John Wesley’s Mission of Evangelism

Introduction

There was a remarkable revival in eighteenth century England. Much of the leadership of that revival would eventually become associated with the Wesley brothers and the Methodists. John Wesley in particular is now remembered as founder of a worldwide movement. He is remembered for his practical theology, his care for the poor and his organizational genius. But at times his passion for evangelism is overlooked. In this paper, I intend to explore the evangelistic mission of John Wesley.

I am particularly interested in the ethos and spirit of the Wesleyan revival, especially in the early years (1740’s). Apparently, in the early years of the Methodist revival, the Wesleys requested new converts to write out their testimonies in the form of letters to John or Charles. The letters were delivered to the Wesleys and read in society meetings. To resource this project I will be drawing from a dozen of these unpublished testimony letters addressed to Charles Wesley. The letters I will be referring to were written mostly in London in 1740 and 1741. I recognize that this is only a limited sampling (there are 150 such letters on file in the John Rylands library), and that there are limits to the generalization of the letters to the larger Methodist revival given that the letters are quite narrow in scope as they are were written mostly in one city and limited to a two year time span. I am hopeful that these letters will effectively serve to illustrate the particular experiences of new converts that will add a dimension to our understanding of the people the Wesleys were reaching as well as the spirit of the overall revival.

Finally, I am interested in exploring the Wesleyan revival with an eye toward understanding Wesley’s theological assumptions regarding evangelism. While there may be ample evidence for the construction of a theology of mission in the Wesleyan tradition, and while Wesley’s commitment to evangelism certainly fits well with his theological presuppositions (e.g. his emphasis on prevenient grace and Arminian theology), Wesley, of course, does not lay out a systematic theology of evangelism. Once again we are reminded that Wesley’s theology is a practical theology. With this in mind, most of our understanding of Wesley’s thinking on evangelism must be constructed from his preaching, his letters, Methodist hymns, and the practices of the early Methodists. In examining these, I am hopeful of discovering key theological concepts related to evangelism which may be useful in constructing a Wesleyan theology of mission.

1 Rather than footnoting each of the references to the unpublished letters, clear reference will be mentioned in the text of the paper indicating the name of the author. Transcriptions of the letters may be found in the appendix.
Wesley’s Passion for Evangelism

John Wesley was an evangelist. There were undoubtedly a number of influences in Wesley’s life that helped to shape his thinking about evangelism and his calling as an evangelist. Some of these influences are exemplified early on in Wesley’s decision to turn down the offer to follow in his father’s footsteps in Epworth in favor of going to Georgia to evangelize the Indians. For Wesley, going to Georgia to evangelize the Indians was much more than a noble enterprise, it was grounded in a theological vision. His reasons for going were tied to his hope that out of his work there might emerge a new community that would re-capture the essence of primitive (New Testament) Christianity. He had idealized understandings of the Native Americans as people who were culturally and theologically innocent and untarnished by the fallen state of the world he lived in. He hoped this would be the opportunity to create a new community that truly exemplified primitive Christianity.²

His motivation as an evangelist was also related to “working out his own salvation”. In his early years, the combination of his hopes for restoring or recreating a true primitive Christian community in which he and other believers would experience Christian perfection along with his own sometimes desperate fear of death and hell were powerful motivations. As Martin Schmidt states, “Wesley’s call arises directly from his dialectic of life. His striving for sanctification as a return to primitive Christianity, his will in the primitive Christian conception of the indivisible oneness of the Body of Christ are the strongest motive forces.”³ Even though, by all rights, Wesley failed in his noble venture in Georgia (on more counts than his failure to create a new Christian community out of the Indian tribes!), this experience both represents his missional thinking at the time and serves to further shape his thinking in preparation for the Methodist revival still to come.

Wesley’s evangelical experience at Aldersgate must have also further confirmed his confidence in preaching repentance from sin and justification by faith. Even though he later doubted that he was a Christian at all, still, the long search for peace in Christ and assurance of salvation that culminated that night in 1738 certainly must have provided Wesley a personal experience that was part of the basis for the encouragement he offered others to press on to the assurance of salvation.

Wesley was also a man with a calling. He was a “brand plucked from the fire”, called of God for service in the Kingdom. This sense of calling would drive him beyond the normal stations of life and beyond the conventional forms of service for Oxford trained clergy. For Wesley, evangelism was never just a theological premise, it was a passion. Skevington Wood writes, “Wesley was first and foremost an evangelist, and as such he was aware that his commission was to preach the gospel.”⁴ In Wesley’s own words, “A dispensation of the gospel is committed to me, and woe is me if I preach not the Gospel wherever I am in the habitable world.”⁵ And further, Wesley said he had but “…one point

---

³ Ibid., 25.
of view—to promote, so far as I am able, vital, practical religion; and by the grace of
God to beget, preserve, and increase the life of God in the souls of men.”

Wesley was decidedly pragmatic in his approach to his work. The urgency with which he
sensed the need to preach the gospel to all who would hear superseded in his mind many
other considerations. The means were important primarily as they were effective in
accomplishing the ends. For example, the mission of calling sinners to repentance was
such a compelling imperative for Wesley that established ecclesiastical boundaries and
ecclesiastical authorities were relatively incidental in comparison. As Coleman states,
Wesley was “…utterly pragmatic in planning strategy and establishing policy. Whether
his approach was approved by church tradition or his ecclesiastical peers was not of great
concern. The question was: Does it work?”

Wesley wrote to a friend, “What is the end of all ecclesiastical order? Is it not to bring
souls from the power of Satan to God, and to build them up in His fear and love? Order,
then, is so far valuable as it answers these ends; and if it answers them not, it is nothing
worth.” From this, it is not difficult to understand how Wesley came to disregard parish
boundaries with the declaration that the “world is my parish”. Henry Rack summarizes:

He (Wesley) wrote to an unnamed friend… who had advised him to return
college or to sit still and not to interfere with souls in other people’s parishes as
this was contrary to ‘Catholic principles’. Wesley responded that ‘scriptural
principles’ alone weighed with him and they commanded him to ‘instruct the
ignorant, reform the wicked and confirm the virtuous’. Since he was unlikely
ever to have a parish, forbidding him to work in others’ parishes meant not doing
this work at all. And so to: ‘I look upon all the world as my parish… This is the
work I know God has called me to.’

Wesley’s passion for evangelism extended to his expectations and instructions to his
Methodist preachers. The Methodist movement was to be an evangelistic movement.
Above all else, they were to be concerned with preaching the gospel and the salvation of
souls. Wesley writes to his preachers, “It is not your business to preach so many times,
and to take care of this or that society; but to save as many souls as you can; to bring as
many sinners as you possibly can to repentance, and with all your power to build them up
in that holiness without which they cannot see the Lord.”

