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# Mission Spirituality in the Early Methodist Preachers

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## Introduction

David Lyle Jeffrey claimed that Christian spirituality in the eighteenth century can be divided into two basic kinds.<sup>1</sup> First, the “meditative tradition” has been expressed through poets, hymn writers, mystics, and prayerful intercessors. Second, the “missionary tradition” has been the territory of prophets, preachers, and reformers. The spiritual life and activity of John Wesley and early Methodism has typically been presented as an example of either the meditative or missionary kinds, but the deep logic between them has rarely been noticed and remains largely undeveloped. This chapter argues that early Methodism embodied a form of “mission spirituality,” which combined the pursuit of personal holiness with a passion for evangelistic outreach. This reached full expression in the lives and autobiographies of the early Methodist preachers, who were patterns of spirituality for the movement as a whole.

Wesley gathered and published autobiographies of his preachers in the *Arminian Magazine* (1778–1811; latterly renamed the *Methodist Magazine*). Some of these were subsequently collected by Thomas Jackson in *The Lives of Early Methodist Preachers*, which went into a fourth edition (1871), in six

1. David Lyle Jeffrey, *English Spirituality in the Age of Wesley* (Vancouver: Regent College, 1987), 24–35.

volumes, and containing forty-one lives.<sup>2</sup> The present study examines this collection as a provisional “canon” for developing the concept of mission spirituality. There are significant limitations to this approach, such as the omission of female voices,<sup>3</sup> and the loss of narratives that didn’t make it into the canon. Nevertheless, I aim to make an imperfect beginning at a potentially significant area of research. In general, the importance of these sources has been overshadowed by scholarly interest in the leaders of the movement. Other studies have been focused on ecclesiological and social analyses of the emerging movement;<sup>4</sup> theological and practical attempts to systematize the principles of early Methodist preaching;<sup>5</sup> or historical and hagiographical accounts of the preachers as saints and heroes.<sup>6</sup> The modest aspiration here is to glean insights into the missionary spirit of the Methodist movement, through the autobiographies of its pioneers, and as a contribution to contemporary thinking on the connections between spirituality, discipleship, and mission.<sup>7</sup>

### Reading the Early Methodist Preachers

In *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative*, D. Bruce Hindmarsh has provided us with a landmark study of spiritual autobiography in early modern England, including that of the Methodist preachers.<sup>8</sup> He reminds us that autobiography is both expressive and constructive. On the one hand, it represents an uncomplicated account of facts and experiences; and we can read trustingly. On the other hand, it is a carefully written genre, with specific theological purposes; and we must read critically. He argues that the autobiographies of these preachers have an apologetic function, to

2. EMP.

3. Paul Chilcote, *She Offered them Christ* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001); Paul Chilcote, *Early Methodist Spirituality* (Nashville: Kingswood, 2007).

4. G. Holden Pike, *John Wesley and His Preachers: The Conquest of England* (London: Unwin, 1903); W. L. Dougherty, *John Wesley, His Conference and His Preachers* (London: Wesley Historical Society, 1944); Adrian Burdon, *Authority and Order: John Wesley and His Preachers* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005); John Lenton, *John Wesley’s Preachers: A Social and Statistical Analysis* (London: Paternoster, 2008).

5. Henry Bett, *The Early Methodist Preachers* (London: Epworth, 1935).

6. Richard Heizenrater, “John Wesley’s Principles and Practices of Preaching,” in *Lectures on Several Occasions*, no. 1 (Dallas: Perkins School of Theology, 1997).

7. Susan Hope, *Mission-Shaped Spirituality* (London: Church House, 2004); Roger Heland and Leonard Hjalmarson, *Missional Spirituality: Embodying God’s Love from the Inside Out* (Leicester: InterVarsity, 2011).

8. D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative: Spiritual Autobiography in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

defend an arminian approach to salvation and discipleship; and they have a mimetic function, as a means of defining a “guild” of leaders, whose lives are worthy of imitation by the movement as a whole. For Hindmarsh, the hermeneutical challenge is to “hover” over the sources, on the wings of trust and suspicion.<sup>9</sup>

Hindmarsh operates with what he calls “the evangelical pattern of climactic conversion,” found within a long “tradition of crisis conversion” from the apostle Paul to John Wesley.<sup>10</sup> So, he claims “the most distinctive feature” of a preacher’s autobiography is “the detailed rehearsal of the subject’s conversion.”<sup>11</sup> For the women preachers of early Methodism, no less than the men, “conversion was taken up as the theme of one’s whole life.”<sup>12</sup> This argument is pushed to the limit when he claims that “the whole of their lives have now become explicable in terms of conversion,”<sup>13</sup> as a series of spiritual crises that best describes everything from awakening to perfection and death. “Conversion became not a moment in one’s life but the key to interpreting the meaning of one’s life from beginning to end.”<sup>14</sup> In his review of Hindmarsh’s book, Henry Rack notes how “the Arminianism of Wesley’s mechanism, unlike the Calvinism of his rivals, meant that conversion was liable to be lifelong,” and that “the published *Lives* of early Methodist preachers, written late in life, show the full pattern.”<sup>15</sup>

From the perspective of Wesleyan theology, however, this “conversionist” interpretation seems like an over-generalization. The dominant leitmotif in Wesleyan theology is not the navigation of spiritual crises, but the overarching story of God’s gracious work in the human heart, and our on-going response of repentance and faith.<sup>16</sup> As we become co-workers with God in working out our own salvation, the story may take dramatic turns in moments of crisis, but it is the journey that defines the moment, not the other way around. When read this way, an autobiography is not just an elaborate account of evangelical conversion, with an agonistic prologue and an extended epilogue of preaching activities. Rather, I argue that these are narratives of a missionary’s life, from beginning to end. Conversion does

9. Ibid., 12.

10. Ibid., 16.

11. Ibid., 227.

12. Ibid., 238.

13. Ibid., 242.

14. Ibid., 322.

15. Henry D. Rack, *JEH* 65 no. 3 (2006) 620.

16. Kenneth Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007); Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace* (Nashville: Kingswood, 1994).

not define the missionary, but being a missionary does define the meaning and importance of conversion. Missionaries are those who have passed through evangelical conversion on the way of holiness, and who are thus empowered to invite others onto that journey.

Since Hindmarsh reduces every kind of spiritual attainment to a crisis moment, he has difficulty accounting for the deeper significance of the whole spiritual journey. So, for instance, the dramatic foretastes of assurance, gained and lost by the awakened seeker, are mistakenly interpreted as examples of justification before the new birth (which Wesley would never admit), or multiple unstable conversions and unresolved oscillations.<sup>17</sup> The deep and formative work of God in the heart and life of the seeker, in the long term making of a missionary, is eclipsed by his conversionist reading. The same kind of reduction can be seen in his approach to the pursuit of Christian perfection; and, indeed, of what it meant to die well.

