

**THE BIBLE TOLD THEM SO: A LOOK AT THE WESLEYS'
RELIANCE UPON THE SCRIPTURES**

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In the Beginning

“There can hardly be a single paragraph anywhere in Scriptures,” wrote Henry Bett more than seven decades ago, in his survey of the literary and religious qualities of Methodist hymnody, “that is not somewhere reflected in the writings of the Wesleys.”¹ Although such a statement might appear, on the surface, as an oversimplification of the obvious, it clearly and succinctly identifies the total extent of the issue. At the same time it begs for a transference from the general to the specific: to what extent and actual degree did the writings of both Charles and John Wesley employ (or, perhaps more accurately, rely upon) the Holy Scriptures as a means of reinforcing their own definitions of, and commitments to, their particular phase of the eighteenth-century evangelical awakening in and beyond the British Isles? For serious students and scholars of eighteenth-century Wesleyan studies, the popular assumption of trumpeting the Wesleys’ complete command of the sound and the sense of Holy Scriptures requires little in the way of further discussion; that the sound and the sense of those Scriptures permeated their private and public writings prompt even less of a necessity for further commentary or analysis.

What remains, therefore, focuses upon a perceived obligation to and for the community of scholars: to collect, catalogue, and index those specific strands and fragments of Scriptural references, allusions, and echoes residing within the mass of prose and verse of the Wesleys so that those students and scholars can expedite their investigations, discussions, analyses, and critical commentaries of the brothers’ literary productions and the contributions of such to eighteenth-century British literature and thought. Indeed, the motivation for the compilation of any and all reference works should arise from the compiler’s interest in reducing the cost, extent and devotion of and to the labor for those whose “higher” tasks involve explication, interpretation, and revelation. In other words, dedication to assisting in the advancement of (in this instance) literary and theological discussions of the Wesleys’ works appears to follow closely in importance behind the end results of those discussions.

¹ Henry Bett, *The Hymns of Methodism*, 3rd ed. (London: Epworth, 1945), 71.

John Wesley's Need for Scripture

In assessing the actual role and contribution of general knowledge to the advancement of John Wesley's own evangelical mission, the Methodist patriarch placed the command of Holy Scriptures at the forefront of his list. All knowledge, he consistently maintained, proceeded from Scriptures. According to the patriarch of eighteenth-century Methodism:

a knowledge of the Scriptures . . . teach[es] us how to teach others; yea, a knowledge of all the Scriptures; seeing Scripture interprets Scripture; one part fixing the sense of another. So that whether it be true or not, that every good textuary is a good Divine, it is certain that none can be a good Divine who is not a good textuary. None else can be mighty in the Scriptures; able to instruct and to stop the mouths of gainsayers.²

For John Wesley, Scriptures stood as the essential textbook for the moral instruction of those who would become, essentially, *complete* Christians. Throughout more than half of a century of his evangelical mission, he spent (if one reads his works thoroughly and carefully) as much time on instruction as he did upon his attempts to convert, and then to the maintenance of those whom he converted. "I have warned you a thousand times," he lashed out upon the collective conscience of his adherents, "not to regard any example which contradicts reason or Scripture."³ Thus, in equating reason with Scriptural sound and sense, John Wesley provided Methodists with the substance upon which to think and to choose—a textual filter, if you will, for all human thought, experience, action, and reaction. He even went so far as to define the key term for the ideal member of his religious organization, "Methodist," as "One that lives according to the *method* laid down in the Bible."⁴

In terms of John Wesley's personal preferences and practices, he followed his own advice. "I read the Bible with what attention I can," he informed the popular (but financially irresponsible) preacher Rev. William Dodd (1729-1777), from Kingswood, Gloucestershire, on March 12, 1756, "and regulate

² John Wesley, "Address to the Clergy," in *The Work of John Wesleys*, ed. Thomas Jackson 3rd ed. (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1872; rpt. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1986), 10:482. Textuary = a body of literature relating specifically to a text of Scriptures and that supports the authority of Scriptures: also, one who studies Holy Scriptures and emerges as an authority upon the same. Then the editors of the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* cite from a *Visitation Sermon* (pub. 1714) of George Bull (1634-1710), Bishop of St. Davids, Pembrokeshire, Wales (1705-1710): "If by a Textuary we mean him who hath not only a Concordance of Scriptures in his Memory, but also a Commentary on them in his Understanding; who thinks it not enough to be ready in alledging [*sic*] the bare Words of Scripture, with the Mention of Chapter and Verse where it is written, unless he know and sense and meaning of what he writes" (¶21). Gainsayers = those who contradict, oppose, deny, hinder, or refuse. See John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (1667), in the midst of Eve's response to Adam: "Too facile thou didst much gainsay/Nay, didst permit, approve, and fair dismiss" (9:1158-1159).

³ John Wesley, "Advice to the People Called Methodists, with Regard to Dress," in *Works*, ed. Jackson, 3rd ed., 11:475.

