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Realizing Spiritual Power: The Experience of Eighteenth-Century Methodist Women

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My thesis offers a close examination of the lives of eighteenth-century Methodist women within transatlantic Methodism. The early movement encouraged these women to recognize their ability to possess and wield spiritual power both inside and outside the religious community. The Methodist literary culture and market provided women the opportunity to realize and gain acknowledgment for their spirituality. The structure and composition of the early Methodist societies allowed women to act upon their internal religious sentiments through official and unofficial leadership positions. Finally, the early Methodist women were able to utilize their spiritual power in order to make decisions about their domestic lives. With the support of their religious societies, these women were responsible for interpreting God's will and were willing to challenge social norms in order to secure their salvation.

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Introduction

Susanna Wesley has been described as the "Mother of Methodism" because of the religious education and guidance she imparted unto her children, John and Charles, who would eventually found the Methodist movement. She remained a spiritual mentor for her sons and daughters and became a role model for future Methodist women.[1] In the winter of 1711-1712, Susanna Wesley began leading family prayers at her husband's Anglican parish in Epworth, Lincolnshire during his absence. Soon other community members began to attend the services until they outnumbered the parishioners at the morning prayers led by the curate. Susanna Wesley's husband, Samuel, wrote to her condemning the practice. In a letter dated February 6, 1712, she responded to his complaint writing, "As I am woman, so I am also mistress of a large family. And though the superior charge of the souls contained in it lies upon you; yet in your absence, I cannot but look upon every soul you leave under my care, as a talent committed to me under a trust by the great Lord of all the families both of heaven and earth."[2] This correspondence demonstrated her acute awareness of the constraints of her gender and the traditional hierarchical relationship between husband and wife.

The societal restrictions placed on her as a woman, however, were overshadowed by her religious responsibility and calling. She believed that God had entrusted to her an obligation to watch over the souls of her family and the Epworth parishioners and led them towards salvation. While her power originated from the divine, the presence of a

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[1] Charles Wallace Jr., "Susanna Wesley's Spirituality: The Freedom of a Christian Woman," *Methodist History* 22, no. 3 (April 1984): 164.
[2] Susanna Wesley, *Susanna Wesley: The Complete Writings*, ed. Charles Wallace Jr. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 79.

willing audience validated her actions. In order to fulfill her religious duties to her children and the community at large, she was willing to defy societal norms, more specifically her husband's wishes.

Nevertheless, Susanna Wesley did not attempt to deny her husband's authority. In fact, she said that she would stop if and only if her husband explicitly commanded her to do so.[3] In anthropology, Judith Oakley described the phenomenon of "cracks of resistance" in which women momentarily rejected their subordinate status.[4] Susanna Wesley's actions can be classified in these terms. She was not attempting to overthrow patriarchy. Instead, she temporarily undertook a public leadership role for the sake of her and her children's salvation. Susanna Wesley remained a spiritual mentor for her children until her death in 1742. From the time he left home until his mother came to live with him two years prior to her death, John Wesley wrote to her for theological advice.[5] After her death, Wesley continued to use his mother as a personal advisor and presented her as a model for others. He published some of their correspondence in the very first edition of the *Arminian Magazine*.[6] Then in 1781, the magazine published a short account of Susanna Wesley's life, including the letter mentioned above that she wrote to her husband in 1712.[7] Therefore, John Wesley offered his mother's experiences as an example of a sincere, devout woman. The eighteenth-century movement gave women the opportunity not only to reflect upon their spirituality but also to gain recognition of their

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[3] Ibid., 82.
[4] Judith Oakley, "Defiant Moments: Gender, Resistance and Individuals," *Man* 26, no. 1 (March 1991): 8-9.
[5] Earl Kent Brown, *Women of Mr. Wesley's Methodism*. *Studies in Women and Religion*, Vol. 11 (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1983), 31-32.
[6] "Letters," *The Arminian Magazine consisting of extracts and original treatises on universal redemption* 1 (January 1778): 31-39.
[7] "A Short Account of Mrs. Susanna Wesley," *Arminian Magazaine consisting of extracts and orignial treatises on universal redemption* (June 1781): 312-316.

spiritual power through a large literary market and local societies. During the early Methodist movement, women were able to cultivate their spiritual power internally, confirm their power through a supportive religious community, and then finally apply their power outside the Methodist society.

Combining their intellectual pursuits with a strong sense of pietism, John and Charles Wesley began the Methodist movement at Oxford University. In 1729, the two brothers, along with a group of peers who would become key religious figures including George Whitefield, John Gambold, John Clayton, James Hervey, and Benjamin Ingham, began meeting with the intention to study, discuss, and serve.[8] The group was mocked for its seriousness and called the "Holy Club." The very term Methodist also derived from a derogatory jab at this Oxford group. A poem explaining the name appeared in a pamphlet entitled "The Methodists; an Humorous, Burlesque Poem," published ten years after the founding of the organization. "By rule they eat, by rule they drink,/ Do all things else by rule, but think--/… Method alone must guide 'em all/ Whence Methodists themselves they call."[9] The group, however, took pride in its reputation and the movement eventually adopted these mocking terms as their own.

Even if the outside world grouped all of the Methodists together, the leaders did not have a cohesive identity. In 1738 after Methodists had been forbidden to preach in St. Antholin's Church in London, the clerk asked Charles Wesley if he called himself a Methodist. Charles responded by saying, "I do not; the world may call me what they

[8] Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville, Tennessee, 1995), 38-40.
[9] Luke Tyerman, *The Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley, M. A., founder of the Methodists,* vol. 1 (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1876), 248.

please."[10] If Charles Wesley did not self-identify as a Methodist in 1738, how could anyone be classified as a Methodist during this time period? Indeed, the term would remain problematic until around 1770s when it had a unified meaning for both Methodists and the general public. Between 1738 and 1770, two major movements separated by theological and geographic differences and led by different members of the Holy Club were both considered Methodists. While Wesley had been largely unsuccessful in his missionary trip to Georgia, George Whitefield established and led a growing movement in the New World. Whitefield and the Americans who followed him subscribed to Calvinist theology that believed in predestination. Whitefield formally distanced himself from the Anglican Church.[11] Wesley, on the other hand, was starkly against the theology of predestination. Wesley, who considered himself a reformer as opposed to a separatist, remained a minister in the Church of England until his death and encouraged his followers to do the same.

The two movements were characterized by the men's leadership styles. Wesley quickly organized a network of preachers and congregations while Whitefield emphasized performance over administration.[12] Because Whitefield's ministry depended largely upon his personality and his oration skills, the major discrepancies between the two movements faded after his death and Whitefield's Calvinist Methodism folded into Wesleyan theology.[13] During his lifetime, Whitefield recognized the superior strength and durability of Wesley's movement compared to his own. Because he neglected the

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[10] Charles Wesley, *The Journal of the Rev. Charles Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson (London: Mason, 1849), 139.
[11] Anna M. Lawrence *One Family Under God: Love, Belonging, and Authority in Early Transatlantic Methodism* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 35.
[12] Whitefield gained followers through his oration and did not established a lasting organizational structure. Dee E. Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutinary America, 1760-1800: The Shaping of an Evangelical Culture* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), 25.
[13] Lawrence, 35.

organization of the awakened persons, his followers were a "rope of sand."[14] This study focuses on the period after Whitefield's death, thus the individuals discussed are primarily followers of Wesleyan Methodism.

The Wesleyan movement during the eighteenth century was centered around the British Isles and North America. The movement's growth in Britain was relatively slow but steadily increased from twenty thousand members in 1766 to over seventy thousand at the time of Wesley's death in 1791. Wesleyan Methodism did not have significant membership in North America until two years after Whitefield's death in 1770 but progressed much more rapidly to over eighty thousand members in 1791.[15] The American Methodist movement continued to rapidly gain membership well into the nineteenth century. In fact by 1850, 34.2 percent of the population of the United States identified as Methodist.[16] This thesis, however, ends with the death of John Wesley in 1791 before Methodism reached its peak membership total.

The local Methodist communities in second half of the eighteenth century provided a practical means to manage the growing numbers of converts while promoting spiritual growth. In *The Nature, Design, and General Rules of Methodist Societies*, John Wesley described the origins and structure of the early Methodist communities. The Methodist societies were divided by geographic location and consisted of classes and bands. According to Wesley, the first class meeting occurred in London in 1739. Eight or ten individuals approached Wesley requesting to spend time with him to receive counsel

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[14] Holland N. McTyeire, *A History of Methodism: Comprising a view of the Rise of this Revival of Spiritual Religion in the First Half of the Eighteenth Century, and of the Principal Agents by whom it was promoted in Europe and America; with some account of the Doctrine and Polity of the Episcopal Methodism in the United States, and the Means and Manners of its Extension Down to A.D. 1884* (Nashville, Tennessee: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church South, 1910), 204.
[15] Heitzenrater, 264.
[16] David Hempton, *The Religion of the People: Methodism and Popular Religion c. 1750-1900* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 9.

and pray. Wesley decided that he would meet with all of them on a Thursday evening.[17] While Wesley claimed the classes preceded the bands, historical evidence has suggested otherwise. The bands predated the classes as voluntary groups that individuals could choose to join for spiritual support. While the bands were largely based on Moravian organization, the classes were a uniquely Methodist organizational tool.[18] The first classes emerged in 1742 in Bristol. These groups consisted of around twelve members. The classes tended to be a bit larger than the bands and were focused around geographic boundaries while bands were always divided by sex and then marital status and age if necessary depending on the size and composition of the society.[19]

Joining a class was the basis for identifying yourself as a Methodist. The class defined who was inside and outside the group.[20] Classes were required for all members of a society while bands were optional. Both bands and classes issued tickets or invitations to deserving members who were seeking to live a godly life.[21] The General Rules were the guidelines for judging who should be issued a ticket.[22] In order to become a Methodist, an individual only needed to "desire to flee from the wrath to come and to be saved from their sins,"[23] but the General Rules provided some expectations of members after their admittance. They could retain their position in the society by following these three rules. "First, by doing no harm,…Secondly, by doing good,…Thirdly, by attending

