meanwhile, Wesley clung to his own belief that “universal atonement was God’s desire” for all.

While Wesley's position was clear concerning the plight of American slaves,
he struggled with the idea of liberty for the colonists. For him, the issue of freedom for the colonists was clouded by his own feelings concerning England’s King, George III. Wesley believed the monarch to be ordained of God, referring to him even as a “father” of the people.

Wesley said of his country’s principal leader in 1767, “King George is the father of all his subjects; and not only so, but he is a good father. He shows his love to them on all occasions; and is continually doing all that is in his power to make his subjects happy.” Ultimately, Wesley’s feelings about his king would have a great impact upon his own assessment of the movement for political freedom in America, eventually leading him to make a vehement denunciation of the movement.

As the battle for independence in America developed, Wesley struggled with his own response. Already, he had voiced strong support for freeing the slave population in the colonies and was on record as supporting liberty for all people as God’s children. The question he faced was whether the liberty that God intended for all humankind was relevant to the plight of the colonists.

During the decade of the 1760s, a rising tide of resistance began to engulf the American colonies. This resistance was prompted by “a sequence of economic, fiscal, political and military measures” adopted by the British government and aimed at manipulating the affairs of colonists for the benefit of the Crown. The colonists interpreted this series of actions as a serious infringement upon their own freedom and liberty.

In the early stages of the struggle, Wesley sympathized with the plight of the colonists. As late as 1768, in a pamphlet entitled Free Thoughts on the Present State of Public Affairs, Wesley criticized the actions of his own government directed toward the colonies. Of the events in the colonies, Wesley wrote, “I do not defend the measures which have been taken with regard to America: I doubt whether any man can defend them, either on foot of law, equity, or prudence.” Meanwhile, Wesley’s purpose in writing the tract appears to be aimed more at defending the King than engaging in a serious consideration of the colonial conflict. He referred to the King as a God fearing monarch and defended him, ultimately laying blame for the situation in America upon political appointees of the British government.

After first voicing support for the colonists’ claim that their liberty had been limited or revoked by the actions of the British government, Wesley appears to have clung for several years to this position. In his tract Thoughts upon Liberty, Wesley spoke of the freedoms that God intended for all people. In that work, he noted, “the love of liberty… is the glory of rational beings: and it is the glory of Britons in particular.” Thus, at the time this document was penned in 1772,
Wesley appeared intent upon promoting freedoms for individuals both in his own country and in the distant colonies.

Later, during the British elections in 1774, Wesley actually advised his followers to "vote for the candidates favoring reconciliation with America as against sheer coercion" of the colonists.\(^{12}\) Shortly thereafter, he affirmed his opposition to tactics of coercion in the colonies in a letter to his brother Charles, written in 1775.\(^{13}\)

Meanwhile, Wesley never forgot his own loyalty to the King and, consequently, his own internal struggle concerning the situation in America appears to have heightened as tensions rose within the colonies. In a 1775 communication to Thomas Rankin, who had been dispatched by Wesley to provide direction to the young Methodist movement in America, Wesley appears purposefully to avoid expressing support for either side in the colonists' struggle. He stated he was not on either side in the dispute, "and yet of both; on the side of New England and of Old."\(^{14}\) Wesley went on to acknowledge, "Faults there may be on both sides; but such as neither you or I can remedy."\(^{15}\)

It was not just his loyalty to the King that created distress for Wesley. He also feared that events resulting in war in the colonies would spur severe consequences on both sides of the Atlantic. By 1775, England had experienced at least four years of severe depression. During the period, a rapid rise in the price of necessities, including food, had been accompanied by widespread unemployment.\(^{16}\) He no doubt viewed his own country as ripe for a violent internal conflict of its own, due to the stagnant economy and the uncertainties stemming from the vast social change that was taking place.

A somber Wesley wrote Rankin again on April 21, 1775, concerning the rising tensions between England and the colonies. In an oft-quoted passage, Wesley observed:

\[\ldots\] the clouds are black both over England and America. It will this summer pass over without some showers of blood. And, if the storm once begins in America, it will soon spread to Great Britain.\(^{17}\)

A few months later, Wesley wrote to his brother Charles concerning his belief that if a war were to break out, he would "give America for lost, and perhaps England too."\(^{18}\) Of course, by the time Wesley wrote these fateful words, the course that would lead to war between the colonies and the mother country had already been set in place.

\(^{12}\)Copplestone, "John Wesley and the American Revolution," 90.

\(^{13}\)In the letter Wesley wrote, "Just what I thought at first, I think still of American affairs. If a blow is struck, I give up America for lost, and perhaps England too. Our part is to continue instant in prayer." *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 11, 34.


