John Hersey:
Dissenting Theologian of Abolitionism,
Perfectionism, and Millennialism

by John B. Boles

The annals of American religious history contain many bizarre figures from Lorenzo Dow to Aimee Semple McPherson. Such individuals are often discussed almost as clerical freaks, strangely motivated creatures of great zeal and a taste for publicity. Their odd habits of dress and action, their outrageously atypical behavior, are described to add color and a lighter touch to serious accounts of history and theology, but their ideas are seldom taken seriously enough to analyze. In many ways the Reverend John Hersey's beliefs and behavior were sufficiently different from the mainstream Methodists to earn for himself contemporary notoriety. Yet today he is a forgotten figure whose numerous books and dissenting ideas are ignored. 1 His career illuminates the left fringe of the Wesleyan movement as the Methodists were achieving greater numbers and respectability in the middle third of the nineteenth century.

Only the barest outlines of John Hersey's life are known, and most of these were included in a brief, admiring biography published almost a century ago. 2 He was born near Christianna, Delaware, on August 2, 1786, the son of Isaac and Jane Hersey. His parents were among the first Methodists in America, who as early as 1771 had sponsored Methodist preaching in their home. Francis Asbury often stayed overnight with them, and spoke to the groups that gathered. 3 Visiting the Herseys in 1789,

1. Hersey wrote an early abolitionist book, but he is not mentioned in Donald Mathews, Slavery and Methodism (Princeton, 1965); he was an early and ardent perfectionist, but is included in neither of Timothy L. Smith's pioneering works, Revivalism and Social Reform: American Protestantism on the Eve of the Civil War (New York: Torchbook ed., 1965), and Called Unto Holiness: The Story of the Nazarenes: The Formative Years (Kansas City, 1962); Hersey wrote widely of his millennial hopes, yet he is ignored in Ernest Tuveson's Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role (Chicago, 1968); Hersey authored two books on childhood and child rearing, but he is not mentioned in Bernard Wishy, The Child and the Republic: The Dawn of Modern American Child Nurture (Philadelphia, 1968). Neither is he included in the Dictionary of American Biography.

2. F. E. Marine, Sketch of Rev. John Hersey, Minister of the Gospel of the M.E. Church (Baltimore, 1879). This book is anecdotal, and reprints many letters. It is very brief on Hersey's ideas and theology.


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Asbury wrote: "I hope their children will all come to God." Nothing is known of the others, but three-year-old John certainly fulfilled Asbury's wish. John Hersey's mother had been a Quaker before becoming a Methodist, and her deep piety and emphasis on simplicity of dress probably influenced his later career.

For a while in the early years of the nineteenth century Hersey operated a salt works on the Eastern shore of Maryland, and about 1809 appears to have established a mercantile business in Georgetown. This enterprise failed shortly after the conclusion of the War of 1812, and there is a brief mention of him in 1815 or early 1816 running a saw and grist mill in Mathews County, Virginia. Shortly thereafter Hersey received an appointment from the Monroe administration to represent the United States Trade Agency in the Alabama Territory. Hersey's prior experience in mercantiling had prepared him for this office, and probably he knew Thomas L. McKenney, a former District of Columbia merchant whom Monroe had named to head the United States Indian Trade. Hersey served in this position, trading goods for the skins and peltries the Choctaws brought in, until 1822.

If Hersey had not earlier become an extremely devout Methodist, then he developed his faith amidst the Indians. When Robert Paine, later a bishop in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, visited the "United States Factory" in June 1820, he heard the Indians talking of a Methodist preacher who prayed so much, with his face and arms uplifted, that they called him "the Man that talks to the Clouds." Paine sought this man out, and found him to be John Hersey, who no longer had the aspect of an enterprising merchant but instead the ascetic cast that was to characterize him the rest of his life. Paine's description captures the impression that Hersey made on countless acquaintances for the next four decades:

He was a small, cadaverous-looking man, thin-breasted, slightly stooped in his shoulders, with features clean-cut, somewhat wrinkled, and strikingly expressive of earnestness....He was probably about thirty-two years old [34], and weighed about one hundred and ten pounds. A striking peculiarity of the man was his dress. The style of his coat was that of our old preachers, the Quaker cut, the material good, but inexpensive, without a button except where indispensable hooks and eyes substituting them. There was not the least ornamentation or approach to it, but extreme simplicity throughout....

Shortly after returning to Virginia from Alabama, Hersey began in earnest his evangelistic career, preaching throughout Virginia in the early

1820s. Rejecting completely the last vestige of his mercantile background, Hersey, the itinerant minister, depended upon freewill gifts for his livelihood. Before the decade ended he was a renowned elder of the Methodist circuit. Like the early Methodist revivalists, Hersey was morally opposed to slavery, and his travels through the Old Dominion intensified both his opposition and his recognition of the practical difficulties of abolitionism. In 1833 he published his first book, *An Appeal to Christians, on the Subject of Slavery*, based in large part on the arguments offered against slavery at the Virginia constitutional convention of 1830-31. This work later caused Hersey difficulty in the state, for he was forced to flee a camp meeting near Fredericksburg in 1835 after word arrived of an approaching Richmond mob.

