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# EVANGELICAL CONVERSION, c. 1740-1850

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At some point in the late eighteenth century a girl named Grace, then about eighteen years old, went to live in the village of Downton, about seven miles south-east of Salisbury.<sup>1</sup> She stayed with her uncle, a man called Budden, who served as the Baptist minister there. 'Soon after', according to the narrative in *The Baptist Magazine*,

thro' the ministry of the word, she was convinced of the evil nature, and fatal consequences of sin; and of the necessity of an interest in Christ for salvation. She had heard a sermon, by which it appeared to her that there was no hope of her own salvation, nor scarcely of any beside. But a considerable time after, she heard another sermon, by which all the obstacles to salvation were removed, and she was enabled to commit her soul into the hands of Christ, and rely on him as her all-sufficient Saviour.<sup>2</sup>

In many ways, though brief, this is a classic account of conversion. The subject is a teenager, the agency is preaching and there is more than one stage in the process. Supremely, conviction of sin is followed by the release of commitment to Christ. The instance of Grace, who went on to marry a man named Poore and died in 1809, may stand as typical of the subject of this paper, evangelical conversion. The aim is to examine the nature of 'the great change' as it was experienced in the evangelical movement between the middle years of the eighteenth century and the middle of the nineteenth.

Much of the evidence will be drawn from a sample of reports of conversions. Three periodicals have been used as sources for the sample.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was first delivered in a seminar held at New College, Edinburgh, on 3 December 1996, under the auspices of the North Atlantic Missiology project, co-ordinated by the University of Cambridge, and supported by a grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts. The opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of The Pew Charitable Trusts.

<sup>2</sup> *The Baptist Magazine* (hereafter *BM*), November 1809, p. 457.

One is *The Evangelical Magazine*, a Calvinist journal that filled the gap left by *The Gospel Magazine*, which had folded in 1784. Though rather less doctrinally rigid, *The Evangelical Magazine* was still definitely Reformed. In this periodical, according to the first preface in 1793:

the fundamental doctrines of the Gospel are elucidated and confirmed, misrepresentations exposed, errors refuted, and the lives and experience of eminent Christians faithfully recorded.<sup>3</sup>

The descriptions of religious experience are what is chiefly useful. Nearly every month the magazine carried obituaries which standardly recorded the conversions of their subjects. Rather like the Missionary Society, later the London Missionary Society, founded two years later, the journal was interdenominational but dominated by Independents. It therefore provides evidence for many denominations, even including a few Wesleyans who, in the eyes of their obituarists, subsequently saw the error of their ways and embraced Reformed belief; but a large number of cases are drawn from the Independent body. The second periodical is *The Baptist Magazine*, the organ of the mainstream Particular Baptists who had been drawn into the evangelical movement. Most of the obituaries commemorate members of that denomination, with its Calvinist piety, but there is also a smattering of individuals from other branches of the movement. The earliest volumes of both periodicals were selected for study, 1793 and 1794 in the case of *The Evangelical Magazine* and 1809 and 1810 in that of *The Baptist Magazine*, in order to obtain a sample of conversions going back to the earliest days of the Evangelical Revival around 1740. With the aim of including cases from later in the period, the 1850 volumes of both periodicals have also been scrutinised. Consequently some subjects died as late as 1850 itself. In order to give a fuller overview of the movement, the first volume of *The General Baptist Repository*, published in 1822, was also examined. The General Baptists of the New Connexion, whose official journal this was, were as strongly Arminian as the Wesleyan Methodists. The sample consists of all the obituaries in these issues of the journals, even brief ones, so long as they contain reference to conversion. A number of obituaries, including an entry for the Queen Dowager in *The Evangelical Magazine* for 1850,<sup>4</sup> could more properly be described as death notices. Others again – as many as forty-one in the issues of the magazines under scrutiny –

<sup>3</sup> *The Evangelical Magazine* (hereafter *EM*), 1793, p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> *EM*, January 1850, p. 29.

incorporate fuller biographical detail but no information about conversion. But to the obituaries have been added all the memoirs and biographical accounts inserted in the same volumes if their subjects fall within the period and if the narratives include mention of their conversions. The resulting sample consists of 140 cases of conversion.

The group provides reasonable coverage of the period. Ninety-one of the narratives record conversions that can confidently be assigned to a twenty-five year time band. Of these, 8% took place before 1750; 16% in the years 1750-75; 35% in 1776-1800; 33% in 1801-25 and 9% in 1826-50. Over two-thirds therefore fall in the half-century around 1800. The sample cannot, however, claim to give a fair representation of the evangelical movement overall. Although two obituaries in the magazine issues explored deal with men originally identified with the Scottish Secessionists, neither mentions its subject's conversion, and so no recorded instance in the sample comes from Scotland. There is, however, a previously published article on the converts of the Cambuslang revival of 1742 to which occasional reference will be made.<sup>5</sup> Although many individuals had an Anglican background, only five cases are of those who were converted in the Church of England rather than away from it. Anglican conversion narratives are, in fact, difficult to obtain in bulk. *The Christian Observer*, the premier Evangelical Anglican magazine launched in 1802, does include obituaries, but its ambitions to be a national journal of record meant that its first issue recounted the deaths of those remarkable only for social rank, public distinction, suddenness of death or prolongation of life beyond a century.<sup>6</sup> The great majority of the sample analysed here, furthermore, were Calvinists. Only 15% in fact, concern individuals reaching mature faith within an Arminian body. This bias, however, has its uses. The two chief existing studies of evangelical conversions in England during this period deal mainly with those professing an Arminian theology. Julia Werner considers one hundred Primitive Methodist converts of the first generation and Michael Watts analyses 670 conversions in the Dissenting denominations during the years 1780-1850.<sup>7</sup> Watts' large sample might be expected to be

<sup>5</sup> T.C. Smout, 'Born Again at Cambuslang: new evidence on popular religion and literacy in eighteenth-century Scotland', *Past & Present* 97 (1982).

<sup>6</sup> *The Christian Observer*, January 1802, pp. 78-80.

<sup>7</sup> Julia S. Werner, *The Primitive Methodist Connexion: its Background and Early History* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1984), pp. 155-7. Michael R. Watts, *The Dissenters: Volume II: the Expansion of Evangelical Nonconformity* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 49-80.

representative of evangelicals outside the Church of England, but in reality most cases are drawn from Methodist periodicals, a few from *The Baptist Magazine* and others from separately published biographies. Only sixty-eight of his 670 individuals are Calvinists, and a mere thirteen are Independents. Hence a fresh sample leaning heavily in the Calvinist direction may help to redress the balance. The two groups, the one examined by Watts and the one considered here, may be regarded as complementary.

