

Methodist Spirituality, 1800-1950

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Methodist spirituality has been too much neglected. Apart from occasional articles, there is little secondary material on the post-Wesley period. An exception must be made for the two valuable books by Gordon Wakefield, *Methodist Devotion* (1966), and its drastically revised version, *Methodist Spirituality* (1999).¹ Yet it is striking that in the bibliography of the second of these works, nearly all the items under 'Methodist spirituality and worship' are about Wesley. The dearth of literature in the field is partly a consequence of the tendency of Methodist historiography to concentrate on the era of its founder, but equally it is part of the global neglect of recent Protestant devotional life. There has nevertheless been some effort in the recent past to redress the deficiency. Much of it has stemmed from the innovative research of George Rawlyk on Henry Alline, the late eighteenth-century evangelist in the Maritimes of Canada.² In Britain, two recent books have done much to illuminate aspects of Methodist piety. Ian Randall's *Evangelical Experiences* (1999) includes two authoritative chapters on the spirituality of inter-war Methodists and Linda Wilson's *Constrained by Zeal* (2000) explores devotion among women and men in the mid-nineteenth century, drawing a good deal of its evidence from Methodist obituaries.³ Much more work is possible, since the sources for the subject are particularly rich. The history of the soul does not deserve to be ignored, whether by historians of Methodism at home or by students of its impact abroad. Here an attempt is made to present an overall survey of Methodist spirituality over a century and a half. Initially its broad shaping influences are examined and then its most striking expressions are considered. The result may afford a bird's eye view of the subject.

Methodism was a branch of the wider Evangelical movement and so leading Evangelical characteristics were salient among its members. There was, in the first place, a powerful strand of biblicism. Methodists were Bible people. William Holdsworth, for example, a tradesman of Eccles Hill near Bradford, joined the Wesleyans in the first decade of the nineteenth century when he was in his thirties. His primary quality, according to his obituarist, was ‘love for the Word of God’.⁴ Likewise Mary Tewson, an Irishwoman living at Kingstown who became a Wesleyan member in the 1820s, could not attend services during her last illness twenty or so years later, ‘but the Holy Scriptures, which she prayerfully searched, still afforded her instruction and encouragement’.⁵ Because of regular study of the Bible, its phraseology supplied the language of devotion. Even when dying, and perhaps especially when dying, the Bible moulded the speech of Methodist believers. The last words of Naomi Stokes, a Wesleyan woman who died at forty-nine in the village of Compton Dando, Somerset, in 1849, were, ‘Into thy hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit’, echoing the sentence uttered by Christ on the cross as recorded by Luke.⁶ The family Bible which so often lay on the parlour table, waiting to be opened for household prayers, was a symbol of Christian allegiance. It was a feature of Evangelical faith and therefore a mark of the Methodists.

A second Evangelical characteristic that moulded Methodism was crucicentrism. Methodist theology was in practice centrally concerned with soteriological themes. Hence in the devotional life, as in more abstract teaching, there was a preoccupation with the sacrifice of Christ on the cross that won salvation. Thus it was said in 1850 of John Crittendon, a seventy-two-year-old Wesleyan who had just died in Chatham in Kent, that ‘the atonement of Christ, and the efficacy of “the precious blood,” were the themes of his rejoicing’.⁷ The emphasis on the death of Christ, albeit in modified form, continued later in the period. At the opening of the twentieth century, for example, a sermon at

a hall attached to Hugh Price Hughes's Wesleyan West End Mission made 'a strong emotional appeal on the love of the Cross'.⁸ Advanced thinkers in Methodism, influenced by broader theologians such as F. D. Maurice, started to shift the emphasis from the atonement to the incarnation. But it is significant that the chief representative of this trend, John Scott Lidgett, a man of developed political sense, chose as the title of his book on the incarnation, *The Spiritual Principle of the Atonement* (1897).⁹ Knowing the Methodist constituency, he realised that he had to present his book as a study of the working out of the implications of the cross. The atonement remained central to the mainstream of Methodist spirituality during the whole period.

A further feature of Evangelical faith upheld by Methodists was conversionism. A grand legacy of the Evangelical Revival of the eighteenth century was the imperative to be converted. A person might be thoroughly religious and yet, in Methodist eyes, be a stranger to the spiritual transformation of the new birth. The *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine* made the point in 1860 under the heading, 'Alarm to Unconverted Christians':

You give, it may be pleaded, your time, your wealth, your influence, and this in a hundred ways, for the furtherance of the cause of Christ in the world. Granted: and you perhaps even preach the Gospel to others, and you are ready to give your "body to be burned" in testimony of it. But what of this? Not a single prayer has yet ascended to God from your own renewed soul... Christ has to do with *you*, to break *your* heart, to melt *your* soul, to bring *you* a happy captive to Himself...¹⁰

The Christian faith had to be personally embraced. Methodists insisted on this axiom. Thomas Sawtell, a Wesleyan local preacher who died on Guernsey in 1849 when he was only twenty-seven, was asked for his dying advice. 'Give your heart to God', he replied, '- give your heart

to God.’¹¹ Usually Methodists knew the time of their conversion because it was vivid point of crisis. Yet some, while adhering to the need for conversion, avowed that for them the process was gradual. This was true, for instance, of Thomas Champness, one of the most intensely evangelistic of the late Victorian Wesleyan preachers.¹² That type of experience, however, could lead to difficulties. Thus James Mabbott, a Wesleyan Association local preacher from Manchester in the middle years of the nineteenth century, could not fix the time or place of his conversion and so sometimes felt doubts about its reality.¹³ But whether instantaneous or protracted, conversion was regarded as the essential prerequisite for vital Christianity.