\(^{15}\)The *Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 11, 34.

\(^{16}\)Kingdon, "Laissez-Faire or Government Control: A Problem for John Wesley," 345.

\(^{17}\)Holland, "John Wesley and the American Revolution," 201.

\(^{18}\)Holland, 201.
 Through the early stages of development of the crisis in America, Wesley had sought a way to balance his trust in and respect for King George with his own belief that God had designed humans to live in a state of liberty. He voiced words of sympathy for the plight of the colonists across the Atlantic and even repudiated some actions of his own government. Meanwhile, he sought to disassociate his King from the very actions of the government he controlled. The position proved complicated and difficult to maintain.

In 1775, it appears, Wesley was confronted with an insightful challenge to the actions of the American colonists. In a pamphlet written by Samuel Johnson and entitled *Taxation No Tyranny: An Answer to the Resolutions and Addresses of the American Congress*, the argument was made that the freedoms sought by the colonists should not be equated with liberty, but rather constituted an unreasonable grasp for political independence. Wesley appears to have been affected by the piece, changing his own position concerning the plight of the colonists and ultimately adopting much of Johnson’s reasoning verbatim in his own work.

In October 1775, Wesley issued his own pamphlet entitled *A Calm Address to Our American Colonies*. This tract represented the first formal acknowledgment of Wesley’s change of heart toward the American colonists. In this work, Wesley attempted to address many of the complaints leveled by the colonists against the British government. Most notably, Wesley dealt directly with the issue of the power of the British government to levy taxes on the colonists. He had come to the clear conclusion, based upon the reasoning of Johnson, that the British government held sufficient power to levy such taxes. Wesley stated early in the work, “... nothing can be more plain, than that the supreme power in England has a legal right of laying any tax upon them for any end beneficial to the whole empire.” The tract went on to reason that if the government has the power to enact laws designed to protect the populace of the colonies, it must have the power to tax them, as well. He further dismissed the notion that the colonists deserved representation in the English parliament, stating that they voluntarily relinquished this right by leaving the mother country. Again, Wesley wrote:

They (the colonists) do inherit all the privileges which their ancestors had; but they can inherit no more. Their ancestors left a country where the representatives of the people were elected by men particularly qualified. ... You are the descendants of men who either had no votes, or resigned them by emigration. You have therefore exactly what your ancestors left you.

Wesley then went on to state his opinion that the true impetus for the calls for...
freedom in America extended not from the colonists, but from a “few men in England,” which Wesley labeled “determined enemies” of the King. He suggested the existence of a conspiracy designed to overturn the English government. Wesley then argued that the creation of a republican form of government within the colonies would not provide any increased measure of liberty for the colonists. He offered the opinion that, “No governments under heaven are so despotic as the republican; no subjects are governed in so arbitrary a manner as those of a commonwealth.” These words were a strong rebuttal to the calls by colonists for the creation of a society free from the control of the British.

Perhaps, Wesley’s most important argument came at the end of the work. Referring to a sermon delivered by a Philadelphia preacher, Wesley discussed the very nature of liberty. In an apparent effort to deflect the call of colonists for liberty, Wesley argued that, in fact, England had granted those individuals living in America significant liberty. He reasoned that the colonists had received both civil and religious liberty from the mother country and that such freedoms had been curtailed only by the actions of the Continental Congress. In response to the charge of the colonists that they were entitled to the same civil and religious freedoms as the residents of England, Wesley responded, “... till you appointed your new sovereigns, you enjoyed all these privileges.” Accordingly, Wesley had quickly moved from lukewarm endorsement of the call for liberty by the colonists to a complete rejection of the concept.

Wesley’s change of heart was not received positively in many circles. Within a short time after it was written, A Calm Address received widespread attention. It is estimated that as many as fifty thousand to one hundred thousand copies of the tract were distributed throughout England and Ireland. Politicians, clergy, and others interested in the cause of the colonists quickly attacked Wesley’s work. In particular, they suggested Wesley was motivated to write the tract by an interest in gaining favor from the English government. The criticisms became so difficult that Wesley was eventually led to respond through a letter to the editor published in Lloyd’s Evening Post, which denied an interest in receiving favorable treatment from the government. The letter went on to explain that his goal in writing the tract was merely to dampen the revolutionary fervor that was damaging both England and the colonies. Finally, Wesley took the opportunity to reemphasize his vital new understanding that the revolutionists “are not contending for liberty.”

