Although known for its role in spiritual formation, the class meeting functioned extremely well as a catechumenate in early New York City Methodism (1766 to the mid-1820s) up until the introduction of the weekly “prayer meeting” which placed less emphasis on a carefully prepared conversion experience. In England, from its inception, the class meeting also served a preparatory, pre-conversion role because Wesley had expected gradual, rather than instantaneous conversions and because the class meeting system, through its class leaders, not only “examined” their members on their discipleship, but also gave doctrinal instruction which particularly assisted new persons. Similarly, the class meeting system in early New York City Methodism retained this catechumenate role because it also emphasized gradual conversions, set high standards for full membership, and fostered close-knit relationships within the classes themselves. Eventually, however, the weekly “prayer meeting” began to replace the evangelistic, pre-conversion role of the class meeting because the prayer meeting emphasized instantaneous conversions which its new methods—borrowed from the camp meeting—apparently brought about. To be sure, the informality and adaptability of the prayer meeting did make it attractive to many people.

The class meeting earlier performed a catechumenate function in British Methodism because of two factors. First, Wesley and the early Methodists normally viewed conversion as a process rather than as an instantaneous experience. Second, several key elements of the class meeting itself, personal testimony, doctrinal instruction, and the encouragement of the class leader, guided “seekers” to new life in Christ.

Besides fulfilling financial and “spiritual growth” roles in British Methodism, the class meeting also performed an evangelistic func-

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1The catechumenate was a preparatory period in which candidates for baptism were instructed in the basics of Christian doctrine. This preparatory period of instruction was fairly common in the early Church, although its length could vary from the period of Lent to up to three years. Those instructed were called “catechumens.”
tion. Indeed, William Dean has described the class meeting as the preeminent "evangelistic structure of Methodism at least until around 1830" and noted that the "basic purpose of the class meeting was designed not so much to benefit the converted person (who could be invited to join a band meeting) as to benefit the unconverted seeker." Moreover, the 1820 Liverpool Conference stressed the evangelistic use of the class meeting by urging the long established local Methodist societies, "to attempt the formation of new classes in suitable neighborhoods, where we may hope by that method to gather some persons who are 'not far from the kingdom of God.'"

Furthermore, this evangelistic understanding of the class meeting was rooted in the idea that conversion was a gradual process which contained several distinct elements and which could take days, weeks, months, or even years.

Many of these conversions occurred in three stages. First, the "early Methodists believed that the goal of preaching was not conversion, but 'awakening'—the stirring of a deep religious sense of condemnation and judgment for having broken God's laws." Second, both clergy and laity tried to guide the newly awakened "seeker" into a class where they could receive further instruction on the doctrines of Christianity in preparation for baptism and full membership in the society. In this vein, Henry Goodfellow, a

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3 In the 1820s and early 1830s, the "prayer meeting," which had been transplanted from America, began to replace the traditional Sunday evening society meeting and quickly became the chief evangelistic tool of Methodism. Prayer meetings of a less revivalistic nature had also existed in Wesley's time. He approved of them as long as they didn't interfere with band and class meetings.


6 Modern Christian initiation has begun to recover the concept of gradual conversion and to reinstitute a pre-baptismal catechumenate. For instance, the Roman Catholic *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* states that "the initiation of catechumens is a gradual process that takes place within the community of the faithful. By joining the catechumens in reflecting on the value of the paschal mystery and by renewing their own conversion, the faithful provide an example that will help the catechumens to obey the Holy Spirit more generously," in *The Rites of the Catholic Church* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1988), IA, 36-7.

7 William W. Dean, "Disciplined Fellowship: The Rise and Decline of Cell Groups in British Methodism" (Ph.D. diss., University of Iowa, 1985), 301.

