

Topic 7: The Fruition of the Revival in England, c.1770-91

i. Wesleyan Methodism, c. 1770-90

By 1770 a 67 year old John Wesley was as active as ever while the Methodist movement, like the Revival itself, was in its fourth decade. The two main events which would characterize Methodist life in the 1770s and '80s would be a doctrinal re-entrenchment following a recrudescence of the Calvinistic controversy, and the move to ordain Methodist preachers to administer the sacraments.

a. The second predestination controversy, 1770-8

Wesley's ingrained antipathy towards predestination (which he had inherited from his High Church parents), surfaced markedly following the publication of the Conference Minutes of 1770. Three years earlier he had mused that practical holiness and a striving after salvation were the marks of experiential Christianity overriding doctrinal exactitude or even a conscious belief in justification by faith alone (see Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism*, p.391). In a refutation of Calvinism which, for Wesley, always implied antinomianism, the Minutes seemingly threw caution to the wind and pleaded for what even some Methodists seemed to imply justification by works (in the vein of the Epistle to James). Justification required *obedience* to Christ and not merely faith as a passive quality of the soul. All who would strive to please God in sincerity and the fear of the Lord, Wesley implied, would be acceptable to him:

As to merit itself, of which we have been so dreadfully afraid: we are rewarded 'according to our works' yes, 'because of our works'. How does this differ from 'for the sake of our works'? And how differs this from *secunda merita operum*? As our works deserve? Can you split this hair? I doubt I cannot (Gordon Rupp, *Religion in England, 1688-1791*, p. 465).

Simmering in the background was the publication by the Anglican clergyman Augustus Toplady (1740-78) of a tract by the seventeenth century Heidelberg Calvinist Jerome Zanchius translated as *The Doctrine of Absolute Predestination Stated and Asserted* (1769). Wesley's curt response was: 'One in twenty of mankind are elected; nineteen in twenty are reprobated. The elect shall be saved, do what they will; the reprobate shall be damned, do what they can ... witness my hand, A[ugustus] T[oplady]' (Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, p.457). Enraged at this *reductio ad absurdum*, a doctrinal altercation ensued with Toplady taking the Calvinistic side and Wesley's assistant, John Fletcher of Madely, taking the Arminian side (with a good deal

more grace and subtlety than Wesley would ever deem to muster) until Toplady's untimely death in 1778. For Wesley, who was never an exact theologian, faith, obedience and works were intricately bound together, and to unpick them, giving preference to faith alone, would always open the way to rank antinomianism. Grace, sanctification and justification were of a piece: the teaching of the Oxford Holy Club of four decades previously would never be eradicated in John Wesley's mature doctrinal scheme.

The effect of the doctrinal controversy of the 1770s was to divide terminally the Calvinist and Arminian wings of the Evangelical Revival in England. When George Whitfield was alive, and while Howell Harris (who was to die in 1773) retained even a residual influence over the Wesley brothers, the unity of the movement, however tenuous, was preserved. The Calvinism of both Whitefield and Harris was understated rather than dogmatic, and it never included the concept of double predestination, that God had actively preordained the perdition of the lost. No-one has better summarized its irenic nature than the Methodist historian Gordon Rupp:

If in the eighteenth century the problems of predestination and reprobation were once again the themes of acrimonious debate it cannot be said too often that the Calvinists were in the main concerned not about these things, but about the free and sovereign grace of God. There was among the evangelicals a spectrum of opinion, from the moderate Calvinism of the majority, to the stricter doctrines of Romaine and Madan and the more extreme views of [Richard] Hill and Toplady. But as the movement drew away from the Methodists, Calvinism ceased to be differential. Rather it was the stress on the depravity of man by sin, and his redemption by the grace of Christ. This was combined with acceptance of the Bible as the Word of God, and ... the inseparable connection between the person and work of Christ, the sufficiency of his atonement, and the imputation of his merits to believers. And this was not a strained rationalist scheme, but religion known and experienced in faith, in conversion, and the continuing experience of forgiveness and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit (*Religion in England, 1688-1791*, p. 483).

Wesley's bullshness and his tone-deafness towards the subtleties of a longstanding debate which had been pursued in depth by some of the greatest minds in Christendom, put paid to co-operation forever. It was not just his impatience with Toplady which was mischievous, but sharing his opinions with his preachers in Conference, 'when most of them could not even translate *secunda merita operum*'. This is not a carping comment, as Rupp says, 'for we have always to ask what was preached, not by the Wesleys or John Fletcher or by the core of their preachers who were highly intelligent and theologically sensitive, but by the larger number who were not so well equipped' (*Religion in England, 1688-1791*, p. 466).

