



Religion and Violence in Early American Methodism



Taking the Kingdom by Force

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INTRODUCTION

*Soldiers of Christ Arise, and put your armor on,
Strong in the strength which God supplies thru his eternal Son;
Strong in the Lord of Hosts, and in his mighty power,
Who in the strength of Jesus trusts is more than conqueror.*

—Charles Wesley, “Soldiers of Christ Arise”

Early Methodist leader Charles Wesley originally, and quite appropriately, set the tune of this hymn to Handel’s *March*. We know the hymn today as “Soldiers of Christ Arise.” Its origins stretch back to a much longer poem, sixteen verses in all, that Charles composed no later than 1742. The selection has appeared in Methodist hymnals for two and a half centuries, sung by everyone from poor farmers in tiny clapboard churches to the world’s elite. Unlike many hymns that have failed to stand the test of time, “Soldiers of Christ Arise” has become a classic that continues to enjoy a place in the official United Methodist hymnal.

But if hymns of similar content indicate important themes and values within a religious community, “Soldiers of Christ Arise” now stands out awkwardly. Though Methodists, like many other Christians, can still open their hymnals and loudly sing “stand up, stand up for Jesus, ye soldiers of the cross,” ask in the words of Isaac Watts “am I a soldier of the Cross?” or bellow “onward, Christian soldiers, marching as to war, with the cross of Jesus going on before,” there are

few other hymns in the United Methodist hymnal that overtly refer to Christians as soldiers or to some aspect of the Christian life as a battle. Two of these hymns, including “Soldiers of Christ Arise,” are more than two centuries old, and their presence is fading.¹

The relative absence of hymns of military glory and epic battle in today’s mainline churches in America masks a much more vibrant past. In fact, “Soldiers of Christ Arise” is the last remaining song in the United Methodist hymnal that also appeared in a curious section of the famous *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists*, compiled by Charles Wesley’s older and more renowned brother John in 1780. The elder Wesley intended his *Collection of Hymns* to be inexpensive, widely disseminated, exhaustive, and highly adaptable. He organized the hymnal around various experiences of the Christian life, with the section of twenty-eight hymns that included “Soldiers of Christ Arise” tucked neatly between seventy-four hymns Wesley labeled “For Believers Rejoicing” and eleven hymns labeled “For Believers Praying.” Wesley provocatively named the section in between “For Believers Fighting.”²

The preacher also utilized “Soldiers of Christ Arise” in another significant early Methodist publication. In 1742, John Wesley appended all sixteen verses of Charles’s poem, then known as “The Whole Armour of God,” to the end of his seminal document *Character of a Methodist*. Wesley used the document to define and defend the growing British Methodist movement against confusion and criticism. Wesley firmly established the character or mark of a Methodist in experiential terms: “one who has ‘the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost given unto him’” and affectionate terms as one who loves both God and neighbor. The Methodist, insisted Wesley, not only puts these experiences and affections into practice by obeying God’s commandments, praying without ceasing, and performing good deeds, but she also attains a form of sinless perfection that Wesley defined as sanctification.³

Through a dramatic rhetorical shift, Wesley cast aside the language of intimacy evoked through his repeated use of terms such as “love” and “joy” and closed the *Character of a Methodist* with his brother’s now famous call for “soldiers of Christ” to arise, stand “against your foes,” and “wrestle, fight, and pray.” Wesley might have used the body of his essay to define Methodists as ones who experienced the love of God and expressed that love to humanity, but his conclusion left no doubt that his followers were also warriors prepared for battle, strong, powerful, and confident in victory.

Wesley's followers responded to his call to battle in profound ways. Wesley's chief lieutenant, John Fletcher, warned Christians about failing to see the necessity of fighting. To view the Christian life in any way other than a battle was "THE GRAND device of Satan" to deny humans their salvation (emphasis in original). By contrast, Fletcher contended that the kingdom of heaven "permits certain kinds of 'violence'" as the appropriate means to wage the "good fight" against what he identified as two primary opponents. First, the Christian battled "those lords who reign over us—the world, the flesh and the devil. These rebels must be turned out." The believer's other opponent was none other than God, against whom converts, like the patriarch Jacob in the Hebrew Bible, "wrestle" for divine blessings. Salvation, for Fletcher, could never be achieved in any way other than struggle against both of these forces. "None prevail but those 'who take the kingdom by violence. . . . Weariness, care, friends, fear and unbelief must all be thrown aside when we seek to see God face to face and to be brought into the light of his life."⁴

Across the Atlantic, where Methodism enjoyed its most profound success in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, "New World" Methodists also communicated the importance of the believer's warfare in the experiential literature—diaries, autobiographies, biographies, and hymnals—they popularized. In these works, American Methodists waged the battles to which leaders like John Wesley and John Fletcher called them, and they hoped that by recording their victories and defeats their readers would enlist alongside them in the fight to conquer evil. The most influential leader within the early Methodist community, Francis Asbury, verified as much. The superintendent-turned-bishop filled his published journals with entries of Satan's constant "assaults," against which Asbury committed to "either fight or die." By steadfastly resisting these attacks with "sword in hand," Asbury explained that he gained power over Satan and joined with other Christians to "be more than conquerors."⁵

Many American Methodists literally embodied Asbury's fight not only in their encounters with Satan, but also in their encounters with God. Describing his experience of sanctification, itinerant preacher Benjamin Abbott recalled that the "spirit of God" came upon him and he "fellfalt [*sic*] to the floor, and lay as one strangling in blood." Fearing that Abbott might die, his wife and children wept at the sight of his lifeless body. "But I had not power to lift hand or foot, nor to speak one word" while he "felt the power of God, running through every part of my soul and body like fire consuming the inward corruptions of fallen

depraved nature.”⁶ In countless similar narratives, Methodists spoke of falling to the ground under the power of God “as if shot,” writhing on the ground, sometimes in extreme physical pain, and shouting for mercy, portraying their conversions as battles in which God ultimately struck them down as soldiers at war in order to resurrect them to new life.

Assuming as we must that Methodists were anything but careless in referring to important aspects of the religious life in terms of war, violence, and aggression, we ought to ask certain fundamental questions. What did Methodists mean when they described their religious lives as battles? What exactly was the nature of this warfare and who were the enemies? How did language of violence, fighting, and warfare relate to other core Methodist values that promised joy, peace, and hope? Perhaps even more importantly, did this martial rhetoric have any relation to Methodist perceptions of or participation in acts of physical violence and aggression?

This book explores these questions through a careful examination of the religious world of early American Methodists and the social implications of that religious world. The militant rhetoric of “Soldiers of Christ Arise” was an essential component of American Methodist theology, experience, and practice. While early Methodists often spoke of the love and intimacy they enjoyed with both God and their fellow Christians, they believed that such bonds emerged through intense struggle and conflict. The religious life was nothing less than a battle against a wide array of forces, malevolent and benevolent. By bodily and spiritually “fighting the good fight” and “taking the kingdom by violence,” even as they were “wounded” or “killed” by God in the process of justification and sanctification, American Methodists sought salvation, holiness, and religious community.

These battles not only exercised a critical role in how early Methodists described the practice of the Christian life, they also had important implications for Methodist perceptions of and participation in social violence. Precisely speaking, the former battle could never be equated with other types of violence such as involvement in the state’s warfare or even run-of-the-mill brawling between angry enemies. The “good fight” took the form of a spiritual battle against spiritual forces for individual salvation and social transformation. If humans hoped to realize the salvation of their souls and the reform of their nation, they needed to fight spiritual forces and their own sinful natures. Very few Methodists, if any, would have applied the same necessity to the temporal conflicts

around them or would have argued that one's salvation depended upon fighting another human being.

In fact, at certain points in their history American Methodists constructed an inverse relationship between their militant struggle for the Christian faith and human warfare, arguing that their enlistment in God's army for the most cherished prize of eternal redemption overshadowed the trivial contests of politicians. Even more strongly, some defined war as inherently sinful so that Christians could not participate in it without compromising their spiritual condition. In such instances, the battle for salvation became a potent force for discouraging participation in social violence.

However, in other important cases Methodists identified certain political or social conflicts that seemed to necessitate violent social action. Methodists commonly observed Satan's corrupting influence in society—in slavery, poverty, and war, for instance—in ways that brought social issues into the Christian's warfare as part of the overall struggle against sin. Some of these issues seemed to warrant action that moved beyond spiritual war on the part of the believer. These issues called the Christian to take up arms and physically wound or kill their opponents. In such instances, the lines between the believer's struggle for salvation and the earthly battle became blurred and the latter became closely intertwined with the former. The community's enemies became minions of Satan and acts of physical violence became a sacred duty in the battle for salvation. As a result, the believer's holy violence intended to lead to salvation provided a powerful justification for social violence.

Despite the prevalence of a highly conflicted, one might even say violent, religious world communicated within the pages of Methodist sermons, hymns, autobiographies, and journals, and its varying connection to systems of social violence, the conflicted aspects of Methodists' religious world have received little serious attention within the resurgence of scholarship on early American Methodism. There are, I believe, a few reasons for this lacuna. First, some of the finest work on American Methodist spirituality has focused on later expressions of spirituality that were not amenable to the militant rhetoric and action of an earlier era. A. Gregory Schneider's work on Methodism and domesticity is the most significant recent critical analysis of early American Methodist spirituality.⁷ Schneider sees Methodist spirituality playing an important role in the evolving cultural embrace of domestic ideology over the course of the first half of the nineteenth century among white middle-class Americans. He seizes upon

Methodism's emphasis on intimate bonds of affection, a religiosity rooted in the domestic realm, and an otherworldliness focused on a heavenly abode of perfection as direct contributors to the growth of domesticity.⁸

Unfortunately, the closest Schneider comes to observing the type of militant spirituality considered here is in what he calls Methodist spirituality's "active passivity." Schneider uses this term to refer to Methodist notions of spiritual transformation that included the roles of God and the human being. Methodists commonly spoke of salvation as an act of God alone, a theological commitment that rendered adherents relatively passive in the process of gaining salvation. However, Methodists simultaneously emphasized that seekers needed to search out and vigorously take hold of the very grace that made them passive.⁹ Methodists sought a sinless perfection that required intense effort, even as believers recognized that ultimately holiness came as an act of God.

