

A Division of Heart

John Wesley's Case for Separation

Jack Jackson

Like many Protestant communions, The United Methodist Church finds itself deeply divided over human sexuality. At least two vocal groups offer competing visions of faithfulness in regard to human sexuality for both Christians in general and Christian leaders in particular. Despite more than forty years of conversation, many United Methodists today acknowledge the church is on the brink of separating into two or more distinct ecclesial communities. In turn, some United Methodist leaders argue that talk of separation, much less separation itself, is profoundly un-Wesleyan, if not unchristian.

In this essay I explore John Wesley's thought regarding separation and unity in his two sermons "On Schism" and "Catholic Spirit." I specifically contrast his view with that of retired bishop Kenneth L. Carder.¹ He argues that talk of separation, much less separation itself, is a profound betrayal of our Wesleyan and Christian identity. I also briefly engage two works by fellow United Methodists Steve Harper and Adam Hamilton, who also prioritize union. I argue that while Wesley clearly values Christian unity, he unmistakably encourages individuals and groups to separate from a denomination or other ecclesial community when union requires being unfaithful to one's own sense of faithful discipleship in the pursuit of holiness. Living faithfully as Wesleyans today, I argue, means not dismissing conversations of separation and the breaking of union but understanding Wesley's justifications for separation. Any discussion of how our Wesleyan heritage may guide United Methodists in this current crisis must acknowledge that discussing separation—even separation itself—is both authentically Protestant and Wesleyan.

Our Current Plight

The United Methodist Church is in crisis over what a faithful Christian and United Methodist understanding and practice of human sexuality entails. United Methodists agree on many other aspects of the Christian life, but the reality is we are in conflict over human sexuality. It is the ecclesial issue of our time, and we do not offer a unified vision. Because of its cultural and ecclesial weight, the debate over human sexuality is both shaping and taking priority over every other conversation in the church.

This is not a new dilemma. Indeed, since our inception in 1968, our church has sought a common witness regarding human sexuality. The church has funded countless gatherings, encouraged ongoing discussions, solicited papers and books on the subject, and formed numerous special commissions. And yet at the end of more than forty years of conversation, we remain divided regarding ordaining practicing LGBTQI persons and in granting permission to clergy to officiate anything other than a heterosexual marriage. In fact, if we are honest, we must conclude that all of our conversations have failed in their essential task of finding a common witness.

The degree of our division is striking. On one side, many laity, clergy, even annual conferences and two jurisdictions have publicly stated they will not abide by any decree they

believe goes against full inclusion of LGBTQI persons. They do so out of deeply rooted beliefs that faithfulness to the story of God in Christ necessitates full inclusion. On the other side, many laity, clergy, and churches are so committed to the *Book of Discipline*'s current vision of human sexuality as most perfectly expressed in the relationship of one man and one woman, that they advocate not paying apportionments due to the church's failure to hold dissenting persons accountable. In between these two groups are countless other voices that lean one way or the other, though not to the extremes expressed above. Furthermore, there seems to be a group of United Methodists who are truly undecided and still seek further reflection, prayer, and discernment on the issue of human sexuality.

In light of the current stalemate, along with the church's decades-long decline in worship attendance and baptism, and its precipitous decline in giving when inflation is taken into account, many, including myself, have asked if we need to go in a new direction. Would the denomination be better served if it separated into two or more Christian communions that could independently seek the Spirit's direction on human sexuality and other issues? Would it be best, in other words, to recognize that all of our conversations over forty years have actually provided little light on the subject, and in turn acknowledge that the mission of God through the people called The United Methodist Church is actually best lived out as multiple Christian communions? Can we best bless one another and the world, not as a single ecclesial community that remains in "union" together, but rather as a number of different ones that live in the spirit of Christian unity as fellow Protestants? I believe the answer to all these questions is yes.

To say that my affirmation has not been well received is to put it lightly. Following the 2012 General Conference, I wrote a blog for the *United Methodist Reporter* titled, "Breaking Up Is Hard but Right Thing for UMC."² Many disagreed, many agreed with my main argument. My favorite response, and I'm taking some license since I could not locate the actual response, was, "Why should we listen to him? Look where he teaches! That explains everything!" I teach at the Claremont School of Theology.

