

“WHAT I AM ’TIS HARD TO KNOW”:
PRIMITIVE BAPTISTS, THE PROTESTANT SELF, AND THE AMERICAN
RELIGIOUS IMAGINATION

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ABSTRACT

JOSHUA GUTHMAN: “What I Am ’Tis Hard to Know”:
Primitive Baptists, the Protestant Self, and the American Religious Imagination
(Under the direction of John F. Kasson)

Though forged in the fires of the early nineteenth-century evangelical revivals, Primitive Baptists became the most significant opponents of the burgeoning antebellum evangelical movement. As Calvinists who despised missionaries, Sunday schools, Bible tract societies, and the other accouterments of evangelical Protestantism, the Primitives expressed none of the evangelicals’ certainty of salvation. To understand why the Primitives fought evangelicalism, why they secured victory in parts of the South, and why they ultimately lost out, we need to come to grips with the deeply personal nature of their struggle. Theirs was a fight over many things — doctrine, the influence of money in the church, ministerial authority, local autonomy, and sundry other matters — all of which registered firstly and most dramatically on the personal level. This dissertation demonstrates that an approach centered on the relationship between Primitive Baptist faith and selfhood offers the most compelling explanation of how the Primitives’ personal spiritual crises animated wide-ranging battles over religious doctrine, cultural authority, and social class in a changing American South.

To all my teachers,
beginning with the first, my parents

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures.....	viii
Introduction - Old Paths/New Roads:Primitive Baptists and the Telling of American Religious History.....	1
Chapter One - “Tell it to the Generation Following”: History and Identity in the Wake of the Baptist Schism.....	26
Chapter Two - “Doubts still assail me”: Uncertainty and the Making of the Primitive Baptist Self.....	65
Chapter Three - Money, Missionaries, and The Market in the Primitive Baptist Imagination.....	100
Chapter Four - The Lonesome Sound: Old Baptist Echoes in Modern America.....	138
Conclusion - Finding the Primitive Baptist Self.....	187
Bibliography.....	194

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Holcomb as talisman.....	148
Figure 2. Bud Fields, cotton sharecropper.....	149
Figure 3. Headlining the first FOTM concert.....	151
Figure 4. In an early report from the <i>New York Times</i>	153
Figure 5. Holcomb at home.....	166
Figure 6. The Louvin Brothers.....	171
Figure 7. Jim & Jesse McReynolds in 1964.....	171
Figure 8. The Stanley Brothers.....	171
Figure 9. Stanley as preacher.....	171
Figure 10. The cover of <i>Cry From the Cross</i>	172
Figure 11. Seeing the heavenly light.....	172
Figure 12. A recent edition of <i>The Clinch Mountain Boys</i>	172
Figure 13. Stanley inside the old mountain church.....	173
Figure 14. Stanley outside the old mountain church.....	173
Figure 15. Sitting in front of his own grave.....	174

INTRODUCTION

OLD PATHS/NEW ROADS:
PRIMITIVE BAPTISTS AND THE TELLING OF
AMERICAN RELIGIOUS HISTORY

*Thus saith the Lord, Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the
old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find
rest for your souls.*

– Jeremiah 6:16

In central North Carolina, outside of the city of High Point and its thicket of furniture stores, beyond the cul-de-sacked streets of its surrounding residential neighborhoods, a two-lane blacktop leads you for miles past neat patches of brightleaf tobacco, the occasional house and graying barn, to a white-steepled, red-brick building that stands primly over the surrounding countryside. Inside, stained glass windows rise from just above floor level up close to the vaulted ceiling. Beside the building, visitors sit in a manicured garden with stone statues and a fountain. A lined asphalt parking lot wraps itself around the building's grounds like a cummerbund. From there, green lawns roll down to meet the road where drivers approaching from either side will see a columnar sign made out of the same red brick that reads in white capitals, "ABBOTT'S CREEK MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH."

Across the road, lies a small, plain brick building, a cousin of sorts to the looming church. At first glance, it could be a parsonage or a recreation hall. Drivers whipping by are liable to miss it entirely. On the first and third Sundays of every month, a handful of cars pull onto the gravel path running alongside the building and leading eventually to a cemetery studded with graves dating back to the late-eighteenth century. These bi-weekly visitors are Primitive Baptists and they meet in the Abbott's Creek Primitive Baptist Church, which is to say they worship in the shadow of the missionary Baptists across the road.

In roughly this same spot, nearly two hundred years ago, things were much different. There was, as late as 1831, only one church, and its members, as they had been doing for nearly fifty years, called themselves simply the Baptist Church at Abbott's Creek. When the church broke apart, the majority excommunicated a small, unruly faction – twelve in all: seven women and five men – who insisted in their petitions that they “stood on the old ground,” were “orthodox in their principles,” and were “clearly the old Abbots Creek Church.”¹ The minority party found themselves pushed out of the meeting house, forced at first to find alternative days to use the plain church building and, later, to build their own house of worship. They comforted themselves with the words of the Apostle Paul: “Now we command you, Brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly.”² In this case, the excommunicants (they simply thought of themselves as reluctant leave-takers) championed

¹ Abbott's Creek Missionary Baptist Church Records, 4 July 1832, North Carolina Baptist Historical Collection, Wake Forest University. For clarity's sake, I have standardized the spelling of “Abbott's.” In both the missionary and primitive records, one finds various spellings, such as “Abbot's” or “Abbots.”

² 2 Thes 3:6 KJV

the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina, a new organization dedicated to educating pastors, ensuring they were paid, and raising funds to aid tract and missionary societies. As such, these twelve men and women constitute the ancestors of the people who each Sunday park their cars and pick-ups and SUVs in the big parking lot surrounding Abbott's Creek Missionary Baptist Church.

It is at first confusing – and a measure of the gulf between our own day and the time of the Abbott's Creek schism – to realize that in 1831 it was the soon-to-be missionary Baptists who insisted that they “stood on the old ground” and that it was the soon-to-be Primitives who held a commanding majority in the pews. But this was North Carolina during the years of the rolling Baptist schism, and the Primitives' message echoed in Baptist churches across the state. That message was sounded loudest and sharpest about two hundred miles east of Abbots Creek when, in 1827, the Baptist churches of the Kehukee Association voted to “discard all Missionary Societies, Bible Societies and Theological Seminaries, and the practices heretofore resorted to for their support, in begging money from the public...believing these societies and institutions to be the inventions of men, and not warranted from the word of God.”³

Similar resolutions appeared in churches and associations throughout the republic. Well before the Kehukee declaration – as early as 1818, in fact – Baptists in the southwestern corner of the Indiana Territory questioned whether operations of the new Baptist Board of Foreign Missions were “agreeable to gospel order.” These Baptists

³ Quoted in W.J. Berry, ed., *The Kehukee Declaration and Black Rock Address, With Other Writings Relative to the Baptist Separation Between 1825-1840* (Elon College, NC: Primitive Publications, 1974), 13-14.

answered themselves in the negative a year later.⁴ Nearly fifteen years later, the majority at Abbott's creek decided similarly. They resolved to "unfellowship" the new missionary societies and theological schools and anyone who aligned with them. These new things, they wrote, were "repugnant to the word of God."⁵ In 1832, then, when the Abbott's Creek anti-missionaries made their stand, they could count themselves among the tens of thousands of other Baptists whose churches had been rent in two over the question of missions. From the 1820s through the 1840s when the schism reached into churches from Florida's swamplands to southwestern Illinois's prairie, one could find anti-missionary Baptists bearing a variety of theologies. But it was always the unique combination of anti-missionism, anti-revivalism, and Calvinist theology that marked the nationwide grouping to which the Abbott's Creek majority came to belong.

What, though, to call these Baptists? Some called themselves Reformed Baptists. Other preferred to see themselves as members of the "Old School." (Their foes simply saw them as obstinate – "Hardshells" or "Straight Jackets," seemed a better fit, they said. "Ignoramuses" would also do.⁶) By the mid-1830s, the faction who insisted that all Baptists – all Christians – needed to "ask for the old paths, where is the good way" settled on the appellation, "Primitive" in order to signify their direct descent from the primitive church –

⁴ William T. Stott, *Indiana Baptist History, 1798-1908* (n.p., 1908), 57. Both the dating of the schism and its geographic trajectory tend to get obscured by persistent, though understandable, focus by both believers and scholars on the split's "signature" declarations, such as the 1826 Kehukee

⁵ Abbott's Creek Primitive Baptist Church Records, 5 May 1832, North Carolina Baptist Historical Collection, Wake Forest University.

⁶ Joseph Kelly Turner and John Luther Bridgers, *History of Edgecombe County, North Carolina* (Raleigh: Edwards & Broughton, 1920), 417.

that is, the church gathered around Jesus nearly two thousand years earlier. They would look back in order to go forward.

Primitive Baptists in the antebellum South struggled with missionary adversaries and with an austere set of beliefs that put them at odds both with evangelicals and their own fraught consciences. As uncompromising believers who, as one historian put it, were “more Calvinistic...than Calvin himself,” the Primitive Baptists held two core beliefs from which flowed all other matters of worldly and otherworldly affairs.⁷ They knew that God had decided, even before He created the world, who among the planet’s later inhabitants would be saved and who would be damned. And they knew as well that not only could they never know or understand God’s decision, they could do nothing to alter it. This put them far indeed from the more optimistic strains of evangelical Protestantism sweeping the early republic. For the Primitives, God’s grace, the only possible succor in a fallen world, remained a mystery. Even today Primitive Baptists sing the words of the old hymn: “I am a stranger here below / and what I am ’tis hard to know.” To outsiders and, indeed, to many Primitive Baptists themselves, this was a dark world.

My dissertation prowls these shadows to explain how a people struggling with the predestinarian paradox — how and why does one act in a world where one’s actions mean nothing? — understood themselves, surveyed their world, and found the wherewithal to

⁷ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, “The Antimission Movement in the Jacksonian South: A Study in Regional Folk Culture,” *Journal of Southern History* 36, no. 4 (1970), 511. Throughout this dissertation, I have used the term “Calvinist” and its variants as shorthand descriptions of Primitive Baptist theology, but like that most famous American Calvinist, Jonathan Edwards, the Primitives did not often cite John Calvin by name. Still, it is beyond dispute, I think, that Primitive theology drew upon on, and was refracted through, a series of Calvinist writers and doctrines. Simply examining the articles of faith for nearly any Primitive church will reveal, for instance, Calvinism’s famous five points. In this context, using “Reformed” or “Orthodox” or another brief theological denotation would lead to more confusion than the somewhat imprecise designation, “Calvinism.”

conduct a sustained campaign of resistance against the evangelical juggernaut. For the Primitives stood within and against the great religious movement of their time: the surge of evangelical Protestant revivals and institution-building that scholars refer to as the Second Great Awakening.⁸ The Primitives, too, had been forged in the fires of religious awakening, but they quickly found their identity as bitter opponents of missionaries, benevolent enterprises, Bible tract societies, Sunday schools, and the other accouterments of evangelical Protestantism. Long before evangelical Protestantism transformed the South into the Bible Belt, Primitives struggled to make the South reflect their own religious convictions. To know, then, about the Primitives' faith, their crises of belief, their organizational life, and their struggles with their former brethren will be to gauge the stakes of the Second Great Awakening. And to gauge these stakes is to learn why and how the Protestant temperament changed in the early decades of the nineteenth century.

But the Primitives' dual status — as both children and adversaries of evangelicalism — confounds us, and for good reason. Calvinists in an evangelical South, opponents of clerical authority who nevertheless refused to venerate individual “free will,” uneducated backcountry folk with an authoritative command of the King James Bible, vitriolic adversaries of “filthy lucre” who nevertheless worked feverishly to capitalize investments, the Primitive Baptists straddle, if not dissolve, the scholarly categories we use to make sense of the early republic's social life.