Shortly after publishing *An Appeal to Christians*, on November 27, 1833, Hersey left Baltimore aboard the brig *Ann*, destination Maryland-in-Africa, as an assistant agent of the Maryland State Colonization Society. Hersey's obsessive pietism, however, and his demand that all others around him share his devotion to spiritual asceticism, caused his adventure in African missionary work to be extremely brief. While at sea Hersey bitterly attacked the ship's captain for drinking and profanity, the sailors for their salty unrighteousness, and the Negro passengers for joyful dancing. He considered resigning his commission before Africa was reached, but then decided to persevere. Yet soon after his arrival he felt Dr. James Hall, the director, was not properly Christian, and that as a result his mission to the colonized blacks was doomed. Hersey abruptly resigned and returned to Baltimore.

For the rest of his life Hersey committed himself to evangelism throughout much of the South, work among the poor of Baltimore, both black and white, and writing a series of books. His devotion to the views he believed to be correct was absolute, and his voluminous publications — which he sold while on evangelistic tours — were attempts to spread his understanding of the gospel message of piety, perfectionism, and millennialism. Because in the expression of these views Hersey both harked back to the first generation of Methodist preachers and pioneered in the later flowering of Methodist perfectionism, his writings deserve analysis.

Reminiscent of early Methodist ministers like Philip Gatch of Maryland, John Hersey was a consistent foe of slavery. Though his con-

demnation of the institution of slavery was complete. His understanding of the moral dilemma Christian slaveholders found themselves in compelled him to examine cautiously the entire topic within the context of antebellum culture. As he walked the tightrope between condemning slavery without explicitly condemning slaveholders, Hersey exemplified the kind of "situation ethics" the slaveholding South forced upon its ministers. To preach harshly was to court death or exile; to preach a form of moral relativism was to risk emasculating the Christian imperative of abolishing slavery. Hersey tried to judge the peculiar institution prophetically in the circumscribed manner required, but even so he met repression. This phase of his career highlights the limits placed on reform by southern society.

Hersey described slavery as a "dark rolling current of iniquity through the midst of our land, diffusing a pestilential vapour through every recess of our country." The system brought poverty and degradation, producing a society of "wealthy nabobs," poor whites, and slaves; many of the best citizens migrated westward, leaving the older eastern states with "dilapidated churches—deserted villages—houses empty and in a state of ruin...old fields grown over with briars and sedge." The slaves themselves were usually maintained in ignorance and misery, with no incentive for self-improvement. What made their state even more "mortifying" was that they were "sentenced like Tantalus, amidst an ocean of civil and religious liberty to perpetual exclusion." Such a contradiction made Christian missionary efforts to "heathen nations" look inconsistent. Precisely because the institution was detrimental to southern white society, severely damaged the slaves themselves, revealed frightful hypocrisy within the American way of life, and embarrassed Christian missionary efforts, Christians must, Hersey insisted, be concerned. The fact that the Gospel "proclaims peace and mercy to all mankind...bond and free" should make "every slaveholder's ears tingle." Destruction would follow if the slavery problem were not solved, so Christians could no longer afford to "slumber on the verge of such an awful precipice."
The crisis defined, Hersey was careful to make clear that he did not intend to "anathematise the slaveholder," recognizing that to do so would neutralize the possible good his actions might have. Sympathetic to the practical dilemma, Hersey instead sought to portray the system of slavery in the light of God's teachings, allowing the slaveholder to discover by his own logical processes the inherent contradictions which threatened his own salvation.19 In other words, Hersey attempted to discuss the issue in a forthright yet skillfully circumscribed manner that led the individual slaveholder to condemn himself. Given the intensity of feelings ignited by any discussion of slavery, Hersey believed his was the only effective appeal to Christian conscience. Since most thoughtful slaveholders found servitude incongruent with national principles and held a theoretical opposition to the institution,20 Hersey sought to energize their abstract commitment by restating it in Christian and practical terms.

Because the Bible was quite explicit in commanding Christians to love their neighbors as themselves, to do unto others as they would be done unto, and not to be respecters of persons, owning slaves would seem to make it exceedingly difficult to imitate Christ. Continuing this argument, Hersey skirted the declaration that slaveholders could not go to heaven, but he showed that their form of society placed unnecessary impediments and temptations in their way.21 Next he listed the six major arguments in favor of slavery, including the Biblical defense, and then used scriptural quotes and reason to refute each.22 He clinched his rebuttal of the Biblical defense based on isolated proof texts by arguing that the Bible's main theme, its substance, its glory is LOVE, and this general spirit overrode any narrow, literalist defense of slavery because slavery was so antagonistic to love.23

Having led his readers to the supposed conclusion that slavery was impractical, un-American, and non-Christian, Hersey then addressed himself to the stumbling block that tripped so many abolitionist authors. Black and white could not live together equally and peacefully in this country. Hersey regarded this as an unalterable fact, not an ideal or a temporary problem. For whatever reason—and Hersey would not say as a "badge of disgrace or inferiority"—the "divine hand has drawn a line of distinction between the slave and his master," and this color line precluded harmonious coexistence. "Custom and prejudice," he wrote, "strengthened by station and pride, has written that opinion indelibly on the heart of almost every white man in our country, whether he lives in Boston or in

19. Ibid., p. 7.
20. Ibid., p. 8.
22. Ibid., pp. 67-82, passim.
23. Ibid., p. 85.
White racism was so strong that even the freed black would be (and in fact was) degraded, insulted, and oppressed in this nation. If slavery were evil, and freedom brought additional problems, what could the concerned Christian do? Colonization in Africa, Hersey insisted, offered a marvelous opportunity to serve this nation, the Negroes themselves, and the Dark Continent.