The sources for this study suffer from serious disadvantages for our purpose. In the first place, there is the problem of distortion. The accounts of the deceased were written for edification, not for record. Some obituaries are even cast in homiletic form, with three practical applications enumerated at the end. The briefest of notices are deeply influenced by the expectations of the times. The descriptions concentrate on standard features, particularly signs of piety displayed in the last few days of life. Other elements of a modern obituary, especially employment, are commonly passed over in silence. Even the date of birth and age at death are frequently omitted. Narratives are often framed in terms of conventions going back to Puritan hagiography that literary scholars have studied in some detail.<sup>8</sup> Conformity to scriptural archetypes, for example, is one recurring motif. Our purpose, however, entails, in so far as it is possible, going beyond the narrative to what lay behind it in human experience. There is a series of other difficulties. Articles were commonly written by ministers whose knowledge did not encompass any detailed information about the start of their subjects' Christian pilgrimage. The sample is skewed by the factor of who troubled to send in narratives to the magazines. The assiduous John Giles, minister of Eythorne Baptist Church in Kent, for instance, contributed all five entries to the August 1810 issue of *The Baptist Magazine*.<sup>9</sup> Other accounts were sent in by relatives whose nearness to the deceased affects the perspective. A poignant description of the death of a fourteen-year-old girl from typhus in 1850, for example, was composed by her father, the Independent minister at Petworth in Sussex. Inevitably in his grief he dwelt on her 'lovely temper', passing over any misdemeanours that may

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<sup>8</sup> For example, Daniel B. Shea, Jr., *Spiritual Autobiography in Early America* (Princeton, N.J., 1968); Patricia Caldwell, *The Puritan Conversion Narrative: the Beginning of American Expression* (Cambridge, 1983).

<sup>9</sup> *BM*, August 1810, pp. 430-34. Frank Buffard, *Kent and Sussex Baptist Associations* (Faversham, Kent, 1963), p. 72.

have marred her life.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps above all the people commemorated in the magazines were disproportionately individuals of standing in their denominations, often ministers, their relations, or those in whom ministers confided. Ordinary sitters in the pews were by no means excluded – recent converts were a favoured category – but there was a tendency for *The Evangelical Magazine* and *The Baptist Magazine* to concentrate on more prominent figures. *The General Baptist Repository*, like its Methodist counterparts, was less selective in its coverage, but the overall effect is to make the sample contain a larger number of the core and a smaller number of the periphery of the congregations that made up the evangelical movement. Allowance must be made for all these distortions. Yet in one sense the very features that cause such problems constitute an advantage for the historian. These obituaries, with all their conventional phrases and personal viewpoints, reflect the real world of evangelical Dissent. In these accounts we peer through the window of the meeting house to witness its authentic life.

A further problem, however, lies in the sheer imprecision of the many accounts. Two adjacent obituaries from *The Baptist Magazine* illustrate the point. Of John Goffe, a deacon of the second Baptist church in Brighton who died in 1850, all we are told about his life before he was baptised and joined Shipston-on-Stour Baptist Church in 1810, is that he was called at an early age to know the Lord. What is the early age? How was he called? Why did it happen? Virtually the only thing we learn is that he did experience conversion. Again, of Hannah, the wife of Robert Ellis, Baptist minister at Sirhowy, Gwent, who died at thirty-five in 1850, the only information about her conversion is that she professed Christ when young. There is in this instance not even a baptismal date to provide guidance about chronology. With that very scanty knowledge we have perforce to be content.<sup>11</sup> The terminology can also suffer from vagueness. Sometimes it is unclear whether or not the writers intended to convey that their subjects had been converted by a particular stage in their experience. The difficulty is particularly apparent in the use of the phrase ‘religious impressions’. At times it appears to mean only a sense of spiritual anxiety, and in some cases the reader is told that the phase was transient. Thus a girl who later became Mrs Elizabeth Tracey of Barrow-upon-Soar, Leicestershire, attended a Methodist Sunday School and there received ‘serious impressions’, but thereafter took up the vanities of the

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<sup>10</sup> *EM*, October 1850, pp. 535-7.

<sup>11</sup> *BM*, August 1850, p. 501.

world such as card playing before she was soundly converted.<sup>12</sup> In other cases, however, the phrase seems to imply vital religion, especially when the word 'permanent' is added. There is considerable scope for misinterpretation here when the context does not clearly point one way or the other. There is a further problem with the Baptists. Commonly the obituarist gives a date for the subject's baptism after the person's conversion. It would be helpful to be able to take the one as a surrogate for the other, but that would lead to serious misrepresentation since there was frequently a gap between baptism and conversion. George Osborn, for example, who was to become an itinerant preacher, was converted as a young man in about 1760, but was not baptised until the age of seventy-seven, nearly half a century later. Although Osborn's is an extreme case – a consequence of his having remained an Independent until his last years – other recorded instances of delay prevent the historian from treating conversion and baptism as being necessarily close in time. Lack of detailed information in each of these respects, however, does not prevent the set of obituaries in the periodicals from being a rich source for our understanding of spirituality in the period. They enable us to construct something approaching a prosopography of conversion.

What was conversion at this time? According to George Redford, Independent minister at Angel Street, Worcester, writing near the end of the period in a booklet issued by the Religious Tract Society, and therefore enjoying interdenominational endorsement, conversion

is a change, or a turning about of our mind or heart, and signifies a reversing of our moral and religious state, a complete transformation of the character – from irreligion to piety, from sin to holiness, from unbelief to faith, from impenitence to contrition and confession, from the service of the world to the service of God, from uneasiness to peace, from fear to hope, from death to life.<sup>13</sup>

It is not surprising that so drastic a change often entailed a crisis. A typical illustration is found in the experience of Elizabeth, who later married William Nichols, pastor of North Collingham Baptist Church, Nottinghamshire. There was a prelude. Elizabeth's brother died of tuberculosis in 1808, when she was twenty-two years old, and 'she discovered the depravity of her heart'. She went to visit relatives living

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<sup>12</sup> *GBR*, April 1822, p. 139.

<sup>13</sup> George Redford, *The Great Change: a Treatise on Conversion* (London, (1844?)), p. 1.

ten miles away and there meditated on the Bible and other devotional writings. Then came the turning point:

But one day walking alone in the fields... she was favoured with such a discovery of the Love of God in the gift of his Son, and the love of Christ in dying for the redemption of sinners, as filled her soul with joy unspeakable, mingled with godly sorrow for her past sins, so that for some time she was unable to leave this highly favoured spot, concerning which the words of Jacob might be adopted, *Surely God is in this place*.<sup>14</sup>

The time was distinct; so, clearly, was the place. Although Elizabeth did not dare speak of her enlightenment for some while, it was the decisive event of her short life. She, too, died of tuberculosis only two years later. A crisis similar to Elizabeth's can be attributed to a particular juncture in life for as large a proportion as 45% of the sample of individuals whose conversions are recorded, and must have been passed through by many others for whom insufficient details are supplied. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries sudden conversions were common.

Yet a decisive turning point was not considered essential. Thomas Reader, for example, who subsequently became an Independent minister, was brought up in the second quarter of the eighteenth century, before the Evangelical Revival had made its impact on the Old Dissent, but the comment of his biographer, writing in 1794 when the revival was in full flood, is highly significant: 'We do not recollect to have heard whether Mr. R. had dated his conversion to any particular time...'.<sup>15</sup> Such a remark demonstrates that a datable experience was by no means thought indispensable. Of the subjects of the case-histories studied here, only 8% are actually stated to have undergone a gradual conversion rather than reaching a crisis. Of the unnamed future wife of another Baptist Minister, John Stock, for example, it is said that 'so early and gradual was the work of grace upon her soul, that she could never refer to any particular period at which she was conscious of its commencement'.<sup>16</sup> Frequently, as in this case, those who had received a religious upbringing fitted this mould. Thus the process was so indiscernible for William Stanger, of Tydd St Mary, Lincolnshire, who as the grandson of a General Baptist minister had been given careful Christian nurture, that he seems to have found it difficult to assess whether he was qualified for baptism and so to

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<sup>14</sup> *BM*, July 1810, p. 392.

