

# **John Wesley, Medical Reform, and the Methodist Revival in 18<sup>th</sup> Century England**

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## **Introduction**

John Wesley understood the Methodist revival as an “extraordinary” work of God designed to help “spread scriptural holiness” throughout England and the rest of the world.<sup>1</sup> In the early years of the revival, the audience that Wesley most clearly and effectively targeted was the working poor and those middle-class skilled workers and craftsmen that had been detrimentally affected by the rise of industry in the eighteenth century. In his publishing and ministry efforts, Wesley was keenly aware of his audience. In his theological writing, the well-read fellow of Lincoln College attempted to write “plain truth for plain people.” He insisted that in order to be accessible to ordinary people, “I abstain from all nice and philosophical speculations, from all perplexed and intricate reasonings.... I labour to avoid all words which are not easy to be understood...”<sup>2</sup> He also sought to provide for some of the this-worldly needs of the poor in the Methodist societies by introducing a lending society, a school, accessible educational resources, a poor house, and free medical dispensaries.

Wesley’s work in medicine was a particularly noteworthy dimension of the Methodist revival. He established a visitation program for the sick in Methodist societies, opened some of the first free medical dispensaries England, published new simplified versions of the works of

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase can be found in John Wesley’s “Large” Minutes.

<sup>2</sup> John Wesley, “Preface” to the *Sermons on Several Occasions*, *Works of John Wesley*, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 1:104.

well-known physicians, and wrote books of medical advice designed to be consumed by ordinary people. Through these written works, Wesley tried to provide tools to improve the public's knowledge of nutrition and medicine and also challenged new trends in the study of medicine which he thought were detrimental to society.

The goal of this essay is to explore how Wesley's understanding of medicine and theology were intertwined. Wesley's medical writings and practice were an expression of his soteriology. Wesley, who often used medical language in his sermons and discourses, believed that sin was the actual source of physical disease and sickness. What Wesley termed "inbeing" or original sin caused the distortion of the natural world and the introduction of sickness and frailty into humanity. Wesley believed the grand purpose of salvation was to heal the distortion of the image of God in human beings caused by this fall from the original state. Salvation was a present reality that encompassed God's entire work in healing this disease of sin. Wesley understood the restoration of the image of God referring to outward, as well as inner, wholeness. For this reason, the soteriological focus of the Methodist revival was not simply about bringing individuals to conversion but also the lifelong growth in holiness. The work of a revivalist or preacher did not end at the moment a believer faced conversion. Wesley's own approach to social ethics often reflected this emphasis and he frequently wrote and preached against issues that contributed to the rise of economic inequality in England. Wesley believed it was vital for Methodists to have increased access to medicine and medical knowledge in order to address the outward symptoms of inbeing sin - disease and frailty.

The first part of this essay explores the impetus for Wesley's medical work, his holistic understanding of salvation and his deep and abiding belief that the people called Methodists were called to serve the poor. The second section of the essay attempts to lay out a concise overview

of Wesley's understanding of medicine. His approach to medicine emphasized simple, practical treatments and a balanced approach to health that took the connection between the spirit and body seriously. In the final part of this paper the connection between Wesley's methodology to medicine and his understanding of sin and the goodness of God in creation is examined.

### **I. "My part is to improve the present moment": Wesley, Medicine, and the Poor**

Throughout much of his life, Wesley was fascinated with medicine and aspects of the human anatomy. His interest in medicine seems to have started during his student days at Oxford where he read medical texts by Robert Boyle and other scientists. This type of study was not altogether uncommon for students preparing for the ministry. During the seventeenth century those who were preparing for the Anglican priesthood studied the foundations of medicine. It was also fairly common for rural priests to offer medical advice to parishioners.<sup>3</sup> Wesley's reading in medicine intensified as he prepared for his ministerial role in Georgia. He rationalized, "I imagined I might be of some service to those who had no regular Physician among them."<sup>4</sup> He continued to read extensively in the field for much of the rest of his life, referencing around 100 different medical works in his writings.<sup>5</sup>

While a concern for the medical needs of parishioners was not entirely uncommon for an Anglican clergyman, the scope of Wesley's medical work was unusual and expansive by any measure. Wesley's interest in medicine was rooted in the belief that the work of salvation required attention to a person's welfare in this world, as well as the next. In *Farther Appeal to*

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<sup>3</sup> Randy L. Maddox, "John Wesley on Holistic Health and Healing," *Methodist History* 46 (2007), 5.

<sup>4</sup> John Wesley, *Plain Account of the People Called Methodists*, §XII.2, in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Rupert E. Davies (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 9:275.

<sup>5</sup> Maddox, "John Wesley on Holistic Health and Healing," 5.

*Men of Reason and Religion*, Wesley described salvation as “restoration of the soul to its primitive health.” He wrote,

By salvation I mean, not barely (according to the vulgar notion) deliverance from hell, or going to heaven, but a present deliverance from sin, a restoration of the soul to its primitive health, its original purity; a recovery of the divine nature; the renewal of our soul after the image of God...<sup>6</sup>

Wesley certainly believed that forgiveness from past sins was an important *part* of salvation. He was often critical of Christians who thought of salvation in such a limited way, insisting that salvation was more radical and far-reaching. He often defined salvation in therapeutic terms - sin was the disease that had corrupted human nature and religion was “God’s method of healing a soul which is thus diseased.”<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, Wesley thought of salvation in more holistic term. In salvation God sought heal the damage done to human beings by sin. This entailed the restoration of the entire human being – body and soul.<sup>8</sup> Methodists and, indeed, all Christians were called to be co-laborers with the Holy Spirit in helping to tend to the this-worldly, as well as spiritual, needs of all humanity.<sup>9</sup>

Wesley and the early Methodists were particularly moved by a deep concern to care for the quality of living and unmet medical needs of the poor.<sup>10</sup> Too often the poor lived in

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<sup>6</sup> John Wesley, *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion* in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. G.R. Craig (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 11:106.

