

“INSPIRED BY GRACE”: METHODIST ITINERANTS IN THE EARLY MIDWEST

FRANK E. JOHNSON

The Methodist itinerant is a familiar American icon: a solitary circuit rider traveling on his horse to yet another preaching point. This image, though historically accurate, masks the substantial diversity of ministry styles or types. In fact, by the mid-1830s, with the growth of Methodism in cities, many itinerants seldom if ever rode a horse in connection with their clerical duties. These itinerants were not even circuit riders; they were assigned to fixed “stations.” This essay reconsiders the itinerant image by focusing on a group whose voices are seldom heard: itinerants in antebellum Ohio, Indiana, Illinois and Michigan. When rescued from shadows of Peter Cartwright and James B. Finley, these men reveal an interesting dimension of 19th-century Methodism. Many antebellum itinerants appropriated one or more of the following types: sojourner, patriarch, persistent pioneer, mystic, or showman.

William Swayze proudly claimed membership in “a class of transient sojourners.”¹ Most itinerants would concur. Yet these ministers were not just aimless wanderers, meandering from one preaching point to another. They perceived their lives as a solitary pilgrimage. Christ’s ministry served as their model; but not everyone could accept the sacrifice. After all, Christ declared in the Sermon on the Mount that “foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.”² This raises an interesting issue. Though many itinerants were married, helped raise children, and often owned land, sojourners always were temporary residents in this world. James Watson goes even further. He celebrates the fact that sojourners have no earthly home. Watson believed that itinerants were “seldom fit for anything else.” He continues that when circumstances force one from active ministry, “he becomes like a caged lion, restless to move forward again in this homeless mode of life.” Yet there is a compelling factor, what Watson terms a “species . . . of holy magic” which invariably draws one back into service: “The preacher who has been once active in the itinerant field, is always panting, even under the greatest embarrassments, superannuation, or what not, to shoulder his crutch, and fight his battles over again.”³

Like many itinerants, John Strange incorporated his sojourner status into his preaching. His ministry in Ohio was thriving. A veteran of thirteen years

¹William Swayze, *Narrative of William Swayze* (Cincinnati: R. P. Thompson, 1839), 199.

²Matthew 8:20.

³One wonders if itinerants would endure “deprivations and embarrassments” without the application of this “holy magic”? J. V. Watson, *Tales and Takings, Sketches and Incidents* (New York: Carlton and Porter, 1856), 378.

and highly esteemed by his colleagues, in 1824 Strange purposely forfeited his popularity and relocated in southeastern Indiana. In one of his first sermons there he addressed the congregation: "Brethren and fellow-citizens, I am a stranger to you all. I have come here from a distance to enjoy in this quiet grove the precious privileges of social intercourse and Christian fellowship and worship."⁴ Despite this posturing, Strange's reputation was based, in part, on his sojourner status. Therefore, remaining in one location too long would undermine his ministry and subsequently his image (or vice versa). Moreover, even though he moved "west," relinquishing an established career, he was never all that far from Cincinnati, the hub of Midwestern urban life.⁵

Sojourning, then, was rooted in a self-imposed exile, a forced separation from the world; yet the purpose of sojourning required itinerants to engage the world from which they were exiled in order to reclaim it and thereby inaugurate the New Jerusalem. F. C. Holliday notes that "when [Allen Wiley] joined the Methodists he well knew that his course would subject him to much reproach, which, however, as it is frequently the case, was the very thing that he needed, as it cut him off from the world, and brought him into close intercourse with the people of God."⁶ Thomas Eddy makes a similar point in an 1845 letter to his fiancée. "Were I called to be a wanderer over earth, to forsake home, friends, and all the sweet endearments of relationship, to go and proclaim some heartless philosophy, I would say the sacrifice is too great. But to preach Jesus, I feel I have made no sacrifice. I yield God his right, glad that I myself am his."⁷ In short, sojourners found rest in motion.

A patriarch is a second itinerant type. A patriarch sired spiritual children; his ministry was one of surrogate fatherhood. Philip Gatch is one of the clearest ex-

⁴J. C. Smith, *Reminiscences of Early Methodism in Indiana* (Indianapolis: J. M. Olcott, 1879), 27.

⁵W. W. Hibben recalls Strange's "charm-power." "The people gathered to hear him by thousands, and he made them laugh and cry, as if they had been but titular subjects, incapable of resistance. All loved him with an ardency which knew no limit, and they consequently listened to his preaching, as if he had been an apostle. No man with a purer spirit, or a greater self-sacrificing zeal, has ever been known among the ministers of the State. *The world was not his home*. Heaven was alone the song of his soul, and the only objective point of all his expectations." W. W. Hibben, *Rev. James Havens, One of the Heroes of Indiana Methodism* (Indianapolis: Sentinel, 1872), 221, emphasis added.