⁸ A note on terminology: I use the designation “Second Great Awakening” even though efforts to catalogue both its chronology and scope are notoriously imprecise. Still, it is possible to make useful observations even while acknowledging the concept's slipperiness. On the need to re-periodize American religious history, see, for example, James D. Bratt, “The Reorientation of American Protestantism, 1835-1845,” *Church History* 67, no. 1 (1998): 52-82. For a still-indispensable effort to bring some conceptual sense to our slippery term, see Donald G. Mathews, “The Second Great Awakening as an Organizing Process, 1780-1830: An Hypothesis,” *American Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (1969): 23-43.

As a perusal of the academic literature on Primitive Baptists makes clear, scholars have attempted to explain these dissenters from any number of directions — as products of a particular regional culture, as heirs to a centuries-long tradition of Calvinistic theology, as disaffected subsistence farmers. We have, on the one hand, studies that locate the Primitives' revolt in theological controversy. In this model, rows over doctrinal matters, such as unconditional election and salvation by grace alone, pushed the Primitives' dissent. Ideas became the key motivating factor. Other scholars, however, seize upon the Primitives' rural roots, their apparent provincialism, their contempt for paper money, and their fear of bureaucracy as signs that the anti-missions controversy was caused by worldly affairs: economics, social class, even politics. This second model shows how even religious rebellions are caused by larger social forces. The debate here is no doubt familiar, although the particulars, here as elsewhere, may at first be alien. Why do religions exist? What functions do they serve? Do they legitimate social hierarchies or destabilize them? Indeed, the argument over causation in the Primitive Baptist case parallels similar disputes between historians of the antebellum market revolution and religious awakenings.⁹ The questions are at once invigorating and enervating, for though the quality of debate has been high, the discussion remains deadlocked.

There has been, of course, a third historiographic response to the Primitives — namely, to avoid them. Many histories do not mention them at all or mention them only

⁹ See Charles Sellers' landmark synthesis and the separate volume of commentary, especially the essays by Daniel Walker Howe and Richard Cawardine, that was published several years later. Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Melvyn Stokes and Stephen Conway, eds., *The Market Revolution in America: Social, Political, and Religious Expressions, 1800-1880* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996). Howe has become Sellers' fiercest critic. See *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

in passing or treat them as unproblematic members of a larger Baptist denomination or evangelical movement. Such avoidance is troubling, though often understandable given both the immense diversity of American Protestantism and Primitives' comparatively small numbers. But the upshot of this "approach" is that southern evangelicalism begins by implication to resemble the united front of some evangelicals' imaginations — an inevitable, unstoppable force — rather than a movement or movements rife with divisions.¹⁰

There is, I think, a way out of these impasses, or, at least, a way forward. And the answer, such as it is, lies in a place where answers, indeed certainty of any kind, find little comfort. If we look more closely at the Primitives' personal crises, their persistent doubts about the status of their own souls, we may find a way to connect their existential struggles with their formal religious dissent and their still-obscure place in the nascent capitalist market. How can this be? Why locate the engine of historical change in the fluttering of faith and the trembling of temperament when historical common sense tells us that larger, impersonal social forces drive sweeping change? If nothing else, a psychologically rich history will finally give us a thorough understanding of the Primitives' distinct worldview. But a growing body of scholarship in sociology, anthropology, psychology, philosophy, and history indicates that we will find still more. These scholars suggest that what we variously refer to as the psyche, the emotions, or the self are the hinges on which the doors of history swing. Sociologists and social historians, for instance, tell us that class resistance is often motivated not by rational perceptions of class interests but by emotional, sometimes non-rational, perceptions of threat to everyday habits, ways of life, or "folk" cultures.¹¹ Feminist

¹⁰ See the historiographic section at the end of this chapter for more discussion along these lines.

¹¹ Craig Calhoun, *The Question of Class Struggle* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

historians and students of sentimentalism have demonstrated the political import of private life.¹² And cultural historians have shown how changes in manners, social comportment, and everyday behavior have powerfully affected the social and political order.¹³ In sum, we have good reason to think that the realm of human experience we call “the emotions” is the place where social forces and subjectivity mix, each thus shaping the other. The Primitive Baptists — a people beset by doubt, a community of believers engaged in constant anguished discussion about their own minds — provide an especially compelling case study. Their rise and decline will tell us much about how religion came to the once-secular South, how it took on the evangelical shape with which we are today still familiar, and how it functions in a burgeoning capitalist economy.

Interpreting the Primitive Baptist past poses problems and possibilities. In both published and unpublished accounts, believers rendered their experiences in vivid detail. The devil appeared before them. Trees threatened to explode. Voices whispered things ominous and providential. I analyze these accounts the way any cultural historian does: I look for patterns, for genre conventions, for illuminating details that give us a sense of how Primitive Baptists organized experience. This level of analysis provides something like a group portrait.

But my work also seeks to do more. I provide a layered analysis whose focus on emotions and selfhood includes discussions about the links and cleavages between

¹² See, for example, Sara Maza, *Private Lives and Public Affairs: The Causes Célèbres of Prerevolutionary France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

¹³ John F. Kasson, *Rudeness & Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990). Kasson draws on the work of sociologist Norbert Elias. See Elias, *The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners*, (New York: Urizen Books, 1978). William Reddy, a cultural historian of France, proposes a synthetic approach to the history of emotions in his *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

individual personality and collective belief systems. In this enterprise, I have been aided by certain psychological anthropologists and historians whose work provides a meaningful account of the relationship between culture and motivation.¹⁴ This theoretical approach accepts what we take to be common sense, namely that cultural forms, such as sermons or parades, have public meanings and that the analyst's job is to make those meanings legible. But historians must deepen their descriptions of the daylight workings of culture by acknowledging finally that "symbolic forms existing on the cultural level get created and recreated through the minds of people."¹⁵ Meaning, then, is not public. Or, at least, not just public. We find it, instead, in the constant dialogue between the psychic and the cultural, the dialogue that is, as Gananath Obeyesekere explains, the work of culture.

My work follows these premises, but I have often found contemporary psychological terminology distracting and, at times, inapplicable to the lives of antebellum believers. I have, therefore, turned to historians, such as John Corrigan and William Reddy, whose work on emotions offers compelling examples of how to analyze psychological processes while remaining faithful to the historical contexts in which particular emotions were

¹⁴ Nancy Chodorow and Gananath Obeyesekere are among a group of psychoanalytically informed scholars working in anthropology, history, and sociology who have used cross-cultural research to test and revise psychoanalytic theory, to strip it of its sexism and ethnocentrism, and to show how it still remains relevant today. See Nancy J. Chodorow, *The Power of Feelings: Personal Meaning in Psychoanalysis, Gender, and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999); Gananath Obeyesekere, *The Work of Culture: Symbolic Transformation in Psychoanalysis and Anthropology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990). Several historians have also usefully applied psychoanalytic theories to historical materials. See John Demos, *Entertaining Satan: Witchcraft and the Culture of Early New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); Lyndal Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (London: Routledge, 1994). Psychologically rich work need not be bound by Freud's science. I have benefitted, in particular, from the work of "person-centered" ethnography which seeks to show "how the individual's psychology and subjective experience both shapes, and is shaped by, social and cultural processes." For an overview of this approach see Douglas Hollan, "Development in Person-Centered Ethnography," in *The Psychology of Cultural Experience*, eds. Carmella C. Moore and Holly F. Mathews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 48-67.

¹⁵ Obeyesekere, xix. For similar sentiments, see Hollan, "Development in Person-Centered Ethnography."

constructed.¹⁶ These historians have helped me focus on the Primitives' own emotional vocabularies, their use of emotionally weighted rhetoric, and the important – and often fraught – relationship between such emotional expression and formal theology. As seen in this dissertation, the end result is, I hope, a history with a particular theoretical influence rather than one driven by a particular theoretical model.

Chapter one examines nineteenth-century Baptist histories as records of group identity. By reading denominational, associational, and church histories as imaginative documents, the chapter shows how these works crafted and sustained the two clashing groups identities – one missionary, the other “primitive” or anti-missionary – that lay at the center of the nineteenth-century Baptist schism. Each side drew its idealized self-portrait against a backdrop teeming with invidious caricatures of their opponent. These stereotypes notions of self and other lived in such perfect symbiosis that for Baptists on either side of the schism, it often seemed unimaginable that such different groups of believers had shared church pews only years earlier. In this way, stereotype became the schism's most enduring legacy.

After this discussion of group-identity formation, we move in chapter two to the making of the Primitive Baptist self at the level of the individual. This chapter uses a series of individual portraits to argue that the Primitive Baptist self was fundamentally an uncertain one, that such uncertainty manifested itself in a variety of ways, that such manifestations were firstly emotional experiences that could be linked to – but were not identical with – Calvinist theology, that such emotional experiences catalyzed the Primitive

¹⁶ John Corrigan, *Business of the Heart: Religion and Emotion in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Reddy, *Navigation of Feeling*.

Baptist movement both by binding Primitives to each other and by serving as the raw material that Primitives projected onto their missionary enemies.

Chapter three uses two case studies to show how uncertain Primitive Baptist selves navigated the currents of the antebellum marketplace. Primitive Baptists described missionaries and their backers as well-heeled mercenaries who carried with them an arrogant bearing and a corrupt “do and live” gospel.¹⁷ Many historians, in turn, have interpreted such bombast as a sure sign of the Primitives’ poverty or plain-folk status and, therefore, have concluded class resentment lay beneath the Primitives’ apparently religious concerns. By contrast, this chapter argues that, for Primitives, the antebellum marketplace, its terminology, and its attendant phenomena — panics, “revolutions,” currency crises, etc. — are best understood as cultural resources, though ones the Primitives were not always conscious of mining.

Chapter four leaps ahead to the mid-twentieth century and falls back to the seventeenth. I argue that an Old Baptist feeling, or “lonesome sound,” rooted in the folkways of dissenting Protestantism seeped into modern American culture through the singing of old-time musician Roscoe Holcomb (an Old Regular Baptist) and bluegrass legend Ralph Stanley (a Primitive Baptist). Holcomb’s emergence during the postwar folk revival and Stanley’s long career as well as his more recent stardom mark the strange eruption of a distinctly Calvinist mood in the nation’s popular culture long after Calvinism itself — at least as Old Baptists have defined it — had ceased being a significant religious force.

¹⁷ Cushing Biggs Hassell and Sylvester Hassell, *History of the Church of God, From the Creation to A.D. 1885; Including Especially the History of the Kehukee Primitive Baptist Association* (Middletown, NY: Gilbert Beebe's Sons, 1886; reprint, Conley, GA.: Old School Hymnal, 1973), 748 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

I am mindful of many of this dissertation's imperfections even if, inevitably, I remain blind to others. Among the work's venial sins is one, I fear, that to some readers may seem mortal, and that is the fact that in the pages that follow I do not thoroughly engage the subject of race. This is a curious — but I hope not inexplicable — omission for a dissertation examining religion in the old South. Since the 1970s, groundbreaking histories of southern religion have either focused on African Americans' religious worlds or emphasized the biracial character of the region's churches.¹⁸ My work, then, might at first glance appear to be one of those old-fashioned denominational histories — the kind that dominated our field in the middle decades of the twentieth century and, in retrospect, seem theoretically unsophisticated. I do not think that is the case, but I will let the ensuing chapters carry that argument.

