"It is heart work to be born again":
The Language of Renewal in Early Methodist Conversion Narratives

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INTRODUCTION

Revival, reform, renewal, revolution: these words are most often used to describe institutional change. We frequently use them in speaking about societal or ecclesial transformation, particularly historic shifts within the church and other organizations. One of the most important emphases of the early Methodist revival, however, was its attention to individual spirituality and personal salvation. Methodist leaders insisted that there can be no large-scale revival without spiritual transformation of the individual. This presentation thus addresses revival, renewal and reform of the individual: how did early Methodist laity experience and interpret spiritual transformation? What constituted authentic transformation, and how could it be verified? How were Methodists in turn perceived by their contemporaries, and what effect did this have on them? The response to these questions are based largely on individual spiritual accounts written by early Methodist laypeople. The majority of these narratives were solicited by Charles Wesley in the 1740s and constitute perhaps the most important source for the voices of laity, without whom there could be no Methodist movement.

LANGUAGE OF RENEWAL IN CONVERSION NARRATIVES

In the early 1740s, Charles Wesley solicited conversion accounts from Methodists in London and Bristol. Those who responded positively to his request offered their handwritten testimonies in obedience to Charles' fatherly spiritual authority. Many wrote of themselves as his spiritual child rather than as a sister or a brother. These letters provide remarkable insight into their lives before Methodism, their first contact with Methodists, and their reactions to sermons, hymn singing and their own spiritual awakening. Each narrative

generally followed a similar pattern of recounting one's pre-conversion life, passing through a period of agonizing convictions leading to a spiritual crisis, finally cumulating in an intense experience of joy, assurance and relief.

Pre-conversion life

Childhood and the fear of death

Following chronological order, the narrative proper typically began by recounting one's pre-conversion life. For many writers, this began with childhood. Many Methodists spoke of an unconscious attraction to God, often described as "drawings." This attraction preceded both conscious theological reflection and fluency in the vocabulary of faith. Mary Maddern's account began: "Allmost from my earliest infancy he seemd to dray me to him self, and I had strong desires at times. And when about eight years ould, I shurely had a tast of the love of God, tho I knew not what it was, but felt such love to Jesus Christ that I longed to die to be with him."[1]

Other writers recounted intensely frightening childhood experiences linked to fears of judgment and death. Mary Jane Ramsay recalled one instance in which "I thought I saw the devil standing upon the bed with great claws over me, ready to take me, and with the fright I skriekt… these things left a great terrour upon me for some time."[2] Similarly, Robert Wilkinson was also "often terrified in dreams and visions of the night. Sometimes I thought I was falling down steep precipices; at others, that the devil was standing over me to take me away immediately. As such times I have often waked, shrieking in such a manner as terrified all who heard me."[3]

Many writers had strict religious upbringings and grew up within a moral framework which they did not initially question or challenge. The image of God as judge combined with

[1] Mary Maddern to Charles Wesley, 29 June, 1762, EMV 105.
[2] Mary Ramsay to Charles Wesley, 4 June 1740, EMV 13.
[3] John Telford, *Wesley's Veterans: Lives of Early Methodist Preachers Told by Themselves,* vol. 5, (London: Charles H. Kelly, 1913), 229.

an intense fear of death produced "prime candidates for evangelical conversion."[4] Indeed, fear played a significant role in stimulating spiritual reflection and motivating religious behaviors, and was certainly utilized with great effect in early evangelical preaching. Even prior to their initial encounters with Methodism, though, many young would-be Methodists were already impressed by the seriousness of living and dying.

