

**THE SHOUT HEARD ‘ROUND THE WORLD:
SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES
BETWEEN AMERICAN AND ENGLISH CAMP MEETINGS**

JONATHAN COONEY

In July of 1820, George Jarrat witnessed what seemed to him to be a mighty battle—in his own words, “a field of action.” It was the Loughborough, England, camp meeting, and Jarrat described the scene for the *Primitive Methodist Magazine*. There were several short sermons, and then the crowd divided into “praying companies” in which those seeking salvation could find encouragement and perhaps even liberty from their spiritual misery. When it was time for the praying service to end and the congregation to come to order for more preaching, neither human voice nor trumpet could interrupt the work of the praying companies. The sounds and sights of the camp meeting resembled a military operation. Seekers approached the preaching stands as though they were engaging an enemy and returned, wounded, to the praying companies for healing and salvation. Jarrat wrote:

When sinners, who were listening to the word, felt the arrows of the Almighty stick fast within them, they repaired to the multitude who were praying with the penitents. And so great an effect attended the preachings, and the other praying services, that mourners continued to flock to the praying multitude, in regular succession, as wounded men to an hospital: where numbers found the healing balm of the Redeemer’s blood to heal their souls.

Jarrat estimated that at least seven thousand were in attendance.¹

The Methodist camp meetings organized in England in the early nineteenth century bore some resemblance to the Methodist camp meetings then being held in the United States, but there were also significant differences between the American and English versions of this outdoor preaching event. The most important difference, perhaps, was in the way in which the camp meetings were received and encouraged by the Methodist Episcopal Church, the largest Methodist denomination in America, and rejected and forbidden in England by the Wesleyan Methodist Connexion, the direct descendent of John Wesley’s own organization. In fact, the Wesleyans’ rejection of the camp meeting led to the founding of the Primitive Methodist Connexion in England. Known as “Ranters,” this sect was never as large as the mainline Wesleyan Methodist Connexion, but it attracted enough attention to become

¹ George Jarrat, “Loughborough Circuit Camp-meeting,” *A Methodist Magazine, For the Year 1819, Conducted By the Camp-Meeting Methodists Known By the Name of Ranters, Also Called Primitive Methodists, Volume I* (Leicester, Eng.: J. Fowler, 1820), 241-242.

a significant player on the evangelical landscape in England between 1820 and 1840—the “heroic age” of Primitive Methodist missionary expansion.²

Although field preaching was a standard practice during the rapid expansion of the Methodist project in England during John Wesley’s lifetime (he had been introduced to it by George Whitefield at Bristol in 1739), the Methodist camp meeting did not originate in England. Most scholars treat the camp meeting as an American invention, growing out of the large ecumenical crowds that gathered along the frontier to worship and to celebrate the sacraments, although some claim that the origin of the class meeting can be traced to the activities of pietistic Swedish soldiers in the early eighteenth century.³ One of the most famous of these early American meetings, at Cane Ridge, Kentucky, in 1801, was inspired by earlier meetings held by Presbyterian and Methodist preachers. At Cane Ridge twenty-five thousand people heard Presbyterian, Methodist, and Baptist preachers over the course of a week.⁴

The American Presbyterians split over the issue of camp meetings and were unable to capitalize on the revivalism that swept the country; the Baptists lacked the organization and manpower to make the most of the opportunity; but the Methodists were ready. The energy and enthusiasm associated with the camp meetings complemented Bishop Francis Asbury’s vision for the growth of the Methodist movement. The Methodist message seemed to resonate with Americans settling on the frontier, and preachers had learned how to touch their emotions with revival sermons perfected through decades on the circuit. The Methodists began to organize camp meetings to coincide with the various conferences that met regularly in the Wesleyan system. Thus the business of the church was conducted amid the spiritual electricity of sermons, love feasts, sacraments, and revival.⁵

Although camp meetings were never officially endorsed by the Methodist Episcopal Church, the scheduling of such events, coupled with the involvement of leading Methodist bishops, clergy, and laity, sent a clear signal. As early Methodist historian Abel Stevens described it:

The arrival of Asbury, sometimes with M’Kendree or Whatcoat, always with an able ‘traveling companion,’ and usually with a retinue of other preachers gathered on his route, became a sort of spiritual ovation, a triumphal march of the great leader, which

² James Obelkevich, *Religion and Rural Society: South Lindsey (1825-1875)* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 220.