The argument presented here, is that the dominant leitmotif of the autobiographies is “co-working with God,” both in terms of one’s own salvation and in the missionary vocation of saving souls. Indeed, this can be seen in James Morgan’s own reflections about the importance of spiritual autobiography.<sup>18</sup> In the first place, they provide us with examples of the Christian life worthy of imitation. Unlike some traditions of autobiography, they are not presented as romantic ideals, which can be dismissed as unattainable in everyday life, but as realistic testimonies of how God transforms the lives of ordinary Christians and empowers them for service. Nor are we meant to be enthralled by the narrative of heroic activity as an end in itself, but as a means of grace that inspires the same life of devotion to God and neighbour that they had. They are properly spiritual autobiographies that provide an inner history of the Christian life, connecting the work of God in the heart with the life of discipleship and mission. Rack claims that early Methodist “autobiographies and biographies were to display God’s merciful, providential dealings with his people and to act as inspirations and guides to others as well as to show the world what the Methodists were really like.”<sup>19</sup>

Morgan laments that “we are too superficially acquainted with ourselves, to get deeply into fellowship with God.” These narratives, therefore, provide an example of what it means to strive for an ever deepening and transforming relationship with God. In particular, they serve to reveal the “more internal state” of the preacher “with respect to his daily course of

17. Hindmarsh, *Conversion Narrative*, 159, 247, 252.

18. *EMP*, 3:2–10.

19. Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (London: Epworth, 1992), 421.

walking with God; his attainments in the Divine life; together with his last sickness and death.” Morgan is convinced, however, that the reader can learn some general “maxims” from these patterns of holiness “which, when adopted into our own conduct, often serve in the room of many rules, and are singular incentives to our diligence and fervour.”<sup>20</sup> The method I have adopted is to identify a few of these “maxims” as common patterns of wisdom that emerge from *The Lives of the Early Methodist Preachers*.

## The Nature of Mission Spirituality

*1. Do they know God as a pardoning God? Have they the love of God abiding in them? Do they desire and seek nothing but God? And are they holy in all manner of conversation? 2. Have they gifts (as well as grace) for the work? . . . 3. Have they fruit? Are any truly convinced of sin and converted to God by their preaching?*<sup>21</sup>

Wesley’s three marks of a preacher provide a useful foundation for building a formal definition of mission spirituality. The spirit of a missionary has its source in the conscious experience of God’s justifying and sanctifying grace, which flows out to others through the gifts of understanding and utterance, and springs up in the fruit of transformed lives. The preacher is not merely thought of as a convert but a seeker, pursuing holiness of heart and life, and inviting others to share this journey into God.

## Piety and Proclamation

Although they often preached three or four times a day, the preachers had no shortage of material to draw upon, because their own spiritual discipline and real life experience provided an abundant source. Jackson noted that they followed in the example of Wesley, who learned how to abandon his manuscripts, and “preached out of the fullness of his heart, which was richly charged with gospel truth, and all on fire with holy zeal.”<sup>22</sup> Preaching was never about expounding doctrine as a speculative exercise, but exemplifying the truths of scripture through personal testimony. The preachers offered a living exposition of scriptural promises, and an impassioned exhortation that others might prove them true in their own experience.

20. *EMP*, 3:9.

21. *Ibid.*, 1:xiv. Cf. Thomas Jackson, ed. *Minutes of Several Occasions* (London, 1797), 10.

22. *EMP*, 1:xx.

Wesley expected his preachers to grow in both knowledge and vital piety. Alongside the practices of devotion, they were required to adopt the discipline of “spiritual reading” and personal study as a means of grace.<sup>23</sup> To that end, he edited and published the *Christian Library* as a means of feeding the understanding of the preacher, as well as the “whole spirit of Missionaries” itself.<sup>24</sup> So, James Morgan noted that the whole life of Thomas Walsh was “one series of holy living and mental improvement,” which had the effect of preserving his heart “like an ever fresh and overflowing fountain, which on every occasion poured forth its fruitful streams of holy doctrine and persuasive exhortation.” He continued, “It was easy enough to discern that he felt the things he delivered” and “was himself a pattern of the truths he taught.”<sup>25</sup>

### Holiness and Usefulness

The nature of mission spirituality can also be traced through the connection between personal “holiness” and spiritual “usefulness.” In short, a heart that is deeply rooted in the life of God becomes eminently useful in the hands of God. John Pawson asked, “What can I wish for more, but an increase of the life of God in my own soul, and that His good pleasure may prosper in my hand?”<sup>26</sup>

When the life of God was made visible in the course of their ministry, it was often felt by others as a kind of anointing. Thomas Taylor wondered, “I am at a loss to know what can induce men to preach, who are destitute of the life and power of godliness,”<sup>27</sup> and others observed that there was a “Divine union which generally accompanied his sermons.”<sup>28</sup> John Valton advised young preachers not to “seek so much for the art, as for the unction, of preaching. If you have the art, you will please: if you have the unction, you will save men.”<sup>29</sup>

James Morgan, one of Wesley’s “assistants,” wrote that “the most shining abilities, natural or acquired, without ‘the wisdom that is from above,’ and the anointing of the Holy Ghost, are . . . lighter than vanity.”<sup>30</sup> Morgan

23. Jackson, *Minutes*, 21.

24. *EMP*, 5:102.

25. *Ibid.*, 3:149.

26. *Ibid.*, 4:69.

27. *Ibid.*, 5:62.

28. *Ibid.*, 5:102.

29. *Ibid.*, 6:122.

30. *Ibid.*, 3:78.

claimed that all Thomas Walsh's public expressions of prayer and preaching "glowed with the love of God."<sup>31</sup>

### Love and Zeal

Mission spirituality also embodies the logic of the Great Commandment. For the preachers, love of God was first about living in the conscious experience of God's own love for them, and the desire it implants to love God fully in return. This wellspring of holy love overflowed in love of neighbour, as the love of God reaching out to others through them. John Gaulter observed that being "converted to God themselves," the preachers "gave efficacy to the savour of their discourses by the active piety of their lives; and their glowing zeal for the salvation of souls."<sup>32</sup>

As a young convert, William Black recounted, "I felt a peculiar love to souls, and seldom passed a man, woman, or child without lifting up my heart to God on their account; or passed a house without praying for all in it . . . so that sometimes I was constrained to speak to them, though I met with rough treatment in return."<sup>33</sup> Beyond conversion, the pursuit of perfect love caused this zeal to take on a highly contagious quality. James Morgan noted that the "whole conversation" of Thomas Walsh "was like fire; warming, refreshing, and comforting all that were about him, and begetting in their souls a measure of the same zealous concern for the glory of God, and the salvation of sinners, which burned in his own breast."<sup>34</sup> In the midst of a powerful love-feast, John Furz recorded how the local leaders became so "filled with zeal for the glory of God, and the good of souls" that "they dispersed themselves on Sundays, went into the country villages, sung and prayed, and exhorted the people to turn to God."<sup>35</sup> By taking up the call to preach, and taking to the road as Wesley's travelling preachers, they spoke of being devoted to "one thing": longing for more of God's love, sharing that love with others, and stirring up the same missionary spirit throughout the movement.

