The Methodist Episcopal Church was remarkably successful during the period 1798 - 1840. The period is bounded by the Second Great Awakening and the rising debate over slavery, which dwarfed other issues by 1840. Membership grew from 60,169 in 1798 to 795,445 reported by the General Conference of 1840. Institutions of learning, e.g., Augusta College, Madison College, Indiana Asbury, Centenary College, LaGrange, Wesleyan, Emory, and Henry College, were founded. By 1833, Methodists had Bible, Sunday School, Tract, and Mission societies. In 1836, the Methodist Publishing House became the Methodist Book Concern. In the writings of the itinerants for the period there was one generally stated reason for this success: “Doubtless our denominational progress is attributable to a great many conditions, but our preaching has been the chief one; it has been related to and has empowered all others.” “Asbury and his corps of Circuit-Riders believed that the nation could actually be reformed and the world saved by the ‘foolishness of preaching’.”

A primary condition that fostered Methodism’s growth was the revivalism of America’s Second Great Awakening which extended at least from 1797 to 1817. An eastern phase revolved around Yale College and President Timothy Dwight, while a western phase was associated with the Cane Ridge, Kentucky meeting of 1801. The innovation of the frontier camp meeting was adopted by the Methodists and in 1807 Francis Asbury wrote to Edward Dromgoole, “camp meetings prevail generally.” Itinerancy, the fundamental polity of the Methodist Episcopal Church, made religious services available to a mobile and westward moving population. The hierarchical system of the church’s organization made possible the creation of circuits and the assignment of traveling preachers to serve them. In 1796, the

General Conference, the denomination's governing body which met quadrennially, created six geographically identifiable annual conferences. Due to growth and expansion, twenty-eight conferences are listed in the General Conference Minutes of 1840. In 1798, there were 267 preachers; by 1840 there were 3,413 traveling preachers plus 6,339 local preachers.3

A prominent feature of Methodism at every level was preaching. The highlight of General, Annual, and District conferences as well as circuit and station religious services was preaching. Preachers were judged largely on their preaching ability. The first Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1784 contained these questions:

What is the best general method of preaching? Ans. 1. To invite. 2. To convince. 3. To offer Christ. 4. To build up; and to do this in some measure in every sermon. Are there any smaller advices relative to preaching which might be of use to us? Ans. Perhaps these; 1. Be sure never to disappoint a congregation, unless in case of life or death. 2. Begin [and end] precisely at the time appointed. 3. Let your whole deportment before the congregation be serious, weighty, and solemn. 4. Always suit your subject to your audience. 5. Choose the plainest text you can. 6 . . . . keep to your text, and make out what you take in hand.4

For a generation and more these statements provided official guidance for Methodist preaching.

The founding of The Methodist Magazine in 1818 with its emphasis on developments in American Methodism regularly featured advice and commentary on preaching. An issue in 1820 admonished preachers:

...open the sacred volume – select your text – divide your discourse into 1st, 2nd, and 3rd propositions, and promise a clear, lucid, and full ecclesiassment of the whole... if you are not able to communicate it in a correct and pleasing style, it will not be heard with pleasure, nor received to advantage... acknowledge the vast importance of cultivating a chaste, correct, and graceful delivery. The great and glorious truths of the Gospel lose much of their force and grandeur by being uttered in a coarse and ungrammatical style.5

Although the author makes no reference to John Wesley's Rules of Preaching, the similarities are striking. "After all, you must admit, that the utility of your preaching can only be tested by the effects it produces on the minds of those who sit under

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3Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1773 – 1828 (New York: T. Mason & G. Lane, 1840), I: 81; Minutes (1845), III: 63.
4Robert Emory, History of the Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church (New York: G. Lane & P. P. Sandford, 1844), 52 – 53.
your ministry?” was the standard in *The Methodist Magazine*. Mr. Wesley’s rule was, “Have they success?”