<sup>15</sup> *EM*, November 1794, p. 443.

<sup>16</sup> *BM*, January 1850, p. 129.



have deferred the event until late in life.<sup>17</sup> A religious education, this and other obituarists noted, made it natural for the spiritual life to evolve gradually. Nevertheless that awareness did not mean conversion was supposed to be avoidable on a by-road to heaven. The observation of the biographer of Thomas Reader is revealing in this respect too: the implication of remarking that he was unaware whether his subject dated his conversion to any particular time was that, even if Reader did not, he had been converted. Whether sudden or developmental, conversion was regarded as the obligatory entrance on the Christian life.

Before the great change, there had often been a period of profligacy. There is frequently an understandable lack of precision on this topic. A woman in Kent was said to have been 'worldly', a London artist to have been marked by 'folly and vanity'.<sup>18</sup> More specifically a copperplate printer in the city is reported to have been 'gay and thoughtless, excessively fond of Cards, the Theatre and gay Company'.<sup>19</sup> On rare occasions more heinous sins were indicated. Before being converted at Norwich Tabernacle, one woman had been a London prostitute and subsequently contemplated murdering her husband.<sup>20</sup> However, it was not particular sins that constituted the kernel of the problem with which evangelists grappled. Rather it was conceived to be the innate fallenness of the human heart, the state of sinfulness rather than a series of individual sins. Hence many converts are described as having previously lived exemplary lives. Thus Catherine Anning, the daughter of a Devon farmer, was respected before her conversion 'for her amiable, industrious and prudent conduct, and especially for her dutiful behaviour towards her aged parents'.<sup>21</sup> Likewise William Johnson, the son of a General Baptist couple at Sawley Cliff in Derbyshire, was 'very steady in his conduct, and obedient to his parents', but that was not the point: he was 'destitute of real religion' and so still had to pass through the wicket gate of conversion.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the great problem for many people was their virtue. Anne Prangnell, of Lockerly, Hampshire, for example, was 'very vain of her goodness'.<sup>23</sup> Evangelists had to knock away the 'false props' upon which such people rested before they could be induced to put their reliance

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<sup>17</sup> *GBR*, November 1822, p. 422.

<sup>18</sup> *BM*, August 1810, p. 434. *EM*, October 1850, p. 532.

<sup>19</sup> *BM*, June 1810, p. 320.

<sup>20</sup> *EM*, December 1793, pp. 265-6.

<sup>21</sup> *BM*, February 1809, p. 65.

<sup>22</sup> *GBR*, February 1822, p. 58.

<sup>23</sup> *BM*, October 1810, p. 519.

on Christ.<sup>24</sup> This type of legalism, the supposition by the subjects that they were capable themselves of fulfilling the obligations of the divine law, is mentioned as afflicting 9% of the sample. For them, as much as for flagrant sinners, conversion entailed a radical transformation of life.

What was the age of the subjects at conversion? Of the sixty-three who were converted at a particular age, 22% underwent the experience at 15 or below; 46% between 16 and 20; 14% between 21 and 25; 5% between 26 and 35; 6% between 36 and 65; and 6% at 66 or above. There were instances of the very young. Thus Master G.A.F. Barss, who died in 1793 at the tender age of four years four months, is presented as a converted character. He used to pray in imitation of his father and to prattle about having a 'good heart' and going to heaven.<sup>25</sup> Equally there were cases of the elderly. Christopher Hunter, who died in 1822 in Redburn, Lincolnshire, is a striking example. He lived as a stranger to godliness until his ninetieth year, but then a passing General Baptist evangelist exhorted a group of senior citizens about the way of salvation. Hunter found peace in believing and was immersed on Easter Tuesday 1820, at almost the end of his ninety-first year.<sup>26</sup> The very young and the very old, however, were the exceptions. The figures clearly demonstrate that adolescence was the peak time for conversion. Nearly half of them were between the ages of 16 and 20; and 82% of all conversions that can be assigned to a specific age took place at 25 years old or below. These proportions can be usefully compared with the results of other analyses. Werner's figures for Primitive Methodists are rather different: only 43% of their conversions took place under the age of 25, and nearly as many were aged between 25 and 34 as were between 16 and 24.<sup>27</sup> The discrepancy is explained by the fact that Werner is examining the first generation of Primitive Methodists. In the earliest wave of their expansion, a higher proportion of adults would be recruited. Again, in Smout's study of the Cambuslang converts of 1742 only 22% were 19 or under, probably because younger people were less free to travel to the communion season when the revival took place. Fully 75%, however, were 29 or under, a concentration of response in the early years of life very similar to the present findings.<sup>28</sup> In Watts' examination of evangelical Nonconformists the results were even closer: half the

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<sup>24</sup> *BM*, February 1809, p. 68.

<sup>25</sup> *EM*, Supplement for 1794, pp. 549-50.

<sup>26</sup> *GBR*, November 1822, pp. 455-6.

<sup>27</sup> Werner, *Primitive Methodist Connexion*, p. 155.

<sup>28</sup> Smout, 'Born Again at Cambuslang', p. 116.

conversions were between 14 and 20 years old and 74% at 25 or below.<sup>29</sup> The tendency for the great change to take place early in life became even more marked as the nineteenth century wore on,<sup>30</sup> but it is evident that even before 1850 it was extremely likely to happen in a person's youth. Watts suggests that the explanation is in the rise of sexual fears, especially anxiety about masturbation, and cites one instance where that is a plausible interpretation.<sup>31</sup> There is, however, no evidence to support that theory in the present sample. There are, on the other hand, different precipitants such as uttering an oath when casting a fishing net and recoiling in horror.<sup>32</sup> We are, of necessity, largely in the dark about the motives hidden in the internal recesses of the soul, but it is likely that sexuality was only one element, albeit an important one, in the psychological *mélange* that adolescents experienced in orientating themselves for life. But what is clear is that there was a high proportion of youthful conversions in the evangelical world of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Another factor to consider is gender. The female proportion of the sample was 44%, a high figure considering the large number of male ministers memorialised. That, however, is a feature of the record rather than of what actually happened. The important question is whether women had the same experience of conversion as men. The accounts suggest that they did. There is for each sex the same normative pattern of early heedlessness, conviction of sin, acceptance of salvation and the discovery of joy and peace in believing. The issue can in some measure be tested by comparing the age distribution of women with that of the opposite sex. Of thirty women whose age at conversion is given, only four were 15 or under, by contrast with ten men, and that seems low. The numbers however, are so small as not to be statistically significant. More important, fifteen of the thirty, exactly half, were converted between 16 and 20; and 80% had the experience at 25 or under. This pattern is similar to the distribution for men: fourteen of the thirty-three, that is 42%, were between 16 and 20; and 84% were 25 or under. There is no major gender difference in the age structure at conversion. That is exactly what Watts establishes.<sup>33</sup> It tends to confirm the fundamental sameness of the

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<sup>29</sup> Watts, *Dissenters: Volume II*, p. 57.