⁶F. C. Holliday, *Life and Times of Rev. Allen Wiley*, D. W. Clark, ed. (Cincinnati: Swormstedt and Poe, 1853), 26. While Strange exudes confidence, for many itinerants, sojourning also entailed isolation, stress, and at times, deep depression. James Havens bounced from one extreme to the other. While regarded as a signal force of Methodism in Indiana, he "frequently felt the darkness of his own surroundings, when there was scarcely a star light upon his path." William I. Fee was another frequent passenger on this emotional roller coaster. A group of unruly Kentuckians pressed Fee to the breaking point when they crossed the Ohio River specifically to disrupt his 1842 camp meeting at Neville, Ohio. Ignoring his charge to convert these infidels, Fee desperately pleaded for order: "I am young, and a stranger here, and alone almost." Oddly enough, his appeal worked. Hibben, *Rev. James Havens*, 56; William I. Fee, *Bringing in the Sheaves: Gleanings from Harvest Fields in Ohio, Kentucky, and West Virginia* (Cincinnati: Cranston and Curts, 1896), 53-54. See also Fee, 64, 189-190, 193.

⁷Letter from Eddy to Anna White dated January 13, 1845. Charles N. Sims, *The Life of Rev. Thomas M. Eddy*, With an Introduction by Rev. Bishop Simpson (New York: Phillips and Hunt, 1884), 125.

amples of this type. John McLean recalls hearing Gatch preach during one session of the Cleremont (County, Ohio) Court of Common Pleas. Gatch preached with equal measures of earnestness and simplicity. "He talked to the people as a patriarch would speak to his children. His language was so plain that a child could understand him; and his attitude, leaning toward them with uplifted hands, was so engaging as to rivet the attention of all who heard him." McLean "thought at the time it was more like apostolic preaching than [he] had ever before witnessed."⁸

James Havens frequently employed the patriarch type to great success. But Havens adds a second dimension. Rather than emphasizing his role as father of the newly converted, he incorporates his own status as a parent into salvation appeals. Once he admonished a young man as follows: "I am the father of eight boys . . . and I love them as a father loves his children. I have seen the company you have been in to-night, and witnessed the wicked practices into which they are leading you." Havens further intoned, "You are a respectable looking man, and doubtless have good and pious parents who pray for you every day of their lives. How do you think . . . they would feel if they knew the company you have been keeping to-night?" On another occasion, Havens converted a rowdy planning to disrupt his camp meeting by physically cornering the man and verbally reproaching him for dishonoring his parents. Havens not only was able to get the man to sit for the sermon, but to receive a special prayer before the preaching service. He joined the church before the camp meeting closed. This is an intriguing—if unorthodox—technique when one considers the personal nature of salvation in evangelicalism.⁹

A patriarch did not require the sojourner's constant movement; yet he was anything but stationary. In fact the concept of nurturing a spiritual family spanning an entire geographic region requires mobility. On the other hand, a patriarch's ministry flowed out of personal experience—his *own* hearth and home. One wonders if the patriarch type offered married men a formula to vicariously fulfill their responsibilities as husbands and fathers. Itinerating cost these men dearly; it took them away from the people they loved most. Again, not all Methodist itinerants were as resolute and hardy as the circuit rider icon suggests. Despite missing family and friends, these men believed they must leave them behind. Joseph Blackburn's papers provide one of the clearest examples of this sacrifice. His letters resonate with a longing for his wife and daughter. Blackburn married in September 1852 and immediately

⁸John McLean, *Sketch of Rev. Philip Gatch* (Cincinnati: Swormstedt and Poe, 1854), 179–180. Gatch personifies this type even though he was not an official itinerant. His ministry, though, extends well beyond the bounds of local preacher. While most local preachers only ministered to their home congregations, Gatch was something of a "traveling" local preacher. In fact McLean's passage illustrates the point. He frequently held services while the Court was in session (he served as an Associate Justice of the Court for twenty-one years, 1803–1823). As late as 1818, a circuit rider visited the Methodists in Milford, Ohio just once every four weeks; though 67 years old, Gatch filled the gap by preaching regularly. Elizabeth Connor, *Methodist Trail Blazer: Philip Gatch, 1751–1834* (Rutland, VT: Academy Books, 1970), 227–229.

⁹Hibben, *Rev. James Havens*, 75, 84.

left for his first appointment. He traveled in Kentucky (representing the MEC) for the next three years. A daughter, Susan, was born in August 1853.

July 18, 1853 Kiddville, KY

Now my dear Betty, do not allow yourself to grieve over our temporary and brief separation. Time will soon fly away and we meet again. Try to keep yourself entirely free from all uneasiness as to future events, trusting in him whose loving kindness never fails. Weeping may, it is true, endure for a night but joy cometh in the morning. Just now I wish I was by your side for my thoughts are coming too fast for my pen—well, soon I shall be.

August 23, 1853, Kiddville, KY

Such changes have taken place since I last sat down to pen you a letter. Are you well? I trust you are. How is our little daughter Susan? You have no idea what an abundance of thrilling emotions are awakened by that word DAUGHTER . . . kiss Susan for me and let us meet morning and evening at a throne of grace. We can do it by there remembering each other.

September 7–8, 1854, Cincinnati, OH

I am aware, my Dear Wife, that you are some troubled and afflicted that we are so long apart and that providence appears to be opposed to us in that matter just now. You know how I feel on that subject but I make no doubt we have saved our child by so doing [there had been a Scarlet Fever epidemic in Brooklyn].

September 13, 1854, Brooklyn, NY

I am rejoicing that the time is coming on when I shall be permitted to gaze upon you and once more converse with you and to take Susan, the compound ourselves, in my arms. A little more than one week and then I hope to be with you. I am ready to exclaim oh! the misery of a single life. . . . [He closes:] Your Husband, and shall I err in adding still a lover as well, for some cease to be lovers when they become husbands. Not so I, thank God.