Although the type of sermon Methodist itinerants delivered is difficult to define, preachers were aware that the sermon was the center of most worship services. “Dressed in round-breasted coat, long vest with the corners cut off, short breeches, and long stockings, with hair turned back, . . . growing down to his shoulders, . . . these preachers believed . . . with their mentors, John Wesley and Francis Asbury, [they] were in the ‘apostolic succession’.” Recognizing that language was a key element, they used “convincational” language to persuade, affirm, and convince hearers of the ideas, values, and attitudes they preached. Yet, “the Methodist pulpit has not received the recognition which the achievements of the Methodist Church justify.”

The discovery and the utilization of volumes of manuscript sermons, outlines, recorded materials, and published sermons for the period 1798 – 1840 have made possible the examination of scores of examples of sermonic materials. While the subjects of these records are generally theological (which deserves a separate essay), an analysis of the form, style, and delivery of the preacher’s message provides insight into the reasons for success.

I

There was an acceptable form in which sermons were organized and delivered although there was no formal rule imposing a prescribed procedure. The formula included the reading of a text, an introduction, body, and conclusion. Published advice was, “Never attempt to preach without deliberate preparation . . . . Give a short and plain solution to the text; and, . . . take the nearest route to the sinner’s heart.” In a more elaborate fashion John A. Roche wrote, “As the osseous system is essential to the human organization, so is a skeleton to a sermon. As through the entire length of the spinal column there runs what may be called brain matter, so in every well constructed discourse there must run the matter that shows a sound and disciplined mind . . . . Passion is not enough.” In 1834, the *Christian Advocate and Journal* carried the admonition, “in each sermon let there be but few divisions, and each division be well illustrated by facts and Scripture.”

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5Several manuscripts used in this essay were found in Lovely Lane Chapel, Baltimore, Md. Periodical literature was used at Old St. George’s United Methodist Church, Philadelphia, PA.
The direct approach was the method generally used in introducing the subject of a sermon. The introduction usually was short, but in the case of more learned preachers, there are examples of introductions that portray a larger background. Of the former type, John Quigley, preaching on the subject “Salvation,” went directly to the point. “The plan of salvation is adapted to the wants of mankind in every possible condition of life,” he declared. In another, James B. Finley stated, “the history of Elisha the prophet is one of great interest.” These examples were pointed and they left no doubt in the hearer’s mind what was to follow. John M. Maffitt, on the other hand, provides an illustration of an enlarged introduction. “The prophet Isaiah,” he announced, “struck the solemn harp of prophecy with a master’s hand. His mind was of such a sublime and toneful mould, that had he lived in Greece, he would have been its Homer; or in a later age, the Milton of Classic England.” This latter type of introduction was used more frequently in sermons for special occasions, e.g., funerals, dedications, or anniversary discourses.

William Simmons, in a sermon entitled, “Christ and his Forerunner,” stated his divisions immediately after the introduction: “... in the discussions of this subject, I shall consider, I. The character and work of John. II. The character and work of Christ.” The intent to direct the thinking of the audience and prepare them for what followed is clear. John Baer in preaching on “Conversion” selected the text, John 3:3, identified two divisions and elaborated each with five scriptural illustrations plus eight examples from experience. Although there was no stated requirement that the preacher announce the organization of a sermon, it was commonly done. Even if the structure of the sermon was not announced, there are numerous examples of itinerants sketching their outlines and identifying major points in preparation for preaching. Practically every sermon was constructed in a simple style. Two, three, or four points constituted the outline and it was the exception for a sermon to contain eight or nine points with sub-divisions. When Phinehas Price delivered a sermon entitled, “The Authenticity of Holy Scripture,” he had five divisions. John Baer had seven to develop in his discourse entitled “Redemption.”