³ Richard P. Heitzenreiter, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 98-99; David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2005), 46.

⁴ L. C. Rudolph, Francis Asbury (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1966), 116-117; Nancy A. Hardesty, “Cane Ridge Revival,” in William H. Gentz, gen. ed., *The Dictionary of Bible and Religion* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1986), 177.

⁵ Rudolph, 117-118.

put in motion the Methodist hosts all along his progress.⁶

According to eyewitness accounts, American camp meetings were organized in a fairly standard fashion. Itinerant Jesse Lee explained that two to four acres of land were cleared in an “oblong square.” Tents were erected along all four sides, with carriages and horses behind and fires for cooking and illumination in front. Two or more stages were erected, one on each side of the square. Seating, segregated by gender, was provided in front of each stage. The stages were far enough apart that preaching could go on at all of them simultaneously; or preaching could be heard at one end while prayer, testimony, and other activities might be occurring at the others. Candles were affixed to the stages, trees, and elsewhere. “These lights in a dark night, when the evening is calm,” Lee wrote, “add quality to the solemnity of the meeting.” An appointed guard patrolled the grounds at night.⁷

Each day, soon after dawn, a trumpet was sounded to awaken the residents of this temporary Zion. Ten minutes later another trumpet call signaled the start of singing and praying, which the people did while either remaining in their tents or standing at their doors. There was a sermon before breakfast and another at ten o’clock. Lunch was at one o’clock, preaching again at three o’clock, supper about sunset, and then at least one more sermon was delivered by candlelight. In Lee’s experience, these camp meetings usually ran from Friday until mid-day Monday; in general, meetings lasted at least two nights and a day or longer, “the people being continually engaged in singing, praying, preaching, or exhorting, without any cessation.” Some camp meetings lasted as long as eight or ten days.⁸

In a letter sent to England in 1806, Francis Asbury described a camp meeting in New York, but his description of emotional revivalism was deleted when the letter was published in the Wesleyan *Methodist Magazine* in England. According to Asbury, almost one hundred traveling and local preachers, and as many as three thousand congregants, were present for the four-day meeting. “Praying societies” were organized in the tents and in the center area itself, and preaching took place at ten, two, and seven o’clock, midnight, and “cock crowing.” “Never was an army in the time of war under greater discipline,” Asbury wrote, though he marveled at “the power of overwhelming power! upon [*sic*] the preachers, the members, the people of the world.” “We felt God was so great in the praying exercises,” he concluded, “we could not call off the people to preaching, seeing that the preachers like the priest at the dedication could not stand before the Lord, weeping on all

⁶ Jesse Lee, *A Short History of the Methodists, in the United State of America; Beginning in 1766, and Continued Until 1809. To Which is Affixed, A Brief Account of Their Rise in England, In the Year 1729, &c.* (Baltimore, MD: Magill and Clime, 1810; repr. Rutland, VT: Academy Books, 1974), 362; Abel Stevens, *A Compendious History of American Methodism* (New York: Hunt and Eaton, 1867), 441.

⁷ Lee, 360-361.

⁸ Lee, *A Short History of the Methodists*, 361-362.

sides.”⁹

As early as 1802, Asbury had encouraged the presiding elder of the Pittsburgh District, Thornton Fleming, to hold camp meetings, which Asbury called “fishing with a large net.” A few years later he reported to Fleming that hundreds and thousands were being converted or sanctified at camp meetings. “Oh, my brother,” Asbury wrote, “when all our quarterly meetings become campmeetings [*sic*], and 1000 should be converted, our American millennium will begin.” But even Asbury recognized some problems associated with camp meetings that offended his own sense of propriety and order. For example, ruffians often stormed the camp meetings. The lifting of inhibitions regarding behavior and expression was the downfall of even the more serious-minded in attendance. Asbury hoped the camp meetings would present a lively and heartfelt contrast to the dullness of orthodox religion. Still, he wrote, “My continual cry to the Presiding Elders is, order, order, good order. All things must be arranged temporally and spiritually like a well disciplined army.”¹⁰

