

**“A POOR, VILE SINNER”:  
LADY HUNTINGDON’S VOCABULARY OF  
WEAKNESS AND DEFERENCE**

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I

Selina Hastings (1707–1791), the Countess of Huntingdon, was one of the most significant figures in 18th century Methodism. In heritage and privilege she was a “peer of the realm”; she was a gifted woman whose piety, ability, and interest in religious reform drew her into the Methodist movement, and catapulted her into a leadership role.

In early 1740 Lady Huntingdon began attending meetings at the Fetter Lane Society where she met many of the principal figures of early Methodism, including George Whitefield and the Wesley brothers. She began to hear preaching at Whitefield’s Tabernacle and Wesley’s Foundery. By 1742, Selina Hastings began hosting Methodist meetings in her various homes (London, Bath, and Ashby Place in Leicester). In this same period Lady Huntingdon began endowing, renting, and building chapels, and appointing Methodist “domestic chaplains” to serve them. Over the next forty years she built a network of more than 67 chapels and preaching posts, which were staffed by more than a dozen traveling preachers. Lady Huntingdon was the matriarch of the Calvinistic Methodists and strategic planner behind most of their major undertakings. She established the first Methodist theological college in 1768 at a time when women, even aristocratic women, were barred from academic education. She frequently described herself as being engaged in “this present Reformation” of England,<sup>1</sup> and indeed a close examination of Lady Huntingdon’s piety and her many reformatory works suggests that she was both a religious leader and a reformer.<sup>2</sup>

In her many ministerial “works” Lady Huntingdon evidenced significant faith, strength, determination, and leadership ability. Yet when looking behind

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<sup>1</sup>Aaron Seymour, *The Life and Times of Selina, Countess of Huntingdon* 2 Vol. (London: 1844), II, 399–401, 459–60; *The Bridwell Manuscript Collection*, Ms. #93, located at the Bridwell Library, Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University [hereafter: *Bridwell* etc.]; *The Rylands English Manuscript Collection*, #338, Ms. #5, located in the John Rylands University Library, Manchester, England [hereafter: *Rylands* 338, etc.].

<sup>2</sup>John R. Tyson, “Lady Huntingdon’s Reformation,” *Church History*, Vol. 64, No. 4 (Dec. 1995) 580–593.

the public record—through windows provided by her personal correspondence—a different picture emerges of Selina Hastings and her dramatic deeds. Her persistent descriptions of herself as a “poor and miserable creature” or a “worthless worm” (or similar terms) stand contrary to the public record.<sup>3</sup> The extent of her rhetoric of self-deprecation is amazing both in terms of its frequency (appearing in roughly one third of her letters) and duration. It emerged in letters dating from the early 1740s<sup>4</sup> and continued unremittingly for almost fifty years until her death in 1791.<sup>5</sup> A similar pattern is found in her description of her various ministries as “poor, vile labours.”<sup>6</sup>

Amy Oden offered a useful standpoint from which to view Lady Huntingdon’s vocabulary of self-deprecation when she wrote, “in much of the writing by women in almost all periods of Christian history, self-deprecating disclaimers and phrases were used. Often self-deprecation was a literary device that would no more be left out than good grammar.”<sup>7</sup> In the case of Lady Huntingdon’s writings the vocabulary of self-deprecation is so much a part of her own self-description that it cannot be ignored and indeed the very predominance of this sort of language suggests that it provides a significant window through which to view the spirituality and self-understanding of Selina Hastings. It also offers an illuminating window into early Methodist piety and the complicated nature of women’s religious leadership in eighteenth century England.

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<sup>3</sup>Her vocabulary of self-deprecation is almost unremitting. Here are a few significant examples of Selina’s descriptions of herself: “poor and miserable creature,” *The Countess of Huntingdon Folio*, located at the British Methodist Archives, John Rylands University Library and Research Center, Manchester, England, ms. #83: [hereafter: CHF, etc.] “an unworthy worm,” CHF #93; “poor and vile” CHF #95; “a poor, vile and foolish creature,” CHF #88; “a vile worm,” CHF #90; “a worthless worm,” CHF #13; “poor, blind, and miserable,” CHF #45; “a poor worm” CHF #103 and *The Bridwell Ms. Collection*, Bridwell Library, Perkins School of Theology, Dallas, #55 [hereafter *Bridwell* etc.]; “poor and worthless,” *Bridwell* #68; “a poor, vile, blind fool,” CHF #77; “poor, evil [and] knowing nothing,” CHF #72; “a poor, worthless, simple worm,” “a poor, wretched creature,” Rylands English Ms. #338, Item #7; *Cheshunt College Archives*, located Westminster College, Cambridge, ms #E4/17/4, {hereafter *Cheshunt* etc.].