In the meantime, let me explain the cursory treatment of race here but how, in future research, the subject will play a more significant role. Firstly, Primitive Baptist church records confirm many of the findings — both significant ones and those more mundane — of more specialized studies. In Primitive Baptist churches in the South, one finds, for instance, that mix of fellowship and coercion that also marked life on the plantation. Antebellum Primitive Baptist churches included free people of color and the enslaved, both groups of whom were confined to separate “galleries.”¹⁹ African Americans

¹⁸ Donald G. Mathews, ““We Have Left Undone Those Things Which We Ought to Have Done”: Southern Religious History in Retrospect and Prospect,” *Church History* 67, no. 2 (1998): 305-325.

¹⁹ Black and white members occasionally met in church on separate days, though white members refused to leave the African Americans unsupervised. See, for example, Tarboro Primitive Baptist Church Record Book, 2 May 1829, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University.

were admitted as members after relating their experience of grace.²⁰ Churches sometimes licensed black members to preach but such “liberties” were expected to be enjoyed only in delivering God’s word to fellow African Americans and not to the church as a whole. White members sought to control black members’ religious experiences on occasion by compelling their attendance in church, limiting their outbursts during worship, or monitoring their meetings outside of church.²¹ Several churches excommunicated white members who were illegally slave trading.²² And of course regular church attendance seems not to have tempered some masters’ enthusiasm for the lash.²³

What remains frustratingly opaque are black Primitive Baptist religious experiences of the kind examined most closely in chapters two and three. That is to say, the density of experience yielded up in the published and unpublished writings of white Primitive Baptists during the antebellum period does not have an analogue among African American Primitives. Nor are there original “hidden transcripts” to be found when one reads against the grain of the public record.²⁴

These findings (or lack thereof) mean that this dissertation remains relatively silent on African American religious and emotional life in the antebellum Primitive Baptist

²⁰ Morattock Primitive Baptist Church Records, 20 October 1832, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

²¹ Skewarkey Baptist Church Record Book, 7 November 1829; Frying Pan Springs Church Record Book, 11 May 1833, Primitive Baptist Library; Bush Arbor Primitive Baptist Church Records, June 1827, Primitive Baptist Library.

²² Bush Arbor Primitive Baptist Church Records, August 1835; Linches Creek Church Record Book, n.d., 141, Primitive Baptist Library; Gilliam's Primitive Baptist Church Record Book, 16 April 1836, North Carolina Baptist Historical Collection, Wake Forest University.

²³ Cushing Biggs Hassell, *Auto-Biography of C. B. Hassell* (n.p.: 1840?), 88, Cushing Biggs Hassell Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

²⁴ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

church, but they do not indicate that further silence is a necessity. After emancipation, black Primitives, like the black religious across the South, left the churches of their former masters to form their own. From these newly independent churches and associations, we have a substantial historical record that remains ripe for investigation. This is the source base I plan to use in future research on the lived experience of Calvinism among black Primitives and the relationship of that experience to the larger question of the viability of John Calvin's theology among African Americans. For it is a given among historians of the slave South, that Calvinism had little, if any, purchase among the enslaved,²⁵ that slaves may have employed Calvinistic language but were in practice Arminian²⁶, that Primitive worship, in particular, was simply too reserved to appeal to African Americans,²⁷ and that the doctrines of predestination were invariably arms of the status quo.²⁸ The post-emancipatory founding of black Primitive Baptist churches would seem at the very least to complicate these broad-brush assumptions. And if we have learned anything from the last generation's worth of study of African American religious beliefs, it is that slaves had no problem understanding the gospel's leveling powers (and Calvinism just as much as

²⁵ Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), 287.

²⁶ Mechal Sobel, *Trabelin' On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979), 244.

²⁷ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *The Shaping of Southern Culture: Honor, Grace, and War, 1760s-1890s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 112.

²⁸ Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 171. The outstanding exception to the assumption of African Americans' aversion to Calvinism is Erskine Clark, *Our Southern Zion: A History of Calvinism in the South Carolina Low Country, 1690-1990* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1996).

Arminianism can be a leveling power) even if their masters remained captives of a constricted view of the Word.²⁹

The Good Old Paths: The Historiographic Context

Any history of the Primitive Baptists must begin with the group's own histories. And of these surely Cushing Biggs and Sylvester Hassell's *History of the Church of God, From the Creation to A.D. 1885* is the most important.³⁰ Written by two church elders, this book frames Primitive Baptist history as story beginning with apostolic church and running through and past the formal split with missionary Baptists that commenced in the 1820s. Soon after its publication, other Primitive Baptist writers penned a series of smaller histories that focused not on Primitive Baptists as a whole but on a particular church or regional association.³¹ These more narrowly cast studies paid particular attention to the Primitive Baptists' exodus from the national Baptist movement over the Primitives' fight

²⁹ Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977).

³⁰ Hassell and Hassell, *History of the Church of God*. For an earlier but less-influential work with a similar approach, see Benjamin Griffin, *History of the Primitive Baptists of Mississippi, From the First Settlement by the Americans. Up to the Middle of the XIXth Century; Containing a Brief Allusion to the Course, Doctrines, and Practice of the Christian Church From Jerusalem to America; Also, the Doctrine and Practice of Modern Missionaries, From the Days of Andrew Fuller, and a Brief Notice of D. Benedict's Late History Of The Baptists; Concluded With an Address to the General Reader* (Jackson, MS: Barksdale and Jones, 1853).

³¹ See, for example, Jesse A. Ashburn, *History of the Fisher's River Primitive Baptist Association From its Organization in 1831 to 1904* (Laurel Folk, VA: F.P. Branscome, 1905). There are also modern examples of this genre: Wiley W. Sammons, *Identity of the True Baptist Church: Doctrine, Precept & Practice From 1701-1971 in West Tennessee, North Carolina, and Alabama* (Collierville, TN, 1971).

against home and foreign missions, Sunday schools, Bible tract societies, and supra-local benevolent organizations.³²

Taking their cue from the Primitive Baptist-authored histories, academic historians have concentrated on the split and the anti-missions impulse that fueled it. In a 1951 article in the *Baptist Chronicle*, I.D. Hudgins rooted anti-missionism in the economic panics of 1819 and 1837.³³ For Hudgins, the missions controversy was a family squabble between Baptists. Gaylord Albaugh dissented. In a brief encyclopedia entry, Albaugh described the fight against missions as a campaign that drew its spiritual soldiers from the ranks of many different Protestant denominations.³⁴ Two decades later, Byron Cecil Lambert followed Albaugh's lead. Lambert's dissertation described anti-missionism as a "common attitude" shared by Baptists and Campbellites, deists and frontier Methodists. In the vein of traditional intellectual history, Lambert's work was a study of ideas and the men who inhabited them.³⁵

A later generation of scholars decided to look elsewhere – to region, economics, politics, and culture – for ways to explain the rise of Primitive Baptists and anti-missionism. Foremost among the studies that located causation outside the realm of ideas was Bertram

³² Henry Sheets, *A History of the Liberty Baptist Association From its Organization in 1832 to 1906, Containing Much History Incidentally Connected With This Body; Also There is Presented Quite an Extended Account of the "Split" in Baptist Ranks Showing Who are the "Primitive Baptists," Together with Side-lights on the "Split"* (Raleigh, NC: Edwards and Broughton, 1907). J.B. White, *A Statement of the Causes That Led to the Division of the Walnut Grove Primitive Baptist Church* (n.p.: n.p., 1913?).

³³ Ira Durwood Hudgins, "The Anti-Missionary Controversy Among Baptists," *The Chronicle* 14, no. 4 (1951): 147-63.

³⁴ Gaylord P. Albaugh, "Anti-Missionary Movement in the United States," *An Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Vergilius Ferm (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1945), 27-28.

³⁵ Byron Cecil Lambert, *The Rise of the Anti-Mission Baptists: Sources and Leaders, 1800-1840* (New York: Arno Press, 1980).

Wyatt-Brown's "The Antimission Movement in the Jacksonian South: A Study in Regional Folk Culture."³⁶ Anti-missionism, Wyatt-Brown contended, pitted intransigent, largely rural, overwhelmingly poor subsistence farmers against their social betters: town-dwelling merchants and the occasionally religious planter. The fight was not without its theological dimensions, but sectional and social factors carried the day. Indeed, anti-missionism's sectional character — its southernness — represented, according to Wyatt-Brown, "the persistent southern struggle to preserve old values in an alien, changing, and often self-righteous world."³⁷ In 2001, Wyatt-Brown revisited his early essay on anti-missionism. His newly augmented thesis continued to describe Primitive Baptists as quintessentially southern, but he further explained their movement as one bound together by shaming rituals and motivated by a disgust with the honor codes of the southern elite.³⁸ More skeptical about such sweeping generalizations was T. Scott Miyakawa, whose work suggested that Primitive Baptists and the other opponents of missions belonged to a particularly Jacksonian reaction against the dislocations imposed by the rising capitalist market. In Miyakawa's framework, the anti-missionists' religious arguments "were essentially... rationalizations after the fact" of economic change.³⁹ Miyakawa's contemporary, William W. Sweet, argued along the same lines: missions opponents, Primitive Baptists among them, developed their theological remedies only after suffering from economic ailments

³⁶ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "The Antimission Movement in the Jacksonian South."

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 529.

³⁸ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *The Shaping of Southern Culture: Honor, Grace, and War, 1760s-1890s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 106-135.

³⁹ T. Scott Miyakawa, *Protestants and Pioneers: Individualism and Conformity on the American Frontier* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 154.

and cultural deficiencies.⁴⁰ In a recent work of institutional history, John G. Crowley takes a position much closer to Wyatt-Brown's. Looking at Primitive Baptists in the wiregrass South, Crowley, ever mindful of the anti-missionists' theological positions, still concludes that the missions controversy represented Primitive Baptists' "reaction to the forces of the Jacksonian era and to entry into the region of a second wave of settlers with more money and social standing" than they enjoyed.⁴¹

Since the publication of Wyatt-Brown's brief in 1970, a new array of scholars has searched for different explanations for the genesis of the Primitive Baptists. In Keith Burich's study of the antebellum Baptist ministry, professionalism, rather than class, became the key cause of the Baptist schism. What Wyatt-Brown construed as an economic rift, Burich argued, was, in fact, an argument between different generations of clergy over the control of local churches.⁴² Of class conflict, there was precious little. Sandra Hayslette has taken a more qualified position. In her work on Edgecombe County, North Carolina, Hayslette found little evidence of religious identification based upon class lines. But she included a battery of caveats: Primitive Baptists composed the overwhelming majority of Edgecombe County's Baptist population, the records that would unequivocally establish the socio-economic status of the county's Baptists do not exist, and, finally, class rhetoric, if not outright class conflict, colored the schism. But Hayslette's most important contribution has been her attention to the gendered language Primitive Baptist leaders

⁴⁰ William W. Sweet, ed., *The Baptists: 1783-1830: A Collection of Source Material* (New York: Cooper Square, 1964).

⁴¹ John G. Crowley, *Primitive Baptists of the Wiregrass South: 1815 to the Present* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), xii.