September 13, 1854, Brooklyn, KY

How much it would rejoice my heart to hear Susan either laugh or cry. Of course, laughing would be preferred but it strikes me I could stand crying for a while.

Blackburn asks his wife to kiss their daughter for him in virtually every letter. He “locates” in the fall 1855. One can imagine his anticipation at the prospect of spending time with the family he so loved. Tragically, Susan died shortly after he returned home. Blackburn was surely haunted by the fact that she died essentially not knowing him as her father.¹⁰

¹⁰Joseph Blackburn Papers, United Methodist Archives Center, Ohio Wesleyan University, Delaware, Ohio. Special thanks to Susan J. Cohen, Curator, for her assistance in finding this collection. Blackburn was not alone in pining for his family. While on his 1843 missionary tour with Edward Ames, Charles H. Titus records missing his wife. Titus, like others turned to prayer as a means to communicate; he claims to have met her spirit while steaming on Lake St. Clair:

The bright image of one dearer than life, . . . whom I had left behind, & who was no many, many miles distant, in the quiet home of her sister, that had ‘blessed me so oft’—now seemed holding communion with my willing spirit, & Oh! how sacred was that hour! Her thoughts, I knew were of her absent husband. And while her prayers ascended to heaven for my safety, I felt that mine were mingling there with hers, in her behalf. Let the skeptic scoff at the idea of this sacred communion, while he knows not & feels not its holy emotion, but while I live I ask no greater blessing, no higher bliss, that such an intercourse with heaven. Never did I more highly prize the blessings of the gospel, its sweet consolation, its enrapturing joy, & its blissful hope, that at this hour. Sweet, sweet, religion! The greatest, dearest, boon to man. Charles H. Titus, *Into the Old Northwest*. Edited by George P. Clark (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1994), 83.

The persistent pioneer is a third type of minister and ministry. This minister was antiurbane, reluctant to accept what others labeled social improvement. Persistent pioneers were suspicious of innovation—especially when such change threatened the moral and ethical framework to which they had dedicated themselves. For example, James Havens' unwillingness to refine his social deportment became a badge of distinction. "He made but little pretention to style or polish . . . but this peculiarity only served to open up before him a wider door of personal influence and power among the people wherever he traveled." Shortly before his death (November 4, 1864), Havens was asked to preach on the profound changes of his lifetime. With "scathing sarcasms, and acute criticisms, on what the world calls progress in the Church," Havens indicted his audience for being pretentious. Methodists were becoming too sophisticated, he argued. Instead of the world conforming to their image, Methodists mirrored the world. Unfortunately for those who might have been convicted of an ostentatious lifestyle, he offered no solutions with which to navigate the changing social milieu.¹¹

Two additional itinerants especially fit the persistent pioneer category. Russell Bigelow would have eagerly adopted this label. Alfred Lorrain considers Bigelow's death a blessing of sorts. Lorrain conjectures that Bigelow could not have accepted the changes he and other itinerants faced on a daily basis. "If brother Bigelow had lived till now he would be borne down by the progress of this generation, for he would never yield a piece of old-fashioned Methodism as big as his thumb nail."¹² If Bigelow *probably* would have been considered behind-the-times had he lived into the 1840s and 1850s, there was no doubt concerning Allen Wiley. In 1847, Wiley's own congregation at New Albany, IN, dismissed him (with one year left in his assignment). This was no small feat; Wiley's tenure of service was impressive: 27 of his 30 appointments were in Indiana, 11 years as circuit rider, 14 years as presiding elder, 5 years as stationed preacher, and a delegate to no less than four General Conferences. Though still "effective" mentally, morally, and physically, his parishioners found him obsolete. They desired a "new" preacher.¹³

The mystic was another ministry type. Of the Midwestern itinerants, Richard Hargrave was probably the most familiar with "Tabor heights." Hargrave was known for his "realizing faith"—"a faith that made God a real presence"—and spiritual visions: several times seeing Christ and being personally enveloped in a "bright cloud."¹⁴ After one of these experiences Hargrave

¹¹Hibben, *Rev. James Havens*, 81, 95–96.

¹²Lorrain, *The Helm, The Sword, and the Cross: A Life Narrative* (Cincinnati: Poe and Hitchcock, 1862), 313. It should be noted that many itinerants, such as Thomas Eddy, were considered "friend[s] of progress," having preaching styles always "up to the times." Sims, *Rev. Thomas Eddy*, 39, 200.

¹³Holliday, *Life and Times of Wiley*, 89, 101–103.

¹⁴William P. Hargrave, *Sacred Poems of Rev. Richard Hargrave, D.D. with a Biography of Himself, and Biographical Sketches of Some of His Coadjutors* (Cincinnati: Cranston and Stowe, 1890), 135, 104.

accosted a friend on the street and, in a voice trembling with fear, claimed: "I can scarcely endure this weight of glory that is resting upon me, and I have asked the Lord to stay his hand, lest I die!"¹⁵ Nelson Greene, a friend and fellow itinerant, recalls one instance when Hargrave preached from II Corinthians 5:7: ("For we walk by faith, not by sight"). Greene insisted that the sermon, "was one of the most powerful that I had ever heard, or have heard since then." To Greene, Hargrave "seemed to be walking by faith beyond earthly visions, among the spiritual things of God, and looking upon the unnumbered multitudes who had been redeemed from earth, as they walked the golden streets and gathered about the throne and Him who sat thereon." Greene was not alone in his assessment:

The audience [was] in sympathy with the preacher, and [was] carried to a sublime height of grandeur and of power, where all were overwhelmed by the weight of glory which settled upon them! Such was the immediate effect of the sermon that, when it closed, some of the believers felt like Peter on the Mount of Transfiguration, . . . Some were unable to move from their seats.¹⁶

A. A. Gee claimed that Hargrave was, "a heated furnace through which the gospel flowed in molten streams, fusing the hearts of his hearers."¹⁷

Ben Boaz gives an intriguing account of a mystical experience. One evening he "fell into a singular nervous affection, and experienced mental sensations" which defied rational explanation. That night, while looking at the stars, he became captivated by Venus. More than admiring its brightness, he was gripped with "a strange, wild sensation." Unable to control himself, he ran to the wooded grove on the outskirts of town. He claims to have been in a state of "ecstasy, almost rapture; a kind of transport." Boaz states that his soul literally swelled: "filling boundless space, grasping immensity, and compassing the very outposts of creation."

I imagined it something that would directly pass off; in that however, I was mistaken; the excitement increased, my thoughts constantly grew wilder, and my feelings more extatic. I passed the whole night alone in the grove, wandering to and fro, and occasionally uttering impromptu poetry.

Boaz's consciousness was partially restored the following morning. He assumed these strange sensations would be temporary. Boaz slipped into a deep depression; he labored even to breathe. As this "dismal gloom gathered upon the sky of [his] mind, [Boaz] grew exceedingly unhappy." Soon the wild emotions returned. He recalls that "singular theories came up before me, and wonderful visions full of fantastical imaginings, floated through my feverish brain. When night came on again my wildness and strangeness of feeling returned; and thus I long continued to be alternately elated and depressed."

¹⁵Hargrave, *Sacred Poems*, 113.

¹⁶Hargrave, *Sacred Poems*, 121-122.

¹⁷Hargrave, *Sacred Poems*, 133.

Boaz suffered two consequences from this encounter: an involuntary subordination to his emotions and restlessness. He acknowledges “a roving spirit at length came upon me.” He began to wander. He resigned from his church in Indianapolis and left for what became a two-year journey. He preached and lectured in Tennessee, Alabama, Louisiana, and pastored for one year in Lexington, Kentucky. He then briefly taught at Franklin College (a Baptist school) and Indiana Asbury before moving on to Iowa. He eventually settled in Cincinnati, studied law and passed his bar exam, but found no fulfillment in this either. Believing himself unsuited for manual labor, and running out of career options, he determined to write a book.¹⁸

Alfred Lorrain experienced two mystical encounters shortly after conversion. The first stemmed from his meditating on the nativity. In this experience he was “overwhelmed with a most unearthly transport of joy and peace.” The other episode occurred just after retiring to bed one evening. He records the incident with fondness.

It seemed as if a flock of happy and invisible spirits were all around me and over me. I was as sensible of their presence as if I had seen them with my eyes, or touched them with my hands, and this was accompanied with a bliss that was all celestial. Then there came to my mind with a definition and clearness that I had never felt before, and may add, have never fully realized since—“*A joy unspeakable and full of glory.*” And I said, “Lord, what is this?” And there came a voice to my soul—bear with me reader—a voice that did not traverse my auditory nerve, and which my ear had nothing to do with—a voice as clear and as distinct to my soul as that of earthly sound to my ear—“The Spirit of the Lord, bearing witness with your spirit, that you are a child of God.” Some will say, “enthusiasm!” Well, if it is found so at the last, it has ever been my safeguard from disbelief in the spiritual world. It has established in me the doctrine—not independent of the Scriptures—that the soul possess senses of itself, to which our outward senses are only mediums—mediums between the outward world and the inner man. But God who is a pure and unmixed spirit, can operate on our inward senses, independently of our bodily organs.¹⁹

Lorrain’s most dynamic mystical encounters occurred very early in his Christian life.²⁰ They whetted his spiritual appetite, and left him craving more of the same. Much to his chagrin, Lorrain sought in vain for comparable experiences.

¹⁸Ben Boaz, *The Winged Chariot: An Allegory* (Cincinnati: A. B. Volney, 1858), 206 ff.

¹⁹Lorrain, *The Helm, The Sword, and the Cross*, 184–185.

²⁰The same was true for Elijah H. Pilcher. Pilcher had his one and only mystical experience while singing a hymn at an 1833 prayer meeting in Monroe, MI (he was just 23 years old and in his fourth year of ministry).

While the melody filled the room he had such a realization of the presence of [Christ’s] sacrifice for him that it was overwhelming. If he had any doubts of the real sacrifice of Christ Jesus for a guilty world before, they would have been dispelled then. He saw Jesus as He hung on the cross, bleeding as clearly as if He had been there present with him. He did not lose his consciousness of surrounding objects, but he saw Jesus the Crucified there among the homely surroundings of that pioneer home. The glimpse at the glory of the Divinity vouchsafed him on this occasion sweetened, strengthened, and rounded out his Christian life to the full. James E. Pilcher, ed., *Life and Labors of Elijah H. Pilcher* (New York: Hunt & Eaton, 1892), 79–80.