John Wesley was apparently not especially animated in his preaching. The convicting
influence on his listeners were the words themselves, “quickened by the Spirit” in the

---

10 Coleman op.cit., 16. (Wesley: included in the Minutes of Several Conversations Between the Rev.
Thomas Coke. LL.D., the Rev. Francis Asbury, and Others, at a Conference Begun in Baltimore… in the
year 1784. Composing a Form of Discipline for the Minister, Preacher, and Other Members of the
Methodist Episcopal Church in America (Philadelphia: Charles Cist, 1785), 12.
hearts and minds of his listeners. Typically, the content of his preaching was bold and to the point. He did not shy away from warning people to “flee the wrath to come” and clearly declaring the effects and results of sin, the judgment of God, and the reality of hell, along with, of course, the love of God and the promise of salvation. Witness these words of Wesley at the end of a message preached in St. Paul’s Church in Bedford in 1758:

O, who can stand before the face of the great God, even our Saviour Jesus Christ! See! See! He cometh! He maketh the clouds His chariots! He rideth upon the wings of the wind! A devouring fire goeth before Him, and after Him a flame burneth! See! He sitteth upon His throne, clothed with light as with a garment, arrayed with majesty and honour! Behold, His eyes are as a flame of fire, His voice as the sound of many waters! ... Hear the Lord, the Judge! ‘Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.’ Joyful sound! How widely different than that voice which echoes through he expanse of heaven, ‘Depart, ye cursed into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels!’ And who is he that can prevent or retard the full execution of either sentence?... Hath he not bought you with His own blood, that ye might not perish, but have everlasting life? O make proof of his mercy, rather than His justice; of His love, rather than the thunder of His power!”

**The Social Context**

A number of biographers (including Heitzenrater and Rack) have been careful to point out that the Methodist revival of the eighteenth century must be understood as part of a much larger revival that included not only England, but Wales, Germany and America, not only the eighteenth century, but from the seventeenth well into the nineteenth, and not only Methodists, but also Pietists, Puritans and Calvinists. This, of course, raises additional interest in the broad social contexts of these times and places. What characterized the social contexts of that day that provided such fertile ground for revival?

Specifically for our consideration here, what was the social context like in 18th century England? Popular thought has often attributed revival movements to times of significant social and economic instability. Certainly there were significant changes occurring related to the industrial revolution in 18th Century England with substantial movement from agricultural occupations to manufacturing and the trade guilds. This, in turn, contributed to increases in the urban population.

Henry Rack, however, points out that the economic conditions were reasonably stable in the earlier decades of the century. He suggests an interesting alternative description of the social context that may have contributed to the openness to revival. According to

---

14 Ibid., 173.
Rack, the Church of England in Wesley’s day had become relatively ineffective and lacked vitality leaving the common people without a meaningful religious or spiritual alternative. Methodism, along with other revival movements, stepped into the void. In fact, the Methodist revival tended to be stronger where the Church of England was weak, and weaker where the Church of England was relatively strong. This weakness in the established church he attributes to the development of a civil religion that robbed the Church of England of its vitality. He writes:

The seventeenth century… left a legacy of civil and religious strife, yet without destroying the sense that religion was a major source of social cement and stability if rightly understood and organized… The political stability achieved by one-party rule after 1714 needed to be accompanied by (if possible) a one-party church… In religious terms this also meant a more comprehensive, less dogmatic creed… with a major emphasis on practical morality in which all good men could agree. The result, for Anglicans at least, has been aptly described as a ‘civil religion’… it was designed to appeal to the lukewarm multitude, and it enlisted their lukewarm support…

Wesley’s goal as a (relatively) loyal Anglican priest, of course, was not to lead people out of the established Church, but, in fact, to revive the Church. His hope was that the Methodists could become an ecclesiola within the ecclesia. To the question in the Larger Minutes, “What may we measurably believe to be God’s design in raising up the preachers called Methodists?” Wesley answered, “Not to form any new sect; but to reform the nation, particularly the church; and to spread Scriptural holiness over the land.” However, if Rack is correct, it means that the great majority of the common people may have typically had a reasonably strong religious background, but the Church often did not offer much in the way of a vital faith. For example, consider these statements taken from testimonies of early Methodist converts:

Thought myself a Christian but I found my self mistaken when it pleased God to reveal his dear son in me and to show me the way of salvation as for the articles of our church the doctrine of the spirit of God of regeneration and of justification by faith I was a stranger to them all nor do I remember to have heard any of them preachd or ixplaind by our clergy indeed I went to church and said my prayers and had a form of profession but --- nothing of the power I had no oyl in my lamp no inward principal of holiness in my heart what was I but a whited sepulcher
Sarah Middleton, 1740

With sorrow do I speak it   I being of the Church of England I was att a grate loss to find a spiritual friend that could give me any spiritual comfort    what minister I liked in the Church I found their lives was contrary to their doctrine that Satan would have often tempted me to believe that all religion was witchcraft  often

15 Ibid., 172.
16 Ibid., 178.
18 Rack., op.cit., 173.
times he tempted me to deny the being of a god and att other times he would tell me if there was a god he need not concern his self with me

Samuel Hewit

The religious background of the common people combined with common beliefs regarding the afterlife may also have contributed to their receptivity to the message of the evangelists. Themes of judgment, hell-fire, and eternal damnation were prevalent and strongly held. Rack notes… “What is common to them all is often a strong sense of hell, and this seems to be induced less by hell-fire preaching than by the subjects’ own innate belief and conscience which appear to have required little to arouse them. They created their own hell.”19

Here again, examples from testimonies of Methodist converts in the early years of the revival illustrate this quite well. Sarah Middleton writes to Charles Wesley, “I felt my self so vile that I thought hell was ready to swallow me up”. Nathaniel Hurst writes: “…sometimes as I was standing I used to think that the ground whereon I stood was hot under me which made me almost to tremble and to think if the ground should open and swallow me up I should perish forever.” And these words from Samuel Hewit:

I was all of a sudden struck to all appearance with sudden death, O who can tell, but them that has felt the same the horror and confusion that I was in, death I thought lit hovering upon my cold lips and hell open and ready to receive me. The terror of the Lord was in array against me and in the agony I lay for some time. I said the Lord’s prayer, I prayed earnestly for Christ’s sake that I might not die…

Samuel Hewit

The reality of hell was combined with a sense of sinfulness that brought a deep sense of conviction that was all consuming and frequently lasted for years. Their sense of sinfulness often was related not so much to flagrant violations of morality, but more frequently to sins of pride, often using the language of being “pharisaical”. In fact, the testimonies typically state that they didn’t even know that they were such perverse sinners until they heard the preaching of Whitefield or the Wesleys! Maria Price writes to Charles in May of 1740:

Dear Sir, my heart longs for words to tell how good my dear Saviour is to save such a dark dead stony hearted damned unbelieving Pharisee as I. I did often repent for one sin and did not know I had any more. But I had no sooner repented of it but I commited it again and was two-fold more a child of hell than before. Thus was I mourning and sinning and wondering that I could not overcome it myself.

Mary Ramsay writes that she is so miserable in her sins that she is unable to sing even at home. She writes to Charles, “And so I went on mourning that I could not mourn more and about a fortnight after you were come I fell into such mourning that my heart was ready to break. I came on Monday morning to speak with you but when I came I could

19 Ibid., 197.
not speak.” And Elisabeth Hinson writes, “Satan came in and told me I had lost Christ and I mite as well hang myself. But god him is rich in mercy tords all delivered me from the evil of this temptation.”