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[17] John Wesley, "The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies" in *The Works of John Wesley: The Methodist Societies History, Nature, and Design,* Vol. 9, ed. Rupert E. Davies (Nashville, Tennessee, 1989), 69.
[18] Jennifer Lloyd, *Women and the Shaping of British Methodism: Persistent Preachers, 1807-1907*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), 28-29.
[19] Heitzenrater, 119.
[20] Lawrence, 39.
[21] Lloyd, 29.
[22] Heitzenrater, 139.
[23] John Wesley, "Plain Account of the People Called Methodist in a Letter to the Rev. Mr. Perronet" in *The Works of John Wesley: The Methodist Societies History, Nature, and Design* Vol. 9, ed., Rupert Davies (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1989), 257.

upon all the ordinances of God…"[24] Belonging and maintaining membership in the classes and bands was crucial for the early Methodists' spiritual development. These smaller meetings were more than just a chance to interact with other Methodists; they were supposed to allow an individual to "commune with God through the intimacy of this fellowship."[25]

While united by these common rules and goals, the North American and British movements officially split in 1784 following the American Revolution in large part due to the changing political situation. With the creation of an independent nation, the American Methodists could no longer be a part of the Anglican Church and needed to form their own denomination. In December 1784 at the Christmas Conference in Baltimore, Maryland, the Methodist Episcopal Church (M.E.C) was founded with Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury appointed as co-superintendents. The major organizational difference between the North American and British Methodists was that all matters needed to be voted on in the M.E.C.[26] In the English movement, Wesley had been assembling preachers for Conference since 1744, but the preachers' role was to "advise not govern me [Wesley]."[27]

Despite the preference of a more democratic system, the newly established Methodist Episcopal Church recognized Wesley's authority and pledged to be loyal to him until his death. One of the first regulations adopted at the Christmas Conference was that "during the life of the Rev. Mr. Wesley, we acknowledge ourselves his sons in the

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[24] Ibid., 138.
[25] Chilcote, *Selected Women's Writings*, 24-25.
[26] Andrews, 71
[27] Jno J. Tigert, D.D., LL.D., *A Constitutional History of American Episcopal Methodism* Third Edition (Nashville, Tennessee: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church South, 1909), 21.

gospel, ready in matters belonging to Church government to obey his commands.[28] The Americans did not have their own formal General Conference separate from the English Methodists until 1792, the year after Wesley's death. John James Tigert, an early twentieth-century Methodist scholar, described the 1792 Conference and the legislative body it assembled as the "final announcement by the Americans of their irrevocable independence."[29] This study focuses on the time period during which transatlantic Methodism was united under Wesley's leadership from the 1760s to 1791. While Wesley's personal inclinations about women greatly contributed to their elevated position in Methodism during his lifetime, the movement also can be considered part of a larger historical trend common in the early stages of a religion's development.

The initial phases of spiritual movements have opened up avenues for female participation and leadership. Natalie Zemon Davis, writing about urban women in sixteenth-century France, observed that Protestantism allowed women to enter into serious study of scripture that was not permitted in the long-established Catholic Church.[30] Charles H. Barfoot and Gerald T. Sheppard observed a similar pattern in the early twentieth century during the development of Pentecostalism. Women's equality, they argued, was limited to the early stages of the movement's evolution and later dissolved.[31] Similarly, Methodist women exercised much spiritual power during the eighteenth century that sharply declined in the following century. The position of female preachers most clearly demonstrated this pattern. Wesley authorized the first woman

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[28] Ibid., 188.
[29] Ibid., 191.
[30] Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1975), 79.
[31] Charles H. Barfoot and Gerald T. Sheppard, "Prohetic vs. Priestly Religion: The Chaning Role of Women Clergy in Classical Pentecostal Churches," *Review of Religious Research* 22, no. 1 (September 1980): 4.

pastor, Sarah Crosby, in 1761 and subsequently allowed a few other women to preach due to their "extraordinary call." By 1803, a resolution was passed by the Manchester Conference stated that an "extraordinary call" could only permit a woman to "address her *own sex*, and *those only*."[32] The restrictive measures passed after Wesley's death limited the public voice women had gained in Methodism during the eighteenth century.

Historians of early Methodism can be divided into two separate schools. Those writing from outside the movement, most notably E.P. Thompson, were highly critical while those working from within Methodism like Charles Wesley Buoy, a nineteenth-century minister in the Methodist Episcopal Church, presented a romanticized version of the denomination's early history.[33] Buoy attempted to create a picture of early Methodist women, but his work relied heavily upon overly idealistic portraits. Recently, Methodist scholarship has returned to a more realistic approach to women's history. In 1994, Jean Miller Schmidt provided an excellent study that traced women's role in Methodism from its beginning up to 1939.[34] Women's roles have been included in other Methodist studies by historians such as Dee Andrews in 2000 and Anna Lawrence in 2011. Karen Westerfield Tucker has researched and written about early Methodist marriage in particular. Her study traced the development of the legislation and rites surrounding Methodist marriage from the eighteenth to twentieth century.[35] My study does not focus on marriage as a ritual. Rather, my aim is to show that early Methodism's emphasis on

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[32] Vicki Tolar Collins, "Women's Voices and Women's Silence in the Tradition of Early Methodism," in *Listening to their Voices: Rhetorical Activities of Historical Women*, ed. Molly M. Wertheimer (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1997), 245.
[33] See E.P. Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966) and Charles Wesley Buoy, *Representative Women of Methodism* (New York: Hunt & Easton, 1893).
[34] Jean Miller Schmidt, *Grace Sufficient: A History of Women in American Methodism, 1760-1939* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1999).
[35] Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, *American Methodist Worship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

spirituality allowed women to be recognized as leaders and models who could apply their spiritual power to the domestic sphere.

Before discussing how Methodist women recognized and wielded spiritual power, the term must be adequately defined. The word "power" is inherently problematic because it has been defined and used by scholars in different fashions; however, a few main definitions have emerged out of the scholarship. In the introductory article of a special issue of the *Psychology of Women Quarterly* revolving around a discussion of women and power, Janice D. Yoder and Arnold S. Kahn identified the two categories: "power-over (domination) and power-to (personal empowerment)."[36] Political scientists, especially Joseph Nye, have divided power into two other classifications: hard and soft power. In 2004, Nye defined power as "the ability to influence the behavior of others to get the outcomes one wants."[37] While hard power involves coercion or force, soft power is found in the ability to influence the opinions of others.[38] Power in the context of this study primarily refers to personal empowerment rather than domination and influence rather than coercion.

In order to formulate a definition of spiritual power for eighteenth-century Methodists, however, an examination of their concept of religion and spirituality is needed. In a 1786 work entitled "Thoughts upon Methodism," John Wesley described the four fundamental principles of the movement that should prove helpful in discerning the eighteenth-century Wesleyan idea of religion and therefore spiritual power:

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[36] Janice D. Yoder and Arnold S. Kahn, "Towards a Feminist Understanding of Women and Power," *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 16 (December 1992): 382.
[37] Joesph S. Nye, Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), 2.
[38] Ibid., 5.

1. That religion is an inward principle; that it is no other than the mind that was in Christ; or, in other, the renewal of the soul after the image of God, in righteousness and true holiness.
2. That this can never be wrought in us, but by the power of the Holy Ghost.
3. That we receive this, and every other blessing, merely for the sake of Christ: And,
4. That whosoever hath the mind that was in Christ, the same is our brother, and sister, and mother.[39]

Using these four points, the relationship between interiority and external expression can be applied to craft a definition of spiritual power. While religion is "an inward principle," an external force, "the power of the Holy Ghost," must aid the individual in order to achieve holiness. Once this internal change has begun it should be reflected in the individual's behavior. Paul Chilcote, a modern Methodist scholar, articulated the importance of action within the Methodist tradition. He wrote, "It is the exterior aspect of the Christian life—the imperative to mission and service—that safeguards this fundamental interiority from devolving into an idolatrous form of narcissism."[40] The final point revealed the importance of community for Wesleyan tradition. As each individual struggled with their spirituality, they had the support of a large Christian family.

Based on these principles, spiritual power in this study can be defined as an outward expression of internal spirituality that is recognized by others.[41] This power had divine origins but was discovered through internal self-reflection and cultivated and encouraged through community support. The first section of this paper shows how life

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[39] John Wesley, "Thoughts Upon Methodism," in *The Works of John Wesley: The Methodists Societies History, Nature, and Design* Vol. 9, ed. Rupert E. Davies (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1989), 527.

[40] Paul Chilcote, ed., *Early Methodist Spirituality: Selected Women's Writings* (Nashville, Tennessee: Kingswood Books, 2007), 61.

[41] Mary Fronhilch defined spirituality as "the living and concrete human person in dynamic transformation towards the fullness of life" in Mary Frohilch, "Critical Interiority," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 7, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 77.

writing allowed early Methodist women to discover their spirituality and have their spiritual power recognized by the transatlantic community. The second section demonstrates the importance of the Methodist society in giving woman a venue for the cultivation and application of spiritual power. The final section focuses on how Methodist women applied their religious empowerment to the domestic sphere in order to make choices regarding their marital life.

Section I

Recognition of Spiritual Power in Methodist Life Writing

For the eighteenth-century Methodist, writing about faith and religious experiences was central to spiritual expression and growth. The Wesleyan literary tradition includes hymns, letters, pamphlets, sermons, eulogies, and life writing. I am using the term "life writing" to include a myriad of sources with autobiographic material, including accounts that were written completely by the individual, edited narratives, and works written by a third party that include quotations or excepts from letters or diaries. All of the components of the Methodist literary tradition offer insight into the motivations and beliefs of early Methodists and are included in this the study. Life writing, however, is especially important because it affirms and creates an understanding of personal spiritual power. Written accounts allowed eighteenth-century women to receive recognition within the Methodist community and, therefore, feel empowered to assert more control in their secular relationships.