<sup>7</sup> John Wesley, “Original Sin,” *Works* 1:395.

<sup>8</sup> Phillip Ott, “John Wesley on Health: A Word for a Sensible Regime,” *Methodist History* 18 (1980), 194-204; E. Brooks Holifield, *Health and Medicine in the Methodist Tradition: Journey Toward Wholeness* (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 18-22; and Maddox “John Wesley on Holistic Health and Healing,” 6-9.

<sup>9</sup> For a fuller explanation of sanctification, see Kenneth Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007); Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994); and Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley’s Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998).

<sup>10</sup> There are a number of works on Wesley that take seriously his commitment to standing in solidarity with the poor. Among the best known is Theodore W. Jennings, Jr. *Good News to the*

unhygienic conditions and consumed an unhealthy diet heavy in bread, beer, and gin. Physicians were costly, overworked, and usually unavailable to the poor and working class in England.<sup>11</sup> Hospitals and medical infirmaries also offered little relief for the poor. These facilities were notoriously dirty, uncomfortable, and dangerous; patients often shared beds and disease spread rampantly.<sup>12</sup> Eighteenth-century medical reformer John Howard lamented that hospitals were places where “white-washing of the wards is seldom or never practiced; and injurious prejudices against washing floors, and admitting fresh air, are suffered to operate.”<sup>13</sup> As an attempt to at least partially ameliorate the healthcare disparity between the poor and wealthy in eighteenth-century England, Wesley started a free medical dispensary at the Foundry in London in December 1746. Prior to that, he set up a visitation program for the sick in all the Methodist societies. The success of the London dispensary inspired Wesley to start medical ministries in Bristol and Newcastle.<sup>14</sup> His dispensaries were among the first of their kind in England.

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*Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990). Kenneth J. Collins describes the theological impetus of the mission of Methodism toward the poor well in *John Wesley: A Theological Journey* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003). Collins writes, “...he and the Methodist proclaimed a gospel of liberation to the downtrodden: from the wrenching guilt of sin on the one hand, and from its crippling power on the other,” (123).

<sup>11</sup> Manfred Marquardt, *John Wesley's Social Ethics: Praxis and Principles*, tr. John E. Steely and W. Stephen Gunter (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 27-29.

<sup>12</sup> Roy Porter, “Cleaning up the Great Wen: Public Health in Eighteenth-Century London,” *Medical History* 11 (1991), 61-75; A. Wesley Hill, *John Wesley Among the Physicians – A Study of 18<sup>th</sup> century Medicine* (London: Epworth Press, 1958), 3-4. Hill’s description is poignant, “Fear of draughts which rendered the wards at best fusty, the crude sanitary arrangements which must at times have filled them with strong offensive smells that intensified the constant maldour of putrescent wounds and sores, four-poster beds with straw mattresses and boxes under the bed for dirty linen, general lack of cleanliness and entire ignorance about infection – such conditions rendered these institutions breeding-grounds for the lethal typhus fever usually referred to as ‘hospital’ fever.”

<sup>13</sup> John Howard, *An Account of the Principal Lazarettos in Europe*, Second Edition (London: J. Johnson, D. Dilly, and T. Cadell, 1791), 141.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, Second Edition (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013), 186-187.

Wesley actually prescribed many of the medications given at the dispensaries himself, where his work was assisted only by an apothecary and a surgeon. In Wesley's estimate, the high expense of physicians and hospitals had made healthcare utterly unaffordable for the poor. He wrote,

...I was still in pain for many of the poor that were sick: there was so great an expense, and so little profit. ... I then asked the advice of several physicians...but still profited not...<sup>2</sup>. At length I thought of kind of a desperate expedient. 'I will prepare and give them a physic myself.' For six or seven and twenty years I had made anatomy and physic the diversion of my leisure hours; though I never properly studied them, unless for a few months when I was going to America, where I imagined I might be of some service to those who had no regular physician among them. I applied to it again. I took into my assistance an apothecary, and an experienced surgeon; resolving at the same time not to go out of my depth, but to leave all difficult and complicated cases to such physicians as the patients should choose.<sup>15</sup>

By Wesley's account, the dispensaries were quite successful. In its first five months alone Wesley estimated that he prescribed medicine to over 500 people at the London dispensary, many of whom were not even associated with the Methodist societies. Though, he lamented that while most patients would take the prescribed medications, "three in four would not" follow the "regimen prescribed."<sup>16</sup> Wesley did acknowledge his own limitations; he generally only treated chronic conditions, advising patients with acute illnesses to see a physician.

Predictably, Wesley's practice was met with criticisms from the medical establishment.<sup>17</sup> Even though the three largest medical schools in the United Kingdom – Oxford, Cambridge, and Edinburgh – were not graduating enough physicians a year to serve England's expanding population, the Royal College of Physicians, which was established in 1518, was attempting to

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<sup>15</sup> John Wesley, *Plain Account of the People Called Methodists*, §XII.1–2, *Works* 9: 275.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, §XII.6, *Works* 9: 276.