Criticism of the emotional excesses of American camp meetings by native and European observers alike had a lasting negative effect on both contemporary and historical understandings of these events. Some observers of early Methodist enthusiasm, such as Thomas Wallcut in 1789, were bothered by the physical and vocal expressions of revivalist spirituality. Wallcut felt that this style of worship appealed mostly to “the lower classes of the People,” and was characterized by “all that confusion, violence, and distortion of the body, voice, and gestures” associated with “a boiling hot religion.” Foreign visitors had already been affected by anti-Methodist propaganda in England, and their negative opinions were not changed when they witnessed the ranting, enthusiasm, and disorder of the American camp meetings for themselves. Englishwoman Frances Trollope, who traveled in the United States for three years in the late 1820s, was appalled at the noise, public display of emotion, and intimacy associated with a camp meeting in Indiana. She was particularly outraged by the manner in which the preachers approached the young women who came forward in response to the exhortation:

Many of these wretched creatures were beautiful young females. The preachers moved about among them, at once exciting and soothing their agonies. I heard the muttered “Sister! dear [*sic*] Sister!” I saw the insidious lips approach the cheeks of the unhappy girls; I heard the murmured confessions of the poor victims, I heard their tormentors, breathing into their ears consolations that tinged the pale cheek with red. Had I been a man, I am sure I should have been guilty of some rash act of interference; nor do I believe that such a scene could have been acted in the presence of Englishmen without instant punishment being inflicted; not to mention the salutary discipline of the treadmill, which, beyond all question, would, in England,

⁹ Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1989), 50; Elmer T. Clark, J. Manning Potts, and Jacob S. Payton, eds., *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury in three Volumes, Vol. 3, The Letters* (London: Epworth Press and Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1958), 344. Apparently Asbury is referring to Ezra 3:10-13—the story of the laying of the foundation of the Second Temple.

¹⁰ Rudolph, 119, 120.

have been applied to check so turbulent and so vicious a scene.¹¹

The effects of generations of race- and class-consciousness made it difficult to approve of the very public demonstrations of private sentiments in groups of mixed genders and ethnicities. Considering the turmoil accompanying the calls for political reform in Europe at that time, the democratic challenge to traditional lines of authority implicit in the camp meetings was certainly troublesome.¹²

The history of the camp meeting in England is associated with the founding of the Primitive Methodist Connexion. The English were introduced to camp meetings in two significant ways: through correspondence with American Methodists, and through the ministry of American preacher Lorenzo Dow. Early volumes of the *Primitive Methodist Magazine* included sections devoted to American correspondence describing camp meetings and their efficacy in the New World, but Dow had a more direct impact. Millenarian and republican to the extreme, Dow left an America which could not hold him and didn't know what to do with him. He made preaching trips to the British Isles during the years 1799-1801 and again in 1805-1807. American Methodists had refused to license the intractable and eccentric Dow, and he worried ecclesiastical and political authorities in England as well. It was probably no accident that the Wesleyan Connexion's ban on camp meetings coincided with the second of Dow's visits. Hugh and James Bourne, however, joined the Wesleyans at about the time of Dow's first trip to England. The brothers were impressed by Dow and acquired some of his literature about camp meetings. A few weeks later Hugh Bourne was instrumental in organizing what was supposed to be an all-day prayer meeting on Mow Cop, a promontory some 1100 feet above sea level, but the event went down in history as the first Primitive Methodist camp meeting.¹³

In June of 1808 Hugh Bourne was removed from his local Methodist society because he preached to large crowds at organized camp meetings. The new generation of sophisticated Methodist leadership found the evangelistic technique unappealing, "allowing," it said, "that in Mr. Wesley's days it was right, but had become improper since that time." In 1807 such sentiments had been entered into the official conference minutes:

Q: What is the judgment of the Conference concerning what are called camp meetings?

A: It is our judgment, that even supposing such meetings to be allowable in America, they are highly improper in England, and likely to be productive of considerable

¹¹ Frances Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1839; repr. 1927), 143.

¹² Lester Ruth, *A Little Heaven Below: Worship at Early Methodist Quarterly Meetings* (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 2000), 74-75; John H. Wigger, *Taking Heaven By Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (New York: Oxford UP, 1998), 120-121.