⁴ *Works*, ed. Jackson, 3rd ed., 14:234 (editor's note) *my ital.*

all my opinions thereby to the best of my understanding.”⁵ Thus, decisions during his personal life and his religious organization known as Methodism came forth upon the basis of supporting evidence from Scriptures. That which could not endure the test of Scriptural text he simply discarded as unworthy of further consideration—a process that yielded both positive and negative results and ranged from relation with specific men and women to the construction of Methodist chapels in provincial Methodist circuits. “The Bible is my standard of *language* as well as sentiment,” he wrote on April 1, 1766, from Manchester, Lancashire, to the Church of England minister and hymnodist, John Newton (1725-1807), then curate of Olney, Buckinghamshire (1764-1780). “I endeavour not only to think but to speak *as the oracles of God*. Shew me any one of the inspired writers who mentions Christ or faith more frequently than I do, and I will mention them more frequently. But otherwise I cannot without varying from my standard.”⁶

John Wesley’s Embrace of Scriptural Language

To the surprise but of a few, there arise instances within the written works of John Wesley when the reader cannot always determine the speaker of a passage—whether the elder Wesley or the writer(s) of one of the Biblical texts. To those individuals whose commitment to evangelical Christian doctrine appeared, in Wesley’s view, to have been uncertain or unsteady, the Methodist leader literally saturated his own texts with direct reference and allusions to Scripture. Thus, certain letters, for instance, tended to appear as diminutive sermons. Writing from Bristol on September 20, 1746, to Joseph Cownley (1723-1792), a member of the Methodist itinerancy since January, 1747, and to Cownley’s fellow members of the Methodist society at Leominster, Herefordshire, John Wesley exhorted them,

As many of you as have set your hands to the plough, see that you go on, and look not back. The prize and the crown are before you, and in due time you shall reap, if you faint not. Meantime fight the good fight of faith, enduring the cross and despising the shame. Beware that none of you return evil for evil, or railing for railing, but contrariwise, blessing. Show forth, out of a loving heart, your good conversation, with meekness and wisdom. Avoid all disputes as you would fire: so shall ye continue kindly affectioned one toward another. The God of peace be with you.⁷

Observe, through a dissection of that epistolary passage, the ease with and the degree to which John Wesley had filtered his thesis of encouragement for the maintenance of discipline through a variety of texts from Holy Scriptures (KJV):

⁵ *The Works of John Wesley. Volume 27. Letters III (1756-1765)*, ed. Ted Campbell (Nashville: Abingdon, 2015): 19.

⁶ *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, ed. John Telford (London: Epworth, 1931), 5:8.

⁷ *The Works of John Wesley. Volume 26, Letters II, 1740-1755*, ed. Frank Baker (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982), 220.

Sentence	Wesley	Scripture Text(s)
1.	As many of you has set your hands to the plough, the see that you go on, and	No man having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for kingdom of God (Luke 9:62).
2.	The prize and the crown are before you, and in due time ye shall reap, if you faint not.	Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain (1 Corinthians 9:24). And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away (1 Peter 5:4). And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not (Galatians 6:9).
3.	Meantime fight the good fight of faith, enduring the cross and despising the shame.	Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, whereunto thou art also called and hast professed a good profession before many witnesses (1 Timothy 6:12). Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 12:2).
4.	Beware that none of you return evil for evil, or railing for railing, but contrariwise blessing.	Not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing: but contrariwise blessing; knowing that ye are thereunto called, that ye should inherit a blessing (1 Peter 3:9).
5.	Show forth, out of a loving heart, your good conversation, with meekness of wisdom.	Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? let him shew out of a good conversation his works with meekness and wisdom (James 3:13).
6.	Avoid all disputes as you would avoid fire: so shall you continue kindly affectioned one toward another.	And they neither found me in the temple disputing with any man, neither raising up the people, neither in the synagogue, nor in in the city (Acts 24:12). Perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness: from such withdraw thyself (1 Timothy 6:5). Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another; . . . (Romans 12:10).
7.	The God of peace be with you.	Now the God of peace be with you all (Romans 15:33). Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3).

Greet one another with a kiss of charity.
Peace be with you and all that are in Christ
Jesus (1 Peter 5:14).

But I trust that I shall shortly see thee,
and we shall speak face to face. Peace
be to thee. Our friends salute thee.
Greet the friends by name (3 John 14).

Mercy unto you, and peace, and love, be
multiplied (Jude 2).

Rhetorically, and without a copy of Scriptures at hand, one cannot readily separate John Wesley's own language and syntax from those of his sources. According to Frank Baker's editorial speculation, Wesley intended the letter to Cownley for public reading before the members of the Leominster Methodist society as a means of diluting or eradicating altogether unspecified Calvinistic disputes that had permeated the group.⁸ Wesley, in that letter, relied upon Scriptures not necessarily to confront and to counter the specifics of the problem, but to steel the faith and the morale of the society—to hold fast, theologically, the members to the discipline and to the conventions of the Church of England, as modified by Wesleyan Methodism. In so saturating the message with Scriptural references, parallels, allusions, and echoes, the Leominster society with a dual authority—the leader of the Methodists as the initiator of the epistolary message and the apostolic voices emanating from the Holy Bible as his substantiation. Those persons attentive to the message might have chosen to challenge the former, the messenger, but, with certainty, they would find little comfort from arguing with the latter.