<sup>30</sup> K. D. Brown, *A Social History of the Nonconformist Ministry in England and Wales, 1800-1930* (Oxford, 1988), p. 54-5.

<sup>31</sup> Watts, *Dissenters: Volume II*, pp. 49-50.

<sup>32</sup> *EM*, September 1794, p. 381.

<sup>33</sup> Watts, *Dissenters: Volume II*, p. 57.

conversion experience for the two sexes. This appears to have been a long established feature, for C. L. Cohen remarks on the uniformity of phrasing between men and women in Puritan spiritual autobiographies of the seventeenth century.<sup>34</sup> The research of Linda Wilson on the spirituality of evangelical Nonconformist women between 1825 and 1875 reaches the same conclusion that there was no substantial difference between the religious experience of the two sexes.<sup>35</sup> It may well be that in a patriarchal society the evangelical insistence on the identical needs of men and women to enter by the straight gate was a major force tending towards gender equality.

Indications of status occur in only about a quarter of the cases in the sample. They arise chiefly through mention of the occupation of the subject or of the subject's father. It emerges that a few individuals enjoyed quite a high standing. There are men in business houses, one the son of a Sheffield master cutler. There are a ship's master, an affluent artist and several ministers who must have been reasonably well-to-do. A larger number, though less prosperous, were nevertheless, in the language of the time, highly respectable. There are a number of farmers and children of farmers, a yeoman, an estate steward, the son of a grocer, a draper and several clerks. These people were drawn from the ranks that later in the nineteenth century would have been called lower middle classes. There are also skilled craftsmen: a builder, a copper miner, a copper plate printer, a shoemaker, a coachman and a surgeon – who, as a manual worker then occupied a much lower status than his successors in the profession would enjoy. The strength of the group among the lower middle classes and the upper working classes might give the impression that evangelical Nonconformity was disproportionately drawn from these sections of society. That is the conclusion that, from similar evidence, historians have often drawn.<sup>36</sup> Recent research, however, has established that the extent of the involvement of the poor has been seriously underestimated. Labourers were numerous and increasingly represented in the meeting houses of the period.<sup>37</sup> The lower ranks of society are

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<sup>34</sup> Charles L. Cohen, *God's Caress: the Psychology of Puritan Religious Experience* (New York, 1986), p. 222.

<sup>35</sup> Linda Wilson, 'Female Spirituality among Evangelical Nonconformists, 1825-1875', Cheltenham and Gloucester College of Higher Education, PhD in progress.

<sup>36</sup> For example, Alan D. Gilbert, *Religion and Society in Industrial England: church, chapel and social change, 1740-1914* (London, 1976), pp. 62-7.

<sup>37</sup> Watts, *Dissenters: Volume II*, pp. 303-27. Lilian M. Wildman, 'Changes in Membership Recruitment and Social Composition in Ten Rural Old

certainly to be found in the sample. There are a farm servant and a poor labourer, a factory worker, several common soldiers and an illiterate. Yet this handful of individuals is not proportionate to their strength among evangelical Nonconformists. It is in regard to status that the sample has been most distorted by the sieve of selectivity through which it has passed. Smout's Cambuslang converts, among whom two-thirds were from a background of small tenants or low-status craftsmen, and Werner's primitive Methodists, among whom more than half were servants, labourers or in poverty, were both of lower average status than the group chosen for insertion in *The Evangelical Magazine* and the two Baptist magazines.<sup>38</sup> But what is most significant for our purpose is that the poor as much as the prosperous were expected to pass through conversion. A man who 'moved in a humble sphere, labouring for the support of his family', for example, was in as much need of renouncing his pharisaic self-righteousness and of praying until he received saving grace as his social superiors.<sup>39</sup> The summons to repentance and faith was a great social leveller.

When the place of conversion is investigated, it turns out that, as might be expected, the great majority of the instances were in England. Most of the counties and all the regions appear in the sample, though, as is inevitable given the strength of the denomination in the region, the East Midlands are particularly strongly represented among the General Baptists. Wales contributed only a pair of sisters from Montgomeryshire and a married woman from Gwent. This paucity was no doubt chiefly a consequence of the language barrier that inhibited the transmission of information from much of Wales to English-language periodicals based in London, and was certainly not a reflection of the true distribution of conversions. Further flung instances, however, do have their own significance. One was from Ireland, where, in Limerick, a serving soldier was converted through the Methodists.<sup>40</sup> Another was from Newfoundland. A boy was sent out at the age of twelve to serve in a shop in the capital, St John's. When rather older, finding the Anglican church in the severe climate 'cold and dreary' but the Independent meeting house warmly heated, he was gradually illuminated as he was drawn into the

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Dissent Churches in the South-east Midlands, 1718-1851', *The Baptist Quarterly* 35 (1994), pp. 343-5.

<sup>38</sup> Smout, 'Born Again At Cambuslang', p. 117. Werner, *Primitive Methodist Connexion*, p. 155.

<sup>39</sup> *BM*, August 1809, p. 372.

<sup>40</sup> *BM*, August 1810, p. 430.

worshipping congregation.<sup>41</sup> These cases are reminders that evangelical conversion was the core of a movement that flourished beyond Britain, extending through the English-speaking world. Two subjects even responded to the gospel preached by missionaries. While serving with the forces of the East India Company, one was converted under the preaching of William Ward, Baptist missionary at Serampore.<sup>42</sup> Again, a woman born of British parents in Sumatra, having been orphaned and then educated at the Serampore school, was converted under the ministry of a recently arrived missionary there in 1837.<sup>43</sup> The same experience was now as possible on the banks of the Ganges as on the banks of the Trent. Conversion was a bond that united a growing international movement.

Most of the sample naturally comes from the denominations whose journals have been examined. At least 44% were converted among the Particular Baptists, 22% among the Independents and 11% among the General Baptists. The lesser Calvinistic evangelical groupings are also covered: the Calvinistic Methodists and Lady Huntingdon's Connexion. There are also instances from the Church of England and the Wesleyans, and even a case – in fact the mother of William Ward of Serampore – who received her permanent religious impression in about 1773 through the preaching of a female member of the Society of Friends in Derby, though subsequently worshipping with the Calvinistic Methodists.<sup>44</sup> Mrs Ward had previously attended an Arian meeting, but that phase had not led her into the paths of salvation. There is no instance of conversion to vital religion among those professing an Arian or Socinian theology, whether of the English Presbyterian or the Old Connexion General Baptist variety. There is, however, an account in *The Evangelical Magazine* of 'The Conversion of a Socinian'. A Northamptonshire farmer was drawn away by reading Socinian authors from the ministry of his meeting house. The minister tried to bring him back, but for long there was no response. Only when the farmer was lying on his death bed suffering from tuberculosis, indeed only three days before his death, did he receive the joy of salvation.<sup>45</sup> This case is instructive because it is an instance of conversion not from nominal Christianity, the normal pattern, but from different religious opinions. Socinianism is presented as a non-Christian option. True conversions were not to be expected under its sway. The

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<sup>41</sup> *EM*, May 1850, pp. 226-7.

<sup>42</sup> *BM*, July 1810, p. 389.

<sup>43</sup> *BM*, July 1850, p. 140.