A noble experiment begun in Liberia in 1822 pointed the way. Hersey showed, to a “Christian” solution. The settlers transported to Africa by the American and Maryland State Colonization Societies were making great advances in civilization, showing to doubters that Negroes, when given incentives and freedom and properly Christianized, could advance to levels the equal of any race. Hersey seemed to acknowledge that blacks in America were an inferior race, yet this was the result not of inherent inability but of their past and present condition. They would be capable of great progress if they were given the benefits whites took for granted, and their cultural advance would be a tremendous benefit to the whole African continent. To help improve Africa and at the same time solve a terrible American dilemma was a wonderful privilege for American Christians.

Christians should avail themselves of the privilege by making their churches serve as societies to relieve those blacks now in bondage. Hersey calculated that if each Christian in the United States pledged to donate a minimum of three cents per week, 100,000 Negroes could be colonized annually, leading to the eradication of the blight of slavery in a third of a century. By scattering their settlements across the face of Africa, they would at the same time redeem the Dark Continent for Christ and Civilization. Peace and harmony, prosperity and virtue, would then rule supreme in the United States, freed at last of its greatest burden.

For Hersey the solution was eminently sensible and practical; however, his financial estimates included only the cost of transportation. Nothing was said about reimbursing the slaveholder. Nothing was said about the high birth rate of the slaves which would counteract his proposed migration rate. His proposal had both the attractiveness and weakness of simplicity, and of course it was tragically inadequate to the dimensions of the problem involved. Nevertheless Hersey met persecution for his views, and labored in Liberia for a short while before his perfectionism caused him to return to America. But he never wavered in his opposition to slavery. In 1835 he wrote of having to leave Virginia, and in 1862 he made arrangements to spend his last months in Pennsylvania because he desired to “close my earthly career.

24. Ibid., p. 87
25. Ibid., pp. 88-90, 100-102.
on free soil.” Throughout his life he ministered to blacks: in 1853 he raised money to build a chapel for blacks in Baltimore, and preaching in Alabama in 1859, he observed that “many of the slaves will shine in heaven while their masters will weep in hell.” His simplistic proposals for eradicating the evil of slavery were ineffectual, but he at least continued to witness against the institution at a time when others in the South and border states were largely silent, and his genuine concern for the blacks themselves was almost unique.

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Hersey’s vigorous asceticism and opposition to materialistic values and worldliness blossomed into full-fledged perfectionism by the mid 1830s. Afterwards for nearly twenty years his major concern, as illustrated by his personal life and his writings, was the Methodist doctrine of Christian perfection, or as it was sometimes called, entire sanctification. Four of his books, including *Practical Thoughts, Selected from the Works of John Wesley, A.M.* (1836), elaborately defended the Wesleyan doctrine of perfection and urged its practice. His debt to Wesley is clear—“we should literally follow J. Wesley, as far as he followed Christ”—but Wesley himself was somewhat ambiguous on the precise morphology of Christian perfection. Did this holiness occur simultaneously with conversion, or did it come later through a miraculous “second blessing,” or was it achieved gradually through asceticism, piety, and Christian growth? Wesley apparently held the latter belief, arguing that the holy life was a dynamic struggle, not a static achievement.

Hersey struggled to make sense of this complex subject which to him was at the heart of the Christian experience. With some contradictions and changing of mind, some hedging and what must be labeled doubletalk, he succeeded in working out a fairly consistent doctrine of perfection that was clearly Wesleyan. And it is important to recognize that Hersey came to his

27. Hersey to Armstrong & Berry, Booksellers, September 12, 1835, and Hersey to Thomas M. Cathcart, September 15, 1862, in Marine Collection.


belief through an intense disavowal of the world. For him urbanization and economic growth were evil vanguards of the emerging American society. His view of the direction American life seemed to be taking was pessimistic. He felt that Methodism too was falling away from the piety, self-discipline, and otherworldliness of the great days of its planting in America. Hersey's variety of perfectionism was a conscious method of escaping, denying, a sin-filled world; it was a rescue of Christian souls from the world's corrupting influence. Nostalgically he urged Christians to recover the sense of purpose and dedication that had motivated the American founders of Methodism. In no way did Hersey exemplify the optimistic, romantic kind of "evangelical transcendentalism" by which Timothy L. Smith has characterized the emerging Methodist perfectionist movement of the mid-nineteenth century. Smith's description may be true for others, but John Hersey's Christian perfectionism represented a pessimistic, critical reading of American culture and religious life, far removed from the hopeful reform movements of the day. Nor was Hersey's perfectionism related to the current vogue of Scottish Common Sense Realism that informed the views of Nathaniel Taylor and through him Charles G. Finney. Instead Hersey returned to the central holiness theme of John Wesley and hoped to rekindle perfectionism among Methodists who seemed to him to have forsaken their heritage. In an age divided between progressive and backward-looking sentiments, John Hersey sought to restore among Christians the degree of devotion and deadness to the world that had marked the pioneers of Methodism.