Perhaps in direct proportion to the penitents’ sense of despair while under conviction was their sense of freedom and power they reported in their experiences of conversion. Consider the following testimonies:

The Thursday following being Ascension day I had so much joy when you was preaching that I thought my soul seemed as if it was ascending into heaven. Indeed the joy began in the morning while Mr. Harris was preaching -- and it so increased in the evening while you was preaching that Methought I saw my Saviour in glory -- My soul seemed as though it was out of my body

Mary Ramsay

Hearing John Wesley preach to a Society in Bair Yard near Claremarket, I felt my heart open within me and like a fountain of water run from it and in that moment I felt such love, peace and joy passed all expression. We sang a hymn. I thought I was out of the body with the angels in heaven for I was so full of joy I could not express my belief.

T. Cowper

After two years deep convictions God rebuked the stormy wind and tempest and their was a great calm—I tasted that peace of God which Paseth all understanding of the natural man

Samuel Hewit

The Incarnational Movement of Wesley’s Ministry

The question arises at this point as to the general social description of the early Methodists. While it is true that there were people of influence in the movement including a few Anglican clergy and people of some status and wealth, most of the early Methodists appear to have been commoners, especially from the working classes. Henry Rack notes that Methodists were drawn especially from the ranks of the common workers, especially craftsmen, industrial workers, miners and fishermen. These mostly “industrial immigrants” found their “disorientation healed by Methodist fellowship”.

Rupert Davies adds that members of religious societies had belonged mostly to the spiritual elite in previous years. But the Methodists were “open to all and sundry, and were to be found in places and among groups of people where spiritual growth had never been expected or found before.”

We have this descriptive account of the Methodist people from the Memoirs of James Hutton:

20 Ibid., 173.
They “…were composed of every description of persons, who, without the slightest attempt at order, assembled, crying ‘Hurrah!’ with one breath, and with the next bellowing and bursting into tears on account of their sins; some poking each other’s ribs, and others shouting ‘Hallelujah.’ It was a jumble of extremes of good and evil… Here thieves, prostitutes, fools, people of every class, several men of distinction, a few of the learned, merchants, and numbers of poor people, who had never entered a place of worship, assembled in crowds and became godly.”

These early Methodists were commoners, blue collar types, lots of people who would today be classified as “working poor”. It must be obvious that Wesley’s ministry was outside of his own social class. I would like to suggest that it was both kenotic (self-emptying) and incarnational (full participation and identification with those to whom he was ministering) in ways that are reminiscent of the life and ministry of Jesus. The whole Wesleyan movement, whether in ministries of mercy, justice, or evangelism, was toward the common people, especially toward the poor and those who were in physical, material or spiritual need.

As the incarnational movement of the Wesleyan revival gravitated toward those in need, it in turn enfolded new converts in ways that were both redemptive and empowering. Those who were used to being disempowered outsiders, frequently discovered a new identity and sense of belonging. Rupert Davies comments, “…Methodists were offered a double and interrelated citizenship of both earth and heaven, not one without the other. This was the ‘exaltation of the humble and meek’, and this was the breach in the class barrier through which the Methodists poured when they heard the ‘pure word of general grace.’” Davies goes on to note that this had significant sociological implications for Methodist converts as well as for the movement as a whole.

Wesley, by preaching a salvation available to all – and by meaning those words quite literally – struck right across this class structure both in its original and in its modified form. The landowners were not much moved by such a gospel, though they were often alarmed by it. The squirearchy and its clerical supporters saw its dangerous possibilities and resisted it by all means in their power. The people to whom its appeal went home were the scarcely educated tradespeople and artisans and superior farm-workers in the first place – people until then deemed to be capable of grasping only the elementary principles of Christianity, those usually identified with the Ten Commandments – and through them to the wholly illiterate peasants and urban ‘labouring classes’ – people thought to be capable of nothing more than blind obedience to their masters. All these people, women no less than men, were now offered the status of children of God, heirs of all God’s promises and responsible members of a community that granted both their natural rights as human beings and their supernatural rights as aspirants by the help of the Holy Spirit to Christian perfection. And they knew that if they entered that community they would have the further chance, if they were not too shy or too ill-

22 James Hutton, in Wood, op.cit., 137.
23 Davies, op.cit., 27.
equipped to take it, of leading classes, preaching from pulpits, and receiving a hitherto undreamed-of measure of education in the fulfillment of their office.  

Another dynamic frequently associated with revival movements among the common people, of course, is ecstatic manifestations or “enthusiasm”.  And “enthusiasm” was a characteristic mark of the Wesleyan revival.  Wesley was sympathetic toward demonstrative manifestations while at the same time being committed to reason and rationality, a combination which led Henry Rack to label him a “reasonable enthusiast”.  Wesley was living in an environment that was alive with spiritual energy and power.  For the most part, he associated the ecstatic manifestations frequenting the Methodist meetings as indications of the moving of the Spirit similar to what had occurred in the book of Acts.  Henry Rack summarizes some of the manifestations that occurred in one brief period:  

On 17 April 1739 Wesley visited the Baldwin Street society in Bristol and while expounding Acts 4 ‘called upon God to confirm his word.  Immediately one that stood by (to our no small surprise) cried out aloud, with the utmost vehemence, as in the agonies of death.  But we continued in prayer till “a new song was put in her mouth”.  Then two people of good reputation were ‘seized with strong pain’ and ‘roared’ with disquiet of heart.  A few days later people dropped to the ground as if ‘thunderstruck’.  Many others followed, most notably John Haydon, a man of ‘regular life and conversation’ who regularly attended church and sacrament and was a strong churchman and hostile to Dissent.  He saw the convulsions as delusions of the devil, but then himself fell ‘raving mad’ after reading Wesley’s sermon on ‘Salvation by Faith’.  He showed symptoms of demon-possession, cursing the devil, but was relieved by prayer.

Similarly, in the testimonies or early Methodist converts we find examples not only of “out of body” ecstatic experiences, but also of healings, convulsions, and fainting.  Consider a few of the manifestations mentioned in our sampling of testimonies:

my lord him loves sinner still carrie on his work and brought all my sins to my remembrance and there I trembled and should have fell down but the popel heald me up and I was out of my senses but the lord awakened me with peace be unto you your sins are forgiving you Elisabeth Hinson

.... soon after yu expounded at Fetterlane and then I was at that time and ever since filled with joy and peace in believing I received the forgivness of sins and the witnes of the Spirit and a dominion over sin at that very time.  I trembled so with joy and cried that I did not know how to bear myself.  You asked me if I found that peace that passed understanding.  -- I said, “Yes, indeed I have.”  

Maria Price

---

25 Rack, op.cit.  
26 Ibid., 187.  
27 Rack, op.cit. 194.  (John Wesley’s Journal, Curnock, ed., 2:180-186, 189f.)
The light of God shown on me once more and my soul was filled with love. Then I could lift up my heart again to the Lord and one day as I was at my work my soul was overpowered with the love of God that I knew not whether I was in the Body or out of the Body.