Just as Wesley rejected forbearance in the cause of doctrinal zeal, the Countess of Huntingdon exchanged her commitment to unity for Calvinistic dogmatism; in fact, by paying heed to Toplady and his associates, she ‘had fallen under the sway of England’s most vociferous exponents of full-blooded predestinarianism’ (Jones, Schlenther and White, *The Elect Methodists: Calvinistic Methodism in England and Wales, 1735-1811*, p.157). Appalled by the publication of the Conference Minutes in 1770, she dragooned her cousin, the Anglican cleric Walter Shirley, to take the offensive against Wesley whom she now regarded as ‘a papist unmasked, a heretic [and] an apostate’, and made loyalty to Calvinism a requirement for all who would retain their place at the Trevecca College. This made the position of Joseph Benson, the tutor, and John Fletcher, the president, untenable, and thereafter virtual trench warfare ensued. If, for Wesley, Calvinism was effectively heretical, for Selina it became the test for evangelical orthodoxy. Toplady, still incensed by Wesley’s biting critique of his translation of Zanchius’ tome, now accused him of being ‘the most rancorous hater of the gospel system that ever appeared in England’ (quoted in Luke Tyerman, *The Life and Times of John Wesley*, Vol 3, p. 159), while the Countess’s preachers, who were hardly renowned for doctrinal finesse, felt free to indulge in unrestrained invective under the guise of defending gospel purity. Whereas Fletcher’s six *Checks to Antinomianism* (1770-5) represent a nuanced apologia for the Wesleyan scheme with the concept of Christian perfectionism well to the fore (just as Toplady’s massively erudite *Historic Proof of the Doctrinal Calvinism of the Church of England* (1774) became a benchmark in the Revival’s historical scholarship), on the whole the controversy was sterile; in fact ‘it left the protagonists in the same entrenched positions at which they had started’ (Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, p. 459). Wesley, for his part, was in no way cowed by the opposition’s response. In 1778 he established the belligerently entitled *Arminian Magazine* in opposition to Toplady’s *Gospel Magazine*, though the younger man’s death in the same year signalled the end of what many commentators have regarded as a regrettable episode in the history of the Revival. The fact remains, however, that even this did not quench the success of the awakening among ordinary people, whether converts or believers, irrespective of their doctrinal views of the preachers who were still zealously sharing the good news of Christ among whoever who would pay heed.

b. The move towards separation

By the 1780s the nature of the Methodist succession had become an ever more pressing problem. Year by year the movement’s basic ecclesiological ambiguity, that it was at the same time a renewal movement within the Established Church and an ever more tightly defined

religious entity in its own right, was becoming increasingly disconcerting. The Wesley brothers (John for more pragmatic reasons, Charles for more conventionally Anglican ones) were intent on maintaining clerical authority, though for all practical purposes, it was the preachers, bereft as they were of any real authority within Conference, who were spearheading Methodist advance. Emotionally charged revivalistic outbursts, reminiscent of the awakenings of the late 1730s, were occurring in many parts of the country, and whereas in 1780 Methodist membership was 43,830 concentrated mostly in Yorkshire, Staffordshire, and Cornwall and in the conurbations of Bristol, Manchester, Leeds, Liverpool, Hull, Newcastle on Tyne, Sunderland and London (it remained weak in the rural south and East Anglia), by 1790 it had increased to 71,463. The movement possessed some 400 preaching houses – Wesley was careful never to refer to them as ‘meeting houses’ as this would give the impression of Dissent – which were served by some 180 preachers, and the success of their mission was everywhere being confirmed. The movement’s ordained clergymen were few. Only the saintly John Fletcher, who frequently exasperated John Wesley by refusing to be prized away from his parochial responsibilities at Madeley in Shropshire, and Thomas Coke (1747-1814), an ordained and beneficed Oxford graduate who had thrown in his lot with the Methodists in 1776 in order to become an itinerant preacher, possessed the status to succeed the aged Wesley. Fletcher, however, refused to countenance the idea of taking over from his mentor – as it happened he would die, aged 56, in 1785, predeceasing Wesley by six years – while Charles, who was never as influential as John, was temperamentally unsuited to leading the movement. In any case, neither he nor Coke enjoyed the confidence of the preachers.

With every succeeding year, the Wesleys’ insistence that Methodism was not a Dissenting sect but a loyal adjunct to the Established Church was becoming ever more implausible. The Model Deed of 1763 had ensured that the preaching houses were the property of Conference and that Conference would be presided over by none other than John Wesley himself. By now two generations of Methodists had been grounded in the faith not in their parish churches but in bands, fellowship groups and local preaching houses, instructed by preachers who shared their own values, spirituality and cultural mores. In practical terms, the Church of England, its parish clergy and bishops, had become very remote. Neither did renewal within the parish structures resonate among the Methodist faithful, so used had they become to lay leadership and inured to the Calvinism of the evangelical clergy. There was little chance of Methodist converts forsaking their fellowship groups and going over even to the evangelical parish churches. At the same time there were conflicts between the desire of local trustees to

choose who should serve the increasingly prevalent preaching houses for which they had provided funds, and Conference which retained its own authority in placing preachers where it saw fit. In Bistall and Dewsbury especially, there were fears of independency and secession, and Wesley realised that in order to preserve connexional unity something would have to be done. Consequently, in 1784, at the age of 82 (Charles was 77), John conceded a plan of succession. Whereas he would retain ultimate authority in the short term, thereafter Conference's authority would be dispersed among a hundred of the preachers, the so called 'legal hundred', all of whom (in typical autocratic mode) would be named by Wesley himself. Despite being contentious, it was accepted by the bulk of the preachers – a few, disappointed not to be named among the 'hundred', seceded – while the 'Deed of Declaration' was registered in chancery. The fact that the Deed was devised by the Methodists and for the Methodists; that it was never approved by an ecclesiastical court (neither did it seek such a court's approval); it never envisaged either episcopal or clerical oversight while taking for granted that the movement would be led by laymen, namely the unordained preachers; and was oblivious to the structures and discipline of the Established Church, showed how hollow the claim of loyalty to the Anglican Church had, in fact, become. Yet even in 1789, John Wesley could still declare, with no apparent incongruity: 'I will not leave the Church of England as by law established, while the breath of God is in my nostrils'.

