

## SHARERS IN HOLINESS

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William Temple once wrote, "The most agreeable experiences in life are those which are marked by a coincidence of duty and pleasure."<sup>1</sup> He had that happiness as he looked back upon a lecture task fulfilled. I have that happiness as I meet with you in this experience of sharing and celebrating. The Francis Asbury Convocation Committee has done me honor in inviting my participation at such a responsible level. I express my thanks to the Committee, and I eagerly confess my pleasure to "dare" this duty and to honor that theological witness within which we find acknowledged agreement. I refer specifically to the Wesleyan witness concerning the experience of holiness.

We all know that this celebration is not to revel in the past, nor to engage in a mere intellectual enterprise, nor even to enjoy another historic speech situation. We are engaged here in nothing less than a reconsideration of the nature and results of our experience of God, "the Holy One." Just what is that experience? How does one posture himself for it? What is our posture because of this experience? What are its personal aspects—and what issues from the inward level of the experience to effect the outward and social aspects of our lives? Our holiness heritage speaks pointedly to these questions. I now move on to trace that pointing, and test it all anew against scriptural categories, definitions, and insights, strongly believing that the basic framework for interpreting our life and living must be forever biblical.

The phrasing of my subject has been influenced, as you have already discerned, by two highly-suggestive New Testament verses. The first of those verses is Hebrews 12:10, the context of which calls us to reconsider our trials as means of training for full life on God's terms,

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1. *Nature, Man and God* (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1934), p. vii.

indeed to view our trials as agents of God's concern to shape us like himself. The analogy drawn by the writer between life under our earthly fathers and life under our heavenly Father is immediately clear. The final thrust of the comparison is razor-sharp in its theology. "For they disciplined us for a short time at their pleasure, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness."

The second of those two verses that influenced my choice of subject is II Peter 1:4. Observe again the particularity of the wording and the distinctive theology of the writer. The connection of thought demands a reading of vss. 3-4 together.

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, that through these you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of passion, and become partakers of the divine nature.

These two verses, culled from a much, much wider catena of texts dealing with the same concern, draw attention to one of the most pertinent and positive claims of the early Church: God has ordained that those who surrender to his love will be sharers of his likeness. Those who live life on God's terms will increasingly experience life on his level. Walking with God not only means a change in our *experience* but it also contributes to our very *being*. The texts are prophetic, admittedly technical, and unmistakably argue for a Christian mysticism. But their message is clearly put: a true knowledge of God gives the Christian believer a share in holiness. It is with this conspicuous fact of New Testament doctrine and experience that the Wesleyan holiness emphasis has concerned itself.

## I.

Every serious student of Scripture knows that the central concept of its vast teaching about God is his holiness. This descriptive word about the nature of God occurs with such frequency and emphasis that it cannot be missed or overlooked. Holiness is the basic and key concept for understanding the witness of both testaments concerning God, both as to his nature and to his relations with men, things, and places. As regards his nature God is referred to, and speaks about himself, as "the Holy One" (Job 6:10; Isa. 10:17). Another description relates God to his people as "the holy One of Israel" (II Kgs. 19:22; Ps. 71:22; Isa. 1:4b; Jer. 51:5; Ezek. 39:7).

As the Holy One, God is distinctly “Other.” He is separated, marked off in nature from that which is ordinary, common, human. The “Otherness” of God is so distinctive and unique, so absolute in its perfection and purity, so utterly peculiar to deity, that it occasions radical awe in man when God deigns by some mode to confront him. Both testaments supply us with multiplied instances when men recoiled upon confronting the “mysterium tremendum,” as Rudolf Otto has aptly termed it.<sup>2</sup> But God is holy Person. This means that his “Otherness” does more than occasion a radical awe; it also occasions a radical attractiveness that invites. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of the Testaments, the God and Father of Jesus the Christ is uniquely separate but not remote nor utterly removed. He is the God of awe, but he is also the God who appeals. He is the God who relates—to share himself and his life with men.

The holiness of God not only stirs a reaction to his presence. He invites a relationship with himself. God is not therefore unapproachable but is rather unavoidable. The clearest pictures of divine action show God’s concern to relate with men and share himself with them. That is the dominating theme of the Scriptures.

Since all of this is so, it is important to ask in what way—and to what extent, does God share holiness with us. It is over this precise question that the theological camps are divided, some claiming more than God has made available, and others claiming less than God intended to bestow. There is a proper claim because there is the Scriptural truth about this whole matter. But it is necessary to ask the questions: does God only impute his holiness to us, or does he actually impart it to us who believe? This is more than a mere academic concern. It is a theme of prime importance to life. All Christendom commonly understands and affirms that God relates his life to our living in significant fashion. Our Wesleyan tradition makes claim upon his holiness in more than a figurative manner because holiness of life is for us more than a figure of speech. We affirm our faith that God has let us have a share in his holiness.