Nathaniel Hurst

I was at the same time restord to my bodily health as well as ever I was in my life

Sarah Middleton

Field Preaching

Perhaps along with the Methodist commitment to ministry to and among the poor through works of mercy, the incarnational nature of the Wesleyan revival was well illustrated through field preaching. Rather than waiting for people to find their way into the church, field preaching moved the preaching of the gospel out to where the people were. It was a movement out of the cathedral and into the marketplace and out of established sacred spaces into unconventional public spaces. This had the effect of catching attention, of meeting people in their home turf. It was missional in the sense that it took the gospel to the people.

John Wesley, of course, didn’t necessarily like the idea of field preaching. Whitefield had started preaching in the open air with remarkable success, and it was at Whitefield’s urging that John Wesley reluctantly agreed to give it a try. He wrote in his *Journal*, “I could scarce reconcile myself at first to this strange way of preaching in the fields; having been all my life (till very lately) so tenacious of every point relating to order, that I should have thought the saving of souls almost a sin if it had not been done in church.”28 And in another entry we find these words, “What marvel the devil does not love field preaching! Neither do I; I love a commodious room, a soft cushion, a handsome pulpit. But where is my zeal, if I do not trample all these underfoot in order to save one more soul?”29

Wesley found the crowds that showed up for open air preaching far exceeded his expectations. The response was so overwhelming that he had to consider field preaching as a means of reaching the people. In his first day of preaching out in the open (April 2, 1739) in the brickfield near Bristol, he estimated the crowd that gathered to hear him preach to be around 3000 people. He had similar response a few days later in Kingswood.30 This was something he simply could not dismiss. Whether he liked field preaching was not the issue, it was an effective means of reaching the people.

And the crowds kept coming. In his first month, he estimated that he had preached to about 47,500 people with an average showing of about 3000.31 In the meantime, the numbers showing up to hear Whitefield preach were estimated at 15,000 to 30,000! Even

---

30 Rack. op.cit., 194.
31 Heitzenrater, op.cit., 100.
if these figures are inflated (ministerially speaking?), the point was that there were huge
crowds of people turning up to hear these evangelists preach from tombstones in
cemeteries, in the market square, under trees and in the rock quarries.\footnote{Ibid., 99.} Perhaps true to
his nature and often the reality check to John’s zeal, Charles remained skeptical,
especially with regard to the numbers that John was reporting. But on June 24, he
decided to try it for himself and found that an estimated 10,000 people gathered to hear
him preach!\footnote{Ibid.}

Not only was the field preaching successful in drawing large crowds, people were being
moved by hearing the Word preached. Apparently, especially early on, the first contact
that many of the Methodist converts had with the movement was hearing Whitefield and
the Wesley’s preaching in the open. Many were deeply affected by the preaching they
heard which frequently led them to attend other preaching services to hear these
evangelists preach. Here again, they report being deeply moved, convicted of their sins,
and confronted with the Truth of the gospel in ways that they had not heard or known
previously. But all of this does not fully capture the impact of the evangelists’ preaching
on their listeners, not only John and Charles Wesley, but perhaps even more the
preaching of George Whitefield. Listen to some of the testimonies of those who were
moved by the preaching of these evangelists:

I went to hear Mr. John Westly his words was sharper to me then a two edged
sword and I cannot but always honour him as an instrument in God’s hands of
shewing me the true way of salvation by Jesus Christ.

Sarah Middleton

your sermon on the threefold state which I often heard with tears showed me I
was one of those that was seeking god but as yet had not found him…

Martha Jones

Then the Lord was pleased to let me hear Mr. John Wesley one night at Fetter
Lane -- the Lord spoke peace to my soul. He let me know my sins were blotted
out by his Blood.

Nathaniel Hurst

how I did rejoice when Mr. Whitefield came about to preach and how was that
spark blown up that was just a dying away

Samuel Hewit

Their I heard Mr. John Wesley such a minister I never heard before.

T. Cowper

Then on a time when the Lord saw fit to let me see myself was by Mr. John at
Wapping. He was explaining the sin of the holy Ghost there I was struck though
Satan had not power to make me believe -- I had committed that sin – the Fryday
following I heard you, sir, and there – I plainly saw my Saviour bleeding on the
cross and the soldiers piecing his precious side… then I heard Mr. Whitefield att Besdey on the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and there I saw I was really half a beast and half a devil.

Awakened by the Reverend Mr. Whitefield:
Convicted by the Reverend Mr. Jn Wesley:
Converted by the Reverend Mr. Charles:

Margerit Austen

The street preachers obviously had their share of critics. Wesley replied to one such naysayer: “It were better for me to die than not to preach the gospel of Christ; yea and in the fields, either where I may not preach in the church or where the church will not contain the congregation.”

Wesley also encouraged his preachers to preach in the open air. He wrote to one of his preachers who needed some encouragement, “Preach abroad… It is the cooping yourselves up in rooms that has damped the work of God, which never was and never will be carried out to any purpose without going out into the highways and hedges and compelling poor sinners to come in.”

So Wesley was an evangelist on a mission to preach the gospel to the common people. Field preaching was not what he preferred, but it was what worked when it came to fulfilling his call.

Societies, Class Meetings and Bands

Wesley’s approach to evangelism was not limited to calling people to justifying faith alone, but rather, as Albert Outler points out, his understanding of evangelism always included calling people to holiness of heart and life. Wesley was not preaching justification alone, but his call was to Christian perfection. Outler writes:

Another aspect of Wesley’s newfound success was his firm conviction that conversion is never more than the bare threshold of authentic and comprehensive evangelism. Most of his hearers were already church members of one sort or another. What they needed was new depth and dimension in their nominal Christian professions… always, ‘preaching Christ’ was aimed beyond confession and conversion toward the fullness of faith and the endless maturing of life in grace… the evangelist accepted a continued responsibility for his converts’ growth in grace; thus, sanctification became the goal and end of all valid evangelistic endeavor…

From this perspective, Wesley’ approach to evangelism began in field preaching but also included enfolding earnest seekers into small accountability groups. Heitzenrater notes

---

34 Wesley, Letters Telford, ed., 2:77f.,(25 June, 1746).
37 Ibid.
that even with the incredible success of field preaching, it was in Methodism’s small
groups where people were most likely to experience initial conversion and the assurance
of forgiveness from sin.\(^{38}\)

For Wesley, Christian holiness was necessarily social in nature, that is, it was essentially
relational with regard to perfect love for God and neighbor. As such, it was necessary for
the pursuit of holiness not to be a private matter, but rather it was lived out in Christian
community. The cornerstone of this community in which people pursued and experienced
Christian holiness was the small group. Small groups created the structure and
accountability for believers to pursue holiness of heart and life.