<sup>4</sup>CHF #83, CHF #93, CHF #95, CHF #88, and CHF #90. All of these manuscript letters are not dated, but by content and contextual analysis it can be determined that they were written prior to 1744.

<sup>5</sup>Her last dated letter that carries vocabulary of self-deprecation was dated Dec. 2, 1790, *Cheshunt* E4/17/4. *The Short Account of the Last Days of the Right Honourable And Most Respected Lady Selina, Countess Dowager of Huntingdon From Authentic Testimonies* (London: J. Chambers, n.d. [1791]), indicates that “. . . in her last day of confinement . . .” Selina said: “I see myself [as] a poor worm” (1).

<sup>6</sup>CHF #23, *Professor Murray’s Papers*, located at the Cheshunt College Archives, Westminster College, Cambridge [hereafter: *Prof. Murray’s*] Ms. #9, #15, #20, and CHF #135.

<sup>7</sup>Amy Oden, ed. *In Her Words* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 13.

## II

Lady Huntingdon understood herself as a faithful daughter of the Church of England. She was born and raised in Anglicanism, and even as a leader among the Methodists (in 1777), she continued to reverence the Church of England “as a true catholic church.” She wrote: “I revere and give it preference to all others and this from Scripture, reason, experience of other denominations and my best light from the Lord . . . .”<sup>8</sup> She regularly used the Anglican prayer book and its prayers were “read” in her various homes and chapels. In fact the *Book of Common Prayer* was used in the chapels of Lady Huntingdon’s Connexion until 1872.<sup>9</sup>

Lady Huntingdon’s initial contact with the Methodists came through her sister-in-law, Lady Margaret Hastings, the convert and subsequently the wife of Benjamin Ingham (1712–1777). During a serious and extended illness (autumn 1739), Lady Selina was nursed to health by Lady Margaret Hastings. Lady Margaret’s passing remark, “That since she had known and believed in the Lord Jesus Christ for life and salvation, she had been as happy as an angel” found a place in Lady Huntingdon’s heart.<sup>10</sup> As she began to examine the adequacy of her own Christian faith and practice, she found her faith to be superficial and found herself to be too full of pride. This self-assessment, and Lady Margaret’s patient witness, led to her religious awakening. Although they offer no account of her conversion, Lady Huntingdon’s manuscript letters do evidence an increase in Christian concern and religious language during late 1739 and early 1740. They seem to signal that period as a religious watershed. One of her later letters, dated September 14, 1766, traces Lady Huntingdon’s Christian pilgrimage from a prayer of utter consecration she breathed in the autumn of 1739, and therefore points to that year as a pivotal period.<sup>11</sup>

After 1739 justification by faith alone became a constant theme throughout Lady Huntingdon’s life and work.<sup>12</sup> Her letters lament dependence upon doing good works as a basis for justification, since she believed that this view predominated in the church of her day. Her emphasis upon justification by faith may have been so insistent because of her own earlier efforts at self-justification through good works and philanthropy.<sup>13</sup> She came to view justification by faith as the authentic foundation and nourishment of the church: “Here, then, is the church, only church that lasts from eternity, from both its foundation,

<sup>8</sup>*Bridwell*, Ms. #93. The recipient of the letter is not specified, it may be Thomas Haweis. It is dated Feb. 20, 1777. She made an almost identical statement in a letter to Dr. Lloyd, Dean of Norwich, cf. *Cheshunt MS.* #E/3/2/9, dated July 23, 1776.

<sup>9</sup>Alan Harding, “The Anglican Prayer Book and the Countess of Huntingdon’s Connection,” *Transactions of the Congregational Historical Society*, Vol. 20, No. 12 (1970):361–67.

<sup>10</sup>Seymour, *Life and Times*, I, 14, and Tyerman, *Oxford Methodists*, 121.

<sup>11</sup>CHF #103. The recipient is not named, but it seems to have been written to Charles Wesley.

<sup>12</sup>Cf. CHF, Ms. #117, Letter to Charles Wesley (June 4, 1743); Jackson, *Works of John Wesley*, XII, 262–63, Letter to John Wesley (September 14, 1772); Seymour, *Life and Times*, II, 290–91, a letter to William Romaine, July 29, 1773.