The expository type sermon was frequently used. The preacher simply took the natural divisions of the text. Francis Asbury and Wilbur Fisk were

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13Sermons on Miscellaneous Subjects (Cincinnati: The Methodist Book Concern, 1847), 153, 182.
15Sermons on Miscellaneous Subjects, 254; John Baer, “Skeletons of Sermons,” n.d., 3 - 4 (Mss. in Lovely Lane Chapel, Baltimore, Md.).
similar in this regard. On Bishop Asbury’s sermon at the 1812 General Conference, Henry Boehm wrote, “No man ever understood adaption in preaching better than Francis Asbury.” Asbury’s expository approach is evident in his writing. “I enlarged on Gal. 2:20. It was observed: 1. That Christ crucified was the grand subject; next in continuance, the being crucified with Christ. 2. ‘I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me,’ in communicated grace and life, as ministers and Christians; to live by faith, as well as to be saved by faith. ‘Love me’ in the feeding experience of gracious souls.”17 In “Law and Gospel” Fisk explained “the law brings condemnation, the gospel justification . . . the former condemns . . . the latter justifies . . . under the law . . . universal corruption; . . . under the gospel . . . the fulfillment of righteous.”18 In describing William Beauchamp, the Demosthenes of the West, James B. Finley wrote, “His manner of preaching was plain, seldom dividing his subject into different heads, but took the natural division of the text . . . . His sermons were deep, and made a lasting impression upon the mind.”19 In light of this and similar evidence the assertion that, “for American preachers the era of Expository preaching had not yet come,” deserves reconsideration.20

The hortatory sermon was, likewise, widely used. Methodist preachers were moralistic and expressed this moralism in a hortatory manner. This form was intended to promote duty, service, and the practical side of Methodist beliefs. There were no “ifs,” “ands,” or “buts” in hortatory preaching. William Ryland, described by William Pickney as the greatest orator he had ever known, declared, “See that ye walk circumspectly” and on another occasion, “Let us love those that hate us and pray for those who despitefully use, and persecute us.” In still another sermon he proclaimed, “The Gospel, . . . must be preached plainly and faithfully, with an eye to the glory of God, and the happiness of mankind.”21 In a sermon on the “Lord’s Prayer,” Fletcher Harris stated, “Prayer is a duty . . . none of us shall be saved without prayer.”22 It was unthinkable for a Methodist to question such authority. Bishop Thomas A. Morris used this method when he declared, “bow down to the authority of Christ.”23 Such exhortations were common in behalf of Sabbath observance and propriety. In this regard, Wilbur Fisk

18The Methodist Preacher, ed. by S. W. Willson and E. Ireson (Boston: John Putnam, 1832), I & II: 10.
19James B. Finley, Sketches of Western Methodism (Cincinnati: Methodist Book Concern, 1854), 259.
22Fletcher Harris, Sermons on Important Subjects (New York: Willis Harris, 1821), 214 – 222.
23Thomas A. Morris, Sermons on Various Subjects (Cincinnati: Wright & Swornstedt, 1842), 16.
added, "As teachers of morality and religion, we should have the same regard to outward conduct that physicians have to symptoms." 24

Apologetic or argumentative sermons ranked high among the organizational forms used by itinerants. Describing the preaching of Allen Wiley, Fernandez Holliday records, "his sermons might be denominated doctrinal, and his style was argumentative." 25 This construction was used when attempting to persuade a congregation of the truth of a particular doctrine. The apologetic technique was used similarly. Phinehas Price's sermon, "the Authenticity of Holy Scripture," suggests its apologetic nature in the title, but the style was argumentative because the points used were designed to convince the hearers. 26 Both devices were used by Joseph Holdich in preaching on "Sin." "All the vices that disfigure the man," he declared, "are distinctly visible, . . . . If therefore men are lost eventually it will not be on the ground of our natural depravity; . . . . But he that is finally condemned will be so for his voluntary and obstinate rejection of that salvation which Christ died to purchase for him, . . . ." 27 James Porter, too, used this approach in defending the Methodist mode of baptism. "We are only required to be baptized," he contended. "The Bible says nothing about immersion, . . . ." Then he cited a series of arguments to support his statement. 28

Sermons in the form of an analogy expressed in poetry were common. William Ryland frequently utilized this method. In one sermon, he compared Christ to Moses; in another Samson was presented as a type of Christ; and in a third Joseph typified Christ. 29 A discourse entitled, "Patience," by Zechariah Connell, reasoned, "If we repose firm and steady trust in God, who is wise, and strong, and good, storms may arise - we may be tossed on the billows - the tumultuous and raging waves, . . . ; but the waves and billows will only rock us to rest eternal."