The structure of the small groups is well known. Just to quickly review, the total
membership in a given location was the society. Within the society there were class
meetings and bands. In addition, for some periods and in some places there were also
penitent groups and select societies. All members of the society also belonged to a
weekly class meeting which was organized by geography and cut across age, gender and
marital status. Newcomers typically were invited to class meetings before they were
admitted to the society. For those who were wanting a deeper level of accountability they
could also belong to a band that also met weekly. The bands were organized with respect
given to gender, age and social class. Penitent groups were formed for those who had
been active in the past but who had fallen away and were wanting to return to the fold.
Select societies consisted of leaders who not only held one another accountable but also
served as a sounding board to the pastor (or specifically to the Wesleys). Bands might be
considered to be something of an inner circle of the society, and the select society an
inner circle of the bands.\(^{39}\)

The accountability expected in the groups was quite rigorous. Regular accountability of
members in class meetings regarding the serious pursuit of the holy life determined
whether or not individuals remained in good standing. Those in good standing received
tickets which were required for entrance into the meetings of the society. Probing
questions were asked every week in the class meetings regarding their Christian walk and
their pursuit of holiness. (See Appendix A). The accountability in the bands were even
more demanding. Before believers joined a band they were asked searching questions
about their desire to be fully transparent with others in the group in order to be
accountable for their spiritual growth in Christian love. (See Appendix A). Once
admitted, members of the bands met for an hour together once a week in which these five
questions were asked of every member:

1. What known sins have you committed since our last meeting?
2. What temptations have you met with?
3. How was you delivered?
4. What have you thoughts, said, or done, or which you doubt whether it be sin
   or not?

\(^{38}\) Heitzenrater, op.cit., 99.
\(^{39}\) Davies, op. cit., 13.
5. Have you nothing you desire to keep secret?⁴⁰

Underlying all this was Wesley’s understanding that we are called not only to be saved from our sins, but we are called to love God with our whole beings and our neighbors as ourselves. While it is the work of the Spirit accomplishes this, the Spirit of God works in us through means of grace. Members of class bands and class meetings held each other accountable for works of piety (attending worship, partaking of the sacrament, prayer, Bible study, etc.) and works of mercy (caring for the poor, visiting the sick) which were understood to be means of grace in the lives of earnest seekers and believers. The small accountability groups were also means of grace for those who were sincere enough in their Christian commitment to want to be held accountable for the way they lived. David Lowes Watson writes:

Perhaps the most significant word throughout these guidelines is that Wesley described all of the disciplines as works: works of mercy and works of piety. The implication is profound. By doing these things, we open ourselves to grace. This is not to say that we can earn God’s grace. That would be a contradiction in terms. But it is to say that we can so order our lives that we are more receptive to grace, more open to grace; that there are means, or channels, through which we can receive grace more abundantly.⁴¹

While the complex structure of the accountability groups was not sustained over time, the part they played in providing structures for evangelism, assimilation, discipleship, and leadership development is incalculable. While Whitefield is generally considered to have been the stronger preacher, the small group structures of the Wesleys conserved, sustained and nurtured the work of the revival in ways that proved to be far more beneficial in the long run.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to offer three reflections, first, a brief summary of John Wesley’s evangelistic mission, second, some closing thoughts on the letters of testimony, and finally, some thoughts toward a Wesleyan theology of mission.

John Wesley was an evangelist. He was a man with a mission. Ultimately, matters of mission had priority over propriety. Even though he was a loyal Anglican, he was less concerned about winning the favor of established authorities than he was about winning the lost. His passion for evangelism especially applied to the common people. Even though most were in some sense churched, many were not being challenged by the Church with a vital Christian faith. Wesley’s intent was to create an ecclesiolae within the ecclesia, a movement of vital primitive Christianity within the established Church that would not only serve to reach the lost, but also to revive the Church.

---

⁴⁰ Wesley, *Works* [BE], 9:78.
Wesley’s movement to the common people, to those in need, was kenotic and incarnational. That is, it was a movement from places of power and privilege to the margins. It was a movement that resembled the movement of Jesus and the Kingdom of God. Wesley’s pragmatism in combination with this incarnational/kenotic movement resulted in the development of creative and unorthodox programmatic methods of evangelism such as field preaching and small accountability groups for seekers and converts. While the methods he used were decidedly pragmatic, they were always at the service of the mission of the Methodist movement which was grounded theologically in his doctrine of Christian Perfection. For Wesley, the mission of evangelism was not limited to calling people to forgiveness, but extended to calling them on to Christian perfection. Field preaching, class meetings and bands all worked together as part of Wesley’s overall strategy of evangelism.

The letters of testimony available to us for this study, though limited in time and place, illustrate to some degree the dramatic experiential impact of the Methodist revival in the lives of ordinary people. It is apparent from reading the letters that the converts were taken mostly from the ranks of the less educated and less influential. It is also apparent, that these early Methodist converts had come to understand themselves to be sinners in need of God’s grace in a way that they had not understood in their participation in the established Church. Frequently they made reference to previously believing that they were morally respectable good Christians, but particularly under the preaching of the evangelists, they had come to realize that their sinful state.

This new understanding of their sinful state was accompanied by a deep and overriding sense of conviction that left them miserable and afraid, sometimes for years. Images of death and hell were very real. All this combined to strongly motivate them to seek God. The preaching and counsel of the evangelists promised the hope and assurance of salvation. Their deep sense of conviction and contrition was matched, in due time, with an equally powerful sense of forgiveness and freedom from sin when they received, often unexpectedly, the grace of God for salvation. The reports of their experiences were typically quite dramatic and often accompanied by unusual manifestations of trembling, fainting as well as reports of physical lightness and healing. The language they used of their involvement was not limited to their initial conversion experiences, but typically extended to the pursuit of Christian perfection and holy living. The gratitude in their letters was not limited to God, but readily extended to the evangelists. The nature of their reports illustrates, at least in this limited perspective, that the influence of the Methodist revival was nothing short of life changing for them. They had been desperately lost in their sins and now they had come to know the power of the love and grace of God which not only gave them assurance of salvation, but motivated them to pursue a life of perfect love.

Finally, a few thoughts toward a Wesleyan theology of mission specifically with regard to evangelism. I would like to suggest that the incarnational/kenotic nature of Wesley’s mission combined with Wesley’s understanding of holiness might be especially helpful in constructing a Wesleyan theology of evangelism. Wesley’s theology is grounded in the holiness of God and manifested, by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, in
the people of God. The holy character of God becomes descriptive of the character of the people of God restored in God’s image. God’s character of holy love becomes the source of love for the people of God in mission. The incarnational movement of God in Christ Jesus into the world, then, is the basis for the incarnational engagement of the church in evangelism as well as ministries of mercy and justice. Stanley Rankin weaves this together with these words:

As love for God grows, so does love for neighbor, because God’s own Spirit instills this love in the believer. Since neighbor love is a reflection of God’s image in the believer, and since full restoration of the image of God is the goal of Christian perfection, love necessarily motivates one toward service, because it reflects God’s own relational nature as well as God’s determination to reclaim what has been lost… the closer one draws to Christ and the more one loves God, the closer one is drawn to the neighbor and the more one feels the compassion of Christ for the lost and lonely, the estranged and afflicted.42

John Wesley was an evangelist. For those of us in the Wesleyan holiness tradition, this is a central dimension of our heritage as well as our reason for being. Ultimately, of course, our commitment to evangelism is not based on our own sense of urgency, or our commitment to historical traditions. Rather, out of the heart of God has come a mission of redemption in the world. As people restored in the image of God, the priorities and passions of God become our own. We are compelled to preach the gospel in the world because we are God’s people and we share His redemptive incarnational mission.

To save what was lost, from heaven he came;  
Come, sinners, and trust in Jesus’s name;  
He offers you pardon, he bids you be free:  
If sin be your burden, O come unto me!43

---

43 Wesley, Works [BE], 7:85-86. A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists, 5.
Bibliography


Outler, Albert C. Evangelism and Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit. (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1996.)