Itinerants perceived their mystical experiences as spiritual milestones, benchmarks of faith, and “safeguards from disbelief.” This was even more the case for Boaz; when the world turned against him, he submitted his mystical encounters as divine seals authenticating both his salvation and ministry. Yet these experiences raise the issue of insincerity. Was Boaz’s experience less genuine because it lacks the evangelical tenor of Lorrain or Hargrave? While further study is needed to clarify the role of the “sensational” in evangelical culture, it appears that mystical encounters were one means by which believers could circumvent restrictive social conventions. How these experiences were sanctioned by the church and/or fellow believers is a key issue to explore.

The showman constitutes a final ministry style or type. Not all itinerants successfully negotiated the challenge they presented themselves as ministers. The ideal itinerant was meek, not in the sense of lacking will or stamina, but submissive and yielding. In attempting to emulate this example, some ministries degenerated into obsequious oblivion;²¹ others became wholesale quests for fame. Itinerants were forced to walk a fine line. Preaching without animation was destined to be fruitless; yet to preach with flair could easily elicit censure as self-seeking theatrics. A. D. Field notes that “too much ‘acting’ in the pulpit is a serious fault; but now and then, when the wave of religious feelings is in tune, a little of the dramatic is in place.”²²

Yet theatrics were an integral weapon in the itinerant’s arsenal. James Watson recalls grand entrances in which itinerants came to service in a processional.²³ Richard Hargrave was noted for wearing a red bandanna around his head (which he removed just prior to preaching) when he felt he had a powerful sermon in store.²⁴ William Christie’s trademark was to swing his arms above his head in a circular motion when reaching full-stride in his preaching.²⁵ Crying was one of the more interesting theatrical devices. John Collins “never preached without shedding many tears . . . and he almost always had a weeping congregation.” These tears helped make his sermons “irresistible.”²⁶ But in this category Silas Bolles literally wins the prize. Bolles joined the Rock River Conference (Illinois) in 1840. Like Collins, he was a

²¹Samuel Bright pleads in his diary, “Lord, *save*, me from a man-fearing spirit” after being embarrassed to preach before his presiding elder at quarterly conference (December 27, 1848, Samuel Bright Diary, United Methodist Archives, Ohio Wesleyan University, Delaware, Ohio).

²²He adds that “Peter Borein [who traveled in Illinois from 1832 to 1839] was a born dramatist; but he held his power in reasonable check.” A. D. Field, *Worthies and Workers, both Ministers and Laymen, of the Rock River Conference* (Cincinnati: Crantson and Curts, 1896), 134.

²³He recalls one such instance. “The church is nearly filled to its utmost capacity. The old fathers, a little hard of hearing, take their seats directly under the pulpit. The local preachers cluster about it, but no one presumes to enter it. But yonder comes the elder, with the senior and junior preachers in his train.” Watson, *Tales and Takings*, 371.

²⁴Hargrave, *Sacred Poems*, 100.

²⁵Maxwell Pierson Gaddis, *Foot-Prints of an Itinerant* (Cincinnati: The Methodist Book Concern, 1855), 90.

²⁶[John Wright], *A Sketch of the life of Rev. John Collins, late of the Ohio Conference* (Cincinnati: Swormstedt and Poe, 1849), 44–45.

“weeping preacher,” and his congregations modeled his behavior. According to A. D. Field, one lawyer claimed he would give five dollars to any preacher who could make him cry. Shortly afterwards he attended a funeral which Bolles officiated. “Remembering his sneer, he nerved himself against the preacher’s influence; but in twenty minutes Ed Harvey sat with the tears trickling down his cheeks. After service, he stepped up to the preacher, and said, ‘Mr. Bolles, I wish to present you with five dollars.’ Brother Bolles thanked him kindly, and took the gift as a special providence, for he had not sufficient money to pay his way back by stage to the city.”²⁷

By far, “death sermons” were the most compelling theatrical device. On at least one occasion, William Gaddis took I Samuel 20:3 as his text: “there is but a step between me and death.”²⁸ James Quinn concluded one sermon with the following: “Beloved brethren, I have delivered to you my last message; for ‘time is shaking me by the hand,’ and death is near.”²⁹ Death sermons were more than affectionate goodbyes, they were coveted preaching experiences of extraordinary power and “liberty.” The week before he died, Moses Crume “pointed a deeply-interested congregation to the Lamb of God as the only hope of a perishing world; and it was remarked by his friends who had long sat under his ministry that he was more heavenly and spiritual than usual.”³⁰ Richard Hargrave preached more than one death sermon. He began one such message “feeling that it was [his] last, and so said to the congregation.” Yet he claims to have “never preached with such ease and power.” He adds, “there seemed to be a halo of glory about me, and I was so happy!” He concluded abruptly, “Now I am done, and want to go out home and die.”³¹

Two additional itinerants deserve particular attention for their death sermons. In 1831, John Strange was dying of “pulmonary consumption.” At a camp meeting that summer, preaching what everyone thought would be his final sermon, he captivated his audience. Though “pale and emaciated” he was “heavenly in appearance.” “Everything conspired to the solemnity of that occasion; the still grove, the somber clouds, the hymn, the text, and, above all, the dying minister. The ground on which we stood was holy.” His text was Rev. 7:14.³² J. C. Smith claims to have never seen “a congregation so solemn,

²⁷Field, *Worthies and Workers*, 199–200.