Darkness and blindness

In the conversion narratives, the early writers often referred to the period prior to conversion in terms of darkness and blindness. Following biblical and enlightenment tropes contrasting the light of truth with the darkness of ignorance, Methodists used darkness and blindness to describe their lack of understanding before encountering evangelical doctrine. Despite her efforts at outward holiness and her belief that she was a sincere Christian, Sarah Middleton claimed she was still in darkness.[5] Elizabeth Halfpenny recalled that she had not yet seen a "glympse of the light of God's countenance, and went on all in darkness and had no thoughts of a saviour."[6]

Early writers also employed the concepts of darkness and blindness to capture the experience of living life according to an illusion. They wrote of cold hearts and dead spirits resulting from a disconnect between the superficial actions of the body and the genuine life of the soul. Elizabeth Bristow described her pre-converted state with an abundance of bodily metaphors, seeing herself as lame, blind, in bondage, a firebrand in hell, dead and in darkness.[7] With even heightened pathos, Mariah Price expressed her amazement that "such a dark, dead, stony-hearted, damned unbeleveing Pharisee as I" could be saved. She elaborated on her lack of vision, confessing that she was "as dark as a blind man from his birth that

[4] D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative: Spiritual Autobiography in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 137-38.
[5] Sarah Middleton to Charles Wesley, May 1740, EMV 5.
[6] Elizabeth Halfpenny to Charles Wesley, May 1742, EMV 87.
[7] Elizabeth Bristow to Charles Wesley, 12 April 1740, EMV 11.

never had no thought of sight. And if he heard that there was such a thing, he did not beleve it because he had it not himself."[8]

As most of the early writers were converted by Charles and had been solicited by Charles to write their spiritual experiences, it is no surprise that much of their language can be traced to Charles's preaching. In a sermon delivered at Oxford in 1742, Charles Wesley described the "sleeper" in Ephesians 5:14 who was exhorted to "awake… and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light."[9] According to Charles, those who sleep are those who are spiritually unawakened. They rest in a state of darkness, believing themselves to be "happy" and "satisfied," as they have not yet seen themselves surrounded by flames. This state of spiritual blindness was only temporary, provided that the individual was able to be awakened. For early Methodists and other evangelicals, blindness was a necessary precondition of sight.

The interruption

Message provoking convictions

When the early writers first encountered Methodist preachers, they were met with a message of damnation designed to shock them out of their worldly complacency. In Methodist terminology, this first contact with evangelical doctrine was known as "awakening." Charles and John Wesley were convinced that the law—rhetoric of judgment based on the Old Testament—was first necessary to turn people away from their worldly attachments and fleshly desires, and to instill in them a profound desire for salvation through Christ. The subsequent in-between period, after having been persuaded that one's salvation was not necessarily assured but prior to receiving confirmation that it was, was referred to as "convictions." During this time, Methodists were frequently brought into the depths of

[8] Mariah Price to Charles Wesley, 18 May 1740, EMV 12.
[9] Kenneth G. C. Newport, *The Sermons of Charles Wesley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2001), 213.

despair knowing that they were damned, but knowing also that they were powerless to do anything about it. The confusion and frustration took them beyond the realm of the intellectual into the foreign territory of feelings, or emotions as one might say today. Once hardened hearts were malleable enough, they could then receive the comfort and assurance of the gospel.

Mary Thomas confessed that she previously thought herself as good as her neighbors "and a great deal better then some of them that did curs and swear and gott drunk." After hearing John Wesley preach, however, she was soon convinced that she had been deceiving herself.[10] Likewise, Elizabeth Halfpenny was "staggered" when she heard Charles Wesley say that she "might be put on a level with whores and drunkards and outward sinners."[11]

During this agonizing period, many wrote they saw nothing but hell and damnation, and cried out continually (at the prompting of Methodist preachers) "What must I do to be saved?" The newfound discovery of damnation coupled with the conundrum of not being able to do anything about it proved overwhelming for many early Methodists. Mary Thomas recalled, "I could find no comefort for me. I knew not where to go. I began to wish I never had heard [the Methodists]."[12] Some, as Martha Jones, began to wish they had never been born.[13] Others, more imaginatively, wished they had instead been born a sheep, cow or toad.[14]

Transformative power of sermons

One of the legacies of evangelicalism consists in its persuasive manner of preaching. Though evangelicals and their predecessors turned to the same biblical texts, something about