¹³ Julia Stewart Werner, *The Primitive Methodist Connexion: Its Background and Early History* (Madison, WI: U Wisconsin P, 1984), 45, 47; Joseph Ritson, *The Romance of Primitive Methodism* (London: Primitive Methodist Publishing House, 1909), 61.

mischief and we disclaim all connection with them.¹⁴

To Hugh Bourne, however, the power and efficacy of the camp meeting was clearly evident, and his enthusiasm for the technique cost him his place in the old conference. That same summer there was a camp meeting at Norton, lasting several days, which was so successful that Bourne was convinced that “the English camp-meetings were established on in immoveable foundation, and could never afterwards be shaken.”¹⁵

Hugh and his brother James championed the cause of the camp meetings in England through the publication of a Methodist magazine. Convinced that worship in the open air was “both methodistical and scriptural” and thus solidly within the biblical and Wesleyan traditions, they argued that many who opposed camp meetings had never actually attended one. The brothers claimed that more souls were converted at camp meetings than on some regular circuits during the course of the same year. Besides, Hugh Bourne felt that he had addressed many of the difficulties that had plagued camp meetings in the past. By organizing camp meetings around a variety of activities, including preaching, praying, reading from testimonies, and so forth, the Primitive Methodists enabled people “to continue the active worship of God, for a course of time, with energy and effect.”¹⁶

Eventually the movement took on the name “Primitive Methodist” because its leaders felt that they “had been directed towards the revival of primitive or early Methodism by a return to the spirit and moods, especially in the matter of out-door preaching, of Wesley and his co-adjutors.”¹⁷ The name was officially adopted in 1812 and by 1820 the Primitive Methodists claimed 7,842 members, including those on trial. By 1850 membership in the Primitive Methodist Connexion was over 102,000, nearly one-third that of the mainline Wesleyan conference’s 334, 458.¹⁸

The typical pattern for the English camp meetings, in place by 1819, was significantly different from that described by American Methodists. A meeting held that year in Staffordshire was begun with a singing march through the area that morning and the commencement of exercises after nine o’clock. A few short prayers and a sermon were concluded by quarter past ten. Thus the whole preaching service lasted less than an hour! At that point the congregation was divided into two companies that stood about fifteen yards apart and engaged independently in singing, prayer, praise, and further exhortation for about thirty minutes. At ten minutes before eleven, the praying groups were brought together to hear two more sermons that were concluded within an hour. The congregation had grown so large by that time that when it was

¹⁴ *The Primitive Methodist Magazine, For the Year 1821, Volume II* (Derby, England: Printed for the Primitive Methodists, by Richardson and Handford, 1821), 51.

¹⁵ *The Primitive Methodist Magazine, For the Year 1821, Volume II*, 54.

¹⁶ *The Primitive Methodist Magazine, For the Year 1821, Volume II*, 52, 76.

¹⁷ Ritson, 96.

¹⁸ *Primitive Methodist Magazine for the Year 1821* (Leicester, England: J. Fowler, 1821), 273, 137; Robert Curie, Alan Gilbert and Lee Horsley, *Churches and Churchgoers Patterns of Church Growth in the British Isles Since 1700* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 140, 141.

sent once again to pray, three companies were formed about ten yards apart. At quarter past twelve they were summoned back to the preaching stand for the reading of an account of the life and death of a certain pious man and the morning was closed with prayer.¹⁹

The afternoon session began at one-thirty and followed the morning's pattern. Prayers and sermons preceded lengthy stints in the praying companies, and a summons to the preaching stands was made again at three o'clock. At four o'clock more life stories were read and the group was dismissed.²⁰

Three simultaneous camp meetings were held on Sunday, May 7, 1820, in the vicinity of Hull during the Primitive Methodists' first annual meeting. Much attention was paid to time and order during a planning meeting the evening before in the vestry at Hull. The content and length of the various services were laid out and preachers appointed to preaching times.²¹ The preachers were to get immediately to the task at hand, "to avoid long winded introductions, and tedious criticisms, and to get as fully into faith as possible." Each sermon was to be fifteen to twenty minutes in length, but above all, it was not to encroach on the prayer service. In fact, "it would be no inconvenience if it concluded a few minutes before the time appointed, but it must not exceed," the instructions read.²²

On another occasion the Primitive Methodist conference instructed the camp meeting "conductor" to signal each preacher five minutes before the time was expired, "by pressing the point of an umbrella or something else" against the speaker's foot. At that point the preacher was to conclude with an exhortation to "a present faith and a present salvation" while avoiding all senseless talk about literature and college education.²³