In another example, the preacher Samuel P. Shaw projected, "Martial hosts, with all the pomp of conquering kings and generals, have often been seen gathering on the battle-field; . . . . But the sublimity of such scenes, compared with that of judgment, is but the light of a taper compared with the noonday sun" in his sermon on "The General Judgment." 31 The poetical use of verbal imagery was utilized by Henry Baker in his treatment of "Life, Death, and Immortality." "The revolving wheel of time, the ceaseless revolutions of the sun, moon, and

26 Price, 5.
27 The Methodist Preacher, I & II: 111.
30 Sermons . . . ., 347.
31 Sermons . . . ., 299.
planets, as they revolve in the sunlet or dusky sky, are measuring and bring to a close the number of months, the days, the hours of this span of life."

Martin Ruter, the Apostle of Texas, and Henry B. Bascom used this type sermon with consistency. These sermons had profound effects upon the emotions and in the truest sense were highly illustrative.

Methodist preachers were consistently directing their sermonic efforts toward producing results. Their concluding remarks demonstrate this. To them it was more important to conclude a sermon effectively than to adhere to a particular form. The direct appeal was frequently used. Appeals like Hiram M. Shaffer's in the "Betrayal of Christ," "O let us follow our 'ensign', cling to the cross, and we shall soon be led from the field of battle in triumph, . . ." were common. "Betray not your blessed Lord," followed by the example of Judas was used by Fletcher Harris in his challenge " . . . follow Christ, imitate his example and you shall reign with him forever; which may God grant for his mercy's sake. Amen." Others used exhortation to action, e.g., "First fall down, and thank God that you are not damned already; and then, with great speed, fly to Jesus." Such a command following a fervently delivered sermon produced results. In essence, the advice published in the Christian Advocate, "First address the understanding, secondly the conscience, and lastly the passions of your hearers" was followed.

II

The key characteristic of sermon style was diversity. After the selection of a text, its words, clauses, and implications were explained in a down-to-earth fashion. Methodist preachers, " . . . came out from the people, they . . . knew how to address the people; . . ." but the style was " . . . painted lively, and solemn." The problem in analyzing style is that complete manuscript sermons are scarce. The best records are primarily in outline form with an occasional point or two amplified. The manuscript sermons of John Baer, Samuel Bryson, and William Ryland, located in Lovely Lane Chapel, Baltimore, Maryland, are proof of this. Indeed, it is probable that many itinerants felt like Samuel Sewell toward the literary composition of sermons. "How impracticable it would be for a minister to write and commit his sermons under such circumstances? For then his word would be in the pocket and not in the heart and instead of being like a fire in the bones active and operative seeking an outlet, it would be dead and dormant."

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32The Ohio Conference Offering, ed. by M. P. Gaddis (Cincinnati: Methodist Book Concern, 1852), 88.
33Sermons . . . , 251.
34Harris, 267.
35Christian Advocate and Journal, April 14, 1827, v. 1, no. 32: 128.
In the original literary sermon fragments that are available, spelling, punctuation, and sentence structure are irregular. One sentence in a sermon outline by John Baer reads, “What is implied in being born again and being some of the evidences of this change that we find in the Bible.” William Ryland, in a sketch of Isaiah 65:13-14 wrote, “The happiness and security of those, who have mad[e] [sic] the Lord their friend.” Another typical example of literary style is in the writing of Nathan B. Mills, whose first appointment was the Burlington Circuit, New Jersey. Mills served from 1787 – 1843/44 filling charges in North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, and New Jersey. His literary style is evident in a letter of February 23, 1843. “In the 15th year I think God sent the Methodist into our neighborhood (Newcastle County, Delaware) and myself with many others was convicted of sin . . . .”38 Although the grass roots style was less than perfect, it is fair to note that the errors were not in properly understanding the meaning of words, but in proper construction and usage.