[10] Mary Thomas to Charles Wesley, 24 May 1742, EMV 128.
[11] Elizabeth Halfpenny to Charles Wesley, May 1742, EMV 87.
[12] Mary Thomas to Charles Wesley, 24 May 1742, EMV 128.
[13] Martha Jones to Charles Wesley, June 1740, EMV 3.
[14] For example, John Furz exclaimed upon seeing a dead toad, "O that I had been a toad!" Telford, *Wesley's Veterans*, vol. 5, 204; John Nelson, "Oh that I had been a cow, or a sheep!" and "Oh that I had never been born!" Ibid. vol. 3, 8.

the evangelical medium affected hearers in a new way. Naomi Thomas recounted that John Wesley "preach[ed] his word in such a clear way and manner… which made me often think it was another gospel, in comparison of what I heard before."[15]

Within the preaching event, Methodists found themselves attracted by an intensely personal message they felt was spoken directly to them. Not only were the preachers effective in *speaking* to individuals, they were also effective at *looking* at them. Many writers recounted the unsettling experience of being under the eye of the preacher. Some felt as if the preacher was looking straight at them, or rather through them, into the secret depths of their soul. Richard Rodda recalled hearing a "certain preacher in St. Just" in 1756: "I thought, as soon as he began, he could not have much to say; but before he had done, I thought he kept his eye continually on me, while everything he said seemed to point at me. I could hardly bear it and had some thoughts of moving to another part of the house, where he might not see me."[16]

Evangelical preachers stoked the imagination, encouraging audience members to see themselves as characters in biblical texts. George Whitefield was particularly adept at this, and many writers recalled vividly the texts preached and the feelings evoked by those texts. In his popular sermon on the pharisee and the publican, Charles Wesley invited hearers to place themselves within the story, to see themselves in the parable "as in a glass."[17] In this way, the story served not only to illuminate a historic truth—it also reflected one's very present and very personal circumstances. Through the story, one's own self-perception became altered. Identification with biblical texts also intensified the intimacy of the preacher-hearer relationship, heightening the sense that the message is intended specifically "for me."

[15] Naomi Thomas to Charles Wesley, June 1742, EMV 129.
[16] Telford, *Wesley's Veterans*, vol. 4, 195-96.
[17] Newport, *The Sermons of Charles Wesley*, 270.

Sight of the self

Evangelical preaching encouraged individuals to enter personally into scriptural stories and metaphors, to see themselves in the place of biblical characters. It also challenged audience members to look closely at themselves and their hearts, to turn their gaze inward and take in the sight of the vile self that the preacher could already see. Some early writers used the sight of the self rather abstractly as a metaphor. Others described more elaborate visual representations and the accompanying feelings of fear, shame and self-loathing. After having heard that "in our best we had eaten and drunk damnation, and that we were but moral devils," Mary Jane Ramsay wrote that "I saw my self so black that I thought I must not go to the Lord's table any more… I was frighted and saw my self in such a manner that I loathed my self."[18]

Charles Wesley often preached of the necessity of seeing oneself lost in order to be found, and the conversion narratives in turn reflect this movement.[19] Mrs. Plat, for instance, found that she had "no power in [her] self to turn from[her] evil ways" until her eyes were opened to the sight of her precarious state.[20] Writing to his godson, Methodist preacher William Seward exhorted:

> till you are truly poor in spirit and know that you are nothing, have nothing and can do nothing without Jesus Christ, till you see yourself a lost and undone sinner being wretched, miserable, blind and naked, full of wounds and bruises and putrefying sores, having no whole part about you – I say, till you thus see and feel yourself a sinner, till you are content to be thought by others the vilest of men, till you are contented to be troden [sic] under foot of men and counted the offscouring of all things, you are not fit to be a Christian.[21]

The problem of feelings

Equally confounding as the reality of damnation was the proposed method of apprehending salvation. No longer was it enough to know that one was saved—one could

[18] Mary Ramsay to Charles Wesley, 4 June 1740, EMV 13
[19] Ibid., 274.
[20] Mrs. Plat to Charles Wesley, 1740, EMV 10.
[21] William Seward to Scipio Africanus, 20 March 1738, DDSe 23, MARC.