<sup>44</sup> *BM*, November 1810, p. 575.

<sup>45</sup> *EM*, Supplement for 1793, pp. 293-4.

occurrence of authentic commitments to vital religion is reported only among denominations created, touched or transformed by evangelicalism. The experience was evidently regarded as unique to the evangelical movement.

A striking feature of the conversion narratives is therefore their association with aspects of evangelical religion. The prominence of the Bible, in the first place, is reflected in the sample. In 6% of the cases reading the Bible, as distinguished from hearing sermons expounding the scriptures, is mentioned explicitly as one of the factors leading to conversion, but that figure is misleadingly low. It is artificial to separate Bible reading from hearing sermons since preaching was so deeply rooted in scripture. Thus Anne Prangnell of Lockerly, Hampshire, recalled the texts of successive sermons as the milestones of her spiritual pilgrimage during the 1760s. Persuaded by her husband to attend the Baptist meeting, she first heard a sermon on Revelation 3:20 ('Behold I stand at the door and knock...'), and concluded that Christ was knocking at the door of her heart through her afflictions. Then she listened to an exposition of Colossians 3:3 ('For ye are dead, and your lives are hid with Christ in God'), inferring that she was entitled to believe. Finally she was established in her new found faith by a sermon on Hebrews 6:17, 18 (which refers to 'the immutability of his counsel').<sup>46</sup>

The Bible as it was explained from the pulpit formed the guidance for her progress through a long drawn out conversion. Preaching by settled ministers is included as a cause of conversion in as many as 27% of the sample, and by evangelists or visiting preachers in another 14%. Preaching in fact, is by far the most important of the precipitating factors mentioned. The Bible, furthermore, shaped the language of those who subsequently testified to conversion. Thus John Dando of Dursley, Gloucestershire, having been affected by a sermon, declared that 'his soul became like the chariots of Aminadib'.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, absorbing the Bible was a consequence as well as a cause of conversion. Master Joseph Thornton of Market Harborough, for example, though dying in 1794 at the age of only eight, having been led to a change of disposition through a sermon on 'Search the Scriptures', afterwards read the Bible at stated hours every day.<sup>48</sup> Conversion, itself a defining characteristic of the evangelical movement, was intimately connected with biblicism, another.

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<sup>46</sup> *BM*, October 1810, pp. 519-20.

<sup>47</sup> *BM*, May 1810, p. 301.

<sup>48</sup> *EM*, October 1794, pp. 429-30.

The heart of the evangelical doctrinal system was the atonement achieved by Christ on the cross. Consequently it features prominently in the conversion narratives. The cross is rarely isolated as a theme on which the subjects meditated before conversion, and so it cannot be identified as a statistically significant precipitant of the experience. Yet phraseology evoking the power of Christ crucified recurs frequently in the accounts, especially at the crisis of conversion. A young woman aged twenty-one of the name of Walker, who lived near High Wycombe, may be taken as an example. Having contracted a disease that would soon prove fatal, she became distressed over her sins. During December 1793, while she was sitting by the fireside bemoaning her situation, 'Christ manifested himself to her soul as a bleeding, dying Saviour, making atonement for sin, with surprising clearness, and sweetness of application.'<sup>49</sup> As in so many other cases, it is impossible to disentangle the language of the obituarist from the experience of the subject, but it would be hard to suppose that Christ crucified was not at the heart of Miss Walker's entry into faith. Likewise an anonymous living minister presenting his autobiography in the supplement to the first volume of *The Evangelical Magazine*, evidently as something of a model, describes how he sought liberty through Christ. 'I was led,' he recounts, 'to behold him as wounded for my transgression, and bruised for my iniquities.'<sup>50</sup> The atonement is by no means universally mentioned in the obituaries, but its common occurrence suggests that it was the doctrine most closely bound up with conversion.

An intense orientation towards practical effort to spread the gospel and its blessings was another fundamental characteristic of the evangelical movement. This activism was evident in the influence exerted by others to bring the subjects to a living faith. Mothers are sometimes named in this connection. Thus Thomas Reader, who, like another brother, became an Independent minister in later life, was sometimes taken as a boy by his mother into her room. Holding her son's hand, she would announce: 'My dear child, I cannot be at rest till I see a work of grace begun in your heart.' The boy, not surprisingly, would burst into a flood of tears.<sup>51</sup> Yet in this sample the mother alone is mentioned as a significant influence on conversion in only 6% of the cases, a smaller proportion than the 9% which alluded to both parents or to the father alone. The mother is

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<sup>49</sup> *EM*, July 1794, pp. 297-8.

<sup>50</sup> *EM*, Supplement for 1793, p. 271.

<sup>51</sup> *EM*, November 1794, p. 443.



therefore relatively less prominent than in Watts' sample,<sup>52</sup> perhaps because a significant number of the present group were children of the manse, where the religious authority of the father was reinforced by his role as a minister. But other relations also went out of their way to influence the subjects for Christ: brothers, sisters, a brother-in-law, a mother-in-law, an aunt, a son, even a granddaughter. Friends were often persuasive too: a girl friend, a boy friend, fellow clerks or 'Blind Sally' of Dover, one of those women who figure so largely in evangelical history as soul-winners. Though blind from birth, Sally Johnson spoke so winningly from texts of scripture that she was the means by which Elizabeth Wood was brought both soul concern and soul comfort.<sup>53</sup> All these friends and relations were active in the cause of the gospel, but so were the subjects once they had been converted. Andrew Kinsman of Tavistock, for instance, having laid to rest tormenting fears about his own salvation, 'was soon impressed with an ardent concern, to interest the attention of his relations to these important objects'.<sup>54</sup> One young convert gathered his friends for a weekly prayer meeting for the advance of the gospel, a factory lad was set delivering devotional addresses when he was only fifteen and one later minister heard the call to future service in the same sermon that led him into the way of salvation.<sup>55</sup> The quest for conversions was the spur to activity; and activism was the result of the dynamic released by conversions.

The narratives refer to a variety of other circumstances that preceded conversion. Devotional works, family prayers and hymns are mentioned: 'Jesu, lover of my soul' was the specific means by which the Norwich ex-prostitute first found rest, eclipsing both text and sermon.<sup>56</sup> A passage of scripture could be impressed on the mind of a person anxious for salvation in a way that might in a later day have been called a revelation.<sup>57</sup> And there were dreams. A dissolute man befuddled by drink is said to have dreamed of a nine-headed serpent ready to seize him during the night before an acquaintance asked him, without knowing of the dream, whether he would like to attend a meeting to hear a sermon on the old serpent; and the man's heart was duly changed.<sup>58</sup> Again, in 1804, a

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<sup>52</sup> Watts, *Dissenters: Volume II*, pp. 53-6.

<sup>53</sup> *BM*, August 1810, pp. 433-4.

<sup>54</sup> *EM*, August 1793, p. 45.

<sup>55</sup> *EM*, Supplement for 1850, p. 705; October 1850, p. 507; April 1850, p. 170.

<sup>56</sup> *EM*, Supplement for 1793, p. 267.

<sup>57</sup> *GBR*, April 1822, p. 140.

<sup>58</sup> *EM*, March 1794, pp. 116-7.