<sup>13</sup>Seymour, *Life and Times*, I, 10.

from heaven derived; and by that only mean[s] can it be supported while on earth, consistent with its divine origin, viz. that by faith only which is the gift of God. . . .”<sup>14</sup> Since faith is of “divine origin” it is received as a “gift”; its reception stands quite apart from a person’s good works.

Lady Huntingdon seemed intent upon synthesizing St. Paul and St. James: “*Faith Alone* is a great thing indeed but here and here only is our life which is to prove by our Works that living [faith] till then we have none left of what self and pride makes for us.”<sup>15</sup> “Living” was one of her persistent descriptions for true faith.<sup>16</sup> The relationship of faith and works was a persistent theme in Lady Huntingdon’s religious pilgrimage. Her concern for this issue was aptly illustrated by her involvement in a major controversy that shook early Methodism. Her role in the “Stillness Controversy” (1740) showed Selina’s willingness to stand with the Methodists (the Wesleys and George Whitefield) against the quietism of the Moravian faction within the Fetter Lane Society. While she sided with Anglican spirituality and with the Methodist emphasis upon holiness of heart and life, the personal mysticism of “Stillness” piety held an attraction for Selina Hastings, as it did for Charles Wesley.<sup>17</sup> From it she seemed to draw a connection between self-loathing and the willingness to give all honor and praise to God. As one of her letters from this period confided: “I find so strong an aversion in myself to everything I do or say from the persuasion I can but dishonour God in all things, that I believe I shall not only become ‘still’ but silent.”<sup>18</sup>

### III

The duties of a “Lady in polite society” in 18th century England were to obey her husband, bear his heirs and raise the children, run the household, and function as “an ambassadress of grace.”<sup>19</sup> A woman’s “place” was decidedly that of the home, and her role there was to create a “safe haven in which children could be nurtured in innocence and morality . . . .”<sup>20</sup> While historians have generally termed this retired, domestic ideal for women “Victorian” it was clearly well in place prior to the 19th century.<sup>21</sup> In addition to severely

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<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup>CHF Ms. #75, letter to Charles Wesley, dated June 9, 1764.

<sup>16</sup>CHF #75, to Charles Wesley, June 9, 1764; CHF #141, to Mrs. Harris, Feb. 15, 1787.

<sup>17</sup>Selina’s letter to John Wesley, October 24, 1741, reports that she saved Charles from “the snare of stillness.” CHF Ms. #1.

<sup>18</sup>CHF Ms. #98, an undated letter. The recipient of the letter is not indicated, but it may have been sent to Charles Wesley.

<sup>19</sup>Roy Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Pelican, 1982), 42.

<sup>20</sup>Barbara B. Schnorrenberg, with Jean E. Hunter, “The Eighteenth Century English Woman,” in Barbara Kanner, ed. *The Women of England: From AngloSaxon Times to the Present* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1977), 185.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.* See for example Alexander Pope’s essay *Of the Character of Women* (1735).

limiting the opportunities afforded women, the tyranny of “the ideal Lady” viewed a woman’s worth chiefly as a product of her role and social standing as wife and mother.<sup>22</sup>

Religion, because it belonged to the nurturing and domestic sphere of life, was more accessible to 18th century women than education or politics, and it offered women opportunities for personal development and larger social roles. In Protestant sectarian groups like the Quakers<sup>23</sup> women were granted equality and opportunities for leadership within their fellowship that were greater than women enjoyed in society at large.<sup>24</sup> But, beginning in the mid-17th century, English women were also emerging as leaders among the Anglicans. Women’s roles within the religious establishment were not as overt as they were in sectarian groups where women preached and led classes, but women in the Protestant mainstream not only served as models of Christian piety; they were also influential patrons who debated church policy and theological doctrine.<sup>25</sup> An articulate minority of women writers had begun to mount a more direct attack upon the social strictures that sought to shackle them.<sup>26</sup> The work of Mary Astell (1688–1731) represented the vanguard of this movement which stressed the importance of educational opportunities for women more overt efforts which came at the end of the 18th century.<sup>27</sup>

In the late 18th and 19th centuries philanthropy was considered to be a part of the domestic role of aristocratic women and an aspect of the “Victorian ideal.”<sup>28</sup> Noble women, acting as “Lady Bountiful,” visited the cottages of the

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<sup>22</sup>Lillian Lewis Shinman, “‘Changes are Dangerous:’ Women, and Temperance in Victorian England,” in Gail Malmgreen ed., *Religion in the Lives of English Women, 1760–1930* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), 193. Cf. Schnorrenberg, “Eighteenth Century English Women,” 184–94.