As long as he did not take upon himself the episcopal prerogatives of ordaining others, Wesley could maintain the conviction – or perhaps the fiction? – that he remained obedient to the discipline of the mother church. Yet in 1784 (a fateful year for the Methodist succession) he was faced with a dilemma in which he felt obliged to take episcopal authority upon himself. Since the revolution of 1776, the American Methodists had been bereft of the sacraments. The Anglican Church in the new republic was in disarray, and even Methodist preachers, most of whom were loyalists, had been obliged to return to Britain. The Methodist faithful implored Conference to send over clergy who could both preach the gospel and dispense the sacraments. Wesley himself appealed to the Bishop of London to ordain some of the Methodist preachers for service in America, but to no avail. Consequently John Wesley ordained three preachers chosen by Conference, who immediately crossed the Atlantic. Whereas the setting apart of the preachers Whatcoat and Vasey was less contentious, the fact that he consecrated Thomas Coke, already an ordained clergyman, as 'superintendent', was more serious: '[Was not] Coke too, on Wesley's principles ... a true *episcopos*, as truly as any Archbishop of Canterbury?' (Rupp, *Religion in England, 1688-1791*, p. 442). To compound matters, after arriving in America,

Coke changed his title 'superintendent' to 'bishop', and promptly ordained Francis Asbury, a leading American preacher, as bishop as well. Whereas Wesley could have contended that this was a special contingency only applicable to America, by 1790 further ordinations had occurred, with the preachers Thomas Rankin and Henry More being ordained to administer the sacraments in the preaching houses, while Alexander Mather was appointed 'superintendent'. Charles Wesley had been scandalized by the American ordinations, and were it not for the exigencies of old age, a rift would have occurred with his brother and with the Methodist body as a whole. As it happened, he passed away in 1788, aged 81. John's continuing protestations of Anglican loyalty were regarded by virtually all as special pleading: 'The ordinations ... could only be taken by Anglicans as the final and irrevocable seal on Wesley's schism' (Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, p. 501).

c. The essence of Wesleyan Methodism

By the time of John Wesley's death, aged 88, on 2 March 1791, he was revered not only as the instigator of a great religious communion but as a national icon. Whereas the mobs had persecuted him when he had risen to preach in the open air a half century earlier, now he was sought out by aristocrats and bishops. 'I am become, I know not how', he wrote in 1785, 'an honourable man. The scandal of the cross is ceased, and all the kingdom, rich and poor ... behave with courtesy, nay, and seeming goodwill!' (quoted in John Walsh, 'Methodism at the end of the eighteenth century', in G. Rupp and R. Davies (eds), *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain*, Vol. 1, p. 277). Always a gracious personality, if stubborn and autocratic, he had aged well. Small of stature and trim, his flowing white hair added to his apostolic aura. He had travelled incessantly throughout his ministry, and if the itinerants had been at the forefront of the movement's advance, Wesley himself had never shirked the evangelist's task. He knew his preachers intimately even in old age, and kept his links with the congregations intact, whether in Cornwall, Halifax, London or Newcastle. 'I am persuaded', wrote one of his spiritual children, 'that from the creation of the world, there never existed a body of men who looked up to any single person with a more profound degree of reverence than the preachers did to Mr Wesley' (quoted in Tyerman, *The Life and Times of John Wesley*, Vol 3, p. 298). This was not obsequiousness or sentimentalism but a true reflection of the influence he wielded over a highly able and disciplined phalanx of men. If Whitfield's connexion withered with the demise of its leader, Wesleyan Methodism, solidly structured and possessing a highly developed sense of identity, would progress from strength to strength. 'My brother Wesley acted wisely', Whitfield had said late in life. 'The souls that were awakened

under his ministry he joined in class, and thus preserved the fruit of his labour. This I neglected, and my people are a rope of sand', (quoted in Michael Watts, *The Dissenters*, p. 404). He was interred in London's City Road Chapel, his coffin borne by six poor men – Charles, characteristically, had been buried in the Anglican churchyard at Marylebone – the future of Methodism was secure.

As to the essence of Methodism, Gordon Rupp has listed 'our doctrines', namely justification by faith, the New Birth, the witness of the Spirit, the preaching of the law to believers, Christian perfection, and 'our hymns', the greatest of which were written by Charles (*Religion in England, 1688-1791*, pp. 407-29). The individual chapters in the first volume of Rupp and Davies' *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain* include assessments of Wesleyan doctrine, discipline, polity and the means of grace, but John Walsh's final chapter, 'Methodism at the end of the eighteenth century', describes the movement's genius with the sharpest degree of perceptiveness:

Methodism was more than a school for citizens; it was a school for saints. Its vitality, its appeal lay primarily in its spiritual message. Methodism presented a view of man's nature, both as it was and as it might become, that was relevant to the conditions of eighteenth century life. For it faced, as much official Anglican teaching did not face, the facts of moral and physical evil in this world. Its message did not share the facile optimism of eighteenth century 'moral preaching' from Pope to Paley ... Enshrined in [the preachers'] doctrine of original sin was a lucid pessimism about man's nature, his moral frailty, his proclivity to evil, the inevitable decay of his body in death ... If for the upper classes it was the age of Gainsborough, for the lower orders it was the age of Hogarth, full of disease and sudden death ... Yet to the Methodist tragedy was only one factor in the make-up of the world. Evil itself was subordinate to the huge design of providence, God's plan for the moral design of the universe. Nothing contributed more to the sense of mission of the Methodist, or his interior peace, than his trust in providence. All of the confusing details of his life history, and that of the society around him, fell into place as part of an over-arching pattern ...

... The deep evangelical pessimism about man was always balanced by an enormous optimism about grace. Man was fallen – but he could be restored: society was debased – but it could be transformed. With the Calvinists, Wesley believed in the natural depravity of man, but he did not really believe in his *total* depravity. Logical Calvinism paralyzed human effort, encouraging despair in the unconverted and sloth in the Christian. Wesley ... held that the natural man was not 'dead as a stone', or unable to cooperate with the grace of God which sought to redeem him. In each man there was a talent of free-will to do good or evil, to choose life or death. His role in the drama of redemption was not passive, but a role of intense activity ... Being Arminians, Methodists believed that it was possible to fall from grace, and stressed the need to for ... strenuous and progressive holiness [but] to this growth of grace there was no limit ... The Christian life to which the Methodist convert was called was one of unending advance through a better life to a better world.

