

**“THE POWER TO KILL AND MAKE ALIVE”:
VIOLENCE AND THE RELIGIOUS WORLD
OF EARLY METHODISTS**

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Conveying the nature of the hopeful convert’s pursuit of redemption, British Methodist John Fletcher argued that the kingdom of heaven “permits certain kinds of ‘violence.’” Fletcher drew from his reading of Matthew 11:12 to insist that those who desired salvation inevitably encountered difficult and even dangerous obstacles requiring an aggressive counterattack that Fletcher considered violent. In fact, far from a voluntary exercise, Fletcher emphasized that this violence was indispensable to salvation: “None prevail but those ‘who take the kingdom by violence. . . .’ Weariness, care, friends, fear and unbelief must all be thrown aside when we seek to see God face to face and to be brought into the light of his life.” Although Fletcher’s association of the quest for salvation with violence did not mean Christians should commit bodily harm against other human beings, it subverted any notion of an easy or even pleasant path to salvation. Rather, true Christians struggled against powerful enemies, both seen and unseen.¹

Fletcher’s understanding of the pursuit of redemption as fiercely contested represents merely one way early Methodists described the religious life as inherently and essentially aggressive. Along with the call to commit “violence” for the sake of salvation, Methodists narrated dangerous struggles with spiritual powers, divine and demonic. Many described horrifying accounts of satanic persecution of mind and body. Others under divine “conviction” of sin recalled falling to the ground “as if dead” or writhing in pain such that onlookers feared the person might actually die. American Methodist Benjamin Abbott recalled that the “spirit of God” came upon him so that he “fell flat [sic] to the floor, and lay as one strangling in blood.” Fearing that Abbott might die, his wife and children stood over him weeping.

¹ John Fletcher, “The Kingdom of Heaven Suffereth Violence, and the Violent Take it by Force,” *A Burning and Shining Light: English Spirituality in the Age of Wesley*, ed. David Lyle Jeffrey (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 352-354. Fletcher appears to be using the word “violence” in the general sense of an act performed with great force. See, for instance, the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of violence as “strength of emotion or of a destructive natural force: the violence of her own feelings.” *The Oxford Dictionary of English* (revised edition), ed. Catherine Soanes and Angus Stevenson (Oxford University Press, 2005). *Oxford Reference Online* accessed June 4, 2006 <<http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t140.e86337>>

“But I had not power to lift hand or foot, nor to speak one word” while he “felt the power of God, running through every part of my soul and body like fire consuming the inward corruptions of fallen depraved nature.”²

Unfortunately, historians have long overlooked the intensely conflicted nature of Methodist religious life. The fierce battles waged upon the spirits and bodies of Methodist men and women fell silent as historians portrayed a more dignified version of evangelical religion.³ More recently, however, the work of Ann Taves, Leigh Schmidt and others has redirected historians’ attention to religious experience, in the process creating fresh interest in the importance of the less “refined aspects” of evangelical religious experience. Within Methodist historiography, this impulse has resulted in attention to the supernaturalism manifest in dreams, visions, and bodily movements often negatively characterized by Methodism’s opponents as “enthusiasm.”⁴

While this work has opened up important lines of exploration, a careful analysis of Methodists’ tendency to describe their experiences as highly contested and aggressive, what some onlookers even called “violent,” has not occurred. Benjamin Abbott did not just fall to the ground, he fell to the ground “as if strangling on blood.” Others fell “as if dead” or felt as if they were being “torn to pieces.” Yet almost no attention has been given to understanding the meaning and significance of these descriptions. Nor has there been adequate attention to the relationship between Methodist experiences and the larger religious world of early Methodism. In other words, what significance did these bodily experiences, falling to the ground “as if dead” or shaking uncontrollably at a revival meeting, have within the religious world of early Methodists?

This essay uncovers the bitter contestation that characterized early Methodist religious life. Although Methodists frequently spoke of experiencing divine love and peace, they relied upon a discourse of dangerous

² Benjamin Abbott, *The Experience and Gospel Labours of the Rev. Benjamin Abbott*, John Ffirth ed., (New York: John C. Totten, 1805), 32-33.