<sup>23</sup>Margaret Fell’s *Women’s Speaking Justified, Proved, and Allowed by the Scriptures* (1667) epitomized this trend.

<sup>24</sup>Dorothy Ludlow, “Shaking Patriarchy’s Foundations: Sectarian Women in England, 1641–1700,” in Richard Greaves, ed., *Triumph Over Silence: Women in Protestant History* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1985), pp. 93–123; and Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Prophets and Humanists: Types of Religious Feminism in Stuart England,” *Journal of Religion*, Vol. 70 (No. 1, Jan. 1990), 118.

<sup>25</sup>Debra Parish, “The Power of Female Pietism: Women as Spiritual Authorities and Religious Role Models in 17th. Century England,” *Journal of Religious History*, Vol. 17 (June 1992), 33–46.

<sup>26</sup>Patrice Crawford, “Women’s Published Writings, 1606–1700,” in Mary Prior, ed., *Women in English Society, 1500–1800* (London: Methuen, 1985), 211–31; Moira Ferguson, ed., *First Feminists: British Women Writers, 1578–1799* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 85ff.; and Jerome Nadelhaft, “The English Woman’s Sexual Civil War: Feminist Attitudes Towards Men, Women, and Marriage, 1650–1740,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 43 (No. 4, 1982), 555–79.

<sup>27</sup>Among Astell’s significant works were *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, for the advancement of their true and greatest interest. Part 1.* (1694), *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies. Part 2. Wherein a Method is offer’d for the improvement of their minds* (1697), and *Some Reflections on Marriage* (1730).

<sup>28</sup>Jessica Gerard, “Lady Bountiful: Women of the Landed Classes and Rural Philanthropy,” *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 30 (No. 2, Winter 1987), 183–209, offers an excellent examination of this pattern. While often associated with the nineteenth century, it is clear that it emerges much earlier. Cf. Frank Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980).

poor, elderly, and sick, bringing with them gifts of food, medicine, and blankets; they also lingered to converse, give advice or read the Bible.<sup>29</sup> Based as they were in the women's domestic sphere, these activities did not conflict with the ideal of "the true Lady," and they provided women with significant opportunities for personal fulfillment and social action.<sup>30</sup>

The lives of aristocratic women were shaped by social expectations that stressed retirement and dependent roles for them. As Mollie Davis pointed out: "Women of high status [were] seemingly more affected by their dependent roles than those of other classes . . ."<sup>31</sup> Lady Huntingdon's social authority and the political power she would use for religious reform was directly attached to her standing in the old social order. While her wealth and natural ability allowed her (in some measure) to depart from the "domestic ideal," the authority, rights, and privileges that came from "peerage" were directly connected with it.

Lady Huntingdon's position in this context was a complicated one. She felt compelled to answer what she understood to be an authentic call of God to embark upon the religious reform of England, but because her social standing was crucial to her personal authority, she also had to work within the accepted parameters and practices associated with a person of her rank. If she presented herself in ways that undermined her social standing, she simultaneously undermined the basis of her own authority. The tension created by her reliance upon aristocratic authority and her attempts to stretch the parameters of what was socially acceptable for women was one of the persistent inner tensions of her life and work. This tension was perhaps best illustrated in Lady Huntingdon's willingness to assume an administrative style of religious leadership without the taking upon herself the prerogative of preaching.

Although she accompanied her preachers on evangelistic tours of England and Wales, there is no record of Lady Huntingdon's preaching in any formal sense. Selina had considered embarking upon a preaching ministry, but she was not certain whether her sense of "call" to Christian service included preaching. An introspective letter, written in 1765, revealed her uncertainty: "With respect to myself this has been the matter between the Lord and my own heart as He has seen this in secret He has favoured me with many more voices for Him, and where mine could not have reached; yet always this constant reserve before Him that His call and mind *well* understood should carry me to the ends of the earth for Him . . ."<sup>32</sup> Another letter written to an unnamed ally in 1775, indicated that Selina continued to struggle with the tension generated by her utter conviction that the gospel must be proclaimed and her personal reticence about entering the preaching office. She wrote "Had my judgment been ever sufficiently clear the fields, the highways would

<sup>29</sup> Gerard, "Lady Bountiful," 184.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>31</sup>Mollie Davis, "The Countess of Huntingdon," *Women in New Worlds*, II, 163.