In addition to Practical Thoughts of Wesley (1836), Christian perfectionism was the theme of three books by Hersey: The Importance of Small Things; or, A Plain Course of Self-examination to which is added, Signs of the Times (Baltimore, 1833; second edition, 1837); The Privilege of Those Who Are Born of God; or, A Plain Rational View of the Nature and Extent of Sanctification (Baltimore, 1841); and Prayer, Its Duties and Privileges: Recommended to All Who Sincerely Desire to Worship God in Spirit and Truth. Original and Selected (Baltimore, 1854). Moreover, Hersey was almost certainly the anonymous editor of Entire Sanctification: or, Christian Perfection, Stated and Defended by...Wesley...Wat-

32. See his discussion of Methodist decline in The Identity of the Two Apocalyptic Witnesses, Their Character, Death, and Resurrection, as Connected With the Introduction of the Millennium, to Which is Added, Pious Reflections (Baltimore, 1857) pp. 79-81.
34. For an analysis of the progressive-retrogressive split mind of the Jacksonian era, see this author's article, "Cultural Reactions to Change in Jacksonian America," forthcoming.
mough...Clarke...Treffy (Baltimore, 1838), printed by his publisher. As one would expect, much that he wrote was repetitive. But by analyzing his works, each of which focused on one aspect of the general topic, it is possible to present a consistent account of his fully developed views.

Through Christ God provides salvation free to all men, for he is in no way a respecter of persons, but each individual, to receive the benefit of this gift, must "repent, believe and obey." Because all men are sinners, they can perform these minimal tasks only by the grace of God. At the moment of conversion, when the soul is born again or justified in the sight of God, the work of sanctification is begun. The justification, of course, is instantly complete and eternal, but sanctification is the commencement of a process of regeneration which is finally completed only at death, when the soul transcends this earth and enters into heaven.35 Hersey specifically refuted the concept of a "second blessing," that one converted and hence justified "must still remain in a defiled state until another and greater work is performed, by which the soul is cleansed from every stain and pollution."36 The full potential of entire sanctification is present from the instant of justification. Since "nothing has ever emanated from the hands of God in an imperfect state," the new Christian is perfect, which is to say justified and regenerated or made holy. Yet language here can mislead, for what Hersey means is perfection not in the sense of sinlessness or omniscence, but rather that one's inclination to sin is, after justification, transformed into an inclination to be holy. The change in inclination is instantaneous, perfect, and everlasting; the existential unfolding of this inclination in one's life is a process of struggle against sin.37 It is not a struggle based upon rational calculation or common sense but upon the sustaining power of grace. Sanctification in the sense of potentiality is complete at the time of justification; in the sense of reality one must strive and grow in grace, finally achieving perfection in fact only after reaching heaven. What might seem like semantic juggling was for Hersey and his followers a justification for a life of constant struggle upwards against the forces of evil that pervaded the world.

In that gloriously miraculous event of conversion "the foundation of that great work of sanctification is laid, but the superstructure is not at that time completed."38 This is so because "the great change which takes place at the moment of conversion, only effects directly the features of the soul."39

36. Ibid., p. 55.
37. Ibid., pp. 55, 64, 60, 28.
38. Ibid., p. 28.
39. Ibid., p. 40.
One's physical powers and bodily senses are still subject, though in a lesser degree, to the wiles of the devil. This "artful deceiver" will attempt to lull men into sin by appealing to their natural desires for comfort and self-gratification. Since the fall of man there has been present in the world a "principle of carnal gravitation, which draws down the thoughts, desires, and affections of man's natural heart to...earthly things." This subtle and pervasive influence must be counteracted every moment by Christians, for Christ wants his followers to grow in perfection. Especially must Christians be on guard against seemingly harmless sins such as "frivolous conduct," unnecessary modes of dress like superfluous buttons, luxuries like fancy desserts: "These are generally termed little things. Alas! how many will lose their souls...for indulging in small things." Of course Hersey spoke out against more flagrant abuses too.

Given John Hersey's belief in the constant war between the forces of good and evil, his vigorous asceticism comes as no surprise. One must constantly discipline one's self, he argued, never giving in to any human desire. Life was deadly serious, and joviality signaled that one either was ignorant of the issues at stake, or worse yet, did not care. "The Christian's whole deportment," exhorted Father Hersey, "should be solemn, weighty, and dignified." So Hersey rebuked those around him who appeared less ascetic than he thought desirable: he scorned soft beds, arose at 4:00 a.m. to pray, wore only coarse linsey-woolsey clothes, and generally set a model that many might have admired but few cared to emulate. A telling anecdote about Father Hersey was included by the Reverend Isaac P. Cook of Baltimore, who wrote the introduction to Fletcher Marine's biography of Hersey:

At a certain camp meeting, Mr. Hersey had preached at night from the narrative, which included the words: "Jesus I know, and Paul I know, but who are ye?" The preachers at the proper time, had nearly all retired to their tents for repose. A belated minister found his usual bed occupied by some other person: full of wit and humor, the minister exclaimed "Paul I know, and these brethren I know: but who are thou in my bed?" That was too much for Mr. Hersey, who was never known to laugh. He instantly arose from his pallet and administered a scathing rebuke for trifling with the Scriptures.