<sup>17</sup> For an excellent overview of the critiques of John Wesley's medical work see Randy Maddox, "Reclaiming the Eccentric Parent: Methodist Reception of John Wesley's Interest in Medicine," in *Inward and Outward Health: John Wesley's Holistic Concept of Medical Science, the Environment and Holy Living*, ed. Deborah Madden (London: Epworth, 2008), 15-47.

exert greater control over barber-surgeons, apothecaries, and other unlicensed medical practitioners in the eighteenth century.<sup>18</sup> Wesley remained adamant that the good accomplished by the dispensaries justified their ongoing operation. He insisted that much as the use of lay preaching was necessary because of the dangers of “irregular preaching,” the medical dispensaries were necessary because of the lack of availability of health care to the poor. Wesley reasoned that “My part is to improve the present moment.” He wrote,

For more than twenty years I have had numberless proofs that regular physicians do exceeding little good. From a deep conviction of this, I have believed it my duty, with these four months last past, to prescribe such medicines to six or seven hundred of the poor as I knew were proper for their several disorders. Within six weeks nine in ten of them who had taken these medicines were remarkably altered for the better; and many were cured of disorders under which they had labored for ten, twenty, forty years. Now, ought I to have let one of these poor wretches perish, because I was not a regular physician? to have said, “I know what will cure but I am not of the college: you must send for Dr. Mead. Dr. Mead had come in his chariot, the man might have been in his coffin. And when the doctor was come, where was his fee? What! He cannot live upon nothing! So, instead of an orderly cure, the patient dies; and God requires his blood at my hands!”<sup>19</sup>

Until regular physicians were available to more efficiently attend to the medical needs of the community, more expedient measures were necessary.

Due to high costs Wesley was only able to maintain the medical practice for a few years.<sup>20</sup> The close of the dispensaries did not end his engagement with the medical world or his

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<sup>18</sup> Hill, 2-3; James G. Donat, “Empirical Medicine in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century: The Rev. John Wesley’s Search for Remedies that Work,” *Methodist History* 44:4 (July 2006), 218; Maddox “John Wesley on Holistic Health and Healing,” 6; Ulrich Tröhler. *“To Improve the Evidence of Medicine”: The 18th Century British Origins of a Critical Approach* (Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh, 2000).

<sup>19</sup> “Letter to John Smith,” in *Works of the Late Rev. John Wesley*, ed. John Emory (New York: B. Waugh and T. Mason 1835), 6: 644.

<sup>20</sup> There is no detailed account of why the dispensaries actually closed. Wesley complained of the difficulties of acquiring medicine for the Bristol dispensary in a letter to Ebenezer Blackwell. From that, Hill hypothesized that in Bristol it was closed because of the difficulty of

attempt to improve the public's knowledge of treatments for ailments and illnesses. Wesley wrote voluminously on the subject of medicine for the next several decades. In 1745 he published his first medical tract, *A Collection of Receipts for the Use of the Poor*. In this brief 17 page booklet he suggested cures for 92-93 different illnesses with 227-237 remedies.<sup>21</sup> Two years later, he published the first edition of *Primitive Physic: An Easy and Nature Way of Curing Most Diseases*, which expanded on the previous work. This text contained treatments for a wide variety of ailments. Assuming a great deal of variability in terms of human susceptibility to illness and responsiveness to cures, Wesley offered many (upwards of thirty in some extreme cases) treatments for around half of the disorders listed in the book.<sup>22</sup>

Wesley published a number of other books and tracts on health over the course of his long life, including *A Letter to a Friend Concerning Tea*, *The Desideratum or Electricity Made Plain and Useful*, *Thoughts on the Sin of Onan, chiefly extracted from [Tissot]*, *Advice with Respect to Health, extracted from [Tissot]*, "Extract from [William] Cadogan on the Gout," and *An Estimate of the Manners of Present Times* (1782). He also frequently included pieces of medical advice in his private correspondence and the *Arminian Magazine*. In the style of *Primitive Physic*, each of these works was edited or written for a plain, uneducated audience.

Wesley's various medical writings were generally intended to increase knowledge and availability of health and medicine to the greater public, particularly the poor who could not afford the service of physicians. His writing on medical matters attempted to be accessible to even those with limited educations. For example, in later editions of the *Primitive Physic* he added "plain definitions of most distempers: not indeed accurate or philosophical definitions, but

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obtaining drugs from apothecaries and the existence of another free dispensary attached to the Bristol Infirmary. See, Hill, 46-48.

<sup>21</sup> James G. Donat, "Empirical Medicine in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century," 218.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 219. Donat adds, "Of the 333 disorders, 114 offer only one remedy, and 58 offer two."



such as are suited to men of ordinary capacities, and as may just enable them...to distinguish one disease from another.”<sup>23</sup> His medical publications were missional, in that they were intended to improve the lives of those of limited education and means.

## II. “cheap, safe, and easy medicines”<sup>24</sup>: Wesley’s Holistic Approach to Medicine”

In addition to wanting to increase the access of the poor to proper healthcare, Wesley was also deeply suspicious of current trends in medicine. Much as he aggrandized the early Church in his desire for the Methodism to be a restoration of “plain, old Christianity,”<sup>25</sup> Wesley greatly admired “primitive” medicine or the approach to healthcare of the previous generations. In actuality, most of the treatments and cures Wesley recommended were taken from contemporary and seventeenth century physicians. His insistence that he preferred the “primitive” physic was mostly an acknowledgement that he preferred time-tested cures learned through experimentation. He also worried about new trends in medicine that deemphasized the interconnectedness of the mind and body in favor of the use of dangerous drugs.

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<sup>23</sup> “Postscript” in Wesley, *Primitive Physic*, xvii; Deborah Madden, ‘A Cheap, Safe, and Natural Medicine’: *Religion, Medicine and Culture in John Wesley’s Primitive Physic* (London: Rodopi, 2007), 20-21. Madden explores the accessibility of *Primitive Physic* at great length in her text.

<sup>24</sup> Wesley, *Primitive Physic*, xvi.