<sup>32</sup>*Bridwell Ms. #59*, "To My Dear Friends," 1765.

have found me the proclaimer of peace from this weight [of it] being important and continual."<sup>33</sup> A few women, like Sarah Crosby, were preaching among the Methodists when Lady Huntingdon's letters reported her own turmoil over the issue.<sup>34</sup> Lady Huntingdon's letters do not specify the nature of her hesitation about preaching. It is likely that the weight of the social ideals for a woman of Lady Huntingdon's class—impediments which were less binding upon middle-class women like Crosby—figured largely in her hesitancy.

Lady Huntingdon's initial reformatory works were immediate extensions of her aristocratic status and the "domestic ideal." Her domesticity and class identification were part of the impetus behind her famous innovation of "drawing room evangelism,"<sup>35</sup> in which notable and noble people were invited to her home for religious conversation with Methodist evangelists like George Whitefield, Charles Wesley, Howell Harris, and John Fletcher. In a similar way a group of aristocratic women gathered for religious class meetings conducted by Lady Huntingdon in her London home.<sup>36</sup> Soon she established a network of women's groups and guided them by her personal visits and pastoral correspondence.<sup>37</sup> Her leadership of Calvinistic Methodism began as an expression of her philanthropy, but she gradually transformed her role as patron of the movement into being its matriarch.

Lady Huntingdon's social deference was most obvious in her communications with the Anglican bishops. She needed their cooperation and they had gradually become increasingly hostile towards several planks of her reformatory platform. Her letter to the Bishop of London, dated August 30, 1771, for example, was extremely deferential and artificially polite. She was, of course, writing to request a favor. She hoped that the Bishop would ordain one of her domestic chaplains, the Methodist lay preacher Richard Elliot, so that he might serve more effectively as a missionary to the colonies in America.<sup>38</sup> More surprisingly, Lady Huntingdon's correspondence with friends and colleagues in the Methodist movement also carried rhetoric which minimized her reformatory efforts. A letter to her friend Hawksworth, for example, announced: "I think I see my way clear, I leave this place tomorrow, to take possession of Northampton Chapel, a congregation of near five thousand souls in London."<sup>39</sup> Then followed the language of self-deprecation: "It is a

<sup>33</sup>Bridwell Ms. #93, letter of 1775

<sup>34</sup>Paul Wesley Chilcote, *John Wesley and the Women Preachers of Early Methodism* (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1991), 118–81. Mrs. Sarah Crosby began preaching in Feb. 1761, Ms. Mary Bosanquet by late 1764. In the 1770s they were joined by Ann Bolton, Martha Chapman, Elizabeth Hurrell, Panelope Newman, and Elizabeth Ritchie—all of whom professed an "extraordinary call" to preach.

<sup>35</sup>Brown, *Women of Wesley*, 191.

<sup>36</sup>Lady Francis Gardiner, Lady Jane Nimmo, the Countess of Buchan, Lady Maxwell, Lady Glenorchy, and Wilhimena Countess of Leven were among the prominent women that met in Lady Huntingdon's home.

<sup>37</sup>Bridwell Ms. #50.

<sup>38</sup>Cheshunt, Ms. #E 3/1/5.

<sup>39</sup>Rylands Ms. 338, item #7, To Rev. Mr. Hawksworth, Feb. 16, 1779.

great undertaking for such a poor worm, but the things that are despised, God chooses. As He never wanted [lacked] a poor, unprofitable widow to serve in His Church . . . .”<sup>40</sup> Even within Methodist circles, Lady Huntingdon was unwilling to draw attention to her own works. She preferred instead to minimize her personal effectiveness and stress the great reformatory work that God was doing through her. Hence, she wrote to Hawkswoth, “. . . the work spreads over the land, nothing has ever run as it has done this last year [1775]. The Lord is with us of a truth and first door opened and the power of God owning our poor vile labours for Him everywhere.”<sup>41</sup>

While this sort of reflection and expression was consistent with Lady Huntingdon’s piety, it also had the advantage of allowing her to point away from the unconventional and socially unacceptable aspects of her reformatory work by attributing them directly to God. It was one thing for God to apply the “poor vile labours” of “a poor unprofitable widow” and quite another thing for her to claim that a talented, aristocratic woman was responsible for these innovations. The former description, while tinged with religious “enthusiasm,” did not challenge the prevailing domestic ideals for 18th century women. But the latter approach would have amounted to a direct affront to social ideals like female “domesticity” and those virtues that constituted the “ideal Lady.”