and should expect to *feel* oneself saved. This movement beyond mere intellectual assent was problematic for many. How should one trust and evaluate *feelings*?[22] Many grew distressed if their emotional state did not correspond to that described by Methodist preaching. Ann Martin wrote to Charles Wesley, "I went away from you very heavy and soon began to grieve that I griev'd no more."[23] Elizabeth Sais wrote that upon seeing other society members "taken with violent fits of conviction," [I] thought that I also must have been partaker of their condition before I could be a Christian, and wished to undergo the same convictions."[24]

Despite Charles Wesley's detailed sermon on the "Three States," in which he describes the conditions prior to, during and after conversion, many early Methodists were left groping after something they did not understand. Mary Jane Ramsay recounted a time when she was "expecting something of the Lord, but I knew not what, nor what to ask for."[25] Early Methodists struggled to fit their experiences into the vocabulary of salvation, as they struggled even to identify what constituted an experience. More often than not, they needed a trusted leader to make the diagnosis for them. Margarit Austin, for instance, knew she had felt something, but she was unable to identify whether or not she had been justified and at what point it might have occurred. After hearing a verbal account of her experiences, Charles Wesley reassured her that she had indeed been justified at a particular date and time.[26]

Conversion proper

Some early writers were converted immediately following a vision of the vile self. Samuel Webb, for instance, felt himself "filled with joy unspeakable, I had such asence of my own vileness & the love of Christ towards me that I was confounded & I had no inclination to

[22] See Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative*, 141-142, 159.
[23] Ann Martin to Charles Wesley, 1740, EMV 4.
[24] Elizabeth Sais to Charles Wesley, May 1742, EMV 126.
[25] Mary Ramsay to Charles Wesley, 4 June 1740, EMV 13.
[26] Margerit Austin to Charles Wesley, 19 May 1740, EMV 1.

go home any more."[27] For him, the sight of his own vileness serveed to enhance his conception of Christ's gracious love.

For other writers, it was a vision of Christ interceding, bleeding, dying specifically *for them* that that finally provided the long-awaited relief and assurance of faith. The experience of George Shadford neatly illustrates several common themes of this stage in the conversion process. While hearing a Methodist preacher in a farm house in 1762, he was moved to cry out, "'God be merciful to me a sinner!' No sooner had I expressed these words," he wrote,

> but by the eye of faith (not with my bodily eyes) I saw Christ, my Advocate, at the right hand of God, making intercession for me. I believed He loved me, and gave Himself for me. In an instant the Lord filled my soul with divine love, as quick as lightning – so suddenly did the Lord whom I sought come to His temple. Immediately my eyes flowed with tears and my heart with love. Tears of joy and sorrow ran mingled down my cheeks. O what sweet distress was this! … As I walked home along the streets I seemed to be in Paradise. When I read my bible it seemed an entirely new book. When I meditated on God and Christ, angels or spirits, when I considered good or bad men, any or all the creatures which surrounded me on every side, everything appeared new, and stood in a new relation to me. I was in Christ a new creature; old things were done away and all things became new.[28]

For Shadford, the sight of Christ impressed upon him the idea that Christ took a personal interest in him. The notion that Christ died *because of me* served to awaken the guilty conscience, while the notion that Christ died *for me* overwhelmed the individual with the incomprehensibility of such love and mercy. It is this sense of undeserved compassion that finally enabled transformation.

One effect of this transformation was the activation of the spiritual eye. George Shadford saw fit to specify that he received his vision through the "eye of faith (*not with my bodily eyes*)."[29] Elizabeth Downes wrote to Charles Wesley of her vision of Christ, "so did I clearly behold him with the eye of faith… that my soul was filled with devout raptures. Sir, itt was no… imagination."[30] Early writers specified that the visions perceived with the

[27] Samuel Webb to Charles Wesley, 20 November 1741, EMV 18.
[28] Telford, *Wesley's Veterans*, vol. 2, 182-84.
[29] Ibid., 183 (emphasis mine).
[30] Elizabeth Downes to Charles Wesley, 13 April 1742, EMV 53.

spiritual eye were not mere fabrications of the imagination, but that they were in fact perceptions of a new spiritual reality.