Although Schneider's idea of active passivity begins to capture a sense of the militant effort Methodists believed they ought to apply to their spiritual lives, the fact that Schneider overlooks the martial language Methodists relied on to narrate their spiritual lives requires a reconsideration of Methodist spirituality. Much of Methodist spirituality had a rougher edge than the refined domestic ideology of home and affection. It spoke of bloody battles against the minions of evil and slayings at the hands of a warrior God. Particularly among the earliest generations of Methodists, the militant became one of the central modes for defining the Christian life, not only in terms of the nature of the discourse used to describe the quest for holiness, but also in the theological descriptions of conversion, the bodily practices that reflected this theology, and participation in physical encounters with Satan, all of which departed significantly from the rhetoric of domesticity.

The difference between the type of spirituality described by Schneider and that presented here likely has less to do with sources or interpretation and more to do with time. Although the periods under consideration in this book and in Schneider's work overlap, the emphasis in the former is on the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, whereas Schneider deals mainly with the early to mid-nineteenth century. American Methodism underwent a process of transformation that by the mid-nineteenth century led the community to abandon fighting as a central aspect of its spirituality. Schneider's work captures this movement, while the arguments made here better represent Methodist spirituality in the decades immediately prior to and following the turn of the century.

A second reason that previous histories of early Methodism have overlooked the highly contested practices and discourse that I argue were so prevalent is that historians of early Methodism have tended to emphasize the positive and refined aspects of Methodism's "experimental" or "heart" religion (e.g., love, joy, and peace) or the socially salubrious implications of what historians imagine to be the fruits of conversion and sanctification.¹⁰ Early Methodist literature certainly took pains to stress that Methodists truly experienced love, joy, and peace and that these affections were evidence of the "new birth." It is equally difficult to deny that early Methodist religious experience could facilitate a countercultural environment that created, if even briefly, space for marginalized peoples to express freely their inner experiences and in some cases exert significant religious influence. Unfortunately, the process of privileging the resolution of conversion and sanctification has resulted in a lack of appreciation for the pervasive struggle and terror that preceded conversion, not to mention that which endured long after the experience ended. Even converted and sanctified believers continued to "fight" in ways that had profound consequences for their spiritual, emotional, and in some cases even physical health.

A final reason that historians have not given serious attention to the battles and warfare of Methodist religious life is that accounts of physical spasms, shouting, falling, Satanic assaults, and suicidal thoughts do not conform to the idyllic image of early Methodism that many historians have sought to portray. Scholars have called the early Methodist community "Edenic," egalitarian, and innocent.¹¹ This idealism reflects what Nathan Hatch has argued is a tendency of "modern church historians . . . to focus on those dimensions of their own heritage that point to cultural enrichment, institutional cohesion, and intellectual respectability."¹² A long-time itinerant preacher driven mad by what he perceived as Satan's attacks or the devout "mother of Israel" who considered killing herself simply do not fit into the historiographical caricature. If we are to achieve a deeper understanding of early Methodism, we must consider more seriously language of "wounding," "killing," "wrestling," and "crucifying" alongside references to "melting," "love," "peace," and "fraternity." Methodists not only credited the former terms with making the latter possible, but also made warfare and struggle a permanent component of the Christian life. Notions of struggle and warfare became enmeshed within the theology, practices, and experiences of early Methodists in ways that made them critical to living the Christian life.

By giving attention to the meaning and significance of Methodism's cosmic battles, this book is situated within a lively area of American religious history influenced by both popular studies and ethnography. Historians such as David Hall, Leigh Schmidt, Robert Orsi, and Colleen McDaniel have made space for religious practices and experiences to take center stage over the more traditional historical focus on institutional formation and formal theological expression.¹³ The values, perspectives, and meaning religious adherents found in religious practices and experiences are understood, in this approach, to be essential for gaining insight into the lives of those in the past, those who shared very different assumptions about the world that otherwise would remain lost to the twenty-first-century interpreter.

The method employed in this book also recognizes that historical interpretation does not stop at the point of reconstructing the meaning religious adherents found in their practices and experiences, but can also be informed by the use of theory, in this case a broader body of literature on religion and violence. A significant literature of varying quality exists that seeks to demonstrate religion's influence in violent acts, whether particular acts of violence, say the First Crusade, or violence more generally. However, only recently have scholars given serious attention to the ways violence often helps give structure and meaning to religion. The work of René Girard is perhaps the most notable attempt to explain how violence shapes religious thought and practice. Girard contends that religion emerges out of social acts of violence. In every culture, mimetic rivalry among members of the community sets off violence that the community can only assuage through the scapegoating, in most cases the murder, of an innocent victim. Of course, the community must not recognize that the victim is innocent. Through misrecognition, the community considers the victim the cause of the disorder and concludes that the death of the victim will not only deliver the community from the violence besetting it, but will also become the source for the founding of a united society. After the event, myths and rituals, the very basis of religion for Girard, arise to retell and re-enact the "founding" murder, passing on to future generations rules for the maintenance of society and passing on the assumption that God decrees violence as the necessary mechanism for the creation and protection of social order.¹⁴

Girard's theory offers a complicated and compelling picture of the relationship between religion and violence by suggesting that violence and religion have integral connections, if not by necessity, then at least in practice.¹⁵ Although

Religion and Violence in Early American Methodism departs from Girard in important ways, the book follows Girard by exploring the role of violence in the formation and performance of religion, in this case within a particular religious tradition in America. By drawing from the work of Girard and others, this book offers a fully textured portrait of the meaning and significance of American Methodists' cosmic battles.

The present discussion of Girard's work and my own sensitivity to how Methodists understood their experiences and practices make it important to take a moment to discuss my use of the word "violence." I have already loosely applied the term to certain aspects of Methodist religious life, but I do so with special care in order to avoid misrepresenting Methodist thought and practice. Precisely speaking, characterizing aspects of Methodist religion as violent does not present a problem. We saw earlier that John Fletcher referred to the Christian's struggle for redemption as requiring the use of violence. John Wesley frequently used the term to describe the power of religious experience. For instance, Wesley referred to a man who "was suddenly seized with violent trembling all over." In another case, Wesley wrote in a letter to John Manners that a Mr. Timmins's struggle for redemption was "violent" after which he fell to the ground "as dead," his body even growing cold.¹⁶ Methodists' description of their spirituality as violent suggests that it is consistent with their own use of language to appropriate the term in this book.

However, what Methodists meant by using violence for spiritual ends, or undergoing a violent experience in the process of salvation, varies significantly from most modern conceptions of the term. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines violence as "the exercise of physical force so as to inflict injury on, or cause damage to, persons or property."¹⁷ As with any term, the definition is both helpful and problematic when read back on a historical community. The idea that violence is the exercise of "physical" force is consistent with Methodist assertions that their battle was a very real struggle that included a physical element. Methodists repeatedly noted their suffering in both mind and body at the hands of God and Satan. Nevertheless, Methodists considered the primary significance of their battles to strike at a spiritual level, namely the eternal state of their soul and Satan's control over the world. As a result, the application of "physical force" does not fully capture what Methodists meant when they described the religious life as violent. Methodists' battles for salvation had as much, if not more, to do with spiritual opponents and spiritual implications than physical ones. We must

be wary, then, of at least initially limiting the term “violence” to only physical force. Methodists believed that the use of spiritual force that resulted in harm to spiritual enemies might equally be identified as violent.

We compromise our ability to reconstruct the early Methodist use of the term “violence” if we add a popular sense of the word to the formal sense of the application of physical force to cause damage or injury. In many cases, when someone calls an act violent there is an assumption about the morality or legality of that act. We not only mean that an action is the exercise of physical force intended to cause damage to persons or property, but we also assume that the exercise of that force is illegal or immoral. There is a negative connotation to calling something an act of violence. In everyday usage we would call a mugging violent, but we tend not to call the defensive counterstrike of the victim violent, though it certainly entails the exercise of physical force intended to cause damage. We call it self-defense. We do so because we want to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate uses of force.

Methodists might have thought that certain experiences that constituted their “violent” religious world were immoral, as when they suffered Satan’s attacks, but it is highly unlikely that Methodists would have seen other, perhaps most, aspects of their combative spirituality as immoral or illegal. The acts of violence they thought they needed to apply against the spiritual forces of evil and that God applied to believers were all, to them anyway, necessary for human redemption and holiness.

If we are to avoid compromising our representation of early American Methodism by imposing an anachronistic definition of violence on Methodist religious life, we must establish a clearer understanding of the term for the purposes of this work. I will use a less value-laden definition of violence as: *the use of force in order to cause injury or harm to someone or something*. This definition does not limit the actors, objects, or the means of force to “physical” or “spiritual.” I reserve the morality or immorality of the actions for explicit discussion, particularly in the final chapter.¹⁸

To unearth the religious and social significance of Methodism’s redemptive violence, the book moves chronologically from Methodism’s emergence in the mid-eighteenth century to the decline of the religious significance of “holy violence” in the mid-nineteenth century. Chapter 1 traces the roots and nature of what came to be known as the “good fight” in the Methodist tradition through a close examination of the life and thought of Methodism’s founder, John Wesley.

Wesley called his followers to participate in a bodily and spiritual battle both as warriors who triumphed over sin, the world, and Satan, and as victims who were “wounded” or “killed” by God in order to be saved. Christians could only assure themselves of eternal salvation by succumbing to a divine wounding even as they aggressively subdued their spiritual enemies.