A portion of Lady Huntingdon’s willingness to use the vocabulary of self-deprecation was connected with her commitment to work as well as she could within the social strictures of her age in order to transform them. It also reflected her leadership style. One of her letters to William Piercy, the unsuccessful master of her Orphan House in Georgia, recommended the approach which she emulated: “My dear friend, keep poor, low and throw aside the appearance you have from all people of high [rank]. None ought to see you govern. Love and simplicity carries an authority that no man’s wisdom can give him.”<sup>42</sup>

#### IV

Lady Huntingdon’s spirituality was a combination of Anglican piety and the experiential expressions associated with early Methodism. She experienced the presence of God in word and sacrament, as well as in the quiet recesses of the inner person.<sup>43</sup> The Word of God came to her not only in Holy Writ and proclamation but also through an inner, “unspoken Word” which the

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<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup>*Prof. Murray’s*, Ms. #15, a letter to Hawkswoth (Dublin), dated August 30, 1775.

<sup>43</sup>*Cheshunt* Ms. #A 4/3/3, letter to Mr. Piercy, Orphan House, Savannah, Oct. 8, 1773.

<sup>43</sup>For example, *CHF* #24, in a letter addressed to Wesley (probably Charles), dated Oct. 7, 1752, she wrote: “Upon the fifth instant in the evening, I experienced an uncommon degree of the glorious presence of our Lord.”

Holy Spirit called to mind by applying biblical sayings to contemporary situations.<sup>44</sup> Since God was heard and experienced in the inner person, introspection was an important part of her piety. A person's motives, aspirations, and "the evil of our own hearts" must be examined and purified by faith in Christ.<sup>45</sup> Feelings of love and acceptance were associated with having "peace with God," whereas feelings of estrangement signaled separation from God.

Lady Huntingdon's many efforts for the cause of the gospel did not bring her a sense of self-aggrandizement, as she wrote: "I think of my poor self as a 'hewer of wood and a drawer of water' [Josh. 9:21] that I despair of being of the least use or comfort to any [one]."<sup>46</sup> Nor did her labors bring with them a sense of acceptance before God, rather they consistently reminded her how much more there remained to be done.<sup>47</sup> But "at the cross" she heard the voice of God's acceptance: "My soul is in the dust, prostrate at the cross hoping for all there and after my poor little vile labors of the day, I go to rest having finished the day's work as well as I can and waiting for that voice each night that shall say 'Come up hither;' that I feel as void of care as a little child knows."<sup>48</sup>

Introspection sometimes caused Lady Huntingdon to doubt her own motives in ministry. Her chief opponents in this regard were the pride and self-love that had dominated her earlier life. She sometimes lived "under this extreme abhorrence of my labours" since she "could even soon be brought to think it is pride, presumption, self-love, and etc. that engages me rather than any motive more refined."<sup>49</sup> She sought to keep pride in check by attributing all success to God and by minimizing her own role in the various ministries in which she was involved.<sup>50</sup> And so, in the last year of her life, she exclaimed "the joy of the Lord is my strength," and resolved to "hold on and hold out, waiting for my inheritance that fadeth not away and made sure in bodily sufferings, [which] I have long known is preserved in heaven for a poor worthless, simple worm."<sup>51</sup> One of the negative aspects of Lady Huntingdon's introspective piety was that it too frequently used her feelings as a barometer for measuring the state of her soul. In July 1743, for example, she wrote Charles Wesley: "I would pray for you, if I could, but I cannot for anything but that God would have mercy upon me, the chief of sinners . . . ."<sup>52</sup> In 1778, she

<sup>44</sup>CHF #24, To C(?) Wesley, Oct. 7, 1752.

<sup>45</sup>Bridwell, Ms. #50, Letter to Mrs. Wadsworth, March 7, 1765.

<sup>46</sup>Prof. Murray's, Ms. #9, to Hawksworth, Oct. 13, 1773.