8 David Holsclaw, "The Demise of Disciplined Christian Fellowship: The Methodist Class Meeting in Nineteenth-Century America" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, 1979), 10-1. Sometimes the traveling preacher formed an entirely new class; on other occasions, however, the newly awakened persons simply joined existing classes. A three month probation period was required as preparation for baptism and for becoming a full member of the society. During this
Methodist "local preacher," after preaching for the second time in the same place,

invited "serious" persons to remain behind after the preaching service. He explained something of the organization of Methodism. He put fifteen persons into a class, and permitted several others to attend without enrolling them. 10

Similarly, a Methodist preaching service so affected William Reeves that he spoke to the preacher after service who,

then tried to give me some comfort, and spoke many comfortable words to me; but alas! I could take no comfort. He then spoke to Mr. Shaw, to take me to his class which he did the next night. 11

Again, some evangelistically-minded class leaders, such as William Carvosso, actively recruited persons for the class meeting after the Sunday preaching service had ended. 12

Last of all, after attending class meetings for a period of time, the probationer usually experienced a conversion as a result of the class leader’s weekly instruction and the veteran class members’ personal accounts of their discipleship. 13 Exemplifying this is that of all the Methodist biographical accounts before 1820, more than half reported conversion occurring either in a class meeting or in talking with the class leader. Moreover, none of these accounts indicated a conversion which occurred during a preaching service. 14

time, the “seeker” attended the weekly society and class meetings. At the end of the three months, the class leaders of the society, who met regularly in the Leaders’ Meeting, voted to accept or reject the candidate. Moreover, probation could also be extended beyond the normal three months, if necessary.

9A local preacher had a full-time secular occupation such as a business, farm, or trade and was licensed by his quarterly conference to preach only in his own city or town.

10Dean, “Disciplined Fellowship,” 208–09.


12Corderoy, *Father Reeves*, 32. Corderoy recalled that during the last hymn of a preaching service, Carvosso’s “active eyes would scan the neighboring pews, but especially the free seats, to see whose moistened eye gave evidence that the heart was touched. Many times and oft, the service over, was the good man found planted just in the right place, beside some poor broken-hearted sinner, begging him to come to class.”

13In examining early British Methodist conversion accounts, William Dean concluded that “the instances in which a Methodist recorded having been converted in a preaching service are very few indeed, and those such accounts are of very personal and private events in the context of a crowd—no public appeals and massed prayer meetings. Not until the early decades of the nineteenth century do we begin to read of conversions in after-preaching prayer meetings at the communion rail or in the vestry, and it was not until mid-century that conversions became normally associated with the chapel service. Of those Methodists born before 1800 whose conversion accounts I have read, the vast majority record their conversion in the context of a class meeting or the influence of a class leader. The sequence was usually, ‘I was convicted of my sin, I went to class meeting, I was converted,’” in William Dean, “The Evangelistic Function of the Class Meeting,” *Conservative Evangelicals in Methodism Newsletter* 10 (1983): 34–5.

14Dean, 35.
Equally important, the format of the class meeting assisted in the process of conversion. First, the class leader opened the meeting with a prayer and a hymn. Second, he gave an account of his own spiritual progress of the past week. An example of this is found in Joseph Barker’s account, in which he related that the class leader “sometimes tells what trials he has met with, and what deliverances he has experienced” or “how he felt at the love feast, the prayer-meeting, or the fellowship meeting, what liberty he had in secret prayer, how he felt while reading the Scriptures, or hearing sermons, or while busy at his work, what passages have come to his mind.” Next, the class leader asked each member, in turn, questions such as “How has it been with your soul?” or “Well, brother, how do you feel the state of your mind tonight?” or “Sister, will you tell us what the Lord is doing for you?” Finally, the class leader responded to each member’s report with suitable words of encouragement, exhortation, or correction after which the class sang a verse or two from an appropriate hymn.

II

Similarly, the class meeting system functioned as a catechumenate in the New York Society and, later, in the Methodist Episcopal Churches in lower Manhattan in three principal ways. First, as in England, the Methodist leadership stressed gradual conversions. Second, early New York City Methodism set high standards for its probationary members which, in turn, called forth a deep commitment on their part. Third, since many members remained in the same classes over a long period of time, close relationships were apparently formed which helped the new members sustain a long-term personal commitment to Christ and to the church.