Chapter 2 introduces American Methodism by examining disputes over the American Revolution within the transatlantic Methodist connection. John Wesley defended Britain’s right to suppress the American rebellion, but in doing so he differed from his American followers who offered religious reasons for neutrality. A careful examination of Wesley’s arguments on the one hand and his American followers on the other reveals that an essential factor in Methodist perspectives on the Revolution was whether Methodists came to see their spiritual battles as bearing on the political conflict. If, as Wesley determined, the outcome of the Revolution influenced the greater battle between good and evil, then Wesley could begin to cast aside his otherwise strong denunciation of physical violence and urge Christian participation in violence that he elevated to a sacred duty. On the other hand, if Methodists could not establish a clear connection between the political and spiritual battles, or if they saw the former as detrimental to waging the latter, then the importance of the spiritual battle discouraged participation in the political.

The third chapter traces the evolution of the battle for salvation in the early American republic. As Methodists grew exponentially in the years following the American Revolution, the community embraced new converts who responded to the call to participate as soldiers for religious redemption. However, while for some the body remained a very real part of the battle, as evident in the emergence of what came to be known as the “jerks,” an experience that violently convulsed people’s bodies, others began a subtle effort to alter the nature of the cosmic battle by restricting the physical body from the fight. Whether they struggled with God or Satan, many began to contend that physical harm would not befall the Christian in the contestation of the inner dimensions of the good fight for salvation.

While chapter 3 uncovers the changes in American Methodist spirituality, chapter 4 explores the changes in their perspectives on social violence. The first generation of American Methodists who opposed the Revolution gave way to a new generation, many of whom had fewer scruples about participation in violent activity. I contend that American Methodists increasingly intertwined their spir-

itual battles with social and political struggles surrounding them, particularly the War of 1812 and Methodism's westward expansion across the continental United States. In so doing, Methodists found a motive for sacralizing both individual and communal acts of violence.

Chapter 5 chronicles the decline of the cosmic battle in American Methodism during the middle decades of the nineteenth century. Although the image of the Christian life as a battle never disappeared, it faced profound challenges from within and outside of Methodism that ensured that fighting the good fight became far less important for one's salvation and the creation of spiritual communities than expressing and experiencing nurturing acts of love. Even so, conceptions of a cosmic battle between good and evil assumed particularly prominent and important roles during the Civil War. Methodists, both North and South, described the war as a divine battle and motivated followers to enlist with the argument that good Christians not only loved their country, they were the only thing that stood between the nation's victory and its destruction.

The concluding chapter brings the importance of Methodism's spiritual battles into conversation with recent theoretical literature on the intersection between religion and violence and, in the process, considers what the battles Methodists fought in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries might mean for the twenty-first century's struggle with religiously inspired violence. The scholarship of René Girard, Maurice Bloch, and others serves as an interpretive lens to help determine how religious struggles and contestation give rise to religious change and how social violence converges with the religious struggles that adherents identify as redemptive. While early American Methodists demonstrate that the "violence" that helps constitute a religious world can prove to be a disincentive to social violence, they also confirm the all-too-soluble boundaries between redemptive and social battles. In all these ways, Methodists have something to offer those interested in the intersection between religion and violence. In a world now beset by terrifying and horrific acts of religiously inspired violence, it is more than mere curiosity to consider whether the history of a mainstream American Protestant community in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has something to offer to conversations on religion and violence.

ONE

FIGHTING THE GOOD FIGHT

*I found more and more undeniable proofs that
the Christian state is a continual warfare
[emphasis in original].*

—Works 19:149

*The very thing that Mr. Stinstra calls “fanaticism” is no
other than heart religion, in other words, righteousness,
and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.*

—Works 22:287

These concise entries from the journals of John Wesley reveal a great deal about what Wesley considered constitutive of the Christian life. “True” religion brought righteousness, peace, and joy.¹ The experience of salvation included literally feeling “the love of God shed abroad in our heart . . . producing love to all mankind, and more especially to the children of God.” Through justification and sanctification, believers not only set out on a path to eternal bliss in the world after, but they also experienced temporal benefits in the form of an intimate relationship with the divine, a holiness of living that freed Christians from the wicked constraints of the present world, and reordered relations with their fellow human beings.²

Yet “continual warfare” also plagued Christ’s disciples. Wesley insisted that Christians faced a trio of fierce enemies in sin, the “world,” and Satan. The powerful attacks of the latter, according to Wesley, caused immeasurable, and in some cases even life-threatening, mental and physical anguish. Likewise, the realities of a fallen world and the hardened cravings of the sinful self required Christians to mount an aggressive attack on the forces of evil. The bitter conflicts between Christians and their enemies left Wesley to conclude that battle was an inescapable feature of Christian living.

Wesley countered the tribulations inherent in the Christian’s warfare by often casting the struggle in triumphalist ways, calling it a “good fight,” a reference to 1 Timothy 6:12: “Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, whereunto thou are also called, and hast professed a good profession before many witnesses.” For Wesley, though the fight was bitter, true Christians were not embattled victims; they were conquering heroes. As such, the Christian was as much an aggressor as an object of attack in a lifelong battle against both internal and external forces for their own redemption and the renewal of society.³

Wesley’s image of the Christian as a victor over evil converged with his description of a very different conflict between humans and the divine, one in which God spiritually, and in many cases even bodily, “wounded” Christians in order to deliver them to salvation. To become conquerors, believers needed first to be conquered by God in ways that Wesley believed caused many to scream, fall to the ground, choke, and tremble. In these instances the body became engulfed in the bitter and destructive contest for salvation.

The hope for righteousness, peace, and joy in the midst of continual warfare seems quite paradoxical. How could Christians experience peace and joy while participating in battle? To Wesley this mix of peace and joy with fighting and warfare was no paradox; fighting constituted a critical mechanism for the realization of peace. Christians needed to be “wounded” to become “soldiers of Christ” who “fought the good fight” against the forces of evil, not only because believers encountered terrible attacks from Satan and those under Satan’s dominion, but also because Wesley credited the struggle and suffering of fighting with a Christian’s ability to conquer sin, realize his or her redemption, and reorder his or her communities according to God’s perfect law. Wesley believed that Christians literally participated in a battle for their souls *and* bodies that made righteousness, peace, and joy possible. The process of understanding the

importance of warfare and violence in Wesley's imagining of the Christian life begins with the origins of such notions in his early life.

The Emergence of the “Good Fight” Against Sin and “the World”

The basis for Wesley's characterization of the Christian life as a fight or battle evolved in significant ways over the course of the first half of his life. Wesley learned from a young age that at its most foundational level the Christian's warfare was a vigilant struggle against sin. Though High Church Anglicans, Wesley's parents, Samuel and Susanna, appealed to reforming elements within the Anglican tradition and the continental Pietists to steer themselves and their children from what John would later call “the dry and dead carcass” of Latitudinarian and Deistic elements within the Church of England.⁴ Central to Wesley's religious upbringing was a highly disciplined commitment to root out sin and conform his will to God's pleasure. In Susanna's famous letter to John on child rearing, Susanna commented that parents could do nothing better for their children than to take pains to subvert the power of self-will, which she saw as the source of all sin:

As self-will is the root of all sin and misery, so whatever cherishes this in children ensures their after-wretchedness and irreligion. . . . Religion is nothing else than the doing the will of God, and not our own; that the one grand impediment to our temporal and eternal happiness being this *self-will*, no indulgence of it can be trivial, no denial unprofitable. Heaven or hell depends on this alone. So that the parent who studies to subdue it in his child, works together with God in the renewing and saving a soul; the parent who indulges it does the devil's work, makes religion impracticable, salvation unattainable, and does all that in him lies to damn his child, soul and body, for ever.⁵

Susanna's aim for John, as for all her children, was a life lived in obedience to God's command to holiness, a call that the Wesleys recognized required significant effort and discipline to combat inbred sinfulness.

Wesley's assumptions about the foundational conflict between human sinfulness and the requirements of holiness strengthened during his years as a student, and later as a Fellow, at Oxford. Wesley's reading of Thomas à Kempis,

Jeremy Taylor, and others continued to inspire him to pattern all his thoughts and actions on Christ. These authors also struck a particularly personal chord that caused Wesley to develop serious doubts about his spiritual state. If Wesley aimed for a life lived in imitation of Christ, he found himself wanting. The young Wesley countered such doubts by turning to ever more careful and even extreme methods of disciplining his behavior and desires in the hope that pious action would reflect a changed inner spiritual condition. Wesley's "exacter" diary, which he began as an Oxford Fellow in 1734, reveals Wesley at perhaps his most extreme period of self-analysis. Here Wesley constructed a rating system whereby he could hourly measure on a scale of one to nine the degree of his "temper and devotion" toward God. On November 26, 1735, for instance, Wesley recorded that he experienced "Lively zeal" three times and a "7 rating five times" over the course of the day. He added that he enjoyed "Fervent ejaculatory prayers twelve times."⁶ On February 21 of the following year, Wesley showed a bit more variation, reaching a 7 rating once between 5:00 and 6:00 AM, a 5 rating between noon and 1:00 PM as well as between 6:00 and 7:00 PM, and a 4 rating twice between 4:00 and 6:00 PM.⁷ While such attention to detail might border on the obsessive, it clearly demonstrated the strict discipline and care the young Wesley felt necessary to apply to his spiritual life. Only through an intricate examination of the self and one's spiritual successes and failures in the midst of the day's many distractions could one hope to stem the tide of sin and grow in grace. Struggle, striving, and conflict against sin, always apparent in Wesley's spirituality, became increasingly critical to Wesley's religious imagination.