⁴² Keith Robert Burich, "The Primitive Baptist Schism in North Carolina: A Study of the Professionalization of the Baptist Ministry," M.A. thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1973.

used to warn their followers about what they saw as the missionaries attempts to upset the ecclesiastical and sexual order.⁴³ A recent study brings us nearly full circle. James Mathis also looked at the Primitive Baptists' birth in the early nineteenth century where doctrinal and theological issues, he argued, took precedence over political, sectional, economic, and social concerns.⁴⁴

While historians puzzled over the Primitive Baptists' origins, anthropologists and folklorists struggled to explain the Primitives' strange persistence in the modern world. The most complete ethnographic study to emerge from these efforts was James Peacock and Ruel Tyson's *Pilgrims of Paradox*. Informed by both Weber and Durkheim, Peacock and Tyson's work described a community of believers balancing doctrinal prescriptions with everyday realities.⁴⁵ Howard Dorgan has also turned his attention to Appalachian folk religions, particularly the region's surfeit of Baptist sects, the Primitives among them.⁴⁶ Beverly Patterson produced the first published study of Primitive Baptist hymnody, *The Sound of the Dove*.⁴⁷ And Deborah Vansau McCauley, though a historian, took an

⁴³ Sandra D. Hayslette, "Missions, Markets, and Men: A Baptist Contest of Values in Tarboro, North Carolina, 1800-1835," M.A. thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1995.

⁴⁴ James Rhett Mathis, "'Can Two Walk Together Unless They Be Agreed?': The Origins of the Primitive Baptists, 1800-1840," Ph.D. diss., University of Florida, 1997. Also see Mathis's recent book, *The Making of the Primitive Baptists: A Cultural and Intellectual History of the Antimission Movement, 1800-1840* (New York: Routledge, 2004). A second recent dissertation, though purportedly about identity, also dwells almost exclusively on points of Calvinist doctrine. See Jeffrey Wayne Taylor, "Self-Definition in the Formation of the Primitive Baptist Movement as Expressed in Their Three Major Periodicals, 1832-1848," Ph.D. diss., Baylor University, 2000.

⁴⁵ James L. Peacock and Ruel W. Tyson, Jr., *Pilgrims of Paradox: Calvinism and Experience Among the Primitive Baptists of the Blue Ridge* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989.)

⁴⁶ Howard Dorgan, *Giving Glory to God in Appalachia: Worship Practices of Six Baptist Subdenominations* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987); *The Old Regular Baptists of Central Appalachia: Brothers and Sisters in Hope* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989); and *In the Hands of a Happy God: The "No-Hellers" of Central Appalachia* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997).

⁴⁷ Beverly Bush Patterson, *The Sound of the Dove: Singing in Appalachian Primitive Baptist Churches* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995).

ethnographic approach to the subject. To McCauley, Primitive Baptists should be seen as practitioners of an Appalachian “mountain religion” that cuts across Protestant denominational lines and has deep cultural roots in Scots-Irish revivalism and German Pietism.⁴⁸ In a similar vein, several scholars have confronted the durability of the primitive impulse in American Christianity. Richard T. Hughes and C. Leonard Allen’s *Illusions of Innocence*, though it has little to say about Primitive Baptists, is an important reminder of the strong pull exerted by real and imagined Christian pasts.⁴⁹ Hughes’s two edited collections, *The American Quest for the Primitive Church* and *The Primitive Church in the Modern World*, plow similar ground in order to reap equally stimulating insights.⁵⁰

This dissertation also depends upon a more sweeping, more general literature on antebellum Protestantism. Of the earlier synthetic works, William G. McLoughlin’s were perhaps most important, though not the most southern. McLoughlin described the Second Great Awakening as “a period of fundamental social and intellectual reorientation of the American belief-value system, behavior patterns, and institutional structure.”⁵¹ McLoughlin’s findings were in line with his era’s generally positive assessment of the Awakening and its most public manifestation, the revival. Perry Miller’s exuberance is noteworthy though hardly atypical: “[T]he dominant theme in American from 1800 to

⁴⁸ Deborah Vansau McCauley, *Appalachian Mountain Religion: A History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995).

⁴⁹ Richard T. Hughes and C. Leonard Allen, eds., *Illusions of Innocence: Protestant Primitivism in America, 1630-1875* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

⁵⁰ Richard T. Hughes, ed., *The American Quest for the Primitive Church* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988); Hughes, ed., *The Primitive Church in the Modern World* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995).

⁵¹ William G. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform: An Essay on Religion and Social Change in America, 1607-1977* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 10.

1860 [was] the invincible persistence of the revival technique, coming to its resplendent triumph in the Third Awakening of 1857-58.”⁵²

A similar optimism buoys Nathan Hatch’s *The Democratization of American Christianity*, the title of which explains his fundamental argument. Hatch’s work on antebellum evangelicalism is probably the most influential of the last twenty years. *Democratization* was not focused on the South, per se, though the book had much to say about movements, such as the Disciples of Christ, the Methodists, and an array of African American denominations, that shaped the region. Hatch sympathized with the revivalists. They were, he argued, democratic insurgents whose claims that spiritual gifts resided within ordinary folk challenged religious, social, and economic hierarchies. Hatch’s democratized Christianity was “a liberating force” in a nation that “was becoming a democratic marketplace of equally competing individuals.” Not surprisingly, the Primitives’ critique of the evangelicals finds little sympathy here. He called their Calvinism a “rollicking irony.”⁵³

Moving south of the Mason-Dixon line, Donald Mathews’s *Religion in the Old South* provided an eloquent analysis of the transformative power of evangelical Christianity, particularly for its enslaved black converts, and Mathews was the first scholar to stress how long it took the evangelical movement to sweep the South.⁵⁴ Like Mathews’ book, Christine Heyrman’s *Southern Cross* attempted to explain how the South, once scorned by Northerners for its inhabitants’ impiety, became the Bible belt. In Heyrman’s story,

⁵² Perry Miller, *The Life of the Mind in America, From the Revolution to the Civil War* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1965), 7. The stream of literature on antebellum revivalism is never-ending. In the southern context, the place to start is still John B. Boles, *The Great Revival, 1787-1805: The Origins of the Southern Evangelical Mind* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1972).

⁵³ Hatch, *Democratization*, 11, 61, 178.

⁵⁴ Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*.

evangelical insurgents advocating spiritual equality and conversions by women and African Americans gradually accommodated themselves to dominant social mores.⁵⁵ Because her story is one of growing accommodation, the resisters – Primitive Baptists and others who challenged evangelical authority – receive little attention.

The Awakening's creeping conservatism in Heyrman's account should not surprise us. Intellectual, social, and church historians have agreed on precious little, it seems, except for the Second Great Awakening's pervasive moderation. Schism, dissent, disorder – these all vanished in modern church histories, which trumpeted, instead, a supposed Protestant ecumenism shortly after disestablishment. For Protestant scholars, such as H. Richard Niebuhr and Winthrop Hudson, this early evangelical moderation attested to their faith's historical propriety and, therefore, confirmed the righteousness and respectability of the faith's message for modern audiences.⁵⁶ Intellectual and social historians have reached similar conclusions, though they have couched their findings in ominous, rather than optimistic, tones. Richard Hofstadter, for example, determined that the revivals' "emotional upheavals took the place of the coercive sanctions of religious establishments."⁵⁷ The most powerful statement of the social-control thesis comes from Paul Johnson's 1978 *A Shopkeeper's Millennium*, which studied the early nineteenth-century revivals in upstate New York's "burned-over district." Whereas Hofstadter located revivalism's conservatism in its apparent appeasement of church authorities, Johnson framed the awakening in economic terms. Johnson's revivalism ushered in an ethos of

⁵⁵ Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (New York: Knopf, 1997).

⁵⁶ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (New York: Meridian Books, 1957); Winthrop Still Hudson, *The Great Tradition of the American Churches* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963).

⁵⁷ Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Knopf, 1963), 84.

spiritual conformity, sobriety, and repression that disciplined workers in the new market economy.⁵⁸

Though these various interpretive streams – the triumphalist accounts, the various forms of the social control thesis, the sweeping narratives of southern evangelicalism – differ sharply, they do share at least one significant trait in common. Antebellum evangelicalism, whether in the South or the North, whether viewed darkly or cheered enthusiastically, emerges from these accounts as a generally unified force that succeeded in conquering the American religious imagination.⁵⁹ Of late, some scholars have questioned that broad assumption. Philip Mulder has done historians a great service by reminding them that the antebellum evangelical movement remained riven by important denominational and theological divides.⁶⁰ And James Bratt has uncovered an anti-revivalist current in the era's religious life that cut across denomination and regional lines.⁶¹

The Primitive Baptists serve as a constant reminder of the southern evangelicalism's fractious roots. They, too, rode the anti-revivalist undercurrent that pulled at evangelicals

⁵⁸ Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978). Working in the southern context, Stephanie McCurry makes a similar point about the anti-democratic aspects of evangelical Christianity. See *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). An early iteration of the social control thesis appeared in Charles I. Foster, *An Errand of Mercy; the Evangelical United Front, 1790-1837* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1960).

⁵⁹ Mark Noll's recent history of American theology also stresses unity. Noll's thesis is that an "American synthesis" of Protestantism, republican political ideology, and commonsense moral reasoning prevailed in the United States from 1790-1860 and led to the nation's Christianization. See *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁶⁰ Philip N. Mulder, *A Controversial Spirit: Evangelical Awakenings in the South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁶¹ James D. Bratt, "Religious Anti-Revivalism in Antebellum America," *Journal of the Early Republic* 24, no. 1 (2004); Bratt, ed., *Antirevivalism in Antebellum America: A Collection of Religious Voices* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006).

and non-evangelicals, Calvinists and anti-Calvinists. And, finally, they also can be counted among a cross-denominational collection of anti-missionaries. But the fit, in each of the cases, remains awkward. The Primitives did not see themselves as part of an ecumenical movement against missions or revivals. Nor would they recognize the totalizing implications of the term, “evangelicalism.” Finally, their lives do not conform easily to the various version of the social control thesis nor do their reactionary tendencies have a place in Hatch’s model of liberal-capitalist democratizing movement. And so the Primitive Baptists remain “hard to know.” But that is what makes them so fascinating. That is why I wrote this dissertation.

CHAPTER ONE

“TELL IT TO THE GENERATION FOLLOWING”: HISTORY AND IDENTITY IN THE WAKE OF THE BAPTIST SCHISM

Walk about Zion, and go round about here: tell the towers thereof. Mark ye well her bulwarks, consider her palaces: that ye may tell it to the generation following.

– Psalm 48:12-13

Introduction

Lemuel Burkitt preached while the rain fell. The hot August sky had cracked open, drenching the thousands gathered in the churchyard to hear Burkitt’s sermon and feel “the powerful effect,” the “uncommon effect,” that only Christ’s grace could bring. The effects that day were obvious. Men and women sobbed, collapsed to the ground as if dropped by a bullet, begged their fellows to pray for them, cried out to God, “What must I do to be saved?” Others stood frozen in the hot rain, transfixed by Burkitt’s words, the holy company, and the legacy of two years of revival. For in North Carolina in 1803, God worked wonders. He sobered drunks and reformed liars, He made enemies into friends

and friends into converts, He stamped out jealousy and led the wayward home. And in a rain-soaked churchyard, His spirit moved.¹

For decades, Burkitt and his fellow Baptists had waited and worked for times like these. When, at last, the revival arrived and meetinghouses overflowed, they praised God for His mercy, testified to His power, and beseeched Him for a future filled with such glad tidings. “After a long and tedious night,” wrote Burkitt in the midst of the revival, “the sable curtains are withdrawn, the day has dawned, and the sun of righteousness has risen with healing on his wings.” Burkitt’s Baptists in North Carolina and Virginia, like so many Protestants in the young nation, read the signs: the revivals burning across America at the century’s beginning were, they believed, marks of spiritual progress and harbingers, they hoped, of a Christian millennium. Wrote Burkitt: “O! that He would continue his work until the whole world is brought into subjection to the peaceable reign of Christ.”²

Within a generation, however, enthusiasm turned to skepticism. For many Baptists in the churches stoked by Burkitt’s preaching, the once-familiar flames of revival looked now like “strange fire.” “Calm reflection,” a gift of time’s passage, revealed different truths and exposed grievous errors. By the late 1820s, skeptics viewed the 1802-1803 revival and others like it with alarm. Obscured within the blessed multitude who joined the visible church during those heady days were those who were “deceived and deceive[d] others.” The revivalists’ zeal had excited base “animal feelings” of those gathered to hear the gospel.