In printed sermons these basic deficiencies are not present. But, in manuscript or print, the unwritten standard was, “our Savior was a very plain preacher; therefore, we follow his example.” In this regard, Thomas A. Morris, one of the most articulate preachers in this period stated his rule. “In regard to style, I have endeavored in writing, as in preaching, to observe plainness of speech, omitting as far as practicable all difficult and unusual words, and adhering as nearly as convenient to Scripture phraseology.”39 Thus it is not surprising that in the sermons of the period, plainness of speech is evident and unusual words are rare. This did, however, give rise to repetition, but the itinerants were fortunate that the typical frontiersman was not too conscious of this problem and the preacher was heard in a particular community every third or fourth week.

The frequency of verbal repetition was noted by the Christian Advocate and Journal in the November 7, 1834 issue. “It really does appear . . . , that some of our brethren use the ever blessed name of ‘God’ too frequently and familiarly.” It is entirely possible that the extemporaneous style of delivery was the chief contributing factor to this problem. If this were true concerning the use of the name of deity, it requires no imagination to realize it was true of the use of other words. The same Journal again admonished preachers, “use no quaint phrases.”40 But preachers were not averse to using figurative, imaginative, and arresting phrases. The more literary sermons are replete with examples, e.g., “… conscience would explode . . . ; “… it is to escape, like a bird from the fowler, . . .”; “… the dykes of order and law . . .”; and “… the range of his artillery.” Again the editors advised, “… indulge no ludicrous ideas.” “God will never help you preach, unless you do

39Morris, 4.
40“Caution to Ministers,” Christian Advocate and Journal, Nov. 7, 1834, v. 9, no. 11: 44.
your utmost to help yourself. He will not send you ideas, unless you look for them.” The lack of literary ability was no excuse for lack of thinking ability. But, by lodging with the people, conversing with them, and being one of them, Methodist preachers knew the needs of people and from these experiences developed their ideas and phraseology.

There was, however, an awareness that literary efforts were important. It is doubtful that a majority heeded the advice, “... write and re-write; compose and re-compose; ...” This advice may have been followed in a mental way, but the written proof of it has yet to be found. Itinerants were not especially concerned about the literary merits of their sermons. By turning to written sermon outlines and comments of outstanding preachers – William McKendree, John Price Durbin, Henry B. Bascom – it is possible to gain insight into what was considered good sermonic style.

It was widely recognized that William McKendree’s sermon delivered at the General Conference of 1808 led to his election to the episcopacy. In the period 1796-1840 the prime requirement for a bishop appears to have been the ability to preach. Peter D. Gorrie reported his observation on McKendree’s style, “as a preacher of the Gospel, he was plain, and pointed, and his sermons consisted chiefly in explaining and enforcing experimental and practical godliness.” It is unfortunate that only a fragment of one of McKendree’s sermons is in print, but from the reading of it, it is obvious that his excellency as a preacher was not in originality of thought or conciseness of expression. His power rested with his eloquence, “... he soared and expanded and astonished you with irradiations of light, and with the power and eloquence with which he delivered the tremendous truths of God.” Although his rhetoric was reportedly faulty, his eloquence impressed Robert Paine. “His voice was clear, soft, and highly musical; and when, in his happiest moments in the pulpit I have looked into his face, all radiant with intellect, ..., and listened to the accents of that most lute-like and persuasive voice, I have thought that I never heard such a voice, or so felt the charm of truth and the attraction of piety. The whole man seemed to speak.”