31. *Ibid.*, 3:187.

32. *Ibid.*, 4:208.

33. *Ibid.*, 5:257.

34. *Ibid.*, 3:121.

35. *Ibid.*, 5:127.

## The Making of a Missionary

*Q. What was the rise of Methodism, so called? A. In 1729 the late Mr. Wesley and his brother, saw they could not be saved without holiness; they followed after it, and incited others to do the same. In 1737 they saw holiness comes by faith. They saw likewise that men are justified before they are sanctified: but still holiness was their point. God then thrust them out . . . to raise a holy people.<sup>36</sup>*

The conversion narratives of the early Methodist preachers follow a common pattern. In retrospect, they note how the work of prevenient grace became consciously operative from as early as four years old, implanting a variety of divine “drawings” and desires that could never be shaken off. God both “strives” and “waits” to be gracious in the way of salvation. Growing up, they reported a range of ongoing spiritual experience, from the fear of death to being “athirst for God,” along with the desire to forsake sin and improve the “form of godliness” in their lives. These accounts serve to uphold an arminian view of universal and prevenient grace, but only as they narrate a spiritual journey in which the work of God gave birth to a missionary, whose life was preserved and “set apart” for the pioneering task.

### Awakening and Longing

In the process of awakening, the Spirit implants a longing for God that can be resisted, but never be satisfied with anything less than holiness of heart and life. Sampson Staniforth remarked, “I that never prayed in my life was continually calling upon God . . . A cry after God was put into my heart, which has never yet ceased, and, I trust, never will.”<sup>37</sup> As each narrative progresses, the dance of prevenient grace and human response unfolds through cycles of godly conviction and practical resolution, followed by quenching the Spirit and backsliding. With each cycle, however, the seeker pressed on towards evangelical conversion, by mourning and wrestling for the assurance of forgiveness and the gift of new birth. This journey is reinforced by many “foretastes” of God’s love in moments of revelation and spiritual breakthrough. Thomas Walsh observed: “One way, among the diversity of the Holy Ghost’s operations, whereby He cleanseth souls, is, to feast them for some moments with so much of the substance of things hoped for, as

36. Jackson, *Minutes*, 9–10.

37. *EMP*, 4:118.

shall captivate them for their whole life after; and, in one taste of the sweetness of God, does the work of a thousand arguments.”<sup>38</sup>

Thomas Taylor also explained, “I had gracious visits from the Lord, exceedingly sweet to my soul” and in pressing forward, “the Lord continued to visit me with tastes of His love.”<sup>39</sup> In this way, a seeker not only learned how to long for God, but also to expect that their longings would be met. Merely believing that God was able to save was eventually superseded by a confidence that God was actually willing to save. The spiritual dynamic was even more subtle, insofar as the Spirit might bring conviction about the need for longing-to-long for God. William Black complained that “I mourned because I could not mourn; and grieved because I could not grieve.”<sup>40</sup> He was “greedy of sorrow!” Understanding this process of awakening and longing was more important to the preacher than counting conversions. Once the Spirit began to work these longings in the heart, and given the right guidance, it was only a matter of time before the gospel promises would be fulfilled.

### Searching and Guiding

One frequent reason given for slow spiritual progress towards conversion was the lack of a “kind shepherd” or spiritual guide to second the work of prevenient grace in a seeker’s life. In the early days of the revival, Christopher Hopper lamented, “I only wanted a spiritual guide to show me the way; but, alas! I could not find him in the country.”<sup>41</sup> The need for this kind of guidance, however, is precisely what the emerging Methodist movement promoted and supplied. By some “particular providence,” these youthful seekers come across a preacher, or are taken to hear one by a friend, and eventually get mixed up in a Methodist society.

Despite often significant cost to personal reputation and safety, these seekers expressed great and growing affection for the Methodist people and their manner of living. George Story recalled the love and zeal of ordinary members when “the first time I entered a Methodist’s house, they went to prayer with me and for me, a considerable time.”<sup>42</sup> William Hunter, one of Wesley’s longest serving preachers, made mention of the affection he experienced when “the people took notice of me, talked with me, and wished

38. *Ibid.*, 3:51.

39. *Ibid.*, 5:10.

40. *Ibid.*, 5:248.

41. *Ibid.*, 1:185.

42. *Ibid.*, 5:228.

me to cast in my lot amongst them.”<sup>43</sup> Once they had been accepted into fellowship, they benefitted from a whole range of transformative practices: from society and class meetings, to participating in love feasts and covenant services. And, in retrospect, Duncan Wright remembered how, “the sight of a Methodist used to set my heart on fire with love.”<sup>44</sup>

Seekers did not always attribute the moment of their awakening, or conversion, to evangelistic preaching. Thomas Lee pointed out, “I was not deeply affected under any particular sermon, yet my conscience was gradually enlightened, by hearing, and reading, and conversing, and praying, till I resolved to cast in my lot among them.” Subsequently, “in the use of these means, God frequently met me, and comforted my soul.” During a moment of private prayer, he rejoiced that “God broke in upon my soul in so wonderful a manner, that I could no longer doubt of His forgiving love.”<sup>45</sup>

### Converted and Called

These mostly short narratives can belie a very long journey, before the experience of evangelical conversion was attained. Richard Rodda noted that from the time of admission into society, and constantly meeting in class, “I was nearly two years seeking rest for my soul” before “God gave me a clear sense of his forgiving love.”<sup>46</sup> Sometimes it is hard to distinguish between foretaste and fulfillment, as these seekers endure multiple cycles of attainment and backsliding, glimpsing assurance, and then sinking back into despair. George Shadford pointed out that “the Lord did not suffer me to take convictions for conversion” and “after those pleasant drawings, I had sorrow and deep distress.”<sup>47</sup> This agnostic process is expressed in the language of spiritual warfare. There is a competition for the soul which Satan is intent to win, but doomed to lose. What marks out the moment of conversion is the sense that this cycle of fear, doubt, and despair is finally broken. The experience is not merely a foretaste of forgiveness, but a “clear sense of pardon.” It exceeds awakening as an abiding assurance of being embraced by God’s love, that endured through the trials and temptations of life to follow.

Henry Rack observes that “early Methodist conversion narratives were punctuated by a variety of supernatural phenomena offering challenges and reassurance on the way to justification and sanctification,” often in

43. *Ibid.*, 2:242.

44. *Ibid.*, 3:111.

45. *Ibid.*, 4:153–55.

46. *Ibid.*, 2:298–99.