As in England, early New York City Methodism considered gradual conversions which occurred as a result of regular class meeting attendance as the norm. First, a person was usually “awakened” at one of the Methodist “public preaching” services which were held on Sundays and on other designated weeknights. Then, the person “under conviction” either joined a class or was asked to join one. To illustrate, the Reverend William Jessop, who had been

12Barker, “A Methodist Class Meeting,” 49.
14The first “Methodist Society” began meeting at John Street in 1766. In 1784, when the Methodist Episcopal Church was established, the name was changed to the John Street Methodist Episcopal Church. Two other churches were soon established: Forsyth Street in 1792 and Duane Street in 1798. In 1800, the “New York Circuit” was formed. This unit lasted until 1832 when it was subdivided into the New York East and the New York West Circuits. By the mid-1820s, the New York Circuit contained seven churches.
stationed at John Street Church in 1790, recorded how on February 5, 1798, while stationed in Nova Scotia, he went home with a “Mr. G.” after an evening prayer meeting and,

conversed with him and his wife concerning religion and explaining to them the rules of the Methodists. When I had done saying what I had to say, they desired me to set their names down on the class paper, saying they were determined to follow that way as long as the Lord should spare them. 19

Again, the Reverend Tobias Spicer wrote that, as a young man living and working in lower Manhattan,

I offered myself to the Methodists, was admitted on probation as a seeker of religion. Reverend Elias Vanderlip was the preacher in charge, who received me into society, and John Craw was the leader to whose class I was assigned.20

In addition, this probationary status was called “admitted on trial.”21 Finally, after six months of probation, at the weekly (later monthly) Leaders’ and Stewards’ Meeting, class leaders either recommended that their probationers be approved for church membership or be continued on probation for another six months. In this vein, the Reverend Alonzo Selleck recalled that he had,

joined on probation the Willett Street Methodist Episcopal Church, and was assigned to the class of Brother Abram Rile. At the end of his probation he was baptized by Reverend Daniel Ostrander, and was received into full membership.22

Furthermore, emotional appeals and mechanical methods to achieve conversion were never used. This idea is shown by the sensitivity and patience of the class leaders which allowed the probationer to experience the class meeting in a non-threatening and non-judgmental way. Moreover, class leaders did not force probationers to give detailed answers to the questions which were asked of them each week; instead they tried to discern the spiritual level of each probationer and act accordingly.23 Indeed, the Reverend John Bangs wrote,

21Frederick Norwood, Church Membership in the Methodist Tradition (Nashville: Methodist Publishing House, 1958), 34. In New York City, in particular, and America, in general, the trial period lasted a minimum of six months and often longer, at least up to 1830. This was three months longer than the British probationary period. A person was received “on trial” in one of two ways: by the recommendation of another member or by attending three or four class meetings. During this time, the probationary member could also attend the private Sunday evening society meeting and the monthly love feast.
22Reverend Alonzo Selleck, Recollections of an Itinerant Life (New York: Phillips and Hunt, 1886), 34. Willett Street Methodist Episcopal Church, one of the New York Circuit churches, was established in 1826.
23“Class Meetings,” Christian Advocate and Journal, 23 April 1830. The anonymous writer of this article described the evangelistic approach of the class meeting “as a school for those who are seeking the Lord. Here they are instructed personally, and individually, in the things which
that before my conversion I was permitted when under deep concern of mind, to take a seat in a class meeting, far back, feeling lonely and dejected. When the minister had spoken to the rest of the people, he did all in his power to administer consolation. I answered his questions as well as I was able, but could not fully explain the deep feelings of my heart. 24

At the same time, more rapid conversions did occasionally occur in the class meeting, but not as a result of pressure. Usually the person had been actively seeking God for some time previously. An example is the experience of Mrs. John Bangs who had been awakened earlier by Methodist preaching and,

continued to seek, and one sabbath she requested to join the class as a seeker, and was admitted. After returning home her distress of mind increased until the next morning, when, while engaged in prayer and reading the Scriptures, her soul was brought into unspeakable enjoyment in believing. 25

Some conversions, however, did not fit the usual pattern. For example, Elizabeth Janion experienced “peace with God” after attending only a few class meetings. On the last day of a New York Circuit Quarterly Conference, she heard the Reverend John Reese preach on the text, “Awake to righteousness and sin not; for some have not the knowledge of God. I speak this to your shame.” As a result, she was “convicted,” joined a class, and was converted after the third meeting. 26

Besides assisting in the process of conversion, another catechumenate function of the class meeting was the way in which the class leaders set and adhered to high standards for admission into the church. To illustrate, during the 1780s and 1790s, class leaders recommended that probationers who had completed their probation either be approved for full membership or be continued on probation for another six months. 27 Yet, acceptance into the Society belong to their peace. They are exhorted to come to him by faith and prayer. Here they meet, with those who have similar feelings, and also have sought the Lord until they found him as their Savior.”