A final attribute that Methodists shared with other Evangelicals was activism. An eagerness to be up and doing was centrally concerned with spreading the gospel but was not confined within solely evangelistic channels. Busyness extended to social action and to every department of chapel life. Ministers were particularly energetic figures. George Warner, for example, a Primitive Methodist holiness evangelist, recorded that in the single year 1883-84 he preached 312 times in buildings and thirty-two times in the open air, delivered other addresses and took part in eleven conventions.¹⁴ It is no wonder that the Methodist connexions organised what they called ‘Worn-Out Ministers’ Funds’. Even the afterlife was conditioned by assumptions associated with activism. One Wesleyan minister who held the demanding post of secretary of the Connexional Education Committee from 1851 to 1866, Michael Taylor, said that ‘The grand attraction of heaven to me is, that I shall still serve [Christ]; to cease to do that would be deprivation indeed.’¹⁵ Activism was the fourth feature that Methodism displayed as part of the wider Evangelical movement.

A further set of qualities, however, tended to mark off Methodists from other Evangelicals. These were traits derived from John Wesley. In the first place there was Arminianism, founded on

the belief that the atonement was universal in scope rather than, as Calvinists held, limited to the elect. A qualification needs to be entered at the start: there existed other Evangelicals who were professed Arminians. The members of the New Connexion of General Baptists, who possessed a large infusion of Methodist spirit, were equally attached to this theological scheme. There also needs to be another qualification: over time, the Calvinism of most other Evangelicals faded, so that differences on this point gradually diminished. Already in 1850 the *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine* was trumpeting that the battle over the scope of redemption had been won. ‘That Christ died for all’, it claimed, ‘is on all hands admitted.’¹⁶ That assessment was an exaggeration. Only moderate Calvinists, not higher Calvinists, accepted this view, and even the moderates retained other features of the Calvinistic scheme. So there was a persistent difference of theological conviction here. Near the opening of the century Peter M’Owan, converted in Presbyterian Glasgow, was persuaded to drop his inherited Calvinism through reading John Fletcher, and went on to become a Wesleyan minister.¹⁷ Towards its end, a Wesleyan participant in the Keswick holiness movement, dominated by Anglican Evangelicals with Calvinist views, at times found the theological difference made conversation embarrassing.¹⁸ One of the practical consequences in spirituality was highlighted by an episode during a Primitive Methodist mission at Tutbury, in Staffordshire, in 1855. The missionary encountered a woman under the sway of a well thumbed book by Joseph Philpot, a strongly Calvinistic Strict Baptist. The woman, according to the missionary, had taken to her bed eight months before in despair over whether or not she was one of the elect. The Primitive Methodist delighted to turn to her Bible, which he reported to have been covered with dust, and show her the salvation that was available to all until she entered peace.¹⁹ It was an instance of Arminianism conditioning the piety of the Methodists.

The defectibility of Faith was a corollary of Arminianism. If, as Calvinists believed, God determined the identity of the elect, then they would certainly be saved. There was no question of their losing their faith. For Arminians, on the other hand, there was no guarantee that faith would endure to the end. An individual could be a true believer and yet eventually fail to reach heaven. Returning to sinful ways was always a possibility and that was the path to perdition. At the 1875 Brighton holiness convention, an interdenominational prelude to Keswick, a Methodist minister, John Brash, told his hearers that if they were in a condition of sin, it was time to ask if they were Christians at all. The next speaker, Evan Hopkins, an Evangelical Anglican, hastened to contradict him. Even though members of the audience might have fallen into particular sins, Hopkins assured them, their standing in Christ was secure.²⁰ For the Calvinist Anglican, there was no risk of losing one's entitlement to eternal life; for the Methodist, it was an ever-present danger. A Methodist knew that if there was no progress in the spiritual life, there was inevitable regress: 'a man going towards heaven', declared the Irish-American Lorenzo Dow who helped spark off Primitive Methodism at the start of the nineteenth century, 'is like one rowing up a river, who when diligent, makes head-way, but if he stops the tide will take him back...'.²¹ The naturally scrupulous could easily become hyper-scrupulous. Martha Foot, a Primitive Methodist who was only thirty when she died at mid-century, 'declined accepting a box of artificial flowers, which had been sent her as a present, fearing that her heart might thereby be drawn away from God'.²² Conversion gave the Arminian little added security. There was always a road back to the City of Destruction from the gate of the Celestial City.