And yet five years after my original post, I am even more convinced we need to have a conversation about separation. I am in my seventh year on the faculty at Claremont School of Theology. Before becoming a professor, I spent fifteen years as a clergyperson in the Florida Conference where I am still a member. In my current capacity as the co-director of the Center for Global Methodism at Claremont, I have had the opportunity to travel across the United Methodist globe, talking to leaders about this issue and others. Certainly other people have a much broader view of the church than I, but my perspective is quite extensive. I am now convinced that we have one final chance to hold the church together—the Commission on a Way Forward. If the commission can bring a unanimously affirmed (or at least one supported by a supermajority of the commission) plan to the church by the 2020 General Conference, then we might be able to stay together as one church for decades to come. If it cannot, if this group fails to come to broad-based consensus, then the church must recognize that it faces one of two choices.

The first option is to stay in union as a single denomination and face a generation of further argument. The second is to find a way to bless the various constituents that make up the current UMC and release one another to be in mission to the world with the different visions of human sexuality that currently reside in our church. In my opinion, choosing the first option will continue, and probably accelerate, the decline in membership, worship attendance, and giving in real dollars that The UMC has experienced for decades. The result, I fear, is that after three or four decades of struggle we will be a smaller, weaker, more regional, less global church, and be

able to offer no more clarity than we currently do on human sexuality. This seems an untenable and irresponsible choice, which many current and future clergy and laity will find wanting, choosing to vote with their feet to find other Christian communities. Only the second choice allows us to bless one another to serve God as faithfully as we can and release one another to be in ministry to the world. Choosing the second option places us in a long line of Methodists, who considered and even followed through on separation, out of a deep sense of faithfulness to the Methodist tradition. Indeed, this second option is the one John Wesley himself insists at times is the most authentically Methodist and Christian.

Carder's Case for Union

Bishop Ken Carder's blog post "Schism Is a Failure of Love and Leadership" received a great deal of attention. He does not advocate one way or another regarding inclusion, but he clearly condemns any discussion over separating, much less separation itself. Both acts are unfaithful, he asserts, to our Wesleyan heritage. He begins with a familiar passage from John Wesley's sermon "On Schism":

To separate ourselves from a body of living Christians, with whom we were before united, is a grievous breach of the law of love. It is the nature of love to unite us together; and the greater the love, the stricter the union. . . . It is only when our love grows cold, that we can think of separating from our brethren. And this is certainly the case with any who willingly separate from their Christian brethren. . . . The pretenses for separation may be innumerable, but want of love is always the real cause.³

At the core of Carder's argument is an assertion that discussion of separation, and separation itself, flows from a failure to love one another as Christian brothers and sisters. Carder attempts to strengthen his basic assertion by arguing that our obviously broken country and world need a church that can live in unity despite our differences. He looks back to the Civil War to argue that the war was perhaps encouraged by denominations, including the Methodists, who could not find a way to stay unified despite radically different understandings of justice and love regarding slavery in the United States.⁴ If we can't live in union, then we have little to offer.⁵ "A church that cannot struggle together," he writes, "with conflicts over sexuality, interpretation of Scripture, and orthodoxy has little to say to a violently divided world."⁶ Only as a unified body can The United Methodist Church position itself, "to provide leadership to a world dreadfully divided and retreating into dangerous ideological ghettos."⁷ Any schism in the church, he writes, is "correctly" seen by the world "failure to love." His conclusion then is to stay in union as an ecclesial community. "Contemplating split precisely when the world needs an embodied message of reconciliation," he writes, "is a transparent betrayal of the church's nature and mission."