At the end of the excerpt from George Shadford's experience, he spoke about the world around him appearing new. A number of other writers also spoke evocatively about the moment of receiving their new eyes. This experience was very much a resurrection, a death to the self and a new birth into the realm of light. Having struggled with the fear of death, confronted the limitations of the physical senses and come face to face with suffering and death, the converts finally emerged with new eyes for witnessing a new reality.

Still other writers' conversions were accompanied by physical manifestations, such as trembling, unusual bodily contortions, or having their senses taken away from them. Mrs. Plat recounted that while praying, she was deprived of her senses. During this time, she received such power in her heart that she thought it might be rent asunder. She received this power "for the space of 15 minuits," after which it was revealed to her that the Holy Ghost was upon her and that God's hand pierced into her heart. In that moment, she felt a "sure pardon" of her sins. Jesus then snatched her soul from the grasp of the devil. In what is either a bold theological statement or an intriguing Freudian slip, Mrs. Plat remarked, "It is heart work to be born again."[31] In all of these instances, the deprivation of one's senses was immediately or soon after followed by a strong sense of pardon and assurance. It was typically a rare occurrence, not to be repeated following one's conversion. The supernatural aspect was not troubling, nor was it especially revered in and of itself. The writers presented their experiences simply and in plain language, matter-of-factly stating the means by which God wrought lasting and holistic change in their lives.

[31] Mrs. Plat to Charles Wesley, 1740, EMV 10. The account of Naomi Thomas is similar: Following two experiences in which it seemed her very bones were "out of joint," she found her "senses and strength" taken away for a "small time." According to her interpretation, God demonstrated his power to a "rebellious wretch," afterward easing her burden and allowing her to return home in comfort and joy. Naomi Thomas to Charles Wesley, June 1742, EMV 129.

Post-conversion

What, then, was the result of this transformational process? How did Methodists interpret life in the afterglow of conversion? Many Methodists, both leaders and laity alike, spoke of salvation in terms of healing and restoration. Within the conversion process, the individual was made aware of her illness, led to *feel* that illness and need of healing, and finally brought to a state of health and wholeness. The transformation effected by conversion, however, was more than a mere augmentation of health. It was nothing less than a total rebirth.

Positive effects

As previously mentioned, this passage into rebirth coincided with the activation of one's spiritual sense. It required "an inner awareness of God's grace: the devotee 'feels, is inwardly sensible of, the graces which the Spirit of God works in his heart.'"[32] In order for this to take place, body and soul had to begin to work in tandem.

In addition to receiving new sight, early Methodists also seemed to receive a new voice. Many found that speaking became an involuntary and unstoppable impulse. For others, conversion helped them to overcome a fear of speaking in the face of opposition. Sarah Middleton remarked, "I find I gather strength daily for I usd to be a fraid to Speak to my carnal relations what god had done for my soul, but now I find I am constraind to speak tho I know they will cast me out as a byword & a Proverb of reproach."

As part of their participation in Methodist activities (particularly the bands), early writers benefited greatly from the opportunity to speak freely about the state of their souls. For many, honest spiritual discourse was a precious source of refreshment. Margarit Austin

[32] John Wesley, Sermon 45, "The New Birth," in ed. Albert C. Outler, *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 2:188.

wrote of her first band meeting: "And the first night we met, hearing the other tell the state of ~~my~~ their souls, it was of much strength to me to speak of the state of mine."[33]

Complications

Despite the intense joy of the newly-converted state, Methodists sometimes continued to experience uncertainty surrounding their conversion. Many wrote that immediately following an experience of justification, the devil tempted them to keep quiet and to not speak of their feelings. Some doubts stemmed from fear of public opinion. Women in particular found it difficult and intimidating to share with their male leaders. Sarah Middleton recounted that despite wanting the whole world to experience the love that was overflowing her heart, she was much tempted to keep it to herself and not to tell John Wesley about God's work in her life.[34]

Other doubts may be attributed to an uncertainty concerning the nature and authenticity of one's spiritual experience. While Methodists were taught that a genuine transformation would produce particular fruits of faith ("freedom from sin, doubt, and fear, and the fullness of peace, love and joy in the Holy Ghost") (Heitz 80), these fruits sometimes proved difficult to identify. Verification of authentic spiritual experience necessarily required the help of the community. Early writers often turned to a trusted leader for assistance in understanding what had happened to them. Methodists sometimes consulted Charles and John Wesley, sometimes another preacher, sometimes their band leader. In this way, one's new spiritual identity relied on community endorsement. One would never simply, audaciously proclaim oneself justified. Internal transformation required external confirmation.