³ Leigh Schmidt has persuasively argued that most historians have intentionally avoided or downplayed the significance of less sober religious experiences in order to present a more refined evangelical tradition. *Holy Fairs: Scotland and the Making of American Revivalism*, second edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), xiv-xxii. One notable exception is Julius Rubin, *Religious Melancholy and Protestant Experience in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

⁴ Ann Taves gives attention to religious experience as it came to be defined and debated by religious supporters and detractors in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. *Fits, Trances and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999). Schmidt, *Holy Fairs*, xiv-xxii. Ellen Eslinger, *Citizens of Zion: The Social Origins of Camp Meeting Revivalism* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 218-235. David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 32-54; John H. Wigger, *Taking Heaven By Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois, 2001), 104-124; Dee Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America, 1760-1800: The Shaping of an Evangelical Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 84-92; W. Stephen Gunter, *The Limits of ‘Love Divine’: John Wesley’s Response to Antinomianism and Enthusiasm* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1989).

conflict not only to describe the reality of many of their encounters with natural and supernatural forces but also to emphasize the necessity of combat for all who hoped to achieve final peace with God in heaven. By attributing religious meaning to conflict and contest, Methodists trod a common path that only now is attracting attention from scholars interested in how and why “violent” symbols, myths and rituals become foundational to the religious worlds of adherents.

‘Sin, the World and Satan Tread Down. . .’

Methodists, like other eighteenth-century evangelicals, insisted upon an affective experience of God’s pardoning grace as evidence of their forgiveness from sin. In his seminal sermon “The Scripture Way of Salvation,” John Wesley emphasized that this experience included literally feeling “the love of God shed abroad in our heart... producing love to all mankind, and more especially to the children of God.”⁵ Although Wesley struggled throughout his life to understand the significance of the waxing and waning of this feeling of love, he remained steadfast in his commitment that a profound experience of peace, love and joy was an essential outgrowth of justification and sanctification. As Richard Steele recently concluded, “authentic religious experience” for John Wesley necessarily resulted in a transformation of the believer’s relationship to God and neighbor and “one’s general disposition from a state of anxious self-preoccupation to a state of abiding trust, love, joy, and gratitude.”⁶

As important as palpable experiences of divine peace and love were to early Methodists, these were not the only experiences that marked the Christian life. John Wesley also asserted that “the Christian state is a continual warfare” that transformed ordinary humans into Christian “soldiers” who achieved their redemption through the “violence” of an attacking army.⁷ Methodists meant such militarized rhetoric to communicate something essential about the nature of the religious life. The faithful undertook forceful action because they believed they faced powerful impediments that could only be overcome through the most diligent application of aggressive effort. American Methodist preacher James B. Finley articulated this ethic clearly in his autobiography: “If I would reign as a king and priest with God and the Lamb forever, I must fight. . . the only way to the crown was by the cross.”⁸ Mary Coy Bradley expressed a similar sentiment after discovering the “enemies” lurking around her. Ripe with references to the battles of the

⁵ John Wesley, *Sermons II*, ed. Albert C. Outler, *The Works of John Wesley vol. 2* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 43.

⁶ *Heart Religion in the Methodist Tradition and Related Movements* (Lanham, MA: Scarecrow Press, 2001), xxi.

⁷ John Wesley, *Journals and Diaries II*, ed. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, *The Works of John Wesley vol. 19* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 149.

⁸ James B. Finley, *Autobiography of Rev. James B. Finley; or, Pioneer Life in the West* (Cincinnati, OH: Methodist Book Concern, 1854), 170.

ancient Israelites, Bradley prayed: “May I be enabled to put my foot upon the necks of all my stubborn inbred foes, that the natures of my heart might be slain, and I may ultimately possess that land which flows with milk and honey.”⁹ The peace of God required a lifetime of struggle. But against whom or what were Methodists’ militant struggles directed?

At its most basic level, Methodism’s call to aggressive action enlisted believers in a war to “conquer” sin’s domination over humanity. Like most evangelicals in the eighteenth century, Methodists affirmed the doctrine of human depravity in which sin entered the world through Adam, ultimately corrupting all human beings and distorting the *imago Dei* or human likeness to the divine being. The legacy of “original sin” left humans in a state of bondage to pride, ignorance, self-love, and disobedience.¹⁰ From their spiritual height as the image of God, humans descended to become “the image of Satan” and fell victim not only to physical death but more importantly, spiritual death.¹¹

However, John Wesley’s formulation of Methodist doctrine stressed the importance of human action in concurring with God’s bestowal of grace to overcome sin. Humans moved toward redemption by responding to divinely initiated acts of grace through the exercise of faith and the means of grace. Wesley forbade his followers from sitting idly by in hope of receiving saving grace. Rather, seekers must actively respond to the grace already given them and pursue redemption with every means at their disposal. As a result, Wesley spoke of humans “working” toward their salvation by responding to the grace God bestowed upon them and pursue the good, which would result in further outpourings of grace that could lead to salvation.¹²

Sin’s power over humanity made this work an extremely difficult enterprise. Wesley insisted that humans had to “agonize” to “enter the straight gate” by fasting, reading the Scriptures, and attending to the sacraments with the utmost seriousness, care and caution. The responsibility of the Christian to “strive” and “agonize” created a conflictual paradigm in which Christians actively struggled against opposing powers of evil in order to respond to divine grace and conquer the sin holding power over them.