26 Reverend George Coles, Heroines of Methodism (New York: Carlton and Porter, 1857), 252.
27 These recommendations were made at the Leaders’ Meetings which were held weekly and then monthly. Sometimes, they were combined into the Leaders’ and Stewards’ Meetings. The Order of Business for a Leaders’ Meeting (circa late 1840s and early 1850s) included singing and prayer, reading of minutes of past meeting, persons received by letter and on probation, those dismissed by certificate or dropped by probation, those passed for membership, transfers from class to class, those who were sick or dead, finances, and miscellaneous, in “John Street Church. Classes. 1842–54” (New York, NY: New York Public Library [hereafter, NYPL], Rare Books and Manuscripts Division, Methodist Episcopal Church Records [hereafter, MECR], vol. 240, photo-copied).
(as the Methodist Episcopal Churches were still called) was far from automatic. Indeed, the first section of the "State of the Society" for 1791 was titled, "First, of those who remain on trial" (the terms, "kept on trial" or "brought forward," were also used to indicate an extended probation). Again, the New York Society’s membership lists in the 1790s listed numerous persons who were "kept on trial," including a future class leader, Moses West, who was "declined" after his first trial on June 17, 1790, and read into society on July 5, 1792, making a total of twenty-five months of probation. In contrast, those who were approved for membership were usually "read into Society" at the next society meeting or love feast. Thus, in the formative years of New York City Methodism, the class system followed the Wesleyan concept of the catechumenate without any deviation.

Similarly, from 1800 to 1832, during the years when the Lower Manhattan Methodist Episcopal Churches were grouped in the "New York Circuit" and served by a rotating corps of stationed preachers, the same careful process was followed. Indeed, the records of the New York Circuit during this time reveal that probation was often routinely extended for another six months. For instance, the 1827 "Probationers" book recorded that Elizabeth Dayton had been "carried forward" and Maria Friday "laid over." Likewise, in the 1832 "Probationers" book, Horace Close was given a "new probation." Moreover, during the five month period from January to May, 1814, only seventy-four out of one hundred twenty-four probationers, or approximately sixty percent, were approved for full membership. In that same period, twelve were "laid over;" twenty were "dropped" (most likely for non-attendance at class meeting), and two were "read out" for repeated unchristian behavior. Again, during the five month period from July to November, 1816, only fifty-one out of sixty-seven probationers, or approximately seventy-six percent, were approved for full membership; seven were "laid over" and nine were "dropped." In fact, in the early 1830s, probationers had to be approved at both the "sectional" and "general" leaders’ meetings. As an

28 "John Street Methodist Episcopal Church" (New York, NY: NYPL, Rare Books and Manuscripts Division, MECR, vol. 241, photocopied).
29 Methodist Episcopal Church. The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America [hereafter, Discipline] (New York: William Ross, 1797), 70.
30 By the 1820s, the New York Circuit had seven churches: John Street, Duane Street, Greenwich Village, Allen Street, Forsyth Street, Bowery Village, and Willett Street (originally the "Mission House" on Broome Street). The first three churches were on the west side and the last four on the east side.
31 "Methodist Episcopal Church of New York. Probationers" (New York, NY: NYPL, Rare Books and Manuscripts Division, MECR, vols. 77–8, photocopied).
32 Forsyth Street Church. Board of Leaders’ Minutes. 1825–32" (New York, NY: NYPL, Rare Books and Manuscripts Division, MECR, vol. 212, photocopied).
33 As the New York Circuit expanded to seven churches in the 1820s, it became more difficult to hold just one leaders’ meeting; consequently, smaller "sectional" meetings and a larger "general" meeting were held. The sectional meetings preceded the general meeting.
illustration, the probationers' list for 1831 recorded that Mary Ann Seely "passed" at both meetings whereas Jane Milliken "passed" at the sectional but was "dropped" at the general meeting. At the same time, class leaders and stationed preachers attempted to reach those who had fallen away during the probationary period. In this vein, on June 17, 1830, the New York Preacher's Meeting resolved to "proceed forthwith in conjunction with the Leaders of the several Sections to look up the delinquent Probationers that we may be prepared to report definitely on these cases at the next Leaders' meeting. Nonetheless, it was the class leaders, and not the preachers, who truly knew the spiritual condition of the probationers and made the important decisions on who should be admitted into the church. In short, the class leaders functioned as "sub-pastors" who informed the other class leaders, as well as the stationed preachers, on the spiritual condition of their probationers.