Religious biographies are not a Methodist invention. They place the movement in a long Christian and literary tradition. The history of Christian conversion narratives can be traced back to the apostle Paul. The Book of Acts recounted Paul's spiritual transformation on the road to Damascus.[42] This anecdote, however, cannot be classified as a spiritual autobiography. Paul did not compose this story, and clear discrepancies exist between Acts and the epistles, which are attributed to Paul.[43] The earliest, most

[42] See Acts 9.
[43] For a discussion of the historical accuracy of Paul's conversion account in Acts, see Paula Fredriksen, "Paul and Augustine: Conversion Narratives, Orthodox Traditions, and the Retrospective Self, *Journal of Theological Studies* 37, no. 1 (1986): 3-34.

prominent model for an autobiographical conversion narrative is St. Augustine's *Confessions* in which Augustine "self-consciously" wrote and thought about his conversion.[44] Augustine's model was followed throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. The Reformation, however, was not characterized by the sharing of such narratives. Both Luther and Calvin only made passing references to their conversion experiences.[45]

The spiritual autobiography reemerged during the seventeenth century. Puritan writers, such as John Bunyan, wrote extensively about their lives. Robert Bell argued the roots of Bunyan's *Grace Abounding* demonstrated the over-saturation of the Puritan model of autobiography. The abundance of such narratives helped to contribute to the development of a modified form of personal writing with a new model of identity adopted by secular figures such as Benjamin Franklin and Jean Jacques Rousseau.[46] Focusing on eighteenth-century American writers, Ruth Banes noticed a more direct connection between the seventeenth-century religious narrative and eighteenth-century secular autobiography. Banes argued that prominent Revolutionary figures, notably John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin, emulated spiritual autobiographies by connecting "individual history and identity with a larger purpose."[47] The Methodist conversion narrative corresponded with Banes' assessment of secular biographers. The accounts placed the individual's story within a "larger matrix of Wesleyan heritage."[48] The writings were personalized experiences that were meant to convey the universal

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[44] Fredriksen, 4.
[45] Bruce D. Hindmarsh, " 'My chains fell off and my heart was free': Early Methodist Conversion Narrative in England," *Church History* 68, no. 4 (December 1999), 913.
[46] For a fuller analysis, see Robert Bell, "The Metamorphoses of Spiritual Autobiography," *English Literary History* 44, no. 1 (Spring 1977): 108-126.
[47] Ruth A. Banes, "The Exemplary Self: Autobiography in Eighteenth Century America," *Biography* 5, no. 3 (Summer 1982), 237.
[48] Chilcote, *Selected Women's Writings*, 10.

nature of conversion and how an "awakened" person's daily life should reflect this transformation.

Wesleyan Methodism, although not unique in promoting autobiographical spiritual accounts, was distinctive because it encouraged all members from the founders to the ordinary laypersons to record their experiences.[49] The most extensive autobiographical records are predicatively from the most recognizable figures of the eighteenth-century Methodist movement. John Wesley, Charles Wesley, and Francis Asbury all released extensive, edited editions of their journals. For example, from 1741 until his death in 1791, Wesley's *Journal* was published in twenty-one parts.[50] For those entering the ministry, writing about one's spiritual journey was not just encouraged but also required.[51] Before Wesley would appoint a minister, he asked for a description of the candidate's early life, conversion, and call to ministry.[52] Wesley, however, did not restrict his emphasis on autobiographical writing to the members seeking position within the Methodist movement. He wrote to Eliza Bennis, an Irish Methodist, praising her for recording her conversion experience and asserted that everyone should declare what "God has done for his soul."[53] John Wesley was not the only Methodist leader to encourage ordinary members to record their experiences. His brother, Charles Wesley,

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[49] This large source base allows historians to asset more easily the values and motivations of the early Methodists. Other religious groups, such as the Baptists can prove more difficult because of the dearth of narrative sources. See Jewel Spangler, "Becoming Baptists: Conversion in Colonial and Early National Virginia, *The Journal of Southern History* 67, no. 2 (May 2001): 243-286.
[50] Hindmarsh, 915.
[51] Many of these autobiographic accounts were collected in John Telford, *Wesley's Veterans: Lives of early Methodist preachers told by themselves* (London: Robert Culley, 1912-1914).
[52] Hindmarsh., 917.
[53] *Christian Correspondence being a collection of letters written by the late Rev. John Wesley and several Methodist Preachers in Connection with him to the late Mrs. Eliza Bennis with her answers* (Philadelphia: Printed by B. Grawes for Thomas Bennis), 18.

solicited a large collection of conversion narratives from the laity with whom he interacted. He then published some of the accounts in his *Journal*.[54]

The Wesleyan emphasis on writing can be related to John Wesley's focus on reason and experience. Richard Brantley, combing religion, literature, and philosophy, argued that a direct link could be made from Locke to Wesley. "Although empiricism is 'natural' and evangelicalism is 'spiritual,' the great principle of empiricism, that one must see for oneself and be in the presence of the thing one knows, applies to evangelical faith as well."[55] While it is clear that Wesley was familiar with Locke, Brantley may have exaggerated Locke's direct impact on Wesley.[56] Wesley was highly educated within the Aristotelian tradition and his recognition of the interdependent relationship between spirituality and critical thinking can be described more accurately as a result of this logical heritage than directly from Locke.[57] Wesley emphasized the important of experience in connection with reason to discern spiritual truths.[58] It was this ability to use both reason and experience to discover religious insights that gave women the opportunity to gain spiritual power.

While the Wesley brothers promoted the literary expression of spiritual experiences, they never specified a particular structure. Still, a clear formula for the

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[54] Lawrence, 84.
[55] Richard E. Brantley, *Coordinates of Anglo-American Romanticism: Wesley, Edwards, Carlyle & Emerson* (Gainsville, Florida: University of Flordia Press, 1993), 1.
[56] Wesley recommended that his followers read Locke's *Essay for Human Understanding* and even had sections of the essay reprinted in the *Arminian Magazine*. Dreyer, "Faith and Experience in the Thought of John Wesley," 1983.
[57] Wesley wrote his own critique Locke's "Essay on Human Understanding." For a detailed anaylsis of his criticisms see Kevin Twain Lowery, "Wesley's Limited Alliance with Lockean Empiricism," *Digital Commons @ Olivet* (Olivet Nazarene University, 2000), accessed on March 28, 2013, http://digitalcommons.olivet.edu/theo_facp/4/.
[58] In the twentieth century, Albert Outler developed his concept of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral in which he found Scripture, Tradition, Experience, and Reason to be the four sources of religious knowledge in Wesleyan theology. For Outler's argument, see Albert Outler, *John Wesley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964). Outler's idea has been adopted by modern Methodists. For a contemporary explaination of the intersection and application of the four areas, see *The Book of Discipline*, 2012, 77-84.

accounts developed. Through extensive research, D. Bruce Hindmarsh discovered a common structure for early English Methodist conversion narratives that can be applied to Methodism across the Atlantic world. The narratives are structured around the biblical framework of "Creation, Fall, Redemption, and New Creation."[59] Hester Ann Roger's account clearly replicated this model. The "Creation" section often referred to the childlike paradise characterized by a religious purity and even somber demeanor. Rogers wrote about her spiritual relationship in early childhood as extremely intimate; she fully trusted and relied on God and went to him for "ease and comfort."[60] The second stage, the "Fall", was represented by an abandonment of this close and sincere faith. Rogers, tempted and facilitated by her wealthy family, began to participate in "dress, novels, plays, cards, assemblies, and balls."[61] In her retrospective analysis, she perceived these activities as sinful and distracting from a healthy spirituality. The conversion to Methodism prompted the redemptive step usually through a "self-despairing crisis."[62] This process would often trigger an extremely emotional response. Rogers felt such remorse for her fall that she cut her hair and destroyed all of her nice articles of clothing.[63] "New creation" occurred as the individual recovered from his or her melancholy and began to live as an awakened person. Rogers, after her conversion, felt a deep communion with God.[64] This final phase was not static and was a constant endeavor to achieve a "hope in grace, pious death, and joy hereafter."[65] The Methodists believed

[59] Hindmarsh, 922.
[60] Hester Ann Rogers and Thomas Coke, *An Account of the Experience of Hester Ann Rogers and Her Funeral Sermon, by Reverend Dr. Coke to which are added her spiritual letters* (New York: Eaton and Mains, n.d), 13.
[61] Ibid., 14.
[62] Hindmarsh, 925.
[63] Rogers, 23.
[64] Ibid., 46.
[65] Hindmarsh, 927.

that conversion was not a guarantee of salvation. Methodists needed to be constantly working towards Christian perfection until their death.[66] While the written accounts may have similar forms, the autobiographic details personalized the works.[67] Not all of the narratives have all four of Hindmarsh's components, but even the briefest accounts have elements of these stages.

The *Arminian Magazine* established by John Wesley in 1778 offered a venue for shorter life writing.[68] The pieces in the magazine about ordinary Methodists tended to be written posthumously as a celebration of a holy life and death fitting into Hindmarsh's fourth stage of "New Creation."[69] In the first issue of the magazine, Wesley wrote an introduction explicitly stating the purpose of the publication. First and foremost, the magazine was a reaction to publications founded upon the principle of predestination such as the *Spiritual Magazine* and the *Gospel Magazine*, which were intended for the "elect only."[70] Wesley wrote that each issue of the *Arminian Magazine* was to have four components. The first purpose was to adhere to the "grand Christian doctrine" that "God willeth all men to be saved." The second intention of the publication was to present an account of the life of a "holy man, whether Lutheran, Church of Englandman, Calvinist or Arminian." The third objective was to feature a contemporary experience. Finally,

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[66] Schmidt, 37.
[67] Lawrence, 51.
[68] The term Arminian comes from Dutch theologian James (Jacob) Arminian. The most notable feature of Arminians is their rejection of Calvinism and predestination. For more on John Wesley's definition of an Arminian, see John Wesley, "The Question, 'What is an Arminian?' Answered by a Lover of Free Grace," in *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley: Tracts and letters on various subjects* Vol. 10, ed. Thomas Jackson (J.&J. Harper, 1827), 352.
[69] For more on holy death, see Schmidt, 43-50.
[70] John Wesley, "To the Reader," *The Arminian Magazine consisting of extracts and original treatises on universal redemption* 1 (January 1778), iii. It is important to note the Methodist movement not was always universally opposed to the idea of predestination. The issue divided George Whitefield, who established a movement in America in the early eighteenth century, and John Wesley. Because Whitefield's Methodist movement was largely motivated by his charismatic personality, his brand of Methodism folded into Wesleyan Methodism after his death. For more on this relationship, see Lawrence, 33-35.

each issue would include scripture that supported the "capital doctrines we have in view."[71] By placing historical accounts alongside life histories of contemporary Methodists, the *Arminian Magazine* elevated the ordinary but devote Methodist to the same plane as deceased "holy men." The breadth of the backgrounds of the historic religious figures also demonstrated the variety of early Methodist inspiration and the inclusivity of its membership. Women were featured prominently in the magazine. In fact, the publication contained more contemporary accounts of women than men.[72]

Although the Magazine's pieces often included quotes or diary entries, they were submitted by a minister or family member and then assumedly edited by Wesley before their publication. Therefore, any message conveyed about women's experience in early Methodism was edited making it difficult to separate the intention and motivation of the editor from the actual experience and voice of the woman being portrayed. Even though the accounts of these women were altered through a male editor, the filter can provide two significant benefits to historians. The edited accounts first showed how the Methodist leadership thought women should act and be perceived. Secondly, the system allowed for the preservation of the experiences of poor or illiterate women, who did not have the leisure or education to produce their own "pious memoirs."[73] Women were aware of this system and utilized it to record their stories. Margaret Davidson, an Irish Methodist who was not able to write about her experience due to blindness, asked an educated minister, Edward Smyth, to record her dictated account.[74]

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[71] John Wesley, "To the Reader," iv-vi.
[72] Schmidt, 36.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Edward Smyth, *The extraordinary life of Christian experience of Margaret Davidson, (as dictated by herself) who was a poor, blind woman among the People called Methodists, but rich towards god, and illuminated with the light of life. To which are added, some of her letters and hymns* (Dublin: Printed for the editor, by Bennett Dugdale, 1782).