The Christian’s battle against sin inevitably directed the warrior back to the self, which Methodists identified as a corrupt entity requiring “sacrifice”

⁹ Mary Coy Bradley, *A Narrative of the Life and Christian Experience of Mrs. Mary Coy Bradley. Written By Herself* (Boston: Strange and Brodhead, 1849), 261.

¹⁰ Wesley, *Sermons II, Works vol. 2*: 170-185, 400-412. Albert Outler emphasizes the importance of the doctrine of original sin in Wesley’s theology in his introduction to Wesley’s sermon of the same name. *Sermons II, Works vol. 2*: 170-171. See also Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994), 73-83.

¹¹ For references to sinners as dead see Wesley, *Sermons II, Works vol. 2*: 190; *Journals and Diaries II, Works vol. 19* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 95. For humans as created in the image of Satan see *Journals and Diaries II, Works vol. 19*: 97; *Sermons II, Works vol. 2*: 179.

¹² The responsibility of the believer in responding to grace is perhaps best expressed in Wesley’s sermon “On Working Out Our Own Salvation.” John Wesley, *Sermons III ed.* Albert C. Outler, *The Works of John Wesley vol. 3* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), 199-209.

through “crucifixion.” Wesley admonished his followers to “crucify” themselves to the “world” in order to realize their liberation from sin’s bondage and enjoy the pleasures of communion with God.¹³ The affects of sin upon the human person transferred desire for God to the world. Thus, the believer must imitate Christ’s denial of sin manifest on the cross. Hope for salvation could not be sustained without the believer undergoing his or her own crucifixion.¹⁴

Wesley emphasized that like Christ’s death, the Christian’s self-crucifixion required suffering and pain. “In order to the healing of that corruption, that evil disease which every man brings with him into the world, it is often needful to pluck out as it were a right eye, to cut off a right hand... The tearing away of... desire and affection when it is deeply rooted in the soul is often like the piercing of a sword.” Here Wesley mixed his metaphors of redemption, comparing sin to a disease and the cure to a wound received in battle. Both ways of understanding the process relied upon the necessity of pain. “It is essentially painful; it must be so by the very nature of the thing. The soul cannot be thus torn asunder, it cannot pass through the fire, without pain.”¹⁵ John Fletcher added:

As the way of the cross leads to heaven, it undoubtedly leads to perfection. To avoid the cross, therefore, or to decline drinking the cup of vinegar and gall which God permits your friends or foes to mix for you, is to throw away the aloes which divine wisdom puts to the breasts of the mother of harlots to wean you from her and her witchcrafts. . . . Our Lord was made a perfect Saviour through sufferings; and we may be made perfect Christians in the same manner.¹⁶

Even as the believer battled the sinful self and its enslavement in a fallen world, Methodists described an equally essential struggle with God, often expressed as a “wrestling” match with God for deliverance from one’s own sin and the redemption of others.¹⁷ Wrestling God derives from the biblical narrative of the patriarch Jacob wrestling the angel of the Lord in Genesis 32:22-32. In this passage, the angel accosted Jacob while he stood alone at the ford of Jabbok, but could not overpower him. The angel dislocated Jacob’s hip, though Jacob refused to relent until the angel blessed him. John Wesley concluded in his *Explanatory Notes Upon the Old Testament* that Jacob’s spiritual *and* corporeal wrestling modeled the effort necessary to obtain salvation. “Those that would have the blessing of Christ must be

¹³ John Wesley, *The Methodist Societies: History, Nature and Design*, ed. Rupert E. Davies, *The Works of John Wesley* vol. 9 (Nashville: 1989), 38; Luke 9:23.

¹⁴ Wesley, *Sermons II, Works* vol. 2: 243-244

¹⁵ Wesley, *Sermons II: Works* vol. 2: 243-244.

¹⁶ Fletcher, *Christian Perfection*, 51.