Methodists were also marked out by their strong version of the assurance of faith. All Evangelicals believed that it was important to seek a personal sense of being saved. Calvinists, however, were less consistent in teaching that such assurance was essential to salvation: some did,

but others did not. For Methodists, on the other hand, it was intrinsic to faith to possess a firm consciousness of saving grace. Without what, following Wesley, they called ‘the witness of the Spirit’, a person was not accounted a Christian at all. This doctrine could come as a startling revelation. Thus Ann Correy, an early Primitive Methodist in Whitehaven, did not suppose before the arrival of the preachers that people ‘could know their sins forgiven upon earth’.²³ At the start of the twentieth century the certainty of assurance was still regarded as a central portion of the Methodist deposit of faith. ‘The joyful assurance of the favour of God’, according to George Jackson in 1903, ‘is one of the chief marks of a Methodist.’²⁴ Conservative ministers such as George Armstrong Bennetts were still encouraging members to cultivate an experience of conscious pardon well into the twentieth century.²⁵ The teaching about assurance was much more robust in Methodism than in the rest of the Evangelical movement.

The other most obvious distinguishing feature of Methodist piety was its love of hymns. Here Charles Wesley exercised a greater influence than his brother, though John’s promotion of the sale of the Methodist hymn book through the travelling preachers also had a great deal to do with the popularity of hymn-singing. The hymn book by itself could be an instrument of conversion, as it was for Peter M’Owan.²⁶ Hymns were mentioned in far more obituaries of Primitive Methodist women around the middle of the nineteenth century than the Bible itself, obviously providing consolation in times of trial.²⁷ On her deathbed in 1849, Mercy Ashton, the wife a Wesleyan minister, found it was becoming hard to breathe. She had no difficulty in quoting an appropriate phrase from a Wesley hymn: ‘Happy, if with my latest breath/ I may but gasp his name.’²⁸ The words of the hymns, like those of scripture, moulded Methodist language. An eighteen-year-old Wesleyan girl at Birmingham, though in acute pain, declared ‘’Tis mercy all!’ – a phrase used more than once in some of Wesley’s best known hymns. Hymnody shaped devotion, bolstering

its other Methodist characteristics.

A third set of formative influences, however, was at work on Methodist spirituality. These were derived not from distinctively Christian sources but from the cultural context of the Enlightenment. Partly they were bound up with the Evangelical factors, for Evangelicalism and the Enlightenment were closely aligned; partly, too, they represented the intellectual legacy of John Wesley, who has strong claims to being regarded as an Enlightenment thinker. Wesley's followers, like their founder and the Enlightenment in general, believed in the rightful prominence of reason in religion. Because reason acquired fresh knowledge through experiment, science had a high place in Methodist esteem. 'Every research into nature', wrote Richard Watson, the first Methodist systematic theologian, in 1831, 'every discovery as to the laws by which material things are combined, decomposed, and transformed, throws new light upon the simplicity of the elements which are the subjects of this ceaseless operation of divine power...'²⁹ Between 1849 and 1864 the *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine* published every year an account of the proceedings of the British Association for the Advancement of Science.³⁰ Equally the Enlightenment's high valuation of happiness became central to the Methodist world view. Adam, Clarke, the greatest Wesleyan intellectual of the early nineteenth century, preached a sermon entitled, 'Genuine Happiness the Privilege of every Real Christian in this Life'.³¹ Likewise at a more popular level a minister could comment favourably on the concern of a child believer for the 'happiness and salvation' – not just the salvation – of all around him.³² The promotion of the happiness of others was benevolence, and this too many Methodists were eager to commend. Christians, declared a Wesleyan preacher at Louth, Lincolnshire, in 1853, must aim for 'the exercise of pure benevolence'.³³ Reason, science, happiness, benevolence – this cluster of Enlightenment values became embedded in Methodism, conditioning the piety it nurtured.

The influence of the Enlightenment can be illustrated in the characteristic optimism of Methodists. They adopted an Evangelical equivalent of the idea of progress, a postmillennial eschatology. They believed, in the light of Revelation chapter 20, that in the future there would be a millennium, a one-thousand-year era of peace, plenty and happiness on earth. Only afterwards would the second coming of Jesus take place as the prelude to the day of judgement. So the immediate prospect was good: the preaching of the gospel would lead to the advance of civilisation and the eventual dawn of the millennium. When, in 1859, revivals broke out in several parts of the world, the *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine* was encouraged. ‘Do not the signs of the times’, it asked, ‘warrant the hope that millennial day is already breaking on the distant horizon?’³⁴ This postmillennial belief was remarkably pervasive in the common mind of Methodists, giving them confidence in their evangelistic endeavour at home and abroad. Its strength among them ensured that the alternative premillennial view gained little ground in the connexions. According to premillennialists, the second coming would take place before the millennium. Hence the world could not be expected to improve. On the contrary, in the short time remaining before the intervention of Jesus the state of affairs would go from bad to worse. This pessimistic worldview made steady advances in the middle and later years of the nineteenth century, especially among Evangelical Anglicans. A few Methodists adopted it: James Wood, a prosperous Liverpool iron-founder who financed the Southport Holiness convention, was one;³⁵ Dinsdale Young, eventually minister of Westminster Central Hall from 1914 to 1938, was another.³⁶ But these were exceptional figures. Far more common was the reaction of George Jackson, the regular Methodist columnist in the *Manchester Guardian* in the 1920s. When some of us hear speeches about the imminent return of Christ, he wrote, we are ‘only moved to feel for our hats and look for the door’.³⁷ An optimistic postmillennialism, merging imperceptibly over the years into the secular idea of progress, was typical of Methodism long

into the twentieth century.