Such a method as seen in the letter to Joseph Cownley appears throughout John Wesley's extensive correspondence, but it becomes particularly noticeable when he addresses his relatively large corps of female followers. They included Elizabeth Bennis (1725-1802), of Limerick, Ireland; Ann (Nancy) Bolton (?-1822) of Blandford Park, near Witney, Oxfordshire; the writer of verse Philothea Briggs (1752-?); the London Methodist class leader and provincial schoolmistress Sarah Crosby (?-1801); Catherine (Kitty) Warren of Haverfordwest, Pembrokeshire, Wales; Elizabeth Ritchie (1754-1835?), a Methodist activist at Otley, Yorkshire; Jane Bisson Cock (1768-?), initially a resident of St. Hellier, on the Isle of Jersey, then, following her marriage, moving to St. Maws, Cornwall; and Hester Ann Roe Rogers (1756-1794), the wife of an itinerant Methodist preacher and one of the London women who attended John Wesley during the final weeks of his life. All of these women experienced occasional spiritual frailties and lapses, moments of spiritual indecision, problems which caused the Methodist leader continued concern.

Charles Wesley's Hymns

The same approach to the employment of Scriptures will be seen in a

⁸ *Works of John Wesley, Letters II*, 26:220 n1.

number of hymns composed by Charles Wesley and in revisions and translations of such pieces by John Wesley. Those pieces reveal a heavy reliance upon Scripture for reasons similar to those cited in reference to John Wesley's prose. Rather than repeat here an exercise that has been adequately treated, I need only direct the reader's attention to "Appendix C" of the latest edition of the *Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists* (1780), where the editors identify a combined total of 196 Scriptural sources found in but *five* hymns: "With glorious clouds encompassed round," "Ah, when shall I awake," "O Thou who camest from above," "Jesus comes with all his grace," and "Behold the servant of the Lord!"⁹

Further, readings of the *extant* sermon texts written by John Wesley (151 of them) and Charles Wesley (but twenty-three) will reveal easily the heavy emphasis upon Scriptures within the homiletics of the brothers—no real revelation to anyone familiar with the rhetorical construction of eighteenth-century (and well beyond) pulpit literature. "[John] Wesley's prose is woven from two principal strands," concluded James Downey, "the Biblical and the colloquial. It is almost impossible to exaggerate the influence of scriptural idiom upon his thought and language. Nor was it an unconscious influence . . . He endeavoured [quoting John Wesley] 'not only to think but to speak the oracles of God.' He realized his aim. Scriptural reference, allusion, quotation, and expression are the warp and woof of his oratory."¹⁰

The same language and thought might well apply (mirror, almost) to the relatively few published sermons of Charles Wesley, who, argues the editor of the most recent edition of those texts, emerged from his hymnodic compositions and withdrawal from the Methodist itinerancy as a theologian in his own right. "As one would expect," explained Kenneth Newport, "the sermons [of Charles Wesley] . . . show heavy dependence upon scripture. This is not merely to state the obvious, that Charles preached on biblical themes, but rather to highlight the fact that much of the linguistic fabric ["warp and woof"?] of the sermons is drawn from the Bible." Mr. Newport further credits Charles Wesley with applying his Biblical "material creatively and [he] has brought together the texts to form a pastiche reflective of his own thoughts . . ."¹¹ Insofar as concern analyses of references in the Wesleys' sermons and verse from Scriptures, as well as allusions and echoes therefrom, that field has been sufficiently ploughed, planted, and harvested,¹² and one need only read two or three sermons, selected at random, from each

⁹ *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 7, A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists*, eds. Franz Hildebrandt, Oliver Beckerlegge, and James Dale (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983), 730-735.

¹⁰ James Downey, *The Eighteenth-Century Pulpit: A Study of the Sermons of Butler, Berkeley, Secker, Sterne, Whitefield, and Wesley* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969): 218, Warp and woof = fabric and texture; the essence, the substance.

¹¹ *The Sermons of Charles Wesley: A Critical Edition*, ed. Kenneth Newport (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001): 67.

¹² See, for example, S T Kimbrough, Jr., "Charles Wesley and Biblical Interpretation, in *Charles Wesley: Poet and Theologian* (Nashville: Kingswood, 1992), 106-136.

Wesley to grasp immediately the quantity and variety of Biblical sources and influences.

Statistical Considerations

For those scholars and general readers who enjoy their studies and analyses of a published text spiced heavily with statistical flavoring, accept this invitation to linger for a moment upon what might appear on the surface as simply an example of the extreme. However, in actuality, what follows comprises a norm within the corpus of John Wesley's published prose. Fairly early in the development of the Methodist movement within the British Isles, John Wesley found himself forced to rise in defense of the new brand of evangelicalism. He had to prove to the Church of England establishment that Methodists, in particular, sought to strengthen, not to destroy or to break away from, reason and order in religion. Therefore, between 1743 and 1745 he published his "Appeals": *An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion* (1743); *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, Part I* (1745); and *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, Parts II and III* (1745).