In some ways, Carder's argument echoes that of Steve Harper in his book *For the Sake of the Bride*.⁸ Harper argues, correctly, that The United Methodist Church, and even the church as a whole, is being ripped asunder by the vitriol over LGBTQI inclusion. As he prayed for and read about the depth of our current turmoil, he heard the Spirit saying to him:

My Bride, the Church, is being abused. Her gown is being torn to shreds by siblings who are trying to end up with the biggest piece of the cloth, and who would rather expose her nakedness than give up the fight. Enough is Enough!⁹

Harper makes two basic arguments in his book. The first is that The United Methodist Church should continue and even deepen its ongoing conversation about LGBTQI ordination and

marriage. Using a model of “round table” conversations, advocated by the great Methodist missionary E. Stanley Jones, United Methodists should continue to converse on all the issues surrounding gender and identity. Ultimately, Harper encourages full inclusion. As The UMC engages in these conversations, the second and underlying argument of the book is that the church should stay in union. He writes:

I believe that staying together (as a single denomination) is a sacred act—a holy experience. . . . We have become patterned to disagree and divide. But the witness in the Trinity is to unite and to be one. [We must be able to say] “We will not separate. We will stay together in prayer, in conversation, and in action—believing that this kind of spiritual tenacity will create some kind of forward progress.”¹⁰

For both Harper and Carder, union seems to be the primary goal of Christian community. Any fracture in our ecclesial union, at least Carder argues, is a “transparent betrayal” of our Christian and Wesleyan heritage.

John Wesley’s Case for Separation

To test the validity of Carder’s claim, we must explore Wesley’s sermons in more depth. At the age of eighty-two, despite years of publicly professing that he was a staunch member of the Church of England and that he would not leave it, many in the Church of England still questioned Wesley’s allegiance. So in 1786, he wrote the sermon “On Schism.” Wesley’s text is 1 Corinthians 12:25, “That there might be no schism in the body.” He begins by writing that schism has been a topic of conversation and disagreement ever since the Reformation, with both Roman Catholics and Protestants arguing for the strength of their arguments, to no avail. One reason for the disagreement: disagreement over the meaning of *schism* itself.

Wesley then traces St. Paul’s understanding of the word *schism*. The schism Paul sees in the Corinthian church is “not a separation *from* any church, (whether general or particular, whether the Catholic, or any national Church) but a separation *in* a Church.”¹¹ The church had a “disunion in mind and judgment,” resulting in “the splitting into several parties, as they gave the preference to one or another preacher.”¹² Commenting on 1 Corinthians 11:18, Wesley writes that schism, according to St. Paul, is anytime a church divides “into little *parties*, which cherished anger and resentment one against another.”¹³ Schism, Wesley concludes, is not when a single ecclesial community breaks union and becomes multiple communities, but rather when competing interests and visions in a single communion lead to a formation of different groups that are actually working against one another.

In light of Wesley’s understanding of schism, United Methodists might ask if our union is already experiencing schism. Some churches threaten to leave the denomination over failure to uphold the *Book of Discipline*. Others refuse to pay apportionments. Some entire regions refuse to obey any part of the *Discipline* they believe goes against the biblical witness. Some groups prepare for what they see as an inevitable split. A bishop told an entire region of the global UMC to “grow up,” and that their support of the *Discipline* is homophobic.¹⁴ Other bishops participate in LGBTQI weddings in full defiance of the *Discipline*. It seems quite clear that we already fulfill Wesley’s understanding of “parties” that have sprung up that reveal “an alienation of affection in any of them toward their brethren; a division of heart . . . though they were still outwardly united together, though they still continued members of the same external society.”¹⁵ Indeed, with the 1975 formation of the United Methodist Gay Caucus, as well as the formation of Good News in 1967, one must ask if the “parties” Wesley warned against were not part of our

denominational DNA from the beginning? We would have been wise forty years ago to heed Wesley's warning: "O beware . . . of countenancing or abetting any parties in a Christian society! Never encourage, much less cause, either by word or action, any division therein. . . . Leave off contention before it be meddled with: Shun the very beginning of strife."¹⁶

Wesley goes on to further differentiate between schism and separation. He specifically points out that "causeless" separation is both "evil in itself, and productive of evil consequences."¹⁷ As Wesley writes:

A causeless separation from a body of living Christians . . . is evil in itself, being a breach of brotherly love, so it brings forth evil fruit; it is naturally productive of the most mischievous consequences. It opens a door to all unkind tempers, both in ourselves and others. It leads directly to a whole train of evil surmising, to severe and uncharitable judging of each other. It gives occasion to offense, to anger and resentment, perhaps in ourselves as well as in our brethren; which, if not presently stopped, may issue in bitterness, malice, and settled hatred; creating a present hell wherever they are found, as a prelude to hell eternal.¹⁸