¹ Lemuel Burkitt and Jesse Read, *A Concise History of the Kehukee Baptist Association: From Its Original Rise to the Present Time* (Halifax, NC: A. Hodge, 1803), 138-155, quotes from 146, 141, 154.

² Ibid., 138, 154. As early as 1767, the churches within the bounds of the United (née Kehukee) Baptist Association “began earnestly to desire a revival of religion” and so set aside two days for fasting and prayer to God. The Association took similar measures in 1785 and, once again, ten years later (Ibid., 61, 75, 114-15). For the full sweep of the Great Revival, see John B. Boles, *The Great Revival, 1787-1805: The Origins of the Southern Evangelical Mind* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1972).

Led by such frantic guides, prospective converts lost their way: “human means” and religious “machinery” supplanted the Holy Spirit’s healing touch. For the latter-day doubters, the revivalistic excesses during the earliest years of the nineteenth century beckoned the wholesale religious treachery of their own day. What Lemuel Burkitt had described as progress, these later Baptist skeptics interpreted as the beginnings of decline. What Burkitt once assumed to be fidelity to God’s word was now seen as a step towards heresy.³

Baptist skeptics had dotted the ranks of the faithful for years, but they only crystallized into a movement by the late 1820s. During those years, they began referring to themselves as “Reformed” or “Old School” or “Primitive” Baptists, and as their various monikers indicate, they disavowed much of what passed for recent Baptist history.⁴ These Old School Baptists insisted on their own antiquity and chastised fellow Baptists for confusing modern benevolent and missionary organizations with the church and for adopting the “new measures” of the day, a term friend and foe alike used to describe the techniques of emotional excitement deployed by modern revivalists.⁵ While the Primitives

³ The quotes come from the 1832 Black Rock Address, a formal declaration of separation issued by a group of Maryland Primitive Baptists. See W. J. Berry, ed., *The Kehukee Declaration and Black Rock Address: With Other Writings Relative to the Baptist Separation between 1825-1840*. Gilbert Beebe, *a Biographical Sketch* (Elon College, NC, 1974), 22, 21. Cushing Biggs Hassell and Sylvester Hassell, *History of the Church of God, from the Creation to A. D. 1885; Including Especially the History of the Kehukee Primitive Baptist Association* (Middletown, NY: Gilbert Beebe's Sons, 1886; reprint, Conley, GA.: Old School Hymnal Co., 1973), 717 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

⁴ “Primitive Baptists” became the label these believers most often used to identify themselves, although many also retained a fondness for the “Old School” moniker. In both respects, I follow their usage. For more nomenclatural insight, see Jerry Newsome, “‘Primitive Baptists’: A Study in Name Formation or What’s in a Word,” *Viewpoints: Georgia Baptist History* 6 (1978): 63-70.

⁵ Revivalists of all stripes used the new measures, though they have been most closely associated with Charles Grandison Finney, who, in 1835, spelled out both his revival techniques and anti-Calvinist theology in *Lectures on the Revival of Religion*. See Charles Grandison Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, ed. William G. McLoughlin (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960).

railed against an array of Protestants, they engaged most often with their opponents within Baptist ranks. Primitives described these people in sweeping terms as “new school” or “missionary” Baptists, labels that did not correspond to a particular sect but rather evoked those believers’ association with what Primitives considered the objectionable traits of modern evangelicalism, namely, its innovations in doctrine and its devotion to organized benevolent causes, such as the emergent missions movement.⁶

In the wake of the schism, each group of Baptists produced preacher-historians who turned to the past for all the usual reasons: for comfort, for justification, for curiosity, for the preservation of memories that might serve as a guides to the present. Among the many functions of the accounts crafted by these preacher-historians was creation of a story of origins for each side in this intra-denominational dispute. Believers could read these accounts and learn something of how their group came to be. These rather different missionary and Primitive chronicles appeared around mid-century – several decades after the schism – but each side’s writers drew from a shared Baptist past. That shared past was most carefully reconstructed in a third set of histories, written in the early 1800s by chroniclers poised on the cusp of two different eras in Baptist history. These early-nineteenth century chroniclers wrote during the series of revivals that were the most dramatic sign of Baptists’ changing fortunes. While these books reflected that era’s newfound confidence, the writers dwelled extensively on the lean times of the eighteenth

⁶ Throughout the dissertation I generally follow the Primitive Baptists’ terminology because it reflects the way they bifurcated antebellum America’s heterogeneous religious landscape. However, where appropriate, I discuss various inter- and intra-denominational distinctions. Needless to say, the Primitives’ terminology shoves together under one umbrella an array of Baptist sects whose members might have been amused or, most probably, outraged to be standing shoulder-to-shoulder with those whose beliefs they considered heterodox. And yet the Primitives’ terminology was not entirely inaccurate. In antebellum America, many Baptists and, indeed, many Protestants, embraced a new ethos that was revivalistic, missionary, and leery of Calvinist theology.

century when persecution and disorder reigned. This shared past of both persecution and incipient triumph offered missionary and Primitive chroniclers the raw materials for their own distinct tales of Baptists' deep history and their more recent conflicts.

What is most remarkable about the early-nineteenth century Baptist histories is their optimism. Within the world conjured up by these works, there is a consistent movement from confusion to certainty, from chaos to order, from fragmentation to unity, from darkness to light. To be sure, the journey charted by the early Baptist historians never comes across as a leisurely tour through an uncomplicated landscape. Instead, hardship, deprivation, persecution, and doubt litter the way, but these trials were mere prelude. Writing in the midst of the early nineteenth-century revivals, writers such as William Fristoe, Lemuel Burkitt, and Jesse Read interpreted their ancestors' struggles as signs of providence. They brandished their ancestors' scars, for the old wounds symbolically bound them to their Savior who, too, suffered before rising. The prior struggle only confirmed the present triumph.

The confidence that had seeped into the early-nineteenth century accounts soon flooded Baptist discourse. In histories of the sect written in mid-century, missionary Baptist writers displayed their faith in progress and their devotion to a God who matched their aspirations. These were romantic tales where a Baptist phalanx conquered adversity and subdued chaos. Baptists' recent history — their growth in numbers, their benevolent efforts, their initiatives to formally educate the laity and the ministry, and especially their foreign and domestic missionary work — became the logical consequence of a divine plan to save the world. To these forward-looking missionary Baptists, their Primitive brethren,

who opposed all that they held dear, were an obstinate people whose objections to progress could only stem from ignorance and a small-minded fear of the future.

Surveying the same historical landscape as their missionary brethren, Primitive Baptists spied deception and error where others had found glory and progress. Works by Primitive Baptist writers took a tragic and, in some cases, bitterly sarcastic turn. Primitive chroniclers often mocked the missionary Baptists' optimism and what they saw as their insouciant certainty of salvation. When mockery would not suffice, Primitives accused missionary Baptists of betraying their faith for reasons of pride, envy, or greed. Old heroes also populated Primitives' tales of the Baptist past, but these men persevered rather than triumphed. And in those lonely luminaries of days gone by, the Primitives' discovered themselves: yet another generation of Baptists, stretching back even to the apostolic church, who had to carry the faith through dark times. What made such tales particularly tragic and instructive was that the worst deceivers now emerged from Baptist meeting houses, not the Catholic Church, the Anglican establishment, or other familiar bastions of treachery.

We recognize these plots. They are conventional, trite even, and, therefore, we may be tempted to dismiss them as cloudy narrative strategies that obscure our view of the past as it really was. But such conventions should not frustrate us. The poetics of these seemingly bland accounts have much to tell us. The church and denominational histories nineteenth-century Baptists wrote were at once factual reports and symbolic narratives. Anyone who has perused these or similar texts — their pages blanketed with baptismal tallies, lists of preacher's names, and bare summaries of church meetings — can confirm the former description. But even these seemingly tedious details find themselves part of a

larger whole whose thematic qualities are revealing. Even the driest of these histories is a record of a people's self-understanding: who they were, how they came to be, what they believed, where they were headed. If, then, we consider Baptists' church, associational, and denominational histories as imaginative documents, if we read them not only for what their authors' wrote but for the ways in which they wrote, then we can begin to understand the two very different group identities – one missionary, the other “primitive” or anti-missionary – at the center of the nineteenth-century Baptist schism. We will see how these identities came to be, how they were sustained in the histories each side crafted, and how their competing notions of self and other lived in such perfect symbiosis that it often seemed unimaginable that such different groups of believers had shared church pews only years earlier.

The Shared Past

In the colonial South, Baptists found themselves estranged from the rituals of plantation society and persecuted by colonial authorities. Outsiders noticed appearances first. In Virginia's Piedmont, Baptists with “cut off” hair dressed plainly, refusing to don “cock't hatts” or other articles of clothing associated with gentry life.⁷ Their churches were rudely constructed outposts or, just as often, members' homes – a stark contrast to the more elaborate Anglican houses of worship that drew the allegiance of each parish's most powerful families. Even more than appearances, Baptists' rituals and beliefs set them apart from other colonial Christians. They insisted that their central rite be full-water immersion

⁷ Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 164.

(No sprinkling allowed.); that only adults were allowed to descend and then arise from this watery grave (No baptism for babies.); and, finally, that all baptisms needed to be preceded by the convert's experience of the saving grace of Jesus Christ (Without such an encounter one remained outside the beloved community.). Anglicans exacted a steep price from Baptist dissenters. Like all colonists in Virginia, Maryland, and the Carolinas, Baptists were required to attend and pay taxes to support the "established" Church of England. For non-compliance, Baptists faced fines, jailings, whippings, and beatings.⁸ Throughout the 1700s, Baptists' numbers remained small, but their presence nevertheless betokened a radical rupture in the region's gentry-dominated social life. By 1760, Baptists in colonial Virginia, at least, constituted what one historian describes as an "evangelical counterculture" revolting against both the Anglican religious establishment and the time-honored pleasures (hunting, drinking, horse racing, music-making) of the secular world.⁹

Even as they fended off Anglicans and pleasure-seeking planters, Baptists found their own ranks splintering. Consider North Carolina where three different Baptist sects sparred over matters profound and petty. The General Baptists, many of them settlers from England, arrived first. They preached a generous doctrine of general atonement, which held that Christ's death made salvation possible for everyone (if they would only choose it)

⁸ Despite Anglicans' often-rough treatment of religious dissenters, it is worth noting that the power of the church establishments in the southern colonies was often compromised by a lack of manpower: shortages of clergy were endemic.