Another ideal associated with the Enlightenment was eagerness for self-improvement. Some Methodists, it is true, were like Matthew Vallens, a boatman on the Tyne who served as a Methodist New Connexion class leader during the earlier part of the nineteenth century. His obituary starkly admitted that ‘he paid no attention to the cultivation of his mind’.³⁸ The very making of the comment, however, reveals that the obituarist regarded effort for mental improvement as normal. Local preachers’ associations assembled libraries, larger chapels ran Young Men’s Improvement Societies and their attenders flocked to lectures at Young Men’s Christian Association branches. Methodism participated fully in the Victorian cult of intellectual progress. Because of their love for hymnody, Methodists came to place particular stress on music. The narrower brethren, such as the Primitive Methodist zealot George Warner, thought the rising fashion for musical services and entertainments spiritually dangerous, a lowering of the sights from higher goals.³⁹ By the end of the century, however, concerts were an entrenched feature of most Methodist circuits. By then, too, the quest for improvement had extended from the mind to the body. Again Warner resisted, denouncing football as much as billiards,⁴⁰ but those who wanted to give healthy exercise a place in the chapel programme triumphed nearly everywhere, at least in towns and cities.⁴¹ Methodist or Free Church football leagues were common in interwar Britain. For many, vigorous activities were seen as legitimate expressions of the spiritual. If the soul was right with God, the whole person – mind, voice and body – needed to find fulfilment.

A particular form of self-improvement became central to Methodist chapel culture: temperance. The temperance movement started in the 1820s as a largely secular enthusiasm among artisans. If, the pioneers believed, they abstained from distilled spirits, and soon from all alcohol, they would be sober, rational and respected.⁴² Many Methodists, and the Wesleyan authorities in

particular, originally saw the movement as a dangerous alternative to the gospel and warned faithful members off teetotalism. In the 1850s beer was always on the table when visiting preachers were entertained, and one early Wesleyan teetotaler earned the displeasure of the president of Conference by failing to provide any. Gradually, however, the cause made headway. The first temperance meeting at the time of Conference was held on the private initiative of T. B. Stephenson in 1869.⁴³ By 1898 there was pressure (though it was resisted) to exclude those in the liquor trade from Wesleyan church membership.⁴⁴ Unfermented wine was by then nearly universal in communion services. During the first half of the twentieth century in public Methodists were at the forefront of temperance pressure in Britain and in private they often showed a fierce antipathy to drinking.⁴⁵ ‘Alcohol’, it was said in 1917, ‘is wholly evil when used as a beverage.’⁴⁶ Hence taking the pledge to abstain from alcohol commonly seemed virtually as important a spiritual advance as the start of the Christian life itself. ‘Some few years after his conversion’, according to a biographical sketch of a Kent Bible Christian, ‘he signed the pledge.’⁴⁷ Refusing alcohol became a crucial outward indication of inward spiritual grace. It was another long-lasting symptom associated with the Enlightenment enthusiasm for self-improvement. Methodist piety was deeply rooted in the prevailing cultural ethos of the times.

Turning from the shaping factors to the actual expressions of Methodist spirituality during the period, we can begin with its strong lay tone. This feature can be missed because of the resistance to lay control that ensured Wesleyan laymen were excluded from Conference down to 1878 and that the Primitive Methodists, supposedly more democratic, were run by a secretive ministerial gerontocracy between the 1840s and the 1870s. The apprehensions of the ministers who led the connexions, however, constitute an index of the strength of the lay dynamic within Methodism. Laypeople were class leaders, prayer leaders, Sunday school teachers, society stewards, chapel stewards, poor

stewards, trustees and circuit officers. Supremely they were exhorters and lay preachers, the local ideologues of the movement. In 1883 seven out of eight Wesleyan preachers were lay rather than ordained.⁴⁸ Some had their limitations. Thus William Chambers of the Ilkeston Primitive Methodist circuit in Derbyshire in the 1840s could not be praised very strongly. ‘His pulpit abilities’, ran his obituary, ‘were not of a high order; yet he was a plain, useful, and faithful expounder of God’s word, and was generally acceptable to the people.’⁴⁹ Some simply went on too long. In a survey of sermon lengths undertaken by the *British Weekly* in 1896, the longest in the whole United Kingdom, preached by E. W. Bishop at Clay Cross New Connexion chapel in Derbyshire, lasted no less than one hour twenty-eight minutes.⁵⁰ Many, on the other hand, were powerful preachers. Joshua Dawson, for instance, a burly Wesleyan Dalesman of County Durham, took up the holiness teaching of Phoebe Palmer. He led a mission in the late 1870s at Middlesbrough where Thomas Cook, soon a connexional evangelist, embraced entire sanctification.⁵¹ Such men could shape the spiritual experience of thousands.