¹⁷ See for instance Wesley, *Sermons II, Works* vol. 2: 217; *Sermons III, Works* vol. 3: 152; 19: 110, 176, 228, 252; 20: 93, 218, 281, 352, 432; John Wesley, *Journals and Diaries IV*, ed. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, *The Words of John Wesley* vol. 21, 376-377; 22: 253. For other Methodists who spoke of wrestling God see Sarah Smith, “The Experience of Sarah Smith,” *Methodist Magazine* vol. II (1798): 17; Anne Taylor, “An Account of Miss Anne Taylor,” *Methodist Magazine* vol. III (1798): 445.

in good earnest, and be importunate for it.” Christians must aggressively contend with God for salvation and maintain their faith in God’s rewards despite discouragement.¹⁸

Although the idea of wrestling with God implies a disinclination on God’s part to bestow divine favor upon human beings, this was not what Wesley had in mind. Wesley asserted that the only reason Jacob did not succumb to the angel was that “it was not on his own strength that he wrestled, nor by his own strength that he prevails; but by strength derived from heaven.” Jacob’s ability to wrestle the angel came from God and this empowered him to undertake the struggle in the first place. Wrestling with God was therefore not an attempt to obtain what God refused to bestow but to demonstrate the commitment and desire of the person undertaking the conflict. It was Jacob’s willingness “that all his bones be put out of joint than he will go away without” the blessing that Wesley found exemplary for believers. Jacob’s faith in divine blessing despite discouragement pointed the believer to a life committed to vigilantly contending with God through divine power for spiritual and temporal blessings.¹⁹

Through the believer’s efforts to destroy sin and aggressively contend with God, Methodists challenged their captivity to sin and ultimately progressed toward sinless perfection that Wesley considered a freedom from evil thoughts and tempers and an empowerment to fulfill the two great commandments to love God and neighbor.

This is the sum of Christian perfection: it is all comprised in that one word, love. The first branch of it is the love of God: and as he that loves God loves his brother also, it is inseparably connected with the second, ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.’ Thou shalt love every man as thy own soul, as Christ loved us. ‘On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets:’ these contain the whole of Christian perfection.²⁰

Like his theory of justification, Wesley asserted that sanctification came only by faith rather than works.²¹ Also like justification, Wesley believed that Christians needed to vigorously pursue acts of repentance, piety and mercy, ensuring that aggressive human effort remained essential to the Christian life.²² As Francis Young notes, Wesley’s doctrine of Christian perfection was

¹⁸ John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the Old Testament*, vol. 1 (Bristol: William Pine, 1765), 131.

¹⁹ Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the Old Testament*, vol. 1: 131.

²⁰ Wesley, *Sermons III, Works vol. 3*: 74. For Wesley, perfection did not entail a complete overturning of the Fall to the degree that Methodists believed they could recapture an “Adamic perfection.” The “perfect” were never guaranteed “always to speak and act right” or avoid all error. Even sanctified Christians continued to commit errors in judgment that could lead to mistakes in practice.

²¹ Wesley, *Sermons II, Works vol. 2*: 162-163.

²² Wesley, *Sermons II, Works vol. 2*: 155-169.

“earthed in the reality of struggle.”²³ One of Wesley’s followers expressed this well when he wrote: “We then [after justification] thought the battle was over, and the fight was won; we were just ready to receive the prize: but now we see that we had then only just put on the armour, and were to go out against the world, the flesh, and the devil” in the hope of obtaining sanctification.²⁴ Transcending sin’s power over human thought and action was a promise that humans could realize in the present, but it required the same strenuous effort and commitment as the soldier who waged a war for life or death.

The fact that the battle was a lifelong struggle, though one that could ultimately be won, became the central motif of the death narratives that assumed such a prominent place in early Methodist experiential literature. Such narratives adopt a formulaic, though reassuring account of the dying’s final and perhaps most difficult battle with Satan. Could the believer, imminently weakened by the impending disruption of her mental and physical powers, marshal one final assault against the temptation to doubt an unseen hope in God’s redemption? The narratives recorded friends and family agonizing as the devil made one last effort to steal the soul of the nearly departed. The successful achieved a “good death” by triumphing over temptation in the final moments of earthly life, thereby gaining assurance of salvation.²⁵ At death, the love, joy and peace experienced only fleetingly in justification and sanctification could now be fully enjoyed for eternity in heaven.

Whether in life or death, Methodists identified the converted and sanctified as a conqueror. Divine grace empowered Christians to become “soldiers of Christ” dedicated to victory over sin. Militant effort opened the way for peace with God and humanity that Wesley and other early Methodists insisted was the result of saving grace. Even so, the Christian needed to pursue her final redemption with great vigor. If the believer failed to seriously consider the surrounding threats, she would surely fall prey to complacency and enter the trap of Satan that destroyed body and soul. If watchful, however, Christians could gain the victory, free themselves from sin, and bask in the pleasures of divine love.

²³ Francis Young, “Inner Struggle: Some Parallels Between John Wesley and the Greek Fathers,” *Orthodox and Wesleyan Spirituality*, ed. S T Kimbrough, Jr. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002), 164.