The styles of other well known preachers reveal the diversity of their preaching. “If we speak of Dr. Durbin in the pulpit as he seemed, we should say he attempted nothing in the way of eloquence; that his single object was to present with simplicity, directness, and persuasive power the message that he had received from God. ... there was no show of physical earnestness.” In this respect John P. Durbin was in marked contrast with Henry B. Bascom who was considered “peerless” in his exercise of eloquence. “But his elo-

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2The Methodist Magazine (1822), v. 5: 345.
4Paine, 179.
5Roche, 232.
quence allowed no relief in the progress of his discourse. His address may have seemed rather to the imagination than to the conscience. If it were possible to be too eloquent, Henry B. Bascom was the example. In his written sermons one can get so involved with his lengthy descriptions that the original idea is lost. Yet, he was rated by his contemporaries as one of the best pulpit orators of his day. In all the comments and criticisms about Methodist preaching for the period made by the participants themselves, one preacher, Bishop Elijah Hedding was cited as “a master of the English language. He was noted for the correctness of his pronunciation, the exactness of his definitions, and the integrity of his sentences.”

There are many interesting comments about grassroot preachers in the sermonic materials. One was that Samuel Parker was labeled “the Cicero of the West.” He possessed an eloquence and power in the pulpit that was irresistible and wherever he went wondering and weeping audiences crowded to hear him. Jesse Lee, of Virginia, is described as, “What gave him the greatest success as a preacher was the manifest sincerity of the man, combined with a soul full of pathos and tenderness which frequently displayed itself through flowing tears.” James B. Finley gives concise, first-hand impressions of the style of several preachers who labored in the southwest. Samuel Douthet was hortatory and pathetic; Ralph Lotspeich, a weeping prophet; Thomas Wilkeson, a son of consolation, whose speech dropped like a gentle dew; John Crane, a warm, eloquent man, who wept while preaching.

All the impressions left by the itinerants were not positive. One of these in the South, Elijah Steele, who died while still a young man from overwork and exposure, had his preaching described by Benjamin Drake. “His pulpit efforts were by no means splendid; but they had a charm impacted by his sincerity.” What is precisely meant is not made clear, but probably his rhetoric and sentence structure were defective while the redeeming element of his preaching was his intense earnestness. Fernandez Holliday commented, “I am aware many preachers preach so long and so loud that they are not well able to meet class after they are done preaching.” Another observed, “Asa Smith was useful, but he was very boisterous in preaching, sometimes forgetting that bodily exercise profiteth but little.” Whatever the difficulties of certain brethren, they were admonished to mend their ways. The advice of one was that, “the preacher’s manner should be free from every thing cal-

46Roche, 229 – 230.
48Boehm, 263.
49Gorrie, 246.
50Finley, 289.
51Benjamin M. Drake, Life of Rev. Elijah Steele (Cincinnati: Methodist Book Concern, 1843), 31.
52Holliday, 182.
53Boehm, 123.
culated to disgust persons of truly refined taste."^{54}

It is evident from the study of Methodist sermons that there was no standard or accepted style. Diversity rather than conformity was the order of the time. This is understandable since the era was one that emphasized individuality and the itinerants could hardly be expected to be different. Their use of illustrations emphasized this characteristic. The Bible was their primary treasure chest of illustrative material. Persons from Moses to St. Paul were frequently used. In the field of church history Wickliffe (sic), Luther, and Luininglius (sic) appear. Among church fathers St. Ambrose, Origin, Tertullian, and Cyprian were used. From ancient history Caesar, Alexander, Hannibal, and Charlemagne; then, Aristotle, Plato, Socrates, Seneca, Thales, Pythagoras, Cicero, and Demosthenes were called upon as examples.^{55} It is notable that in the use of the "great man" theory of religion and history, there were few, if any examples or illustrations drawn from Medieval history.