Women, too, played a prominent part in the nurture of piety. Although the Wesleyan Conference officially banned female preaching in 1803, it is clear that many women continued to exhort in the localities. Primitive Methodism refused to discriminate between the sexes at all. ‘If persons who exercise in the ministry are of good report’, wrote their founder Hugh Bourne in 1808, specifically of women, ‘and the Lord owns their labours by turning sinners to righteousness, we do not think it our duty to endeavour to hinder them...’⁵² Bible Christians, too, allowed female preaching, and the *Joyful News* evangelists at the end of the nineteenth century included women.⁵³ Nevertheless it was in the home that women exercised the greatest influence. Childcare normally fell to their lot, and that involved Christian training. Pious mothers were often responsible for the early religious impressions of their children. Yet the role of women was wider than that. There

was in the chapels what Linda Wilson has described as a ‘third sphere’, neither wholly public nor wholly private, where women could find much personal fulfilment.⁵⁴ In Methodism women were class leaders; gradually during the nineteenth century they became a majority of Sunday school teachers; and it was women who performed the lion’s share of district visiting. Going from door to door, calling on the sick and distributing tracts, the female members were the evangelistic cutting edge of the chapels.⁵⁵ Callum Brown, who has stressed the role of women as transmitters of Evangelical faith down the generations, suggests that spirituality was different in the two sexes. Whereas women naturally cultivated Christian virtues, men were perennially exposed to worldly temptation.⁵⁶ Linda Wilson confirms that there was a difference between the sexes in relation to the expression of spirituality, since women cared for the home and offered hospitality, but she also shows that personal devotion, at least among the Methodists, was barely differentiated by gender at all.⁵⁷ Women and men shared the same personal faith.

Methodism created some distinctive agencies for the encouragement of the spiritual life. Primacy must go to the class meeting, a weekly gathering for the exchange of religious experience that was the basis of Methodist membership in all the connexions. The great aim of the class meeting was originally to generate conversions, so that the sole qualification was serious concern for the welfare of one’s soul. Hence there came about the curious situation that people were often Methodists, but not, according to their own criteria, Christians. James Caughey, a visiting American evangelist, noticed in the 1840s that whereas in the United States a person seldom continued to meet in class without being born again, in Britain large numbers attended for years without evidence of conversion.⁵⁸ Class meetings were therefore crucial in sustaining the quest for salvation as well as for fostering converts. There were also, in the early nineteenth century, band meetings. These were select groups designed for those who, already possessing assurance of faith, aimed for the entire

sanctification that will be considered shortly. They trained a spiritual elite, ensuring that Methodism retained its central aspirations. By 1850, however, band meetings were being spoken of in the *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine* as a thing of the past, and few survived beyond that date.⁵⁹

Lovefeasts also faded with the years, nearly disappearing by the twentieth century except in the few places where they survived as annual events. These were gatherings where bread and water was shared while speakers volunteered their personal testimonies.⁶⁰ Lovefeasts were often the contexts in early Primitive Methodism for numerous conversions, helping to sustain the revival atmosphere of the movement. The same is true of camp meetings, the distinctive gathering that Primitive Methodists championed when Wesleyans denounced them as dangerous American innovations. Held out in the countryside, they allowed a succession of rousing addresses and fervent prayers to stir a spirit of commitment.⁶¹ Perhaps the crucial feature shared by these agencies was that they fostered communal religion. Experiences were pooled, testimonies heard, conversions witnessed. Because they were together, people caught the vision from each other. These flexible institutional settings did much to fan the flame of Methodism in the earlier part of the period.

One dimension of prayer, which constituted a further expression of spirituality, was also communal: the prayer meeting. Gatherings for prayer were a frequent feature of nineteenth-century Methodism, though by the early twentieth century they were often becoming routinised, with stock phrases being repeated and the same individuals praying each time, often at invitation of the leader.⁶² There were also family prayer, a symbol of religious seriousness in the household, and individual prayer, often an index of personal commitment. From 1878 there was a Methodist Bible and Prayer Union offering suggested topics for daily prayer. But spontaneous prayer forms one of the best windows into Methodist spirituality. It embraced confession. William Clarke, a Guernsey

member of the New Connexion who died in 1851 at the age of eighty, believed that ‘every day needs fresh pardon’. Therefore, he explained, ‘for many years past I have made a habit of calling to mind the sins of the day, and bringing them in particular before God...’.⁶³ Another New Connexionist, John Spencer, living at Ovenden near Halifax, who was converted in 1831, devoted a portion of each Friday to fasting and prayer.⁶⁴ Some Methodists were specially known for their prayer lives. Mary Easingwood of Sutton in the East Riding of Yorkshire, a Primitive Methodist mother of eight children during the first half of the nineteenth century, found time to pray in private seven or eight times a day.⁶⁵ When a dedicated Primitive Methodist minister of the second half of the century underwent an operation late in life, the surgeon was struck by the ‘horny knees’ he had acquired through long hours at his prayers.⁶⁶ One of the most remarkable prayer warriors was John Smith, a Wesleyan who entered the ministry in 1816 and served until 1831. When he wrestled in prayer, it was said, ‘Every muscle in his frame appeared to quiver in emotion...his face was bathed in tears and perspiration.’ Smith would often engage in private devotions for seven or eight hours at a time and occasionally spent a whole night in prayer. Maintaining an old Methodist custom, he would sometimes address each person of the Trinity separately in personal communion. The result was that he possessed a ‘luminous insight into the invisible world’.⁶⁷ Here was a man for whom prayer was profoundly real.