47. *Ibid.*, 6:149.

the form of a supernatural vision and voice.<sup>48</sup> For some seekers, spiritual breakthrough came through a vision of Jesus on the cross through an “eye of faith” and filled them with an assurance of God’s forgiving love.<sup>49</sup> For others, it came by hearing the still small voice of God speaking, “Thy sins are forgiven thee.”<sup>50</sup> Either way, there is a repeated connection between this overwhelming sense of personal forgiveness and an overflowing love of neighbour. Christopher Hopper confessed, “I found love to my God, to His yoke, to His cross, to His saints, and to His friends and enemies.”<sup>51</sup> Here is the thread that connects awakening, conversion and calling in the spirituality of these emerging missionaries. Indeed, the art of preaching meant to “set forth Christ as evidently crucified before their eyes . . . justifying us by his blood, and sanctifying us by his Spirit.”<sup>52</sup>

The narrative of being called to preach also has an identifiable narrative pattern; and the experience of Thomas Hanby is somewhat typical.<sup>53</sup> First, there came a “sudden impression” that he “ought to preach the gospel;” an inner compulsion of the Spirit, not an aspiration of the flesh, that leaves him “perplexed.” On the one hand, as a relatively untutored and unlettered individual, there was a deep sense of inadequacy for the task: “I cannot preach; for I am a fool, and a child.” On the other hand, the tyranny of this anxiety is broken by a desire for obedience: “I was willing to preach, provided I was sure it was the will of God concerning me.” This was followed by a period of spiritual wrestling and consulting with friends. Hanby looked for a sign and, while out visiting the sick, God spoke to him through the words of a dying woman: “God has called you to preach the gospel; you have long rejected the call; but He will make you go. Obey the call, obey the call.” He was then resolved to “make a trial” by preaching abroad, and noted that “God was pleased to visit us,” as some were moved to prayer, and two people received a sense of pardon. Other would-be preachers tested their call by taking on leadership of classes and bands before venturing out. Either way, a degree of liberty in speaking, accompanied by fruitfulness, were looked upon as “seals” of their call to preach.

48. Henry D. Rack, “Charles Wesley and the Supernatural,” *BJRULM* 88 no. 2 (2006) 67. See also, Rack, “Early Methodist Visions of the Trinity,” *PWHS* 46 nos. 2-3 (1988) 38-44 and 57-69.

49. Cf. *EMP*, 4:286; 5:11.

50. Cf. *Ibid.*, 4:122; 5:113.

51. *Ibid.*, 1:189.

52. Jackson, *Minutes*, 27.

53. *EMP*, 2:137-38.

## Set Apart and Sent Out

To Wesley's three marks of a preacher, Alexander Mather added a fourth: the "clear conviction that he was called of God to the work; otherwise he could not bear the crosses attending it."<sup>54</sup> A common fear of "running before being sent" was fuelled by the normal expectation that preaching was reserved for ordained clergy of the established Church, or dissenting ministers ordained by congregational appointment. In the face of this, Wesley grounded their authority to preach in the direct call of God, evidenced in sound conversion and fruitful ministry. So, Christian Hopper reasoned, "I have heard and believed the gospel, and found it to be the power of God to the salvation of my own soul" and "I have preached the gospel to sinners dead in sin, and they have been awakened and converted to God." He therefore concluded that his "call to preach the gospel was consistent with Scripture, reason, and experience." He may not be formally ordained by church or congregation, but he can say, "I have now the countenance of my God" and "the hands of His dear Son, the Bishop of my soul, laid upon me."<sup>55</sup>

The long journey of awakening is not merely a prologue to conversion, but training for evangelistic mission. Indeed, it would seem that a preacher's spiritual journey was often longer and more laborious than most. James Morgan observed that "those whom God intends chiefly for the service of other souls, He gives them to feel, as they are able to bear, the uttermost of their nature's death . . . before He shows them His salvation." In this way, "they may be the better capable of sympathizing with, and counseling, others in like circumstances, and be quickened in their endeavors of saving souls from death."<sup>56</sup> John Pawson also reflected that, God "took this method with me: He dug deep, and laid the foundation sure, and hath carried on the building to this day!"<sup>57</sup>

## The Character of a Missionary

*Have you a lively faith in Christ? Do you enjoy a clear manifestation of the love of God to your soul? . . . Do you expect to be perfected in love in this life? Do you really desire and earnestly*

54. Ibid., 2:178.

55. Ibid., 1:193–94.

56. Ibid., 3:51–52.

57. Ibid., 4:19.

*seek it? Are you resolved to devote yourself wholly to God, and to his work?*<sup>58</sup>

The preachers were committed to the gospel of Christian perfection, variously referred to as entire sanctification, the great salvation or being saved to the uttermost, and especially perfect love. The evolving doctrine, and its experiential proof, was proclaimed as something to be actively pursued, attainable in this life, given in a moment, capable of growing, being lost and regained. It was a promise they proclaimed to all the world, and invited people to seek evangelical conversion as a means to that great end. On his deathbed, John Pawson advised the next generation of preachers to “constantly preach Christ, in all the riches of His grace, and offer in His name a present, free, and full salvation—a salvation from the guilt, the power, and the very being of sin.”<sup>59</sup> In an obituary to Pawson, Adam Clarke wrote that “nothing short of this experience he considered as salvation.”<sup>60</sup> Christian perfection was not merely a promise for all real Christians, but an experience of God’s presence and power that many preachers considered vital for their missionary vocation.

### Vocation and Perfection

For around half the autobiographies, the pursuit of perfection is a significant thread in the testimony about being called and empowered as missionary preachers. Among these, there are two basic patterns of experience.

First, there are those who become exhorters and then local preachers relatively soon after conversion. In the course of their ministry, they find themselves subject to trials and temptations, all of which reveal the need for a deeper renewal in grace, and this kindles their pursuit of perfection. The testimony of Alexander Mather is exemplary. The new birth had endowed him with “a continual power over outward and inward sin,” yet he explained: “I felt in me what I knew was contrary to the mind which was in Christ, and what hindered me from enjoying and glorifying Him.” The context for this revelation was a struggle to fulfill his vocation: “When I saw my call to preach, the difficulties attending that office showed me more and more the need of such a change, that I might bear all things” and “I saw as clearly as I do now, that nothing furthers that end so much as a heart and life wholly devoted to God.” For the preacher, attaining perfection was more

58. Jackson, *Minutes*, 11.

59. *Ibid.*, 4:89.

60. *Ibid.*, 2:190.

about mission than morality. From that moment, he claimed to have, “an unspeakable pleasure in doing the will of God” and “I had also a power to do it . . . with such a fervent zeal for the glory of God and the good of souls, as swallowed up every other care and consideration.”

This conscious state of perfect love was typically given in an instant, but could grow by degrees through “continued watchfulness,” or gradually fade away through “wandering thoughts.”<sup>61</sup> Either way, the moment left an indelible longing within the soul for the presence and power of God, along with an expectation of ongoing renewal. Mather concludes, “My soul is often on the stretch for the full enjoyment of this without interruption; nor can I discharge my conscience, without urging it upon all believers, now to come unto Him ‘who is able to save unto the uttermost!’”<sup>62</sup>

Second, there are those who sensed the need of perfection soon after conversion, and sought it as a proper progression of the holy life.<sup>63</sup> Among these, many testified to the importance of band meetings in wrestling for God’s blessing, as well as resisting “Satan’s devices” to dampen and derail their spiritual fervour.<sup>64</sup> The call to preach comes either as part of their journey towards perfection in love, or as a consequence of having attained it.