More than simply a focus on internal sin, Wesley also directed his efforts against the effects of sin on his surroundings, particularly after 1730. Wesley and his "Holy Club" peers spent much of their time ministering to the poor, sick, and imprisoned. The aims of this work were more charitable and evangelistic than direct attempts to overturn the structures that gave rise to suffering. Nevertheless, Wesley's interests clearly strayed beyond his own internal state to the health of society in general, a characteristic that remained part of Wesley's interests for the remainder of his life. In like manner, his relatively conservative approach to addressing the social effects of sin also remained intact throughout his life.

Throughout the 1730s, Wesley's lingering doubts that his strivings against sin proved efficacious played an essential role in the continued evolution of his understanding of the Christian's warfare. In the months preceding Wesley's so-

called conversion in 1738, Wesley clearly criticized his spiritual life as nothing more than a “works righteousness” that deprived him of true pardon from God (justification).⁸ The influence of the Moravians, particularly Peter Böhler, led Wesley to see justification as an instantaneous act of God arising through faith alone. Wesley’s Moravian mentors also influenced him to insist that an inner witness in the form of the Holy Spirit’s testimony confirmed that the person was a “child of God.”⁹

Wesley found great solace in an understanding of justification that freed him from a sense of works righteousness. Yet he also sought to avoid the quietism of his Moravian advisers who advocated seeking justification in “silence and retirement.” Wesley, influenced by his longstanding commitment to root out evil, countered that while faith alone rather than “works” could justify, humans had the responsibility to actively observe the means of grace, prayer, Bible study, and the sacraments, in the process of seeking justification.¹⁰

Wesley’s struggle for justification by faith without falling into the errors of quietism led him to particularly martial language to describe the experience of justification and, later, sanctification. Wesley’s Aldersgate conversion in 1738 laid claim to providing Wesley with a direct witness from the Holy Spirit to the forgiveness of his sins. In his post-Aldersgate reflections, Wesley adopted an image of his past efforts as a series of deliberate, though always fruitless, battles. Wesley’s lament of his pre-Aldersgate state is telling: “In this vile, abject state of bondage to sin I was indeed fighting continually, but not conquering.”¹¹ Wesley claimed that his recurring struggle and defeat ceased with his Aldersgate experience and instilled a new identity in him as a “conqueror” of sin.¹² Thereafter, Wesley’s writings made prominent the notion of the Christian life as a fight in which the converted believer transformed into a conqueror. In fact, in his 1746 sermon “The Spirit of Bondage and of Adoption,” Wesley associated fighting and conquering not only with setting the believer on the path to conversion, but also with constituting the essence of Christian identity:

Art thou daily fighting against all sin; and daily more than conqueror? I acknowledge thee for a child of God. O stand fast in thy glorious liberty. Art thou fighting, but not conquering, striving for the mastery, but not able to attain? Then thou art not yet a believer in Christ. But follow on; and thou shalt know the Lord. Art thou not fighting at all, but leading an easy, indolent, fashionable life? O how hast thou dared to name the name of Christ! Only

to make it a reproach among the heathen? Awake thou sleeper! Call upon thy God, before the deep swallow thee up.¹³

The practice of fighting urged in this sermon played an important role in many of the hymns that occupied such a prominent place in the early Methodist community.¹⁴ Wesley intentionally organized his most important hymnal, *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists*, “under proper heads, according to the experience of real Christians.” Critical to this organization is a section of hymns provocatively titled “For Believers Fighting.”¹⁵ These particularly militant hymns vividly portrayed believers as beleaguered or, in the words of one selection, “surrounded by a host of foes” and “stormed by a host of foes within.”¹⁶ The hymns respond to such dire straits by calling forth an aggressive response on the part of Christ as the believers’ defender. Hymns such as the following depict Jesus’ victory on behalf of believers:

Yet God is above, Men, devils, and sin
My Jesus’s love the battle shall win
So terribly glorious His coming shall be
His love all-victorious shall conquer for me.¹⁷

Although several hymns attest to Jesus’ role in achieving the victory, a belief that Wesley’s larger theological system supported, more often the hymns portrayed an active response from believers who strove to slay their enemies through prayer, the exercise of faith, and virtuous living. Take, for instance, this dramatic call to Christian action:

Urge on your rapid course,
Ye blood-besprinkled bands:
The heavenly kingdom suffers force,
'Tis seized by violent hands;
See there the starry crown
That glitters through the skies;
Satan, the world, and sin tread down,
And take the glorious prize!¹⁸

This hymn’s identification of “bands” underscores the fact that believers fought as a collective army of saints as well as individuals. Many of the hymns certainly take an individualistic tone, as in the plea, “equip *me* for the war / And teach *my* hands to fight” [emphasis added].¹⁹ But the struggle, like the context

in which Methodists sung these hymns, was social, a reality that required the efforts of an army amassed “in close and firm array.”²⁰ Similarly, another hymn commanded:

Fight the good fight of faith with me,
My fellow-soldiers, fight.
In mighty phalanx joined,
To battle all proceed.²¹

The popularity of these hymns helped disseminate the fight among Methodists of all classes. But if hymns helped convey and spread the importance of the individual and collective fight against sin, they took a backseat to Wesley’s theology and cosmology when it came to providing the central foundation for the Christian’s warfare. For Wesley, the cosmos existed in a state of conflict, torn asunder by various competing spiritual and temporal forces. Sin acted as the major force in creating this state of affairs. The fall of Adam and Eve introduced sin into the world and corrupted all human beings, distorting the *imago Dei* or human likeness to the divine being, rendering humans prideful, ignorant, self-loving, and disobedient.²² From their spiritual height as the image of God, humans descended to become “the image of Satan” and fell victim to physical death and, more importantly, spiritual death.²³ Wesley insisted on the centrality of this doctrine:

Is man by nature filled with all manner of evil? Is he void of all good? Is he wholly fallen? Is his soul totally corrupted? Or, to come back to the text, is ‘every imagination of the thoughts of his heart evil continually’? Allow this, and you are so far a Christian. Deny it, and you are but an heathen still.²⁴

The fall of humankind rendered the earth a kind of battlefield in which humans existed in constant animosity with one another, the spiritual world, and even nature itself. The world labored under the power of darkness, groping for life and hope but more commonly existing in a state of suffering, despair, and death. God’s grace, which preserved some measure of light, was all that prevented the world from falling into utter ruin.

Wesley’s embrace of the doctrine of total depravity denied humans any natural capacity to perform good or warrant salvation. However, Wesley’s emphasis on prevenient grace, expressed most clearly in his sermon “On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” provided the foundation for transcending depravity.

Humans were “dead in sin by nature” and therefore unable to attain salvation on their own merit, but God did not leave them to their own feeble powers. God granted every person enough grace to desire the good, differentiate the bad, and exercise their conscience.

Everyone has sooner or later good desires. . . . Everyone has some measure of that light, some faint glimmering ray, which sooner or later, more or less, enlightens every man that cometh into the world. And everyone, unless he be one of the small number whose conscience is seared as with a hot iron, feels more or less uneasy when he acts contrary to the light of his own conscience. So that *no man sins because he has not grace, but because he does not use the grace which he hath* [emphasis added].²⁵

Wesley’s understanding of the grace given to each human being supported his conviction that humans could “work” toward their salvation by responding to the grace God had given them and by pursuing the good, which would result in further outpourings of grace that could lead to salvation. Wesley also insisted that because of the strength of sin in each person’s life, the ability to work toward salvation became an extremely difficult enterprise. Humans had to “agonize” to “enter the straight gate” by fasting, reading the Scriptures, and attending to the sacraments with the utmost seriousness, care, and caution. Even more, humans assumed this active role even though their effort could never be sufficient in its own right to merit salvation. Salvation could come only through an act of divine grace.²⁶ Nevertheless, Wesley created a system by which human effort played an essential role *as a response to grace*. The responsibility of the Christian to “strive” and “agonize” created a conflictual paradigm in which Christians became active participants who needed to struggle against opposing powers of evil.²⁷

The effect of the combined doctrines of total depravity and prevenient grace created a powerful dynamic in Wesley’s theology that allowed Wesley to assert the depths of sin but also establish the power of humans to overcome their enslavement to it. This dynamic provided the foundation for Wesley’s aggressive attack against sin. Humans could not overcome the power and pervasiveness of sin on their own. But through the infusion of divine grace that permitted a militantly aggressive effort, humans could to a large degree become free from sin’s malicious hold.

Wesley’s doctrine of sanctification extended the prospect for triumphing over sin beyond that of many of his evangelical peers. Wesley allowed that Chris-

tians could actually live free of sin, though he clarified that this state did not overcome humanity's Fall to the degree that humans could recapture an "Adamic perfection" in which the understanding and affections were so perfected that, like Adam, people had the ability "always to speak and act right" as well as avoid all error.²⁸ Even sanctified Christians continued to commit errors in judgment that could lead to mistakes in practice. Rather, Wesley meant that the sanctified could obtain freedom from evil thoughts and tempers while being empowered to fulfill the two great commandments to love God and neighbor.

This is the sum of Christian perfection: it is all comprised in that one word, love. The first branch of it is the love of God: and as he that loves God loves his brother also, it is inseparably connected with the second, 'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.' Thou shalt love every man as thy own soul, as Christ loved us. 'On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets:' these contain the whole of Christian perfection.²⁹

As he did in his theory of justification, Wesley asserted that sanctification came only through grace by faith rather than works. However, Wesley ensured that he did not leave human effort out of sanctification by continuing to parallel the work of justification and sanctification. Just as they did in justification, Christians needed to pursue acts of repentance, piety, and mercy in their pursuit of sanctification. Wesley insisted that though these actions were neither of the same sense nor degree as the role of faith in bringing about sanctification, they remained significant and thus further ensconced believers in a spiritual world of conflict in which humans needed to pursue holiness with the same vigor with which they sought their justification. Grace awaited those who actively strove for the blessing.³⁰

This dualistic battle between holiness and sin extended to what Wesley ambiguously called "the world." The "world" served as Wesleyan shorthand for all earthly things that kept people from God, such as the love of money, the pleasant company of sinners, or participation in evil structures such as slavery. Wesley called "friendship" with this world "spiritual adultery" in which the hearts of believers became corrupt and their sinful desires inflamed. As a result, Wesley directed Christians to break off all relations with the world, including all unnecessary contacts with nonbelievers, even as he simultaneously called converts to demonstrate love toward nonbelievers by ministering to them through the proclamation of the Gospel and providing for their temporal needs.³¹ Unfortunately,

the break with the world did not come easily because human desire remained firmly oriented toward the material rather than the divine.