Bound memoirs, like the magazine, facilitated the circulation of women's life writing. A family member or minister usually published these accounts after a woman's death. For example, *The Life and Death of Ann Cutler* was composed and edited by William Bramwell, the minister who initially converted her,[75] and William Bennet collected and published the *Memoirs of Mrs. Grace Bennet*, his mother.[76] Both of these works had sections that were written in first person, either in the form of a memoir, a diary, or even letters, with an editorial introduction and conclusion relating the author's "holy death." Although the women's writings were done during the eighteenth century, the majority of these works were not published until the early nineteenth century. The editorial process once again rendered the discovery of women's voice difficult; however, the editors' commentary revealed the intention behind releasing the life writing, which demonstrated the importance of women in the early movement. William Bramwell wrote at the beginning of his account of Ann Culter's life, "As I never met with her equal…I thought that a relation thereof might be useful and instructive."[77] Thus, Ann Cutler's story was presented as a model for other Methodist women and even men.

Accounts like Cutler's can be compared to more traditional hagiographic writing. While examining a medieval example of a saint's life, Margaret Cotter-Lynch found a two-fold purpose: *imitato et admirio*, to imitate and to admire.[78] The use of Methodist life writings corresponded with these goals with the additional objective of self-discovery.

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[75] William Bramwell, *The life and death of Ann Cutler, who was made a principal instrument in the revival of the work of God in Yorkshire, Lancashire, &c. &c. during her day* (London, n.d), 1796.
[76] William Bennet, *Memoirs of Mrs. Grace Bennet, lately deceased: relict of the Reverend John Bennet, of Chinley, Derbyshire: intersperse with some account of the ministry and death of Mr. Bennet to which are subjoined extracts from her diary, and a brief account of her death, February 23, 1803, in the eighty-ninth year of age* (Macclesfield, England: Bayley, 1803), Microfilm.
[77] Bramwell, 1.
[78] Margaret Cotter-Lynch, "Rereading Leoba, or Hagiography as Compromise," *Medieval Feminist Forum* 46, no. 1 (2010): 15.

Writing provided an opportunity for a woman to explore her interior life within the religious rhetoric found in Methodist conversion narratives.[79] The very existence of unpublished narratives supports this claim. In Maryland, Rebecca Ridgely wrote a short eight-page account of her conversion. Ridgely's narrative largely followed Hindmarsh's model. This could either suggest that Ridgely was structuring her story based on the other writings she would have presumably read or that the women's published accounts were not so drastically edited. Regardless of the format, Ridgely's tale was not written for circulation.[80] Instead, she was writing to reflect on her own religious experience. It was through such introspection that women could discover their spiritual power.

Eliza Bennis understood and experienced the benefit of self-reflective writing. She hesitantly wrote an account of her conversion after being asked by gentlemen in town on business from Holland who she referred to as a "godly man" with a "deep work of grace wrought upon his heart."[81] She feared writing her life story because it would reveal her ignorance and that she "had lost the witness of my [her] sanctification." When Bennis finally began to write, despite her reluctance, she found the "testimony of God's spirit" in her own writing.[82] The writing process itself was a way for women to recognize their spirituality and their capacity for possessing divinely granted power. Conversion narratives were not the only form of writing that could help an individual become more spiritually conscious. Diary writing was another way to discover internal truths. According to Rev. William Bramwell, Ann Cutler "made it her custom to *daily* to write

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[79] Phyllis Mack, *Heart Religion in the British Enlightenment: Gender and Emotion in Early Methodism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 23.
[80] Ridgely's short account was composed as a diary with the first pages being the conversion narrative and additonal entries added over the next few years. Since she held on to her narrative, it seems unlikely that her writing was widely circulated. See Rebecca Ridgely, "Conversion to Methodism," 1790, Hoyt Collection of Ridgley Papers, 1716-1970, Maryland Historical Society Archives.
[81] *Christian Correspondence*, 14.
[82] Ibid.,14.

down the dealings of God with her soul."[83] Bramwell recommend that others follow Cutler's example and begin to practice this habit, as he deemed it would be helpful for their spiritual development.

Writing did not just facilitate the discovery of spiritual power, but the published accounts allowed early Methodist women to gain recognition across the Atlantic. The conversion narrative industry was flourishing during the mid-eighteenth century. This industry contributed to the development of a transnational spiritual community—a community that encouraged women to have a voice.[84] In her dissertation on Catherine Livingston Garrettson, Diane Lobody described early Methodist women's narratives as opening "a grammar of liberty."[85] The accounts revealed not only a language but also a market for liberty and expression. One of the most popular books in this market was the *Account of the Experience of Hester Ann Rogers*. The work was originally published in 1793 but was released in over fifty editions in the nineteenth century.[86] Jean Miller Schmidt asserted that Hester Roe Rogers' memoir had a greater effect on American Methodism than all other British spiritual journals and letters.[87]

While Rogers' popularity occurred in the early nineteenth century, slightly after my focus time period, her work's reputation in America exemplified the importance of the transatlantic evangelical Methodist narrative exchange that continued to exist even after the establishment of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1784. In fact, the publishing process became more regulated with the approach of the nineteenth century. In 1789,

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[83] Bramwell, 1. (Emphasis in original)
[84] Lawrence, 36.
[85] Diane Lobody, "Lost in the Ocean of Love: The Mystical Writings of Catherine Livingston Garrettson," (Ph.D. dissertation, Drew University, 1990), 136.
[86] Collins, "Women's Voices and Women's Silence in Early Methodism," 239.
[87] Schmidt, 13.

John Dickins was appointed as the first Methodist Episcopal Book steward. His duties included overseeing the collection, editing, printing, and distribution of materials.[88] While the writing process gave women a chance to discover their inward religion, the Methodist market provided women with the opportunity to have their holy insights acknowledged by themselves and others and, therefore, gave them to chance to wield spiritual power both inside and outside the Methodist community.

[88] Lucas Endicott, "Settling the 'Printed Business': John Dickins and the Methodist Episcopal Book Concern from 1789 to 1798," *Methodist History* 48, no. 2 (January 2010): 83.

Section II

Cultivating Spiritual Power in Early Methodist Societies

While the eighteenth-century literary culture of Methodism could create personal awareness and bolster a woman's spiritual reputation in the transatlantic movement, the local Methodist communities recognized and cultivated spiritual power in women by encouraging them to speak freely as active leaders and participants. In his sermon, "On Visiting the Sick," John Wesley expressed his distain for the maxim "women are only to be seen but not heard" calling the sentiment the "deepest unkindness," "horrid cruelty," and even "mere Turkish barbarity."[89] Accordingly, within the Methodist societies, each individual, man or woman, had the responsibility to speak as well as listen. By occupying both official and unofficial leadership positions and by simply being ordinary members of Methodist societies, women were given an avenue for the external expression of their internal relationship with God. According to Wesley, Christianity should not and indeed could not be fully practiced as a solitary religion. An individual needed to mix solitude with society.[90] The composition and inclusivity of these eighteenth-century Methodist communities facilitated the manifestation of individual woman's spiritual power.

While the welcoming nature of the movement did attract many working class people, Methodism had a diverse membership on both sides of the Atlantic. Wealthy and influential women such as Selina Hastings, the Countess of Huntingdon, and Catherine Livingston Garrettson, daughter of a prominent New York judge, became associated with

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[89] John Wesley, Sermon #98, "On Visiting the Sick," 1786, *The Works of John Wesley: Sermons 71-114,* Vol. 3, ed. Albert C. Outler, (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1986), 390.
[90] John Wesley, Sermon #24, "Upon Our Lord's Sermon On the Mount: Discourse Four, " *The Works of John Wesley: Sermons 1-33*, Vol. 1, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1984),

the movement. On the other end of the spectrum, the movement had a large appeal among coal miners and slaves. Methodism also attracted people from various religious backgrounds. Because Methodism was not officially a separate denomination in America until 1784, its members attended already established churches to receive the sacraments. Most of the women included in this study belonged to other Protestant traditions, but the movement did not have any particular religious background requirement. For example, Rebecca Ridgely was by raised by a Quaker mother and Sarah Ryan lived with a Jewish family before her conversion.[91] This inclusivity was powered by what Jean Miller Schmidt referred to as a "radical spiritual equalitarianism" that allowed it to "oppose the worldly hierarchies of race, gender, and class."[92]

This inclusivity was very important theologically for John Wesley. While the Moravians largely inspired the structure of Methodist societies, Wesley saw the group's exclusivity as a serious problem. The Moravians equated conversion with achieving Christian perfection.[93] Wesley, on the other hand, believed that the conversion was an aspect of justifying not sanctifying grace.[94] For Wesley, the conversion experience did not require the achievement of Christian perfection; rather, the justifying grace present in the conversion was the forgiveness of sins. Justification was not for those who have "'finished their course,'" but for those "who are now just 'setting out,' just beginning to 'run the race which is set before them.'"[95] Therefore, Wesley reasoned that the society

[91] See Ridgely, "Conversion to Methodism" and Sarah Ryan, "A Short Account of Mrs. Sarah Ryan (by herself to John Wesley)," *Arminian Magazine consisting of extracts and original treatises on universal redemption* (June 1779): 300.
[92] Schmidt, 51.
[93] Heitzenrater, 84.
[94] Justifying grace refers to the the free gift from God of forgiveness of one's sins. Sanctifying grace requires the practice of spiritual discipline with the goal of achieving holiness or Christian Perfection.
[95] John Wesley, "Justification by faith," in *Sermons on Several Occasions*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2011), 36 Wesley is quoting 2 Tim. 4:7 and Heb. 12:1.

should be open to new members to encourage their spiritual growth. In September 1738, he composed a letter criticizing the Moravians for being too separated and guarded. In this letter, Wesley raised several questions he thought that the Moravians should consider. He asked, "Is not the spirit of secrecy the spirit of your community?"[96] In contrast, the spirit of the Methodist community was one of open discussions and forums, which focused on an individual's personal relationship with God. In the Methodist societies, the voices of people from varying backgrounds were given a forum in which to pursue sanctification within a supportive Christian fellowship.