Finally, the third catechumenate function of the class meeting was its apparent ability to foster close relationships both among those who remained in the same class for a long period of time and between class members and their class leaders which, in all likelihood, spiritually strengthened probationers and new members alike. To illustrate, the class lists from 1785 to 1796 contain numerous examples of people being in the same class for years at a time such as Jane Hipp and Mary Sands who were in Peter McLean's class together from 1791 to 1796 and possibly longer. Similarly, Susannah Mercein and Sarah Riker were in John Staples' class from at least 1785 to 1795. Moreover, since class lists for the New York Society are extant only for 1785, 1787, 1791, and 1795, it is possible that these class members, and others, were in the same class for a much longer period than five years. Also, class lists from the New York Circuit period (1800–1832) further confirm these patterns. Besides meeting each other at class meeting, some class members visited

34 "Methodist Episcopal Church of New York: Probationers" (New York, NY: NYPL, Rare Books and Manuscripts Division, MECR, vols. 77–8, photocopied). This information was entered on October 29, 1831.
35 The New York Preachers' Meeting was formed on January 22, 1817, with twenty-seven members; it met on Wednesday evenings at 6:30 p.m. at the Forsyth Street parsonage. According to the minutes of the first meeting, the preachers were to "meet every Wednesday evening for the purpose of conversation and mutual improvement on moral and religious subjects. The chairman or other brother shall propose one or more subjects or questions for the next meeting which the majority must approve." Beginning in 1824, the meeting was moved to Saturday morning at nine a.m. at the parsonage of the preacher-in-charge. In the 1820s and 1830s, the meeting took on a more pastoral tone. The 1824 agenda called for the preachers to "report probationers received during the week, members received on certificate, members removed, deaths, disorderly persons, vacant classes, or the manner in which they have been filled" as well as "propose new leaders and report trials of accused persons," in "New York Preachers' Meeting. Minutes" (New York, NY: NYPL, Rare Books and Manuscripts Division, MECR, vol. 116, photocopied).
37 "John Street Church" (New York, NY: NYPL, Rare Books and Manuscripts Division, MECR, vol. 241, photocopied).
as a group. For instance, early New York City Methodist records contain accounts both of classmates visiting a sick member of their class in order to pray for healing and of a dying class member exhorting his or her fellow classmates to persevere in the faith. ³⁸

In addition to developing close bonds among members of the same class, the class meeting was also apparently able to foster close "class leader–class member" relationships. In this vein, the class lists from 1785 to 1795 show that a number of women had the same class leaders from five to eleven years. Specifically, Sarah Coodingston was in John Bleecker's class for ten years, Susannah Mercein and Sara Riker were in Staples' for ten and eleven years, respectively, and Mary Sand was in McLean's for eleven. ³⁹ Consequently, these class leaders might have found it easier spiritually to direct their long-term members. For example, over a five to ten year period, the leader would come to know their temperaments, their strengths and weaknesses, and the various kinds of experiences they normally encountered at home and at work making it easier to encourage, instruct, or admonish them. Thus, for probationers and newly approved members, this stable pattern probably helped them remain committed to growing in holiness.

At the same time, some class leaders apparently were changed frequently. To illustrate, class lists of this early period show that six women had three different leaders, three other women had four different leaders, and one woman had five. ⁴⁰ To be sure, a change in class leaders could also have a positive effect. For example, while a frequent change of class leaders could affect long-term "class leader–class member relationships," it could also bring variety and new enthusiasm to a lifeless class. In fact, Wesley had recommended that leaders frequently be changed, especially those who were ineffective. ⁴¹ Nonetheless, the frequent changing of some leaders at John Street Church may have been due to more practical concerns such as a shortage of leaders or a rapidly expanding membership that required constant class realignment.