The impact of Wesley’s tract was not limited to England. Though early copies were lost before they reached the colonies, word about the tract eventually

24 “A Calm Address . . . ,” 87.
25 “A Calm Address . . . ,” 89.
27 Holland, “John Wesley and the American Revolution,” 204.
28 Holland, 205. Wesley wrote in the letter, “I contributed my mite toward putting out the flame which rages all over the land... now there is no possible way to put out this flame, or hinder its rising higher and higher, but to show that the Americans are not used either cruelly or unjustly; that they are not injured at all seeing they are not contending for liberty . . . ; neither for any legal privileges.”
reached American shores. The tract generated a great deal of resentment aimed both at Wesley and the Methodist leaders in the colonies. The events would eventually prompt Francis Asbury, one of the early ministers dispatched by Wesley to America to guide the Methodist movement in America, to write in his journal in February 1776, about the impact of the tract in the colonies. Asbury wrote of Wesley that he was:

... truly sorry that the venerable man ever dipped into the politics of America. ... However, it discovers Mr. Wesley’s conscientious attachment to the government under which he lived. Had he been a subject of America, no doubt he would have been as zealous an advocate of the American cause.29

In addition to illustrating his own frustration concerning the publication of *A Calm Address*, Asbury appears subtly to dispute Wesley’s reasoning concerning the actions of the colonists. He suggested that Wesley’s own reasoning may have been clouded by the strength of his loyalties to the British monarch.

Despite the uproar, Wesley continued his own campaign designed to de-link the crusade of the colonists with any notion of “liberty.” In 1776, Wesley published a tract entitled *Some Observations on Liberty.*30 The very purpose of the tract is to redefine the actions of the colonists. For Wesley, the battle in the Americas was not now about liberty, but instead “independency.” He again argued that the colonists were afforded the same liberty as residents of England.31 However, the liberty offered did not satisfy the colonists, and, instead, they chose to “openly plead for independency.”32 This distinction was critical for Wesley because, as he reasoned, the power to govern emanates not from “the people,” but from God. Accordingly, while the colonists were afforded the liberty due them as God’s creation, they now sought more. The revolutionaries sought independence from the English government. Such freedom is broader than that which flows naturally to humans, according to Wesley.

**IV**

Johnson provided Wesley with a means to distinguish the calls for freedom in the colonies from his own support for freedom of the slaves. Though he struggled with the issue early, Wesley now could distinguish the issues of slavery and American freedom through a definition of liberty. However, the key question that remains is whether this distinction was truly substantive or was, instead, a superficial mechanism that allowed Wesley to remain loyal both to his King and his support for the eradication of slavery.

In assessing Wesley’s understanding of liberty, it is worthwhile to reconsider his own statements about slavery. As noted above, Wesley’s interest in the

29 Holland, 205.
eradication of slavery led him to invest significant attention in the plight of the Africans violently delivered to America. In 1772, in his tract *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, Wesley unambiguously pronounced that, "Liberty is the right of every human creature." He went on to explain his belief that such right is derived from "the law of nature," and should not be taken from another through any human action.

Having explained the importance and role of liberty to members of the human race, Wesley now had to reconcile this belief with the calls of colonists for their own liberty. He was forced to consider whether the calls for liberty from those supporting freedom for the slaves and from the colonists were of the same character. It appears that his early answer was that these situations were sufficiently similar to demand a consistent resolution.

In 1768, Wesley seems to have heeded the calls of the colonists for liberty, declaring that the actions taken against those living in America by his own government were beyond justification. Still, Wesley voiced strong support for his own King and the maintenance of his position concerning the colonies appears, at best, troubling to Wesley. This can be derived by the fact that Wesley spent far more time in the same tract defending the King, than considering events in America. These writings, taken together, suggest Wesley found himself caught in a logical conundrum. If the colonists were truly fighting for liberty, then their fight must be just. Through his consideration of the plight of the slaves, Wesley had already determined that liberty is a right due all humans. Meanwhile, Wesley firmly believed his King to be ordained of God and, accordingly, he was forced into a precarious position of affirming the actions of the colonists, while offering support to his King.

With the printing of *A Calm Address*, Wesley, for the first time, was beginning to draw a firm distinction between the fight for the eradication of slavery and the freedoms being sought by the colonists. He stated specifically in the tract, "You and I, and the English in general, go where we will, and enjoy the fruit of our labors: This is liberty. The Negro does not: This is slavery." He went on, later in the work, to further elaborate upon this new understanding of liberty. Wesley stated:

"If the Parliament taxes you without your consent, you are a slave," is mere quibbling. Whoever talks thus, should say honestly, "Reader, I give you warning, I affix a new sense, not the common one, to these words, liberty and slavery." Take the words in this sense, and you may prove there are slaves enough in England, as well as America; but if we take them in the old, common sense, both the Americans and we are free men.

