“Mark the Perfect . . . Behold the Upright”: Freeborn Garrettson Speaks for Methodism

by Patricia Hayes Bradley

His contemporaries lauded him as “a father in the gospel.” 1 A close friend and fellow itinerant declared that it was questionable whether “any one minister in the Methodist Episcopal Church, or indeed in any other church . . . was more instrumental in the awakening and conversion of sinners.” 2 And the religious scholar, William Warren Sweet, writing nearly a century later, noted with conviction, “Of all the early native preachers, Freeborn Garrettson undoubtedly stands at the head of the list in total influence exerted on the development of American Methodism.” 3 Although Garrettson never gained the prominence attained by John Wesley in England or Francis Asbury in America, and the twentieth century Methodist might find his name more a subject of curiosity than familiarity, still it is unquestionable that he should be ranked, if not among the great, certainly among the best, the most devoted and the most successful ministers who played key roles in the establishment of Methodism in the United States.

The years during which Garrettson preached witnessed impressive increases in the number of Methodist church members and preachers. In the city of New York alone, Garrettson and his associates brought about an increase of 2,547 church members during a three year period (1788-1791) and increased the number of circuits in the district from four to twelve. 4 From the time Garrettson joined the Conference of itinerant Methodist ministers in 1775 until his death in 1827, he traveled extensively through Maryland, Delaware, New Jersey, Nova Scotia, New York, Connecticut, and Vermont. 5

1 Minutes of the Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church for the Years 1773-1823, 1 (1840), p. 574.
4 Bangs, p. 196.
5 Minutes of the Annual Conference, p. 574.
One of his most notable accomplishments came as the result of his volunteering as a missionary to Nova Scotia in 1784. He worked there for three years "with great assiduity and success, leaving about 600 members in society as the fruit of his ministry." Garrettson’s success during this mission was so impressive that it culminated in 1787 with John Wesley’s plan for ordaining Garrettson bishop or General Superintendent of Methodism in the British North American provinces and the West Indies. Wesley’s plan was never actually consummated due, perhaps, to Garrettson’s deep reluctance to restrict his ministry for Christ to any one area of the world; it remained, however, a considerable tribute to Garrettson that, at the age of thirty-seven, such men as Wesley, Coke, and Asbury believed him ready to become the first missionary bishop and the first native bishop of the American Methodist Church. Another great challenge of Freeborn Garrettson’s ministry occurred when in 1788 he was appointed elder of the Hudson River and Lake Champlain District, a vast district which was, for the most part, destitute of organized religion. Those congregations which did flourish within the area were Dutch, Lutheran, and Calvinist. The latter in particular were “in deadly opposition to the so-called Arminian tenets of Methodism.” To meet the challenge of this difficult mission, Garrettson reportedly traveled nearly four thousand miles on horseback during a single year and preached well over four hundred sermons. Characterized by his wife as “an early riser . . . of active turn . . . very diligent, nay, indefatigable till the end was accomplished,” he was a man of great zeal and ceaseless energies.

Background and Conversion

Little more than a decade before Methodism was planted in Maryland, Freeborn Garrettson was born near Perryman, Maryland, August 15, 1752. Though destined to become “one of the state’s most celebrated contributions to the leadership of early