Unpublished Sources:

Margerit Austin
Sarah Barber
T. Cowper
Katharine Gilbert
Samuel Hewit
Elisabeth Hinson
Nathaniel Hurst
Martha Jones
Sarah Middleton
Joanna Mussell
Maria Price
Mary Ramsay
Appendix A


Requirements for entrance into a class-meeting

“There is only one condition previously required in those who desire admission into these societies, ‘a desire to flee from the wrath to come, to be saved from their sins.’ But wherever this is really fixed in the soul it will be shown by its fruits. It is therefore expected of all who continue therein that they should continue to evidence their desire of salvation,

*First, By doing no harm, by avoiding evil in every kind* [examples: taking the name of God in vain, profaning the day of the Lord by doing ordinary work or buying and selling, drunkenness, buying or selling liquor or drinking them unless in cases of extreme necessity, fighting, going to law with a brother, giving or taking things on usury, uncharitable conversation, especially speaking evil of ministers or those in authority, the putting on of gold or costly apparel (including enormous bonnets), taking such diversions as cannot be used in the name of the Lord, singing songs or reading books which do not tend to the knowledge or love of God, self indulgence, laying up treasures on earth, etc.]

*Secondly, By doing good, by being in every kind merciful after their power, as they have opportunity doing of every possible sort and as far as is possible to all men;*

To their bodies, of the ability which God giveth, by giving food to the hungry, by clothing the naked, by visiting or helping them that are sick, or in prison.

To their souls, by instructing, reproving, or exhorting all they have any intercourse with; trampling under foot that enthusiastic doctrine of devils, that ‘we are not to do good unless our heart be free to do it.’ [examples: doing good especially to the household of faith, employing them preferably to others, buying one of another helping each other in business, diligence and frugality,

*Thirdly, By attending upon all the ordinances of God.* [Examples: public worship, ministry of the Word, The Supper of the Lord; Family and private prayer, searching the Scriptures, and fasting or abstinence.” (70-73)

**Rules of the Band Societies: Drawn up Dec. 25, 1738**

Questions proposed to every one before he is admitted amongst us may be to this effect:

1) Have you the forgiveness of your sins?
2) Have you peace with God, through our Lord Jesus Christ?
3) Have you the witness of God’s Spirit with your spirit that you are a child of God?
4) Is the love of God shed abroad in your heart?
5) Has no sin, inward or outward, dominion over you?
6) Do you desire to be told or your faults?
7) Do you desire to be told of all your faults, and that plain and home?
8) Do you desire that every one of us should tell you from time to time whatsoever is in his heart concerning you?
9) Consider! Do you desire we should tell you whatsoever we think, whatsoever we fear, whatsoever we hear, concerning you?
10) Do you desire that in doing this we should come as close as possible, that we should cut to the quick, and search your heart to the bottom?
11) Is it your desire and design to be on this and all other occasions entirely open, so as to speak everything that is in your heart, without deception, without disguise, and without reserve?
Appendix B

Partial transcripts of unpublished letters.

Maria Price

May 18, 1740

My dear father in God I now declare unto you with a joyful heart as well as I can remember how the Lord worked in my soul by you my own father. I came to you about the beginning of last March was a year by the desire of a friend as dead as myself.

I had been a partaker of the bread and wine for some months but not of the body and blood of my loving Saviour.

Dear Sir, my heart longs for words to tell how good my dear Saviour is to save such a dark dead stony hearted damned unbelieving Pharisee as I. I did often repent for one sin and did not know I had any more. But I had no sooner repented of it but I committed it again and was two-fold more a child of hell than before. Thus was I mourning and sinning and wondering that I could not overcome it myself. That one sin was passion.

Your discourse and your prayer gave me so much comfort that when I came home I said to the same person? “This is the day of salvation”. You bid me read the 7th to the Romans. You said that was my state and I did read it and found much comfort insomuch that I began at the first Chapter in order to read them through to see what was in them. But as I was a reading, I think it was the sixth Chapter, I was forced to lift my eyes off the book and look about me like a person that was born blind and that moment received light (sight?).

.... soon after you expounded at Fetterlane and then I was at that time and ever since filled with joy and peace in believing I received the forgiveness of sins and the witness of the Spirit and a dominion over sin at that very time.

I trembled so with joy and cried that I did not know how to bear myself. You asked me if I foround that peace that passed understanding. -- I said, “Yes, indeed I have.”

Dear Sir, I am your own daughter in God.

Maria Price

Nathaniel Hurst 1741

When first the lord sent Mr. Whitefield out into the fields I went to hear him in Moorfields. I liked what he said very well I said I would go again accordingly I went on the next Sunday and ever since I have followed the Lord in his appointed ways. I had a form of godliness for some time but knew but little of the power.

(St. Lawrence church -- power over outward sin)

Then the Lord was pleased to let me hear Mr. John Wesley one night at Fetter Lane -- the Lord spoke peace to my soul. He let me know my sins were blotted out by his Blood. This was in the Christmas week -- this Christmas two years.

My master one night forced me to stay at home which caused us to have words. Then anger broke out of me. (The enemy: “How can you call yourself a Christian?”)
"a hell within me"

sometimes as I was standing I used to think that the ground whereon I stood was hot under me which made me almost to tremble and to think if the ground should open and swallow me up I should perish forever.

The light of God shown on me once more and my soul was filled with love. Then I could lift up my heart again to the Lord and one day as I was at my work my soul was overpowered with the love of God that I knew not whether I was in the Body or out of the Body.

Mary Ramsay, June 4, 1740

The first time I heard Mr. Whitefield was the 2nd of June last. His text was out of the gospel of St. John, the 17th Chapter the 3rd Verse.

I liked the discourse exceeding well but applied it to myself so well that I scold at a young gentleman that was a scoffer. He called somebody that was by him Whitefield's disciple and laughed and scoffed and I told him he was the devil's disciple.

I went on as usual to church every Sunday to the sacrament every month preparing myself the whole week before. -- So I came with a whole week's righteousness, or rather a whole week's Pharisaical hypocrisy.

(Again to hear Whitefield July 21 -- Sat pm -- at Kinsington. Subject was Gen 3:15. -- "Showed us our sinful nature". Went the next day. John 7:37-39)

…That time I heard little of his sermon being full of the devil but knew it not for there was a fine gentleman and his spouse in the place where I stood that mocked every word he said and much interrupted those that stood by them.

I scolded them and called them infidels. I would go home in a great hurry with a great deal of the sermon in my heart so that I could repeat half or sometimes three quarters of the discourse.

When Mr. Whitefield told us we was by nature half beast and half devil there was something in that heart of mine that showed it was very true.

John W. came to town Sept. 4 at Dowgate (?) Hill (text -- John 16:16)

Trial was coming on for before that as soon as my neighbors and acquaintances knew that I went to hear the field preachers they began to persecute and took their chilfren from me and put them to other schools.