After a remarkable conversion and period of wandering, Thomas Rankin “began to seek this great salvation” and observed “the more I sought it, the more my soul grew in grace.”<sup>65</sup> In a time of private prayer, he heard the words, “Whom shall I send?” And, the moment he accepted the call, he said, “I felt such love for the souls of my fellow-creatures” that “I could lay down my life if I might but be anywise instrumental of saving one soul.” His initial efforts at preaching, however, were somewhat unsuccessful; and, coupled with an increasing consciousness of his own sinful nature, he was “tempted to preach no more, till God had purified my heart.” Nevertheless, he pressed on with the help of his band meeting, until he reported that the power of God “descended upon my soul.” As was his practice, Wesley advised Rankin that he would not ultimately find what he was looking for “till you give yourself wholly up to the work of God!” Complete breakthrough came when he “no longer felt reluctance to go out as a poor despised Methodist preacher.” Not long after, he was appointed as a travelling preacher, and then sent as a missionary to America.

61. Cf. John Wesley, “Wandering Thoughts,” *Sermons II 34–70, BEW*, 2:126–37.

62. *EMP*, 2:194

63. A cursory survey suggests that this group of preachers undertook their spiritual journey around or after the “holiness revival” of the 1760s, when the intentional pursuit of instantaneous perfection was at its height. See Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 427.

64. Cf. John Wesley, “Satan’s Devices,” *Sermons II 34–70, BEW*, 2:139–51.

65. *EMP*, 5:160–72.

For Richard Rodda, the son of a first generation Methodist preacher, it was not moral failure or the call to preach that occasioned his journey into perfection, but the responsibility of praying in public, which he admitted “was a cross to me.”<sup>66</sup> After hearing the doctrine of perfection expounded, he “longed to experience it” and “prayed that every thought and desire might centre in God.” He recollected, “My soul was now on full stretch after the blessing” and “I not only believed it attainable, but that I should attain it.” With the help of his class meeting, he became more earnest in private prayer, until the power of God descended upon him, such that he “could no longer refrain from telling what God had done.” Following this, he simultaneously wrestled with the call to preach while becoming captive to wandering thoughts, through which Satan even tempted him to contemplate suicide. Peace only came through accepting the call to preach; first in homes, then abroad, and finally as a travelling preacher.

Although half of the autobiographies do not explicitly speak of pursuing perfection, they are all characterized by a way of holiness that is guided by the vision of perfect love. This vision shaped the missionary character these preachers. What follows is an exploration of their own descriptions of perfection, derived from personal experience, and demonstrating a richness of language not often found in contemporary theological expositions of the doctrine.

## Union and Communion

The greatest aspiration was to attain an “uninterrupted communion with God,” which meant a “sacred sense” of God’s presence and providence that would uphold them throughout the course of their ministry. William Black relished the ability to “see, feel, or taste God in everything.”<sup>67</sup> They coveted “having fellowship with the Father and the Son,” through an indwelling and abiding witness of the Spirit. Rankin spoke of the desire to walk in a conscious and conversational relationship with God, in the spirit of Abraham and Enoch. The preachers sought a heavenly flame in the heart, that caused them to delight in God and overflow in joyful obedience. They longed for an “inundation of love,” and the ability to live in the covenant promise that “Christ is mine, and I am His.”<sup>68</sup>

Against accusations of enthusiasm, John Murlin was unashamed to speak of having “a constant communion with Him” and “I pay no regard

66. *Ibid.*, 2:302–9.

67. *Ibid.*, 5:256.

68. *Ibid.*, 6:58.

to those who tell us, ‘You must come from the mount.’<sup>69</sup> John Pawson also “enjoyed the abiding witness of the Spirit” and being “favoured with the continued presence of God.”<sup>70</sup> Alexander Mather claimed that perfection is that “communion with God in which is my only happiness” and “that the fullness of the promise is every Christian’s privilege.” Joseph Benson illustrated further the missionary significance of this communion, by noting that Mather “generally felt himself the truths he delivered to others, and, in consequence thereof, his hearers felt them too.” So, “he laboured to diffuse the odor of the knowledge of God, and of the truths of His precious word.” His life “was consistent with his teaching.”<sup>71</sup>

### Intimacy and Power

Mather also claimed that “intimacy with God” is “the life of preaching.”<sup>72</sup> In different ways, the journaling of a preacher’s ministry narrates the close connection between abidingly deeply with God, and living missionally in the world. George Shadford reflected that, “If we had more of God in our hearts, there would be more of Him on our tongues, and shining in our lives; for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh.”<sup>73</sup> John Valton summed this up: “When I am thus happy in God, my bowels thus yearn after the souls of poor sinners” and “nothing but love glowing in the soul can make us zealous and persevering in every good work.” Consequently, “if love decay, we shall soon become unfruitful.”<sup>74</sup>

The preachers discovered that a sound conversion was not sufficient to save them from fear, doubt, and despair. The trials they endured, and the temptation to give up their calling, made them vigilant in spiritual warfare and urgent in their pursuit of the perfect love that casts out fear. The ability to spend and be spent in the service of God was not determined by the force of circumstance, but the ability to see his presence, feel his embrace, hear his word of promise, and trust that the future was in his hands. When this connection was threatened or unravelled, the vitality and fruitfulness of the preacher depended upon wrestling for its renewal. James Rogers confessed that “I did not retain the witness of full salvation long;” but, “the Lord has

69. *Ibid.*, 3:300.

70. *Ibid.*, 4:23.

71. *Ibid.*, 2:198–99.

72. *Ibid.*, 2:191.

73. *Ibid.*, 6:176.

74. *Ibid.*, 6:28, 91.

graciously restored it to me at different times” enabling him “to feel a measure of the genuine fruits of holiness.”<sup>75</sup>

### Emptiness and Fullness

The experience of perfection was one of utter moment-by-moment dependence on God’s grace, and of patience to receive the gifts of God as the moment required. Far from inducing a sense of pride, the journey into perfection was marked by the humility of knowing oneself to be nothing, to have nothing, and to be capable of nothing, apart from the grace of God alone. George Story “supposed a soul saved from all sin would be a great, wise, and glorious creature” whereas he had “such a discovery of my own nothingness as humbled me to the dust continually.”<sup>76</sup> John Valton confessed that “my greatest trials have been timidity” and “standing in that pulpit was like standing to be shot!”<sup>77</sup> The enormous challenges of the missionary vocation, coupled with a sense of inner weakness, left them in little doubt of their own “littleness, helplessness and unworthiness.” They understood the necessity of being kept by grace, every moment.

