

moving west beyond the Appalachian Mountains. For people on the move, it was a conversion experience, not a particular congregation or tradition, that defined their faith. The Methodist strategy of circuit riders who preached for conversion was much better suited to the frontier than the traditional Anglican system.

At the helm of early American Methodism was Francis Asbury (1745–1816). Sent from England by John Wesley in 1771, Asbury later assumed the title of bishop—against Wesley’s wishes. So strong was Asbury’s command over his preachers that critics charged Methodists with “popery” and monarchy. But Asbury asked nothing of his preachers that he himself was

not willing to endure: he traveled the wilderness for decades, never marrying or acquiring wealth. Asbury understood his authority as a bishop to come from his apostolic sufferings. Thus, his “Episcopal vision, premised on Jesus’ saying that ‘the first shall be last,’ was a radical inversion of worldly power”¹¹ that won respect on the frontier.

Asbury demanded that his preachers “itinerate” (travel) rather than “locate” (settle down). Itinerancy was a mark of the apostolic church, Asbury believed. Following Wesley’s strategy and Asbury’s orders and example, Methodist preachers were “circuit riders.” The ideal circuit rider was self-taught, young, and single. (Marriage made preachers want to settle down, and married preachers needed money to support their families.) Like the medieval mendicant (begging) orders, circuit riders relied on the kindness of common people for food, clothes, and shelter. Often they slept out in the cold; many died from exposure and fatigue. But their circuits reached everywhere. So aggressive and so thorough was the Methodist advance that other preachers lamented “The Methodists always get there first.”

The spectacular rise of Methodism—from a fledgling renewal movement to the largest Protestant group in the U.S. by 1850—owed much to its message. “Early Methodism,” notes Mark Noll, offered people “a loving God able to touch people with his Holy Spirit, able to enfold them into supportive fellowship with others who had also felt the touch of justifying grace, and able to nerve them for lives of self-disciplined sacrifice to others.”¹² American Methodism, however, changed along with the frontier. Its ministry gradually became more settled. Education came to be more highly valued. By 1860 the Methodists had founded many schools, including those known today as



Fig. 3.6 This 1867 illustration from *Harper's Weekly* shows the circuit-riding preacher braving foul weather to carry the



Fig. 3.5 *The Peaceable Kingdom*. Quaker artist Edward Hicks painted many variations on this theme. Hicks sometimes painted the words of Isaiah 11:6 around the edges of his art: "The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them." Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

The Methodists and the Baptists

Finney's revival techniques owed much to the Methodists and Baptists, two groups that enjoyed phenomenal growth in early nineteenth-century America. The Methodists were founded in England by John Wesley (1703–1791) as a renewal movement within the Church of England. The Methodists urged people to experience God directly and personally and to live the Christian life with discipline and joy. They took their message to factory towns and coal mines and other places seldom reached by the Church of England. The Methodists loved singing. Their hymns, especially those written by Charles Wesley, spread the movement. Organization was another key to their growth. John Wesley sent traveling preachers out on routes ("circuits") and created a system of small

groups ("classes") that involved every Methodist in fellowship and service. The Methodists reached the American colonies by the 1760s.

American Methodists officially separated from the Church of England in 1784 at the "Christmas Conference" in Baltimore. At least two things compelled the American Methodists to make this break. First, the Methodists in America needed a new identity. In the wake of the Revolution, they could ill afford to be associated with the Church of England, and they were embarrassed by John Wesley's opposition to American independence. The second concern was mission strategy. Unlike the Church of England, whose educated ministers served in settled parishes, the American Methodists needed traveling preachers who could speak the language of frontier people. So many Americans were leaving their old communities behind and



Fig. 3.7 Mary Lyon (1797–1749) founded Mt. Holyoke Female Seminary in Hadley, Massachusetts, in 1837. Lyon believed that women should have the same educational opportunities as men. Placing a high value on conversion and morals, she sometimes preached revival sermons at Mt. Holyoke. In 1893 the school became Mt. Holyoke College, one of the famous “Seven Sisters” colleges for women. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

Wesleyan, DePauw, Northwestern, and Boston universities. Church buildings became more sophisticated. And although conversion remained a strong emphasis for much of the nineteenth century, Christian nurture slowly became the preferred means for securing the next generation of Christians. In time, those who longed for the fervor of early Methodism separated to form “holiness churches.”