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6 Ibid.
7 Bangs, p. 190.
9 Ibid., p. 115.
10 Ibid., p. 120.
American Methodism,” 12 Garrettson was not reared a Methodist. In fact, his parents were third generation English settlers, firmly rooted in the Church of England, and were fairly well-to-do. 13 He received a good elementary education; and before the age of eighteen when he left school, he gained a reasonable knowledge of English, astronomy, mathematics and bookkeeping. 14 Garrettson, in his extensive journal, characterized himself as a proud, willful, stubborn child—yet, a lover of freedom and independence. 15 When he quit school, he was, in his own words, “careless, and carnal, . . . fond of pleasure . . .” 16 and, indeed, a lover of the world more than of God. 17 Apparently, he was not alone in this opinion of himself, for an unnamed writer in the Methodist Magazine said of him shortly after his death, “in his youth he exhibited those evidences of hereditary depravity, which marked him as a fallen being.” 18 Garrettson, however, was not long in attaining salvation. The spirit of God pursued him as early as 1772; for he was plagued by dreams, visions and accidents. Garrettson, terrified even to recall it, writes in his journal that one day, while out riding, his horse stumbled and threw him; he struck his head on a large rock and was trampled by his horse. According to Garrettson, he was “beaten out of his senses.” 19 When he at last came to himself, he found that he was on bended knees with his hands and eyes raised to heaven, “crying to God for mercy.” 20 Garrettson concluded that had he died at that moment, he would surely have “dropped into hell.” 21 At once he praised God and went about the task of seeking salvation. Garrettson heard both Robert Strawbridge and Francis Asbury preach and was, in 1775 at the age of twenty-three, “happily converted.” 22

The story of Garrettson’s conversion deserves some mention since it is illustrative both of his own visionary nature and of the

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12 Simpson, p. 2.
14 Ibid., p. 38.
16 Ibid., p. 28.
18 Methodist Magazine, p. 93.
19 Garrettson, p. 16.
20 Bangs, p. 30.
21 Ibid.
22 Smith, p. 38.
dramatic conversions typical of the times. According to Garrettson, one night he was awakened from a peaceful sleep by an awful voice which boomed forth, “Awake, sinner, for you are not prepared to die!” Garrettson responded with much weeping and a great deal of anguish. A few days later God demanded that Garrettson serve him; the young man tried to put off his response; and God declared to him that for three years he had sought “fruit on this fig tree,” but he had found none. At that moment Garrettson believed that his Maker offered him life and salvation and demanded that he “choose or refuse.” At last, he submitted to becoming a traveling preacher and was at once surrounded by a divine power which disclosed heaven and hell to his view. Being humbled, he felt “that power of faith and love that [he] had been a stranger to before.” Garrettson never again lost this sense of faith and love although time and again throughout his life he was tempted by evil. On occasion, the devil appeared in familiar form. His father, for example, discouraged him from Methodism, saying, “I have no objection to your being religious; but why would you turn from the church?” In the mind of the elder Garrettson, leaving the Church of England was tantamount to giving up one’s birthright. Actually, Garrettson’s struggles continued with considerable force until the Conference of 1776, where he was received on trial as a Methodist itinerant and began his travels in Maryland and neighboring states.

**Garrettson, the Minister**

As a minister, Garrettson was a great success. Wherever he traveled, dramatic conversions were evident and Methodist membership climbed rapidly. In his early years as an itinerant, Garrettson was nearly overcome by a fear of preaching. Once he noted, “Sometimes when I have been at the appointed place and the people assembling, I have been tempted to hide myself, or wish that I was sick.” As with other problematic conflicts, however, Freeborn Garrettson converted his anxieties into a blessing for

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23 Bangs, p. 36.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid. p. 37.
27 Simpson, p. 6.
29 Garrettson, p. 57-58.
God, for he later wrote, "I constantly found that the greater the cross it was to speak for God the greater was the blessing." 30 Throughout his ministry, Garrettson remained a controversial figure and a resolute man of conviction. When others such as Asbury went into retreat during the dangerous years of war, for example, Garrettson continued to travel and preach.31 When Calvinist preachers attended his worship services during the New York mission, he often silenced their theoretical arguments and disruptions by asking with discernible Methodist practicality, "Have you been converted to God?" 32