This fundamental optimism of Methodism – often ignored by modern social historians to whom Methodism seems largely a matter of hellfire and sabbatarianism – impressed contemporaries and shines today (1966) through every page of the Methodist hymn book. Ascetics the Methodists might be, in their mild and eighteenth century way, but their asceticism was not that of kill-joys but of men who believed that the real joy of human life was spiritual joy ... This cheerful, experiential piety, this activist progressive ethic, this synthesis of ‘the Protestant doctrine of grace and the Catholic ethic of holiness’ made up Methodism’s contribution to the eighteenth century, and was to inspire its work for the new industrial society that lay ahead (‘Methodism at the end of the eighteenth century’, pp. 313-5).

ii. ‘Lady Huntington’s Connexion’, c. 1770-91.

The two occurrences which fuelled the development of Lady Huntingdon’s portion of the evangelical movement by this time were the expulsion of the six evangelical students from St Edmund Hall, Oxford, in 1768, and the opening of her college in Trevecca (see Topic 6, ii b and c). Having taken her stand for Calvinism, and sensing that Wesley’s movement was moving inexorably towards separation, she redoubled her efforts to spread the gospel message, notionally within the structures of the Established Church, but in fact through her own expanding network of private chapels. The keener she became to support zealous Calvinistic itinerants, the less likely it was that the bishops would consider ordaining her students. Whereas her earlier chapels had been erected in the grounds of her private residences, she could hardly maintain that the preaching venues which she patronized and erected in the 1770s were connected with any of her various homes. Like her nemesis John Wesley, she would never contemplate registering her chapels under the Toleration Act of 1689. This would affirm that they were, in fact, Dissenting causes, while she (like Wesley) was staunchly attached to the Anglican Church. Yet ever keen to extend the influence of Calvinistic preaching – and to establish livings for her students – by the latter part of the decade she had extended her patronage to a handful of unregistered preaching houses in London: at Woolwich, Westminster, and most expressly, the Mulberry Gardens Chapel in Wapping. Energized these successes, in 1778 she took possession of a preaching centre, registered by two disaffected Anglican clerics as a Dissenting chapel, at Spa Fields, Clerkenwell, and for good measure bought the adjacent dwelling and transformed it into one of her London homes. In her ensuing correspondence with the Bishop of London, she insisted that, by granting the preaching station her imprimatur, she had prevented it from becoming a Dissenting chapel; rather it was now the private chapel of a loyal member of the Established Church. In order to strengthen this contention, she appointed Thomas Haweis (1734-1820), the evangelical rector of Aldwinkle, Yorkshire, her personal chaplain with special responsibility for Spa Fields.

The bishop, along with the parish incumbent, was not mollified by this move, and challenged Selina's right to establish her own cause without recourse to the Toleration Act. With the authorities adjudging against her, she became truculent in her criticism of the Established Church, and in order not to relinquish Spa Fields she proceeded in January 1782 to register it as a Dissenting meeting house. By so doing, she became 'the first English Methodist to secede from the Church of England' (Jones, Schlenther and White, *The Elect Methodists: Calvinistic Methodism in England and Wales, 1735-1811*, p.167). Applying pressure to her chaplains to relinquish their livings in order to serve exclusively as preachers in her chapels, she became incensed that they refused to do so. (Peter Williams, the Welsh Methodist clergyman, told her that it would be easier 'to persuade the Pope to become Lutheran' than to entice the gospel clergy to renounce their benefices). In fact, most of her chaplains severed their ties with her network which infuriated her even more, and soon she proceeded to establish a denomination of her own. On 3 March 1783 Thomas Wills and William Taylor, her only seceding clergymen, having duly registered as Dissenting ministers, proceeded to ordain six Trevecca students as itinerant preachers to serve the chapels of what now came to be called 'Lady Huntington's Connexion'. Unlike John Wesley, the Countess had no qualms about allowing her ministers, duly ordained, to administer the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Though in fact a Dissenting body, it retained its connexional structure while Selina insisted that her ministers remained circuit preachers. Worship would be according to a revised version of the Book of Common Prayer; preachers would still be expected to wear the black gown and preaching bands, and the 'fifteen points' of doctrine replicated the more Reformed parts of the Church of England's 39 Articles. By 1800 105 chapels were in communion with the Connexion, most in the larger towns with eight in the capital.

The development of the Connexion between its formation in 1783 and Selina's death, aged 84, in 1791, was precarious at best. Her preachers, bereft of an effective grounding even in Calvinistic theology – the college at Trevecca was languishing by mid-decade – tended to be abrasive and harsh, and insufficiently sensitive to the dangers of antinomianism. Believing themselves to have been saved by grace alone, they disparaged the importance of the law as part of the Christian scheme. This had been a besetting weakness of even Selina's faith: 'Her ladyship approaches too near the antinomian extreme' commented Charles Wesley, not maliciously, in 1780. Since having come to the fore in the revival movement a quarter century earlier, her only desire had been the salvation of souls. Unlike Wesley, she had no burning

commitment to the ideal of practical holiness, and in contrast to the evangelical clergy, her untutored Calvinism left little place (in theory at least) for moral striving: ‘Her religious zeal did not direct her or her people towards works of charity; if anything the reverse was true ... At its worst, this produced a religion that lacked the discipline of ethics’ (Jones et al, *The Elect Methodists: Calvinistic Methodism in England and Wales, 1735-1811*, p.164). Surprisingly, she retained the loyalty of some senior and level-headed clergy who were immensely respected within the Calvinistic Methodist movement in Wales: David Jones of Llan-gan, Glamorganshire; David Griffiths of Nevern, Pembrokeshire, Nathaniel Rowland and Thomas Charles. Jones and Griffiths would serve regularly at Spa Fields while Rowland and Charles preached frequently in Bristol and Bath. Imperious as ever – she had clashed with Wills and Taylor who left her connexion in 1789 – she did, however, retain her zeal to the last: ‘Like that of Count Zinzendorf, her humility did not always break through the aristocratic mould, and there were often traces in her behaviour of the Old Eve’ (Rupp, *Religion in England, 1688-1791*, p.471). Rupp’s assessment closes with a quotation from an essay by the nineteenth century Roman Catholic John Henry Newman:

By the sight of a person simply and unconditionally giving up this world for the next ... she devoted herself, her name, her means, her time, her thoughts to the cause of Christ. She did not spend money on herself: she did not allow the homage due to her rank remain with herself: she passed these on, and offered them up to Christ. She acted as one ought to act who considered this life a pilgrimage, not a home (*ibid*).

iii. The revival of Dissent

After 1783, the smaller Calvinistic groupings which had emerged during the Evangelical Revival chose to stand apart from Lady Huntingdon’s Connexion. The congregations linked with Whitefield’s preaching - the ‘Tabernacles’ – in London, Bristol, Gloucester and other centres; the so-called ‘Rodborough Connexion’ in the West Country, created following Whitefield’s ministry but now under the jurisdiction of the free-spirited (if episcopally ordained) Rowland Hill (1744-1833), and the Whitfieldian outpost in Pembrokeshire, the Haverfordwest Tabernacle, tended to downgrade liturgical worship and clerical norms, and merge into a rapidly reviving evangelical Dissent. A major aspect of the Revival after 1770 was that, belatedly, it began to permeate and rejuvenate Protestant Dissent.

a. The Independents

As noted in Topic 1, by the 1730s Dissent had become an introverted and exclusivist movement. Its standards attracted the middling classes while its theological exactitude and

ecclesiastical discipline held little appeal for the ordinary folk who responded so readily to Wesley, Whitefield and their popular preachers. It remained a minority movement representing some six per cent of the population of England and Wales, and whereas it did cater for the needs of its home constancy, it had difficulty in reaching beyond those bounds. Just as conventional Anglican churchgoers were prejudiced against its chequered political legacy, many Dissenters themselves would not warm to the undisciplined enthusiasm of those who were being drawn to the Methodists' fellowship meetings and bands: 'Dissent had long contained not only some to whom religious experience and evangelism were the breath of life but others whose education and sense of propriety made them critical of ranting enthusiasm by the uninformed, unfit and unapproved' (Geoffrey Nuttall, 'Methodism and the Old Dissent: Some Perspectives', p. 279). Philip Doddridge (1702-52), Independent minister at Northampton and the one leading English Dissenter to cooperate with George Whitefield during the early stages of the Revival, was criticized even by his godly, orthodox and evangelical colleague Isaac Watts for injudicious collaboration with those who had little respect for decorum and discipline. In 1766 the Norwich Independent Samuel Newton complained bitterly about Methodist proselytizing and the drawing away of established church members 'with a frenzied kind of zeal that has raised them above sentiment and instruction' (quoted in Watts, *The Dissenters*, p. 451).

Yet even during the mid-century years, Dissent was not only losing members to Methodism but drawing others *from* Methodism and being animated, in parts, by the Methodist spirit. Despite being an Anglican cleric, Whitfield (who did not share Wesley's scruples) had been happy to register both the Moorfields Tabernacle and the Tottenham Road Chapel in 1764 as 'independent' meeting houses under the stipulations of the Toleration Act. Following his death and the weakening of connexional bonds, they would reformulate themselves as regular Independent or Congregational churches replete with ministers, deacons and a church meeting. The equivalent occurred with congregations from the Rodborough Connexion, Rodborough itself in 1774 and Dursley in 1784, while the Devonport Tabernacle had withdrawn from Whitefield's circle to become a fully constituted Independent cause as early as 1763. Portsmouth Tabernacle would do the same in 1790. A similar dynamic manifested itself among some congregations which had previously belonged to Lady Huntingdon's association. The Dublin chapel was the first to become a regularly established Independent or Congregational church in 1772, and was followed later by Chichester, Peterborough, Preston, West Bromwich and Wigan. The same was true of the Trevecca College preachers, many of whom would be

ordained as Congregational ministers. Unsurprisingly, '[t]he Countess of Huntingdon was not at all happy with the way in which so many of her societies were becoming Independent churches' (R. Tudur Jones, *Congregationalism in England, 1662-1962*, p.150).