The intimate connections between human desire and the world's impediments to holiness inevitably led Wesley to call the warrior back to the self, which Wesley identified as a corrupt entity requiring "sacrifice" through a "crucifixion" modeled by Jesus. Wesley admonished believers to "crucify" themselves to the world in order to liberate themselves from the bondage of sin and enjoy the pleasures of communion with God.³² When converts embraced Christianity, Wesley contended, they entered into a life of sacrifice that Wesley saw embodied in Jesus' command: "And he said to them all, 'If anyone will come after me, let them deny themselves, and take up their cross daily, and follow me.'"³³ Wesley's understanding of "taking up the cross" required the believer to deny the self and the self's desires and embrace the will of God, an activity that though displeasing to the person breaks his or her desire for sin and conforms them to the will of God.³⁴

Wesley's followers clearly perceived the difficulty of reforming the human will when the process of self-denial, by necessity, resulted in suffering and pain.

In order to the healing of that corruption, that evil disease which every man brings with him into the world, it is often needful to pluck out as it were a right eye, to cut off a right hand. . . . The tearing away of . . . desire and affection when it is deeply rooted in the soul is often like the piercing of a sword.

Here Wesley mixed his metaphors of redemption, comparing sin to a disease and the cure to a wound received in battle. Both ways of understanding the process relied upon the necessity of pain. "It is essentially painful; it must be so by the very nature of the thing. The soul cannot be thus torn asunder, it cannot pass through the fire, without pain."³⁵

Wesley's words denote how the struggle extended beyond a mental effort to control the desire for material comfort. The Christian's warfare demanded a willingness to sacrifice, suffer, and die. Some eighteenth-century British Methodists experienced this command in literal form through physical harm, and for a few even death. In the 1740s, for instance, Wesley and his followers faced mob attacks and persecution, the most serious of which occurred in Wednesbury, where in 1743 a mob physically assaulted Methodist followers and besieged their homes and shops. Assailants dragged Wesley himself through the streets and

later beat him, though he claimed that he miraculously did not feel pain.³⁶ In fact, attacks like this ultimately functioned positively for Wesley in helping him situate his movement within the early Christian tradition of persecution and martyrdom.³⁷

The external dangers Wesley's followers faced from angry mobs were compounded by the battle's internal emotional and psychological toll, a fact that created a great deal of controversy for Wesley and the early Methodist community. Methodism's opponents questioned whether the intense struggles, acetic behavior, and "false" sense of inspiration from God they called enthusiasm would prove destructive to mind and body. Such arguments haunted Wesley from his Oxford days because of the death of his fellow Oxford Methodist, William Morgan. In the search for an explanation for the passing of a promising young man, some within the Oxford community, including Morgan's father, cast an accusing gaze Wesley's way by suggesting that Wesley's "rigorous" fasting regimen and socially questionable ministry to the poor, sick, and imprisoned drove the young man mad.³⁸

Wesley took a measured response to his critics immediately following the Morgan affair. In his letter to Morgan's father, Wesley denied claims of excessiveness.³⁹ In particular, Wesley asserted that William gave up fasting more than a year before his death. Wesley also defended the propriety of the group's outreach to the poor, infirm, and imprisoned, largely on the grounds that they sought advice and approval from various authorities, including Wesley's father. Nevertheless, Wesley later admitted that many in the throes of conversion and even those who had already undergone the new birth experienced significant psychological struggles. The most serious of these were often pejoratively identified as "religious melancholia," a condition in which sufferers experienced "humiliation, terror of conscience, despair, suicidal inclinations, self-accusations of blasphemy and the unpardonable sin, and fear of having sinned away the day of grace."⁴⁰ Opponents seized on victims of melancholia as evidence that Methodism represented a false religion that corrupted the psyche of its followers.⁴¹

Although Wesley blamed some of the most serious cases of mental suffering on illness and denied that others resulted from the proper practice of the Christian life, he offered his most direct explication of mental turmoil in the religious life in two noteworthy sermons, "The Wilderness State" and "Heaviness Through Manifold Temptations." In these sermons, Wesley reduced many of the conditions that his opponents perceived as melancholia to the strictness and struggles

inherent in his idea of Christian living as a form of warfare. In fact, Wesley linked the two sermons for publication with “The Wilderness State” preceding “Heaviness Through Manifold Temptations.” These sermons carefully balanced Wesley’s recognition that many of his followers suffered mental turmoil, some of which he thought was beneficial, with a desire to attribute much of the blame for the most serious manifestations to sin. He achieved this balance by separating the various conditions into two qualitatively different categories: “heaviness” and “the wilderness state.” Heaviness was a significant psychological and even physical burden that “sinks deep into the soul” and lingers “as a settled temper.” It was an intense feeling of grief or sorrow that Wesley commonly observed among believers. Unlike the wilderness state, which originated most frequently in a person’s sin, heaviness arose from the “manifold temptations” of sickness, disease, poverty, and death that Satan used to “inject unbelieving, or blasphemous, or repining thoughts” into the minds of believers. These negative effects of heaviness, however, functioned positively for Wesley as a test of faith that one could see as a form of divine grace.⁴² By emphasizing the origins of heaviness in temptation rather than one’s own sinfulness and the potential for growth that might come through heaviness, Wesley created a space for recognizing the religious benefits of what many of his opponents saw as a psychological danger.

Wesley countered that in stark contrast to heaviness, the wilderness state was neither as common nor as beneficial as the condition of heaviness. The wilderness state was a retreat into “darkness” that resulted in a total loss of faith, love, joy, and assurance in ways that mirrored the diagnosis of religious melancholia. Wesley believed that the state arose from sin, sloth, or ignorance and presaged the departure of God’s spirit from the person.⁴³ The experience did not originate with God nor was it a tool through which God nurtured believers in the faith. Wesley even admitted that for many, the attending mental and physical anguish could be utterly devastating. Such was the terrible case of a woman Wesley encountered in Salisbury, who, though a convert, fell into what Wesley called a “black despair” that ultimately led to madness.⁴⁴

Interestingly, one of the very causes Wesley attributed to inducing the wilderness state was a failure to “‘agonize’ continually ‘to enter at the strait gate’” and “‘strive for the mastery’” that was so characteristic of the good fight. Not surprisingly, then, Wesley’s cure for the wilderness state took the form of a renewed battle against sin. By “putting away” all sin, repenting, and “shak[ing] yourself from the dust” by “wrest[ing] with God for the mighty blessing,” one

might hope to emerge from the darkness of the wilderness into the light of God's love.⁴⁵

Wesley's recognition of the potentially negative psychological states that the battle created never dissuaded him from stressing that the Christian's warfare was the necessary means for Christians to achieve the righteousness, peace, and joy for which they longed. Wesley reminded his followers that their redemption transformed them from death to life. Justification brought with it "the peace of God" and "joy unspeakable" that was "full of glory."⁴⁶ Christians could rejoice in their experience of the love of God that sanctified them from all sin and permitted them to "love all mankind, and more especially to [love] the children of God" even as this love "expelled the love of the world, the love of pleasure, of ease, of honour, or money; together with pride, anger, self-will, and every other evil temper—in a word, changing the 'earthly, sensual, devilish' mind into 'the mind which was in Christ Jesus.'"⁴⁷

Wesley reinforced this hope of triumph and redemption through battle in his frequent narratives of the life and death of his followers that he inserted in his published journals. By encountering the testimonial evidence of believers who successfully defended themselves against the attacks of sin and Satan, readers could be heartened to learn that even in death the redeemed believer could gain the victory.⁴⁸ Katherine Murray's narrative included in Wesley's published journals is typical of both the struggles and confidence Wesley anticipated for his followers. The narrative opens with Murray's initial struggle against sin and the "workings" of God that convicted her of sin at the age of thirteen. Her conviction steadily grew over the next several years until she received a frightening vision of the Lord that caused her to cry out and faint. This event set off a process of intense anguish in which "sleep departed from her; her food was tasteless, and she mingled her drink with weeping." At the same time, Katherine committed herself "never to rest till she found rest in him whom alone her soul desired."⁴⁹

The resolution of Katherine's suffering in her conversion provided reassurance to readers that God would deliver the earnest seeker. For Katherine, conversion included the reception of yet another vision, this time of Christ in majesty, who assured her that her sins had been forgiven. In common fashion, however, victory in one phase of the war merely opened up a new battlefield. Katherine now had to fight Satan, who terrorized her into thinking she was eternally damned. Her successful resistance throughout the course of her life led to a final and most crucial fight with Satan immediately prior to her death. Wesley

informs us that while on her deathbed the “devil made his last effort” to shake Katherine from her faith. “She was in a violent struggle about half an hour. Then she stretched out her hands and said, ‘Glory to Jesus! O love Jesus! Love Jesus! He is a glorious Jesus! He has made me fit for himself.’” She continued, “I have long been drinking wine and water here; now I shall drink wine in my Father’s kingdom.” After uttering this proclamation, Katherine died and “breathed her soul into the hands of her Redeemer.”⁵⁰

The victories of Katherine Murray and her coreligionists demonstrated to others the ability to persevere under the conflicts of the Christian life and offered encouragement that death could be met with confidence and joy rather than doubt and fear. Believers could even long for death and the final release from sin that accompanied it.⁵¹ The living celebrated a “good death” as Wesley did in a hymn sung before “the most beautiful corpse” he had ever seen:

Ah, lovely appearance of death! What sight upon earth so fair!
Not all the gay pageants that breathe, Can with a dead body compare!⁵²

Wesley stressed that whether in life or death the converted and sanctified believer was a conqueror. Though often beset by the world and their own sinful cravings, Christians were empowered by divine grace to become soldiers of Christ dedicated to victory over the forces of evil. Wesley implored Christians to act vigorously in pursuit of salvation. If they failed to consider seriously the real war surrounding them, they could fall prey to complacency and enter the trap of Satan that destroyed body and soul. If watchful, however, Christians could gain victory in the “good fight,” free themselves from sin, and bask in the pleasures of divine love.