In contemporary history, John Wesley, Methodism per se, and the United States were used as illustrations in that order of frequency. Typical references were, "when Wesley was raised up." On Methodism, it, "has now become the practical and successful Archimedes of the church; . . . , it is actually lifting up the moral world to God." Moreover, America was the Israel of God. "This is a country favored of the Lord, . . . . [Here] he is establishing his everlasting kingdom." "He saved us from British bondage, which embraces two things, monarchy and the English hierarchy; and what an indescribable favor is this!" On the War of 1812, one preacher stated, "once they [the British] dared to insult our public ministers and force into their service our generous marines. But now, how changed the scene! They consult our wishes; they respect our rights; they honor our name." Benjamin Franklin, Patrick Henry, and the celebrated George Washington stood tall in the view of "a special providence exercised toward our nation."^{56}

Nature, philosophy, and geography were ready sources of examples to enliven sermons. "How sad and dreary would be the earth without the rain from heaven in its season! How doubly wretched and miserable the moral world without God’s word or Gospel! The golden harvest is gathered, the summer flowers decay and die, . . . . But wait with patience the opening of Spring."^{57} On the subject of philosophy, while the names of prominent thinkers and writers were used, the conclusion of the matter was that "philosophy is insufficient to bear us on its pinions to the throne of him, who dwells in unapproached light."^{58} To describe the expansion of the Gospel, Henry B. Bascom asserted that it was extending, "from Labrador to Good

^{54}Holliday, 178.
^{55}Henry B. Bascom, Sermons from the Pulpit (Louisville, Ky.: Morton & Griswold, 1850), 216, 298.
^{56}The Ohio Conference Offerings, 427, 525, 526.
^{57}The Ohio Conference Offerings, 377.
^{58}The Methodist Preacher, I & II: 268.
Hope, and from the Steppes of Tartary to the Caribbean archipelago!" 59

It is striking that the itinerants, for the most part, appear to be fairly well read in a variety of fields for men of their time. This added degrees of depth and insight to their sermons. But the illustrations as well as the sermon itself were designed to achieve positive results. If an illustration aided this, it was used again. In time the diligent minister knew what type of material to use at what point in a sermon to produce a desired effect. In this, the itinerants were adept. But a significant fact is evident by its absence – the sources examined revealed not one personal illustration. Although these preachers had deep personal religious experiences, they did not seek to elevate themselves by referring to them in their sermons. It is, however, certain that their own experiences with God furnished part of the unseen power that equipped them for service.

III

In the entire work of the ministry, no phase was given more attention than the manner in which the preacher delivered his soul. In reading the scriptures and delivering sermons there were definite rules which a wise minister observed. The procedure for reading is described in an issue of the Christian Advocate and Journal. Succinctly stated, “read audibly . . . , read distinctly . . . read solemnly . . . , avoid affection, and let everything be done naturally, both as it respects voice and manner.” 60 How far these directions were followed is impossible to tell, but that the circuit riders tried their best to measure up to these ideals is beyond question when the earnestness and sincerity of their desire for self-improvement is acknowledged. The delivery of the sermon was, as a rule, given more attention. The unwritten belief was that in sermon delivery “practice made perfect.” The frequency with which itinerants preached served to improve their skills. But the one fact which affected their delivery above all others was that, “Methodist preaching . . . was characterized by the effort to effect immediate decision.” 61 To achieve this result the extemporaneous method of delivery was used. Abel Stevens stated in 1855 that, “extemporaneous preaching was, until lately, the universal usage of our ministry.” 62 But it was this approach, unpolished as it may have been in many cases, that captured the minds and hearts of the hearers. The right theme coupled with an effective delivery and aimed at direct results was their formula.

On the other side of the issue, the attitude toward read sermons among Methodists was one of abhorrence. “In the early ministry of Dr. Durbin a paper sermon in a Methodist pulpit would have been like an ecclesiastical heresy . . . . Imagination could hardly conceive it. Read sermons in any

59 Bascom, 189.
61 Barclay, Early American Methodism, II: 393.
62 Abel Stevens, Essays on the Preaching Required by the Times (New York: Carlton & Phillips, 1855), 140.
church were construed as evidence of want in spirituality in the minister who gave such discourse and in the people who would consent to accept them.” The attitude toward sermon outlines was only slightly different. “We object less, but yet strongly to the use of briefs in the pulpit. We can conceive of no reason for it except indolence or imbecility.”63 These were, of course, dangers to extemporaneous preaching – vagueness was one and the reliance upon readiness of speech more so than thoroughness of preparation were obvious hazards. Yet, the major purpose of preaching was achieved by the unpolished earnestly delivered extemporaneous sermons.