Not all Methodist spirituality scaled such heights. Much religious experience, a further aspect of the theme, consisted of a conscious struggle against temptation. Thus William Scott, a Wesleyan of Sheerness in Kent, was described as having been ‘powerfully assaulted by his spiritual adversary’, but he resisted and overcame.⁶⁸ Methodists considered it imperative to have conscious experience. Baptists, they supposed, did not. The Baptist parents of one Methodist were said in 1850 to have ‘rested in outward ceremonies’ without ‘evidences of scriptural and saving

piety’.⁶⁹ They might possess a form of godliness but they lacked inward experience. It was suffering that tested the authenticity of faith. Mrs Swain of Ashton-under-Lyne, for example, underwent two years of pain in the late 1840s, but she was ‘called to regard it as the chastening of her heavenly Father’.⁷⁰ Death was the ultimate test, and that is why most nineteenth-century Methodist obituaries allocate roughly half their space to the deathbeds of their subjects. Faced by the last enemy, believers could display their true colours. They might not manage, even in the touched up accounts transmitted to posterity, a perfect serenity. Thus Martha Taylor, though the wife of a New Connexion minister, never achieved the ‘privilege of rising above the fear of death’.⁷¹ Yet the prevailing note is one of triumph or peace. When John Simpson, a Wesleyan trustee at Batley in Birstall circuit, was warned that his illness was dangerous, ‘his mind was unmoved, and he was enabled to bear a happy testimony to the power of divine grace’.⁷² Last words were eagerly awaited, and often, if the published accounts are to be believed, referred to victory, glory or the preciousness of Christ. Believers were confident they would meet again in after death. Heaven, in fact, was conceived as a sort of glorified class meeting. Joseph Blanchard, a Leeds Wesleyan, ‘had long found his chief earthly enjoyment in the company of God’s ministers and people; and he felt assured God would admit him to their fellowship in heaven’.⁷³ Blanchard no doubt looked forward to further exchanges of religious experience.

In many nineteenth-century circuits experience was heightened by periodic revivals, a feature of the spirituality of the movement that must not be underrated. ‘A Wesleyan revival’, declared a Wednesbury man in 1848, ‘is simply *Methodism in earnest*’.⁷⁴ A revival was a time when intense anxiety about salvation gripped a community, leading to spiritual quickening, numerous conversions and, often, strange happenings. Here is an account from the journal of John Oxtoby, a forceful Primitive Methodist itinerant, of events during a revival in Weardale, County Durham, on 3 October

1824:

8, preached at Westgate chapel; a pentecostal shower came down whilst singing “Refining fire go through my heart” &c. They began to fall over on all sides, crying, “Glory! – Glory! – Glory!” and some cried, “ O Lord, enlarge my heart.” Many were astonished and amazed. Some ran out of the chapel. One said it was devilism. To some it appeared nothing but confusion; as some were praying with mourners, others rejoicing with believers, and others were singing.⁷⁵

The Primitives were frequently less inhibited about such behaviour than the Wesleyans. Yet the Wesleyans also experienced vivid revivals long into the nineteenth century. In Cornwall in particular revival was endemic among them. The result was a striking sacralisation of society: ‘in Cornwall’, remarked a Wesleyan at the start of the twentieth century, ‘they will let you talk of nothing but religion’.⁷⁶ By that time, however, revival, like so much else, had become routinised in many parts of the country. Events called revivals were planned, advertised and unduly talked up. At a week of United Methodist Free Churches revival meetings in Battersea Park in 1900, it was alleged that there were fifty converts, but an investigator could not find that any had joined a church.⁷⁷ Yet, even when spontaneous revivals were becoming a thing of the past, the longing for revival remained a powerful element in Methodist spirituality long into the twentieth century.

The capstone of Methodist piety was the experience of entire sanctification or full salvation, what Wesley had called ‘perfect love’. It was considered to be the absence of all known sin. Calvinists claimed it was impossible. Everybody, on their account, remained tainted by sin until death. Methodists controversially insisted that, on the contrary, justified believers could go on to a further experience in which sin was removed from their lives. As in the approach to the moment of justification, there was expected to be a time of searching, often protracted. Then came a crisis in