At its most elemental, evangelical religion, especially as it had been fired by the Revival, was a felt faith which emphasised the immediate experience of release from sin and the anointing of the Holy Spirit. For all John Wesley's and Selina Huntingdon's loyalty to the inherited forms of the Anglican Church, and the orthodox Dissenters' ecclesiological rectitude and doctrinal precision, revivalistic religion seldom respected institutional bounds. As well as renewing individual parishes, the preaching of the gospel clergy often stimulated the establishment of gathered churches. In Yorkshire it was the preaching of William Grimshaw and Henry Venn which inspired the establishment of Independent churches at Huddersfield, Holmfirth, Henley and Halifax, while in Lancashire the ordination of a younger generation of Congregational ministers, zealous for evangelizing and employing a more immediate, animated and vital mode of preaching than their predecessors, ensured the rejuvenation of older and more staid causes: Tudur Jones lists Blackburn, Darwen, Elswick, Forton, Greenacres and Whitworth as exemplifying this trend, as well as Cockermouth in Cumberland. In the Midlands it was the evangelistic ministry of Jonathan Scott (1735-1807) that put new life into the Congregational cause. A professional soldier who had been converted in a Countess of Huntingdon chapel by the evangelical cleric William Romaine, 'Captain Scott' took up residence at his wife's home at Willerton, Shropshire, in 1769 where he gathered together a fellowship which ordained him as its pastor. From there, with the blessing of his fellow Independent ministers, he commenced a vigorous peripatetic ministry which by 1800 had resulted in the establishment of twenty-two Congregational churches in Shropshire, Staffordshire, Cheshire and Lancashire. By the 1780s old-established causes, their roots in seventeenth century Puritanism, had also been revived: Shrewsbury and Oswestry were cases in point, while in London, the King's Weigh House, established following the post-1662 persecution, experienced renewal under the ministry John Clayton, a Trevecca student and convert of William Romaine, which commenced in 1778. On inquiring as to his denominational affiliation, it was said: 'I can scarcely tell you ... but I have heard that he is considered to be an Independent Presbyterian Methodist' (Elaine Kaye, *History of the King's Weigh House*, p.49). Exuberant eclecticism rather than denominational exactitude would characterize the witness of post-Revival Protestant Dissent.

Not all were happy with this development. Thomas Morgan, Independent minister at Morley, Yorkshire, between 1763 and 1795 (and, ironically, a convert of the Welsh Methodist Howell Harris), complained in 1765 of the ‘unhappy divisions almost in all the congregations in the kingdom, chiefly occasioned by Methodistical delusions’ (Jones, *Congregationalism in England, 1662-1962*, p.161), but, like Samuel Newton in Norwich, he represented a diminishing cause. Independency or Congregationalism was in the throes of renewal, and radical changes were about to occur: ‘The dignified shyness of the early eighteenth century was fast developing into the militant assertiveness of the nineteenth ... The pleasant but only partially-filled meeting house became the uncomfortably packed chapel’, while ‘[t]he old emphasis on a learned ministry was being severely modified by the men who were in too much of a hurry to get their sickles into the harvest to spend five or six years sharpening them’ (*ibid*, pp. 162, 163). Evangelical Independency was being revived.

b. The General Baptists

Since the seventeenth century, the English Baptists had been divided into two sections, the General Baptists, restricted mostly to the South East, who held to an Arminian doctrine of redemption, believing that Christ’s sacrificial atonement had been for all, and the more numerical and geographically extensive Particular Baptists who maintained that Christ had died for the elect alone. Both communions vested ultimate authority in the Bible, but the General Baptists were particularly insistent that doctrinal formulations should reflect scriptural simplicity and not be expressed in philosophical or metaphysical terms. As the word ‘trinity’ was not to be found in the Bible, while the traditional concepts concerning Christ’s two natures had been forged by the patristic theologians of the fourth century rather than being extrapolated from the biblical text alone, some General Baptist ministers had become wary of traditional orthodoxy. There had been incessant debates early in the century as to whether the orthodox formulations were biblically valid. Although most held to the substance of traditional Christianity, the insistence that all discussions on the nature of God and Christ should be ‘in scripture words and terms and no other’, allowed leeway for heresy to flourish: ‘However orthodox some of the London ministers might be, some of the General Baptists made no secret of their doubts concerning the deity and humanity of Christ as well as the doctrine of the Trinity’ (Raymond Brown, *The English Baptists of the Eighteenth Century*, p. 27).

This strict non-speculative Biblicism was even more pronounced in the community’s worship and discipline. Hymn singing was forbidden as hymns were the words of men rather

the word of God. Old Testament dietary laws and the prohibition of the eating of blood were upheld, the imposition of hands on the baptized remained an essential denominational practice while marriage outside of one's local church was prohibited. Guided by a narrow scriptural literalism, fellowship was restricted to activities within the local church, and external links could only be forged with other churches of the General Baptist persuasion. There was virtually nothing in the form of inter-Dissenting cooperation. The most immediate impulse among the General Baptists during the earlier part of the eighteenth century had been to withdraw and conserve, rather than to evangelize and convert. An already introverted denomination was in danger of becoming ever more constricted. By the 1760s, membership had dwindled perilously, and the more alert leaders were conscious that the movement's very future was in the balance.

It was then that the Evangelical Revival began to register in the life of the Arminian Baptists. David Taylor, a servant in the household of the Countess of Huntingdon at her estate in Donnington Park, Leicestershire, had been converted by the Moravians in 1741, and so impressive was his zeal that he was released by his employer to evangelize in the surrounding villages. By 1745 he had gathered a group of converts who organized themselves into a religious society with their own meeting house at Barton-in-Fabis near Market Bosworth, which they registered as 'independent'. Among their number was Samuel Deacon (1714-1812), a farm labourer and wool-comber, who would later become an important denominational leader. Becoming convinced, on the basis of their reading of scripture, that infant baptism was invalid, they underwent believer's baptism wholly independently of any links with the existing Baptist churches. Evangelization continued in earnest, and soon these Barton baptists had planted a handful of new causes in the surrounding area: 'Close relations were encouraged between the churches. The ministers [all of whom were engaged in secular, often menial, occupations] met each month for mutual encouragement, and quarterly conferences were held for all members of the churches' (Brown, *The English Baptists of the Eighteenth Century*, p. 68). In other words, the principle of cooperation and the intimacy of warm revivalistic fellowship was being instilled within this newly established community.