The Battle Intensified: The Christian’s Fight Against Satan

Katherine Murray’s death narrative presents the Christian’s fight as not only against sin and desire for the comforts of a fallen world, but also against Satan. The power that Wesley and his fellow Methodists granted Satan ran counter to the Enlightenment’s skepticism about the supernatural and the direct intervention of the divine in earthly events. Wesley insisted on the pervasive influence of spiritual powers, both benevolent and malevolent, in the daily affairs of human beings. Wesley testified to horrifying demonic possessions, cases of witchcraft,

and miraculous wonders, begging skeptics to account for these through scientific or natural means.⁵³ In this way, Wesley reflected what H. C. Erik Midelfort has called “the awkward and ungainly transition to secular modernity” in the eighteenth century.⁵⁴ The effects of the Enlightenment, the rise of modern science, and disillusionment with the controversial witchcraft trials of the seventeenth century undermined eighteenth-century belief in supernaturalism, demons, and miracles, though the process was far slower to take root and more uneven than many have presumed. Belief in wonders, in contrast to enlightened skepticism, endured and even flourished in many areas of eighteenth-century western Europe, both Catholic and Protestant.⁵⁵

Wesley’s England exhibited the tensions and contradictions prevalent in Europe as a whole. Claims of demon possession and witchcraft continued throughout the early modern period. John Milton’s epic poem *Paradise Lost* gave new life to literary images of Satan in the seventeenth century and joined Dante Alighieri’s fourteenth-century poem *The Divine Comedy* as Western literature’s most detailed and influential depiction of Satan, demons, and hell. The figure of the devil and the demonic ability to harm remained a fixture in the consciousness of most early modern English, but three factors bequeathed to the eighteenth century a more moderate demonology. First, the widespread Protestant belief that the age of miracles ceased with the writing of the New Testament directly influenced the means with which English Protestants addressed demon possession. In the face of preternatural assaults, English Protestants rejected dramatic exorcisms as superstitious and more often turned to what they identified as natural means to overcome possession, including prayer, fasting, and Bible reading.⁵⁶ Here natural means for expelling evil intermixed with preternatural causes to retain the explanatory power that belief in devils and possession entailed for intractable cases of sickness, suffering, and natural disasters, while reducing dependence on supernatural intervention to cure them.

A second factor in the moderation of English demonology is that though cultural expressions of Satan’s physical appearance and belief in his role in witchcraft persisted in early modern England, Protestants increasingly emphasized mental temptations as Satan’s most powerful tool. The main site of conflict with Satan shifted away from the body to the conscience. In response, prayer, faith, and an understanding of the meaning of temptation became the most important weapons to counter Satan’s attacks. The impact was not a decline in demonism, but a change in its power and implications away from the body and toward the mind.⁵⁷

Finally, by the turn of the eighteenth century, the philosophical, religious, and scientific transformations generated by the likes of Descartes, Locke, and Newton began to profoundly influence English thought and culture. The intellectual elite envisioned the universe functioning independent of the actions of spiritual beings, instead operating in an orderly fashion according to natural laws. Rationalism insisted that religion ought to be subjected to rational analysis, and empiricism emphasized the priority of sense observation as the foundation of knowledge. These shifts left little room for the influence of demonic powers in the workings of the world, a result that Jeffrey Burton Russell argues helped pave the way for the emergence of notions of the devil as simply a function of the human personality, a symbol of human evil rather than a literal, embodied creature.⁵⁸

English Protestants' increased scrutiny of the devil did not translate into a wholesale purging of the Evil One. In fact, the eighteenth century witnessed vigorous debates about the devil. In England, this controversy appears in the continued popularity of early modern defenses of demons and witchcraft, including a text influential on John Wesley, *Saducismus Triumphatus; or, Full and Plain Evidence Concerning Witches and Apparitions*, but also in the ways that eighteenth-century English writers engaged in fierce contestations over the interpretation of New Testament passages describing demonic possession.⁵⁹ In 1737, Anglican clergyman Arthur Ashley Sykes (c. 1684–1756), motivated by his assumptions about the incredulity of demonic possession, sought to recast the interpretation of biblical passages normally associated with Satanic affliction. In *An Inquiry Into the Meaning of the Demoniacks in the New Testament*, Sykes sought to challenge the traditional interpretation of possession narratives on two fronts. First, Sykes asserted that ancient writers used the Greek word “daimon” as a literary device to describe wicked human beings rather than Satan’s fallen angels. By referring to one’s opponents as seducing spirits that tempt humans to do evil, biblical writers, Sykes argued, harnessed a powerful rhetorical argument in order to discredit their enemies and discourage believers from associating with them.⁶⁰

When he turned to the miracles of Jesus, which seemed to suggest that Jesus literally exorcised demons from the bodies of stricken followers, Sykes resorted to a different understanding of “daimon,” one influenced by Greek cosmology that equated demons with the souls of the dead rather than devils. These crea-

tures were not generally thought to possess human bodies, but only to cause natural illnesses that science could now explain. Thus, the malevolent work of a dead soul made the “demoniack” infirm. In Sykes’s view, Jesus had no intention of suggesting human beings were physically possessed by demons. Rather, the Son of God merely used common language to convey the essential message of his power over sickness.⁶¹

The strength of opposition to Sykes’s works from the likes of Anglicans Thomas Church and Leonard Twells and from the Newtonian antitrinitarian William Whiston illustrates the devil’s vitality, even within educated circles.⁶² Sykes’s critics attacked his departure from what they considered the “literal” and most obvious reading of both the Old and New Testament’s claims to demonic possession. Marshalling their own biblical passages, defenders of Jesus’ exorcism of evil spirits hoped to show that the New Testament authors and the church’s own traditions understood “daimon” to be an apostate spirit who had the power to harm and possess human beings. These writers further countered that their reading of extra-biblical sources showed that ancient readers did not universally understand demons to be only the souls of the dead.⁶³

These interpretive controversies reached their highest pitch in the very year John Wesley underwent his Aldersgate experience. Though Wesley did not interject himself into these particular arguments, he revealed his predilections in his later ministry and writings. David Hempton has recently summarized the positive influence of several aspects of the Enlightenment on Wesley and the early Methodist movement, including Wesley’s “indebtedness to Lockean empiricism and sensationalist psychology, his endorsement, within limits, of the scientific method, his boyish enthusiasm for all kinds of experimentation, his fundamentally optimistic emphasis on human progress,” and some of Wesley’s most deeply held commitments to “religious toleration, advocacy of slavery abolition, concern for bodily and mental health, and dislike of all persecution and violence.”⁶⁴ While the influence of Enlightenment was significant, it did not seem to substantially influence Wesley’s demonology or his belief in the miraculous in general. Wesley’s thought in these matters remained largely traditional. Wesley’s diaries record fantastic tales of supernatural visions of heaven and hell and miraculous wonders. In Wesley’s telling, bodies literally burned before his face, the dead haunted the living, and Satan, whom Wesley described as the “prince of this world,” the “enemy” of Christian souls, and “the god of this world,” assumed the

most destructive role within the cosmos.⁶⁵ Though Wesley discussed Satan and demons more frequently in his journals than in his sermons, he set forth his most clearly articulated ideas about the origin and work of Satan and demons in his sermon “Of Evil Angels,” published in 1783.⁶⁶ Like so many before him, Wesley acknowledged that Christians inevitably struggled against evil spiritual beings. These creatures were once holy angels, but their apostasy forced God to cast them from heaven. Full of rage and malice, “Satan and all his angels are continually warring against us” by looking for any moment of weakness or vulnerability to exploit to destroy humankind.⁶⁷

With his Protestant forebears, Wesley strongly emphasized Satan’s capacity to tempt believers to sin and doubt. Satan’s “fiery darts” often took the form of mental assaults that provoked questions in believers’ minds about their own salvation, undermined their desire to perform good works, and aroused evil “passions or tempers.”⁶⁸ Wesley even explained that no evil was committed in the world, even that by humans, apart from the leading of Satan and his demons.⁶⁹

But “Of Evil Angels” also exposes Wesley’s more traditional view that Satan’s work extended beyond merely mental temptation. Departing from many of his contemporaries, Wesley clearly emphasized Satan’s threat to the body. Wesley explained to his followers that “[i]f he [Satan] cannot entice men to sin he will (so far as he is permitted) put them to pain” by causing diseases, “accidents,” and nervous disorders that either incapacitated or killed people.⁷⁰

If Wesley presented his most intentional reflections about Satan and demons in “Of Evil Angels,” he offered his clearest picture of the devil ravaging mind, body, and soul in his journals. Wesley repeatedly bemoaned cases of Satan’s assaults, particularly during his relation of his followers’ conversion narratives. In these narratives, Wesley chronicled the devil’s temptations to sin and doubt as more than nuisances that delayed conversion. He portrayed such attacks as provoking horrifying mental anguish, as in his publication of a Quaker woman’s conversion narrative in which Satan inspired visions of hell along with a belief that devils continually surrounded her. The woman explained that her trauma became so great that she feared she would go insane.⁷¹ For others, Satan’s temptation went so far as to cause them to contemplate suicide.⁷²