which sanctification was received, as in justification, by faith alone. Joseph Agar Beet, in defining the doctrine in 1880, wrote that ‘just as we obtain forgiveness by believing that in the moment of our faith and through the death of Christ our sins are forgiven, so, by believing that it is ours, we also so obtain and retain the holiness which God gives and requires’.⁷⁸ The word ‘retain’ is significant. Again like justification, sanctification could be lost. Sammy Hick, a Yorkshire character who preached in his native dialect, declared in 1831 that he had lost the state of sanctification ‘a vast o’ times’ but he had always got it again.⁷⁹ The incidence of full salvation undoubtedly declined as the nineteenth century wore on, but from the 1860s it underwent a revival.⁸⁰ Phoebe Palmer, the sophisticated wife of a New York doctor, spent five years in England propagating entire sanctification, commending it in a specially attractive way. There was no need, she taught, to pursue a long quest, waiting for a definite experience. Instead, full salvation could be claimed immediately, and although there might be no feeling, a state of holiness was granted.⁸¹ Largely in this form, the teaching was spread from 1872 by a new journal, *The King’s Highway*. The Southport Convention cultivated the experience from 1885 and Cliff College became its bastion from 1903. The holiness revival was the Methodist equivalent of the Keswick movement among other Evangelicals. Indeed a handful of Methodists, of whom Charles Inwood was the most prominent, were associated with both. The experience, however, was increasingly regarded as the hobby of a small circle, not as the general possession of the Methodist bodies. Entire sanctification became marginal in twentieth-century Methodism.

In reviewing some of the leading forms of Methodist piety it has already become clear that many of them changed drastically over the years. Now we need to consider the major developments of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. What altered in the latter part of the period? An underlying force, in the first place, was the rise of respectability. British economic growth led to

wider prosperity. Methodists shared in the process, enjoying larger incomes and higher status. In 1933, the year after Methodist union, the denomination had no fewer than fifty mayors.⁸² The well-to-do, often embracing a Romantic taste rather than values inherited from the Enlightenment, demanded grander buildings in which to worship. The word ‘church’, first used of a Methodist building in 1863, soon became general.⁸³ Organs, choirs and even chanting were introduced at city-centre and suburban churches. Worship became more formal. At Saul Street Primitive Methodist Chapel, Preston, an observer noticed in 1869 that cries of ‘Amen’, ‘Yes’ and ‘Praise the Lord’, though frequent in the past, were now voiced only by a few.⁸⁴ Religion became a more private affair. Accounts of deathbeds disappeared from connexional magazines because they were now considered intrusive. Participation in class meetings, lovefeasts and prayer meetings became an embarrassment and was increasingly dropped. From 1890 a Wesleyan no longer had to attend class to be a member.⁸⁵ Even the Evangelical distinctives began to be eroded. Professions of conversion became less explicit, even among candidates for the Wesleyan ministry.⁸⁶ The preaching of the cross became less common.⁸⁷ Activism faded, and, with the rise of biblical criticism, the scriptures seemed a less solid foundation for religion. A Wesley Bible Union, Fundamentalist in tone, was established in 1914 to oppose the changes, but its clamour condemned it to insignificance. By the end of the First World War, Methodist spirituality seemed much shallower than in the past.

A movement was launched in 1919 to remedy that state of affairs. Called the Fellowship of the Kingdom, it was set up by a circle of ministers who wanted to breathe new life into traditional Methodist forms. Its leading figure was Russell Maltby, warden of the Wesley Deaconess Institute, whose book *The Meaning of the Cross* (1920) reinterpreted the atonement as a sacrifice from which believers could draw strength.⁸⁸ Biblical inspiration was understood in the movement, for example by

J. Arundel Chapman, as a quality injecting uplift into the text, as in a poem by Wordsworth or a composition by Bach.⁸⁹ There was an emphasis on the supposedly simple picture of the historical Jesus portrayed in the synoptic gospels. Newton Flew, later principal of Wesley House, Cambridge, a deeply committed member of the Fellowship of the Kingdom, was willing to criticise the early Methodist preachers:

They had not seen a vision of God affirming the world as good, as delighting in the colour and gaiety and many-sidedness of human life, ceaselessly operative as in Nature so among men and their systems and their creeds, striving against all evil and yet inspiring and strengthening all impulses after the true and beautiful.⁹⁰

Here was an aesthetic explicitly formulated in Romantic categories that moulded a fresh spirituality. The Fellowship of the Kingdom believed in a threefold programme, again employing Romantic terminology, of quest (search for spiritual renewal), crusade (a local mission) and fellowship (mutual support). Cross, Bible, activism and conversion were all reaffirmed by the Fellowship of the Kingdom but charged with fresh meaning, so breaking with the staleness of the past. Its stance was a species of liberal Evangelicalism.⁹¹ Because its members, who numbered Leslie Weatherhead in their ranks, went on to positions of importance, the organisation exercised a profound influence over the future of reunited Methodism. Its devotional temper is well exemplified in Weatherhead's *Private House of Prayer* (1958).⁹² The Fellowship fostered the prevailing tone of Methodist piety in the middle years of the twentieth century.