Liverpool clerk was awakened three times by a voice calling him, 'John! John! John!', and the following night he saw 'a most beautiful figure' who urged him to seek the Lord.<sup>59</sup> It was not only the Magic Methodists of Delamere Forest who in this period saw visions. Death and illness, however, formed the second most common precipitating factor after sermons: 13% of the sample included one or the other. Funeral sermons in particular, blending bereavement with proclamation, often provoked serious thought that led to change of heart. Watts draws attention to the importance of disease and death as causes of the fear that preceded conversion, but he lays most stress on the fear of hell.<sup>60</sup> The subject does occur in this sample too. Thus Ann Anderson, a seventeen-year-old in the last days of tuberculosis, was convinced that after death she would '*burn in hell for ever*'.<sup>61</sup> Less vivid phrases such as 'endless perdition' crop up more frequently.<sup>62</sup> But what was emphasised, in the obituaries and apparently in evangelical teaching, was not so much the prospect of future punishment as the guilt of the sinner before God. An article on 'Conviction of Sin' in *The Evangelical Magazine* for December 1793 distinguished delusive from real conviction. The first of the symptoms of the delusive variety was fear of the *danger* of sin; the contrasting attributes of real conviction were a sense of the *desert* of hell and of the *evil* of sin.<sup>63</sup> Sometimes, as in this article, it was insisted that conviction of sin is an essential preliminary to conversion, but at other times it was taught explicitly that never having felt the '*terrors of the Almighty*' was common among true Christians.<sup>64</sup> Terror 'from a fear of divine wrath' was deliberately played down in pre-conversion spiritual counselling in order to concentrate on human responsibility for sin and the kindly promises of the gospel.<sup>65</sup> Maria Prudence Brassington of Burslem was said to have been 'one of those who seem to be drawn by the cords of love rather than by the terrors of the law'.<sup>66</sup> The two approaches are treated as equally valid. Fear of hell was undoubtedly associated with conversion in many instances, but the evidence of this material would imply that it was not as prominent a factor leading to conversion as Watts suggests.

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<sup>59</sup> *EM*, November 1850, pp. 567-8.

<sup>60</sup> Watts, *Dissenters: Volume II*, pp. 72-80.

<sup>61</sup> *EM*, January 1794, p. 34.

<sup>62</sup> *EM*, Supplement for 1850, p. 708.

<sup>63</sup> *EM*, December 1793, p. 233.

<sup>64</sup> *EM*, September 1794, p. 354.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 383.

<sup>66</sup> *BM*, July 1850, p. 436.

How did conversion change over time? The sample is too small to draw statistical conclusions about shifts in any of the areas that have been considered, but trends are nevertheless apparent in the material, especially when it is seen against the backdrop of the theological literature of the period. The fundamental change was in the understanding of the balance between divine and human agency. Theologically the point was explained by the relationship between regeneration and conversion. Puritan divines, to whom eighteenth-century evangelicals turned for guidance on the subject, distinguished between regeneration as the divine action whereby a person became a Christian and conversion as, in some sense, the human action which accomplished the same transition. John Rippon, the Baptist minister at Carter Lane, Southwark, included a valuable discussion of the subject in the 'Theological Dictionary' that he inserted in his *Baptist Annual Register* for 1801-2. Regeneration is defined as 'the MOTION OF GOD in the heart of a sinner'. Conversion on the other hand is 'the MOTION OF THE HEART of a sinner towards God'. 'In Regeneration,' he explains, 'men are wholly passive – in Conversion, they become active.' Here the distinction seems stark: conversion, by contrast with regeneration, is a solely human work. Yet Rippon has just defined conversion as consisting 'both of God's act upon men in turning them, and of acts done by men under the influence of converting grace: they turn, being turned'. Here the contrast is located within conversion: it is both a divine transformation and a human achievement. There is an ambiguity in Rippon's expression about whether or not the Almighty is at work in conversion. As though aware of his confusion, Rippon tries to illustrate his position by quoting a series of antitheses between regeneration and conversion from the 'most judicious' Puritan Stephen Charnock. Here again, however, there is ambiguity. In some of Charnock's axioms, conversion seems to be wholly human, but in others it is both divine and human. 'In Conversion,' the Puritan concludes, 'the sinner is active, but it is NOT FROM THE POWER of MAN, although it is from a POWER in MAN, not growing up from the FEEBLE ROOT of nature, but SETTLED THERE by the almighty spirit of God.'<sup>67</sup> In that complex statement the great change is twice said to be human, twice not human, and once divine. Both Rippon and before him Charnock were wrestling with an intractable problem in theology, the sense in which human autonomy is compatible with divine agency. The ultimate

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<sup>67</sup> John Rippon, *The Baptist Annual Register for 1801 and 1802* (London, n.d.), pp. 664-5. I am grateful to Mrs Susan Mills of the Angus Library, Regent's Park College, Oxford, for drawing my attention to this passage.

grounding of the problem is the issues of freedom against necessity. Eighteenth-century evangelicals such as Rippon were concerned to maintain the divine element even while admitting human freedom. The trend in the nineteenth century was for the human component to become exclusive so that divine participation in conversion tended to diminish. The structure erected by Rippon, perhaps inherently unstable, gradually disintegrated.

The change expressed itself, for one thing, in an increase of human planning. It was a hallmark of eighteenth-century evangelicals to believe that the Almighty and human beings both used what were called 'means', that is mundane instruments, to bring about conversions. The word *had* already been used in this sense by seventeenth-century Puritans such as William Ames,<sup>68</sup> but in stressing the concept, eighteenth-century evangelicals differed from their high Calvinist contemporaries, who believed that conversion happened as a result of an unanticipated exercise of divine sovereignty, a shaft from the blue. On the high Calvinist view, conversion had to be waited for rather than contrived. William Carey was attacking this position in his celebrated work, *An Enquiry into the Obligation of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen* (1792). There should be no delay until God was pleased to act because means, in this case a missionary society, ought to be used to fulfil the known divine purposes.<sup>69</sup> The word 'means' crops up in this sense in the obituaries. A woman among the General Baptists, for example, was stirred by the death of a friend in about 1815 to seek salvation and, as her memorialist puts it, 'in the use of means, she was enabled to trust in Christ as an all sufficient Saviour'.<sup>70</sup> The tendency over time was for the use of such means to increase. The process can be illustrated from the field of religious education. Traditionally the catechism had been taught to lay the foundations of Christian knowledge. An instance occurs in the obituary of Mrs D. Smith, born in 1747 the daughter of a Suffolk farmer:

Her father being a grave steady man, who kept up the old custom of catechising his children and servants, and praying with them on Lord's

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<sup>68</sup> Cohen, *God's Caress*, p. 220.

<sup>69</sup> William Carey, *An Enquiry into the Obligation of Christian to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen* (London, 1961), sect. 1.