<sup>47</sup>CHF Ms. #88, to Charles Wesley, 1749?; CHF Ms. #32, to Charles Wesley, Jan. 7, 1754; Bridwell Ms. #68, to Mrs. Wadsworth, April 15, 1766; Prof. Murray's to Hawksworth, Sept. 23, 1775; Prof. Murray's, to Hawksworth, Aug. 30, 1775; Rylands English Ms. #338, Ms. #7, to Hawksworth, Feb. 16, 1779; CHF #77, to Charles Wesley, Nov. 7, 1788; CHF Ms. #135 to Carpenter, Feb. 10, 1787 etc.

<sup>48</sup>Prof. Murray's Ms. #9, to Hawksworth, Oct. 13, 1773.

<sup>49</sup>CHF Ms. #32, to Charles Wesley, Jan. 7, 1754.

<sup>50</sup>Bridwell Ms. #68, to Mrs. Wadsworth, April 15, 1766.

<sup>51</sup>Cheshunt, Ms. #E 4/17/4, to Mac Call, Dec. 2, 1790.

<sup>52</sup>CHF Ms. #13, to Charles Wesley, July 1743.

confided to an unnamed correspondent: "Faith, true Divine Faith, is at low ebb. I often think of myself a very Herod in a gorgeous robe of profession, such a poor, wretched, creature do I seem to myself, not worthy . . . to be called by that holy name 'Christian.'"<sup>53</sup>

It not surprising that Lady Huntingdon experienced periods of self doubt and emotional disturbance. But the amount and distribution of the "poor, vile sinner" language suggests that more than recurring bouts of doubt or depression was at work in her spiritual vocabulary. Did elements of early Methodist spirituality prompt her to engage in religious language that stressed self-deprecation? An important letter from the early 1740s—which may have been connected with the "Stillness Controversy"—indicates an affirmative answer. In this letter Lady Huntingdon reported to Charles Wesley the prescription which his brother, John Wesley, gave for the well-being of her soul:

. . . your brother thinks you not a plain dealer enough for the depth of mine iniquity. He wants me to be more a poor sinner, and that in the right sense of it, and indeed when I think of myself at all I feel it as a sore burden too heavy for me to bear, but I would as carefully avoid such a declaration if I did not feel it as any other untruth, but I think God and man is sufficient to fill my thoughts and if I don't always think myself a sinner it is because I don't think of myself as being but as nothing in the sight of the Lord . . ."<sup>54</sup>

John Wesley's recommendation that Selina see herself "more a poor sinner and . . . in the right sense of it" was probably connected with the Methodist soteriology of grace and Lady Huntingdon's ongoing warfare with pride. Not surprisingly, her own advice to William Piercy, written forty years later, strangely echoed Wesley's words: "O don't feel yourself anything but a poor vile sinner by nature and that grace alone has kept you and can alone help you. This dependent spirit in faith will do and carry you through all."<sup>55</sup>

Selina Hastings connected the vocabulary of being "a poor vile sinner" with "grace alone" and the cultivation of a "dependent spirit in faith." The independence of pride, and self-will was thought to be kept in check by such language, since it caused one to rely upon God's grace alone, and it developed reliance upon God rather than one's self. Hence, she exclaimed: "I am a desperate creature because a desperate sinner. This makes desperate faith by which alone all is attainable."<sup>56</sup> In a similar way, Selina occasionally called herself "a worm of His [God's] mercy."<sup>57</sup> Another element of this same piety was the belief that minimizing self and one's own deeds magnified God's grace, and power. Hence, Lady Huntingdon confided to Mrs. Wadsworth: "I hate to say anything of myself so that the tender and loving Bridegroom of

<sup>53</sup>*Prof. Murray's Ms. # 20*, to a "Faithfully esteemed friend," Dec. 5, 1778.

<sup>54</sup>*CHF Ms. #91*, to Charles Wesley (identified by contents), n.d.

<sup>55</sup>*Cheshunt, Ms. #A/4/3/3*, to Mr. Piercy, Oct. 8, 1773.

<sup>56</sup>*Bridwell, Ms. #57*, to Mrs. Wadsworth, Dec. 27, 1765.

<sup>57</sup>*Bridwell, Ms. #59*, recipient unknown, 1765.

our souls is but set forth.”<sup>58</sup> Its attack upon human pride and self-reliance, its stress upon God’s grace and faithful dependency upon God, as well as its tendency to minimize human efforts so that God might be exalted made the vocabulary which esteemed her as “a poor vile sinner” very attractive to Lady Huntingdon.