<sup>25</sup> John Wesley, “The Character of a Methodist,” §II.17, in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Rupert E. Davies (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 9: 41. For a good description of Wesley’s fascination with primitive Christianity, see Geordan Hammond, *John Wesley in America: Restoring Primitive Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 13-44. Hammond summed it up, “This impulse to restore the purity of the early church was an established tradition within Anglicanism that was mediated to Wesley through his High Church predecessors including his parents, and the Nonjurors, Anglicans who declined to take the Oaths of Allegiance and Supremacy to William and Mary (r. 1689-1702 and 1689-94). For Wesley, primitive Christianity – especially as mediated to him through certain aspects of the High Church movement – was much more than a romantic ideal, it was a living tradition to be engaged both in the realms of academic study and Christian practice,” (13).

Wesley strongly believed that medical knowledge was gained through experimentation, not philosophical speculation. In his estimate, results were the proper criteria for deciding if a medical treatment was effective. In his *Primitive Physic*, Wesley often included phrases such as “Tried,” “I believe this never fails,”<sup>26</sup> and “I have frequently done this with success”<sup>27</sup> to provide hope to readers and evidence and demonstrate the usefulness of his empirical methods. Wesley wrote, “He is the best physician...not who talks best, or writes best, but who performs the most cures.”<sup>28</sup> *The Primitive Physic* is thought to have sold more copies than almost any other book written by Wesley, as it went through an astounding twenty-three editions during his lifetime.<sup>29</sup> From 1747 until his death in 1791, Wesley did his best to keep the book updated based on his reading and observations. In his study of the 17 extant editions of the *Primitive Physic*, James Donat noted that all editions taken together contained 333 disorders and 1,456 remedies. However, the 23<sup>rd</sup> edition of the text only contained 288 disorders and 824 remedies. Wesley was constantly updating the book, adding and subtracting disorders and cures based on experimentation and advances in the field.<sup>30</sup>

He worried the move of the medical field from experiment-based to theory-based had contributed to keeping time-tested treatments provided by God in nature “out of the reach of ordinary men.”<sup>31</sup> Replacing these cures were “compound medicine” that were often very expensive and contained potentially harmful chemicals. For example, Wesley worried about the

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<sup>26</sup> John Wesley, *Primitive Physic: Or An Easy and Natural Method of Curing Most Diseases*, 14<sup>th</sup> Edition (Bristol: William Pine, 1770), 48.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>28</sup> John Wesley, “May 9, 1767,” *The Works of John Wesley*, eds. W. Reginald Ward and Richard Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 22: 81. Wesley claimed to be quoting a “sensible man.” He was actually reflecting on the decline of a society in Ennis.

<sup>29</sup> Donat, “Empirical Medicine,” 218. Donat notes, “There are actually 24 edns, including a non-numbered version appearing in the first edn of his *Works*, vol. 25, pp. 3-149.”

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

<sup>31</sup> Wesley, *Primitive Physic*, vi-vii.

use of dangerous “Herculean” medicines such as opium, bark (which contained quinine), steel, and quicksilver.<sup>32</sup> Wesley’s own aversions to those medications were due to cost, perceived dangers, or, in some cases, personal experience. For example, he had some unpleasant experiences with Peruvian bark when a young man.<sup>33</sup> Wesley remembered,

...it may be esteemed huge want of sense, if not of modesty likewise, to contradict the skillful, in their own art: yea, some of the greatest names in *Europe*. But I cannot help it: When either the souls or lives of men are at stake, I dare not accept any man’s person. What I refer to, is his vehement recommendation of *Peruvian bark*, as “the only infallible remedy either for *mortifications* or *intermitting fevers*.” ...I object to this, 1. It is not an “infallible remedy” ...No, not even when administer’d by a very skilful physician, after evacuations of every kind. ...I myself took pound of it when I was young, for a common Tertian ague. And that after vomiting. Yet it did not, would not effect a cure. And I should probably have died of it, had I not been cured unawares, by drinking largely of *lemonade*.<sup>34</sup>

Wesley was convinced that the bark had brought on consumption. It should be noted, he had no strong objection to bark being taken as a liquid decoction. He was most concerned about powdered bark and some of the questionable practices related to the processing and distribution of it.<sup>35</sup> In general, Wesley favored older, established cures and methods of processing medicines.

Wesley was not altogether incorrect about current trends in medicine. In the universities, training was focused on helping physicians understand the core principles of medicine. They

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, xvi-xvii.

<sup>33</sup> Peruvian bark also known as cinchona bark or “Jesuit’s Bark” was often used to treat malaria. In 18<sup>th</sup> century England, physicians were experimenting with it to address a variety of maladies, including fevers. A-H. Maehle, “Four Early Clinical Studies to Assess the Effects of Peruvian Bark,” *James Lind Library Bulletin* (2011), <http://www.jameslindlibrary.org/articles/four-early-clinical-studies-to-assess-the-effects-of-peruvian-bark/>.

<sup>34</sup> Quoted from James G. Donat, “The Rev. John Wesley’s Extractions from Dr. Tissot: A Methodist *Imprimatur*,” *History of Science* 39 (2001), 294. From Wesley, “To the Reader” in his publication of Samuel Auguste Andre David Tissot’s *Advices with Respect to Health*. Tissot was, actually, one of the physicians that Wesley admired.