Wesley really intended two distinct tracts—*An Earnest Appeal* and *A Farther Appeal*—thus, for the purpose of analysis of the writer's reliance upon Scriptures, the first (and earliest) of the three tracts proves sufficient, particularly in terms of its organization and its obvious commitment to a general intent that is, a reasonable appeal to reasonable men in defense of a reasonable social and religious movement. "These are our fundamental principles;" he wrote, "and we spend our lives in confirming others herein, and in a behavior suitable to them."¹³ Both Old and New Testaments, then, loomed large as the repositories from which John Wesley withdrew the substance for "our fundamental principles" while at the same time he relied upon those identical repositories to provide energy and authority to his own prose style.

By way of summary, *An Earnest Appeal* contains 101 paragraphs, approximately 16,953 words, and 216 distinct quotations that extend to no less than 3,145 words (or 18.6% of the total). The average length of each paragraph has been computed at 167.85 words, of which 31.13 (or 18.5%) stand as direct quotations. One finds, on the average, 2.11 direct quotations per paragraph, the average length of each being 14.67 words. Thus (again on an average) approximately 18% of each paragraph comprises language quoted from sources. The sources for the 216 direct quotations divide into two principal categories: non-Scriptural (32) and Scriptural (184). From another and less excruciating perspective, one might state that 85% of all direct quotations in *An Earnest Appeal* derive from Holy Scriptures.

Consider, next, in *An Earnest Appeal*, a summary of the Methodist leader's principal sources. The 35 "non-Scripture" items arrange themselves into

¹³ *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 11: The Appeals to Men of Reason and Religion and Certain Related Open Letters* ed. Gerald Cragg (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), 49. Page references in my text correspond to this edition.

three classifications (with the number of quotations from each in brackets):

1. Modern Literary (14)
 - Henry Aldrich (1647-1716): *Artis Logicae Compendium* (1692) [1]
 - John Dryden (1631-1700): *The Hind and the Panther* (1687) [1]
 - John Milton (1608-1674): *Paradise Lost* (1667, 1674) [5]
 - Alexander Pope (1688-1744): "Eloise to Abelard" (1717) [1]
 - Alexander Pope: "Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady" (1717) [1]
 - Matthew Prior (1664-1721): "Charity" (1709) [1]
 - Charles Wesley (1707-1788): From *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1742) [1]
 - John Wesley (1703-1791): "Letter" to the *London Magazine* (January 1, 1765) [1]
 - Samuel Wesley the younger (1690-1739): "On the Death of Mr. William Morgan of Christ Church, Who Died August 26, 1732" (1736) [1]
 - Samuel Wesley the younger: "Epitaph on a Gamester and Free Thinker" (1736) [1]

2. Classical (5)
 - Lucius Annaeus Florus (fl. 295-325): *Epitome Bellorum Omnium Annorum DCC* (AD 122) [1]
 - Quintus Horatius (Horace) Flaccus (65 BC-8 BC): *Satires* (35 BC) [1]
 - Titus Lucretius Carus (96? BC-55 BC): *De Rorum Natura* (?) [1]
 - Publius Vergilius (Virgil) Maro (70 BC-19 BC): *Aeneid* (19 BC) [1]

3. Ecclesiastical (16)
 - Book of Common Prayer (1662) [10]
 - Canones et Decreta Dogmatica Concilii Tridenti* (1564) [1]
 - Certain Sermons or Homilies Appointed by the King's Majesty* (1547) [3]
 - Articuli XXXIX Ecclesiae Anglicanae* (1562) [1]
 - The Constitutions and Canons Ecclesiastical* (1604) [1]

The Ecclesiastical group of sources, with its total of 16 quotations, comprises 7% of the total number of quotations (216) within an *Earnest Appeal*. However, the same group constitutes 40% of the total of non-Scripture citations. Next, the Modern Literary group, with 14 quotations, comprises almost 7% of the total and 40% of the non-Scripture quotations. Finally, the 5 Classical sources represent but 2% of the total and 16% of all non-Scripture sources.

Turning the attention to a survey of the 184 quotations from Scripture (KJV), in his *Earnest Appeal*, John Wesley extracted 139 of them from the New Testament, 43 from the Old Testament, and 2 from the Apocryphal books. Those citations convert to the following outline (with the number, or frequency, of quotations in parentheses):

New Testament (139)	Old Testament (43)	Apocrypha (2)
Matthew 13	Genesis (4)	Ecclesiasticus (1)
Mark (4)	Exodus (3)	Wisdom (1)
Luke (8)	Leviticus (1)	
John (9)	Deuteronomy (2)	
Acts (18)	1 Samuel (3)	
Romans (14)	1 Kings (1)	
1 Corinthians (13)	2 Kings (1)	
2 Corinthians (8)	Nehemiah (1)	
Galatians (6)	Job (1)	