⁹ Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790*, 159-177, quote from 164. Donald Mathews's work still makes the best case for understanding early evangelicalism in the South as a social movement. Mathews argues that Separate Baptists, in particular, radicalized that movement. See Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), especially 1-135. More recently, Philip Mulder has questioned whether such a movement existed at all. Mulder emphasizes the competition and tension among Baptists, Presbyterians, and Methodists in the early national period. See Philip N. Mulder, *A Controversial Spirit: Evangelical Awakenings in the South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

and not just for a limited number of predestined souls. Nor did these General Baptists require prospective members to publicly relate their conversion experience or submit to full-water immersion. A second Baptist sect called Regulars also traced their roots to England, but they espoused a “particular” rather than a “general” atonement. That is, in Calvinist fashion, they believed that Christ’s atonement on the cross did not make salvation available to all but, instead, saved only a predestined elect. The growth of Regular Baptist churches in North Carolina soon outpaced the halting progress made by the General Baptists, and by the 1760s Regular Baptist churches in New Jersey had dispatched preachers to the South on a successful campaign to reorganize many once-General churches along the Regulars’ “Calvinist scheme.”¹⁰ Meanwhile, a third clique of Baptists, the Separates, entered the fray. The notoriously spartan Separates scorned the Regular Baptists’ “superfluity of apparel.” They deemed the Regulars lax in doctrinal matters too, objecting to what they considered the Regulars’ willingness to admit converts without requiring a relation of their conversion experience.¹¹ For their part, the Regulars suspected the Separates of unreasonably hiding their true beliefs.¹²

For Baptists who had drifted into the rolling hills of Virginia and Carolina in the mid-1700s, it was not an auspicious start. Certainly, that’s what the nineteenth-century

¹⁰ Burkitt and Read, *Concise History of the Kehukee*, 32.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 38-39.

¹² William Fristoe, *A Concise History of the Ketocton Baptist Association: Wherein a Description Is Given of Her Constitution, Progress and Increase, the Intention in Associating, the Doctrines Holden by Her, Reasons for the Names of Regular and Separate Baptists, an Account of the Death of Sundries, the Constitution and Order of Churches, the Manner of Administering Baptism, of the Ordination of Ministers, Bounds of the Association, the Doctrines Preached, Providing for the Ministry, Annual Meetings, the Number of Ministers, of Persecution, the Mode of Redress, of Circular Letters, Objections to the Baptists Replied to, of Good Works, and of Her Civil Policy* (Staunton VA: William Gilman Lyford, 1808; reprint, San Antonio: Primitive Baptist Heritage Corporation, 2002), 22 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

descendants of these Baptist pioneers believed. Whether they were writing during the heady days of the Great Revival or during the fractious years following the denomination's split, nineteenth-century Baptist chroniclers of all stripes recalled their ancestors' struggles with a mix of horror, disappointment, and awe.

In Baptist histories and memoirs of those early years, tales of persecution abound. At times, the books read like catalogues of abuse. Verbal ridicule and threats of violence were standard fare. Interlopers shouted down Baptists preachers in mid sermon. Dogs were cast into the river to interrupt baptisms. Such ridicule easily turned to violence. Colonial authorities ripped Baptist elders from the stand and carried them to prison for preaching without licenses.¹³ Elder John Tanner received a thigh full of buckshot for baptizing a woman whose husband disapproved of the upstart sect.¹⁴ Club-wielding mobs set siege to churches, a miscreant brandished a gun at a preacher, and another mob rushed a meeting house, beating worshippers "so that the floor shone with sprinkled blood."¹⁵ And so it went. The examples were legion, and Baptist chroniclers took them down with a bookkeeper's efficiency.

When nineteenth-century Baptists recounted this violent past, they poured their ancestors' experiences into a familiar mold. The persecuted were to be admired because in their suffering they resembled Christ, and their injuries were to be carefully chronicled because the wounds formed a record — they were proof — that the current revivals were real and, in some sense, prophesied. Writing in 1808, William Fristoe, for instance, concluded

¹³ Ibid., 74-79.

¹⁴ Burkitt and Read, *Concise History of the Kehukee*, 55-57.

¹⁵ Fristoe, *Concise History of the Ketocton*, 73-74, quote from 74.

that the early Baptists' persecution was, in fact, responsible for their growth.¹⁶ Just as stories of Christ's patient torment on the cross attracted converts, the early American Baptists' trials must have earned them new followers, or so Fristoe surmised. Lemuel Burkitt and his co-author Jesse Read also availed themselves of this sturdy Christian model. Writing at roughly the same time as Fristoe, they praised the aforementioned Tanner for refusing to seek restitution, and they pointedly noted that instead of feeling angry or fearful when he was shot, Tanner "submitted to it patiently as *persecution* for Christ's sake."¹⁷ Primitive Baptists, too, patterned the Baptist past this way, declaring themselves startled, but happily so, that the endemic suffering of Baptists was "precisely the same in the modern eighteenth century as in the ancient first century."¹⁸

While the nineteenth-century chroniclers easily apprehended and admired the Christ-like suffering of their ancestors, they found the intra-denominational chaos and strife that plagued these same people to be a more difficult interpretive challenge. When the first wave of antebellum Baptist chroniclers gazed backward, they either downplayed their denomination's recent history of factionalism or admitted the disharmony only to the extent necessary to shoehorn it into a grand narrative of Christian progress. Such denial seems a corollary of the newfound unity borne of the revivals. Even for the notoriously fractious Baptists, disagreement and division were nearly impossible to countenance during the years immediately surrounding the Great Revival. This shift in both story and mood marked a significant departure from what had traditionally been the conventional Baptist

¹⁶ Ibid., 85.

¹⁷ Burkitt and Read, *Concise History of the Kehukee*, 57 (italics in the original).

¹⁸ Hassell and Hassell, *History of the Church of God*, 577.

narrative, a narrative featuring bloodied and imprisoned preachers, struggling but holy churches, and ruthless oppressors. Baptists with particularly keen historical imaginations traced their denominational roots well past a familiar figure like Roger Williams, connecting themselves instead to a series of little-known sects – the Waldenses, the Petrobrusians, the Hussites – that, they claimed, also practiced believer's baptism and were, therefore, Baptists in everything but name. But during the years of revival, this story of suffering and hiddenness lost some of its relevance. To make it comport with their present reality, the early-nineteenth century chroniclers downplayed it. These writers reduced the old narrative of persecution into an unfortunate, if necessary, prelude to their joyous present and smoothed the pitted surface of intra-Baptist conflict to reflect their own era of harmony.

Perhaps our best sense of this narrative strategy comes from Burkitt and Read, the two preachers mentioned above who in 1803 cowrote a history of their particular Baptist association, the Kehukee. Though primarily a catalogue of minutes, church enrollment figures, and doctrinal resolutions, Burkitt and Read's book tells us much about how turn-of-the-century Baptists understood their past and envisioned their future. A catalogue of minutiae, the book also works to situate the Kehukee Association's Baptists in the middle of a symbolic story about Christendom. The co-authors were themselves living testimony to the spirit of unity that pervaded the Kehukee and many other Baptist associations in the South beginning in the late 1700s. Both Burkitt and Read found their calling as preachers, but they first tended to flocks on different sides of the Baptist divide. Lemuel Burkitt, a Regular Baptist preacher, had led the movement to effect a union with Read's Separate

Baptists. To do this, Burkitt turned out from his churches anyone who had been baptized without first having a conversion experience. Satisfied that the churches under Burkitt's care were now sufficiently rigorous in their membership standards, the Separates joined with them and, in the spirit of unity, decided to rename the new conglomeration the "United Baptists." This union of 1787 had itself been preceded by what Burkitt and Read called, with a sense of historical significance, "the Reformation." The reformers, in this case, hailed from Philadelphia rather than Wittenberg or Geneva. Part of several waves of northern Baptists seeking common cause with their brethren in the southern colonies, the Philadelphia Baptists organized matters on "the Calvinist scheme." By 1765, they had convinced many Baptists in the South to do likewise. Across stretches of Virginia and North Carolina, these newly Calvinist churches called themselves the Kehukee Association.¹⁹ After the "Reformation" of 1765 and the union of 1787, old differences over doctrine and dress and the very means of salvation – differences that had divided southern Baptists into the ranks of Separates, Regulars, and General Baptists – were now seen simply as "imaginary conjectures," or, at worst, "obsolete" relics of an old time that could happily be "buried in oblivion."²⁰

Burkitt and Read's portentousness (They were writing about a new Reformation, after all.) clashed with their simultaneous effort to paint such momentous events as ordinary (Those old differences were simply "imaginary."). That thematic discord was the precipitate left behind as Burkitt and Read dissolved Baptists' bleak past into the emergent

¹⁹ Burkitt and Read, *Concise History of the Kehukee*, 32.

²⁰ Fristoe, *Concise History of the Ketocton*, 21 ("imaginary conjectures"); Burkitt and Read, *Concise History of the Kehukee*, 42 ("obsolete," "buried in oblivion").

logic of evangelical millennialism. Within a generation, Primitive Baptists would find such logic dubious. Even then, however, missionary Baptists, along with a growing phalanx of other evangelicals, found such logic irresistible, as natural as the new dawn Lemuel Burkitt had seen rising over the Carolina piedmont back in 1803.

Millennialism, Missions, and a New Baptist Ethos

Burkitt's Baptists were not alone. A similar spirit of optimism prevailed in evangelical precincts across the America and the wider Atlantic world. In Baptist and Methodist and Presbyterian churches, more and more sinners felt the Holy Spirit descend upon them. Just as their hearts were changed by God's touch, they believed that the world, too, might soon witness startling changes, among them the return of their Savior. There were the portents they knew: the rolling fires of revival, the suddenly swollen church rolls, the cataclysm of political revolution. And beneath these, the tectonic social and economic shifts that only later generations came to catalogue: increasing immigration, rapid westward expansion, the beginnings of a market revolution, the explosive growth of cities. Millennialism and, in particular, the belief that the Kingdom of God might soon be at hand, flourished in the soils watered by such torrents of change.²¹

The hothouse of revival seemed to ensure the continued growth of millennial hope. With glee, evangelicals tallied up the additions to God's flock. But the numbers, astounding as they were, told only part of the story. It was the intensity of the gatherings that drew the most attention: the weeping and groaning, the convulsions (the "jerks," as

²¹ Ruth H. Bloch, *Visionary Republic: Millennial Themes in American Thought, 1756-1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

they were called), the dramatic testimonies that revealed moments of instantaneous transformation. More than one convert recalled his days at a revival by comparing himself to a burning coal whose fire would not go out.²² There were other surprises as well, the child converts not least among them. Their piety commanded crowds and bespoke the dawning of a time of wonders.²³

These experiences of regeneration along with a pervasive sense of optimism became the emotional analogues to the theological changes that were both cause and effect of the awakenings. A new ethos stressing a keen hope for salvation and an incipient belief in the power of the human will to help bring about such change worked to push aside the old Calvinist emphasis on doubt and the fallenness of man. Though evangelicals were careful to maintain some distance between their beloved community and the secular world, millennial thought was no respecter of boundaries. Capacious and protean, it escaped the churches and camp meetings and happily ratified popular secular optimism in the wake of America's successful revolution.

Nevertheless, the "hopeful and roseate" feelings generated by millennialist expectations might have faded away had they not found concrete expression in evangelicals' fervent intent to sacralize the world.²⁴ As if to hasten Christ's return, evangelicals found new ways to yoke heaven to earth, and of all the reform movements to which antebellum

²² Quoted in Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 13.

²³ Jonathan Edwards was fond of noting revivals' "surprising" features, which he believed confirmed their divine origin. Later generations embraced Edwards's term, his search for God's hand in the revival process, and his particular fascination with the intense piety of child converts. See Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (New York: Knopf, 1997), 78-82.

²⁴ Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), 216-218, quote from 217; Robert H. Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

Baptists attached themselves, none figured so prominently as foreign and domestic missions cause. Missionary work channeled the revivals' enthusiasm outward, directing it first toward the frontier, where eager itinerants sought out Native Americans and unchurched whites, and then toward foreign lands where the heathen masses might finally be delivered from their misery. Missions galvanized the Baptist faithful in all sections of the young nation. Because the work was so momentous and the task so daunting, Baptist churches, which were notoriously jealous of their autonomy, even consented to the creation of the denomination's first large-scale extra-church bureaucracies. It was these new missionary societies that would transform weekly donations by the laity into a massive effort to save mankind in preparation for Christ's return. With only slight exaggeration, it can be said that the foreign and domestic missions cause was responsible for organizing Baptists as a denomination. The bureaucracy that sprung up to support their missionary work offered Baptists their first formal state- and nation-wide networks of communication and association. The novelty of this Baptist bureaucracy and the speed with which it was erected caused Baptists to look upon it with either admiration or dread.