<sup>35</sup> Madden, “Pastor and Physician: John Wesley’s Cures for Consumption,” in *Inward and Outward Health*, 118-119.

believed that it was from these theoretical principles (which were still only partially understood in the eighteenth century) that practical rules could then be understood.<sup>36</sup> For that matter, in the eighteenth century many physicians were still enamored with humorism,<sup>37</sup> had only a superficial knowledge of anatomy, and even less knowledge about physiology.<sup>38</sup> In her exhaustive studies of medical science and the *Primitive Physic*, Deborah Madden has even argued that Wesley's practice was "well within the bounds of 'orthodox' practice."<sup>39</sup>

Wesley also critical of the increased professionalization of the role of physicians. He worried that many physicians were prescribing expensive and dangerous drugs and unnecessarily drawing out treatments for prestige and personal gain. In the preface to the *Primitive Physic*, Wesley took a particularly aggressive tone, accusing doctors of deliberately mystifying and complicating medicine for personal gain. He lamented,

Physicians now began so to be had in admiration, as persons who were something more than human. And profit attended their employ, as well as honour; so that they had ... reasons for keeping the bulk of mankind at a distance, that they might not pry into the mysteries of the profession. To this end, they increased those difficulties by design, which began in manner of accident. They filled their writings with abundance of technical terms utterly unintelligible to plain men. They affected to deliver their rules, and to reason upon them, in an abstruse and philosophical manner.<sup>40</sup>

He did not think all university-trained physicians were problematic. He endorsed the work of those medical authorities who emphasized more traditional methodologies. However,

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<sup>36</sup> Holifield, 32-33.

<sup>37</sup> Humorism was a system of medicine developed by Ancient Greek and Roman physicians. It maintained that four distinct bodily fluids maintained the proper balance in the body (blood was believed to be produced by the liver; yellow bile was thought to relate to anger and aggression; black bile in excess was believed to cause depression; and phlegm was thought to cause depression or sadness). Bleeding was thought to be a proper way to maintain this balance. Wesley rejected bleeding and humorism. See, Ray Porter, "What is Disease?" in *The Cambridge History of Medicine*, ed. Ray Porter (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 86-87.

<sup>38</sup> Hill, 3.

<sup>39</sup> Madden, "Pastor and Physician: John Wesley's Cures for Consumption," in *Inward and Outward Health*, 132; Madden, *A Cheap, Safe, and Natural Medicine*.

<sup>40</sup> Wesley, *Primitive Physic*, viii.

while a few of the over 250 cures in the *Primitive Physic* were from “books or conversation,” the overwhelming majority of the treatments were drawn from the works of physicians.<sup>41</sup> Wesley insisted that there were honorable physicians who prioritized simple, practical cures and put the patient’s interests above their own. Wesley maintained there were physicians “who have endeavoured (even contrary to their own interest) to reduce physic to its ancient standard: who have laboured to explode it out of all the hypotheses and fine spun theories, and to make it a plain intelligible thing, as it was in the beginning.”<sup>42</sup> In the 1747 preface to the *Primitive Physic*, Wesley listed Dr. Thomas Sydenham (1624-1689), “his Pupil” Dr. Thomas Dover (1660-1742), Dr. Hermann Boerhaave (1668-1739), and Dr. George Cheyne (1673-1742) as influences on the work.<sup>43</sup> He also frequently published the works of physicians. Notably, in 1769 he published extracts from Dr. Simon A.D. Tissot’s *Advice with Respect to Health* and in 1774 he published *An Extract from Dr. Cardogan’s Dissertation on the Gout, and all Chronic Diseases*. For that matter, toward the end of his life, Wesley also grew close to his personal physician (who was also a former lay preacher), John Whitehead.<sup>44</sup>

Among the physicians who most influenced Wesley was the Cheyne. Like Wesley, the deeply religious Cheyne emphasized a holistic approach to medicine, one that took seriously the connection between the mind, body, and soul. In the Galenic tradition, Cheyne maintained that the primary role of medicine is to assist nature in healing the patient. To that end, health required the proper ordering of the naturals and non-naturals. The natural included the elements, the body, human faculties, and humors. The non-naturals consisted of air, food, sleep, evacuations, motion,

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<sup>41</sup> “Letter to the Editor of *Lloyd’s Evening Post*” in *Lloyd’s Evening Post* (26-29 January 1776), 102.

<sup>42</sup> Wesley, *Primitive Physic*, viii.

<sup>43</sup> Donat, “Empirical Medicine,” 218.

<sup>44</sup> John Whitehead, *The Life of the Rev. John Wesley, M.A.* (London: J. E. Beardsley, 1793). Whitehead was one of the figures Wesley left his papers to and also one of Wesley’s first biographers.

and passions.<sup>45</sup> Wesley found this line of thinking consistent with his own primitive vision of medicine. He even concluded the preface to the *Primitive Physic* with a lengthy extract from Cheyne's *Rules of Health and Long Life* (1724). The portion of the *Rule* transcribed in the *Primitive Physic* carefully addressed each of the non-naturals, giving rules for "I...*The air we breathe*...II. ...*eating and drinking*...III. ...going to bed.... IV.... *exercise*...V...*Costiveness* ...VI. ...*The passions*..."<sup>46</sup>

For the most part, Wesley's advice on the non-naturals was immanently practical. The health regime he recommended in his various medical writings included regular exercise, proper hygiene, and good nutrition. He was, particularly, a stickler for cleanliness, even insisting that visitors to the sick "Be cleanly."<sup>47</sup> He also emphasized the importance of small portion meals, the dangers of tea and coffee on the "nerves," and the importance of proper hygiene. He even seemed to be aware of how bad health decisions can be habit forming. In his widely circulated 1748 tract, *A Letter to a Friend Concerning Tea*, Wesley warned of the ill effects of tea on the nerves. Recognizing how deeply entwined in the lifestyle of an individual a daily cup of tea was, he recommended a variety of alternatives including "Milk ... Water-gruel.... Sage green Balm, Mint, or Pennyroyal Tea, infusing only so much ... to change the Colour of the Water. ... ten or twelve other English Herbs. ...Foltron... Coco."<sup>48</sup>

Wesley was also concerned about the direct link between emotions ("the passions") and physical health. He worried that many physicians resorted to dangerous medications in their

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<sup>45</sup> George Cheyne, *An Essay on Health and a Long Life* (London: George Strahan, 1724), 5; see also, Philip Wesley Ott, "John Wesley and the Non-Naturals," *Preventive Medicine* 9 (1980): 578–584.