²⁴ George Park, “Letter from Mr. George Park to Mrs. Pearce, 1781,” *Methodist Magazine* vol. I (1798): 39.

²⁵ On the prominence and meaning of Methodist death narratives see David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 65-68; Lester Ruth, ed. *Early Methodist Life and Spirituality: A Reader* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2005), 287-308; A. Gregory Schneider, *The Way of the Cross Leads Home: The Domestication of American Methodism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), 49-51.

God, Satan and the Battle for Soul and Body

Although Methodists called one another to take the kingdom by violence as a way to emphasize the difficulties of Christian discipleship, their pleas for Christians to commit aggressive acts occurred within a context in which Methodists considered themselves the embattled subjects of aggression, particularly from Satan, corrupt humans and even God. The battles against these three foes shifted the Christian's experience of "violence" away from a largely internal battle of Christian vigilance to a far more dangerous struggle that enmeshed both soul and body in a fight for life itself.

In *Of Evil Angels*, John Wesley presented his ideas about the violent work of Satan and demons. Wesley explained that "Satan and all his angels are continually warring against us" by looking for any moment of weakness or vulnerability to exploit for the destruction of humankind. Satan's "fiery darts" could take the form of mental assaults that provoked questions in believers' minds about their own salvation, undermine their desire to perform good works, and arouse evil "passions or tempers." In fact, Wesley explained that no evil was committed in the world, even by humans, apart from the leading of Satan and demons.²⁶

Unlike later Methodists, Wesley clearly detailed Satan's threat to the body. Wesley explained to his followers that, "If he [Satan] cannot entice men to sin he will (so far as he is permitted) put them to pain" by causing diseases, "accidents," and nervous disorders that either incapacitated or killed people.²⁷ Most fearful of all, Satan could physically possess people. Take, for instance, the terrifying case of Sally Jones. Wesley found her

on the bed, two or three holding her. It was a terrible sight. Anguish, horror, and despair, above all description, appeared in her pale face. The thousand distortions of her whole body showed how the dogs of hell were gnawing her heart. The shrieks intermixed were scarce to be endured.

In the midst of her trials, Sally received a vision of Satan and cried out, "Come, good devil come. Take me away. You said you would dash my brains out. Come, do it quickly. I am yours. I *will* be yours. Come just now. Take me away." When Wesley returned to the woman four days later he found that "her pangs increased more and more; so that one would have imagined, by the violence of the throes, her body must have been shattered to pieces."²⁸

Countless Methodists confirmed Wesley's demonology in their autobiographical writings. Among the most popular was the journal of American preacher Freeborn Garrettson. This work provides as complete

²⁶ Wesley, *Sermons III, Works vol. 3*: 21-24.

²⁷ Wesley, *Sermons III, Works vol. 3*: 25-27.

²⁸ Wesley, *Journals and Diaries II, Works vol. 19*: 109-111. Wesley records Sally Jones' problems beginning in October 1739. Jones' struggles with Satan continued until at least January 1741, 178.

a picture of the extent and nature of Satan’s assaults as almost any other early Methodist autobiography. Born in 1752 to a wealthy Maryland family, Garrettson rose to distinction as one of the early American Methodist leaders. Satan first appeared in Garrettson’s journals in the author’s narrative of his early progression toward conversion. Garrettson recalled that Satan attacked with “powerful darts” meant to derail his pursuit of salvation. As Garrettson groped for redemption, “the devil strove hard to drive away all my good desires.” Persevering, Garrettson attempted to overcome the temptations and trials by continuing his “secret devotions” meant to stir the fires of redemption. But Satan would not release him that easily. Garrettson’s demonic enemy continued to “exercise” his mind until Garrettson abandoned his pursuit of salvation.²⁹

Fortunately for Garrettson, God strove with him as eagerly as Satan worked against him and his conviction returned. But as Garrettson pushed further toward conversion, “the devil. . . seemed to rise higher and higher” and Garrettson became so “opprest [*sic*] that I was scarce able to support under my burden.” He fled to the woods to pray where his struggles with Satan climaxed with Garrettson “sensibly [feeling] two spirits, one on each hand” contending with him. While the good spirit encouraged him toward salvation, “the enemy” would “rise up on the other hand, and dress religion in as odious a garb as possible.” Although initially giving in to the evil spirit, Garrettson responded to the beckons of the good spirit and “submitted to the Lord.” At once, Garrettson experienced release from his warfare: “[I] saw a beauty in the perfections of the Deity and felt that power of faith and love that I had ever been a stranger to before.”³⁰