Certainly, Garrettson was not greatly gifted in oratory. His voice was described as "harsh and high-keyed," 33 and his manner as "colloquial" although his preaching was characterized by "earnestness, sincerity and directness of appeal." 34 In his Journal, Francis Asbury noted Garrettson’s lack of sophistication in speech when he wrote, "Freeborn Garrettson spoke in his usual plainness, as to matter and manner, but it moved the people greatly." 35 Perhaps it was his quality of simplicity and repetition of basic ideas which reached the people best, for Asbury remarks time and again that the audiences were greatly moved by what Garrettson said “though simple and the same things he frequently says. . . ." 36 Throughout the journals of both Asbury and Garrettson there are frequent references to weeping listeners whenever Garrettson exhorted. Asbury notes, “The people are generally moved under his preaching.” 37 Many seemed to “drink in every word”; 38 Garrettson noted that some begged him “with tears not to leave them.”39 Everywhere tears and groans were eventually exchanged for shouts of praise to God.40

Garrettson’s physical appearance apparently served him as an asset. He was a robust man with kindly eyes and waving hair.

30 Ibid.
31 Simpson, p. 63.
32 Bangs, pp. 199-200.
34 Ibid.
36 Ibid., p. 338.
37 Ibid., pp. 308-309.
38 Bangs, p. 55.
39 Ibid.
40 Methodist Magazine, p. 93.
Described as “handsome,” possessing the “gentleness of a child,” Garrettson, according to his wife, need not alter his countenance “to be received as an angel.” At least one incident in his life confirmed Mrs. Garrettson’s complimentary opinion. In 1779 on a dark and stormy night, Garrettson became lost in a swamp. Stumbling for hours through torrents of pounding rain, he was about to “take lodgings upon the cold, wet ground” when he discovered a light at some distance. He followed it and, at length, found a cabin where he was graciously entertained by a gentleman who, on first seeing Garrettson, actually mistook him for an angel. When the lady of the house, who had lain ill for sixteen days, saw Garrettson, she rose up in her bed and exclaimed, “You thought mine a disorder of the body, but it was not; now I know my maker loves me.” She proclaimed Mr. Garrettson to be a man of God, one whom the Lord sent “to reform the world.” Evidently, Garrettson’s appearance alone was enough to inspire confidence and inner strength.

One impressive aspect of Garrettson’s talent for winning souls to Christ was his unbelievable perseverance and ability to take advantage of each opportunity to save a single soul. Even Asbury was amazed by his fervor, for he writes, “Brother Garrettson will let no person escape a religious lecture that comes his way.” On one occasion, Garrettson exhorted the landlord of a tavern and prayed with him all night long in an unsuccessful attempt to win his soul. More often, however, Garrettson met with unmitigated success. Asbury recounts his experience with Garrettson during a tour of Maryland. A great Churchman, who is identified only as B.T., heard Garrettson exhort; and on his way home he was seized with conviction and fell down in the road where he spent a great part of the night crying to God for mercy. Someone found him in this state and, in an attempt to arouse him, suggested that his house was on fire. His fervent answer was, “It is better for me to

43 *Methodist Magazine*, p. 95.
45 Ibid., p. 68.
46 Ibid.
47 Asbury, p. 348.
48 Ibid.
lose my house than my soul." Even more striking examples occurred on several occasions when Garrettson, by means of exhortation, saved himself from being thrown into jail. Many attempts had been made to shut him up in prison for preaching the gospel; for the most part, they failed. One magistrate was about to sign the paper committing Garrettson to the local jail when the good minister thundered forth that the only offense he had committed was preaching the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ and furthermore, "this matter will be brought to light . . . in an awful eternity." The magistrate dropped his pen and made no further attempt to imprison him, but instead joined several others present in listening with rapture to one of Garrettson's exhortations.