The Methodists recognized the spiritual and practical benefits of community, and the societies, classes, and bands were the crucial centers of support for the early movement. The societies even became equated to a member's spiritual family.[97] They adopted familiar terms for their fellow members, calling one another brother or sister. This equalitarian terminology did not mean that early Methodism lacked a hierarchical structure. Before the founding of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America in 1784, John Wesley was the clear head of the transatlantic movement. John Wesley appointed the majority of leadership positions. For example, Wesley chose all class and band leaders.[98]

These leaders, although appointed by Wesley, gained their authority through the consent of the membership. Wesley remained at the head of the Methodist movement because the members had chosen to follow his doctrine.[99] By accepting membership in a

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[96] "John Wesley to the Moravians at Marlenborn and Hernhut, September 1738." *The Wesley Center Online, accessed on March 15, 2013, http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-letters-of-john-wesley/wesleys-letters-1738/#Eleven* Wesley never actually sent this letter.
[97] For more on the spiritual family, see Lawrence.
[98] Heitzenrater, 119.
[99] Fredrick Dyer, " 'Religious Society Under Heaven: John Wesley and the Identity of Methodism," *Journal of British Studies* 25, no. 1 (January 1986), 70.

society, individuals were entering into a contract that they "were free at any time to dissolve and annul."[100] David Hempton, the dean of Harvard's Divinity School, saw this relationship as one of the great paradoxes in early Methodism. An "authoritarian religious structure" was created and "empowered by the authority of the people."[101] Wesley served as a spiritual guide, and the society members were expected to prescribe to three major rules. They were to do no harm, do good, and attend upon the ordinances of God.[102] If society members did not live up to these obligations, they could be expelled from the community. Although a clear hierarchy existed, most Methodists, apart from the inner circles of leaders, "thought in terms of community, not hierarchy."[103]

Within the framework of these societies, women became extremely influential. They composed the majority of the membership; the ratio of female to male membership in the eighteenth century was two to one.[104] They dominated societies and served as the motivating force for the founding of new communities. For example, all of the founding members of the Annapolis society in 1780 were women.[105] Women provided leadership for the societies in both official and unofficial capacities. Even when just acting as ordinary members, they found a supportive environment to express the "inward principle" of religion. In the societies, women were provided with an opportunity to be heard, offer advice, and shape their fellow Methodists' theology.

The most obvious way in which women exercised spiritual power was through the handful of female preachers briefly discussed in the introduction. The way in which these

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[100] Tigert, 16.
[101] Hempton, 10.
[102] Ibid., 257.
[103] Mack, 27.
[104] Schmidt, 27.
[105] Andrews, 112.

women discovered their "extraordinary call" revealed the importance of recognition in the cultivation of spiritual power. The women, who became preachers, often did so unintentionally. Sarah Crosby was serving as a class leader in 1761 when she arrived to her meeting place and discovered nearly two hundred people present. Because of this large number she could not speak to each member individually as a class leader should. Crosby wrote to Wesley concerned about the very public role that had been thrust upon her and expressed concern that she was overstepping her bounds. Wesley responded that she had done nothing wrong and should merely preface her remarks with this statement. "You lay me under a difficulty. The Methodists do not allow of women preachers; neither do I take upon me any such character. But I will just tell you what is in my heart."[106] Perhaps following a model of deference, Crosby presented her spiritual power assumingly. Her power was justified by her audience not her ambition. While her position was derived from her internal spirituality, it could not be articulated without people coming to hear her speak.

Sarah Crosby's case was not typical. Only a few eighteenth-century Methodist women were given approval to preach. While the Methodists did not let all women preach, they were still quite radical in letting even a few women approach the pulpit. In the eighteenth century, only the Quakers officially sanctioned woman as ministers.[107] The appointment of selected individuals based on an "extraordinary call" showed that the early Methodists had a great respect for the individual within the communal structure. Spirituality rather than the circumstances of birth were the primary qualification for leadership.

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[106] John Wesley to Sarah Crosby, February 14, 1761.*The Wesley Center Online, accessed on March 15, 2013. http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-letters-of-john-wesley/wesleys-letters-1761/.*
[107] Schimdt, 66.

Beyond preaching, there were many ways for women to speak in public worship services including "praying in public, testifying, and exhorting."[108] While some methods of speaking were debated, public prayer was always an acceptable form of speech for early Methodist women. Ann Cutler was especially well known for her gift in prayer earning the nickname of "Praying Nanny." The transition from testifying to public prayer was usually quite smooth. Women would offer their testimony at preaching services, love feasts, and other large gatherings.[109] Exhorting was a form of public speech, usually following the itinerant's sermon, in which a woman would urge her listeners to "hear the gospel message, repent, and be saved."[110]

While women did participate in the larger Methodist meetings in these prescribed forms, the class and band structure really offered them a place to undertake leadership roles. Because women were the large majority within the societies, most of the band leaders were women. Women also served as class leaders, the position Sarah Crosby initially occupied. Women almost always led all female classes and occasionally were asked to lead integrated classes.[111] The women were not always at ease being placed in charge of men. John Wesley had to reassure Dorothy Downes that no one should have any "objection to your meeting a class even of men. This is not properly assuming or exercising any authority over them. You do not act as a superior, but an equal; and it is an act of friendship and brotherly love."[112] The class leaders received their positional authority through their spirituality not on the basis of social status or gender. This

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[108] Schimdt, 28.
[109] Lloyd, 32-33.
[110] Brown, 23.
[111] Schmidt, 27.
[112] "John Wesley to Mrs. Dorothy Downes," August 1776, *The Wesley Center Online, accessed on March 15, 2013, http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-letters-of-john-wesley/wesleys-letters-1776/.*

authority was not supposed to negate the spiritual equality present in early Methodism. The voice and experience of each member regardless of gender or leadership position was important.

The class leader, however, did possess a good deal of responsibility and power within the structure of the movement. The class leaders were supposed to have some spiritual qualifications to serve in the position. William Jessop an English Methodist wrote that a man who enrolled in a class led by a woman felt that he had made a wise choice because she "stood spiritually and intellectually above every other member of the society."[113] Class leaders needed both religious and secular skills since they served in dual spiritual and administrative roles. They were expected to meet with the members of their class on a weekly basis to see how "their souls prosper," to offer to counsel and comfort members when appropriate and to collect offerings for the poor. Class leaders were the connection between the ministers and the individuals. They were supposed to inform the ministers of any illness or disorderly conduct within the society.[114] Class leaders were essential figures that allowed the structure of Methodism to function efficiently while maintaining the possibility of an intimate community.

While women were worked within the community, they often served as representatives to the outside world. Many women, including Eliza Bennis, Mary Fletcher, and Sarah Crosby, served as "visitors of the sick" in addition to their other leadership roles. As "visitors," they were instructed to visit Methodists and "unawakened persons" alike who were suffering both spiritually and physically. This practice was seen as a return to not only primitive Christianity but also to the example of Christ. Wesley

[113] William Jessop, *An Account of Methodism in Rossendale and the Neighbourhood* (Manchester: Tobbs, Brook and Chrystal, 1880), 293.
[114] Wesley, "A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists," 261.

wrote to Miss March in June 1775 imploring her to visit the poor and sick. "Take up your cross, woman! Remember the faith! Jesus went before you, and will go with you."[115] In addition to invoking the example of Jesus, Wesley also addressed what might have been some of Miss March's reservations. "Put off the gentle woman: You bear a higher character."[116] Her responsibility as a Methodist overshadowed her prescribed role as a wealthy woman. Social class was not supposed to be a hindrance to mission work. Rather, Wesley argued that an individual with an elevated financial or social position had an obligation to visit the poor more frequently since he or she had more time and resources.[117] The poor in health and resources were not the only group that needed to be visited. John Wesley wrote to Eliza Bennis in Ireland encouraging her to converse in person or by letter with Mrs. D since he believed that Bennis was "particularly called to be useful to those whom the riches or the grandeur of this world keep at a distance from the pure world of God."[118] Visiting the wealthy but spiritually impoverished could provide some practical financial aid to struggling societies. Wesley seemed to be especially invested in Bennis' relationship with Mrs. D because of the resources she might provide if converted.

Along with their appointed positions, Methodist women occupied unofficial leadership roles within the Methodist spiritual family. The familial model of Methodist address expanded beyond brother and sister. John Wesley served as a spiritual father to many converts in the British Isles. He was even referred to as a "father-in-Christ" by

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[115] Chilcote, *Selected Women's Writings*, 33.
[116] Ibid., 33.
[117] Wesley, "On Visiting the Sick," 390.
[118] *Christian Correspondence*, 73. John Wesley had earlier referred Eliza Bennis to the life writing of Elizabeth Johnson, who acted in a similar role.

many American Methodists.[119] Similarly, female leaders were often called "Mothers of Israel." These women served as spiritual leaders in an informal capacity. Jean Miller Schmidt developed a composite picture of one of these "Mothers." She hosted preachers and held services in her house and served as a class leader. In the preachers' absence, she would hold worship services. Finally, a "Mother of Israel" died a "holy death" and inspired her family and friends to lead a "more godly life."[120] On the surface, women were able to be such strong leaders partially out of necessity. After Jane Trimble, whose memoir classified her as a "Mother of Israel," moved with her husband to Kentucky following the Revolutionary War, she single-handedly organized a Methodist society with her home serving as the preaching house.[121] Trimble and the other women in their roles as "Mothers of Israel" were applying acceptable female roles and characteristics to a higher spiritual purpose. In a discussion of Catherine Livingston Garrettson, historian Diane Lobody wrote, "Catherine constructed a ministry that was entirely acceptable as a feminine enterprise and yet as vibrantly pastoral as any man's ministry."[122] Women did not have to defy societal expectations in order to assert spiritual power. Instead, sometimes they could incorporate the expectations of women into their ministry.