Though Garrettson conquered Satan’s attacks and accomplished the redemption he longed for, the evil one remained a potently dangerous being. Garrettson recorded frequent “assaults” and “afflictions” from Satan in the days following his conversion, eventually becoming so intense that Garrettson hoped his “horse might throw me, and put an end to my life; or maim me so that I might not be able to go on.”³¹ Again, the young man fought off the devil’s attacks, but these would be life-long, sometimes quite bodily, struggles.³² The preacher even confessed to becoming “deranged” in later life because of the assaults of Satan.³³

Other Methodists recounted similar experiences. Benjamin Abbott recalled locking himself in his house and refusing to leave because he feared that the devil would apprehend him.³⁴ Jarena Lee related that Satan

²⁹ Freeborn Garrettson, *American Methodist Pioneer: The Life and Journals of the Rev. Freeborn Garrettson, 1752-1827*, ed. Robert Drew Simpson (Rutland, VT: Academy Books, 1984), 41-44.

³⁰ Garrettson, 44-45.

³¹ Garrettson, 53.

³² Garrettson recounts one particularly notable occasion in which Satan appeared to him in bodily form and the two briefly fought. *American Methodist Pioneer*, 96.

³³ Garrettson, 291-292.

³⁴ Abbott, *The Experience and Gospel Labors*, 11.

frequently tempted her to kill herself and at least once appeared to her in a physical form.³⁵ Francis Asbury wrote of a group of Christians who believed that the devil killed a man in their church.³⁶

Though quite controversial in the annals of American Methodist history, William Glendinning's narrative of his demonic persecution offers one of the most extreme cases of demonic assault. A Scottish immigrant, Glendinning rapidly rose through the ranks of early Methodism in Maryland and Virginia, culminating in his appointment to a committee intended to oversee the Methodist community during the Revolutionary War if Francis Asbury returned to England.³⁷ However, Glendinning ceased preaching in 1786 after "all spiritual comforts" departed from him and he began to doubt his salvation.³⁸

Glendinning's travails only deepened as he suspected Satan might be the cause of his suffering. One evening "a loud rap at the door" confirmed his deepest fears. "I opened it, and saw his [the Devil's] face: it was black as any coal—his eyes and mouth as red as blood, and long white teeth gnashing together." Although Satan disappeared almost immediately, Glendinning explained that his demonic persecutor appeared in bodily form "two or three times a week" throughout the winter of 1786:

He appeared upward of five feet high, —round the top of his head there seemed a ridge; some distance under the top of his head, there seemed a bulk, like a body, but bigger than any person; about 15 or 18 inches from the ground, there appeared something like legs, and, under them, feet; but no arms or thighs. The whole as black as any coal; only his mouth and eyes as red as blood. When he moved, it was [like] an armful of chains rattling together.³⁹

Glendinning labored in his persecuted condition for five years, during which he twice attempted to kill himself.⁴⁰

As dramatic as Glendinning's account was, his experience reflected most other Methodist narratives of Satanic assault in that it did not include actual possession. In fact, Wesley's testimony notwithstanding, "while all Methodists believed in the literal existence of the devil, the Evil One's role was generally that of the harasser who assaulted, challenged, and haunted, rather than possessed the seeker at his or her times of spiritual

³⁵ Jarena Lee, "The Life and Religious Experiences of Jarena Lee," in *Sisters in the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. William L. Andrews (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1986), 30-31.

³⁶ Francis Asbury, *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury, vol. I*, ed. Elmer T. Clark (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958), 262.

³⁷ Because Asbury remained in the colonies throughout the war, the committee never assumed control. Nevertheless, Glendinning's appointment demonstrates just how prominent he was in the early Methodist community. William Watters, *A Short Account of the Christian Experience and Ministerial Labours of William Watters* (Alexandria: S. Snowden, 1806), 57.

³⁸ William Glendinning, *The Life of William Glendinning, Preacher of the Gospel Written By Himself* (Philadelphia: W.W. Woodward, 1795), 16-17.

³⁹ Glendinning, 19-22.

⁴⁰ Glendinning, 29. On his attempts to commit suicide see 17, 28.

darkness.”⁴¹ Indeed, Methodists more often found themselves the victims of an unwelcome demonic presence or even physical attack than possession in which the consciousness is said to be taken over in part or whole by a foreign entity. Nevertheless, as Glendinning’s narrative shows, Satan’s attacks could be destructive to mind, body and soul.