Hersey's correspondence shows that the struggle for perfection was his total preoccupation. Even while near death he worried about the

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42. Ibid., p. 76.
43. Ibid., p. 74.
44. Marine, Sketch of John Hersey, p. vi.
hospitality and care he received in Charles Rees's home. As he wrote an old friend, "while it is most pleasing to flesh and blood to enjoy those privileges yet it is most dangerous. Smiles are more likely to lead us astray than frowns—O may not the smiles of friends on earth lure me away from [Jesus], who says—If any man will be my disciple let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."46 Hersey never put his cross down, and contemporaries noted the effect on his personality: "he failed at a cardinal point, in failing to make religion a genial, attractive and joyous experience. He was too much of an ascetic. He acted too much as if he served a hard master. His manner of life and preaching did not recommend Christianity as joy-giving, but for deadness to the world...."47

In this endless contest with Satanic forces, the Christian has two strong defenses. His mental faculties—reason and will—were ruined by Adam's fall, but he still possessed their remnants "in desolated grandeur, like the fallen pillars of some magnificent temple." The believer receives through the Holy Spirit a supernatural power that helps set those pillars back up into a "temple of God," giving the converted individual the responsibility and ability to consciously live a consecrated life.48 The enabling power is of God, but man has a necessary volitional role to play.

Man's second defense, one that helps him continue under the grace of the Holy Spirit, is the power of prayer. Devout prayer sets in motion "a kind of moral, or rather spiritual machinery, which is to be kept in constant exercise throughout the day, drawing up the heart in devout aspirations to God...."49 This is an obvious aid in the midst of the "carnal gravitation" which tries to pull the natural man down to worldliness. Satan knows that fervent prayer "invests the believer with a strength with which he vainly endeavors to cope,"50 and thus throws up impediments, trying to convince the Christian that prayer is unnecessary, appropriate only for Sunday, and so on. For that reason Hersey strongly emphasized that prayer must be heartfelt and never-ceasing. Christians must cultivate the "habit of devotional communion with God" throughout the day "amidst all its business and bustle."51 Such heavenly meditation strengthens one's

46. Hersey to R. Turner, Oct. 6, 1862, in ibid.
47. John F. Chaplain to F. E. Marine, Jan. 19, 1879, quoted in Marine. Sketch of John Hersey, pp. 68. Bishop Robert Paine concluded in a similar vein: "I do believe if he had exhibited more forbearance toward others in things of minor importance, and less self-abnegation, his life might have been more genial and joyful without being less holy and useful ("Pictures From My Diary." Christian Advocate, July 24, 1880. p. 6).
49. Ibid., p. 57.
50. Ibid., p. 103.
51. Ibid., pp. 58, 59, 62-63.
knowledge of God, insulates one from the menacing attraction of “carnal gravity,” and allows one to progress in that perfection to which Christ calls all believers. The true Christian life, then, is one of unbending effort for perfection through prayer. One must “hunger and thirst after righteousness,” must live a life of “watching, striving, praying, laboring, wrestling, running, using a holy violence to seize on heavenly things.” If one properly seeks this quality of living, one will find perfection, and consequently enter into heaven. “To remain in an unholy—and unsanctified state is not only offensive, but insulting to God, and will prove ruinous to our own souls.”

Hence the motivation for Hersey’s fanatical commitment to prayer, devotion, and asceticism.

Parenthood presented the Christian with still greater responsibility—not only was he properly concerned with his own perfection, but even more so with the children under his control. The task facing Christian parents was awesome, and to this charge Hersey addressed two books, one of which, *Advice to Christian Parents* (Baltimore, [1839]), specifically concerned child rearing. As has been pointed out elsewhere, the 1830s saw the flowering of a great interest in childhood and proper methods of child rearing. This interest was in response to the social change that had enveloped America after the War of 1812. Economic growth, the westward movement, and urbanization were transforming the nation, and many were worried about the future. Children, as everyone could see, would be growing up in a different world, hence their preparation for adult life became a topic of great moment.

For all Hersey’s deadness to the world, he could not escape the social concerns of the day. Consequently for Christian parents uneasy about their parental duties in an age filled with confusing change, Hersey wrote a manual teaching supposedly time-tested methods for insuring that one’s children survived as godly adults.

To begin with, Hersey emphasized that God’s plan for salvation included children. Like their parents, they inherited the transgression of Adam and consequently had a stubborn will to do wrong. Small children who die are forgiven by God with no requirements, but those who are

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53. The other was *An Inquiry Into the Character and Condition of Our Children, and Their Claim to a Participation in the Privileges and Blessings of the Redeemer’s Kingdom on Earth. Examined and Established. Also, Some Remarks on the Mode of Administering the Ordinance of Baptism* (Baltimore, 1839).
54. See, for example, Wishy, *The Child and the Republic*.
55. For an elaboration of this point, see Boles, “Cultural Reactions to Change in Jacksonian America.”
baptized by Christian parents are in the best position to accept the gospel ordinances when they grow older. Baptism of the child does not save him, but it elevates his character and admits him into the church, God's earthly kingdom. So the parent is preparing the child for his eventual salvation by having him baptized and instructed in the church. The parent's responsibility is clear, but it does not cease with baptism.

The child under the care of the parents is a human treasure of great plasticity. He will grow up and be the kind of person his parents have molded; their instruction, models, and correction will determine what the child will become. Hersey has obviously moved far beyond the fatalism of the Calvinist and accepted the developmental concepts of Christian nurture. Because of the parental role in their children's eventual salvation, parents should consider themselves the right arm of gospel ministers. Christ will ultimately effect their children's justification, but as with a minister's preaching, they can participate in the process by training up their charges in the way they should go. Their partnership with God in this task makes parenthood an enormously serious undertaking. Much more than with their money or business affairs, adults must use utmost care in the supervision of their children. One's every action must be guarded for the impact it will have on their impressionable minds, and their every action must be observed, corrected, and shaped in the proper way. Hersey's perfectionist beliefs dominated his advice on child rearing to Christian parents.