(Under great conviction -- could not sing -- even at home)

I continued to go to the Foundery Sundays and Thursdays and to the Society in Brick Lane and there was great division in the Society that grieved my very much and I knew not what to do. I was very loathe to leave them and staying with them there was disputes and animosities. I came away from them and at last the Lord sent you, Reverend Sir. I can admire ye wisdom of God in seeing how he sends out the Labourer - - one after another. That what one has planted the other waters and the Almighty gives the increase.

And so I went on mourning that I could not mourn more and about a fortnight after you were come I fell into such mourning that my heart was ready to break. I came on Monday morning to speak with you but when I came I could not speak.

The Thursday following being Ascension day I had so much joy when you was preaching that I thought my soul seemed as if it was ascending into heaven. Indeed the joy began in the morning while Mr. Harris was preaching -- and it so increased in the evening while you was preaching that Methought I saw my Saviour in glory -- My soul seemed as though it was out of my body. (Mentions meetings at Sister Robinson's)
Margerit Austin (May 19, 1740)

Initial thoughts
- confessionally written
  - I was very proud, married young, cruel, abusive husband
- heard Whitefield preach
  - on Zacchaeus and the rich man who laid up treasures for himself
  - “there I found that I was that person though as to worldly treasure I had none, but I had a great deal in desire”
  - “though I went to church as often as I could, I never was struck in such a manner as then.”
  - Heard Whitefield preach again on Saul’s persecuting the saints

And there again I was much affected with the word, finding myself to be the very person: and so continued to follow him wherever I could and indeed the Lord by his ministry did awaken me. And I saw myself to be a lost undone sinner: Then on a time when the Lord saw fit to let me see myself was by Mr. John at Wapping. He was explaining the sin of the holy Ghost there I was struck though Satan had not power to make me believe -- I had committed that sin – the Fryday following I heard you, sir, and there – I plainly saw my Saviour bleeding on the cross and the soldiers piecing his precious side… then I heard Mr. Whitefield at Besdey on the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and there I saw I was really half a beast and half a devil.

Awakened by the Reverend Mr. Whitefield:
Convicted by the Reverend Mr. Jn Wesley:
Converted by the Reverend Mr. Charles:
For the truth of whole doctrine in the strength of the Lord I am ready to lay down my life.

Elisabeth Hinson (May 25, 1740)

I was a Pharisee but god was plest to convince me by hearing Mr. Witfeals sermon that I may know him and the power of his resurrection but know further it plese god to send your dear brother to come I am bound in duty to pray for so long as I live it pleaded god that I went to Mr. pearkens and he was upon the 13 chap of Corinthians and hear I knew myself a damd sinner. I came home and I thought I was then sinking into hell… your brother expounded the 12 chapter of sant John and the lord work mytilly in me and I felt a strong conviction and wold have hid it but my lord him loves sinner still carried on his work and brought all my sins to my remembrance and there I trembled and should have fell down but the popel heald me up and I was out of my senses but the lord awakened me with peace be unto you your sins are forgiving you I went home full of joye note knowing ware to --- my joys left me Satan came in and told me I had lost Christ and I mite as well hang myself. But god him is rich in mercy tords all delivered me from the evil of this temptation. I was in darkness and know not god It pleased god to send your dear brother I whent to hear him his text was --- not that I said unto the --- you must be born again he polde down what I had bilt up he said a person will go on forty years for a graddual sanctification

T. Cowper, 1741

By the providence of the Almighty, my friend heard of a religious society in Aldersgate Street, I think in the month of August, 1738. We went there and one night the Lord brought you and Mr. James Hutton. You began to preach on justification by faith alone and told them they must feel their sins forgiven them in this life or they never would in the life to come. I remember they YOUSED you ill and some were for putting you out of the room. But at last they suffered you to read a homily upon faith. I thought It comfortable doctrine but strange doctrine to me for I heard such before. The Lord did not suffer me to speak against it but he let me to see they were not right by their behavior toward you.

Then I heard of the SA--OR Society. Their I heard Mr. John Wesley such a minister I never heard before.
This was the first of October, 1738 in the beginning of the 28 years of my age.

Hearing John Wesley preach to a Society in Bair Yard near Claremarket, I felt my heart open within me and like a fountain of water run from it and in that moment I felt such love, peace and joy passed all expression. We sang a hymn. I thought I was out of the body with the angels in heaven for I was so full of joy I could not express my belief.

Sometimes I begin to think I have a new heart but the Lord is pleased to show me to the contrary that I have not yet but I have a hope in me that he will perfect his work in my soul before he takes me hence and gives me a clean heart.

Martha Jones (June 1, 1740)

I should have been very glad if I had been excused from this task and was in hopes you would forget to ask me for it again. I knew it was my duty to obey you as my spiritual pastor. But in this I thought I could not indeed it was a secret pride in my heart which made me so unwilling… instead of the church the playhouse was my greatest delight…

I felt I was a damned sinner. I strove all I could to stifle these convictions but neither company nor my beloved amusements seeing and reading plays would not do. The fire of god’s wrath was kindled in my soul and I could not put it out…

I went on in this dead way upward of two years at last I heard of mr. Whitfeild a little before he went to Georgia. I heard him preach four times but the account I had of his life had much more effect upon me then his sermons. The piety of the young preacher made a deep impression and I had a glimpse how far I was from being a Christian.

your sermon on the threefold state which I often heard with tears showed me I was one of those that was seeking god but as yet had not found him…

[then speaking to John Wesley after the meeting]

they said I must stay for Mr. Wesley (Jn) was coming to me when I heard this I was

Katharine Gilbert (1740)

Rev. Sir,
With humility I make bold to write these lines unto you, it being my grief of heart which is --- cause, upon ye account of your leaving us in this place of great work which ye Lord Jesus has done for me and in me thro: ye operations of ye Holy Spirit under your ministry I am constrained thro: love to acknowledge what ye Lord hath done for my soul, for I am pluckt as a firebrand out of ye fire. God as convinced me of sin, of righteousness and of judgment before ye Lord sent you and your worthy brother amongst us, I thought my self something but I can now see what I am by nature and deserved nothing but damnation. I knew nothing of faith alone in Christ nor of Operations of ye Holy Ghost nor what it was to be born of God and to become as a little child a new creature in Christ Jesus. I was ignorantly led and taught. My soul longeth to become more and more in purity of heart and to receive greater measure of ye love of God shed abroad in my heart. I humbly desire your prayers at ye throne of grace that God in Christ would perfect and compleat my salvation. I am not left without reproaches or threatenings by ye children of he world for ye words sake but I hope I am thro Christ overcoming this world I am not moved at their doings toward me as at ye contempt cast upon Gods word and children. May ye lord our God even Christ Jesus fill you more and more with his Spirit and crown your ministry wherever you go with thousands of souls in ye conversion of my guilty brethren. So continually prayeth your handmaid in ye Lord

Katharine Gilbert
Samuel Hewit (Nov. 1741)

[descriptions of conviction, and then an apparition in a dream]

I was all of a sudden struck to all appearance with sudden death, O who can tell, but them that has felt the same the horror and confusion that I was in, death I thought lit hovering upon my cold lips and hell open and ready to receive me. The terror of the Lord was in array against me and in the agony I lay for some time… I said the Lord’s prayer, I prayed earnestly for Christ’s sake that I might not die… I never would offend him in thought word deed any more All this I promised in my own strength so ignorant was I of the ways of God…

With sorrow do I speak it I being of the Church of England I was att a grate loss to find a spiritual friend that could give me any spiritual comfort what minister I liked in the Church I found their lives was contrary to their doctrine that Satan would have often tempted me to believe that all religion was witchcraft often times he tempted me to deny the being of a god and at other times he would tell me if there was a god he need not concern his self with me

After two years deep convictions God rebuked the stormy wind and tempest and their was a great calm – I tasted that peace of God which Paseth all understanding of the natural man

[then comes a lengthy description of falling into a lukewarm state]

Satan told me I could not fall away -- though I know nothing of predestination doctrine the next thing I began to grow spiritually proud I despised others that had never gone through what I had – I know by experience that spiritual pride is the foundation of predestination Many things is done away since I sit under your doctrine

But God who began a good work would carry it on and how I did rejoice when Mr. Whitefield came about to preach and how was that spark blown up that was just a dying away but after all this I never saw the hundredth part of my own wicked deceitful heart till you and your dear brother…..