Even the ordinary Methodist sisters had a voice within the society. One of the major purposes of the small settings such as the classes and bands was to facilitate discussion about an individual's personal spiritual life. Wesley stressed that a society was "a company of persons, who having the form, are seeking the power of Godliness: united,

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[119] Andrews, 39.
[120] Schmidt, 52.
[121] Joesph M. Trimble, *Memoir of Mrs. Jane: A Tribute of Affection from her grandson with an introduction by Reverand D. W. Clark, D. D.* (Cincinnati: The Methodist Book Concern, 1861), 83.
[122] Diane Lobody, " 'A Wren Just Bursting Its Shell': Catherine Livingston Garrettson's Ministry of Public Domesticity," in *Spirituality and Social Responsibility: Vocational Vision of Women in the United Methodist Tradition*, ed. Rosemary Skinner Keller, 19-40 (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1993), 29.

in order to prayer together, to receive the word of exhortation and to watch over one another in love, that they may help each to work out their salvation."[123] The community allowed individuals to offer each other support and encouragement while trying to discover his or her own spiritual power. Within the societies, both men and women had a voice to speak freely. In discussing the duties of visiting the sick, Wesley explicitly denied that there should be any distinction between men and women. "Herein there is no difference; 'there is neither male nor female in Christ Jesus,'…Let all you that have it in your power assert the right, which the God of nature has given you…Be 'not disobedient to the heavenly calling.'"[124] Women as well as men could possess power from the divine. The Methodist societies were places that allowed women to put their spirituality into practice; however, outside of these communities, women sometimes had to be defy social customs in order to be obedient to their "heavenly calling.

[123] Wesley, "The Nature, Design, and General Rules of United Societies," 69.
[124] John Wesley, "On Visiting the Sick," 390.

Section III

Wielding Spiritual Power in Methodist Marriages

The spiritual power that women discovered through the literary culture and societal structure had tangible secular implications. These women placed their spiritual wellbeing above their roles as a submissive wives. Several married women defied their husbands by joining the movement. The single women relied on their ability to interpret God's will to determine if they should get married and utilized the community to find an appropriate mate if they so desired. Before assessing how eighteenth-century Methodists were exceptional in their stance on marriage, a brief description of the contemporary matrimonial landscape and practices is necessary. The primary focus of scholarship on eighteenth-century marriage varies with geographic location. English scholarship has focused on legal disputes and the ceremony of marriage.[125]Across the Atlantic, American woman and wives have been more frequently evaluated in terms of their social and political role.[126] In both America and England, a woman was defined by her husband legally and socially. Sir William Blackstone described the wife's position in English law in 1753. "By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage…."[127] Socially, women were tied to their husbands. In a comprehensive study of the history of the wife, Marilyn

[125] Specifically, much work has focuses on the 1753 Hardwicke Act. For more see, Lawrence Stone, *Uncertain Unions: Marriage in England, 1660-1753* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) and Rebecca Probert, *Marriage Law and Practice in the Long Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
[126] This is best reflected in the scholarship on Republican Womanhood or Motherhood. This concept was first developed in Linda Kerber, "The Republican Mother: Women and the Enlightenment—An American Perspective," *American Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (Summer 1976):187-205.
[127] William Blackstone as quoted in Bridget Hill, *Women, Work & Sexual Politics in Eighteenth Century England* (Quebec, Canada: McGill-Queen's Press, 1994), 196.

Yalom asserted that eighteenth-century American women were defined by their spouses' occupations.[128] The events of the eighteenth century, however, added a new dimension to women: "a political consciousness."[129] It was this political awareness that gave women more authority in the Revolutionary era. Similarly, early Methodist women's newfound spirituality granted them more control over their domestic relationships even if it defied the social expectations.

When Thomas Coke journeyed to America in 1784, John Wesley sent with him an abridged version of the 1664 Anglican Book of Common Prayer entitled *The Sunday Service of Methodists in North America with other Occasional Services*. The new marriage service eliminated the father's need for consent within the ceremony.[130] Karen Westerfield Tucker, in *American Methodist Worship*, offered a few different possible reasons for this change including that the consent was already expected to have been obtained, fathers were often not at the ceremonies, a distain for the practice of treating human beings like property, or the view that women were spiritual equals to men.[131] All of these reasons probably contributed to the change; however, the last rationale is the most significant in this study. Because women were able to possess spiritual power, they had the ability make important decisions regarding their spousal relationships.

The conversion experience was the first opportunity for women to demonstrate a sense of independence from their husbands. After joining a society, they had to be aware of how their marital status would affect their spiritual life. The community was invested in the marital choices of its members, but the individual had the ultimate power to

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[128] Marilyn Yalom, *A History of the Wife* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2002), 147.
[129] Ibid., 146.
[130] Bufford W. Coe, *John Wesley and Marriage* (Bethlehem, Pennsylvania: Lehigh University Press, 1996), 11.
[131] Tucker, 179.

interpret God's will and make decisions about his or her domestic life. These decisions were occasionally in contrast with the mainstream practices. Contrary to contemporary anti-Methodist literature, the movement did not encourage women to neglect their domestic duties. Reverend Bryan praised his late wife for her fulfillment of her caretaking duties as a wife and mother.[132] Yet, women were compelled to defy their husbands if their salvation was at stake.

With the eternal goal of their salvation in mind, women made decisions to convert against the wishes of their husbands. The initial act of defiance was not direct. Several women who would become prominent leaders within the Methodist movement went to hear a travelling Methodist preacher when their husbands were out of town. In England, in the 1730s, Grace Murray had wanted to attend a Methodist meeting, but her husband had forbidden it. While her husband was out at sea, her child died. In her distress she decided attend a sermon preached by George Whitefield. She was moved and went to hear John Wesley as soon as he returned from his mission to America. During her husband's extended absences, she converted to Methodism. Her husband, Andrew, was quite upset when he returned and told her, "You will forsake these Methodist, or I shall put you in a madhouse."[133] Mr. Murray's claim corresponded with the anti-Methodist pamphlets that described a conversion to Methodism as the first step to entering the madhouse.[134] Mr. Murray backed down from his aggressive claims when his wife became

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[132] J. Bryan, *A Short Account of the late Mrs. Bryan, wife of the Rev. J. Byran, a preacher in the Wesleyan Methodist Connexion* (Burselem, England" Tregortha, n.d.), 7.
[133] William Bennett, *Memoirs of Mrs. Grace Bennet, lately deceased: relict of the Reverend John Bennet, of Chinley Derbyshire: interspersed with some account of the ministry and death of Mr. Bennet to which are subjoined extracts from her diary and a brief account of her death, February 23, 1803, in the eighty-ninth year of age* (Macclesfield, England: Bayley, 1803), Microfilm, 4-10.
[134] Lawrence, 46.

seriously ill. Grace then was able to become an influential member of the early Methodist movement despite her husband's reluctance.

Sarah Ryan, an English woman, had been exposed to Wesleyan preaching before her marriage but never joined a society. Writing in 1760, Ryan described becoming ill while her husband was at sea, which eventually led her to seek full membership in the Methodist society and begin attending class meetings. Upon her husband's return Sarah Ryan wrote that he "tried me exceedingly but she refused to give up her faith and told her husband simply, "It is the Lord."[135] Sarah Ryan's defiance of her husband progressed as she became more involved in the movement. She received a letter from her husband reminding her that she had promised to move to New England after he became settled there. She was torn about her decision. After assuring John Wesley that her husband would be able to support her in North America, she asked, "But can I go and save my soul?" Wesley asked her what she thought and she instantly replied, "No Sir, I cannot."[136] Ryan then remained in England in direct opposition to her husband's desires in order to ensure her sanctification.

American women like their English counterparts used their husband's absences to explore Methodism. In her conversion narrative, Rebecca Ridgley wrote that she went to hear Thomas Webb preach in 1777 while her husband was in Annapolis, Maryland for business. Although Ridgley did not discuss her husband's reaction to her conversion, she noted that she continued to go to the Methodist meetings every night her husband was in Annapolis. Mr. Goodwin, the husband of one of the women who accompanied Rebecca to her first sermon, offered a response similar to Andrew Murray's. Goodwin remarked to

[135] Ryan, 300.
[136] Ibid., 305.

Rebecca Ridgley, "If he was in my husband's place, he would not let me go again."[137] Lucy Watson's husband was not able to voice any opinion about her conversion. She first attended Methodist meetings while her husband was imprisoned for being a loyalist during the American Revolution.[138] The most extreme reaction from a husband was when Sarah Anderson Jones's husband her conversion threatened her at gunpoint to which she very calmly replied, "My dear if you take my life, you must obtain leave from my heavenly spouse."[139] This idea of being married to a heavenly spouse was very common in the celibacy debate that will be discussed below.