<sup>46</sup> Wesley, *Primitive Physic*, xi-xv. Costiveness is "constipation."

<sup>47</sup> John Wesley, *Plain Account of the People Called Methodists*, §XI.5, *Works* 9: 275.

<sup>48</sup> John Wesley, *A Letter to a Friend Concerning Tea* (London: A. MacIntosh, 1825) [original version was published on December 10, 1748], 9; "Foltron" was "a mixture of herbs to be had at many grocers..."

treatments, when lifestyle adjustments might better serve the patient. In *Primitive Physic*, Wesley cautioned “Till the passion, which caused the disease is calmed, medicine is applied in vain.”<sup>49</sup> He worried that when doctors encountered symptom likely caused by emotions, they “commonly term them *nervous*; a word that conveys to us no determinate idea, but it is a good cover for learned ignorance.”<sup>50</sup> Wesley insisted that sometimes these “nervous” disorders were the work of conviction of sin on a soul, the result of another physical ailment, or the product of overindulgence of alcohol or caffeinated beverages.<sup>51</sup> Insisting that “...the soul and body are united,” Wesley maintained that emotions could have a physiological effect on an individual.<sup>52</sup>

He cautioned against those physicians who ignored the connection between the mind and body. In his *Journal* on May 12, 1759, he reflected on the case of a poor woman with stomach pain. Wesley wrote,

I could not but remark the inexcusable negligence of most physicians in cases of this nature. They prescribe drug upon drug, without knowing a jot of the matter concerning the root of the disorder. And with knowing this, they cannot cure, though they can murder a patient. Whence came the woman’s pain? ... From fretting for the death of her son. And what availed medicines while the fretting continued? Why, then, do not all physicians consider how far bodily disorders are caused or influenced by the mind, and in those cases which are utterly out of their sphere, call in the assistance of a minister?<sup>53</sup>

Ailments with emotional or spiritual causes must be treated through pastoral care, not potentially dangerous medications. Years earlier during a visit to the infamous Bedlam Royal Hospital, Wesley observed that many of the poor psychiatric patients were being dosed with potentially

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<sup>49</sup> Wesley, *Primitive Physic*, xv.

<sup>50</sup> John Wesley, “Thoughts on Nervous Disorders; Particularly that which is Usually Termed Lowness of Spirits,” in *Works of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, ed. Thomas Jackson (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1872), 11: 515.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 515-520; Wesley, *A Letter to a Friend Concerning Tea*, 2-3.

<sup>52</sup> Wesley, “Thoughts on a Nervous Disorder,” 519.

<sup>53</sup> John Wesley, “May 12, 1759,” *The Works of John Wesley*, eds. W. Reginald Ward and Richard Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 21: 190; Philip W. Ott, “John Wesley on Mind and Body: Toward an Understanding of Health as Wholeness,” *Methodist History* 27 (1989), 71-72.

dangerous medicine as opposed to having the root cause of their condition examined. He lamented that patients were isolated from conversation, loved ones, and “innocent entertainment of the mind,” while

forced by the main strength of those,

“Who laugh at human nature and compassion,”

to take drenches of nauseous, perhaps torturing medicines, which you know you have no need of now, but know not how soon you may possibly by the operation of these very drugs on a tender and weak constitution.<sup>54</sup>

Wesley’s concern about the relationship between the body and mind, as Phillip Ott noted, “antedates the contemporary interest in a more wholistic understanding of health.”<sup>55</sup>

### **III. “he governs by second causes”: Theology and Wesley’s Medical Empiricism**

Wesley’s empirical methodology was grounded in two theological assumptions - that sickness was the result of sin and that the world was created by a benevolent deity. Wesley maintained that death, decay, and sickness were the punishment for sin. In his preface to the *Primitive Physic*, Wesley stated unequivocally, “When man came first out of the hands of the great Creator, clothed in body as well as in soul, with immortality and incorruption, there were no place for physic, or the art of healing.... he knew no pain, no sickness, weakness, or bodily disorder.”<sup>56</sup> This idea that sin distorted the soul, the body, and nature itself was deeply grounded in the Christian tradition, most famously espoused by Augustine of Hippo who associated human free will with the corruption of the natural world. The association of sin with disease was

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<sup>54</sup> John Wesley, *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, Part I*, §III.17, *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. G.R. Craig (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 11:200. Wesley was describing the sources of “real madness” in this section of *Farther Appeals*, responding to criticisms of the Methodists for inspiring lunacy.

<sup>55</sup> Ott, “John Wesley on Mind and Body,” 62.

<sup>56</sup> Wesley, *Primitive Physic*, iii.



recurrent one in Wesley's theological writings. In his lengthy treatise on the *Doctrine of Original Sin*, Wesley insisted that the "Sentence pronounced upon Man includes all Evils which could befall his Soul and Body: Death Temporal, Spiritual and Eternal."<sup>57</sup> In his 1730 (unpublished) sermon, "Image of God," Wesley was more vivid in his description still. He stated that in the original state the human body had "no seeds of corruption.... All its original particles were incorruptible..."<sup>58</sup> Wesley credited the fruit of the tree as causing corruption in the body. He insisted that the "...the fruit of that tree alone...seems to have contained a juice, the particles of which were apt to cleave to whatever they touched. Some of these...naturally lay a foundation for numberless disorders in all parts of the machine."<sup>59</sup> In addition to corrupting the body, sin distorted nature itself. Wesley claimed,

The sun and moon shed unwholesome influences from above; the earth exhales poisonous damps from beneath; the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, the fishes of the seas, are in a state of hostility.... yea, the food we eat, daily saps the foundation of that life which cannot be sustained without it.<sup>60</sup>

Sin transformed the world into a chaotic, dangerous place and the very aspects of creation meant to sustain life now can jeopardize it.