Wesley made clear his belief that Satan’s attacks continued after conversion in his repeated warning drawn from 2 Corinthians 2:11 not to let Satan “gain an advantage” and in his dramatic accounts of his followers’ deaths.⁷³ Again

and again these narratives related Satan's final attempt at derailing a person's salvation in the days and even moments prior to death.⁷⁴ Those like Lucy Godshall, who found herself facing death in "darkness and heaviness," had to fight against Satan's attempt to "sift them like wheat" during their moments of greatest weakness.⁷⁵

Wesley's journals also confirm the belief he articulated in "Of Evil Angels" that Satan's work extended beyond mental temptation to bodily affliction. Wesley attributed uncontrollable bodily movements, including running, jumping, and laughter, as well as many physical illnesses to the work of Satan.⁷⁶ Wesley's association of some bodily afflictions with witchcraft exposed a particular tension with many eighteenth-century religious leaders. For instance, Wesley diagnosed Sally Simpson, who in 1760 experienced horrible bodily afflictions, including suddenly falling to the ground, choking as if someone was strangling her, beating herself, speaking incoherently, and attempting to throw herself on the house fire, as bewitched.⁷⁷

Wesley described even worse physical cases than Simpson's in his accounts of Satan's direct invasion of the body through possession. Take, for instance, the terrifying case of Sally Jones. Wesley found her:

. . . on the bed, two or three holding her. It was a terrible sight. Anguish, horror, and despair, above all description, appeared in her pale face. The thousand distortions of her whole body showed how the dogs of hell were gnawing her heart. The shrieks intermixed were scarce to be endured.

In the midst of her trials, Sally received a vision of Satan and cried out, "Come, good devil come. Take me away. You said you would dash my brains out. Come, do it quickly. I am yours. I *will* be yours. Come just now. Take me away." When Wesley returned to the woman four days later, he found that "her pangs increased more and more; so that one would have imagined, by the violence of the throes, her body must have been shattered to pieces."⁷⁸

On another occasion, Wesley referred to a letter he received describing a woman against whom "Satan raged vehemently." The letter explained that the woman had to be tied to the bed to protect her from killing herself. Nevertheless:

He [Satan] caused her to roar in an uncommon manner, then to shriek, so that it went through our heads, then to bark like a dog. Then her face was

distorted to an amazing degree, her mouth being drawn from ear to ear, and her eyes turned opposite ways and starting as if they would start out of her head. Presently, her throat was so convulsed that she appeared to be quite strangled. Then the convulsions were in her bowels, and her body swelled as if ready to burst. At other times she was stiff from head to foot as an iron bar, being at the same time wholly deprived of her senses and motion, not even breathing at all. Soon after, her body so writhed, one would have thought all her bones must be dislocated.⁷⁹

In classically Protestant form, Wesley did not resort to exorcism to heal the demon-possessed. Rather, Wesley's approach to ridding evil spirits followed the typical method of prayer, fasting, and Bible reading, though Wesley also occasionally included hymn singing as well.⁸⁰ Some found relief relatively quickly while others labored on for some time with only occasional respite.

Wesley recommended a similar response to those suffering from Satan's assaults that fell short of bodily possession. First, Wesley called his followers to "put on the whole armour of God" defined simply in "Of Evil Angels" as "universal holiness."⁸¹ Holiness gave strength to the believer to stand firm against "all the force and stratagems of the enemy." Second, Wesley reminded believers to make use of the "the shield of faith" and the "helmet of salvation" to resist Satan's temptations.⁸² These defensive weapons used against Satan's most powerful "malice and rage" allowed the believer to turn the tide of the battle and assume the offensive, to "attack in the name of the Lord, and in the power of his might; and 'he [Satan] will' soon 'flee from you.'" A vigilant watch against sin and fervent prayer for power became the critical weapons of the offensive warrior. Even so, Wesley clarified that the believer finally earned victory through God's deliverance of the loyal soldier. "If you continue" to fight, Wesley said, "the God whom you love and serve will deliver you." The converse is apparent. Those who did not fight would fall prey to Satan's destructive power.⁸³

The nature and importance of Satan's aggressive attack of both mind and body, when coupled with the power of sin and the temptation of the world, confirmed Wesley's claim that the Christian life was nothing less than continual warfare. In response, Christians fought in the hope that by "treading down" the evil threats plaguing them they might gain victory over their foes. Constant vigilance helped ward off any moment of weakness that could spell ruin for the soldier of God and, more importantly, ensured the glorious prize of eternal life.

Fighting and the Religious Experience of the Divine

Those seeking respite from the terror and exhaustion of battle against sin, the world, and Satan found little solace in many of Wesley's depictions of the believer's interactions with God. In addition to the war against their trio of dark enemies, Wesley also insisted that believers became victims within a divine battle to deliver humanity to salvation. This form of conflict moved beyond the Christian's battle against evil to dominate critical aspects of human interaction with a God defined as inherently good.

Wesley identified the foundation of this divine struggle in the enmity that characterized the preconverted relationship between humanity and the divine. Human sin awakened divine judgment, most commonly when people willingly interfered with the divine plan. For instance, Wesley witnessed an example of "awful providence" after a man cursed, blasphemed, and "hindered the work of God." Wesley recalled that "God laid his hand upon him" and two days later he died.⁸⁴ For Wesley, divine justice demanded the punishment of all evildoers, whether in this life or the next.

Even the intimate relationship with God, which Methodists claimed was one of the fruits of the new birth, depended upon believers retaining obedience to God's commands. If they failed in this responsibility, they too could experience divine wrath. Francis Coxen, a former follower who Wesley explained opted to pursue a less rigorous faith, is a good example. While walking home one evening, Coxen mysteriously fell to the ground with a broken leg. Wesley said that Coxen knew immediately what happened to him. God had "overtaken" him because of his disobedience. Unfortunately, even Coxen's repentance could not save his mortal life, though Wesley indicated that it at least saved him from eternal damnation.⁸⁵

Wesley made human rebellion and divine punishment common features of the divine-human interaction. He saw the conversion process as the most conflict-ridden aspect of the relation between God and humanity. Wesley often characterized the process of conversion as humans "wrestling" God for deliverance from sin.⁸⁶ Wrestling God seems to derive from the biblical narrative of the patriarch Jacob wrestling the angel of the Lord in Genesis 32:22-32. In this passage, the angel accosted Jacob at the ford of Jabbok but could not overpower

him. The angel proceeded to dislocate Jacob's hip but still Jacob refused to relent until the angel gave him a blessing. John's brother Charles memorialized the event in his hymn "Wrestling Jacob," which Isaac Watts said "was worth all the verses he himself had written."⁸⁷ In John Wesley's *Explanatory Notes Upon the Old Testament*, Wesley wrote that Jacob's encounter with the angel for a blessing consisted of both a corporeal and spiritual wrestling. Wesley concluded believers should follow Jacob's examples and struggle with God for divine favor. "Those that would have the blessing of Christ must be in good earnest, and be importunate for it." Christians must aggressively contend with God for what they seek and maintain their faith in God's rewards despite discouragement.⁸⁸

The command to wrestle with God might suggest a disinclination on God's part to bestow divine favor upon human beings, but Wesley argued otherwise. The only reason Jacob did not succumb to the angel, Wesley insisted, was that "it was not on his own strength that he wrestled, nor by his own strength that he prevails; but by strength derived from heaven." God empowered Jacob to wrestle the angel in the first place. Wrestling with God was therefore not an attempt to obtain what God refused to bestow, but to demonstrate the commitment and desire of the person undertaking the conflict. Jacob's willingness "that all his bones be put out of joint than he will go away without" the blessing made him exemplary for believers. Wesley concluded that Jacob's faith in divine blessing despite discouragement pointed the believer to a life committed to vigilantly contending with God through divine power for spiritual and temporal blessings.⁸⁹

In the published form of his sermon "The Wilderness State," Wesley underscored just how important the believer's pursuit of divine blessings through fighting might be. In the course of the sermon Wesley referred to Matthew 11:12 to reinforce the struggle that Christians must endure to "strive for the mastery." Wesley commanded Christians to "take the kingdom of heaven by violence," by which he meant that Christians must rush into the kingdom like "those who are taking a City by Storm."⁹⁰ Christians, like soldiers, must use every effort to realize their redemption.

Wesley nuanced his understanding of this aggressive expression of piety as critical to the struggle against God by arguing that Christians could never claim the status of conqueror like they could against sin, the world, and Satan. The battle with God placed the divine in the role as conqueror over the defeated human. God must "wound" or "kill" the believer as part of the conversion process.⁹¹ Such experiences found their antecedents in biblical narratives such as

James 4:12: “There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy.” By referencing such passages, Wesley constructed an image of God as a warrior who vanquished converts in order to deliver them to salvation.