Matthias Joyce felt the call to become a travelling preacher, but knowing that he was insufficient for the task, his prayer for perfection consisted in pleading, “Lord, I am nothing! Lord, I am nothing!” and then “in a moment, found power to obey.”<sup>78</sup> Similarly, James Rogers learned from his band meeting that “the blessing of Christian perfection consisted in feeling I am nothing, and Christ is all in all . . . this I found true by experience.” He bore witness to being, “so truly humbled with a sense of my own nothingness, that I rejoiced to suffer reproach for the name of Christ.”<sup>79</sup>

This experience of nothingness meant being freed from self-centeredness, a deadness or disengagement from the world, and being fully devoted to God. Although many of the preachers were reluctant to speak of perfection as sinlessness, they enthusiastically talked about being “emptied of sin,” in order to be “filled with love.” Alexander Mather spoke of being “inflamed with great ardor in wrestling with God; determined not to let Him go, till He emptied me of all sin, and filled me with Himself.”<sup>80</sup> Jasper Robinson also reflected that “contrary to my former expectation of being

75. *Ibid.*, 4:326.

76. *Ibid.*, 5:236–37.

77. *Ibid.*, 6: 87, 100.

78. *Ibid.*, 4:271.

79. *Ibid.*, 4:290–91.

80. *Ibid.*, 2:191.

something extraordinary when sanctified, I am emptied of self, and sink into an unfeigned nothingness, that Christ may be my all in all.”<sup>81</sup> Others also enumerated this sense of emptiness and fullness as two distinct and sequential forms of experience, the latter offering an abiding witness of the Spirit that brings peace and power for missionary service.

### Hunger and Thirst

The experience of perfection also filled the early Methodist preachers with a vehement thirst and fervent longing for more of God and a greater conformity to Christ. Being “athirst for God” in personal holiness was inseparable from being “thirsty for souls” in evangelistic mission. Having entered into the experience perfect love, Thomas Walsh recorded in his journal a constant interplay between thirsting for God and neighbor. On one day, he can record, “All the day my soul thirsted for the living God.” And a few days later, “I had intercourse with heaven all the day” and “thirsted for the salvation of all men, as for my own soul.”<sup>82</sup>

The preachers were not merely thirsty for making converts, but also for a holy people. John Nelson’s response to antinomianism was to “create such a hungering and thirsting in them after inward holiness, that they may pant as the hart panteth after the waterbrooks, till all that is in them be made holiness to the Lord!”<sup>83</sup> It was not merely that they proclaimed the gospel of full salvation, but were also witnesses of what it meant to live on full stretch for it. They invited people to long after God in the same way that they did. James Rogers explained: “My soul at present doth hunger and thirst after a more entire conformity to the image of God. I see nothing so desirable as holiness; and I am resolved, through grace, to recommend it to all, both by example and precept.”<sup>84</sup> With mission spirituality, the medium is the message.

81. *Ibid.*, 6:186.

82. *Ibid.*, 3:215, 223.

83. *Ibid.*, 1:152.

84. *Ibid.*, 4:238.

## The Work of a Missionary

*Q. What is the office of a Christian Minister? A. To watch over the souls as he that must give account; to feed and guide the flock. Q. How shall he be qualified for this great work? A. By walking closely with God, and having his work greatly at heart.*<sup>85</sup>

The preachers do not talk about “the mission of God,” but “the work of God” and being co-workers with God. This way of speaking, however, perfectly captures the essence of the *missio Dei*, as the activity of God in the world, and our participation in it. The calling to be a preacher was understood as being sent out in mission, or having a “commission” from God to be a co-worker in the gospel. The “work of God” was fundamentally what God did to lead people through the whole way of salvation, from awakening to seeking, from seeking to conversion, and from conversion to perfection. These missionary preachers were sent into the world as labourers in God’s vineyard, in order to promote salvation to the uttermost. They were co-workers with God’s universal and prevenient grace by “preaching broad” in fields, graveyards, and marketplaces. They were co-workers with God’s convincing, converting, and perfecting grace through proclaiming the gospel of holiness in society meetings, small groups, and from house to house.

In case anyone was tempted to standardize, predict, or control the work of God, Thomas Walsh commented that one cannot make “the progress of the work of God in one, or a thousand persons, a standard by which to judge of the genuineness of the experience of others.”<sup>86</sup> The work of God was continued through many means, and in a diversity of ways, but always with a view to lives perceptibly transformed by grace. One way or another, the preachers were passionate to see the work of God increase, in both the numbers of changed lives, and their progress in the way of salvation. Wesley encouraged them to be observant, and they frequently refer to general trends in the societies, or actual numbers of those awakened, converted and perfected in love. This was not a cult of success, but a conviction that God would “own his work” and prosper it.

## Apostolicity and Surrender

As local preachers, they carried out this missionary vocation alongside their ordinary paid employment; but the more it grew, the more they became

85. Jackson, *Minutes*, 13.

86. EMP, 3:51.

unsettled and started (or were advised) to consider taking up the apostolic challenge of full-time itinerancy. John Mason explained, “I found a stronger and stronger conviction, that it was my duty to give myself wholly up to the work of God, and to commence an itinerant preacher.”<sup>87</sup> Being “given up” to God meant leaving behind the comforts of the settled life and the securities of secular employment, to live by faith and stake their future on the belief that God would prosper both his work and his workers. It also meant being fully surrendered to Wesley’s process of stationing, and fully committed to Methodist doctrine and discipline as the particular means through which the work of God was being prospered.

Part of Wesley’s appointment process for travelling preachers was to ensure they had the right motivations, and were not proceeding with any romantic illusions about the way of life. He warned Alexander Mather that being “a Methodist preacher is not the way to ease, honor, pleasure, or profit. It is a life of much labour and reproach. They often fare hard, often are in want. They are liable to be stoned, beaten, and abused in various manners. Consider this before you engage in so uncomfortable a way of life.”<sup>88</sup> The calling was not merely to do the work of a preacher, but to take up the uncompromising life of a missionary.

They were not all “extraordinary or splendid” as preachers, but their holy love and evangelistic zeal was the foundation of their missionary spirit. They were willing to live and die, spend and be spent, to the glory of God and the salvation of souls. John Pawson repeatedly claimed that “long life never appeared very desirable” compared with the privilege of being a co-worker with God, and being “worn out” in his service.<sup>89</sup> On being invited by Coke to superintend the work in the West Indies, William Black stated, “My great desire is to enjoy God, and to live in His will. Away, ye earthly loves, and leave me to my God! His love, His favour, His will, are dearer to me than life itself.”<sup>90</sup>

Being a “good steward” meant recognizing that all they had, and all they were, belonged to God and was to be used in his service. In giving themselves up entirely to the work of God, the preachers were ultimate examples of good stewardship. Christopher Hopper affirmed “I did not want ease, wealth, or honor, but to know, do, and suffer the will of my Lord and Master.”<sup>91</sup> At sixty-eight years old, after a lifetime of service, John Pawson

87. *Ibid.*, 3:311–12.

88. *Ibid.*, 2:169.

89. *Ibid.*, 4:25.

90. *Ibid.*, 5:288.