**Hardships of the Times**

Although Garrettson and several of his contemporaries achieved success in their preaching, they worked, for the most part, under mental hardship and physical duress. In fact, the Methodists described themselves in the *Methodist Magazine* as "greatly despised and persecuted." Garrettson's sufferings reminded John Wesley of the "Iliad of woes given by Saint Paul to the Corinthians." In 1780 Garrettson was actually confined in the Cambridge, Maryland, jail for a fortnight where he had "a dirty floor for [his] bed" and saddlebags for his pillow. Never at a loss when it came to finding an opportunity to suffer for the Lord, Garrettson claimed that the Lord was good to him and enabled him to experience prison as if it were "a paradise." Indeed he "had a heart to pray for [his] worst enemies." Eventually, Bishop Asbury, who viewed Garrettson's imprisonment as the stretching forth of the chain of Satan, rescued him from his plight by having him removed to Delaware where he was set entirely at liberty.

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40 Buckley, p. 200.  
50 Bangs, p. 68.  
51 Ibid.  
52 *Methodist Magazine*, p. 93.  
55 Ibid.  
56 Bangs, p. 105.  
57 Ibid.  
58 Asbury, p. 338.  
59 Bangs, p. 107.
Garrettson's journal is filled with accounts of his brushes with violence. Angry mobs occasionally met him, and individual attackers frequently attempted to knock him from his horse, club him or drown him. Apparently, those who observed the situation felt Garrettson was in desperate need of a bodyguard, for he recounts an amusing tale in which he looked behind him only to discover a man dressed as a soldier riding toward him at "full speed with a great club in his hand." At this moment Garrettson said he found it necessary to exercise his faith. Fortunately, God smiled on Mr. Garrettson, however, for the man had come not to fight but to protect him. Having seen Garrettson "abused at the river" that day, this man equipped himself, rode twenty miles to meet Garrettson, and promised to go with him a thousand miles to assure his safety.

One major reason for the persecution of these early Methodist ministers during the revolution was John Wesley's evident sympathy with the English cause. Wesley borrowed Samuel Johnson's famous tract "Taxation No Tryanny" and had it printed under his own name with a new title, *A Calm Address to Our American Colonies*, a bitter arraignment of the colonists and a defense of the course taken by the British government on the matter of American taxation. Wesley consistently upheld the doctrine of the divine right of kings, repudiated the idea of the sovereignty of the people, and was at all times the consistent supporter of kingly authority. Obviously, these fundamental ideas were diametrically opposed to the whole political philosophy of the American Revolution. Using the principle of guilt by association, Americans soon reached the conclusion that all Methodist preachers were Tory in sympathy. In 1788, for example, Garrettson narrowly escaped when he was surrounded by a mob in Delaware which cried out, "He is a Tory! Hang him! Hang him!" The state of Maryland was the most dangerous for traveling Methodists and, indeed, it was there that Freeborn Garrettson was beaten by a county judge and pursued on horseback till he fell from his horse and was nearly killed.

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61 *Ibid*.
64 *Men of Zeal*, p. 120.
66 *Methodism in American History*, p. 90.
Closely associated with this issue was the whole controversy surrounding the test oath administered in such states as Virginia. Both Garrettson and Jesse Lee had conscientious scruples against bearing arms and shedding human blood. Garrettson felt that the test oath was worded in such a way that it bound him to take up arms whenever called on, and he "felt no disposition to use carnal weapons." Additional persecutions came about as a result of this stance. In a letter to Wesley, Garrettson once looked at his sufferings in resume. He included in his account the fact that he was once imprisoned, beaten several times, left on the highway "speechless and senseless," once shot at, presented with guns at his breast and frequently stoned. But Garrettson never lost his ability to look at his sufferings as a means to better serve his Lord. He writes, "I have had to escape for my life at night! Oh! shall I ever forget the Divine Hand which has supported me?"

In addition to ideological differences which caused him problems, Garrettson went forth into wild, unsettled lands and found it necessary to fight wind, rain, hail, and snow—as well as the devil. In Nova Scotia, for example, Garrettson waded "through morasses half-leg deep in mud and water." He ate from his knapsack, quenched his thirst from brooks, and rested his "weary limbs" on the leaves of trees. His daughter, after Garrettson's death, recounted the story of her father who, out to keep an appointment, traveled through unfrequented country with hail driving in his face "until nearly benumbed." At last, he was obliged to lay the reins on the horse's neck and let the animal by its own instinct keep the road. Such incidents were not infrequent in his life.