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2. See Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1923), pp. 12–24. Trans. by J. W. Harvey.

## II.

On the Christological level of our witness, we affirm that *God has shown us his holiness* on our human level in his Son Jesus. The sonship of Jesus is real. It is also revelational. The character of his life was a manifestation of holiness in the flesh. This is in view in John 1:14 where the witnessing writer exclaims, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father." In Jesus Christ we have what Paul referred to as the visible "image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15); and the writer to the Hebrews used the same term as John in saying that Jesus the Son "reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature" (Heb. 1:3). The witness of the New Testament is unanimous in declaring that Jesus expresses the divine mode of being on our human level. In Jesus divine holiness has shown itself in *sarx*, and though he is fully human that holiness is undiminished. So Jesus could rightly claim, "And he who sees me sees him who sent me" (John 12:45), and he could truthfully declare, "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). God has revealed his holiness on our level in the unique sonship of Jesus.

Jesus of Nazareth understood and declared himself to be the Son of God. He used the sonship designation in effect when in teaching his disciples he referred to God as Father; and it is common knowledge that he openly addressed God in prayer as "*Abbā*," as if it were his custom to be intimate with Him, and as if that way of addressing God possessed a deeper meaning and relationship.<sup>3</sup> His use of that term of endeared relation is much too intense and intimate to allow me to believe only that "the decisive feature of the title [Son] is subordination."<sup>4</sup> I rather believe, with the New Testament writers, that Jesus lived among us with a consciousness of unique relation with God. I believe that Jesus held, and now holds, with God a unique position, a unique relation, a unique life, a unique sonship. God was Father for

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3. See Gustaf Dalman, *The Words of Jesus* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1902), esp. pp. 280–287. Trans. by D. M. Kay. See also Joachim Jeremias, *The Prayers of Jesus* (SBT, Second Series, No. 6) (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1967), esp. pp. 44–57. Trans. by John Bowden.
  4. See the treatment of this view by Hans Conzelmann, *An Outline of the Theology of the New Testament* (New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, 1969), p. 127. Trans. by John Bowden.

Jesus and in a manner we are not able completely to understand or explain. The New Testament witnesses to his life did not get side-tracked over metaphysical questions of his genesis or descent as divine Son; they rightly and wisely celebrated Jesus as saving person—giving honor to God the Father. What they saw in Jesus they began to share through his company. “And from his fulness have we all received, grace upon grace.” “No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known” (John 1:16, 18).

It has been necessary to repeat these statements about Jesus as the revealing Son because what we are to share of the holiness of God is related to what we see in Jesus. We see his sonship—and upon accepting him are granted sonship “in his name.” As John 1:12 puts it, “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.” As children of God we stand related to him, saved by grace and secure in his love. But there is more. As children of God we stand responsible to him—responsible to reflect his likeness and honor his name. We believers not only draw confidence from our Father’s care; we must dare full commitment to our Father’s will. Jesus himself shows us the model Son. Jesus himself is the “Beloved” for whose sake we have been admitted into the family of God. Paul expressed the matter in these words:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. (Eph. 1:3–6)

The Holy God stands behind it all, working through Jesus Christ in our interest and to his honor. Here Paul speaks again: “He [God] is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (I Cor. 1:30). Jesus is not only God’s model Son, he is our means for sonship at its best—which means a derived holy likeness to the Father.

### III.

Ours, then, is *Christian* holiness—that holiness made possible for us in the Spirit of Christ. It is derived. It is definite. It is distinctive. It is also holiness as *imitatio de Christi* since his person, life, teachings, actions, and spirit form the visible norm for our conduct and concerns.

Just as Jesus “imitated” God, doing as Son the deeds of his Father, (see John 5:19–20; 8:38–47), we “imitate” Jesus, following him, keeping his commandments, and living for his interests.