The Baptists also grew dramatically in the nineteenth-century revivals. Like the Methodists, the Baptists preached for conversion and

spoke the language of the common people. However, Methodists and Baptists differed in several important respects—above all, in their understanding and practice of baptism. For Baptists, baptism was a public testimony to grace already received; conversion came before baptism. Following New Testament accounts, baptism was done by immersion. The Methodists, in contrast, practiced infant baptism as a means of grace that prepares one for conversion. Following the practice of their parent church, the Church of England, Methodists usually baptized only the person’s head. Frontier legends of Methodist and Baptist rivalries abound, usually with the mode of baptism as the flash point. But Methodists and Baptists also differed in their modes of ministry. In contrast to the Methodists with their circuit riders under a bishop’s control, Baptists tended to call their preachers from within each congregation, and preachers supported themselves by farming. When Baptists went west, they often brought their own preacher with them.

Methodists and Baptists differed theologically. Methodists strove for sanctification (perfection or freedom from sin’s power), a goal most Baptists rejected as unreachable due to original sin. Methodists believed that Christ’s death on the cross gave all people the potential to embrace Christ through repentance and conversion; but some (not all) Baptists believed that God elects particular individuals to salvation. Among themselves, Baptists could differ in theology and practice. In time, the Baptists surpassed the Methodists as the largest Protestant group in the United States.

We should not give the impression that revivalism was just for Protestants. Nineteenth-century Roman Catholics had a form of revivalism called the “parish mission,” in which traveling priests preached for repentance. Those

who were brought to conviction by the preacher were directed to the confessional, where a priest would absolve them of their sins. According to Catholic historian Jay Dolan, the parish missions gave people the opportunity of “getting religion and setting oneself straight with God as the church had traditionally instructed.”¹³ Catholic revivals caught on in the 1840s and ’50s and for decades remained an important means of recruiting immigrants and transforming nominal Catholics into devout, active ones.

This widespread use of revivalism helped to make Christianity more democratic and, hence, more American. According to Nathan Hatch, popular religious movements of the early republic were militantly democratic in spirit. “They denied the age-old distinction that set clergy apart as a separate order.” Instead of traditional religious authority, revivals promoted the religious experiences of ordinary people. Revivalism became the religious counterpart of the quest for political, economic, and social equality in America.¹⁴

Pioneers of social equality included female preachers among Methodists, Baptists, and other new groups. In the period between 1790 and 1845, according to historian Catherine Brekus, “none of these women were ordained

and, technically, they were not even licensed.... Nevertheless, clerical leaders wrote women letters of recommendation giving them official permission to preach.”¹⁵ African Methodists and Baptists also had female preachers, such as Jarena Lee (1783–1850), who was for thirty years an itinerant preacher.

Gains for women, however, were hard to sustain. Some evangelical groups sought social respectability and began to develop a professional ministry. Since ministerial training and systems of church governance were for men only, female preachers often found themselves excluded from the very groups that had briefly tolerated (if not welcomed) them. During the 1830s, ministers of several groups passed “a flurry of resolutions forbidding women to pray aloud, lecture or preach.”¹⁶ Some female preachers responded by seeking religious frontiers where regulations and social constraints had not yet closed in. For example, Brekus documents at least twenty-two female preachers among the Millerites—a revivalist group that expected Christ’s immediate return.¹⁷

In pre-Civil War America, a famous female religious leader was Phoebe Palmer (1807–1874).¹⁸ Inspired by the writings of John Wesley, Palmer sought to rekindle the fervor of

Box 3.3: Jarena Lee

Source: Jarena Lee (1783–1850), “My Call to Preach the Gospel,” in *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee*.

Jarena Lee was a free black woman, born in New Jersey. In her autobiography, *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee*, she describes her call to preach and explains why women, as well as men, can be preachers.