Those in leadership positions, especially Hugh Bourne, believed that, while the sermons were important, they set the stage for the real work of the camp meetings, that is, the prayer companies. A particular concern of Bourne's, the prayer companies were the product, in part, of the Primitive Methodist movement's reliance on lay involvement and leadership. In the prayer companies laity were able to participate in the service and minister to those under conviction. In these smaller groups those who had been "wounded" under preaching could be "saved." The time spent in these prayer groups was of critical importance. By 1816 some of the circuits had allowed the time in prayer services to contract until the camp meetings had become primarily preaching services. "By this means," the connexion's officials wrote, "the talents of the pious praying labourers had generally been buried; the designs of Providence frustrated, and the circuit in various ways, greatly injured; and this method, if persisted in, was likely to be attended with consequences still more injurious." The prayer companies were re-

¹⁹ *A Methodist Magazine, For the Year 1819* (Leicester, England: J. Fowler, 1819), 133.

²⁰ *A Methodist Magazine, For the Year 1819*, 133-134.

²¹ *The Primitive Methodist Magazine For the Year 1821*, 221

²² *The Primitive Methodist Magazine For the Year 1821*, 222.

²³ Werner, 148.

stored to their position of prominence with sufficient time allowed and the order made that “the pious labourers should divide into companies, to carry on these services, whenever it was suitable or necessary.”²⁴

Once the camp meetings were returned to “their Providential order” the effect was “like life from the dead.” The praying laborers were filled with “life and vigour,” and a general awakening occurred throughout the circuit. A camp meeting without significant emphasis on prayer was not a Primitive Methodist camp meeting.²⁵

Other elements of the English camp meetings involved large groups of laity. The day of the camp meeting often began with a march through the nearest village or part of town. These marches were a manner of physically moving from the staging area to the campground and drew attention to the camp meeting itself. In 1826, in Keighley, for example, the day began at eight o'clock with a half-hour prayer meeting in a local chapel. Then the group sang as it marched “through the street, as a little army sounding for battle.” “Our fortitude, courage, and faith, increased while we sung [*sic*]. The traveling and local preachers led the van; the leaders followed close to them, and the members and hearers brought up the rear.”²⁶ Some of the marches covered quite a bit of ground. A group in Stockport in 1836 split into two bodies and, beginning at opposite ends of town, worked their way toward the central marketplace. This march included short, two-minute sermons delivered at various spots along the way. The singing and preaching drew both supporters and opposition. But the general effect was probably meant to be more like a circus parade. The marching began at six o'clock, and after the groups converged on the market, broke up at eight o'clock for breakfast.²⁷

Another laity-centered feature of the English camp meeting was the love feast that often concluded the day's activities. Love feasts were traditionally simple meals of bread and water accompanied by moving spiritual testimonies designed to encourage all present. John Wesley had adopted the love feast as a tool for mutual spiritual support and celebration among believers, but for the Primitive Methodists it became a way to extend the energy and enthusiasm created on the field during the day's camp meeting into an evening revival, often held late into the night and usually indoors. It is not clear what food, if any, was used at Primitive Methodist love feasts. It is obvious, however, that these were occasions for tremendous revival for the local population. The love feasts became, not just an extension of the camp meeting, but an integral part of the whole experience, usually held that evening.

²⁴ *A Methodist Magazine, Published June, 1820, Intended as a Substitute for September, 1819* (Leicester, England: J. Fowler, 1820), 228, 229.

²⁵ *A Methodist Magazine, Published June, 1820, Intended as a Substitute for September, 1819*, 229.

²⁶ *The Primitive Methodist Magazine For the Year 1827* (Leicester, England: J. Fowler, 1827), 29.

²⁷ *The Primitive Methodist Magazine For the Year 1836* (Leicester, England: J. Fowler, 1836), 427, 428.

It didn't seem to matter how many conversions occurred on the campground during the day; the event was still a success if a great outpouring of salvation attended the evening's love feast.

The popularity of these love feasts in association with Primitive Methodist camp meetings was significant in terms of the sect's understanding of its mission. The Primitive Methodists did not see typically Methodist occasions, such as class meetings and love feasts, as designed strictly to nurture the spirituality of believers. Rather, the Primitive Methodists believed these were evangelical, as well as nurturing, tools. Their message, therefore, took on an even more democratic, universalist tone, suggesting that every means of grace should be available to every kind of person, class ticket-holding Methodist or not, so that no chance to convert some might be missed.