Jesus Christ himself conditions our share in holiness as the source of our Sanctification (I Cor. 1:30). Sanctification is that moral and ethical state that results from the commitment of our will to God’s will as seen in Christ. Christian holiness involves our will in the same way that God’s own original holiness necessarily involves his every act of will. Walther Eichrodt rightly states that God is known in terms of “holy personal will.”<sup>5</sup> Christians are known in terms of personal will anchored in the experience and commitment of holiness. Again Eichrodt, declares that, “. . . in any picture of the divine nature the moral will must be in the foreground dominating the whole.”<sup>6</sup>

Christian holiness always involves the will. The gift of holiness is procured to the believer by the Spirit of Christ, but it develops in line with the believer’s dedication and decisive openness toward God. What we have before us in Christian holiness is a qualitative life, a life that is both consequent and commitment.

1. Our share in holiness is, first of all, *individual*. It is personal. The whole self is called into the transaction with God. The will is addressed and engaged. Sanctification must have to do with the will because it is at the point of willing that personal life is realized. The will and its actions are the basic ingredients of history. History has to do with human action and intentional process, in the main. An act is not historical just because it happens, but because what is done relates to human decision.<sup>7</sup> Personal history must be understood within such a context. The peculiar uniqueness of will is that it proclaims individuality and intentionality. Just as sin involves an intentional, willful act that contradicts divine will, holiness must involve intentional, willful

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5. *Theology of the Old Testament*, Vol. One (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961), p. 278. Trans. by J. A. Baker.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 279.

7. See, for example, John Macmurray, *The Self As Agent* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), p. 205, who comments: “What merely happens lies outside the historian’s province. He is concerned with natural events and organic processes only in so far as they enter into the activities of human beings and play their part in setting the field for human decisions.” See also H. Wheeler Robinson, *The Christian Experience of the Holy Spirit* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1928), esp. pp. 101–102.

obedience to that divine will. The self is always positioned between possibility and actuality, positioned there with some frame of reference by which to understand and relate to one or the other. Christian holiness is lived out when the will is so dispositioned that it relates to all matters in line with what is known about God's intentions regarding them. The bondage of the will to sinful choices is broken and overcome in conversion as a divine consequent; the freedom of the will in holiness is granted and guarded through relation with the Spirit in sanctification. We do not sin innocently but voluntarily. We are not made holy innocently but through decisive commitment voluntarily made in response to God's claim upon us. God calls the nature of our lives into account by addressing the will. God responds to the call of our need by addressing the will. God conforms the direction of our will only when we surrender it to the full claim of his intentions. This is always personal, individual, decisive.

2. Our share in holiness is also *identifiable*. New character traits are shaped under the influence of holiness. Christian character is an historical fact and an identifiable form of life. Meister Eckhart referred to this as "a habitual will"—by which he meant the will transformed into instinct, complete self-unity, oneness of self and self-interest. This is a kind of real adjustment to the scales provided by God, an adjustment aided by the Spirit who works within by both potency and immediateness.

Christlikeness is identifiable. The work of the Holy Spirit within us bears distinguished fruit. All of the listed fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23) are identifiable in the walk and work of the Christian. The fruit develops as the Holy Spirit does his critical and creative work within us, focusing personality, and drawing tight the otherwise loose strings of personal life, holding them with the sure grip of God. It is that same Spirit who helps us to conform to the image of Christ. Irenaeus was referring to this special work of the Spirit when he said that the Holy Spirit "adjusts us to God."<sup>8</sup> Other relations and influences in life tend to diminish the self, diffuse and dissipate the life. The Holy Spirit helps us to focus ourselves—in will and deed, to "cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, and make holiness

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8. Quoted by F. W. Dillistone, *The Holy Spirit in the Life of Today* (London: The Canterbury Press, 1946), p. 10.

perfect in the fear of God” (II Cor. 7:1). Such an experienced result is surely identifiable.

3. Our share in holiness is *intelligible*. The experience can be expressed in the form of definite doctrines and a set of convictions. Christian holiness can be discussed in terms of its features and aspects. We can isolate so much of what is involved, and interpret so much of what it means. It certainly involves a love of truth that enlightens and an abhorrence for falsity and sin. It involves separation from that which stimulates fleshly lusts. It involves a life separated from the will to transgress against God. This is intelligible. It is always good sense to live by a behavior pattern that honors God. It is always wisdom to live by a principle of selectivity that forbids evil and honors the good. Holiness has always meant certain limitations, but they are limitations in the interest of life at its best, the consecration of every power and potential to realize the manifest destiny of true and obedient sons of God. In the experience of holy living, a normative and intelligible loyalty to God is involved.

4. Our share in holiness is also *instrumental*. The sharing is processive, fitting us for a destiny in the will of God. That sharing is also productive, fitting us to fulfill the works of love, and “love is the fulfilling of the law” (Rom. 13:10b). That love, we remember, is a divine issue “because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us” (Rom. 5:5).