Parents must keep a close watch on themselves, always and absolutely speaking "the language of truth" to their children. Never under any circumstances flatter your children, for that will only spark the fires of pride. Never allow them to contradict you, for then they will doubt your authority. Teach them that they are fallen creatures, and live in sin, greed and passion, which only constant care can prevent from entangling them in eternal damnation. Yet do not go to the extreme of condemning them, for then they will naturally have no encouragement to do good. Above all, set for them a holy example in all your words and actions, for children are instinctively very close observers of their parents from whom they learn their style of living. By setting the wrong example parents doom their children to hell. Hence the character of the father and mother must serve as a sanctified model, as should that of the carefully selected nurse. Being a proper Christian parent requires moment-by-moment control of one's every thought.

In addition to setting an example of truth and Christian behavior that

57. *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17, 23-24, 25. Hersey is very circumspect on this point, for he wants to emphasize the importance of baptism, but doesn't want to imply that it actually saves the child.


the children will absorb naturally and passively. parents must actively work to shape the character of their children. First, they must under every circum­stance demand complete obedience — otherwise their "children must be ruined."60 Never let crying change your command, or they will learn thus to manipulate you. Obedience to earthly parents, and later, obedience to their heavenly parent, must be drilled into them as the "foundation" of their future happiness. To enforce the habit of total obedience, parents must quickly and effectively break the child's will, which is an evil inheritance of Adam's fall.61 "Nurse them as little as possible," do not coddle them, do not use a cradle but teach them to sleep anywhere, "give them no sweet cakes, plums, sugar, or sweet-meats of any kind—it only excites in them new desires and new wants." Their natural desires for fleshly, earthly things must be thwarted. Hersey here quotes Wesley: "Let a child from a year old be taught to fear the rod, and cry softly....break his will now, and his soul will live."62 The perfectionist devotion to asceticism must be instilled into children.

After their will is sufficiently broken and corralled, the contrite children must then be taught Christian precepts by word and example. In a serious but loving tone piety should be presented to children "as an ornament to the mind." Teach them to pray, to study the scriptures diligently with an open mind, exciting in them "a spirit of inquiry and investigation." Their ability to reason dawns at a very early age, and as soon as it is present, begin a plain, simple course of theological reasoning. Be careful not to produce rigid bigots, but prepare them to understand and accept the Bible. Avoid "novels, romances, &c."; all reading material should be "decidedly of a pious character." The Bible is the library of truth, and along with history will provide adequate literature. All this, of course, will not save the child: "you cannot change their hearts, nor make them pious; but you can give them the theory: and when Almighty God changes their hearts...then a theoretical knowledge of the plan of salvation will be of incalculable advantage to them."63

Teach your children that industry leads to "wealth and wisdom, to virtue and happiness," that idleness is the "parent of every evil."64 Teach them to waste nothing, either "time, money, or property."65 Teach them to live by orderly rules, having an appropriate place for every thing and every

60. Ibid., pp. 23, 25.
61. Ibid., p. 27.
63. Ibid., pp. 39, 45-46.
64. Ibid., pp. 69, 67.
65. Ibid., p. 73.
Teach them not to treasure the things of this world but to be generous, helping the poor. Do not be preoccupied with worldly matters; teach them to eat what is put before them, asking no questions, making no complaints about the food. The family should not entertain such fleshly interests, but rather should think on God. Avoid “fine and costly apparel,” which leads to hypocrisy, indirectly robs the poor, and most important, “feeds the flame of pride and vanity.” Christ said plainly to deny thyself, and hence “there is no duty more imperiously enjoined upon Christians than self denial.” Avoid the unnecessary gratification of entertaining idle company; rather use the time to “expand the minds of your children.” “A studious, industrious youth, seldom or never makes a dissipated man.” Give your children a plain, practical education at home, for the schools—and especially boarding schools and colleges—teach dead languages and spiritually murder their students. The home should be a moral oasis in the midst of the deserts of public corruption; hence the didactic and spiritual role of the mother—the “cult of true womanhood”—is implied. Regulate judiciously the company your children keep, and make them avoid the public streets: “There is an amount of vice to be found in the streets of nearly all our towns and cities, which must necessarily taint and corrupt every young mind which comes within its influence.... Parents, if you do not wish to [spiritually] murder your children, keep them out of the streets, except when they are going to and returning from their business.” Prepare them for and put them into a godly employment, but—perhaps a reference to Hersey’s early disastrous career in commerce—“utterly condemn merchandising.” And “do not qualify them for the bar, if you wish them to live in heaven.”

Such a strict and unbending parental attitude is required of Christians because they have in their guardianship the future not only of their children, but of the nation. The Republic depends upon a populace of virtue and character. The firmness and good sense with which Christians manage their children controls “to a very great extent, the destinies of both church and state.” In an era swamped with frightening, unprecedented change,
Hersey’s words were doubtless consoling, if demanding, to many worried parents. For this great double responsibility—the good of the church and the state—Christian parents are liable. “Therefore, do not,” Hersey concluded,

fold up your arms and say, “We cannot govern our children— we cannot give them grace— we cannot change their nature— we cannot expect to find an old head upon young shoulders.” This, to a limited extent, is all true; yet in one sense it is not true: you can do your part: you can prepare the ground: and enclose the field, and cut down the thorns and weeds: and then God can, and will, cause the clouds to rain upon the soil thus prepared by your care and labour, and a rich and abundant harvest of virtue and piety, of peace and love, of honour and happiness, will be the result.76

Such words must have been welcome assurance to pious parents facing the troubled years of the Jacksonian America.