Between four and five years after my sanctification, on a certain time . . . there seemed to sound a voice . . . which said to me, “Go preach the Gospel!” I immediately replied aloud, “No one will believe me,” Again I listened, and again the same voice seemed to say—“Preach the Gospel; I will put words in your mouth, and will turn your enemies to become your friends.”

At first I supposed that Satan had spoken to me, for I had read that he could transform himself into an angel of light for the purpose of deception. Immediately I went into a secret place, and called upon the Lord

to know if he had called me to preach, and whether I was deceived or not; when there appeared to my view the form and figure of a pulpit, with a Bible lying thereon, the back of which was presented to me as plainly as if it had been a literal fact.

... During the night following ... in my sleep ... I thought there stood before me a great multitude, while I expounded to them the things of religion. So violent were my exertions and so loud were my exclamations, that I awoke from the sound of my own voice, which also awoke the family of the house where I resided. Two days after I went to see the preacher in charge of the African Society, who was the Rev. Richard Allen ... to tell him that I felt it my duty to preach the gospel. ... Several times on my way there, I turned back again; but as often I felt my strength again renewed, and I soon found that the nearer I approached to the house of the minister, the less was my fear. [This time] as soon as I came to the door, my fears subsided. ...

I now told him, that the Lord had revealed it to me that I must preach the gospel. He replied, by asking, in what sphere I wished to move in? I said, among the Methodists. He then replied, that [another woman] had also some time before requested the same privilege; who, it was believed, had done much good in the way of exhortation, and holding prayer meetings; and who had been permitted to do so by the verbal license [spoken permission, not official ordination] of the preacher in charge at the time. But as to women preaching, he said that our Discipline knew nothing at all about it—that it did not call for women preachers. This I was glad to hear, because it removed the fear of the cross—but no sooner did this feeling cross my mind, than I found that a love of souls had in measure departed from me; that holy energy which burned within me, as a fire, began to be smothered. This I soon perceived.

O how careful ought we to be, lest through our by-laws of church government and discipline, we bring into disrepute even the word of life. For as unseemly as it may appear now-a-days for a woman to preach, it should be remembered that nothing is impossible, with God. And why should it be thought impossible, heterodox, or improper for a woman to preach? [Since] the Savior died for the woman as well as for the man. ...

Did not Mary *first* preach the risen Savior, and is not the doctrine of the resurrection the very climax of Christianity—hangs not all our hope on this, as argued by St. Paul? Then did not Mary, a woman, preach the gospel? For she preached the resurrection of the crucified Son of God.

But some will say that Mary did not expound the Scripture, therefore, she did not preach, in the proper sense of the term. To this I reply, it may be that the term *preach* in those primitive times, did not mean exactly what it is now *made* to mean; perhaps it was a great deal more simple then, than it is now—if it were not, the unlearned fishermen could not have preached the gospel at all, as they had no learning.

... If then, to preach the gospel, by the gift of heaven, comes by inspiration solely, is God straitened [limited]; must he take the man exclusively? May he not, did he not, and can he not inspire a female to preach the simple story of the birth, life, death and resurrection of our Lord, and accompany it too with power to the sinner's heart? As for me, I am fully persuaded that the Lord called me to labor according to what I have received, in his vineyard. If he has not, how could he consistently bear testimony in favor of my poor labors, in awakening and converting sinners? In my wanderings up and down among men, preaching according to my ability, I have frequently found families who told me that they had not for several years been to a meeting, and yet, while listening to hear what God would say by his poor female instrument, have believed with trembling—tears rolling down their cheeks, the signs of contrition and repentance towards God. I firmly believe that I have sown seed, in the name of the Lord, which shall appear with its increase at the great day of accounts, when Christ shall come.

■ early Methodism. She preached at hundreds of camp meetings and revivals in the U.S., Canada, and Great Britain. Palmer was an early advocate for the religious leadership of women. She also supported ministries for the urban poor. Most important, she pioneered the holiness movement that later contributed to modern Pentecostalism.