<sup>70</sup> *GBR*, April 1822, p. 139.

day evenings; some very serious impressions respecting soul concerns began in very early life.<sup>71</sup>

The expectation was that, as in this case, seeds would be sown that, under divine providence, might later germinate. Catechetical training was conceived as preparation of the soil, not as a forcing house for conversion. Very different, however, were the Sunday schools that first became popular in the 1780s and increasingly became associated with particular congregations during the nineteenth century. In the latter phase they generally aimed for conversions. Sunday schools constituted a means that could deliberately be used for that end. Thus four of the fifteen General Baptists in the sample were swayed by Sunday school. In a similar way other means were arranged to promote conversion. The sample includes instances of the phenomenon at a Sunday morning young men's prayer meeting in Market Harborough and at a Sunday evening cottage meeting in Fareham, Hampshire.<sup>72</sup> In another case an experience meeting at Redruth Baptist Church in Cornwall was where a man was able to give vent to the anxiety of soul that preceded his enlightenment.<sup>73</sup> This gathering seems to be an example of the copying of a Methodist class meeting in the most Methodist of counties. The followers of John Wesley, with their itinerancy and their love-feasts, were long the exemplars of pragmatic innovation for the sake of the gospel, but by the 1830s and 1840s a school of 'instrumentalists' had arisen who copied the more elaborate American methods. The evangelists of the Baptist Home Missionary Society and their counterparts among the Independents both imitated the 'new measures' pioneered in the United States by Charles Finney, notably the protracted meeting at which burdened souls could be prayed through to the new birth.<sup>74</sup> There was a trend over time towards deliberately creating the most favourable circumstances for turning to God.

Human timing, like human planning, came increasingly into fashion. It was increasingly believed that the sinner did not have to wait until the moment of divine appointment for conversion. In the seventeenth century it had been common for conviction of sin to last for years before a soul found rest in believing.<sup>75</sup> As late as the end of the eighteenth century the

<sup>71</sup> *BM*, September 1810, p. 122.

<sup>72</sup> *EM*, Supplement for 1850, p. 708. *BM*, June 1810, pp. 346-7.

<sup>73</sup> *BM*, April 1809, p. 147.

<sup>74</sup> Richard Carwardine, *Transatlantic Revivalism: Popular Evangelicalism in Britain and America, 1790-1865* (Westport, Conn., 1978), ch. 2.

<sup>75</sup> Cohen, *God's Caress*, p. 205.

same pattern is clear in the experience of many Calvinists. In 1798 a man who was awakened by an Independent field preacher did not close with Christ immediately but rather spent 'considerable time' in conviction of sin.<sup>76</sup> In 1789 another continued for four or five months 'in the pangs of new birth'; and in 1795 a third occupied a full two years doubting his personal interest in redemption.<sup>77</sup> Among the Arminian General Baptists there was often much more Methodist-style earnest seeking after salvation, but, again, the time allocated to persevering prayer delayed the climax of conversion. Thus in around 1800 Mrs Elizabeth Johnson of Quorndon, Leicestershire, did not give up her heart to the Saviour until some years after marriage. 'In her first attempts, she was much perplexed with an evil heart of unbelief; but steadily pursuing the subject, her views became rectified, and she was enabled to say, "I know in whom I have believed."'<sup>78</sup> As the nineteenth century advanced, however, the approach to timing altered. Finney in the United States was once more the pace-setter, urging immediate surrender to Christ. His admirers in Britain during the 1830s and 1840s adopted the same technique. George Redford, a prominent Independent minister deeply influenced by Finney, issued a tract called *The Great Change* (?1844) in which a chapter is given over to 'Reasons why your conversion should take place now'.<sup>79</sup> Likewise James Morison, the founder of the Evangelical Union denomination in Scotland in 1843, argued that people were guilty of a very great crime if they did not believe immediately on hearing the gospel.<sup>80</sup> There could be no plea for a moment's delay. In progressive evangelical circles around the middle of the nineteenth century sinners were thought to be able to come to Christ at a time of their own choosing.

There was a similar development of opinion about human conviction. Expectations shifted about how confidently people could know that they had been converted. Reformed piety in the seventeenth century had deliberately fostered anxieties about whether or not a person was of the elect in order to ensure that each sinner persevered in ensuring that faith was real rather than counterfeit. Assurance of salvation was not regarded as a standard possession of the believer. The Evangelical Revival

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<sup>76</sup> *BM*, March 1810, pp. 118-19.

<sup>77</sup> *EM*, March 1794, p. 117; March 1850, p. 114.

<sup>78</sup> *GBR*, April 1822, p. 141.

<sup>79</sup> Redford, *Great Change*, ch. 7.

<sup>80</sup> James Morison, *Saving Faith: or the Simple Belief of the Gospel* (Kilmarnock, 1842), p. 14.

encouraged greater confidence in one's eternal destiny as a result of stronger assumptions about the capacity of human beings to achieve knowledge.<sup>81</sup> Yet the older Calvinist tradition still powerfully influenced late eighteenth-century evangelicals. John Newton, the slave-trader turned clergyman, insisted that assurance was not of the essence of faith and portrayed the earliest phase of Christian experience as typically lacking any certainty of salvation.<sup>82</sup> Many Calvinist Dissenters continued to experience worries of the old type in the years around 1800. Thus Elizabeth Bowden, daughter of the Independent minister at Tooting, Surrey, fell seriously ill at the age of 17 in the early 1790s. Aware of her danger, she was anxious and despondent. 'I want more comfort in my soul...', she told her father, 'I want to *know* my interest in the *covenant*.'<sup>83</sup> Elizabeth evidently lacked assurance – though, since her last word as she died was 'Joys!', she presumably found it at the end. Comparable uncertainty about one's spiritual state occurs several times in the sample. If the piety shows the continuing legacy of the seventeenth century, the counselling given in such circumstances was now different. Puritan pastors would not readily have calmed the anxieties for fear of giving ungrounded hope. The newer attitude in such a case was expressed in an authoritative footnote to a spiritual biography in *The Evangelical Magazine* for 1794. The subject, not remembering the start of God's work in her soul, sometimes questioned whether she had been effectually called to Christian discipleship. To doubt the sincerity of one's religion because of inability to recall the circumstances of one's conversion, according to the weighty editorial opinion, was 'unreasonable and unscriptural'. Fears could safely be set aside.<sup>84</sup> It was no longer supposed to be beneficial to welter in uncertainty. Accordingly the obituaries in the sample discussing experiences after about 1820 reveal no such lack of confidence in the validity of personal faith. By 1842 Morison was teaching, like the early Wesley, that assurance is actually essential to faith. 'Every man who believes the gospel,' he asserted, 'knows that he believes it.'<sup>85</sup> Similarly the Independent R. W. Dale of Birmingham, when beginning his ministry in mid-century, had no qualms about the

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<sup>81</sup> D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: a History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London, 1988), pp. 42-50.

<sup>82</sup> D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the English Evangelical Tradition between the Conversions of Wesley and Wilberforce* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 66, 251-2.

<sup>83</sup> *EM*, March 1794, p. 121.

<sup>84</sup> *EM*, September 1794, p. 354.

<sup>85</sup> Morison, *Saving Faith*, p. 11.

proper stance on the question of assurance: 'it should be the aim of the Christian teacher so to represent the power and grace of the Lord Jesus, and the unconditional freeness of His gospel, that the troubled and guilty heart, forgetting itself altogether, shall trust everything to Christ'.<sup>86</sup> There is now no need for introspection because confidence in one's spiritual state depends on Christ, not on one's response to him. The doctrine of assurance had become much more robust.