Wesley’s link between the conversion experience and a divine wounding harks back to English and American Puritans who spoke similarly in the seventeenth century. Thomas Hooker’s massive seventeenth-century analysis of the movement of the soul toward salvation identified a “Holy kind of violence” that saved sinners from the entrenched hold of sin over them.⁹² The power of sin required an equally powerful counterforce to tear humans away from their ignorance and blindness. That such “violence” could take bodily shape in experiences like falling out or feeling physical pain did not appear in any widespread way among Protestants, however, until the eighteenth century, when the experience became a particularly prominent and contentious part of the religious revivals then occurring on both sides of the Atlantic. Revivalist supporters from a host of denominations, from Presbyterian and Congregationalist to Baptist and Methodist, attributed bodily exercises to the work of God.⁹³ In most cases, the person trembled, groaned, screamed, and/or fell motionless to the ground “as dead” under divine power.⁹⁴ Wesley told of both men and women who were “seized with violent pain” that included feeling “just as if a sword was running through them; others, that they thought a great weight lay upon them, as if it would squeeze them to the earth.” Further accounts included people who felt they were “quite choked so that they could not breathe” and some “that it was as if their heart, as if all their inside, as if their whole body, was tearing all to pieces.”⁹⁵ Still others found the very signs of life departing from them, as did one woman whom Wesley recalled showed almost no signs of breath or a pulse.⁹⁶

For converts who underwent such bodily experiences, the theological language of death and new life in Christ assumed tangible forms, and the trauma to the convert was often considerable. Some found only temporary relief from their conditions after the passing of days and even weeks.⁹⁷ Wesley recorded in his journals that one woman suffered such horrible bodily forms of conviction that she had to be tied to her bed, while another suffered so greatly that Wesley recalled, “you would have imagined she could not live a moment.”⁹⁸ In the face of such suffering, Wesley admitted it was sometimes even difficult for him to watch.⁹⁹

The gravity of such experiences that served as a precursor to the feelings of joy and love that marked, albeit in some cases temporarily, the resolution

of conversion, raise important questions about Wesley's understanding of the function of bodily religious experiences. What connection did such experiences have to the theological claim that the person moved from spiritual death to new life? Ann Taves argues that Wesley attributed bodily experiences of falling, trembling, and the like to the natural effects of what Wesley called the "witness" or "testimony" of the Holy Spirit to the person of their sinfulness and rightful damnation. The individual's awakening to her or his own sinfulness shocked the person to such a degree that the only response could be to scream, cry, tremble, and even faint at the depths of his or her own degradation. God did not directly cause the bodily movements, and they were not supernatural. Rather, Wesley saw the movements as natural responses of humans to the supernatural testimony of the spirit.¹⁰⁰

Taves's interpretation likely reflects Wesley's most careful analysis of bodily exercises, though at various points Wesley offered far more ambiguous accounts. Even in moments when he seemed to attribute bodily movements to one source, Wesley opened up the possibility for their origins in another. In one revealing passage of his journals, Wesley attributed bodily exercises to the witness of the spirit, but then also explained "I have no doubt but it was Satan 'tearing' them, as they were 'coming' to Christ." Similarly, Wesley wrote of a woman who attended one of his meetings and experienced "violent fits" in which she "strongly convulsed from head to foot and shrieked in a dreadful manner." Wesley concluded that an "unclean spirit did tear her indeed." Thus, bodily effects could originate from Satan's attempt to disrupt the conversion process as well as from divine conviction.¹⁰¹

On the other hand, Wesley suggested that people could also experience bodily exercises as a natural response to God's love. Like those exercises that resulted from conviction, these experiences also flowed from a divine influence and were a human response to a divine witness rather than a direct act of God. However, the witness was not one of wrath or condemnation as in the cases mentioned above, but love. Wesley recalled a woman named Margaret who could not speak or move because "the love of God so overflowed her soul."¹⁰² Similarly, Wesley received a letter describing a revival near Everton in which a man "was so filled with the love of God during morning prayer that he dropped down and lay as one dead for two hours."¹⁰³

Finally, Wesley described ambiguous occasions of bodily exercises that suggest God might have been more directly involved in the movements than simply

testifying through the Holy Spirit. Wesley's language suggests God was the first cause of the experience. In narrating bodily movements, Wesley referred to "the hand of God pressing them [those falling] to the earth."¹⁰⁴ Wesley also wrote of what he called a "peculiar" case in which a woman cried aloud like others under conviction. What made the woman's case unusual was that she felt "the sufferings of Christ," including "sharp bodily pain, as if she had literally suffered with him."¹⁰⁵ Other people, Wesley said, felt "the terrible wrath of God" course through their bodies.¹⁰⁶ These examples show that whether because of imprecision in his language or genuine ambiguity in his thinking, Wesley could imply a direct role for God in causing bodily exercises.

It is important to note that the prospect of a more direct role for God in bodily experience is not alien to other ways that Wesley imagined divine action. Wesley's broader theological system allowed God to cause bodily pain and discomfort to bring about some greater good, including salvation. God had to subdue human hearts, break their wills, and eradicate their sinful attachments to the world. These changes could only come through an act of divine power likened to a wound or even a death. In Wesley's third discourse on the Sermon on the Mount, he explained how God caused suffering, particularly in the form of persecution, in order to chastise the wayward and foster spiritual growth. Physical suffering became the "medicine" by which God "healed" humans of their sins and their attachments to the world and created a deeper communion with the divine.¹⁰⁷

More generally, E. Brooks Holifield found that Methodists imputed religious significance to physical suffering by identifying it with the suffering of Christ. Suffering allowed Christians to imitate Christ and in the process come to more fully understand the sacrifice that Christ made for human beings. At the same time, suffering could permit Christians to better identify with other sufferers and thus more effectively engage them in acts of love.¹⁰⁸

All these examples suggest that Wesley's writings sustain at least three possible ways of interpreting the causes of what he considered legitimate bodily exercises: a natural human response to the witness of the spirit concerning either a person's sin or God's love, direct divine force, and Satan's resistance to the person's conversion.¹⁰⁹ Good reason exists to think that a combination of these could also account for bodily exercises. Wesley's analysis of bodily movements in the second volume of his journals explained that those who could give a coherent relation of their experiences said that "the Word of God" in the form of the testi-

mony of the spirit “pierced their souls” and convinced them of “inward, as well as outward, sin. They *saw and felt* the wrath of God abiding on them and were afraid of his judgments” [emphasis added]. In addition to the wrath displayed by God, Satan attempted to convince them that they could not be saved and struck their bodies with pain that resulted in their “loud and bitter cries” as well as their falling to the ground, feelings of being torn, and so on.¹¹⁰ In this passage God and Satan both caused bodily effects.

Stephen Gunter suggests that by the end of Wesley’s life the preacher’s views on bodily movements changed such that Wesley doubted that God played even an indirect role in their manifestation.¹¹¹ For Gunter, bodily exercises resulted from the level of anxiety seekers felt when confronted by claims about their impending damnation. The mental stress derived from fears about their damnation caused people to fall out and scream. Gunter contends that largely under the influence of Charles Wesley, John began to emphasize a more optimistic message to people, saying that if they were earnest seekers of God they would eventually receive saving grace. This message lessened people’s fears and the concomitant mental anxiety, thus taking away the cause of bodily exercises.¹¹² Ann Taves has argued, however, that while Wesley acknowledged that bodily experiences declined after a few years, he never claimed that they disappeared altogether nor was he ever willing to grant that God did not play a role in at least some of the experiences.¹¹³

Wesley’s association of bodily religious exercises with “the *natural consequences*” of divine conviction and his willingness to allow that Satan also occasionally imitated these exercises for demonic purposes seems to have been Wesley’s most refined theological reflection on bodily experiences.¹¹⁴ Yet the ambiguity with which he addresses the issue in his writings can only leave his interpreters to puzzle over whether Wesley might have entertained other possible relationships between the divine and bodily religious experiences. In all cases, Wesley steeped the experience of conversion in aggression. Christians had to wrestle God with the effort of an attacking army even though victory could come only in defeat as God “wounded” believers both metaphorically and literally in order to heal them. Only after God’s successful battle with the penitent could the believer claim redemption.

The reward for success in this conflict, according to Wesley, included spiritual redemption as well as temporal power and authority. “They that by faith have power in heaven, have thereby as much power on earth as they have occa-

sion for. . . . Those that resolve though God slay them yet to trust in him, will at length be more than conquerors.¹¹⁵ Though their battle might be difficult, believers could take solace that God would provide for both their spiritual and temporal needs. An integral part of this provision entailed the formation of a religious community bound by the shared experience of the new birth. Wesley explained in “The Marks of the New Birth” that conversion gives rise to a love of God *and neighbor* that extended to the willingness to sacrifice all things, even one’s life, for another.¹¹⁶ While this ethic applied to all humans, whether redeemed or not, it imposed itself most strongly on those who shared the intimate bonds of the new birth and could truly call their fellow believers “brothers” and “sisters” in Christ. This new community, formed in the present world through a reconstituted relation with God, prefaced the final heavenly state in which “an intimate” and “uninterrupted union with God” will lead to “the continual enjoyment of all the creatures in him!”¹¹⁷

John Wesley’s spirituality depended heavily upon the notion of conflict between saint and sinner, good and evil, the redeemed and the demonic. Although Wesley sought the salvation of human beings from all sin, a restored relationship with the divine, and an intimate community of faith bound together by the new birth, he argued that Christians could only realize these aims through intense struggle defined in terms of warfare. That Christians participated in a fight extended from metaphorical ways of understanding believers’ struggle to overcome sin in their life to very tangible encounters with Satan, human beings, and even the divine that could leave humans physically and psychologically wounded. Simply stated, Christians needed to fight, and Wesley celebrated when a believer reached the end of his or her life having “conquered” sin, Satan, and the world. Through fighting the good fight, even as God conquered penitents in conversion, believers moved from enmity with the divine to an intimate relationship in which they worked for the transformation of their communities and the fruits of redemption for eternity in heaven.

The battles Wesley found so important for the Christian life also came to shape Wesley’s view of temporal struggles, whether in the form of England’s wars or personal conflicts between individual human beings. Wesley often discouraged Christians from using force against other human beings. The Christian’s battle was not against “flesh and blood.” Yet at various points throughout his life, Wesley allowed for the possibility that aspects of the Christian’s fight might

intersect with that of the state. In this intersection the boundaries of the good fight became more permeable and contested as Wesley's followers struggled to apply the fight to their own lives and communities. Most preserved the idea that fighting provided one of the central means of facilitating spiritual growth and creating communal relations. Yet within different economic, political, and theological contexts, Wesley's followers either could not or would not adhere to Wesley's exact formulations of the good fight and who the object of that fight might be. While some focused on a purely spiritual fight, others justified social violence by rooting it within the context of the good fight against sin, the world, and Satan. For nearly all Methodists, the terms of warfare dramatically shifted from Wesley's design.