Wesley continues that a broken church is a poor witness to Christ's love and new creation in a broken world:

And what grievous stumbling-block must these things be to those who are without, to those who are strangers to religion, who have neither the form nor the power of godliness! How will they triumph over these once eminent Christians! How boldly ask, "What are they better than us." How will they harden their hearts more and more against the truth, and bless themselves in their wickedness from which, possibly, the example of the Christians might have reclaimed them, had they continued unblamable in their behavior. Such is the complicated mischief which persons separating from a Christian Church or society do, not only to themselves, but to that whole society, and the whole world in general.¹⁹

Carder shares Wesley's concern about a church's witness to a broken world when the church itself divides. But Carder's concern is different from Wesley's. Carder is concerned that any separation will set a poor example in a divided world. But Wesley's concern is about how the world sees "causeless separations." Here Carder misses a key aspect of Wesley's thought, which undergirds much of Wesley's life and ministry, namely the validity of separation "with cause."

Wesley makes it clear that separation is justified in some circumstances. If a person can no longer "continue [in a movement] with clear conscience," because continuing in a movement causes a person to sin (even if only in conscience) then a person has no choice but to separate from a movement.²⁰ If such a situation exists, a person "could not be blamed for separating from that society."²¹ He goes on to give the example of someone within the Roman Catholic Church who cannot remain within it without committing idolatry. In this case, it would be the Catholic's "bounded duty to leave that community, totally to separate from it."²² He then mentions a similar hypothetical example from the Church of England where a person was asked to do "something which the word of God forbids, or [omit] something which the word of God positively commands."²³ In this case, the person "ought to separate from the Church of England." Wesley then makes the argument personal, writing that God had committed to him a "dispensation of the gospel" upon which his "own salvation depends." If the Church of England required him to stop participating in the Methodist movement or to give up meeting in any of the Methodist societies, then, as he writes, "I should be under an absolute necessity of separating from [the church]." In other words, obedience to one's understanding of what it means to live as a faithful disciple of

Jesus must be given priority over Christian union. Separation may indicate a failure to love fellow Methodists, as Carder argues. But disobedience to one's understanding of faithful discipleship in the pursuit of holiness indicates a failure to love God in Wesley's eyes.

Wesley's understanding of catholicity informs our discussion at this point. One of Wesley's most cited (and misrepresented) comments on Christian union is found in his sermon "Catholic Spirit." Wesley's words in his sermon "Catholic Spirit" are often quoted:

Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike. May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion. Without all doubt, we may. Herein all the children of God may unite, notwithstanding these smaller differences. These remaining as they are, they may forward one another in love and in good works.²⁴

This sermon is often cited as evidence that Wesley would call United Methodists to stay together despite our profound differences over human sexuality. One recent example is found in Adam Hamilton's recent book *Revival: Faith as Wesley Lived It*. Hamilton argues that Wesley learned from his family how to deal with theological and ecclesial disagreements by finding a moderate, middle road between competing ideas. Citing this sermon as evidence, Hamilton writes, "Wesley had the ability to value and listen to people on opposite sides of the theological divide, to find the truth each possessed, and to chart a middle way, embracing the best of both sides."²⁵ Adam Hamilton is one of the most competent leaders we have in all of United Methodism, and I have deep respect for him. But I think at this point he misreads Wesley.

Hamilton is, of course, certainly correct that Christians are called to humility, grace, and love, and that we are to listen to others, learn from them, and love them. But Hamilton overlooks some critical aspects of Wesley's vision of catholicity. For example, in this sermon, Wesley's goal is not to keep Methodists in union together but rather to demonstrate to people in different ecclesial communities that they can keep their specific ecclesial ties (be they Presbyterian, Independent, Anabaptist, Quaker, or Anglican) and be Methodist too.²⁶ He asks people from different denominations and communities to "join hands" (picking up on language from 2 Kings 10:15) on broader projects even as they retain their unique ecclesial commitments. In other words, Wesley acknowledges that people from different ecclesial communities—who can't live in full ecclesial union with one another because they have different "opinions" on issues that do not strike at the "root of Christianity"—can work together in ministry in the unity of the Spirit.²⁷ People of different opinions can join together in hand and heart even as they acknowledge they will not live in full ecclesial union. Such opinions "may prevent an entire external union" even as they allow for a "union in affection."²⁸