Alongside rising confidence in human conviction went a growing belief in human ability. High Calvinists of the eighteenth century taught that only God, by an irresistible exercise of his grace, can bring about the great change. The human contribution was minimal or non-existent. The evangelical mainstream, by contrast, learned from Jonathan Edwards to distinguish between natural and moral inability. Natural ability operated when human beings could not do what they wanted to do; moral inability operated when they did not do something because they did not want to do it. The latter was true of those rejecting the gospel, who therefore bore the culpability of their decision.<sup>87</sup> There was an obligation to believe, what came to be called 'duty faith'. This stance was shared by Andrew Fuller for the Baptists, Edward Williams for the Independents and Thomas Chalmers for the Presbyterians: it was the prevailing evangelical theology of the early nineteenth century. Thus John Angell James, Dale's predecessor at Birmingham, could write of avoiding the antinomianism of the high Calvinists as much as the Arminianism of the Methodists.<sup>88</sup> His version of Calvinism was in the middle between the two. In parts of England and Wales, especially in East Anglia, as in the remoter parts of the United States, the Baptists split on this issue. The high Calvinists became the Strict and Particular body while the bulk of Baptists followed Fuller. It was a topic of sufficient gravity to divide brethren into separate denominations.

What has been less noticed, at least for Britain, is that there was a further shift on the question of human ability during the early nineteenth century. In the United States, where the process is much better known, the change was expressed in the New Haven theology associated particularly with Nathaniel W. Taylor. Starting with the principle of duty faith that a person has an obligation to believe the gospel, Taylor applied

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<sup>86</sup> R. W. Dale, *The Life and Letters of John Angell James* (London, 1861), p. 302.

<sup>87</sup> Hindmarsh, *John Newton*, pp. 153-4, offers a particularly clear exposition of the distinction.

<sup>88</sup> Dale, *James*, p. 283.



the Kantian maxim, 'No ought without can'. He inferred that all human beings have a free capacity to believe. Conversion was within the sinner's will. Taylor's theology, first extensively promoted in 1818, was to be the foundation for Finney's practice in revivalism, but it was stoutly resisted by the Old Presbyterians of Princeton as derogating from the divine prerogative.<sup>89</sup> The debate did not rage on the other side of the Atlantic, though it was known in Britain, for example by John Angell James.<sup>90</sup> There were, however, echoes of the controversy in discussions about the role of the Holy Spirit in conversion. John Howard Hinton, the son of the respected Baptist minister at Oxford, and himself at the start of a distinguished ministry, argued in a book of 1830 that human beings had power to repent without the aid of the Spirit.<sup>91</sup> The contention found little favour, but Hinton was able to assume a leading place in his denomination without recanting. Finney accepted that the Holy Spirit is always at work in conversion, but only as a moral influence, that is merely in a persuasive role. The evangelist's major change in received theology was to collapse the distinction between regeneration and conversion altogether. Each term, according to Finney, described the same divine and human action, but the human being held the whip-hand. 'Neither God,' he wrote, 'nor any other being, can regenerate him, if he will not turn.'<sup>92</sup> The prestige of the revivalist, who toured England in 1849-50, ensured his views a wide audience. In Scotland James Morison, who was deeply influenced by Finney, taught that there was nothing miraculous about conversion, 'for if turning to God be a miracle, it cannot be the duty of any sinner to turn himself from his evil ways'.<sup>93</sup> The intense moralism that was dominant in theology led to a minimising of the divine part in the transformation of sinners. It was such teaching that brought about Morison's condemnation by the United Secession Synod and his founding of the Evangelical Union. Here again was a theological disagreement about the balance of the divine and human in conversion that was capable of causing denominational division. Just as in the United States, a much stronger view of human ability entered

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<sup>89</sup> Sidney E. Mead, *Nathaniel William Taylor, 1786-1858: a Connecticut Liberal* (Chicago, 1942).

<sup>90</sup> Dale, *James*, pp. 261-2.

<sup>91</sup> John Howard Hinton, *The Work of the Holy Spirit in Conversion* (London, 1830). Carwardine, *Transatlantic Revivalism*, pp. 63-4.

<sup>92</sup> Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Systematic Theology*, ed. George Redford (London, 1851), pp. 411, 407, 413.

<sup>93</sup> Morison, *Saving Faith*, p. 49.

British theology as the standpoint of revivalists who wanted to maximise conversions.

The prevailing trend in the understanding of conversion in the period therefore consisted in an elevation of the human element – in planning, timing, conviction and ability. The fine tension maintained by Charnock between divine and human activity was gradually relaxed. Why was the Puritan inheritance modified? All the changes may be traced to the spreading influence of Enlightenment patterns of thought, not external to the evangelical movement, but in and through it. Since the Enlightenment was the dominant cultural form, it necessarily shaped the appreciation of the gospel. Its typical motifs of progress, pragmatism and shedding the metaphysical obscurities of the past are evident in the processes of adaptation that have been discussed. Finney voiced many of its characteristic themes in the introduction to the British edition of his *Lectures on Systematic Theology* (1851). The gospel must no longer be hidden by a ‘false philosophy’; in this age of science the ‘spirit of enquiry’ demands theological reformulation; only so can there be ‘improvements’ suited to the nineteenth century.<sup>94</sup> As a result, conversion became a simpler, shallower experience, less a wrestling with the angel and more a scientific experiment. John Angell James described the British scene to an American correspondent in 1828. ‘Conversions,’ he wrote, ‘at least supposed conversions, are not unknown, nor unfrequent in many congregations, but the work, in most instances, is not of a decisive or impressive character.’<sup>95</sup> Quality, it might be said, was being sacrificed to quantity. This was the legacy transmitted to the later nineteenth century.<sup>96</sup>

A number of overall conclusions can be drawn from this study. First, conversion, though not necessarily a crisis experience, was regarded as essential in the evangelical movement of this period. The situation of around the start of the twentieth century, when even candidates for the ministry were not necessarily expected to be able to testify to a great change of life, had not yet arrived.<sup>97</sup> The experience, secondly, was concentrated chiefly in a particular age group, those of twenty-five and

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<sup>94</sup> Finney, *Lectures*, pp. vii, viii, x.

<sup>95</sup> J.A. James to Dr W. B. Sprague, 15 December 1828, in Dale, *James*, p. 250.

<sup>96</sup> Cf. Phyllis D. Airhart, ‘“What Must I Do to be Saved?” Two Paths to Evangelical Conversion in Late Victorian Canada’, *Church History* 59 (1990).

<sup>97</sup> Brown, *Nonconformist Ministry*, pp. 50-3.

under. Yet it was common to both sexes and widespread in terms of status, place and denomination. These findings correspond closely to those of Watts and others. Conversion, thirdly, was associated with the other main features of the evangelical movement, the Bible, the cross and activism. Although the prospect of hell was a stimulus to conversion, an awareness of guilt was more significant. Finally, the direction of change, under the influence of the Enlightenment's categories of thought, was towards stressing the human dimension of the experience rather than the divine. Conversion, even mass conversion, was increasingly being seen as a matter of free choice. Already by the mid-nineteenth century the evangelical movement had moved a long way towards the stance of some Nottingham Baptists who in the 1880s recorded the following resolution of church meeting: 'that after the Bazaar we go in for a revival'.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> D. W. Bebbington, *A History of Queensberry Street Baptist Church, Old Basford, Nottingham* (Nottingham, 1977), p. 17.