Satan’s fierce assaults against the holy became doubly powerful in the Methodist imagination when combined with earthly persecution from Methodists’ fellow human beings. Mob attacks occurred commonly throughout the 1740s and 50s in Britain and into the early nineteenth century in America. Most of the persecution derived from Methodism’s challenge to the prevailing social and religious order and took the form of stoning, beatings, and acts of public humiliation. Although only one Methodist is known to have been killed in mob violence, the community’s vulnerability to violence etched itself prominently within early Methodist writings and thought.⁴²

Unlike the aggressive response Methodists directed against their demonic persecutors, early Methodists frequently refused to defend themselves against assaults from other humans. In fact, Wesley referred to Jesus’ command in the Sermon on the Mount to love one’s enemies as the basis for forbidding self-defense.⁴³ Rather than reciprocating violence by harming one’s enemies, Wesley and many other early Methodists ascribed benefit to suffering violence. Violent persecution became a blessing that produced spiritual maturity.⁴⁴

Although Methodists readily acknowledged the reality of human and demonic attacks against the holy, and even invested some of their encounters with spiritual benefit, their most significant battles pitted them against God. Deeply imbedded in Methodist ideology was the notion that God must “wound” or “kill” the believer as part of the conversion process, a reference to James 4:12: “There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy.”⁴⁵ The warrior God vanquished the convert’s soul in order

⁴¹ Dee Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America 1760-1800: The Shaping of an Evangelical Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 82.

⁴² See for instance John Walsh, “Methodism and the Mob in the Eighteenth Century” in *Popular Belief and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 213-227; Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism, Third Edition* (London: Epworth Press, 2002), 270-275. For persecution of Methodists in America see, Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America*, 157-161.

⁴³ John Wesley, *Sermons I*, ed. Albert C. Outler, *The Works of John Wesley vol. 1* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 517-518.

⁴⁴ Wesley, *Sermons I, Works vol. 1*: 521-528. The idea of suffering as confirmation of one’s being chosen or a means for deeper communion with God was central to thinking of the leading early Methodist in America, Francis Asbury. Asbury, *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury, vol. I*. In particular, see 1:5, 103, 104, 120-121, 122, 129, 146, 229, 240, 250, 266, 339, 357, 499, 527.

⁴⁵ John Wesley, *Journals and Diaries III, Works vol. 20*: 98; *Journals and Diaries IV, Works vol. 21*: 110, 127, 166; *Journals and Diaries IV: Works vol. 22*: 315, 363, 426; *Journals and Diaries IV, Works vol. 23*: 62, 80.

to deliver the sinner to salvation.

Despite the largely spiritualized sense in which Methodists envisioned their divine “wounding,” the body often became an important site of contestation. People trembled, groaned, screamed, and/or fell motionless to the ground “as dead” under divine power.⁴⁶ Methodists told of both men and women who were “seized with violent pain” that included feeling “just as if a sword was running through them; others, that they thought a great weight lay upon them, as if it would squeeze them to the earth.” Further accounts included people who felt that they were “quite choked so that they could not breath” and some “that it was as if their heart, as if all their inside, as if their whole body, was tearing all to pieces.”⁴⁷ Rev. Henry Smith spoke of the “arrows of the almighty” piercing people, causing them to scream and fall to the ground.⁴⁸ Itinerant Jacob Young recorded falling to the ground during his conversion and provocatively called it his “death wound.”⁴⁹

The bodily conflicts that seized so many early Methodists assumed an even more controversial form in an experience called the jerks. Primarily restricted to the southern and western parts of the United States, the jerks first appeared sometime around 1803.⁵⁰ The experience entailed uncontrollable quakes of the body attributed to divine power. One observer explained, “I saw women, who were held by two or more strong men, throw themselves back and forward with such violence, that they threw the combs out of their hair, and then their loosened locks would crack nearly as loud as a common carriage whip.”⁵¹

The jerks did not strike any particular group of people but affected both saint and sinner, regardless of race, class or gender.⁵² The relative universality of the experience may have contributed to the struggles many Methodists encountered in explaining the experience naturally. Peter Cartwright, however, postulated that the jerks served as a judgment from God to bring

⁴⁶ Wesley commonly uses the term “as dead” when speaking of falling out. See Wesley, *Journals and Diaries II, Works vol. 19*: 57, 73, 178, 276, 302, 336; *Journals and Diaries IV, Works vol. 21*: 148, 377, 450; *22*: 254. Ann Taves finds the biblical precedence for falling out in Ezekiel 21:7 “and every heart shall melt, and all hands shall be feeble, and every spirit faint, and all knees shall be weak as water” and Ezekiel 21:14, “I have set the point of the sword against all their gates, that their heart may faint.” Taves, *Fits, Trances and Visions*, 108.

⁴⁷ Wesley, *Journals and Diaries II, Works vol. 19*: 317. It is interesting to note that in letters written by some of Wesley’s followers, they suggest that men “fell out” more than women, Wesley, *Journals and Diaries IV, Works vol. 21*: 196, 219-220. However, there is ample evidence that women commonly fell out so that it would become difficult to support a claim about the gendered nature of the experience.