Wesley continues in the sermon to identify the requirements of "joining hands." Shared "opinions" are not necessary, but a shared understanding of essential doctrines, or a "right heart," is actually vital to partnership.²⁹ The characteristics of a "right heart," in Wesley's mind, are quite pointed, including:

- Belief in God's "being and his perfections his eternity, immensity, wisdom, power his justice, mercy, and truth"
- Confidence in God's final and ultimate sovereignty
- Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ
- Conviction that Christ dwells in the person

Questions such as:

- "Dost thou seek all thy happiness in him alone?"
- "Is God the centre of thy soul, the sum of all thy desires?"

- “Art thou accordingly laying up thy treasure in heaven, and counting all things else dung and dross hath the love of God?”
- “Art thou employed in doing, ‘not thy own will, but the will of him that sent thee’?”
- “Is thine eye single in all things always fixed on him always looking unto Jesus?”
- “Dost thou point at him in whatsoever thou doest in all thy labour, thy business, thy conversation aiming only at the glory of God in all?”
- “Does the love of God constrain thee to serve him with fear, to “rejoice unto him with reverence”?”
- “Is thy heart right toward thy neighbour Dost thou love as thyself, all mankind, without exception?”³⁰

This is a rather long (edited and shortened here) list of essentials for Wesley. And yet, only those who “art thus minded,” have what Wesley believes is the “right heart.”³¹ For Wesley, Christians can disagree in their “opinions” to such a degree that, while not living together under the same ecclesial banner, they can think of one another as faithful Christians. If this is true for opinions, we should not be surprised, however, that Wesley argues that people who differ on the nature of the right heart can’t truly work “hand in hand,” much less live together in the same ecclesial community. Wesley’s catholicity has nothing to do with Hamilton’s vision of listening to both sides and finding a middle way, as Hamilton asserts. A Wesleyan vision of catholic spirit is one whose discipleship flows from the doctrinal distinctive of the right heart. It describes those whose missional vitality centers on a Methodist vision of holiness, which is uniquely ecumenical as it brings together those of different Christian communities who will never serve under the same denominational banner.

This brings us back to the subject of separation “with cause.” For Wesley, separation is just and right when Christians disagree on fundamental doctrine. This was the case, Wesley asserts, when Protestants separated from Roman Catholics.³² At the core of Protestantism is the notion that mission and critical aspects of doctrine supersede ecclesial union. To argue otherwise is to deny the very basis for Protestantism. So, if those who assert that human sexuality has risen to the point of *status confessionis* are correct, then it should not surprise us that the conflict is intractable and a challenge to maintaining ecclesial union. According to Wesley’s definition of separation with cause, both traditionalists and progressives on human sexuality can clearly claim from their own perspective the necessity of separation, for each sees their position as representing the biblical witness of human sexuality. Talk of separation, therefore, and even separation itself, are not, as Carder would have us believe, a “failure of love.” A failure of love would be to continue to support an artificial unity that forces one or both groups to disobey their understanding of the biblical witness.

Conclusion

Wesley is clear: sometimes separation is necessary. Whether human sexuality is a doctrinal essential or an opinion, we clearly have at least two groups in The UMC that believe their vision of the holy life as it relates to human sexuality is the gospel vision. This is true for traditionalists, who seek to retain the current prohibitions in the *Discipline*, as well as for progressives, who ignore such prohibitions and are working to remove them from the *Discipline*.

Wesley is clear: if our conscience demands it, then we must choose obedience to God over any call to love people that requires some in our communion to go against their understanding of faithfulness to God. Schism has been part of our church since its inception in 1968. The question

is not can we avoid schism, but can or should we avoid separation in response to our schism? Answering this question is not a failure of love, but a faithful witness to what it means to be Protestant in general, and Methodist in particular. Perhaps the Commission on a Way Forward will indeed discern a plan that can allow people to remain faithful to their consciences and live in union together. If not, United Methodists would be wise to recognize that, while we can no longer live in full union as one ecclesial community, we can live in Christian unity with fellow Protestants of a Methodist persuasion. Perhaps then we could “join hands” in service to the world with those who were once our sisters and brothers in The United Methodist Church but with whom we developed a “division of heart.”