**Views on Slavery**

Although exposed to innumerable sufferings which he felt strengthened his own soul, Garrettson was ardently opposed to general human misery. In particular, he became obsessed with the evil of slavery. Shortly after his conversion, Garrettson recognized

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68 Bangs, pp. 57-58.
69 Simon, p. 235.
70 Garrettson, p. 74.
71 Bangs, p. 41.
72 Smith, p. 41.
74 Bangs, p. 163.
slavery to be wrong. One day, while reading the Bible, a powerful thought struck him: “It is not right for you to keep your fellow-creatures in bondage; you must let the oppressed go free.” 76 He noted in his journal time and again that his heart ached for those kept in slavery. Frequently, he endeavored to preach his doctrine of freedom; but, for the most part, he succeeded only in procuring “the ill will of some who were in that unmindful practice.” 77 Garrettson went out of his way to meet the black people during their free hours and preached to them, adapting his discourse especially to their experience and understanding. 78 He derived much satisfaction from this preaching and noted on one occasion, “This night my soul was transported with joy when meeting the black class, a company of humble, happy souls.” 79 Speaking to these “ill-fated” people, Garrettson met with great success. He described their faces as “bedewed with tears,” 80 and their hands as stretching out so as to reach the cleansing power of God. 81

In 1812 Garrettson published an anti-slavery booklet which was constructed in the form of a dialogue between Garrettson and a slave holder. In it, he clearly outlined some of his major objections to slavery. Using a method similar to the Socratic dialogue, he asked the “professing Christian,” “Suppose the Algerines were to take you, your wife and children, and carry you to Algiers, and sell you to the highest bidder, as property forever, would you think it an action compatible with the religion of the meek and lowly Jesus, or with Justice?” 82 When the slave owner admitted the cruelty of such an act, Garrettson quickly pointed to the parallel between this hypothetical situation and that of the so-called “Christian” Americans and Europeans who brought the Africans from their native land to sell “forever in a state of abject and hopeless slavery.” 83 According to Garrettson, to keep a brother in perpetual slavery was one of the greatest of all evils, for it demoralized the slave—leaving him with no hope for himself or his posterity and thus, leaving him without stimuli to find meaning in life. 84 Gar-
rettson loaded his arguments with emotional appeals and vivid detail in describing the slaves as they were brought to market: "See the horrors of a gloomy eternity depicted in their countenance . . . follow them a little farther and . . . see another parting scene—nearest and dearest friends bedewing each other in parting!" Eventually, in the market-place they were "struck off to the highest bidder." When his opponent pointed to their stealing, Garretson argued that with similar backgrounds, white men would exhibit the same behavior. He admitted they were a proud people—but, he cried, "Can you show me a human creature, by nature, that is not proud?" It was Garretson's plea that those who could legally free their slaves, do so and those who could not do so legally—as in the South—must at least provide them with clothing, food and religious instruction. Apparently Garretson felt his efforts had not been in vain, for in a letter to Lyman Beecher he says, "Tens of thousands of the [poor Africans] have been made the subjects of free grace and unbounded mercy."

Garretson's Conflicts and Contributions

Basically, Garretson upheld essential Methodist doctrine. He believed in the depravity of the human family, the divinity of Christ, the redemptive love of Christ and the significance of his death, the impossibility of a human being meriting salvation, the granting by Christ of free will and grace, the value of the Holy Spirit and the necessity of constant service to God. Garretson, himself, was a man frequently racked by internal conflicts. More than once in his visions and dreams the devil appeared to him, condemned him loudly (declaring he would cause Garretson's death), and led him into hell. His descriptions of that eternal place of little repose are imaginative and the whole affair is reminiscent of the voyage of Dante. On one occasion he described hell "as large as the sea . . . [with] myriads of damned souls in every posture that miserable beings

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85 Ibid.
86 Ibid.
87 Ibid., p. 37.
88 Ibid.
90 Ibid., p. 35.
could get into." On a later night, it became "a sea of fire, whose high surges . . . continually rolled along. [He] saw the damned beat about by them in all the tortures of agony—toiling and striving to stem the waves, which, like molten metal, drove them back, while the place resounded with their bitter groans."