From our vantage point, this enthusiasm seems unremarkable. Evangelicals seek converts; it is their nature. But for the first wave of missionary Baptist chroniclers — men like David Benedict and Robert Howell who came of age in the early 1800s just as Baptists' denominational and institutional growth surged — the missions cause was a new one and they interpreted it as a sign that their denomination had finally found its calling. In 1814, when American Baptists organized a national board to direct their missionary operations, the denomination found itself in the midst of a series of remarkable events. The late-

eighteenth century union had ushered in an era of intra-sect harmony where acrimony had once reigned. And the early-nineteenth century revivals had quickened seemingly barren churches and swollen the denomination's once-modest numbers.

Missionary Baptist chroniclers insisted that it was the worldwide missions crusade that secured these victories. The work's significance encouraged an endemically fractious people to "act in concert;" its results made missionary work Baptists' "favorite undertaking" and "greatest strength."²⁵ Indeed, by mid-century, it seemed clear to the first generation of missionary Baptist historians that their denomination's missionary efforts surpassed all successes enjoyed by Baptists in a history they often traced back to Jesus' day. A sustained, organized missionary enterprise, they argued, allowed Baptists to finally carry out Jesus' ancient instruction that his followers should "go ... into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature" and "teach all nations."²⁶ When missionary Baptists chroniclers gazed into the Baptist past, they realized that however noble their ancestors had been, however unjust their suffering and righteous their cause, those old Baptists' ability to carry out Christ's Great Commission had been hampered. A small sect subjected to persecution and stubbornly insistent on church autonomy could imitate Jesus' suffering but never effectively spread His gospel. Only a denomination able to shed such a past could emerge to spread Christ's gospel in the most effective way possible. Only a denomination like theirs had recently become could transform instruction into action, creed into deed. That old Baptist past of persecution and hiddenness was becoming a dim memory.

²⁵ David Benedict, *Fifty Years among the Baptists* (New York: Sheldon & Company, 1860), 183; George Winfred Hervey, *The Story of Baptist Missions in Foreign Lands: From the Time of Carey to the Present Date* (St. Louis: Chancy R. Barnes, 1884), xvii.

²⁶ These are versions of the Great Commission. See Mark 16:15 and Matthew 28:19.

The new missionary work required the establishment of a sturdy bureaucracy (modern missions needed “more *system*,” as the Baptist preacher Adiel Sherwood put it²⁷), but missionary Baptists typically framed their depiction of these corporate actions as a study in heroic individualism. The familiar account, which appeared in any number of missionary Baptist publications, went something like this: In 1812, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions dispatched two Congregational ministers to India. During their voyage, the two men experienced conversions of a kind and adopted Baptists’ creed and rituals. After several months on the subcontinent, one of these men, Luther Rice, returned to America. Like a latter-day Paul, Rice roamed the land urging Baptists churches traditionally jealous of their autonomy to band together to form a tiered network of local, state, and national missionary societies. In Richmond and Philadelphia and Fredericksburg and countless towns and hamlets in between, Rice’s efforts bore fruit. By the spring of 1814, the General Convention of the Baptist Denomination, a meeting with representatives from churches across the nation, endorsed Rice’s plans.²⁸ The account nestled Rice inside a Pauline mold that Christians often used to shape their hagiographies. Here he was: a lonely individual sojourning in strange lands (either India or the American backcountry); a traveler who, like Paul on the road to Damascus, experienced a startling conversion; an evangelist and a correspondent on an errand that succeeded despite letter to

²⁷ Adiel Sherwood, “The Identity of Primitive and Modern Missions: A Discourse,” *The Southern Baptist Preacher Or, Sermons by Living Baptist Ministers in the South* 1, no. 4 (1840): 63 (italics in the original).

²⁸ For a typical account of these events, see James B. Taylor, *Lives of Virginia Baptist Ministers*, 2nd ed. (Richmond: Yale & Wyatt, 1838), 433-435.

the editor, overwhelming odds. Charismatic, eloquent, and tireless, the “young apostle” convinced American Baptists that his mission was one that they ought to endorse.²⁹

Rice’s heroism did not last long. In the accounts crafted by the first wave of missionary Baptist historians, Rice quickly became a transitional figure, an individual who birthed a far-flung missionary network but who, ultimately, was not suited for the new bureaucratic era that he single-handedly ushered in. In the typical hagiographic mode Baptist writers had long used for their ministerial portraits, a story like Rice’s would end either in a conventional triumph like, say, the founding of a church, or martyrdom, which, after all, was simply a different kind of Christian victory. With Rice’s story, Baptist chroniclers deployed a new narrative arc. Consider, for example, David Benedict’s treatment of Rice. Benedict refused to allow Rice to bask in the glow of his missionary triumphs, and he gave his death only a glancing notice.³⁰ Instead, Rice’s story reached a sad denouement as the doughty missionary became a failed bureaucrat. We learn that soon after the denomination adopted his ambitious plans, Rice was beset by a series of “pecuniary embarrassments.”³¹ He misappropriated funds. He ran a seminary into debt.³² Benedict lamented Rice’s missteps, but he concluded with a kind of literary sigh that “this was the way things were managed in those [i.e., past] times.”³³ Benedict’s account described the emergence of an era of Baptist bureaucracy, where traditionally heroic figures such as

²⁹ Benedict, *Fifty Years*, 111-116, quote from 114.

³⁰ Ibid., 123. Benedict mentioned that the end of Rice’s “laborious, peculiar, and earthly career” came “in South Carolina, in 1836, at the age of fifty-three.”

³¹ Ibid., 118.

³² Ibid., 118-122.

³³ Ibid., 124.

Rice were easily subsumed beneath the denomination's new organizational machinery. Other chroniclers treated Rice in similar fashion, blaming him for "his lack of business sagacity" even as they honored his missionary efforts.³⁴

As the once-heroic Rice sank into a financial morass, missionary Baptist chroniclers trained their gaze on the new institutions — benevolent societies, missionary societies, Sunday schools and like — that folk heroes such as Rice helped bring into being. Describing the era of institution building — the "golden age" of Baptist history, as its admirers called it — required new character types and tropes. The preacher-heroes of yore no longer dominated the narratives of this new era. Writers might laud them, but neither did they flinch from chastising them for an assortment of managerial misdeeds. Indeed, the men — most of them preachers — running these institutions were, like Rice, subject to criticism their eighteenth-century forebears would not have recognized. Like grumpy managers, missionary Baptist chroniclers issued constant complaints about the disorganization and waste endemic to the new bureaucratic structures. They blamed the problems on a few "inside managers" who, like vain executives, droned on during meetings and drew too much money from the group's coffers.³⁵

The institutions themselves, at least as embodied in their motivating ideas, remained unscathed. Missionary Baptist writers invariably framed the institutions themselves as the embodiment of righteousness and the logical expression of Baptists' calling. Instead of the noble but "sporadic" efforts of earlier itinerants, the modern,

³⁴ Hervey, *Baptist Missions*, 193-194. James B. Taylor lauded Rice but conceded that "as a financier he was not skilled." See Taylor, *Lives of Virginia Baptist Ministers*, 436.

³⁵ Benedict, *Fifty Years*, 238, quote from 431.

permanent missionary organizations unleashed permanent transformations: modern-day “Pentecosts, as wonderful as Paul and Peter ever knew!”³⁶ Even apparent setbacks became new triumphs. When northern and southern factions in the denomination acrimoniously split apart over the question of slavery, the foreign missions cause only grew stronger, according to the missionary Baptist chroniclers. Just as they had downplayed the significance of the cleavages that rent their denomination in the 1700s, they learned to finesse the cataclysmic regional split of the denomination into a “very quietly effected” move that increased organizational efficiency.³⁷ In this way, the chroniclers catalogued various nuisances and even instances of malfeasance, yet they attributed these problems to the failings of individual men rather than to any weakness in the causes or institutions they served. The result was a new portrait of the denomination where individual Baptists were consistently eclipsed by the institutions they inhabited.

If, to us, that result seems like the unsurprising consequence of both an evangelical understanding of sin and the natural growth of bureaucracy, it held far more significance to the people who came to call themselves Primitive Baptists. In the missionary Baptists’ narrative of progress, they saw a betrayal of the Baptist past.

The So-Called Revival: Primitives’ Reconstruction of the Recent Past

As one reads Primitive Baptist histories, conversion narratives, polemics, and theological tracts, it becomes clear that, for the Primitives, the darkness of the Baptist past

³⁶ Hervey, *Baptist Missions*, xiii, xv.

³⁷ Robert Boyte C. Howell, *The Early Baptists of Virginia* (Philadelphia: The Bible and Publication Society, 1857), 82-83; Benedict, *Fifty Years*, 176, quote from 217.

never receded. A perpetual gloom shrouds these works. If all antebellum Baptists acknowledged their ancestors' eighteenth-century persecution, Primitives remained the Baptist sect most engrossed with the subject.

All antebellum Baptists honored their ancestors' suffering. Primitive Baptists, however, insisted that the persecution of the faithful persisted into the nineteenth century not simply because its eighteenth-century incarnations had never been vanquished but because persecution of the faithful had "shown itself in every age" and had "always been the case."³⁸ Suffering was law. The chief error of most modern Baptists, the Primitive argued, was their desire to escape a constant condition of suffering that God, if He had not ordained, had, in some sense, allowed to occur.³⁹ To seek to alleviate Baptists' suffering by, for instance, increasing the denomination's numbers or raising its esteem among fellow Christians was a mistake. Even to aspire to such things — to hope, as Samuel Fuller put it, to "raise the Baptists from the degradation of the dunghill" — was to sink further into the sloughs of error and sin.⁴⁰ And because, following Fuller's lead, many nineteenth-century Baptists had sought in various ways to remove themselves from the mire, Primitives considered the century to be the darkest one yet. The story that Primitive Baptists told themselves unfolded in this darkness. While they insistently traced their history in an unbroken line back to the apostolic age, the Primitives, like their missionary foes, realized that the recent past could tell them even more about who they were and how they came to

³⁸ James Osbourn, *A Religious Devil Detected; or, Apollyon's Soliloquies Overheard by a Listener, and the Depths of Satan Exposed* (Baltimore: Toy, 1834), 150.

³⁹ See, for example, Hezekiah West, letter to the editor, letter to the editor, *Signs of the Times*, 11 December 1833, 5.

⁴⁰ Gilbert Beebe, "Remarks on Religious Revivals," *Signs of the Times*, 1 June 1862, 4.

be. After all, Primitives knew that it was only recently, in the opening decades of the 1800s, that Baptists, indeed Christendom itself, had taken its most precipitous plunge.