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The second third of the nineteenth century saw an upsurge of millennial expectation. Much of this was an outgrowth of the revival successes and corresponding optimism of the Finneyite and related movements. The optimistic perfectionism of Charles G. Finney, Phoebe Palmer, and others—so drastically different from that of John Hersey—also contributed to the hope that the millennium was drawing near. As with the millennial speculation that came out of the Great Awakening, that of the 1840s and 1850s was postmillennial. In other words, it assumed that devoted Christians, organized into far-flung missionary, reform, tract, Bible, and temperance societies, would be able progressively to improve the world to such a glorious extent that eventually, their having in effect initiated the millennium, Jesus would come in all his glory with no need for a cataclysmic destruction of the evil world. The concentrated efforts of Christians would have already substantially transformed the earth from a veil of tears to the Kingdom of God. Postmillennial optimism fueled all sorts of reform movements, even leading Timothy L. Smith to find in it the origins of the Social Gospel.77 But of all this voguish speculation John Hersey would have none. His dour premillennial theories stand in sharp contrast to the dominant postmillennialism of the era.

John Hersey began writing about the end of history in 1833; in that year the second part of his perfectionist tract, The Importance of Small Things; or A Plain Course of Self-examination to which is added, Signs of the Times,

76. Ibid., p. 117.
dealt with the then common expectations of the millennium and what he believed were the erroneous grounds for that hope. He concluded that the Bible contained much evidence for the belief that there would be a Second Coming, and it indicated a variety of signs and symbols of that approaching event. "It is therefore most certain that Christ will come again to dispel the gloomy clouds of sin; to elevate his church on earth, and to reign gloriously in Zion." 78 Then "the whole earth will be full of the knowledge and glory of God," 79 but only after Christ's return. Thus will be the result of the Second Coming: the exact nature of the return—in person? or in great spiritual power?—was uncertain. But the events of the world, and of the church, in the light of scriptural prophecy, suggest that the event was growing near.

Hersey admitted that in a great variety of ways the church was making progress in the world. He listed the plenitude of moral reform societies, all of which were imparting light "to a benighted world." Many kinds of licentious behavior—horse racing, gambling, drunkenness—were receding before the "light." Similarly advances in art, political theory, and science were expanding man's ability to cope with the world. "The dawn of the millennial morning is spreading all about, and announces the immediate appearance of the SUN." 80 But these advances, particularly the moral ones, only accentuated the failures and responsibilities of Christians. Because of our comparative advantages in this era, urged Hersey, we should be so much the better Christians, growing in holiness. We are capable of far greater perfection, and hence more liable for our lapses. And in the midst of such illustrious gospel privileges, this nation—and preeminently its Christians, are falling far short of entire sanctification. 81

Beneath the surface of frenetic activity for good Hersey detected much evil. The churches themselves were divided by meaningless bickering and sectarian animosity. Supposed Christians in their everyday lives maintained all sorts of unnecessary communion with unbelievers, mixing evil with their good. Even the societies ostensibly organized "for the promotion of the Redeemer's kingdom on earth" welcomed and consort ed with wicked characters. These same societies received tainted money, excusing it on the grounds that in this fashion it would be used for God's purposes—as if God were "dependent on man, much less the favours, of his enemies, the wicked, to accomplish his purposes." Obviously, insisted Hersey, "something rotten" is in the church when it resorts to such temporizing with evil. Christians had best keep themselves uncontaminated by the world. And the nation, too,

79. Ibid., p. 124.
80. Ibid., pp. 131-34.
81. Ibid., pp. 142-78, passim.
offered sad testimony. America “forms the garden spot of the Christian world,” yet the sin of slavery indelibly stained its soul. The Sunday mail proponents likewise gave evidence of the political vices profaning the Sabbath.82 What must be the result on the nation and its Christian people of such missed opportunities to realize their gospel advantages? Hersey was quick to the point.

According to Hersey’s comprehension of the Bible, especially the Book of Revelation, the millennium—“a thousand years enjoyed on earth as a holy Sabbath”—was very near, but he also foresaw “a gathering storm of divine wrath, which must burst with great vengeance...before the glorious Son of Righteousness arises, to dispel forever the gloomy night of sin and iniquity.”83 Again and again he emphasized this premillennial position, that the evil and ultimately unimprovable world must “experience a...awful and complete overthrow” before Christ made his second appearance.84 Hersey’s theological understanding gained backing from the events of the decades after 1830, when it seemed increasingly obvious that slavery would plunge the nation into civil war. Hersey ventured this warning in 1837, and harked back to it with another book twenty years later, The Identity of the Two Apocalyptic Witnesses, Their Character, Death, and Resurrection, as Connected With the Introduction of the Millennium, to Which is Added, Pious Reflections (Baltimore, 1857).