Social ramifications

[33] Margerit Austin to Charles Wesley, 19 May 1740, EMV 1.
[34] Sarah Middleton to Charles Wesley, May 1740, EMV 5.

After associating themselves with Methodism, many writers subsequently encountered the rejection of their friends, families and employers. Some were harassed or disowned by their loved ones. Others lost their employment. Mary Ramsay, a teacher, recalled that parents stopped sending her students once they learned that she had turned Methodist.[35] J. Okely's master forbade him from having contact with Methodists. He wrote sorrowfully to William Seward, "I have no body here to converse with at my leisure… so I am always by my self."[36]

In developing strong ties to Methodist leaders, bands and societies, laity did sometimes consider Methodism as an alternative family. Indeed, several early writers commented on the significance of these relationships. Susannah Designe confessed to Charles Wesley, "I find greater ties, both of love and duty to your brother and you than my natural parents after the flesh."[37] Similarly, J. Purdy wrote to John Wesley, "I did'nt think it till now, but I believe I love you as well as I do my papa."[38] For some, Methodism became their sole support system after their "natural" families and acquaintances abandoned them because of their evangelical activities.

REFLECTIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Language of renewal and revival pervade the conversion narratives of the early Methodists. The first Methodist laity frequently wrote of experiencing new birth, being made a new creature, receiving a new heart, singing a new song, looking at the world with new eyes, etc. The radical transformation altered both body and soul, leading the individual out of the fear of judgment and death into a newfound confidence, from a state of spiritual

[35] Mary Ramsay to Charles Wesley, 4 June 1740, EMV 13.
[36] J. Okely to William Seward, 23 November 1738, DDSe 4, MARC.
[37] Susannah Designe to Charles Wesley, 18 March 1742, EMV 51.
[38] J. Purdy to John Wesley, 23 June 1739, Letters to John Wesley box 1, MARC.

somnolence into an active participation in the spiritual realm, from an intellectual understanding of salvation to a felt assurance of it, from an anonymous churchgoer to a loved and personally redeemed child of God.

Fast-forward nearly three hundred years. Methodists are still present, still worshipping regularly, still sharing together rituals of birth, life and death. Like other "traditional" denominations, however, Methodism (at least in the northern hemisphere) is facing a significant decline. Many churches share the same complaints: fewer people in general, fewer youth in particular, an aging populating, financial insecurity. Scheme after scheme of church renewal are proposed and implemented, but with seemingly little effect. A piercing question posed by this year's Institute is more than rhetorical: "Does Methodism have a future?" I sometimes find that historians are the least-equipped people to make suggestions about the life of the church in the present. Even so, I will venture a few recommendations based on my time spent in withering but hopeful congregations as well as my study of early Methodist lives. It has been my experience that most church renewal schemes based on language of marketing and business strategies are doomed to fail. Methodism did not originate as its own separate institution. It is firmly rooted in a Spirit-based *movement* of individual spiritual transformation and communal support. Any plan to revive Methodism must necessarily 1) pay close attention to the spiritual progress, the joys and the fears of individual human beings; 2) encourage living encounters and mutual accountability across generations 3) nourish spiritual and social transformation; 4) create an atmosphere of sincere trust and love. Where there is love, there is life – regardless of the size of the gathering. As much as the first Methodists in the 18th century, Methodists today are thirsting for real relationship in which we can share the workings of our souls. The capacity to share deep joy and pain lies at the heart of authentic community, and it is this "holy conversation" that has the potential to revive more than any democratically voted vision

statement. Does the future of Methodism depend on the financial health of the church institution or on the spiritual, physical and social health of human beings? The first Methodists would surely elect the latter.