²⁸A. D. Field, *Memorials of Methodism in the Bounds of the Rock River Conference* (Cincinnati: Cranston and Stowe, 1886), 209.

²⁹*Sermons on Miscellaneous Subjects, by the Bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church, and the Senior Preachers of the Ohio and North Ohio Conferences* (Cincinnati: Methodist Book Concern, 1847), 133.

³⁰Crume died April 1, 1839 at Oxford, Ohio. He was a member of the Ohio Conference and had preached in Miami region since moving to Ohio in 1805. Maxwell P. Gaddis, *Last Words and Old-Time Memories* (New York: Phillips and Hunt, 1882), 37.

³¹Hargrave, *Sacred Poems*, 169.

³²[One of the “elders” had asked the Revelator, “These in white robes—who are they and where did they come from.”] And I said unto him, Sir, thou knowest. And he said to me, These are they which came out of the great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

so awe-struck." Strange knew his trade: measuring both the moment and his message, he switched from preaching to participating in his sermon.

Just then, when every heart was full and every eye and face was bathed in tears, he drew himself up to one of his loftiest attitudes and stood in solemn silence for a moment, then said, in a voice and manner that can never be forgotten: "Farewell, world, I leave you in the hand of the Redeemer. Farewell, beloved ministers. Farewell, brethren all; I shall soon be with the blood-washed on that shining shore. Very soon I shall lift these feet, *all dripping*, from the waters of Jordan and set them on the golden streets. Soon I shall be with Paul and John, with Pollycarp [sic] and Wesley, and Whitfield [sic], and all the martyrs and sufferers for the testimony of Jesus. But who are *these*? There stands one in the midst of the throne, brighter than all. It is the Lamb in his glory; he beckons and bids me come." Then stepping forward a little and waving his hand, he said: "Get out of my light, ye crowding multitudes; I must see Jesus, I must take him in my arms."

At this point Strange fell backwards into the arms of a nearby minister. The effect was electric. Smith recalled that "what followed beggars description. The ministers in the stand were bathed in tears and most of them had fallen flat on the floor. Multitudes in the audience lay as dead men, overpowered with intense emotion. Some stood in silence, awe-struck; some shouted for joy, and all wept."³³ Did Strange attempt to die, or to resign his spirit? Was this something like spiritual suicide? He had made it known he preferred to "go directly from the pulpit to the tomb." Was this, as one known for incorporating drama into his ministry, to be his last and greatest act? Moreover, what about the congregation? The picture of hundreds of individuals prostrate on the ground could signify their interest in following Strange to Jordan's "other side." Or were they acting out his death for him? No doubt Strange was disappointed to find himself very much alive at the end of his message.³⁴

John McLean records a comparable experience concerning Philip Gatch. The congregation at an Ohio camp meeting sensed something unique about Gatch. Though neither the date nor place of this meeting have been preserved, eye-witness accounts exist. Benjamin Westlake recalls that Gatch appeared as though "he did not belong to this generation. It was as the dead arising to speak to the living, and such seemed to be the impression produced upon the assembly." Gatch is given a special empowerment and delivers a remarkable sermon. Westlake concludes, "although there were the whitened locks, the furrowed cheek, the wrinkled brow, the wreck of a trembling frame, under the weight of many years, yet that morning's exercises seemed to impart to him newness of life and a vigor of effort unknown to him in my earlier acquaintance." Another observer recalls that "before the sermon was closed the congregation were on their feet, and were drawn round the stand in a solid body; that saint and sinner were deeply affected, while the flow of tears was great."³⁵ Again, the congregation plays an intriguing role in receiving the death sermon.

³³Smith, *Reminiscences*, 42–44.

³⁴Strange does a similar routine latter that year at the annual Conference. See Smith, *Reminiscences*, 47–50.

³⁵McLean, *Sketch of Rev. Philip Gatch*, 134–135.

Through these sermons itinerants could rise to new heights, with their congregations close behind. Stephen R. Beggs notes that regardless of what motivated these sermons, they were an important vehicle for worship. He witnessed a death sermon by Peter Borein in 1838 and concluded: "Who shall dare say that God in that hour did not permit his soul to catch some strain of that heavenly music, in which he was soon to join?"³⁶

Itinerant theatrics were not perceived as necessarily detrimental to Methodism. In fact, they often proved of divine origin and edified those who witnessed them. Yet for some itinerants, such displays were nothing short of crass attempts to manipulate an audience. Ezra Lathrop argues that no one can preach a great sermon at every service. He maintains that, more often than not, preachers lack inspiration and congregations the patience (allowing the minister to warm up to his subject) for great preaching. Lathrop contends that unless these two elements are divinely synchronized, great preaching will only occur on/at great occasions.³⁷ This raises an interesting question. If mediocre sermons were the norm, how could itinerants regularly enter the pulpit with any measure of confidence? After all, these men were called by God to do a great work.

While some like Hargrave sought mystical experiences to stimulate their ministry, others took matters into their own hands. Most itinerants report at least one instance when they tried preaching on their own power. Customarily, these services embarrassed the preacher for failing to trust God, and proved fruitless besides. Moreover itinerants found that God blessed their efforts most when they were at their weakest.³⁸ Yet, on the other hand, some itinerants were surprised to find that they preached just fine on their own. Such self-assurance never failed enrage more humble itinerants. John Wright warns that vanity is the hardest obstacle for any minister to overcome, especially "gifted" ones: "A more sickening and disgusting exhibition can nowhere be witnessed, than to see a minister of the Gospel, forgetful of his high duties and holy calling, prostituting the pulpit by preaching himself." Wright continues that minister "stands between the living and the dead. His

³⁶Beggs, *Pages from the Early History of the West and North-West* (Cincinnati: Methodist Book Concern, 1868), 179.