Convinced of the reality of a hell “where the worm dieth not and the fire is not quenched,” Garrettson devoted his life to the tremendous task of saving sinners from eternal damnation. “My mind,” he wrote, “is after precious souls.”

In order to work for God as a “good and faithful servant,” he felt it necessary to allow neither family, nor friends nor personal ambitions to stand in the way of his promise to serve God until his dying day. In 1799, the Garrettsons erected a spacious mansion on the banks of the Hudson River near Rhinebeck, New York. Formally known as Wildercliffe, it readily became a center of Methodist interest and activity; and Asbury, a frequent visitor at the Garrettson home, soon renamed it “Traveler’s Rest”. Though Garrettson dearly loved Wildercliffe and his family residing therein, he seldom “rested” there for long. Once he noted, “To be sure it is a great cross for me to leave one of the most agreeable families with which a man can be blessed; but for Christ’s sake I can stagger under even this cross. . . .” On another occasion he noted that he desired neither honors, nor riches, nor pleasures of the world; he wanted only to be a follower of the “adorable Jesus.” Mrs. Garrettson recalls his intense anxiety that he might fall from God’s favor. One night in particular she found him weeping in relief because God had promised not to take away his crown.

For fifty-two years Freeborn Garrettson worked on God’s earth to earn this crown of salvation. At the time of his death, he was the oldest traveling preacher on the continent. Garrettson never actually retired from the itinerant ministry. Three years before his death when, by his own admission, he was “bending

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81 Bangs, p. 74.  
82 Ibid., p. 125.  
83 Ibid., p. 126.  
84 Ibid., p. 234.  
85 Simpson, p. 149.  
86 Ibid., p. 244.  
87 Beecher, p. 36.  
88 Methodist Magazine, p. 96.  
89 Buckley, p. 98.
over eternity,” he traveled to a Long Island camp meeting where he preached to an audience of over six thousand.\textsuperscript{100} At the age of 74, only one year before his death, he delivered a semicentennial sermon to the New York Conference, an event which for him was “the crowning hour of [a] long career.”\textsuperscript{101} A lifetime member of the American Bible Society and a founder of the Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Garrettson witnessed the number of church memberships increase from 3,148 in 1775 to 381,997 in the year he died and the number of traveling preachers increase from nineteen to 1,576.\textsuperscript{102} His was an unblemished reputation. To Buckley, he was the epitome of the “iron pillar”;\textsuperscript{103} to Thomas Coke he seemed “all meekness and love, and yet all activity”;\textsuperscript{104} to his wife, he was an object of adoration;\textsuperscript{105} to Asbury, he was a man capable of “incredible good.”\textsuperscript{106} To himself, he was the humble servant of God. In the end, he believed that he had succeeded in attaining salvation; indeed, his final words radiated a sense of leaving the church militant to join the church triumphant: “Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!”\textsuperscript{107} It would be difficult to imagine a more fitting epitaph than the one inscribed on his tombstone: “Mark the perfect man, and behold the upright, for the end of that man is peace,” Psalm xxxvi, 37.\textsuperscript{108}

\textsuperscript{100} Simpson, p. 190.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid., p. 193.
\textsuperscript{102} Bangs, p. 291.
\textsuperscript{103} Buckley, p. 98.
\textsuperscript{104} Bangs, p. 134.
\textsuperscript{105} Methodist Magazine, p. 97.
\textsuperscript{106} Asbury, pp. 308-9.
\textsuperscript{107} Methodist Magazine, p. 98.
\textsuperscript{108} Bangs, p. 282.