This new understanding of liberty, gleaned from the work of Samuel Johnson,

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34 See Note 9, above.
35 "A Calm Address to Our American Colonies," 81.
36 "A Calm Address . . . ," 93.
allowed Wesley to avoid the complications stemming from conflicting loyalties. Through this new reasoning process, Wesley was able to maintain a strong loyalty to the King, an avid aversion to slavery and opposition to the calls for freedom in America consistently.

Wesley sharpened this distinction in his tract *Observations on Liberty*. In the tract, he asked rhetorically whether colonists are beaten or imprisoned “at pleasure,” taken away from family members or sold as animals. Instead, he reasoned, the colonists enjoyed both civil and religious freedom, rather than “being bound to hard labor, smarting under the lash, groaning in a dungeon, perhaps murdered or stabbed, or roasted alive, at their masters’ pleasure.” At this juncture, Wesley appears most comfortable with his analysis and strident in his remarks. He had an answer that resolved many conflicts.

Of course, not everyone agreed with Wesley’s analysis. In America, he was roundly criticized and his own ministers came under suspicion for being English subversives. His own assistant, Asbury, even questioned Wesley’s motives, suggesting implicitly that the founder of Methodism’s judgment had been clouded by his strong loyalties to the British monarch. An even more compelling commentary came from Caleb Evans, a Baptist minister in Bristol, in the form of a pamphlet entitled *A Letter to the Rev. Mr. John Wesley Occasioned by his Calm Address to the American Colonies*. In the work, Evans criticizes Wesley for promoting “passive obedience” and “non-resistance.” He further suggested that Wesley acted as a pawn of his King and government in producing a pamphlet entitled *A Calm Address*. While there is no clear answer as to whether Wesley was correct in his late assessment of the freedom movement in America, it does appear that he was motivated by strong feelings toward the British monarchy. In fact, based upon the sequence of his published works related, at least in part, to the situation in America, it appears Wesley relished any opportunity to support his King and did so with uncommon zeal.

Despite Wesley’s writings, many in America and in England believed that if humans were deserving of some form of liberty as creatures of God, the colonists had been denied that benefit. While the treatment of the colonists by the British government may not have been as harsh as the treatment of many slaves, there was a deprivation of liberty that demanded action. Accordingly, while Wesley’s arguments may have provided him with some modicum of personal solace, they simply could not withstand direct scrutiny in the opinions of many.

Perhaps, if there is an answer to this dilemma, it lies within the confines of the events that occurred along the eastern shores of America more than two

39 See Note 29, above.
40 Allan Raymond, "I Fear God and Honor the King: John Wesley and the American Revolution," *Church History* 45, no. 3 (Sept. 1976), 316–328, 322.
hundred years ago. The answer to whether there was a deprivation of liberty depends upon a true analysis of the practical actions of the British locally within the colonies, and, of course, few possessed such intimate knowledge. When Patrick Henry uttered the now famous words “give me liberty or give me death,” was his call one that reflected the true state of affairs in the colonies, a true deprivation of liberty, or was it simply a misguided rallying cry? Whatever the answer, Wesley’s finely tuned definition of liberty was sufficient to provide him a personal peace of mind concerning his own views about the events in America.

V

The period leading up to the American Revolution was a difficult time for Wesley. As he cared for the members of his own flock, he witnessed his community shaken to its foundation. In addition to the economic troubles affecting his own land, colonists had begun to challenge the English government. War appeared to be the unacceptable, but almost certain outcome.

In the midst of these multiple and troubling issues, Wesley distinguished the issue of slavery from the charges of the colonists that they were being denied personal liberties. For Wesley, slavery constituted a clear deprivation of liberty that conflicted with God’s intentions for humans. Meanwhile, the freedom movement in America did not constitute such a fundamental deprivation of rights. He balanced these seemingly inconsistent views with a delicate definitional treatment of the word “liberty.”

Though many disagreed, Wesley determined that the colonists had either received both civil and religious liberty or had voluntarily waived them by their own actions. In America and in Europe, Wesley’s definition proved difficult for many to accept. For Wesley, the analysis was essential to the maintenance of his own strongly held opinions, including his ardent support for the British King and his belief that the monarchy derived its authority to govern from God. Accordingly, while Wesley’s views regarding the colonists’ quest for freedom may have hampered early growth of the Methodist movement in America, it was for Wesley a reaffirmation of his own theological beliefs.