91. *Ibid.*, 1:193.

still maintained, “I am in His hand, and at His disposal: let Him do with me as seemeth Him good.”<sup>92</sup>

Self-denial and good stewardship were not merely expressed in submission to Wesley’s system of circuit appointment, but in surrendering to the providence of God and the impulses of the Spirit, in the daily round of ministry. Hopper noted, “I spent every Sabbath, and all my vacant hours, in preaching, reading, praying, visiting the sick, and conversing with all that Providence put in my way.”<sup>93</sup> By setting aside “every other concern and employment,” James Morgan commended Thomas Walsh for setting out “with a resolution to give himself up wholly to the dictates of the Holy Ghost, and to be ready to go what way soever the voice of heaven should call him.”<sup>94</sup> Having “a heart always at leisure for God, attentive to His teaching, and obedient to His dictates, is the great thing; to which every design and pursuit must give place, if we mean to be truly great in the grace of God.”<sup>95</sup>

### Fruitfulness and Discipline

Once convinced of their call, the preachers had a spirit of expectancy that God would continue to set his seal to their work, and they would see the fruit of their labours in the salvation of souls. As a young local preacher, Rankin recalled, “I had been led to think, if I really was called of God to preach, the Divine power would attend the word in a very remarkable manner, in the conviction and conversion of sinners.”<sup>96</sup> When this did not happen as anticipated, he was tempted to give up. And even as a seasoned travelling preacher, Matthias Joyce confessed, “that which distressed me most was, my not having so many seals of my ministry as I expected.” The problem was that “nothing would satisfy me, but hearing the people roar under the sermon, from a sense of their misery” or “shouting for joy, through a sense of pardoning love.” When this did not happen, he lamented, “I was almost ready to conclude I was not sent of God.”<sup>97</sup>

Joyce found breakthrough by re-examining the nature of fruitfulness itself, and being re-assured of “doing the will of God, from the comfortable testimonies of the people at class-meetings and lovefeasts.” Because evangelistic proclamation was inseparably connected to Methodist discipline,

92. *Ibid.*, 4:72.

93. *Ibid.*, 1:195

94. *Ibid.*, 3:85.

95. *Ibid.*, 3:132.

96. *Ibid.*, 5:165.

97. *Ibid.*, 4:265.

those awakened under preaching were more likely to experience and express their life-transforming encounters with God in the class meeting itself. Joyce concluded, “I think it would be well for every young preacher especially, to meet the classes whenever he can” since “nothing has a greater tendency to lift up the hands that hang down, than to hear those who have sat under us relating the good they have received thereby.”<sup>98</sup> This connection to Methodist discipline has the effect of chastening any undue dependency on revivalistic enthusiasm to sustain their call to preach, and removing the temptation to confuse being a co-worker with God with the giftedness of the preacher.

### Width and Depth

The preachers were equally as concerned for what hindered the work of God as what prospered it. Part of their apostolic task was to confront party spirit and division in the life of the societies, as well as occasions of spiritual and moral declension. Very often, what quenched the spirit of the societies, and broke the hearts of the preachers, was failure to maintain Methodist discipline in the pursuit of perfection.<sup>99</sup> This was not simply a result of spiritual apathy, but also undue enthusiasm. During times of intense revival, some local preachers might be caught up in a spirit of freneticism, and lay aside discipline in the pursuit of more converts. Reflecting on the periodic revivals of the 1770s, Thomas Taylor lamented that “oftentimes God begins a good work, but poor ignorant men will needs take it out of His hand.”<sup>100</sup> When not handled well, they complained that revival turned into “wildfire,” suggesting that the work of God may spread rapidly but burn out equally fast.<sup>101</sup> When properly connected to Methodist discipline, however, William Hunter celebrated how the revival proceeded with both “swiftness and depth.”<sup>102</sup>

There was no doubt that the work of God could proceed with or without the help of human hands, but the preachers were committed to the way God had chosen to bless the ordinary discipline of Methodist society. Later on, in the 1780s, John Pawson noted that there had been “no particular revival” that year, but they did witness “a gradual increase in the societies, as well in number as in grace.”<sup>103</sup> James Rogers reflected that the

98. *Ibid.*, 4:265.

99. Jackson, *Minutes*, 24–25.

100. *EMP*, 5:86.

101. *Ibid.*, 4:46.

102. *Ibid.*, 2:244–45.

103. *Ibid.*, 4:46.

“congregations continued very large, and the prayer-meetings and classes exceedingly lively” yet “there was scarcely any appearance of what is commonly called wildfire; and the work was not only gradual, but deep in most of them who were the subjects of it.”<sup>104</sup> Whether the preachers expected the work of God to result in a rapid or gradual growth of the movement, it was not the speed with which the gospel spread that mattered most, but the depth of its transforming power.

### Suffering and Warfare

Where the work of God advanced, they expected spiritual battle.<sup>105</sup> This battle was waged in the flesh through physical injury and illness, the violent persecution of mobs, and the combined powers of church and state to silence the advance of the Methodist movement. In the midst of this, there was also a battle waged in the soul, as the flesh pressed down on the spirit, driving the preachers into times of trial, and sometimes into despair.

Those preachers with private means might well exhaust their personal savings in the course of their calling. Eventually, provision was made to support the domestic needs of their wives and children, but in general it would seem that they received very little income for themselves beyond a small quarterage or an annual allowance. It was anticipated that the circuits would supplement this to cover travelling and living expenses, but often this was not the case, especially where the work was in its infancy.

In addition to being financially stretched, the preachers were often faced with physical endangerment. They constantly travelled from place to place, in all weathers, either on foot or by horse, and from early morning to late at night. At times they might not make it to good lodgings, and have to settle for sleeping rough by roads that were typically nothing more than dirt tracks. James Rogers also recorded an incident in which a travelling preacher was attacked by three highway robbers.<sup>106</sup>

Worse of all, the preachers had to suffer the violence of mobs raised by local clergy and gentry who were determined to rid themselves of the

104. *Ibid.*, 4:321.

105. Rack discusses this supernatural interpretation of life in *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 431–32. See also, David Dunn Wilson, *Many Waters Cannot Quench: A Study of Sufferings of Eighteenth Century Methodism and their Significance for John Wesley and the First Methodists* (London: Epworth, 1969). Robert Webster also discusses the “rhetoric of the supernatural” in, *Methodism and the Miraculous: John Wesley’s Idea of the Supernatural and the Identification of the Methodists in the Eighteenth Century* (Lexington: Emeth, 2013).

106. *EMP*, 4:323–24.

troublesome Methodist witness. Through all this, the preachers were often taken to within an inch of their lives. Time and again, however, these narratives of persecution conclude with stories of divine providence, as God miraculously protected and delivered them from serious injury and death. They refused to return violence with violence, preferring to stake their lives on the power of God, and then have stories to tell of his ability to save. The work of a Methodist preacher was often at the cost of personal wealth, health, and reputation. Such stewardship and self-denial were undoubtedly at the heart of the missionary spirit, and this was often a difficult price to pay.