The objections of the Wesleyan connexion notwithstanding, the English camp meetings were nothing like their American counterparts, in terms of the degree to which enthusiastic and emotional response was encouraged from the assembly. The Primitive Methodists distanced themselves from the extremes in behavior and expression reported in the United States, probably due to at least in part to generally accepted European standards of good taste and decorum. Unseemly and completely unregulated outbursts of emotional religious feeling were frowned upon. The length of the American meetings also caused concern, since worship that "continued day and night for several days together" seemed extraordinary to readers of the *Primitive Methodist Magazine*.²⁸

There were social and political forces at work on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean that no doubt accounted for some of the differences between the styles of camp meetings. In the United States, the political and social economies were rapidly advancing toward the Jacksonian ideals of democracy, as exhibited at the ballot box, in the marketplace, and in the pew. The personal and enthusiastic responses of camp meeting attendees were the victorious cries of a people finding its voice through the liberty of Arminian spirituality.

In the United States the popularity of the camp meetings has often been associated with the rapid growth of the Methodist movement before the Civil War, although John Wigger has pointed out that the period of Methodism's most significant expansion occurred before the camp meeting became widely popular. According to Russell Richey, the camp meeting served as a metaphor for Methodism itself, encapsulating in just a few days Methodism's historic ability to create democratic and self-reliant communities across the American frontier. The camp meetings dramatically portrayed the enthusiasm and vitality that had been at the heart of the Methodists' sweep across American society, while bringing people and clergy together to confer and share in liturgical rituals such as the Lord's Supper and love feasts. The camp meetings "countered those hierarchical-deferential gentry expressions of patriarchal community with an inclusive and spiritually egalitarian alternative." Participants were encouraged to express themselves emotion-

²⁸ *A Methodist Magazine, For the Year 1819*, 150.

ally and boldly before diverse audiences. Sometimes even the preachers took their cues from the congregation. At one camp meeting on an island in Chesapeake Bay a woman interrupted preacher Lorenzo Dow by clapping her hands and shouting, "Glory! Glory!" Dow announced, "The Lord is here. *He is in that sister!*"²⁹

While the Methodist leadership in America embraced the camp meeting as "a phenomenally successful instrument for popular recruitment," according to Nathan Hatch, English officials opposed it for many reasons, not the least of which was its threat to the cultural, political, and ecclesiastical order. The camp meetings defied the church's accepted standards of time, space, authority, and liturgical form. Camp meetings were more threatening than field preaching, because they were not strictly speaking preaching events, but were developing more and more into spectacles emphasizing congregational involvement. As Hatch has described it:

Those who led the meeting made overt attempts to have the power of God "strike fire" over a mass audience; they encouraged uncensored testimonials by persons without respect to age, gender, or race; the public sharing of private ecstasy; overt physical display and emotional release; loud and spontaneous response to preaching; and the use of folk music that would have chilled the marrow of Charles Wesley.³⁰

In England, social upheaval was also acute at this time. By the second decade of the nineteenth century there was "widespread discontent with the established social and economic order." Food shortages, postwar unemployment, depressed wages, and soaring prices applied increasing pressure on those least able to deal with it. The painfully slow democratization process at once encouraged people to think beyond their station in life while constantly reminding them that there was no escaping it. Other, more immediate crises made the people more receptive to the Primitive Methodists' message. The presence of cholera in the Leeds circuit in 1832 probably led to the swelling of membership there and the disease may have also been responsible for adding 250 members to both the Hull and North Shields circuits in just one quarter. Liverpool, which had even higher mortality rates by the end of the 1840s, gained over nine thousand members in 1849—the largest annual increase in Primitive Methodist history.³¹

Jabez Bunting presided over the Wesleyan Methodist Conference "with almost papal authority" from 1820 until his retirement in 1851, precisely during the period of Primitive Methodism's most rapid growth. As a young man in 1803 he witnessed the forces of revivalism cause a rift between Methodists. He came to favor "discipline, good order, and tradition" above all else. According to David Hempton:

[Bunting] contrasted the noisy and transient enthusiasm of the revivalists with an

²⁹ Wigger, 96; Russell E. Richey, "From Quarterly to Camp Meeting: A Reconsideration of Early American Methodism," *Methodist History* 23.1 (July, 1985): 199-207; Hatch, 58. Italics original.