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³⁹ "John Street Church" (New York, NY: Rare Books and Manuscripts Division, MECR, vol. 241, photocopied). Throughout the 1780s and 1790s, women made up two thirds of the membership of the New York Society.
⁴⁰ "John Street Church. Class Lists" (New York, NY: NYPL, Rare Books and Manuscripts Division, MECR, vols. 233 and 241, photocopied). Moreover, six other women had two different leaders during 1785 and 1796. These women were, in alphabetical order, Hester Bleecker, Elizabeth Carpenter, Hannah Grant, Mary Lent, Rachel McLean, and Hester (or Helen) Russell. For a chart of members having three or more leaders from 1785–1796, see Appendix 4 in Philip F. Hardt, "A Prudential Means of Grace: The Class Meeting in Early New York City Methodism, 1766–1870" (Ph.D. diss., Fordham University, 1998), 230.
in the various neighborhoods. In addition, autocratic deacons and elders sometimes simply removed class leaders without just cause. As an illustration, Francis Asbury wrote to the Reverend Ezekiel Cooper,

that we ought to guard against these local presiding elders for three or four years in a town or city that can change or suspend leaders of twenty or thirty years standing, but let it be known for what fault. Then expel them.

In short, besides the evangelistic and rigorous screening process for probationers, the class meeting system quite naturally continued to provide close-knit fellowship for new Christians as they were assimilated into the churches of the New York Circuit.

III

By the 1820s, however, the weekly "prayer meeting" became the New York Circuit's primary method of evangelization and consequently diminished the class meeting's traditional role in Christian initiation. Influenced by the "camp meeting," these prayer meetings emphasized instantaneous conversions, were highly emotional in content, and depended on certain standard techniques. At the same time, the informality and adaptability of the prayer meeting helped numerous persons experience God in a personal and heart-felt way.

In order to understand how the prayer meeting developed as it did in the New York Circuit, it is necessary to examine the origins of the camp meeting which preceded and influenced it. Camp meetings have been thought to begin at Cane Ridge in Bourbon County, Kentucky, in August, 1801. The Methodists who had participated at Cane Ridge very quickly began to hold camp meetings of their own and, by 1810, almost every Methodist circuit had

42 Class size grew to immense proportions during the years of the New York Circuit with some classes having as many as sixty and seventy members. Also, one class leader often had the responsibility for two, and on rare occasions, three classes. For additional information on large classes in the New York Circuit period, see Hardt, "The Class Meeting in Early New York City Methodism," 101-05.

43 Francis Asbury, no place indicated, to Reverend Ezekiel Cooper, New York City, no date, Ezekiel Cooper Collection, vol. 18, ms. 12, Garrett Evangelical Seminary, Evanston, Illinois. Judging from his letter, Asbury apparently was hundreds of miles away. Cooper may have been stationed in New York City since Asbury was the one who made the appointments each year and would have known where to reach him. The letter, however, did not indicate where this abuse had occurred. At the same time, Asbury felt Cooper could correct the situation and urged him to "state the case of those ejected leaders, many will know whom you mean."

44 Paul K. Conkin, Cane Ridge: America's Pentecost (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 83-96. The Cane Ridge camp meeting was actually patterned after the large outdoor communion services held once or twice yearly in the Scottish Presbyterian Church in the eighteenth century. These special services drew up to thirty thousand persons and lasted three to four days. Conversions often occurred and unusual phenomena were also reported, see Conkin, 18-25.
Camp meetings, however, were not just limited to the south and west. Indeed, according to Richard Carwardine, "the camp meeting had been transferred to eastern areas as an adjunct and a spur to city revivalism."

Unlike the class meeting, the weekly prayer meeting sought to initiate a person into the Christian faith in just one evening through a three-step process. First, fervent evangelical preaching and exhortations often "converted" persons of their need for reconciliation with God. Next, unlike the six-month probationary process, those awakened were invited to make an immediate response by coming to the altar rail for prayer where the minister and other appointed church members offered sustained prayer for them. Third, great pressure was placed on the "penitents" to experience a heart-felt conversion. This idea is shown by James P. Horton's account of a prayer meeting at the Willett Street Methodist Episcopal Church in which the "mourners" who were invited forward,

came flocking to the altar and in a short time the Lord converted all that came to the altar. We continued our meeting until nearly 11:00 o'clock, and there were twenty-five, I believe, soundly converted during the meeting. I never saw people get religion so easy as they did that night.