Not only did Wesley think of sin as the source of human frailty, in some writings he also indicated was a ongoing connection between sin and poor health. His 1748 tract *A Word to the Street-Walker*<sup>61</sup> was written in order to caution prostitutes about the dangers of their profession to the health of their souls and bodies. This brief tract cautioned prostitutes that they should give

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<sup>57</sup> John Wesley, *The Doctrine of Original Sin According to Scripture, Reason, and Experience* (Bristol: E. Farley, 1757), 102.

<sup>58</sup> John Wesley, "The Image of God," *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 4: 296.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 297.

<sup>60</sup> Wesley, *Primitive Physic*, iv.

<sup>61</sup> The tract was renamed *A Word to an Unhappy Woman* in nineteenth-century collections of Wesley's works.

up the illicit sexual activity and trust God to provide for their sustenance in this world. Warning of dangers to the body from engaging in immoral sexual activity, Wesley warned “Know...your body is, or ought to be, the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you!” He cautioned the street-walker to “Have pity upon your body, if not your soul! Stop! Before you rot above ground and perish!”<sup>62</sup> He associated the illicit sexual activity with causing spiritual and physical damage to the prostitute’s body.

The possibility of sin having a detrimental effect on a person’s health was emphasized in Wesley’s 1767 extractions from Samuel Auguste André David Tissot’s *L’Onanisme*. Tissot was among those eighteenth-century physicians that believed that masturbation was harmful to health. Wesley’s work, titled *Thoughts on the Sin of Onan: Chiefly extracted from a late writer*, was a 20 page extract of a 232 page translation of the third edition of Tissot’s work.<sup>63</sup> Wesley’s extraction associated masturbation or onanism with a variety of medical conditions ranging from poor vision to paralysis. Summarizing Tissot’s argument, Wesley wrote,

BY Self-pollution, the young of both sexes frequently contract the infirmities of old age. They become pale, effeminate, dull, inactive; they lose their Appetite, weaken their sight, their memory, their understanding, and contract all the disorders attending weak nerves. Many bring on thereby a general weakness, and paralytic disorders of all kinds: Yea, lethargies, epilepsies, madness, blindness, convulsions, dropsies, and the most painful of all gouts.<sup>64</sup>

Onanism was, according to Wesley and Tissot, was so dangerous that practitioners risked the possibility of death. Wesley’s extraction was not simply a shortened version of Tissot’s book. Instead, Wesley took sections I-XVI and XIX-XXXIII from Tissot’s text and wrote sections

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<sup>62</sup> John Wesley, *A Word to an Unhappy Woman in The Works of the Reverend John Wesley, A.M.*, ed. John Emory (New York: B. Waugh and T. Mason, 1835), 6: 358.

<sup>63</sup> Donat, “The Rev. John Wesley’s Extractions from Dr. Tissot,” 287. Donat adds, “Prior to the eighteenth century, there was no general belief in medical circles that masturbation was specifically harmful to health, or any more so than excessive indulgence in heterosexual activities.”

<sup>64</sup> Quoted from Donat, 289.

XVII-XVIII and XXXIV himself.<sup>65</sup> In the portion of the text he wrote, Wesley provided a theological rationale for the physical damage caused by masturbation. He insisted that evidence that masturbation was a sin was contained in the Bible with the death of Onan.<sup>66</sup> He emphasized the importance of individuals abstaining from self-pollution in order to preserve both their physical and spiritual wellbeing. Wesley also prescribed a treatment plan that included cold baths, as well as abstaining from acidic food like fruit, greasy and fatty foods, and alcohol. Instead, he recommended that the penitent consume “flesh of all young animals (roasted in their own gravy),” eggs, root vegetables, and milk.<sup>67</sup>

Wesley’s understanding of medicine was also grounded in the assumption that God, the “grand Author of Nature,” was benevolent to creation. God, according to Wesley, did not abandon creation to sickness, death, and damnation. Through Christ, a pathway to salvation was possible and through the created world some reprieve of sickness and pain was possible. Wesley believed that God had ensured that cures or, at least, salves for most maladies and diseases were found in the created world. For that reason, Wesley idealized the simplicity of ancient medicine, insisting that in the past most ailments were cured through simply remedies derived from nature and learned by trial and error. He wrote, “...in the first ages...every father delivering down to his sons, what he had himself in like manner received, concerning the manner of healing both outward hurts, and the diseases incident to each climate, and the medicines which were of the greatest efficacy for the cure of each disorder.”<sup>68</sup> Wesley chose the title *Primitive Physic* to

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<sup>65</sup> Donat, “The Rev. John Wesley’s Extractions from Dr. Tissot,” 285-287.

<sup>66</sup> In Wesley’s day, it was assumed that the sin for which Onan was executed for was abdicating his responsibility to produce heirs for his deceased brother (by spilling seed) (see Genesis 38).

<sup>67</sup> John Wesley, *Thoughts on the Sin of Onan: Chiefly extracted from a late writer* (1767), 19-20; William Gibson and Joanne Begiato, *Sex and the Church in the Long Eighteenth Century: Religion, Enlightenment and the Sexual Revolution* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co, 2017).