Poverty of spirit was a significant theme in Lady Huntingdon’s spirituality. In this she sought to emulate Jesus Christ: “Our Saviour’s spirit is a poor and lowly spirit that rises above pride and self esteem.”<sup>59</sup> Those who emulate the spirit of Christ develop a “poor heart” and profound trust in Him: “A poor heart wholly trusting on Him as wanting Him more than any other creature can want Him, fails not with Him of the bounty His loving kindness supplies.”<sup>60</sup> She yearned for spiritual poverty and its benefits, and she made it a constant focus of her reflection. She wrote: “My heart does breathe day and night to become the poor devoted creature of that tender hearted God who bore my sins and carried my sorrows . . . .”<sup>61</sup> Christ’s death on the cross, in Lady Huntingdon’s view, epitomized spiritual poverty. Hence, her prayer for James Hawksworth and herself was: “May the Lord keep you and me . . . poor enough to live upon the riches of the cross . . . .”<sup>62</sup> This living “upon the riches of the cross” amounted to living a humble life of obedience to God. As she advised William Piercy: “O! don’t feel your self any thing but a poor, vile sinner by nature and that grace alone has kept you and can alone help you. This dependent spirit in faith will do and carry you through all.”<sup>63</sup> This dependent spirit was the basis of Christian living and more particularly the reception of “knowledge of God.” As Selina Hastings wrote, “I so little know that I can but just say He does teach hearts and he will teach mine when I am poor, poor, enough to be taught in His poverty.”<sup>64</sup>

Spiritual poverty was an important element in Lady Huntingdon’s understanding of sanctification. She stressed utter consecration as the basis of sanctification: “*To be wholly the Lord’s*, has, I trust, been my object only and this I cannot fail while the pardon of grace remains in the Saviour’s compassionate heart for such a poor, vile sinner.”<sup>65</sup> She viewed pride as the chief opponent of utter consecration to Christ and sanctification: “Pride has so many works and various insinuations that I must ever be content to plunge my guilty self into His hands without reserve as only a sin offering to Him.”<sup>66</sup> She also characterized sanctification as an invasion of God’s love, “the fire of Zion,”<sup>67</sup>

<sup>58</sup>Bridwell, Ms. #55, to Mrs. Wadsworth, Dec. 3, 1765.

<sup>59</sup>Bridwell Ms. #55, to Mrs. Wadsworth, Dec. 3, 1765.

<sup>60</sup>Bridwell #55, to Mrs. Wadsworth, Dec. 3, 1765.

<sup>61</sup>Bridwell, Ms. #51, to Rev. Townsend, June 4, 1765.

<sup>62</sup>Prof. Murray’s Ms. #9, to Hawksworth, June 9, 1772.

<sup>63</sup>Cheshunt Ms. #A/4/3/3, letter to William Piercy, Oct. 8, 1773.

<sup>64</sup>CHF #72, to Charles Wesley.

<sup>65</sup>CHF #79, to Charles Wesley, Nov. 28, 1770, emphasis added.

<sup>66</sup>CHF Ms. #88, to Charles Wesley, 1749(?).

<sup>67</sup>Cheshunt Ms. #A 4/3/7, to William Piercy, n.d.

which destroys self-love and brings Christ into a person's life: "His presence is better than even the life He gives us to all eternity. It is by this and this only our will, our affections are separated (or sanctified) from earth, [and] selfish ends are all lost in Him."<sup>68</sup>

## V

Lady Huntingdon's vocabulary of self-deprecation was shaped by her own religious pilgrimage, by her ongoing warfare against pride and her earlier reliance upon good works as a basis of gaining God's acceptance. In this sense it was a corollary to her soteriology of grace and justification by faith. Her vocabulary was also shaped by early Methodist piety and the complicated social context in which she practiced her faith and exercised religious leadership. Like other early Methodists, she employed the language of self-loathing as an antidote to human pride and as such this language was part of her prescription for Christian Perfection. Her language of self-deprecation was also an element in Lady Huntingdon's reformation. It not only characterized her leadership style, it camouflaged her many unconventional deeds with conventional rhetoric. Her persistent unwillingness to speak positively of her various efforts was consistent with a spirituality that considered almost any positive mention of self to be a detraction from the glory appropriately due only to God, but this vocabulary also allowed her to work within the repressive social order of her day, and to reform it by employing the very rights and authority given to her by the old order.

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<sup>68</sup>*CHF* Ms. #88, recipient unknown (perhaps Charles Wesley), n.d.