⁴⁸ Henry Smith, *Recollections and Reflections of an Old Itinerant. A Series of Letters* (New York: Lane and Tippet, 1848), 83. On people falling out see 53, 54, 56, 61, 73, 74, 82.

⁴⁹ Jacob Young, *Autobiography of a Pioneer: Or, The Nativity, Experience, Travels, and Ministerial Labors of Rev. Jacob Young* (Cincinnati, OH: Cranston & Curtis, 1857), 41-43.

⁵⁰ William Capers, *Life of William Capers, D.D.*, (Nashville: Southern Methodist Publishing House, 1859), 53.

⁵¹ Susannah Johnson, *Recollections of the Rev. John Johnson and His Home: An Autobiography* (Nashville: Southern Methodist Publishing House, 1869), 27.

⁵² Young, *Autobiography of a Pioneer*, 135-137; Capers, *Life of William Capers*, 53-54.

sinner to repentance. Through their physical affliction, Cartwright believed people could feel God’s power and the wrath due them because of their sins.⁵³

If this is true, the jerks underscore the ways the bodily fight for salvation could take very dangerous forms. Jacob Young explained that the jerks could be so intense that onlookers feared they would snap a person’s neck.⁵⁴ Peter Cartwright claimed that a man died because he resisted the jerks until his neck broke.⁵⁵

For these Methodists, the Christian could not, and in fact must not, escape falling victim to a grand conflict that afflicted mind, body and soul. Through divine wounding, Satanic assault and human persecution, Methodists insisted that Christians actively participated in direct and potentially painful conflict with spiritual and temporal beings. Such battles established the Christian’s experience of “violence” as more than a symbolic struggle against sin, but a literal, often bodily, fight for spiritual transformation and eternal life.

Conclusion

Whether because of the Christian’s responsibility to “fight” for redemption, the work of God in “wounding” the person to achieve that redemption or the “assaults” of Satan to oppose it, violence and aggression became central aspects of the religious world of early Methodists. A redemption dominated by love, joy and peace was surely the aim. But life on earth, even for those who claimed to have been perfected through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, meant that the blessings of love were always achieved through, and permanently mingled with, sacrifice and struggle. The body was by no means exempt from the struggle. Rather it often became embroiled in the sinner’s crucifixion and war for redemption.

The importance of conflict and aggression in early Methodist belief and practice presents interesting comparative opportunities with recent research on the meaning and significance of violent myths, rituals and symbols within the religious worlds of faith communities across traditions. A growing body of literature has argued that violent struggle, whether in a cosmic or earthly realm is inextricably linked to the core beliefs and practices of religious communities.⁵⁶ As diverse as the foundational Christian narrative of Jesus’

⁵³ Peter Cartwright, *Autobiography of Peter Cartwright, The Backwoods Preacher*, ed. W.P. Strickland (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1856; reprint Nashville: Abingdon, 1956), 46.

⁵⁴ Young, *Autobiography of a Pioneer*, 136.

⁵⁵ Cartwright, *Autobiography*, 46.

⁵⁶ See for instance, Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), Maurice Bloch, *From Prey Into Hunter: The Politics of Religious Experience* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), Walter Burkert, *Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth*, trans. Peter Bing (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1972), Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000).

crucifixion, the painful Sun Dance ceremony performed by Native Americans or the Shi'i Muslim ritual reenactment of the martyrdom of Hussain, violence seems to be foundational to religions throughout history. Several scholars have recently postulated that "violent" elements are inescapable for those religions engaging an infinite "other." Some have even suggested that religious change cannot arise apart from an experience of "violence."⁵⁷

If placed within these broader lines of inquiry, early Methodism's investment of religious significance in bodily and spiritual struggles against sin, Satan and even God raise important questions for Methodist historians. Did the vitality of early Methodist religious experience in some way depend upon the types of "violence" described here? Did these forms of violence have any relationship to Methodist perspectives on social violence? If, as many recent scholars have argued, religious myths, rituals and symbols that incorporate violence often encourage the use of social violence, how might the prevailing, often romanticized, image of the early Methodist community as a kind of idyllic movement change?

The answers to these questions, though difficult, may well provide the foundation for important advances in the historiography of early Methodism. In the process, they may also allow the study of early Methodism to make important contributions to the broader examination of the intersection between religion and violence.

⁵⁷ See for instance, Bloch, *From Prey to Hunter* and T.M. Luhrman, "The Ugly Goddess: Reflections on the Role of Violent Images in Religious Experience" *History of Religions* 41, no. 2 (2001): 114-141.