³⁷Hargrave, *Sacred Poems*, 141.

³⁸For the clearest statement of this, see William I. Fee's remarks to an unnamed but "very distinguished" fellow itinerant following a revival at Williamsburg, Ohio, ca. 1844. This minister unsuccessfully attempted to awaken a grandson of Philip Gatch. Yet when Fee spoke, the young man came forward and joined the Church. The distinguished minister was incredulous; he claimed to have preached a good sermon. He asked Fee what his strength was (meaning what technique did he employ to convict Gatch). Fee replied: "Doctor, next to Christ, it is in my weakness." The minister did not understand Fee's word play. He pressed his point: "You speak at times apparently without preparation, . . . while my preparation is carefully made. I want to know where my weakness is." "[Fee] answered 'It is in your strength' and remarked that God was not likely to bless the ablest sermon if we make an idol out of it. [The eminent "Doctor"] said no more." Fee, *Bringing in the Sheaves*, 118-119.

mission is of the last importance to man; and he should fill it with singleness of heart. If this be the spirit of the preacher, he cannot fail to be eloquent.”³⁹

Augustus Eddy was told by long-time itinerant John Meek that his quarterly meeting congregation would not allow him to preach from notes. Eddy hid the notes in his Bible and preached as though giving an extemporaneous sermon. “In this style he went on until the congregation was fired and lifted to more than fever heat.” Then, suddenly, Eddy pulled the notes from his Bible, waved them in Meek’s face, and boasted: “Ah, Brother Meek, I thought you told me this congregation woudn’t stand notes!” “Yes,” retorted the old pioneer, “but your Holy Ghost fire has set your notes ablaze!”⁴⁰ This behavior almost defies explanation. Just as the preacher has the congregation on the verge of significant spiritual break through, he stops in mid-thought to say “I told you so” to both the veteran and the local people. One wonders whom Eddy was serving at that moment. It would be hard to find a more clear cut example of “quenching the Spirit.”

Yet Eddy was only half the showman of Alfred Arrington. Albeit briefly, Arrington lived every itinerant’s dream. He was transferred to Indiana from Illinois in 1830 at age 24. His gift as a revivalist was immediately evident. At one of his first meetings Arrington converts an entire neighborhood, including several men “generally supposed to be absolutely beyond the power of the gospel.” John Smith recalls that “this was the beginning of his fame.” Afterwards, Arrington was besieged with invitations to preach. Later that year he agreed to speak at a camp meeting near Greensburg as it was on his way to the Annual Conference at Indianapolis. Arrington was the last to climb the crowded preacher’s stand; from this venue he “casually” surveyed the crowd. Smith remembers the performance with a tinge of envy, as one who seemingly witnessed the opposite through many of his own sermons:

During the delivery of the discourse there was no loud shouting, no boisterous applause, no sleeping, no walking about or whispering one with another, every eye fixed on the speaker, and every ear and every thought was chained in rapt and mute attention. The sermon occupied one hour and three-quarters, and at its close most of the audience were standing upon their feet leaning forward, eagerly gasping for more.⁴¹

Even the distinguished veteran James Havens was absolutely enthralled.

The following day, Arrington, Havens, and Wiley set off for Conference. Once there, the assembly virtually demanded Arrington to preach (“he was eyed with no little interest by all the members”). He spoke to yet another packed house—but this time crowded with his peers, presiding elders, and a Bishop. Undaunted, Arrington selected Job 37:16 for his text.⁴² The subject in this passage is not Job, nor his three counselors, but the young and zealous Elihu. Elihu rebukes his elders: Job for self-righteousness of all things, and

³⁹A *Sketch of the life of Collins*, 55–56.

⁴⁰Hibben, *Rev. James Havens*, 91–92.

⁴¹Smith, *Reminiscences*, 56.

⁴²“Dost thou know the balancing of the clouds, the wondrous works of him which is perfect in knowledge?”

the other three for allowing Job to out-reason them. In a way, Arrington almost taunts his colleagues, asking them if they have the same boldness and power. Smith adds, "I need only say that the effort was fully up to his best, and he captured the whole Conference."⁴³ Arrington was then assigned to Vevay circuit, which according to Smith, was "one of the best in the State at that time." But within six months he is embroiled in some undescribed controversy. He eventually became an eminent lawyer in Arkansas and Illinois and died a Catholic. Smith mourns the loss; Arrington had gifts which, if properly used, could have guaranteed that he would have been one of the most celebrated itinerants of the nation.⁴⁴

Conclusion

During powerful 1845 revival in Salem, Indiana, Thomas Eddy desired one thing above all else: "I pray that I may be made useful. I ask not for the meteor flash of fame. I crave not the evanescent adulation of the world."⁴⁵ Joseph Tarkington believed pioneer Methodist preachers "were resolute, fearless men, full of power and the Holy Ghost . . . [who] made the breach in the wall of Satan."⁴⁶ Perhaps Tarkington's bias (himself an itinerant) causes him to inflate the accomplishment, but he makes a valid point. Regardless of their gifts or graces, Methodist itinerants sought to be useful. Even most "showmen" desired to proclaim the Gospel effectively. In fact, often the best showman delivered the most "plain" sermons.