By 1857 Hersey was clearly arguing with the optimistic reformers, especially those of a religious bent whose postmillennial expectations were so opposed to his views. “Ministers will doubtless prefer their favorite theories,” he complained. “Most of them believe that the instrumentalities now in operation will in due time effect the great object and design of the gospel, and the purpose for which Christ came into the world, viz. to destroy the works of the devil, and establish a state of universal peace, purity, and righteousness on earth.”85 But after reviewing the state of the church and the nation, he found such hopes “visionary” and impractical. He knew there was discord between the various Protestant denominations, much less that state of mutual animosity that divided Catholics and Protestants. The Baptist, Episcopal, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches were in regional conflict, and “Mormonism, mesmerism, and spiritualism” were raising their ugly heads.86 Hence, postmillennial hopes were sadly mistaken.

From his reading of Revelation, Hersey was certain that “the fire of

82. Ibid., pp. 142-45, 153-56, 158-59, 159-60, 164, 168-69, 177-78.
84. Ibid., p. 238. See also Hervey to Thomas M. Cathcart, June 1, 1856, in Marine Collection, discussing the implications of Bleeding Kansas.
85. Hersey, Two Apocalyptic Witnesses, p. 94.
86. Ibid., pp. 25-26, 45-46.
God's anger will literally consume all the monuments of pride and vanity erected by the folly of man."87 He had believed this in 1833, and the intervening years only reinforced his belief that human forces could not fundamentally reshape the world. And this eminent destruction would also include the churches with their phalanx of voluntary societies.88 Certainly Hersey recognized that his was a minority position, one that most would not want to hear and would probably discount if heard. But had not, he exhorted, the antediluvian civilization been destroyed for rebellion against God, and had not the Jews—God's chosen people—been scourged and dispersed throughout the world for not accepting Christ? Yes, a terrible apocalypse was very near, when God would pour out his wrath upon the world. "Then will the mighty angel come down from heaven having a chain in his hand, and Satan the adversary and deceiver of the nations shall be bound."89 The millennium will have begun: Christ upon his return will find evil vanquished, the lamb and the lion lying down together, the earth "restored to its paradisical purity and glory."90

John Hersey lived only five years after publishing Two Apocalyptic Witnesses, but that was long enough for him to feel that his premillennial views were substantiated by historical events. In 1858, hearing of the great urban revivals sweeping the nation's cities, he was convinced they were "unmistakeable evidence that the master is coming."91 Then, in 1859 and 1860, civil war loomed on the horizon, and visiting the South, Hersey wrote of the "distant thunder of division, and discord" that loudly proclaimed "a coming storm of ruin for our sin [-stained] world."92 Two years later the nation was in the midst of an internecine Civil War, and in his final book, Satan Unmasked, The Human Heart Unveiled, and the Mysteries of Revelation Made Plain, published in the year of his death, 1862, Hersey wrote that "this fatal malady, could not have happened by mere accident."93 The end times long prophesied were arrived, dashing the final hopes of those who had expected the millennium comfortably to appear by the agency of human instrumentality.94 That ultimate vanity was crushed. The Civil War was only the beginning of the end, for further vials of fiery

87. Ibid., p. 91.
88. Ibid., p. 124, 177.
89. Ibid., pp. 115-16.
90. Ibid., and pp. 272-73.
91. Hersey to Thomas M. Cathcart, May 18, 1858, Marine Collection.
94. Ibid., p. 13.
wrath would be poured out. Hersey conjectured that there was "yet much rubbish remaining which must be burned up and destroyed before a state of universal truth and righteousness shall fill and cover the earth."95 The battle of Armageddon was approaching. Concluding his final work, Hersey surmised that the "present state of the world, and of the church, indicate the immediate appearance of Christ as conclusively as the budding of the trees bespeak the opening spring."96 Grimly convinced that growing destruction presaged the event for which he had labored for forty years—union with Christ—Hersey died in contentment in the free state of Pennsylvania on November 17, 1862.

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How does one conclude the account of such a strange, zealous man? Hersey was well known in the Middle Atlantic region and in much of the South. His bizarre physical appearance, his vigorous asceticism, his argumentative theology which both reflected and differed with that prevalent in the nation, rendered him a much-talked-about figure. His evangelistic and bookselling successes indicate that his appeal was more than ephemeral. He has been sadly neglected by historians, probably because the major arena of his activity was in the South. Exactly how representative he was of a kind of dissenting Methodist radicalism is difficult to ascertain. No one would argue that his views were typical. In 1842 the Quarterly Conference (the meeting of ministers, local preachers and exhorters, and class leaders) of Baltimore City Station decided that Hersey's book, *The Privilege of Those Who Are Born of God, or a Plain Rational View of the Nature and Extent of Sanctification*, was not in accordance with Methodist teachings. Hersey was willing to suppress his book, and the charges were dropped.97 This suggests that his views were out-of-step, but he addressed anxieties that were real. People were worried about the morality of slavery, worldliness, the changes that seemed to threaten old values. The roles of the Christian, the parent, and the minister were in a state of flux, and Hersey spoke to that point. Certainly he represents a fashion of thought and life style that merits additional study. A deep current of pessimism ran through Jacksonian culture, belying the optimistic egalitarianism usually portrayed. John Hersey suggests the complexity of an era historians are finding increasingly intriguing.

97. Baltimore City Station Quarterly Conference Minutes, 1840-1848. Lovely Lane Museum, January 1842 (pp. 205-206), April (p. 207), and June (p. 210). M. S. Franch brought this citation to my attention.