Sarah Barber (May 1740)

Reverend Sir:

Att your request: I here as far as the Lord gives me knowledge to see and to know my conversion which before I heard the Rev. Mr. Whitefield I was a publican living in the world as if there was no god but that I did not know it because I was not a notorious open offender. I therefore thought myself a very good person but the Lord was pleased to call me first by the ministry of Mr. Whitefield and by the ministry of Mr. John on a time when the Lord saw fit his subject was on the woman that stood behind our blessed Saviour when he was att meat at the Pharisee’s house that she poured the box of ointment on him and att that time I went to sister Robinsons to get into the bands but could not be admitted then and told her my case but she told me I had no faith which indeed was true. --- afterward I was admitted upon tryall and then I was most of the time in great doubts – then I hoped and found comfort and indeed the band was of great service to me for I never went away without some comforts. Then when the lord sent you to town I thought the Lord had something in store for me. --- but att night when we met again in your prayers the Lord was pleased to give me the second gift of faith to believe that Jesus was my Lord there was several sisters had received the same gift

I beg leave – to subscribe myself your young babe in Christ

Sarah Barber
Sarah Middleton (May 1740)

Reverend Sir,
I write these lines to let you know what a Pharisee I was. I went to church and sacrament constantly and I thought I did very well for I was a strict Pharisee. I would not be in any one's company that said an ill word nor would I go a pleasing as others did for fear of sin if I die at any time and mis my church. I thought some judgment would follow me so if any one had asked what hope I had of my salvation I would presently have said I never did any harm for I always did to others as I would they should do unto me and I thought I was very sincere so I did not fear but God would accept me that is the most account I could give of my self then but thanks be to God for his unspeakable mercy in bringing me by his free grace out of darkness I which I sat. Thought myself a Christian but I found my self mistaken when it pleased God to reveal his dear son in me and to show me the way of salvation as for the articles of our church the doctrine of the God of regeneration and of justification by faith I was a stranger to them all nor do I remember to have heard any of them preachd or ixplaind by our clergy indeed I went to church and said my prayers and had a form of profession but --- nothing of the power I had no oyl in my lamp no inward principal of holiness in my heart what was I but a whited sepulchre the harlots and publicains would have entered into the kingdom of heaven before me how shall I sufficiently praise the Lord for first drawing me to hear Mr. Whitefeld but Satan would fain a kept me from hearing him but the Lord drawd me with the cords of his love so that I could not keep from hearing him where ever he went but when I have heard him say that every person born into this world deserves Gods damnation and tho' we went to church and did all the outward things we were but baptized heathens them words used to sink deep into my heart I had a great deal of sorrow under his preaching but when it pleased God to call him away I went to hear Mr. John Westly his words was sharper to me then a two edged sword and I cannot but always honour him as an instrument in God's hands of shewing me the true way of salvation by Jesus Christ. Sept. 10th 1739 I heard Mr. Westly take the 16 chapter of Acts verse 30 the words as follows what must I do to be saved then he explained the ten commandments which wounded me so much that I was hardly able to stand under him for I thought I had kept them as touching the law blameless from my youth up. But hearing them explained I felt I had broke all of them so that I could take no rest night nor day by reason of that load of sin which I felt within me for I felt a hell within me so that I often cryed out in the agony of my soul what must I do save for my souls was like the troubled sea so that it weight my body down so that my mother and others thought I should hardly overcomit that would had me taken many things but I know it was for sin so that I refused all outward comfort it used to press much upon me that the power of the lord was present to heal me so that I had hope against hope for I could plead with my dear saviour O Lord thou hast said come unto me all that are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest. I felt my self so vile that I thought hell was ready to swallow me up but I found Christ's everlasting arms was under me the 14 of Sepr. When I was in the greatest agony of soul I heard a voice say unto me daughter be of good cheer thy sins be forgiven thee at the same time I felt so much love in my heart that I could hardly contain my self for I wanted the whole world to feel what I did I was at the same time retorid to my bodily health as well as ever I was in my life but I was much tempted to keep it to my self and not to tell Mr. Westly what the Lord had done for me but that saying of our lords pressed much upon me t that I had hope against hope for I could plead with my dear saviour O Lord thou hast said come unto me all that are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest. I felt my self so vile that I thought hell was ready to swallow me up but I found Christ's everlasting arms was under me the 14 of Sepr. When I was in the greatest agony of soul I heard a voice say unto me daughter be of good cheer thy sins be forgiven thee at the same time I felt so much love in my heart that I could hardly contain my self for I wanted the whole world to feel what I did I was at the same time retorid to my bodily health as well as ever I was in my life but I was much tempted to keep it to my self and not to tell Mr. Westly what the Lord had done for me but that saying of our lords pressed much upon me that there were ten cians but where are the nine there is none that is returned to give thanks save this stranger. So that gave me courage to go to him and let him know how gratius the lord had bien to me for I was catchd as a fire brand out of the fire I was full of pride and passion and every thing that was evil but did not no for I never remember our teachers to speak against it for I was alive without the Law once but when it came in a spiritual meaning sin revived and I dyd but thanks be to God for his free grace for shewing mercy to the chief of sinners for it is not of him that willleth nor him that runneth but God that sheweth mercy Blest be the name that set me free the name that sure salvation brings the sun of righteousness as rose one me with healing in his wings blessed be God now I can say whom have I in heaven but thee and there is none upon earth that I desire besides thee thee I can love and thee alone with holy peace and inward bliss to find thou takest me for thy own O what a happiness is this glory be to the Lord I feel a continual peace and love springing up in my heart day by day I know I do not commit sin for my soul is always hungary and thirsting after righteousness and I know I shall be feled I used to rest in going to church and sacrament but now I do not rest upon them but upon Christ Jesus my lord and my God but I find it a glorious liberty to use the means of grace and not abuse them glory be to thee O Christ. I find I gather strength daily for I usd to be afraid 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 and a proberb or reproach when I was of the world the world loved its own but now Christ has choose me out of the world therefore the world hates me but this I rejoice in for it only sets a mark upon me to show what master I belong to

I am

Dear sir
Your affectionat but unworthy sister in Christ

Sarah Middleton