Another strand in twentieth-century devotion was represented by a sacramental impulse. Because thought deriving from Romanticism exerted so powerful a sway over the interwar generations, it is not surprising that its love of history should impinge on Methodism. A fascination with the Christian past in its totality, and therefore with elements in the Catholic tradition, was

present in the Fellowship of the Kingdom, but it found fuller expression in a new sacramentalism. The communion service had rarely loomed large in the devotional lives of nineteenth-century Methodists. The Oxford Movement had confirmed their existing suspicion that a high regard for holy communion led towards formality and away from spiritual religion. By the interwar years, however, the prominence of the inheritors of the tradition of the Oxford Movement within the Church of England was encouraging greater attention to sacramental worship in other denominations. Alfred Whitham, the first president of the Methodist Sacramental Fellowship, established in 1935, urged on his fellow-Methodists ‘the adoration of Christ in His sacrament’.⁹³ Whitham’s colleague Theophilus Gregory, who drew up the constitution of the Fellowship, became a Roman Catholic in the year of its foundation and went on to become editor of the *Dublin Review*. The same impulse led, in the wake of the Second World War, to the creation of the Order of Christian Witness to mount local missions culminating in a celebration of the eucharist. Its prime mover, Donald Soper, is better known for his open-air speaking, social commitment and Labour politics, but in 1950 he also became president of the Methodist Sacramental Fellowship.⁹⁴ Although its numbers were never large, Soper’s weighty name ensured a degree of salience for the Fellowship. Its style of devotion, focusing on holy communion, provided for the needs of a section of Methodism around mid-century.

A large proportion of Methodist opinion during the first half of the twentieth century was nevertheless attached to more traditional Methodist ways. The persistence of the Evangelical inheritance should not be underestimated. Many shaped by pre-First World War ideas of mission were still leaders in the societies at mid-century. What is more, the evangelistic dynamic of Methodism was reinforced in the 1930s by the Oxford Group. Organised by Frank Buchman, an American Lutheran minister, the Oxford Group was so called because it drew some of its keenest

supporters from the University of Oxford. Undergraduates in the early 1930s formed teams that went out to evangelise an area, shunning conventional religious language because it erected unnecessary barriers to the transmission of the gospel. They were ‘life-changers’ not missionaries. Converts were formed into groups for fellowship and mutual confession of sins.⁹⁵ Noticing the similarity of the groups to class meetings, Methodists became disproportionately involved, even forming their own Cambridge Groups in imitation. W. E. Sangster, then a young minister, wrote *Methodism can be Born Again* (1938) to commend the Oxford Group emphases on fellowship, assurance, holiness and personal evangelism.⁹⁶ A further spur to evangelistic endeavour was given by the Second World War. Fighting the battle against Nazism inspired many to take up the Christian warfare with fresh vigour. Colin Roberts of the Methodist Home Mission Department organised the Christian Commando Campaigns, bringing a plain gospel message to the working people between 1942 and 1947.⁹⁷ Sangster as President of Conference in 1950 summoned Methodists to renewed evangelistic effort.⁹⁸ His personal consecration formed an attractive advertisement for the traditional Evangelical priorities he championed. It was easy for a Methodist in 1950 to sustain a pattern of devotion little changed from that of 1900.

Methodist spirituality, then, was generically Evangelical but distinctly Wesleyan and powerfully affected by currents flowing from the Enlightenment. As an Evangelical phenomenon, it made much of the Bible, the cross and conversion, stimulating activism. As an inheritance from Wesley, it held that all could be saved, accepted that faith could be lost, insisted on personal assurance and delighted in hymn singing. The Enlightenment temper is discernible in its allegiance to values surrounding reason, a characteristic optimism, a keenness on self-improvement and, eventually, a strong commitment to the temperance cause. The spirituality of the movement was originally lay in tone, female in much of its support and corporate in its expression; it was prayer-

focused, experience-centred, revival-orientated and fulfilled in entire sanctification. Methodist devotion altered significantly, however, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a result of social and intellectual forces, especially those associated with respectability and Romanticism. The names of Weatherhead, Soper and Sangster represent the three chief paths taken by the Methodists of the era, respectively liberal, sacramentarian and evangelistic. Yet in 1950 every tendency retained something of the spirit marking the movement ever since the days of John Wesley. In the middle of the twentieth century the Methodists still possessed the characteristics attributed to their piety by a New Connexion publication of 1848: they were ‘active, fervid, and joyous’.⁹⁹

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⁵ *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine* [hereafter *WMM*], April 1850, p. 431.

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⁷ *WMM*, February 1850, p. 206.

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⁹ J. S. Lidgett, *The Spiritual Principle of the Atonement* (London: Charles H. Kelly, 1897).

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¹¹ *WMM*, March 1850, p. 315.

¹² Eliza M. Champness, *The Life-Story of Thomas Champness* (London: Charles H. Kelly, 1907), p. 29.

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²⁰ Page (ed.), *Brash*, p. 35.

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²² *Primitive Methodist Magazine* [hereafter *PMM*], March 1850, p. 186.

²³ *PMM*, April 1824, p. 81.

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- ²⁷ Wilson, *Constrained by Zeal*, pp. 123-4.
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- ³⁷ George Jackson, *A Parson's Log* (London: Epworth Press, 1927), p. 144.
- ³⁸ *Methodist New Connexion Magazine* [hereafter *MNCM*], September 1850, p. 427.
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- ⁶⁴ *MNCM*, July 1850, p. 326.
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- ⁷³ *WMM*, January 1850, p. 93.
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