<sup>68</sup> Wesley, *Primitive Physic*, iv – v.

emphasize his preference for what he believed to be traditional cures and methodologies for treating ailments and illnesses. He also preferred the term “physic” to the term “medicine,” which was becoming more widely used in the eighteenth century.

While Wesley’s medical advice was overwhelmingly concerned with the regulation of the “non-naturals,” he also believed that God had provided in nature a variety of helpful simple treatments that were more effective than expensive and potentially dangerous compound medicines. Wesley certainly believed that God could heal supernaturally. He was also open to the idea that illness could be, at times, the product of the devil. In Wesley’s worldview to not be open to supernatural power was to deny the Bible.<sup>69</sup> However, Wesley believed that ordinarily sickness and health operated within the laws to govern the universe established by God. He insisted that “the Creator of the universe, is likewise the governor of all things therein. But we know likewise, that he governs by second causes; and that accordingly it is his will, we should use all the probable means he has given us, to attain every lawful end.”<sup>70</sup> Wesley urged his readers to understand that God had provided resources and tools to aid medical conditions. To ignore or abuse those tools was a disservice to God.

Most of the cures Wesley recommended involved easily attainable herbs or household items such as white vinegar, small beer, or honey. For example, he recommended for treatment of a high fever “plunging into *cold water*,”<sup>71</sup> for inflammation of the eyes or eyelids, he

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<sup>69</sup> Holifield, 35-38 provides a good overview on this topic. Holifield puts it thusly, “Wesley therefore held in balance two perspectives on health and healing, one natural and one preternatural. In his mind the two never conflicted with each other, and he felt an intense curiosity about both of them. He never imagined that the balance could be lost or that the tension between the two visions could disrupt his Methodist movement,” (37-38).

<sup>70</sup> John Wesley, *Desiratum: or, Electricity made Plain and Useful*, Third Edition (London: New Chapel, City Road, 1790), 29.

<sup>71</sup> Wesley, *Primitive Physic*, 63.

suggested a “poultice, *boiled, roaster, or, rotten apples warm*” or the use of the “*white of an egg,*”<sup>72</sup> and for a “*Consumptive Cough*” he recommended a “stick liquorice.”<sup>73</sup>

As far as Wesley was concerned the best cures were simple cures that had been passed down generationally. Through his publications, particularly the *Primitive Physic*, Wesley hoped to make many of these cures familiar to the wider public. Wesley considered the work so essential that up-to-date editions of it, along with his *Sermons* and *Appeals to Men of Reason and Religion* were made available “at all the Methodist Preaching-Houses in Town and Country.”<sup>74</sup>

Wesley also believed that electricity was a potential cure provided by God in the natural world. While scientists did not adequately grasp electricity until the nineteenth century, the 1746 invention of the Leyden Jar<sup>75</sup> by Dutch scientist Pieter van Musschenbroek contributed to greater experimentation and study of its potential uses. After all, for the first time a cheaply available device was capable of storing an electric charge for multiple days. Wesley first observed experiments with electricity in 1747 and was so impressed that by November of 1756 he had acquired an electrostatic machine and was experimenting with its curative process on himself and willing patients.<sup>76</sup> The work was so successful that Wesley claimed “...our patients were so numerous that we were obliged to divide them; some part were electrified in Southwark, part at the Foundery, others near St. Paul’s, and the rest near the Seven Dials.”<sup>77</sup> In 1759, Wesley published *Desideratum: or, Electricity made Plain and Useful* which compiled some of the latest

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<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>74</sup> Advertisement printed in each edition. See, Madden, ‘*A Cheap, Safe, and Natural Medicine*’,

<sup>75</sup> A glass container full of water wrapped inside and out with metal wires and connected to a portable electrostatic machine.

<sup>76</sup> Hill, 86-87.

<sup>77</sup> John Wesley, “November 9, 1756,” *Works* 21:81.

writings on electricity from physicians, scientists, and fellow amateurs who were experimenting with the medium, including Benjamin Franklin, Richard Lovett, Joseph Priestly, John Freke, and William Watson.<sup>78</sup> Wesley believed that electricity was enormously useful in treating all manner of maladies including epilepsy, inflammation, tooth-aches, and St. Anthony's Fire (ergot poisoning).<sup>79</sup> He stopped short of referring to electricity as a "absolute *panacea*: a medicine that will cure every disease incident to the human body." Though, he insisted that if there were such a medicine, "Electricity would bid fairer for it, than anything in the world."<sup>80</sup> Later editions of the *Primitive Physic* also included some electricity based remedies. While the treatments Wesley was providing with electricity were more than a bit irresponsible, the dosages of electricity that he was using were small enough to not cause any serious harm. Wesley attributed accounts of the dangers of electricity as being spread by those with "great want either of sense or honesty"; he insisted "I have not known one man, woman, or child, who has received any hurt thereby."<sup>81</sup>

## Conclusion

John Wesley's ever curious mind may have well contributed to his lifelong interest in medicine. However, it's clear that the major reason he devoted so much time and energy to the pursuit of medicine and human anatomy was because of a deep and abiding concern for the welfare of the poor and his belief that salvation concerns both the spiritual and material needs of believers. Wesley's approach to medicine was grounded in a practical empirical methodology that emphasized simple, inexpensive, tested cures and treatments that were found in nature.

Wesley's methodology was, at least in part, rooted in a theological worldview that understood

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<sup>78</sup> Wesley, *Desiradatum*, 2.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 42-43.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, v.

<sup>81</sup> Wesley, "November 9, 1756," *Works* 21:81; Holifield, 30-31.

sin to be the source of disease and God's benevolence embodied in the created world to be a conduit of healing.

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