Ephesians (9)	Psalms (13)
Philippians (4)	Proverbs (1)
Colossians (3)	Ecclesiastes (1)
1 Thessalonians (1)	Isaiah (5)
1 Timothy (1)	Jeremiah (3)
2 Timothy (4)	Ezekiel (3)
Titus (1)	
Hebrews (12)	
James (1)	
1 Peter (3)	
2 Peter (1)	
1 John (6)	

The 139 New Testament quotations comprise 64% of the total number of quotations in *An Earnest Appeal* and 75% of the 184 quotations from Scriptures. On the other hand, the 43 Old Testament citations translate to 20% of the total number of quotations and 23% of those from all of the Scripture quotations. Lastly, the 2 citations from the Old Testament Apocrypha appear as less than 1% of the total 184 references from Scriptures.

Focusing directly upon the text of *An Earnest Appeal*, the reader will observe that in only 7 of the 101 paragraphs of that tract did John Wesley rely upon the actual language of the 1611 King James translators of Scriptures. Note this summary of those seven paragraphs:

¶# words	Total quotations	# of words	# of quoted words	% of total
59	186	2	151	81
80	416	1	323	78
66	174	9	119	68
52	138	8	80	58
53	170	4	96	56
1	89	4	51	57
101	155	3	79	51

At the other end of the scale, 28 of the 101 paragraphs of *An Earnest Appeal* (or 27.7%) reveal no evidence of direct quotations from any of the four groups of sources (paragraphs 2, 5, 13, 18, 23, 26-29, 33-34, 37-38, 42-44, 68, 75, 87, 89-94, and 98-1000. Within that context, one needs to note that in paragraphs 87-96, John Wesley set down a narrative in defense of his personal financial transactions and of the overall conduct of his personal financial affairs. Of the 1,648 words in that section of the tract, only 68 (or 4%) emerge as direct quotations from three separate sources. Finally, the discussion of John Wesley's sources comes to rest on the note that six quotations in *An Earnest Appeal* emerge from non-English language texts—five in Latin and one in Greek. Little doubt that the leader of the not yet fully-developed religious organization had responded to the self-obligation to nod, slightly but obviously, in the direction of his scholarly interests and tutoring experience while still a fellow of Lincoln College, Oxford.

Literary Contexts

But I am done with the numbers! Perhaps more stimulating and/or in-

tellectual pursuits would appear to generate interest by observing a number of literary contexts in which both John Wesley and Charles Wesley actually supplied their rhetorical wares with bits and pieces from their the considerable storehouse of Biblical knowledge. Consider, as but a single example, Romans 1:18, the introductory verse to that section of the apostle Paul's epistle on sin, and the achievement of salvation by faith in Jesus Christ, which reads, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness . . ." (KJV).¹⁴ For Paul, in that verse, the terms "righteousness" and "wrath" reflected upon the revelations in the last days of this world, and thus they stood as clear signs that God would bring human history to a climactic and, perhaps, even to a catastrophic conclusion. To underscore both theme and event, Paul juxtaposed God's wrath and God's righteousness so that the readers of his epistle would understand that the very presence of those qualities had been already identified as the final turning point in the history of the world. From another perspective, Paul clearly, at the outset of that address to the Romans, set out to characterize sinful humankind as both the object and the occasion of the present wrath of God.¹⁵ In the end, humankind had to discover the means to achieve a lasting peace with God.

Charles Wesley's sermon on Romans 3:23-25,¹⁶ preached before the University of Oxford on Sunday, July 1, 1739,¹⁷ in which the writer explicated his doctrine of justification by faith, reveals three distinct instances upon which he turned directly to Romans 1:18. At the outset, in the second sentence of the opening paragraph, the younger Wesley incorporated the verse as a means of underscoring his thesis, asserting that "Herein is the wrath of God revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who hold the truth in unrighteousness."¹⁸ By the twenty-fifth paragraph, he had increased the rhetorical intensity of both his tone and his substance, and thus he declared that "Every sinner deserves to be damned, every man is a sinner, therefore every man deserved to be damned." Then follows the obvious question: "Which of the premises can be denied without denying the Scriptures?" The answer lies, partially, in this Scriptural mosaic from Romans: "'The wages of sin are death (6:23); the wrath of God is revealed against all unrighteousness of men (1:18), and there is none righteous,

¹⁴ The sentence concludes in 1:19—"Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them" (KJV).

¹⁵ Robert A. Spivey and D. Moody Smith, *Anatomy of the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (New York and London: Macmillan, 1974): 339.

¹⁶ "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God;/Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus:/Whom God has sent forth to be a propitiation [conciliation, atonement] through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God . . ." (KJV).

¹⁷ "Preached my sermon on justification before the university with great boldness. All were very attentive. One could not help weeping" (*The Manuscript Journal of the Rev. Charles Wesley, M.A.*, eds. S T Kimbrough, Jr., and Kenneth C. G. Newport [Nashville: Kingswood/Abingdon, 2007-2008], 1:180).