### Heaviness and Wilderness

Many preachers, like Thomas Lee, described their lives as “continually hung in suspense” between despair and hope.<sup>107</sup> In the midst of seemingly endless trials, this state of suspense was an occasion for both triumph and temptation. They often record a weariness with enduring, and an inner struggle with the temptation to doubt their calling and to quit the rigours of this missionary life for more settled occupations.<sup>108</sup> Christopher Hopper recounted how, sometimes “I was carried above all earthly objects, and had a comfortable view of the heavenly country,” but “at other times I was much depressed, and could see nothing but poverty and distress” so that “I staggered through unbelief; and almost yielded to the tempter.”<sup>109</sup>

The autobiographies provide an inner history of spiritual struggle through times of heaviness and even wilderness.<sup>110</sup> On the one hand, heaviness is a kind of spiritual depression that drags down the soul, but never finally extinguishes the assurance of God’s presence and love. The journal of Thomas Walsh can read like a spiritual roller coaster, oscillating between moments of profound communion with God and times of severe heaviness through manifold temptations. On the other hand, wilderness is the experience of losing the sense God’s presence and the assurance of forgiveness. John Haime confessed to enduring an inner wilderness for some twenty years as the result of personal sin, arising from a failure to watch and pray.<sup>111</sup>

Under a variety of circumstances, some preachers chose to settle down and resume regular employment, or take up paid leadership in dissenting

107. *Ibid.*, 4:161.

108. *Cf. Ibid.*, 2:273–74.

109. *Ibid.*, 1:191.

110. John Wesley, “On Satan’s Devices,” and “Heaviness through Manifold Temptations,” *Sermons II* 34–70, *BEW*, 2:222–35.

111. *EMP*, 1:308.

congregations. For those who persevered to the end, however, God continued to prosper his work despite their various inner and outer conflicts, and brought redemption in the midst of them.

### Intrepidity and Prosperity

After Thomas Taylor's death, the minutes of Conference recorded how, "when Methodism was but in its infancy," the preachers had to "endure much from hunger, cold, weariness, and persecution;" but they "met and surmounted those difficulties with a truly apostolical intrepidity."<sup>112</sup>

If there is one overarching missionary motivation that emerges from these autobiographies, it is a passion and longing for the work of God to prosper in the lives of individuals and whole societies. "My soul thirsts for the prosperity of Zion."<sup>113</sup> This was not merely reflected in their tireless ministry, but also in their fervent devotion. John Pawson reflected about Alexander Mather: "For as no one had the prosperity of the work of God more deeply at heart, so, I believe, no man more constantly and fervently wrestled with the Lord in prayer for the enlargement, as well as the establishment, of the Redeemer's kingdom in the world, than he did."<sup>114</sup> Indeed, Pawson himself wrote: "The deep concern I felt for the prosperity of the work of God led me to earnest prayer; so that my own soul was kept alive, and I got clearer views of the gracious designs of God."<sup>115</sup>

Wesley was convinced that the spiritual and physical health of the preacher was connected to the fulfillment of his duties. Personal renewal did not come from retirement, but being caught up in the work of God. As John Milner wrote to Jonathan Maskew, "I doubt not but the work of God prospers in your hand, and rejoice to hear that as your day so your strength is; that the more you labor the more you prosper both in soul and body. Verily, we may say we serve a good Master."<sup>116</sup> Whether in the vigour of life or the rigours of death, it was their mission spirituality that shone through; a deep communion with God, a longing for holiness, and a zeal for the salvation of souls. Their deathbed testimonies and detailed obituaries affirmed the blessedness of living well, through the witness of dying well.<sup>117</sup> Henry D. Rack argues that deathbed biography in early Methodism had a deeply

112. Ibid., 5:104.

113. Ibid., 1:224.

114. Ibid., 2:217–18.

115. Ibid., 4:55.

116. Ibid., 4:212.

117. Joseph McPherson, *Our People Die Well* (Bloomington: Author House, 2008).

apologetic purpose, insofar as “holy dying seemed to prove the truth of the message preached by the dying saint.”<sup>118</sup>

## Conclusion

John Pawson summarized the importance of mission spirituality in his appeal to the next generation of preachers:

Forgive me, brethren, if on this occasion I drop a tear, and in the fullness of my heart pray, that a double portion of that Spirit which influenced the first Methodist preachers may rest upon you who are likely to be their successors . . . labor with all your might in maintaining the life and power of godliness, both in your own souls and those who hear you. Promote old genuine Methodism, which stands in the renewal of the soul in righteousness and true holiness. Remember, brethren, that the whole weight of the cause of God will very soon rest upon your shoulders and seriously consider, how much will then depend upon your walking closely with God . . . and labour in his vineyard.<sup>119</sup>

I have read the spiritual autobiographies of the early Methodist preachers as narratives of mission spirituality. From a missiological perspective, they can be seen as pioneers of a movement, whose goal was to make disciples and not just converts. Their overarching concern was for “spreading scriptural holiness across the land.”<sup>120</sup> Methodist discipline embodied a spiritual journey that passed through the two defining moments of evangelical conversion and perfection in love. It was not the moments that mattered most, however, but the resulting consciousness relationship of union and communion with God that empowered growth in grace. The way of holiness was about becoming a co-worker with God in working out one’s own salvation. Mission spirituality, however, is about becoming a co-worker with God in the salvation of others. This can be seen as a mark of the whole Methodist movement, insofar as they were a people committed to helping each other work out their salvation with fear and trembling.

An overly strong conversionist reading of these autobiographies can tend to reduce the preacher’s mission to making converts, and reduce discipleship to the endless pursuit of conversion-type crisis experiences.

118. Henry Rack, “Evangelical Endings: Death-Beds in Evangelical Biography,” *BJRULM* 74 no. 1 (1992) 48.

119. *EMP*, 2:152.

120. Jackson, *Minutes*, 9.

Historically, this way of thinking has caused evangelicals to truncate the journey of awakening, and fail at making disciples by making conversion an end in itself. Focusing on the moments themselves can eclipse the ordinary moment-by-moment way of growth in holiness they are meant to promote.

From this Wesleyan perspective, therefore, evangelism is a complex task that involves proclaiming the gospel of perfect love, awakening people to seek after it, and initiating them into a form of discipline that helps them pursue it. Salvation is not fundamentally about guilt management or moral development, but a life-transforming journey of entering, deepening and perfecting one's communion with the triune God. It is a way marked by an insatiable longing to be emptied of self, to be filled with the Spirit of love, and to grow in Christlikeness. It is a way marked by spiritual discipline and spiritual warfare, as one seeks God's blessings and resists Satan's devices in the means of grace. It is a way marked by Christian fellowship, in which mutual accountability and spiritual direction become the rhythm of one's walk with God and growth in holy love.

Mission spirituality is about being filled, transformed and overflowing with the holy love of God and neighbour. This is why Pawson pleaded with the next generation of preachers, to "labour with all your might in maintaining the life and power of godliness, both in your own souls and those who hear you." Mission promotes a movement when ordinary people become recipients of God's love, and are moved themselves to become participants in God's mission.