By now evangelical religion was spreading rapidly throughout Yorkshire and the north through the labours of Methodists, Moravians and gospel clergy such as Grimshaw and Venn. One of those who had been touched was another Taylor, Dan Taylor (1738-1816), a coalminer from Halifax, who had already served as a Methodist preacher. For an unspecified reason, Taylor broke with the Wesleyan system and in 1762 and became the pastor of an independent group of worshippers who met at Wadsworth in the West Riding. Like the Barton fellowship,

they too had become convinced of the validity of believer's baptism, and following Taylor's immersion at the hands of a General Baptist minister at Gamston, Nottinghamshire, in 1763, the society joined the Lincolnshire Association of General Baptists while their leader was ordained to ministry within the denomination. The more, however, Taylor came to know of his new grouping, the less comfortable he became. Its biblical literalism he found stifling, its traditionalism was legalistic, and for a man moulded by Methodism, the strictures upon hymn-singing were frustrating in the extreme. Even more worrying was the espousal of doctrinal liberalism under the guise of scriptural freedom. Moreover, in discovering the Barton Baptists, fellow Arminians but incontrovertibly orthodox and imbued with the spirit of revival, he set about creating a new network in order to connect existing General Baptist churches which were yearning for change, with the Barton circle and other congregations which were in the process of being established, and in 1770 the 'New Connexion of General Baptist Churches' was formed.

Despite everything, the New Connexion retained fraternal links the older Association of General Baptist Churches, indeed Taylor frequently represented the 'Leicester Association' (as the New Connexion came to be known in the older circles) in its annual gatherings in London. Neither did the older body repudiate the New Connexion, though, for both doctrinal and cultural reasons, relations were often strained. With the New Connexion's adherence to its 'Six Principles', namely the deity as well as the humanity of Christ; the doctrine of the fall; justification by faith; the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration; the importance of the moral law; and believer's baptism, the older body insisted on the concept of general redemption, freedom of interpretation within the stipulations of Hebrews 6:1-2, and the continuing value of longstanding denominational traditions. The question of a more lasting union between both factions was frequently broached during the 1770s and 1780s, and following Taylor's removal to minister in London in 1784, it was pursued more vigorously. But continuing, and increasingly more pointed, doctrinal liberalism in the older churches militated against rapprochement until it was put paid to terminally in 1803 when the Association of General Baptist Churches welcomed into fellowship the avowedly Unitarian church of Battle in Sussex and its influential minister William Vidler. Thereafter the Association became ever more heterodox ('I think the doctrine of the Trinity one of the greatest corruptions of the Christian Church', wrote one of its members in 1815. 'The doctrine of the pre-existence of Jesus Christ I have entirely given up ... The doctrine of original sin, of atonement ... are to me absurd in the extreme' (quoted in Brown, *The English Baptists of the Eighteenth Century*, p. 109)), while

the New Connexion withdrew, to share increasingly in the growing successes of the latter phase of the Evangelical Revival.

The one person who ensured the prosperity of the New Connexion was Dan Taylor himself: ‘Frequently making long journeys in the interests of the churches, Taylor became respected and loved throughout the entire Connexion. No comparable figure within the life of the general assembly was so widely acknowledged as an outstanding leader’ (*ibid*). His many publications, and editorship of the *General Baptist Magazine*, confirmed church members in the evangelical faith, while his incessant preaching, wide pastoral care and outstanding leadership skills, ensured his reputation as a remarkable personality within contemporary English evangelicalism. The growth of the Connexion, especially in the Midlands, coincided with rapid industrialization and the increase of population, while much of John Walsh’s assessment of the essence of Wesleyan Methodism at the end of the eighteenth century, can equally well be applied to the values and virtues of the New Connexion of General Baptist Churches as it developed between its inception and Taylor’s death in 1816.

c. The Particular Baptists

The Particular Baptists possessed in the early eighteenth century nearly twice as many members and churches as the General Baptists and were more evenly spread throughout England. But they too had suffered a diminution of zeal and influence as the century had progressed. The Baptist historian Joseph Ivimey alluded to ‘the cold, dry, uninteresting doctrinal statements of the leading Baptists’, and asserted that ‘had God not raised up the Methodists ... the rapid decline of the churches must have gone on with an accelerated motion’ (quoted by J.H.Y.Briggs, ‘The changing pattern of Baptist life in the eighteenth century’, p.6). For the Particular Baptists too, it was during the 1770s and 1780s that the Evangelical Revival really registered.

During the mid-century two different emphases had characterized the witness of the denomination, a more open, zealous and evangelistic one operative in Yorkshire, the Midlands and especially the West Country focusing on the Bristol Academy, and a more restrictive trend exemplified in the works of two learned and influential London ministers, John Gill (1697-1771) at Horsleydown, Southwark, and his colleague John Brine (1703-65) at the Currier’s Hall church, Cripplegate. Both men held to so called ‘High Calvinism’, a form of Reformed teaching which so privileged the concept of election and predestination that unrestricted

evangelistic preaching was held to be inappropriate. Faith was a gift bestowed on the elect alone, and it was unscriptural to urge the vast majority of humankind to have a faith which they could never possess. Andrew Fuller, a younger theologian who suffered under this teaching as a youth, commented that nothing was said to the ‘unregenerate’ ‘in the way of warning them to flee from the wrath to come, or inviting them to apply to Christ for salvation’. Christ would call his elect come what may, and in the meantime individuals had no innate power to actuate their own redemption. Both Gill and Brine were prolific authors, Gill especially so, and his three volume *Exposition of the New Testament* (1746–8) followed by his six volume *Exposition of the Old Testament* (1748–63) were not only erudite and useful tools for Bible study, but were widely used by Baptist preachers and laymen of all persuasions. Nevertheless, for all their scholarship and commitment to the life of the churches, the result of their work as ‘to divert the thinking of many Particular Baptist ministers into patterns of occasionally abstruse high Calvinism and caused the good news to be a matter for arid debate rather than confident proclamation’ (Brown, *The English Baptists of the Eighteenth Century*, p. 76).