Besides the new emphasis on instantaneous conversions, the prayer meeting succeeded as an evangelistic tool because of two other reasons. First, the prayer meeting had an informal structure which consisted of extemporaneous prayers and exhortations which were often led by laypersons. In contrast, the class meeting could become routine and dull because of its repetitive question-and-answer format. Moreover, the prayer meeting allowed women...
Class Meeting in Early New York City Methodism

to exhort and pray, a practice which was not allowed in the other Protestant churches. These ideas are shown by the Reverend John Clark’s recollection of his first prayer meeting where,

after several prayers had been offered, the exercises were changed, and exhortations were given by several persons in succession. At length, Mrs. Richards, the wife of the class-leader, addressed the little assembly in an affectionate and powerful manner."

Another reason for the prayer meeting’s apparent evangelistic success was its ability to adapt itself easily to different settings and groups. In addition to church sanctuaries, some prayer meetings were held in private homes or smaller rooms in churches. For example, the Reverend Laban Clark, in his “Sketch of the Rise and Present State of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the City of New York,” described a prayer meeting begun in 1825 at the John Street Church “at the request of pious females, exclusively for their own sex, in one of the class rooms in the basement story of the church.” Furthermore, since prayer meetings were so flexible, they could be directed toward specific constituencies, such as the “seekers’ prayer meeting” held at the John Street parsonage every Monday afternoon. Accordingly, the Reverend Heman Bangs, who was stationed at John Street at that time, praised the “seekers’ prayer meetings,” which we find very profitable; those wounded on the Sabbath, we gather up here. Many were present today. Some wept aloud for mercy; others shouted for joy. It was the most powerful time I have seen since I have been in New York.

Similarly, “camp meeting—prayer meetings” were often held in the Manhattan churches for those who had either been “awakened” or converted at the out-of-town meetings to encourage them to join a class where they could receive a fuller presentation of the Gospel message and begin the process of assimilation into the body of Christ.

IV

In short, the Methodist class meeting in early New York City Methodism, as well as helping full members grow in their faith, catechized its probationary members—at least up to the mid-1820s—in true Wesleyan fashion. As in England, gradual conversions were seen as the norm for the first sixty

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52 From 1810 to 1830, many August camp meetings were held in New Jersey, Long Island, and in the mid-Hudson River Valley area. Class leaders often arranged group transportation by steamboat from Manhattan to the camp meetings.
years and the class leader unfailingly provided doctrinal instruction along with patient sensitivity to the state of each probationer. Besides the key role of the New York City class leaders, the testimonies or "reports" of the long-time members in the class meeting also helped the probationers experience a true and lasting conversion. Again, at least up through the mid-1820s, the close scrutiny of the probationers at the monthly Leaders' Meetings insured that only those persons who actually demonstrated commitment and appropriate Christian moral behavior would be admitted. Finally, the way in which many members and class leaders remained in the same classes over long periods of time apparently allowed both new and long-time members to form close spiritual associations both in and out of class. Conversely, the popularity of the weekly prayer meeting with its emotional approach to conversion—which was now seen as occurring in one evening instead of over the course of six months (of probationary membership)—in all likelihood caused the class meeting to recede in evangelistic and catechetical importance. Granted, some aspects of the prayer meeting, such as the way it allowed both men and women to participate and its ability to be held in both large and small settings, did allow many people to have genuine spiritual experiences. The prayer meeting, however, weakened the catechetical role of the class meeting and ushered New York City Methodism into a new era in which both probationary and long-time members increasingly avoided the searching weekly examination of what Wesley had called one of Methodism's "prudential means of grace." Moreover, the original Wesleyan synthesis of justification and sanctification had started to break down. Indeed, in the 18th century, Wesley had seen the futility in only converting people without joining them into a close-knit community where they could grow in grace.53 Consequently, New York City Methodism, in particular, and American Methodism, in general, were about to exchange a proven initiation process, with roots in the early church, for a highly emotional and heavily contrived one which produced questionable results. Indeed, the rest of the 19th century would reveal just how far Methodism had departed from its Wesleyan beginnings.

53Wesley felt so strongly about putting new converts into classes that he would not preach in certain areas unless societies and classes could be formed. On August 25, 1763, he noted that "the preaching like an apostle, without joining together those that are awakened and training them up in the ways of God, is only begetting children for the murderer. How much preaching has there been for these twenty years all over Pembrokeshire, but no societies, no discipline, no order or connexion; and the consequence is that nine in ten of the once-awakened are now faster asleep," in John Wesley, The Journal of the Reverend John Wesley, A.M., Standard Edition. Edited by Nehemiah Curnock (London: Robert Culley, 1909), 5:26.