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¹ See Kenneth L. Carder, “Schism Is a Failure of Love and Leadership,”

<https://shiftingmargins.wordpress.com/2016/10/12/schism-is-a-failure-of-love-and-leadership/>.

² The posting can be found at <http://unitedmethodistreporter.com/2012/10/19/breaking-up-is-hard-but-right-thing-for-the-umc/>.

³ John Wesley, “On Schism,” *Sermons III: 71–114*, vol. 3 in *The Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986), §II.11, p. 64.

⁴ Citing the evil consequences of separation, Carder points to C. C. Goen’s argument that churches, and specifically the Methodist Church failed to lead the country through the struggles over slavery and that society with the result that, “Rather than leading the nation toward justice and reconciliation, the denominations simply mirrored society’s brokenness. By splitting into self-justifying enclaves of like-minded congregations, the denomination opted to mirror the brokenness in society. The church, thereby, provided an ecclesial model and theological underpinning for a broken nation and subsequent civil war.”

⁵ Readers may want to contrast Carder’s view on the importance of union with Morris Davis’s chapter in this book. Davis argues persuasively that the 1939 merger that formed the Methodist Church essentially subjugated the dream of equality for African American Methodists to the ecclesial priority of unity. One of the conclusions I’m left with from Davis’s work is that, while retaining The UMC’s union is a legitimate desire, prioritizing it over faithfulness to the gospel is itself a betrayal of the Wesleyan spirit.

⁶ Carder, “Schism Is a Failure of Love and Leadership.”

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Steve Harper, *For the Sake of the Bride: Restoring the Church to Her Intended Beauty* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2014).

⁹ Ibid., Kindle loc. 105.

¹⁰ Ibid., Kindle loc. 1509.

¹¹ Wesley, “On Schism,” §I.1, 60. italics in original.

¹² Ibid., §I.2–3, p. 61.

¹³ Ibid., §I.4, p. 61. italics in original.

¹⁴ Minerva G. Carcaño, “Deal with Our Wounds,” Reconciling Ministries Network, <http://www.rmnetwork.org/blog/2012/05/23/flashnet-05-23-2012/#3>.

¹⁵ Wesley, “On Schism,” §I.7, p. 63.

¹⁶ Ibid., §II.20, pp. 68–69.

¹⁷ Ibid., §II.10, p. 64.

¹⁸ Ibid., §II.10, p. 64; §II.12, p. 65.

¹⁹ Ibid., §II.16, p. 66.

²⁰ Ibid., §II.17, pp. 66–67.

²¹ Ibid., §II.17, p. 67.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ “Catholic Spirit,” *Sermons II: 34–70*, vol. 2 in *The Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), par. 4, p. 82.

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- ²⁵ Adam Hamilton, *Revival: Faith as Wesley Lived It* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2014), 25.
- ²⁶ John Wesley, "Thoughts Upon a Late Pheomenon," *The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design*, vol. 9 in *The Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), par. 9, p. 536.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, "Character of a Methodist," §I.1, p. 34.
- ²⁸ Wesley, "Catholic Spirit," *Sermons II: 34–70*, §4, p. 82.
- ²⁹ In "Catholic Spirit" he refers to these as the "first elements of the gospel of Christ" or alternatively as the "main branches of Christian doctrine." Being of a catholic spirit, Wesley writes, are not speculative latitudinarians who are "of muddy understanding; because your mind is all in a mist; because you have no settled, consistent principles, but are for jumbling all opinions together." Rather, a person "of a truly catholic spirit has not now his religion to seek. He is fixed as the sun in his judgment concerning the main branches of Christian doctrine." *Ibid.*, "Catholic Spirit," §III.1, p. 93.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, §I.12–18, pp. 87–89.
- ³¹ *Ibid.* See also Kevin Watson's blog, "(Mis)understanding Wesley's Catholic Spirit," <https://vitalpiety.com/2012/07/26/misunderstanding-wesleys-catholic-spirit/>.
- ³² Wesley, "Catholic Spirit," §I.10, p. 86.