Not all Baptist ministers, however, took such a cramped view of their task, and though holding to Calvinism and the truths of sovereign grace and election, conjoined this with a vigorous preaching of the good news. (Their views, though not formulated with sophistication, replicated the evangelical Calvinism of the Congregationalist Matthias Maurice who had published in 1737 *A Modern Question Modestly Answer’d*, which John Brine had considered rank Arminianism, as shown by his *A Refutation of Arminian Principles delivered in a pamphlet entitle The Modern Question* (1742); see Geoffrey Nuttall, ‘Northamptonshire and the *Modern Question*: a turning point in eighteenth century Dissent’). Whereas this practice retained much spiritual ebullience within the Baptist churches, there remained numerous complains, in association gatherings, of a low level of commitment by church members, lukewarmness, formality, and too much complacency in spiritual matters, and the need for ‘a stirring up of sleepy professors’. Yet the gospel was being preached from Baptist pulpits, while converts were coming into the churches who had been convicted elsewhere. In Yorkshire, many who had been converted under the ministries of Grimshaw and Venn found themselves in Baptist churches: ‘So many of my chickens have turned into ducks’, Grimshaw is reported to have said!, while some notable Baptist ministers of the post-1770 period had been drawn to faith under the incontrovertibly evangelical yet wholly Calvinistic preaching of George Whitfield. This was true of Robert Robinson (1735-90), later minister at Cambridge, Samuel Medley (1738-99) at Liverpool, and John Fawcett (1740-1817) at Wainsgate, Yorkshire. The

Baptist academy at Bristol under Bernard Foskett, Hugh Evans and his son Caleb Evans, represented this vigorous, open Calvinism which was both open to the powers of the Evangelical Revival and would be reinforced by its verve.

By the 1760s, the renewal of associational life among the Particular Baptists which provided a forum for co-operation, spiritual improvement and mutual encouragement, became a means of sharing revivalistic emphases among the faithful. It was the Northamptonshire Association, established in 1764, which would provide the context for most emphatic affirmation of the Revival within the denomination at large. A sermon preached by Robert Hall (1728-91) minister at Arnesby, Leicestershire, at the 1779 association meeting, published two years later as *Help to Zion's Travellers*, denoted the turn. Like Whitefield a generation and more earlier (and Jonathan Edwards in America), he refuted the claim that Calvinism in any way restricted evangelistic preaching, or that anyone was precluded from coming to Christ who desired to do so. In fact sinners were *required* to turn to Christ, and should be actively implored so to do. The one who built most decisively upon his work was Andrew Fuller (1754-1815), minister of the church at Kettering. The son of a Cambridgeshire farmer, Fuller was a burly, broad shouldered, bushy eyebrowed and heavy set, who, according to William Wilberforce, gave the impression of being a village blacksmith. Intellectually able though largely self-taught (he would later be awarded honorary doctorates from both Princeton and Yale), his *Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation* (1785) became a benchmark in Baptist theology and the touchstone of orthodoxy well into the nineteenth century. Deeply influenced by the works of Jonathan Edwards, and perturbed by the way in which the older, rigid Calvinism was seen to excuse moral striving, he set out a clear interpretation of the way in which divine sovereignty cohered with human responsibility and freedom, and provided the Particular Baptists with a rationale for their evangelicalism. Soon 'Fullerism' replaced High Calvinism as the received orthodoxy, and such would be its prevalence that his colleague, Robert Hall Jr (1764-1831) would refer to John Gill's previously influential *Body of Divinity* (1767) as 'a continent of mud'.

The death of John Brine in 1765 and Gill in 1771, and their replacement by an able generation of younger leaders equally committed to the new doctrines, consolidated the Revival's effect on the movement. John Rippon (1750-1836), Gill's successor at Southwark, John Sutcliffe (1752-1814) at Olney, John Ryland (1753-1823), minister at Broadmead, Bristol, and later principal of the academy, were but a few of the talented, effective and highly successful preachers who came to the fore by 1790. Not least among them was William Carey

(1761-1834), formerly a Northamptonshire shoemaker, and ‘one of the most gifted, persuasive and influential figures in Baptist history’ (Brown, *The English Baptists of the Eighteenth Century*, p. 119). His association sermon, published as *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to use means for the Conversion of Heathens* (1792) contributed to the establishment of the Baptist Missionary Society, while Carey himself, as the first Baptist missionary to India, illustrated far from being a transitory phenomenon, the Evangelical Revival, now in its sixth decade, was widening its scope even further and creating still more energy among its adherents and devotees. ‘For quite some time, the main evangelical developments would continue to occur within the bounds of the English-speaking world as known in the eighteenth century. But now a process of globalization was definitely under way’ (Mark A. Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield and the Wesleys*, p. 219). The English Baptists, like their Methodist and Anglican contemporaries, would contribute richly to this next phase of its development.

The Independents and the Baptists were not the only manifestation of English Dissent. The Quakers, who had been the most radical of the seventeenth-century Puritans, and the Presbyterians, the most numerous following the ‘Great Ejection’ of 1662, would be the least effected by the Revival. The Quakers had declined sharply during the century and were inimical to the evangelical emphasis on human sinfulness and the need for an objective redemption, while the Presbyterians had been deeply affected by the rationalism of the age and were repelled by what they regarded as doctrinal crudities and base enthusiasm. History, nevertheless, was against them, and both traditions would decline precipitously by the end of the century and beyond (see Watts, *The Dissenters*, pp. 464-81). Yet orthodox Dissent would flourish as never before. By 1790 it was clear that ‘[t]he Evangelical Revival was initially an Anglican, not a Dissenting movement, but it was Dissent, not the Church of England, that reaped the ultimate benefits’ (*ibid*, p. 440).

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