Sharing in holiness deepens the believer’s sense of commitment to what is sacred. There are real differences to be regarded as we live, and a sense of commitment keeps us oriented to regard them. But sharing in holiness also orients us for a sense of caring. Just as there are sacred distinctives, there are social concerns. Wesley knew this, and he exercised a caring heart: attacking slavery, the plight of the poor, inhumane prison conditions, social and economic imbalances, among other evils, with direct, piquant, and vehement indignation.<sup>9</sup> The Spirit of holiness is the spirit of righteousness and social reform. Francis Asbury knew this, and his antislavery sentiment was no secret matter. His work among black slaves as persons worthy of truth and love was so exemplary that the slaves honored him as a kind of Moses among

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9. See esp. J. Wesley Brady, *England: Before and After Wesley: The Evangelical Revival and Social Reform* (New York and London: Harper and Brothers, 1938).

them. I am pleased to report, as a black American, that one of the most notable Spirituals from our heritage was shaped in honor to Francis Asbury. The Spiritual was "Go Down Moses." Hindered in his efforts to emancipate the blacks, Asbury increasingly worked to evangelize them. An entry in his *Journal* on Monday, September 18, 1797, reads: "O, it was going down into the Egypt of South Carolina after these poor souls of Africans I have lost my health, if not my life in the end. The will of the Lord be done."<sup>10</sup> Black historian Miles Mark Fisher has commented, "Negroes had no tangible way to tell him that they were thankful, but they promptly immortalized him in a great spiritual. He was their Moses."<sup>11</sup> "Surely, at that time, if not before," Fisher continues, "Negroes of Maryland were understood to sing the simplest form of their traditional song about their patron saint, saying:

Go down, Moses,  
Way down in Egypt land,  
Tell ole Pharoh  
Let my people go.<sup>12</sup>

Asbury's bi-racial ministry grew out of an indiscriminating heart. It was a heart in which God was instrumentally at work—by love. "My desire," Asbury once wrote, "is to live in love and peace with all men; to do them no harm, but all the good I can."<sup>13</sup>

John Wesley had written much earlier:

The Gospel of Christ knows of no religion,  
but social; no holiness, but social holiness.  
*Faith working by love* is the length and breadth  
and depth and height of Christian perfection.<sup>14</sup>

It was a statement and reminder for all time.

10. *The Journal of Francis Asbury* (London: Epworth Press, 1958), Vol. II, p. 132.
11. Miles Mark Fisher, *Negro Slave Songs in the United States* (New York: The Citadel Press, 1953), p. 40. See also pp. 75–76, 178.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
13. Asbury, *Journal*, Vol. I, p. 181.
14. *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley*, A. M. (London: John Mason, 1856), Vol. XIV, p. 305.

## IV

It is Jesus who shows us the perfect life of holy sonship to God. It is the Holy Spirit who initiates us into that sonship life. That initiation is called *conversion*. Jesus spoke of this experience as being “born of the Spirit” (John 3:6), as being “born anew” or “born from above” (John 3:3, 7). Our human nature can originally reflect only our natural heritage of flesh, but by spiritual rebirth through conversion we can meaningfully intersect with the higher order of existence—and secure a share in it as new sons. Jesus must have been referring to this new life and nature and relationship when he urged men to “turn [*straphete*] and become like children” (Matt. 18:3).<sup>15</sup> Jesus was concerned to have his hearers fully relate to God as obedient sons, honorable members of the family. The means was conversion, the divine begetting, a new origin “from above.”

But that initiation is anticipatory. Conversion brings us into the new life, but sanctification grants us a fuller share in it. Conversion is the divine mode of our begetting; Sanctification is the divine mode of our maturity as sons. The experience of sanctification is both existential—that is, having to do with the problem of our human nature and the possible character of our lives—and it is eschatological—that is, having to do with our future; this being so, there are aspects within the experience that are conclusive and processive. It is conclusive in that our sonship has been “sealed” (Eph. 1:13) with the Holy Spirit, tagged and authenticated as God’s very own through a share in holiness; yet it is processive in that the full realization and manifestation of the sonship state increasingly takes place.