¹⁸ *Sermons of Charles Wesley*, 186.

not one (3:10).”¹⁹ Further, toward the end of his text, in the sixty-third paragraph, Charles Wesley directed the message of the wrath of God down upon those who had denied their faith, yet continued to assert righteousness. Again, multiple Scriptural sources come into play here, as Charles Wesley heaped condemnation upon the rebellious offenders:

Woe unto them who stumbled at this rock of offence (1 Peter 2:8) and first dared teach justification by faith and works. Good had it been for those men had they never been born (Mark 14:21). But let not us, my brethren, increase the unhappy number. Let not us deny the truth because some held it in unrighteousness [Romans 1:8], professing to know God while in works they denied him (Titus 1:16).²⁰

The careful reader of this sermon observes not only Charles Wesley’s command of the appropriate application of Holy Scriptures, but also his recognition of parallel texts by which to weigh, heavily and fully, his arguments. Wesley totally appreciated the need to equate evidence with authority.

Turning the attention to Charles Wesley’s verse, consider, briefly, the application of Romans 1:18 to the poet’s two-part hymn (1756) on the destruction of Lisbon, Portugal, during the earthquake of November 1, 1755.²¹ The initial stanza of “Part I” reads,

Woe to the men on earth who dwell,
Nor dread th’ Almighty’s frown;
When God does all His wrath reveal,
And shower his judgment down!
Sinners, expect those heaviest showers;
To meet your God prepare!
For, lo! the seventh angel pours
His phial in the air.²²

Charles Wesley had begun the stanza with a rhetorical nod to a portion of Revelation 8:13 as his source: “And I beheld, and heard an angel flying through the midst of heaven, saying with a loud voice, Woe, woe, woe, to the inhabitants of the earth the earth by reason of the other voices of them trumpet of the three angels, which are yet to sound!” (KJV). The transition from the angel of judgment in Revelation to the apostle Paul’s epistolary

¹⁹ *Sermons of Charles Wesley*, 196.

²⁰ *Sermons of Charles Wesley*, 207.

²¹ This piece published as an addendum in Charles Wesley’s *Hymns Occasioned by the Earthquake, March 8, 1750. In Two Parts*. 2nd ed. (London: William Strahan, 1756). Following the earthquake of Sunday, November 1, 1755, the city of Lisbon suffered virtual destruction by flood and fire. According to estimates, between 10,000 and 30,000 persons lost their lives. To complicate matters, a seismic sea wave ensued; the Tagus River—which rises in east-central Spain and eventually empties into the Atlantic Ocean at Lisbon—flooded, followed by the serious fires that contributed significantly to the destruction of the city (see Edward Paice, *The Wrath of God: The Great Lisbon Earthquake of 1755* [London: Quercus, 2008] 92-99).

²² *A New and Critical Edition of George Osborn’s Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley (1868-1872), with the Addition of Notes, Annotations, Biographical and Background Information*, ed. Samuel Rogal (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2009-2013), 6:43, Wesley: “Woe! To the men on earth who dwell,” 1:1-8. Revelation 16:17: “And the seventh angel poured out his vial into the air, and there came a great voice out of the temple of heaven, from the throne, saying, It is done” (KJV).

pronouncement to the Romans of the wrath of God upon the unrighteous comes about naturally enough, and both sources from Scriptures prove more than applicable within the context of the natural disaster inflicted by God upon (in Wesley's view, of course) the unrighteous inhabitants of Lisbon—a significant number of them practitioners of Roman Catholicism. Not unexpectedly, Wesley brought the first part of this hymn on an uncertain note of gloom and doom to an end with the question, “When heaven and earth are fled and gone, / O where shall I appear?” Yet by the conclusion to Part II the speaker has begun to recover his or her faith and can muster the spiritual strength to plead, “And when Thou dost in glory come, / My Lord, remember me!”²³ Again, Biblical authority emerges as Charles Wesley's final words on the subject echo the verse from Luke 23:42.

Four examples of Romans 1:18 from John Wesley's prose works will assist in the illustration and examination of the Methodist leader's application of that passage from perhaps one of the most theologically significant among Paul's New Testament epistles. To repeat, that verse reads, “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness . . .” (KJV). In a letter to the secessionist Scottish Presbyterian minister Ralph Erskine (1685-1752), written from London on June 26, 1740, Wesley continued his earlier attempts to solidify his relationship with his evangelically inclined colleague: “I greatly rejoice,” wrote Wesley in the fourth paragraph of that message, “in the simplicity and plainness of speech wherein [in an unidentified tract by Erskine] you testify to the truth, and against those who are either utter strangers thereto,

²³ *New Edition of Osborn's Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley*, 6:44, 46. Luke 23:42: “And he [one of the malefactors] said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom” (KJV). The key phrase in that Gospel verse—“remember me”—resounds loud and clear through the centuries into (and beyond) the second half of the nineteenth century, represented most noticeably in the short poem by Christina Georgina Rossetti (1830-1894), “Remember” (London: MacMillan, 1862):

Remember me when I am gone away,
 Gone far away into the silent land;
 When you can no more hold me by the hand,
 Nor I half turned to go yet turning stay.
 Remember me when no more day by day
 You tell me of our future that you planned:
 Only remember me; you understand
 It will be late to counsel then or pray.
 Yet if you should forget me for a while
 And afterwards remember, do not grieve:
 For if the darkness and corruption leave
 A vestige of the thoughts that once I had,
 Better by far you should forget and smile
 Than that you should remember and be sad.