³⁰ Hatch, 50-51.

³¹ Werner, 85, 154.

alternative vision of how to secure the future well-being of Methodism: sound finances, the careful selection of preachers, the assiduous application of Conference rules, the erection of new chapels and the vigorous exploitation of a connexional system of church government so that the weak could be helped by the strong.³²

In Bunting's mind, unregulated revivalism not only challenged the discipline of the Methodist movement but also reflected the social instability in England at the time. Freedom from ecclesiastical oppression had been granted to Methodists and other Dissenters in the Toleration Act of 1812. This act recognized the right of Christians to worship according to their consciences but also made it clear "that no one had the right to disturb the peace or escape from civic responsibilities under the pretense of teaching religion." Bunting was determined to protect and take advantage of the church's new legal status. He not only avoided entanglement with anyone who supported radical reform; he actively pursued new members who could make significant financial contributions and whose respectability stood in sharp contrast to the political and spiritual threats posed by radicals and enthusiasts.³³

By the 1830s, however, efforts were also being made by some American Methodists to distance themselves from the excesses of enthusiasm of the type seen at camp meetings. In 1826, the Ithaca, New York, Methodist Episcopal Church decided not to endorse a local camp meeting so that area residents could appreciate the difference between the Methodists in town and "the rural Ranting Methodists." It seemed as if there had always been a significant number of American Methodists opposed to what they saw as "unscriptural disorder in worship." As early as 1809, an itinerant preacher appointed to the Annapolis, Maryland, Methodist society classified his members as shouters and "anti-shouters."³⁴ There can be no doubt that this disassociation from the revivalism of the past was motivated by the same thing that moved the Wesleyans in England to reject camp meetings two decades earlier; i.e., Methodism's arrival as a respectable denomination full of upwardly-mobile middle-class citizens. By 1850, Methodists accounted for more than a third of religious adherents in the United States.³⁵

How one responded to the camp meetings depended a great deal on whether one was comfortable with the noise and activity associated with them. Noise and activity were at that time part and parcel of American national expansion. Whether in the cities or on the frontier, one was never far removed from the hustle and bustle of the young republic. Leigh Eric Schmidt has pointed out that "the sounds of revival rattled those who could not contain them." For observers of enthusiastic religion, "hearing was a potent indicator of social order or chaos . . . the ear, indeed, was a crucial

³² David Hempton, *The Religion of the People: Methodism and Popular Religion c. 1750-1900* (London: Routledge, 1996), 91-93.

³³ Hempton, 98-101; Hatch, 50.

³⁴ Wigger, 124; Ruth, 76.

³⁵ David Hempton, "Methodist Growth in Transatlantic Perspective, ca. 1770-1850," in *Methodism and the Shaping of American Culture*, ed. Nathan O. Hatch and John H. Wigger (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 2001), 53.

guide to social harmony, discord, and concord.” According to Schmidt, “the evangelicals were not only defined by their noises; they *were* noise.”³⁶

The camp meetings as experienced in America and England in the first third of the nineteenth century represented a unique kind of trans-Atlantic phenomenon in that they began in the United States and were transported and received back in England even if in a somewhat altered state. This kind of reverse flow in the development of Methodism exemplifies both the close communication between Methodists in different parts of the world and the fact that there have always been many different kinds of Methodism in many different places at many different times. As David Hempton has pointed out, Methodists on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean were already preparing to go their separate ways:

In England it [Methodism] cozied up to governments, expelled radicals, and built its Gothic chapels, often more out of a quest for social acceptance and respectability than for any more noble purpose. In America it first renounced slavery, than accommodated it, liberated women and then controlled them. Everywhere, Methodists began as cultural outsiders, but through work discipline and an unquenchable passion for education, they remorselessly moved to the cultural center, sometimes with remarkable speed.³⁷

By the time camp meetings arrived in England the Methodist leadership no longer found it desirable to be out of touch with the mainline political and cultural forces at play. Most Methodists in America eventually distanced themselves from the enthusiasm of camp meetings but in the camp meeting's heyday the frontier was not yet closed; a nation on the move remained energized and vocal. The lifecycle of the American camp meetings may have been relatively brief; its influence limited as the nation developed rapidly; but it was certainly a testament to the significant differences between American and English Methodism as they charted their respective courses into the nineteenth century.

³⁶ Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2000), 67.

³⁷ Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit*, 31.