Sanctification enables us to fulfill two essential obligations: (1) experience in our character the holiness of God, and (2) bring honor to God through our dedicated living. It is possible to see this first

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15. See Gerhard Barth, “Matthew’s Understanding of the Law,” in Guenther Bornkamm, Gerhard Barth, and Heinz Joachim Held, *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew* (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1963), where it is suggested, “Conversion, and thus also becoming a disciple, means ‘becoming like a child’ (18:3).” p. 121. See also p. 118. Trans. by Percy Scott. Compare Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology: The Proclamation of Jesus* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1971), pp. 155–156, 178–184. Trans. by John Bowden.

obligation even in the teachings of Jesus. "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). The correlation of "shining light" and "good deeds" expresses the notion of extraordinariness and recalls the splendor associated with the glory of God. God is always honored when we act true to our calling as sons. All that God does is worthy of himself because he is holy. The Christian son of God must see to it that his every deed be worthy of God. This is the meaning of a "Walk in the Spirit" (Gal. 5:16, 25) and being "led by the Spirit" (Rom. 8:14). Sanctification makes this all possible—in disciplined and obedient joy. Paul expressed it in still another way in Galatians 4:6, saying, "And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" Our sonship through conversion is the evident ground for a richer more complete experience of the Spirit. In that verse, Paul looks back from effect to cause, stating that the full share in the Spirit rests upon the prior fact that we are sons through his work. Paul further describes the Holy Spirit as "the Spirit of his Son," actively resident in our hearts—the very seat of our experienced life, stirring us to rightfully make the cry of Jesus before God our own cry: 'Abbā, "Father!"'<sup>16</sup> As Spirit-filled sons, as sons who have a share in holiness, we can publicly announce God as our Father. We can make that cry in witness or in prayer, and say it with overwhelming joy, with moral strength, with sure insight, with responsible emotion, and with definite assurance. It is with the possibility, necessity, excellence and availability of this experience that the Wesleyan emphasis on Christian holiness has been concerned.

As sharers in holiness we do not move on the basis of theory but rather by Scripture-informed faith. Ours is no independent holiness that smacks of regional, national, or denominational influence—some pattern of pious conformity and conduct peculiar to some group rationale. We have become sharers in "the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph. 4:24). Our experience is a real fulfillment of "his precious and very great

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16. On the Galatians text (4:6), see Ernest DeWitt Burton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* ("International Critical Commentary") (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920), pp. 221–223.

promises” and we have “become partakers of the divine nature” (II Pet. 1:4). Under the impact of the Holy Spirit’s immediacy and potency we are learning to love and labor on God’s terms. Under the impress of the Spirit’s leadership we are increasingly open to dare our necessary tasks in the world. And in the midst of it all, we are learning more and more about life with God. We are experiencing far more than we can adequately explain. So much continues to out-distance all formal lines of our understanding. But we do know that it is all because of “God at work in [us], both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:13).

## V.

Our celebration is not because we are “beside ourselves.” We rather celebrate because we have grounds for being “enthusiasts”—literally so: *God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts.* God has placed his holiness at our disposal for life in this world and in the next! God has let us begin to apprehend him in his own holiness, while at the same time deepening and clarifying our own humanity. We are learning to live more and more out of God and less and less out of ourselves.

You have noticed my frequent use of “we” as I have been speaking about all this. My use is admittedly confessional. I speak honestly and without reluctance. I speak, like the writer of John 1:14, because I too have experienced the “glory.” It is a vast company of believers for whom I speak in witness, a company of men and women who have known the disciplines and delights and duties of holiness. It is a company filled with men and women who eagerly affirm, with Paul, “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain” (I Cor. 15:10a); believers who can confess, with John, that “our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ” (I John 1:3b); believers who are assured, like Jude, that God “is able to keep [us] from falling and to present [us] without blemish before the presence of his glory with rejoicing” (vs. 24). It was to such a company that John Wesley belonged, and he could ably trace out the source and meaning of his experience. Wesley knew “holiness and happiness” through divine promises fulfilled in his own sonship. Declared he, “I now am assured that these things are so: I experience them in my own breast. What Christianity (considered as a doctrine) promised is accomplished in my soul. And Christianity, considered as an inward principle, is the completion of all those promises. It is holiness and happiness, the

image of God impressed on a created spirit, a fountain of peace and love springing up into everlasting life.”<sup>17</sup> Francis Asbury was of such a company. He testified at 31, “All my desire is for the Lord, and more of his divine nature impressed on my soul. I long to be lost and swallowed up in God.”<sup>18</sup> Such a company takes divine sonship seriously. Such a company knows the deeper ways of God with men.

Soli Deo Gloria

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17. From his letter to Dr. Conyers Middleton, dated January 4, 1749. See *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley*, ed. by John Telford (London: Epworth Press, 1931), Vol. II, p. 383.
  18. *The Journal*, Vol. I, p. 178. The entry is dated Feb. 12, 1776.