(1-14)

Coincidentally, if removed from the thesis and context of her poem, Rossetti's lines do not stray terribly far from the sound (if not the sense) of Charles Wesley's effort, written a century earlier.

or hold it in unrighteousness.”²⁴ The reader should take note that Wesley, in that particular instance, appeared more interested in the language of Romans 1:18 than in the principal theological message of the Pauline passage—specifically so because the Scriptural allusion to the authors {or “strangers”) of several Scottish religious tracts sent to him by Ralph Erskine, that he viewed as non-complimentary to evangelical thought.

Some forty-five years later in a letter from Whitehaven, Cumberland, dated May 26, 1785, John Wesley wrote to Zachariah Yewdall (1751-1830), a Methodist itinerant preacher then stationed in Cardiff, Wales. In this letter, Wesley stretched the language of Romans 1:18 a bit further, inserting it within the context of behavioral advice to a preacher in the service of Methodism: “I observe nothing much amiss in your behavior. Truth and love you may hold fast, and courtesy will increase insensibly.”²⁵ Whether he actually intended to extract the phrase “hold the truth” from Romans 1:18 and insert a variant of it into the letter to Yewdall, or whether the choice of language proves merely a coincidence, cannot easily be determined. Certainly, though, by age eighty-one, John Wesley’s command of the language of Scriptures could well have been classified as instinctive, and it came forth easily and without much deliberation.

However, in regard to the composition of the written address from the pulpit, John Wesley preferred to play rhetorical or substantive games with the sound and the sense of Holy Scriptures. Instead, he placed that language and substance, clearly and directly, onto the proper path as authoritative sources for his theological arguments. Thus, in his 1748 sermon, “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount: Discourse the First,” he began the eighth paragraph of the first section with “The great Apostle, where he endeavours to bring the sinners to God speaks in a manner just answerable to this [the helpless guilt and misery of humanity]: ‘The wrath of God (saith he) is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men’—a charge which he immediately fixes upon the heathen world, and thereby proves they were under the wrath of God.”²⁶

Finally, in the conclusion to a brief essay on “Thoughts Concerning Gospel Ministers”(1784), John Wesley dwelt upon those characteristics preventing one from achieving the distinction of a Gospel minister, in the process cautioning his readers against considering automatically any person who simply preaches as fit to function as a minister of the Gospel: “Not every one,” maintained the Methodist leader, “who deals in the promises only, without ever shewing the terrors of the law; that slides over ‘the wrath of God revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness,’ and endeavours to heal those that never were wounded. These promise-mongers are no Gospel Ministers.”²⁷ In such an instance, John Wesley injected a por-

²⁴ *Works of John Wesley. Letters II*, 26:16.

²⁵ *Letters of John Wesley* (ed. Telford), 7:271.

²⁶ *Works of John Wesley, Sermons I*, 1:479.

²⁷ *Works of John Wesley*, 3rd ed., (ed. Jackson), 10:456.

tion of Romans 1:18 into the midst of his own sentence, thus calling upon the apostle Paul to speak for him, and, at the same time, to lend the former apostolic authority to the latter's argument.

Epistolary Exchange

Another aspect of the Wesleys' reliance upon Holy Scriptures comes to mind in viewing an epistolary exchange between the brothers themselves—Charles Wesley in London and John Wesley in Bristol. The former labored among the various London religious societies amid feelings of discomfort and insecurity; and when the itinerant Calvinist field preacher George Whitefield (1714-1770) arrived at the English capital city from British North America on March 15, 1741, Charles Wesley urged (on March 16-17) his brother to return to London and attempt to ease the tensions caused by Calvinist and Moravian influence and intervention in the thoughts and beliefs of those societies. "Lord," pleaded Charles Wesley, leaning upon the language of Scriptures to communicate to his brother, ". . . our eyes are unto thee! Arise and maintain thine own cause."²⁸ For that plea, Charles Wesley began with the opening lines of 1 Chronicles 2:16—"And David lifted up his eyes and saw the angel of the Lord stand between the earth and the heaven. . . ." (KJV) and proceeded to 1 Kings 8:45: "Thus hear thou in heaven their prayer and their supplication, and maintain their cause."

In John Wesley's response on April 21, 1741, the older brother argued that he had to complete his evangelical work at Bristol before he could return to London, and he sensed that his brother's concerns had come upon him more from rumors and gossip than from fact. Thus, in concluding his own letter, John Wesley simply cast the same words from 1 Kings 8:45 back into Charles Wesley's rhetorical lap: "'O my brother, my soul is grieved for you. The poison is in you. Fair words have stole away your heart. . . . Lord, if it be thy gospel which I preach, arise and maintain thine own cause."²⁹ In that instance, each of the brothers latched on to Old Testament Scripture in hopes of motivating the other into action; each depended upon the other's commitment to and compliance with the substance and authority of Biblical language and thought as means of bringing to fruition a solution to the problem, or at least alleviating the intensity of it.