Most itinerants, according to Elwell Crissey, were after the flock and not the fleece.⁴⁷ This was a welcome metaphor within the itinerant community. It

⁴³Smith, *Reminiscences*, 58. Such enthusiastic preaching was not uncommon at Annual Conferences. In fact, just two years earlier John Strange delivered a powerful sermon.

While Strange was preaching, the congregation almost involuntarily arose to their feet, and shouted 'Halleluiah!' till their deafening hosannas almost drowned the voice of the preacher. He was in turn affected by their enthusiasm, and sat down, shouting 'Glory to God in the highest!' (Beggs, *Pages from the Early History of the West*, 82).

The difference between Strange and Arrington is that Strange stopped his sermon in deference to the Spirit, whereas Arrington would have pressed on in defiance of the Spirit.

⁴⁴Arrington's case came before the newly created Indiana Conference in October 1832. Allen Wiley, Arrington's Presiding Elder, claims that Arrington "withdrew" after "becoming skeptical." One wonders if this is more euphemism than hard fact; Arrington could very well have been forced out of the ministry. At this conference session, Arrington pleads for forgiveness and seeks restoration of his credentials. The conference twice voted against him. After a third motion, he was received back into the conference—but without his "parchments" and with the stipulation that he not be allowed to "exercise the office of Deacon." Arrington transferred to the Missouri Conference the following year. William Hibben claims that Arrington was "one of the most eloquent preachers in Indiana, and was much admired and flattered, and his fall was due to dizzy head, from too much flattery." William Warren Sweet, *Circuit-Rider Days in Indiana* (Indianapolis: W. K. Stewart Co., 1916), 92–94, 110.

⁴⁵Letter to his wife Anna data March 1, 1845. Sims, *Life of Rev. Thomas Eddy*, 128.

⁴⁶Joseph Tarkington, *Autobiography of Rev. Joseph Tarkington*, With an Introduction by Rev. T. A. Goodwin (Cincinnati: Curts and Jennings, 1899), 86.

⁴⁷Crissey, *Horse Preacher: A Methodist Circuit Rider Travels the Prodigious Tallgrass Prairies of Illinois During the 1830s* (Tigard, Oregon: Blue Water Publishing, 1989), np.

signified that they were becoming more Christ-like, modeling their ministries on the one who claimed to be “the good shepherd” (John 10:14).⁴⁸ Yet no minister could truly reap the whitened fields without first experiencing a personal—and continuous—work of grace. Edmund S. Janes made this point to all aspiring preachers in 1847: “. . . a man fully imbued with the constraining love of Christ, himself deeply experienced in the things of God, given to prayer, and strong in faith, may labor with astonishing success in winning souls to Christ.” As Methodism transitioned from frontier faith to mainstream religion, qualifications for ministry remained constant. Janes adds that exemplary preachers were “efficient and useful, not by their ‘might’ and ‘power,’ their learning, and eloquence, and popular regard, but by the Spirit of God.”⁴⁹ Of course, this charge was not limited to clergy; the emerging evangelical culture licensed all believers to propagate the gospel.

The evolution of the Methodist Episcopal Church from sect to the most powerful denomination in the country is well documented. A less known facet of antebellum religious history is how itinerants were simultaneously victims and agents of this institutionalization. As they assumed greater control over church affairs they became further removed from the heart-felt religious practice which defined Methodism early in the century. How such change altered itinerant ministry types calls for additional study. In reconsidering itinerating in the antebellum Midwest, it would appear that *where* one served was secondary to *how* one served. Yet place did effect ministry. Did all five ministry types exist outside the Midwest, or did the region allow unique opportunity for experimentation and development of ministry styles? What is certain is that Methodist itinerants do not fit a single mold, let alone the static image of the circuit rider. James Quinn, rather than Cartwright or Finley, better reflects the commonalities within the Midwestern itinerant core. Though preaching was an exhausting (and at times vexing) vocation with only intermittent spiritual peaks, Quinn excelled as an itinerant. “His oratory was not the result of a studied art, but of nature inspired by grace, leaving a conviction that he was not only one of nature’s noblemen, with a clear head and a warm heart, but that he was an able minister of the New Testament, commissioned from heaven as an ambassador of Christ, beseeching sinners to be reconciled to him.”⁵⁰ The prospect of such a eulogy propelled many itinerants from one preaching point to the next.

⁴⁸Sheep and shepherd metaphors abound in the literature. For example, at an 1825 camp meeting in Orange County, Indiana, Billy Cravens responded to Richard Hargrave’s message on the divinity of Christ by shouting: “That’s right, Hargrave; the sheep will eat that!” Hargrave, *Sacred Poems*, 80.

⁴⁹*Sermons on Miscellaneous Subjects, by the Bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church, and the Senior Preachers of the Ohio and North Ohio Conferences* (Cincinnati: Methodist Book Concern, 1847), 106.

⁵⁰Quinn helped pioneer the work in Ohio. John F. Wright, *Sketches of the Life and Labors of James Quinn* (Cincinnati: Methodist Book Concern, 1851), 113–114.