One pattern that became clear in the preceding conversion accounts was that the women initially were trying to avoid direct disobedience to their husbands. The women were propelled by a traumatic event that placed them in close contact with death and caused them to think about the afterlife. These near-death experiences motivated the women to explore Methodism, in which they previously had expressed a mild interest or curiosity. A husband's absence made the decision to attend a Methodist sermon easier as she would not have to face her husband's judgment until he returned. Grace Murray went to a meeting after the death of her child. Lucy Watson started attended meetings in the midst of the Revolutionary War. After facing criticism from their husbands, some women abandoned their newfound religious convictions only to be brought back by yet another traumatizing event. For Grace Murray, her illness and close encounter with death served as the motivation for her husband to allow her to continue practicing Methodism. Although Andrew Murray eventually permitted his wife to explore the movement, he did

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[137] Ridgely, "Conversion to Methodism."
[138] Andrews, 88.
[139] Rhonda D. Hartweg, "All in Rapture: The Spirituality of Sarah Anderson Jones," *Methodist History* 45, no. 3 (April 2007): 175.

not convert himself. In contrast, some women, like Mary White, were even able to convert their husbands.[140]

Although the examples of converting in defiance of their spouses' wishes provide powerful examples of how religious concerns could outweigh a wife's deference to their husbands, most women were unmarried when they became Methodists. These women still could face opposition to their exploration of Methodism, but from parents instead of husbands. Hester Ann Rogers' mother threatened to disown her daughter if she became a Methodist.[141] After their conversion, the single women had to choose whether or not to marry. The issue of celibacy was a concern for many devout Methodists of both genders. Several prominent Methodist ministers had promoted absolute celibacy claiming that this was the "only way to be truly religious."[142] John Wesley frequently wrestled with the concept of celibacy in his own writings. Wesley published three different editions of his pamphlet entitled *Thoughts on Marriage and Single Life* from 1743 to 1784. In this work, Wesley discussed the benefits and difficulties of remaining celibate. He concluded that it was better to be single and fully devoted to God, but it is better to marry than commit fornication outside of wedlock.[143] There was, however, a distinct division between "Catholic celibacy and Methodist sexual abstinence."[144] The primary disparity between these two categories was choice, especially for those involved in the ministry. Wesley's ideas about celibacy were not especially radical. They derived initially from Pauline scripture.[145] Wesley's argument also closely mirrored Martin Luther's own opinion on

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[140] Mary and Judge Thomas White would end up hosting Francis Asbury during the Revolutionary War. Schmidt, 57.
[141] Rogers, 25-26.
[142] Lawrence, 134.
[143] John Wesley, *Thoughts on Marriage and Single Life*, 12.
[144] Lawrence, 134-135.
[145] See 1 Corinthians 7:1-17.

the subject of celibacy.[146] Wesley, like Luther, personally decided to not remain celibate. Wesley had two unsuccessful attempts to get married, first with Sophia Hopkey and then with Grace Murray Bennet. He eventually ended up in an unhappy marriage with Mary Vazeille.[147] Charles Wesley, on the other hand, had a very rewarding and happy marriage to Sarah Gwynne.

Because according to Paul, Luther, and Wesley, celibacy was ideal, women who decided to remain unmarried were granted a special sense of spiritual power. In a letter addressed to all of the single women of Methodism, Mary Fletcher wrote that some women are "called to the glorious privileges of a single life."[148] Unmarried Methodist women often considered themselves to have a companionate relationship with Christ. Ann Cutler provided an excellent example of such a woman. She wrote in her diary:

> "I am thine, blessed Jesus; I am wholly thine. I will have none but thee. Preserve my soul and body pure in thy sight. Give me strength to shun every appearance of evil. In my looks keep me pure, in my words keep me pure—a chaste virgin to Christ for ever. I promise thee upon my bended knees, that if thou wilt be mine I will be thine, and cleave to none other in this world. Amen."[149]

Along with the spiritual benefits of celibacy, deciding to remain unmarried could have some practical results that contributed to the liberty of women. Women, more frequently than men, could become trapped by bad marriages.[150] Women were given a voice and spiritual power in the Methodist movement, but a husband who forbade his wife's

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[146] Martin Luther, "Open Letter to the Nobility of the German Nation."
[147] His relationship with Sophia Hopkey led to Wesley facing arrest and trial for defamation. Andrews, 18. Grace Murray Bennet married John Benett instead of Wesley but maintained a close relationship. For a discussion of Wesley's relationship with Vazeille, see Kenneth J. Collins, "John Wesley's Relationship with His Wife as Revealed in his Correspondence," *Methodist History Journal* 10 (October, 1993):
[148] Mary Bosanquet Fletcher, *Jesus altogether Lovely: or A letter to some of the single women in the Methodist society* (Bristorl: England, 1766), 5.
[149] William Bramwell, *The Life and Death of Ann Cutler, who was made a instrument in the revival of the work of God in Yorkshire, Lancashire, etc. during her day* (London, n.d.), ???
[150] Lawrence, 156.

adherence to Methodist practices could revoke this empowerment. Just because women were granted power within the Methodist context did not ensure that this power transferred into the secular world. The negative impacts of a bad marriage caused the community to be invested in the marriages of its members, as a bad match could hinder their spiritual development. In both the British and American societies, marriage to an unbeliever was frowned upon. In fact, marriage with an "unawakened person" was grounds for expulsion from the society.[151] The language surrounding the consequences was reduced in later years from the marriage having "fatal effects" and being a "cross for life" in 1784 to being described as having "bad effects" and causing a person to be "hindered for life" four years later.[152] After being exposed to Methodism, Hester Ann Rogers felt compelled to give up her relationship with a young man "for whom I had a sincere affection" because he was "yet unawakened."[153] Hester Rogers made this decision without any real pressure from the society. In her mind, giving up this young man was just part of renouncing all of her worldly pleasures. Later in her life, she reaffirmed her understanding of the danger of wedding unconverted men. Rogers was glad to hear of the death of her friend Ann B. Ann who had married a unconverted man and thus according to Rogers "lost much of spirituality of mind." God had shown his love for Ann through her death by sending an illness that "slew the body, but saved the soul."[154]

In order to prevent the corruption of members through unsuitable marriages, single members were matched by their spiritual brothers and sisters. Wesley strongly

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[151] *Minutes of Several Conversations between the Reverend Mr. John and Charles Wesley, and others. From the Year 1744, to the Year 1780.* (London: Printed by J. Paramore, at the Foundry, Moorfields., 1791), 13.
[152] Tucker, 177.
[153] Rogers and Coke, 20.
[154] Ibid., 62.

supported this practice. He wrote that no society member should "take any step towards marriage but in the fear of God, with earnest prayer for direction, and with the advice and approbation of their Christian friends."[155] While the first two conditions emphasized the individual's relationship with God, the third showed the importance of the fellowship of believers within the process. One way this third step was manifested was through the practice of matchmaking within the society. For example, in 1770, Eliza Bennis, an Irish Methodist, wrote to John Wesley informing him of the marriage of Sister Ann and Brother L. in the Limerick society. She and an itinerant preacher had set up the couple. "Brother Bourke and I made the match, and think it was the Lord's doing."[156] Bennis' letter indicates the importance of spiritual power in justifying her and Brother Bourke's authority to arrange the match. The match was validated because it was conceived of being God working through Mrs. Bennis and Brother Bourke. The Moravian society was involved in the selection of spouses but in a much more regimented form. The Moravians would select a spouse. While an individual could technically refuse, he or she would be highly pressured to accept the match. The Methodists, on the other hand, allowed members to individually interpret God's will with a much more informal guidance from his or her spiritual brethren.[157]

Couples also met through their ministry. While visiting the sick was a key aspect of duties of a Methodist. Wesley warned his unmarried followers to be cautious when engaged in this service. In his sermon "On Visiting the Sick," Wesley preached, "Only be wary, if you visit or converse with those of the other sex lest your affections be

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[155] *Minutes of Several Conversations between the Reverend Mr. John and Charles Wesley, and others. From the Year 1744, to the Year 1780, 16.*
[156] *Christian Correspondence,* 47.
[157] For more on Morvian marriage practices, Paul Peucker, "Into the Blue Cabinet: Moravians, Marriage, and Sex," *Journal of Moravian History* 10 (Spring 2011): 11.

entangled, on one side or the other, and so you find a curse instead of a blessing."[158] By 1783 when Wesley preached this warning, he personally had experienced developing affection for his caregiver. Grace Murray became a close advisor to Wesley and appears to have made a verbal marriage contract with him. Murray also cared for Rev. John Bennet while he was critically ill. She became so close to each man that they both desired to marry her. Grace recorded in her memoir that Bennet said to her, "God gave me [Grace] to him for a *wife* in the prayer when he lay sick on his bed at *Newcastle*, and cried out above."[159] Grace Murray's first husband had died at sea leaving her free to marry again. While the women who were married when converted were fine to be wed to "unawakened persons," widowed and single women needed the approval from their spiritual family.[160]

Even if a bride and groom were both respected members of a society, they still would desire the support of their spiritual family for a marriage before it occurred. Before marrying Sarah Thompson, Joseph Benson felt that he needed approval from Wesley himself. He transcribed a letter to Thompson of Wesley granting his blessing for the match in a letter to Thompson on December 29, 1779. Wesley wrote:

> Dear Joseph,
> There are few persons on whose judgment I can more confide, than S. Clapham, S. Downes & Betsy Ritchie. I know little of Miss Thompson but if they approve of her I shall have no objection. Take every step with much prayer & trust God will give you his blessing.[161]

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[158] Wesley, "On Visiting the Sick," 392.
[159] Bennet, *Memoir of Mrs. Grace Bennet*, 19.
[160] It is interesting to note that Grace Murray Bennet eventually left the Methodist movement when her husband seceded from Wesley's leadership, but returned after Rev. Bennet's death,
[161] Joseph Benson, *A Methodist Courtship: Love Letters of Joseph Benson and Sarah Thompson, 1779-1789*, edited by Margaret M. Jemison (Atlanta, Georgia: The Library, Emory University, 1945), 22-23.

Not only does this letter show the importance of obtaining approval from a spiritual father, but also it conveys the importance of society members in obtaining an accurate evaluation of the merit of each party. For this marriage, the consent of a spiritual father was more important than the blessing of the biological parents. Benson dismissed Sarah Thompson's mother's concern and was willing and eager to get married despite her mother's doubts.[162] Benson's confidence in dismissing his future mother-in-law's doubts did not convey the real restrictions placed on the marriages of itinerant preachers. According the Large Minutes, Methodist preachers, specifically, were not allowed to marry a woman without her parents' consent.[163] So if Thompson's mother had persisted in her opposition to Benson, the marriage could not have gained Wesley's official blessing. Even if Benson had not been a preacher, marriage to a woman without parental consent was not preferred. Wesley stressed that the only reason a woman should marry without her parents' approval was if they "absolutely refused to let her marry any Christian."[164] This exception, however, did not apply to preachers.