In examining the various twists and turns of the Wesleys' rhetorical reliance upon Scriptures, one might observe those instances wherein the rhetorical mode of one underwent change to suit the purposes of the other. One obvious example of such method arose in a letter from John Wesley, again in Bristol and written, on October 6, 1776, to Hester Ann Roe, in which Psalms 69:1-2 served as the principal Scriptural source: "Save me, O God, for the waters are come into my soul./I sink in deep mire, where there is no standing: I come into deep waters, where the floods overflow me" (KJV). In his letter, John Wesley began his concluding exhortation with, "I know pain

²⁸ *Works of John Wesley. Letters II*, 26:54, 55.

²⁹ *Works of John Wesley. Letters II*, 26:57.

or grief does not interrupt your business; but does it not *lessen* it? You often feel sorrow for your friends; does that sorrow rather quicken than depress your soul? Does it sink you deeper into God? Go on in the strength of the Lord. Be careful for nothing. Live to-day.”³⁰ John Wesley simply reversed the negative images within the opening verses of Psalms 62: sorrow enlivens the soul, rather than drowns it; the blessings of God immerse the body and soul, not the floods of pain and despair. For Wesley, the bewailing and breast-beating of the Old Testament psalmist gave way to the positive notes of strength through faith. If one trusts the accuracy of John Telford’s loosely documented editorial headnote to this letter, John Wesley’s manipulation of Scripture text (KJV) achieved its intended effect upon the recipient of that letter, for as Hester Ann Roe noted in her journal, “I am still kept in various trials. This day the following letter was as if sent from God to strengthen me.”³¹

Primary and Secondary Sources

Lest these introductory observations and comments overstay their welcome, consider one more issue, that of primary and secondary Scriptural sources found in the Wesleys’ prose and verse. In other words, the primary source represents that which the writer initially intended as his principal textual reference; although the secondary references might arise as clear, recognizable, and vibrant echoes or reverberations from it, they remain subordinate to it in importance. Thus, John Wesley, writing from Deptford, London, on November 20, 1775, to another of his lay preachers, John Francis Valton (1740-1794), then stationed in the Oxfordshire circuit, began by concerning himself (and his preacher) with the state of the English weather, “We had hardly any frost last winter; perhaps you will have [in Oxfordshire] little more the ensuing. I am commonly more pinched³² by the November cold than by that which comes after Christmas. But, as it may, our wisdom is to take no thought for the morrow.”³³

Wesley’s principal source—*principal* because it functions, for him, as the major text—for the quotation ending the passage stands as Matthew 6:34 and the words of Jesus Christ from the Sermon on the Mount: “Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought of the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof” (KJV). However, Wesley knew that had John Valton been so disposed he could well have extended the thrust of the Methodist leader’s quotation to sections of Scriptures preceding and following Jesus Christ’s words from the Mount: (1) from Proverbs 27:1—“Boast not thyself of to morrow; for thou knowest not what the day may bring forth” (KJV); (2) from James 4:14—“Whereas ye know not what

³⁰ *Letters of John Wesley* (ed. Telford), 6:234.

³¹ *Letters of John Wesley* (ed. Telford), 6:233

³² Pinched = affected by cold, hunger, exhaustion, wasting disease, painful physical sensation, or mental affliction.

³³ *Letters of John Wesley* (ed. Telford), 6:190.

shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away” (KJV).

One might argue, with reason, that, from the perspective of pure content, all three of the Biblical passages reflect the same notion. Nonetheless, the authority of the speaker, the Son of God, establishes the primacy of the verse from Matthew, while those verses from Proverbs and James serve as the secondary sources. As has been stated and alluded to repeatedly in this discussion, Biblical authority emerged consistently as a principal consideration to substantiate doctrine and direction for both Charles and John Wesley.

In Conclusion

The points raised in this discussion merely touch the surface of potential issues and considerations emerging from the Wesleys’ heavy reliance upon and utterance of the language and the substance of Holy Scriptures. In the end, one cannot but agree with the editorial declaration that “. . . Wesley’s [John’s, primarily, but Charles’ as well] grasp of Scripture amounted to his being something of a concordance, *viva voce*”³⁴ Therefore, the miscellany of thoughts, reflections, and observations rendered upon and from these pages will have accomplished its purpose if they will expedite the search and research process and then, in turn, stimulate thought concerning the Wesleys’ reliance upon the application of passages from Holy Scriptures to their poetry and prose. If nothing else this effort will, in a more general sense, once again emphasize the important role and contribution of Holy Scriptures, as both literary and spiritual texts, to the studies within those academic disciplines concerned with the inception, emergence, and development of Western world religious thought.

³⁴ *The Works of John Wesley. Volume 3: Sermons III, 71-114*, ed. Albert Outler (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986), 63: n. 7.