An additional factor which helps to explain the success of the preachers was the emphasis on eloquence. A description of this quality appeared in the Christian Advocate and Journal. “The preacher should study to be, . . . , really eloquent. He should bring every power of mind and heart to bear upon his subject, . . . It is evident that his eloquence must be in thought more than in language.”64 There was an interplay of thought and imagination which produced this eloquence commonly referred to as the “language of the heart.” With this ability a “skillful preacher could play upon his audience as on a harp, speaking now loudly, now softly, now gratingly harsh, and again charming his hearers with low and dulcet tones. The modulations alone had a powerful effect upon the listeners, regardless of the subject matter of the sermon.”65

The dramatic abilities of Methodist itinerants was another positive factor. On many occasions a dramatic gesture or incident brought sinners to their knees and believers to their feet. Of William Beauchamp, James B. Finley wrote, “there was a soft tenderness, a sweetness in his voice, produced frequently by gentle breaks, as if the rising sympathies of his soul obstructed, in some degree, his utterances.”66 Another example is John P. Durbin as a young camp meeting preacher. Preaching on the “Godhead of Christ” he was carried away with his subject and exclaimed, “if you deny it, take the whole Bible from me.” In the same instant, a small Bible flew from the hand into the congregation and fell at the feet of an unbeliever. It had a tremendous effect.67

In addition to the aforementioned methods of delivery there was the element of God-consciousness in Methodist preaching. Ministers referred to it as the, “unction of the Spirit.” William Walters, one of the earliest and most successful Methodist ministers, described it, “The sermon was delivered with great unction, and many resolved under it to be valiant for the truth; to conquer and then share in the rewards of victory.”68 The preaching of

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63 Roche, 279; Stevens, 99.
65 Nottingham, 46.
66 Finley, 258.
67 Roche, 265; Finley, 242.
68 Boehm, 119; Kidder, 69.
Richard Whatcoat was described in these terms. "His preaching is said to have been generally attended with a remarkable unction from the Holy One." 69 In other words, this consciousness of God was not automatic. It was dependent upon one’s entire life, devotion, and attitude. An itinerant had to maintain a vital relationship with God to secure or receive this "unction." "Coming to their congregation with an unction from the Holy One, the word of God was like ‘a fire and a hammer,’ which broke the rock in pieces!" 70 It was the consciousness of the presence of God that motivated Methodists to expect and experience results which distinguished this period in early American Methodism.

IV

The Discipline of the church provided basic instruction on the form and function of preaching throughout the period. The publication of The Methodist Magazine and its successors played a major role in informing readers on the subject of preaching and urging preachers to improve their skills. The difficulty in defining Methodist preaching 1798 – 1840 is, however, reduced by focusing on its form, style, and delivery as evidenced in the print and manuscript materials. It is clear that literary merit and worth of a sermon was not a primary concern, but formal organization, logical structure, and extemporaneous delivery were standard features. The simplicity, practicality, and eloquence with which the message was presented were essential. Diversity of style and manner were demonstrated in the techniques individual preachers used to elaborate their topics. In this, one’s personality, background, experience, and education were key factors. The combination of formal and informal features blended with the frontier, primitive, transient condition of the hearers so that the standard for successful preaching — "Our fathers expected to see men awakened and converted under their sermons" — was realized. 71 Methodism grew more than seven hundred percent in this period. "The confidence of the pulpit was in the Spirit to secure the highest success . . . . It was such sensational preaching as the Church might justly honor." 72

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69 Gorrie, 222.
70 Finley, 179.
71 "Methodist Preaching," 74.
72 Roche, 271.