Several of the women who wrote popular memoirs ended up marrying itinerant preachers. Mary Bosanquet Fletcher is an example of one such woman. Charles Wesley Buoy wrote in 1893, "Miss Bosanquet was great as a deaconess, living a celibate life; but she was greater as a wife."[165] Although Buoy's view was from the nineteenth century when women's roles were narrower, eighteenth-century Methodists also appreciated marriage unions as a source of strength and placed preacher's wives in an elevated position. Upon her husband's first appointment in 1788, Mary Holder wrote about the

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[162] Ibid., 14-19.
[163] Tucker, 177.
[164] Andrews, 177.
[165] Buoy, 228.

pressures her position entailed. "But the qualifications necessary for a preacher's wife, the going in and out before the people, and setting an example worthy their imitation with a sight and sense of my wants for such a station affected me much."[166] Marriage, between all Methodists, not just preachers, was ideally a partnership. Both parties had obligations and duties to themselves and their partners. Companionate marriage meant "spouses were bound primarily by affection, friendship, respect, shared values, and interests."[167] For Methodists, an ideal match was one composed of "religious soul mates."[168] Before she was able to convince herself to marry, Ann Mason Freeman wanted to make sure that her future husband, H.F. "is to be a companion for me through the wilderness."[169]The marriages of preachers, like Fletcher and Benton, were especially significant because the wife gained much influence and responsibility through the match.

While having a married preacher meant that a society essentially gained two leaders, supporting a husband, wife, and their children could be a financial burden to a struggling society. In fact according to the 1798 *Discipline*, a minister's wife should receive the same salary as her husband.[170] On October 15, 1771, Bennis wrote on behalf of the Limerick society requesting an unmarried preacher. They were so much in debt that they would not be able to support a couple. The previous wife upon "finding the affairs of the society much embarrassed, refused the usual subsistence and supported herself and her children by working at her trade while here."[171] The preacher's wife was

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[166] George Cole, *Heroines of Methodism or, Pen and Ink Sketches of the Mothers and Daughters of the Church* (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1857): 286-287.
[167] Yalom, 156-157.
[168] Lawrence, 218.
[169] Ann Mason Freeman, *A Memoir of the Life and Ministry of Ann Freeman* (London: Harvey & Darton, 1826), 60.
[170] Andrews, 111.
[171] *Christian Correspondence*, 63.

concerned for the future of the society. She placed the well being of her spiritual community above her material gains.

Through the deliberation of marriage, the clearest example of spiritual power can be discerned. Women as well as men had to rely on their ability to interpret God's will. Intellectually Ann Mason Freeman felt that she should remain celibate but her spirituality allowed her to act differently. "And though in my own will and wisdom I should refuse to marry; yet I am limited by the strongest ties to submit to Divine Wisdom, that cannot err."[172] Since Freeman attributed this union to the will of God, she could completely justify her marriage to the Methodist society. Being able to interpret signs from God was essential for devout Methodists. They used them to help while "making every kind of religious, social, or political decision."[173] If, after finding a potential husband, women still expressed doubts about the union, they turned directly to God. Sarah Thompson wrote to Joseph Benson in 1779 expressing doubt that their union was God's will.[174] Providential signs served as the ultimate source of spiritual authority. The Methodist courtship "paradoxically reinforced individuality by disregarding human input in favor of divine knowledge or approval, because divine knowledge could only be accessed through the individual's interior sense of divine will."[175] Seeing God's will for the formation of a union outweighed other typical forms of authority even the wishes of their parents.[176] God was the ultimate authority for the early Methodists and no person could "put asunder whom God has joined."[177] Within the realm of early Methodism, women possessed

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[172] Freeman, 63.
[173] Lawrence, 15.
[174] Joseph Benson, 14-15.
[175] Lawrence, 220.
[176] Ibid., 158.
[177] Matthew 19:6 as quoted by John Wesley in *Thoughts on Marriage and Single Life*, 5.

enough spiritual power to determine God's will for their life. Once women gained this understanding, they were obligated to attempt to follow what they had determined to be God's plan. The intimacy with God and their spiritual brethren allowed early Methodist women to be personally empowered to seek their best spiritual path. Their marriage choices were intended to fulfill their spiritual not social obligations.

Conclusion

The opportunities for women to wield spiritual power declined quickly after Wesley's death. By 1803, the Methodist Conference had ruled that women could only address their own sex.[178] The more formalized and institutionalized the church became, "the less women seemed to have to public roles or official capacities in the church."[179] After losing their position, women faced a long struggle to regain the recognition of their spiritual power they exercised in the late eighteenth century. In the nineteenth century, the political and ideological disputes caused the splintering of the Methodist Episcopal Church. The Methodist Protestant Church split in 1828 over position of laity within the governance of the congregation, and in 1844 the Methodist Episcopal Church South was founded over the issue of slavery. The Methodist Protestant Church allowed women to be ordained in the nineteenth century. After earning her theological degree from Boston University, Anna Howard Shaw was refused ordination by the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1880. Shaw left the M.E.C and was ordained in the Methodist Protestant Church within a year.[180] Women did not obtain full clergy rights in the Methodist Church until the General Conference in 1956.[181] While one hundred and fifty years may seem like a lengthy amount of time for women to regain their recognition as preachers, women continued to exercise a form of spiritual power in the intervening years. During the nineteenth and early twentieth century, women had to create and nourish a separate

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[178] Schmidt, 32.
[179] Ibid., 65.
[180] Kenneth Cracknell, *An Introduction to World Methodism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 219. The Methodist Church emerged from the merger between the northern and southern fractions of the M.E.C. and the Methodist Protestant Church in 1939. The Methodist church became the United Methodist Church when it merged with the Evangelical United Brethren Church in 1968.
[181] Frederick Schmidt, *A Still Small Voice: Women, Ordination, and the Church* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 46.

sphere. They created an area for their influence by founding and running missionary societies.[182] Eventually, by the mid-twentieth century, Methodist women were exercising the same level of power they were in the eighteenth century.

Eighteenth-century Methodism was distinctive in its view of women and their ability to discern and wield spiritual power. The nature of Methodist theology provided each individual, male or female, with the opportunity to incorporate his or her own experiences and interpretations. The Methodist theology was not so much a "set of dogmas or a display of religious hegemony, but a series of conundrums."[183] Beyond the core Christian beliefs Wesley did not define a Methodist in terms of any specific opinions or doctrine. The Methodist movement was a place to "think and let think."[184] Therefore, outside of the societies, individual practitioners would spend much time in prayer and silent reflection. Periods of intense internal agony were common for women after being first stirred by Methodism. Rebecca Ridgely spent all night and day in prayer until she "felt something come as an arrow out of a bow in my heart."[185]

Early Methodism emerged as a unique combination of Reformation pietism with Enlightenment ideals. Methodists looked both forward and backwards. They looked to the primitive church for an example for a Christian community should operate. After attending a Methodist meeting, Margaret Davidson's skeptical mother asked her whether she preferred the old way or the new. Davidson responded that she preferred the old way. For her mother, this clearly meant that her daughter preferred the Presbyterian to the

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[182] Rosemary Skinner Keller, "Creating a Sphere for Women: The Methodist Episcopal Church, 1869-1910," in *Women in New Worlds: Historical Prespective on the Wesleyan Tradition* ed. Hilah F. Thomas and Rosemary Skinner Keller (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1981), 250.
[183]Mack, 26.
[184] John Wesley "The Character of a Methodist," in *The Works of John Wesley: The Methodist Societies History, Nature, and* Design, Vol. 9, ed. Rupert Davies (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1989), 34.
[185]Ridgely, "Conversion Experience."

radical Methodists, but Davidson revealed that she was alluding to Methodism. She perceived the Wesleyan tradition as older because it was a return to primitive Christian practices.[186]

The position of eighteenth-century Methodist women was unique among the other evangelical religious movements occurring during the same time. On the surface the Baptists appeared to have very similar practices to the Methodists. They addressed one another as "brother" and "sister." They encouraged the sharing of emotions as part of the religious practice.[187] Yet, the two movements had different leadership roles women could occupy within the religious communities. Women were prohibited from having any major public role within the church. In her study on Virginian Baptists, Jewel Spangler found that the only official position that women were allowed to possess was the official housekeeper of the meetinghouse.[188] The Methodists significantly differed from their model group, the Moravians. The Moravian doctrine was characterized by a strict sexual segregation. In fact, casual contact between genders was forbidden beginning at the age of four.[189] The completely separate spheres were in stark contrast with Methodist practices in which men and women would often join together and speak freely to one another in classes.

The position of women in Methodism was not static within the eighteenth century nor was it consistent across geographic locations. North America and Britain had different timelines in terms of the height of women's spiritual empowerment. Wesley's recognition of Sarah Crosby right to preach in 1761 marked a period of women's

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[186] Edward Smyth, *The Extraordinary Life and Christian experience of Margaret Davidson*, 25.
[187] Isaac Rhys, "Evangelical Revolt: The Nature of the Baptists," 353-354.
[188] Spangler, 264.
[189] Maggie Dresser, "Sister and Brethen: Power, Propriety and Gender among the Bristol Moravians, 1746-1833," *Social History* 21, no. 3 (October 1996): 318.

empowerment as individuals. After granting Crosby's preaching privileges, Wesley was more willing to allow other women, such as Mary Fletcher to perform a similar role. The Methodist women in North America experienced the same sort of status in the 1770s when the Wesleyan movement began to take root. The status of women reached its height under Wesley's leadership and felt an almost immediate decline upon his death. Within ten years after his death, the Methodist leadership had already begun to restrict women's role. The conversion narratives became increasingly edited to present a model woman that the nineteenth-century church could approve. Mary Fletcher's nineteenth-century editor, Henry Moore, minimized the fact that she had ever preached.[190] Hester Ann Rogers's account was increasingly edited to include more text by men praising her for her role as a wife, mother, and "woman in the pew."[191]

Eighteenth-century Methodist women, however, were not simply, "women in the pews." They were intensively involved in almost all of the areas of the early Methodist movement. The eighteenth-century Methodists fostered an environment that encouraged men as well as women to consider their spirituality through self-reflection, writing, and conversation. The life writings of early Methodists provided an opportunity for women to discover their spirituality and then have the experiences confirmed by circulation of their accounts. The Methodist societal structure encouraged women to verbally share their experiences and then act upon their spirituality through leadership positions in official and unofficial roles. Finally, the spiritual power cultivated and achieved through

[190] Collins, "Women's Voices and Women's Silence," 247
[191] Ibid., 248.

participation in Methodist practices empowered women to exercise control in their domestic relationships.

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