The Primitives' origin story was simple and compelling. It straightened the coils of theological exegesis and hauled the older, familiar Baptist narrative of persecution into the Primitives' present experiences. As did the missionary Baptists, the Primitives viewed the turn-of-the-century revivals a significant turning point in Baptists' recent past. The revivals, Primitives argued, trembled with excitement, and excitement was the handmaiden to sin. Excitement disturbed the senses, induced good people to admit the unsaved into the church, and encouraged sinners to believe they, rather than God, had an active role in their apparent salvation. Under the spell of such enchantment, once-humble Baptists concocted "man-made" schemes that purported to save the heathen but, in fact, enriched the self-appointed saviors. Primitive Baptist writers populated their origin stories with characters drawn from the realm of stereotype. Here the missionary Baptist played the villain. Underhanded, prideful, aristocratic, the missionary Baptist either willfully or foolishly mistook his good fortune for a sign of God's favor, sought to consolidate power in his own hands by building Byzantine money-making schemes disguised as benevolent institutions, and chided those who refused to abide his plans as pigheaded, backward fatalists. Primitive Baptists of course wrote themselves into their story although the process always seemed to them more like self-discovery than self-generation. When the Primitives surveyed their past, they saw themselves walking the old paths, lonely truth-bearers in a fallen world, guardians of the doctrine of election, and hard-working husbandmen whose labor preserved Jefferson's republic against encroaching aristocracy.

No work told this story more thoroughly than *History of the Church of God*, a sprawling account regarded since its publication in the late 1880s as the definitive history of Primitive Baptists. As indicated by the book's serpentine subtitle — *From the Creation to A.D. 1885, Including Especially the History of the Kehukee Primitive Baptist Association* — it sought to place the Primitives within a grand cosmology, to see them as heirs to an epic history rather than isolated malcontents dappled across the South and the western frontier. At the same time, the co-authors — Cushing Biggs Hassell and his son Sylvester, both of them long-serving Primitive Baptist elders — consciously designed the book as a revision and extension of two earlier and decidedly more small-scale histories of the Baptists in the Kehukee Association.⁴¹ But the Hassells' book was the one that Primitives inside and outside of the Kehukee Association quickly called their own. Written towards century's end, long after the schismatic years of the 1820s and '30s, the book reflected more than fifty years of Primitive Baptist wisdom and conjecture. When Primitives turned to their *History*, they found snippets of argument and streams of thought that they had encountered in other texts, in conversations, or perhaps during a preacher's sermon. The Hassells gave this miscellany a solid form. Their book told Primitive Baptists — and told them in encyclopedic detail, in a way no pamphlet or sermon could, and told them forcefully in a way their predestinarian theology formally discouraged — that they lived during a new dark age but they could be reassured that they were at the center of God's plan.

If any single thing ushered in that new dark age, it was the revivals — their ubiquity, their innovations in preaching and worship, and the consuming passion they generated in

⁴¹ These were Lemuel Burkitt and Jesse Read's 1803 account and Joseph Biggs's 1834 revision, a work written in the immediate wake of the schism. Joseph Biggs, Lemuel Burkitt, and Jesse Read, *A Concise History of the Kehukee Baptist Association, From Its Original Rise to the Present Time* (Tarboro, NC: G. Howard, 1834).

attendees. The revivals at the century's beginning burned so brightly that Lemuel Burkitt's Baptists in North Carolina and Virginia compared them to the brilliance of a "new dawn." Observing those same events, the Hassells saw instead "Heavens [filled] with clouds of inky blackness."⁴² What caused such a dramatic change in perspective? Who or what had turned day into night? The Hassells could rattle off a list of malefactors: rationalists, materialists, Roman Catholics, socialists, and a host of "isms" ranging from anarchism and atheism to "Presumptuousism" and "Atrocicism."⁴³ But the Hassells channeled most of their ire toward their fellow Baptists, and the enduring theme of their account was that the new dawn celebrated in camp meetings and church houses had, in fact, never arrived. It was an illusion conjured up out of the stew of hope, ardor, faith, and self-deception that were the inevitable ingredients and byproducts of any revival.

The revival of 1803, the Hassells explained, was only a "revival, so called." Sure, more than 1,500 souls were added to church rolls in the Kehukee Association within two years.⁴⁴ But upon closer examination, the revival seemed a chimera, its effects either muted or, because of their unreality, deleterious. Were all those souls truly saved? The Hassells could only conclude that it "seemed" that way, that if one were to observe the electrified crowds in Lemuel Burkitt's churchyard, it once again "seemed" that the

⁴² Hassell and Hassell, *History of the Church of God*, 578.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 587.

⁴⁴ These, of course, were the years of spectacular growth for all evangelical denominations. Between 1792 and 1832, Regular Baptists' numbers in the United States increased from 891 churches with 65,345 total members to 5,320 churches with 172,972 members. See Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). Heyrman's numbers are different, but they reveal a similarly impressive increase in numbers. She estimates that in the South alone, Baptists' ranks increased from 40,492 in 1790 to 290,141 in the years between 1834-1836. See *Southern Cross*, 261-266. Another way to consider growth is to look at denominations' institution building. American Baptists had six multi-church associations in 1780. By 1820, the number has risen to at least one hundred, and by 1860, there were more than five hundred. See Butler, *Awash*, 269-270.

preacher's enthusiastic testimony had encouraged the gathered to beg for mercy, which they quickly received from a gracious God. But it wasn't so much grace abounding as it was the appearance of grace. The seeming had supplanted the real. Witnesses observed all the outward signs of salvation among the crowds: despair, conviction, conversion, and rejoicing. Such stirring displays, said the Primitives, amounted to a kind of emotional theater so convincing that even its participants mistook performance for reality. Outright fraud lurked at the edges of the scene like a half-seen stage manager calling cues in a theater's darkened wings, yet the revivals' emotional drama was most often not so consciously crafted. In the camp meeting's hothouse atmosphere, zeal — a term the Hassells and other Primitives returned to time and again when discussing revivals — became its own object. Since "self-styled sincerity...is all that is necessary for salvation," the Hassells lamented, the revivals were "transforming religion from a saving inward reality into a vainglorious outward show."⁴⁵ The anxious seat and the mourner's bench were only the rudest props in the revivals' emotional theater. These "new measures," as they were known, worked like public cauldrons in which the potential convert was brought to a boil from the combined heat of a congregation's stare, a preacher's exhortations, and their own burning conscience, all of them stoked by the divine bellows of the Holy Spirit. But the revivals' machinery did not need to be so conspicuous. In the Primitives' diagnosis, much of the work was carried on silently by men and women who sincerely believed they were experiencing the work of the Holy Spirit. But sincerity itself was the problem. The revivalists' belief in their own sincerity became their warrant for upheaval. Since an

⁴⁵ Hassell and Hassell, *History of the Church of God*, 586.

impassioned, yet apparently sincere display signaled the Holy Spirit's touch, it was no wonder that revivalists learned to cultivate such experiences. In the camp meetings, emotion usurped reason and a feeling of grace replaced the thing itself. "Men dream," the Hassells wrote, "and then assert that their visions are truth."⁴⁶

From the vantage point of Primitive Baptist writers like the Hassells, it was clear that the revivals during the early 1800s ushered in a new era in Baptist history.⁴⁷ In their telling, a newfound exuberance had replaced judicious Calvinist restraint, and a preoccupation with surface appearances had crowded out Baptists' traditional inward gaze. Because the excitement stirred up at revival meetings blunted rational thought, it was axiomatic that "errors in practice would creep in" during "this exciting time."⁴⁸ The process was simple, if pernicious: revivals generated false hope and false hope led to false conversions, which, in turn, fostered more false hope. The emotional logic was self-sustaining, which is what made it so insidious to the Primitive Baptists. The zeal that propelled preachers and congregants alike encouraged them to seek out ways that they might sustain the wonder-working effect of the Holy Spirit's touch. This quest, even if conducted unconsciously, meant that Baptists began relying on what the Hassells, following generations of Primitive Baptist usage, referred to as "human means," rather than divine

⁴⁶ Ibid., 579.

⁴⁷ What the Hassells described was a transition to what the historian William Reddy calls a new emotional regime. An emotional regime is a normative order for emotions in a given place, culture, or time. An emotional regime will encourage the display of certain emotions and discourage the display of others. The emotional discipline induced by emotional regimes can differ. In general, however, emotional regimes aim to enhance and habituate normative emotions while penalizing those who do not react within the regime's normative range. The early-nineteenth century revivals, which sought to institutionalize the dynamic quality of an encounter with the Holy Spirit, can be understood as a particular manifestation of an evangelical emotional regime. See William M. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

⁴⁹ Hassell and Hassell, *History of the Church of God*, 717.

grace, for the conversion of sinners. And to open that door – to, for example, put sinners on stage on an anxious bench in order to cultivate the cries and tears that were the outside signs of conversion – was to deign to overthrow an omnipotent and omniscient God who would save who He wanted when He wanted. The drift towards “human means” in the conversion drama was, therefore, a theological betrayal, another breach in the Calvinist defenses through which their longtime Arminian antagonists would surge.

As much as the Hassells relished theological debate, their narrative and, indeed, the larger Primitive Baptist historical imagination, turned on issues both more mundane and fundamental. Bedrock issues of emotion and perception propelled the Hassells’ story forward. Theological transgressions entered through church doors first flung open by excited crowds. It was no wonder, then, that the question of missions, the issue that would eventually cleave the Baptist denomination in two, was first raised in this heated atmosphere. Only in the wake of the revival – only “at a time when the zeal and credulity of many hundreds of new converts were at their height,” the Hassells explained – could Kehukee’s faithful Baptists even have contemplated the missions question. “But for the revival, so called,” they wrote, “this new measure and great departure from the custom of the fathers would, probably have received no favorable consideration among the staid old members of the Association.”⁴⁹

While the early nineteenth-century revivals seeded Baptist ranks with deceivers and the deceived, some of those “staid old members” clung to the true vine. At the time, of course, there were no Primitive Baptists. The rolling schism of the 1820s and ‘30s lay a

⁴⁹ Ibid., 721.

generation ahead. But the Hassells and their fellow Primitives had learned to locate their ancestors in the chaotic past. If they looked closely, they glimpsed the “few faithful soldiers of Christ” who dared oppose the excited revivalists and budding missionaries. That the Hassells’ faithful few failed to prevent the introduction of missionary plans into the Kehukee Association made them no less heroic to their would-be descendants in the Primitive Baptist movement. The spurned truth-bearer, that durable model of the Savior, was precisely the type Christians had long used to describe their fallen heroes. It was missionary Baptists brightened by their newfound prosperity who found that reliable Christian type less useful in their chronicles of the recent past. Meanwhile, the Hassells marched through the past following their faithful few, reminding readers that in each epoch true Christians found themselves an outnumbered lot warding off enemies from without and deceivers from within. Theirs was a continuation, albeit a heightened one, of the older Baptist narrative, the story Baptists had shared before the schism. Primitive Baptist chroniclers clung to that old story just as their fellow Baptists were abandoning it.

This tale of resilience and deception only intensified when the Hassells and other Primitive Baptist writers turned their attentions to the missions cause. The Kehukee Baptists’ initial interest in missions was sparked, as we have seen, by the buoyant mood surrounding the early-nineteenth century revivals. Are we not called, they asked in 1803, “to step forward in support of that missionary spirit which the great God is so wonderfully reviving amongst the different denominations of good men in various parts of the world?” Their answer was an assured “yes,” a response that, as their query indicated, was shared by

evangelicals across America who were posing similar questions.⁵⁰ That their “Mother Kehukee” entertained the missionary cause for roughly two decades could be excused, the Hassells argued, because missions, like the revivalistic zeal that animated them, represented a form of deception.⁵¹ But unlike the self-deception that inevitably flowed from the revivals’ “animal excitements,” the missionary cause thrived on conscious acts of betrayal.⁵² And so the early proponents of missions came to be described as “adulterers and adulteresses” who had “gotten [their] bantling born” during a shadowy liaison in an eastern North Carolina church house.⁵³ Or they were “wire-workers” manipulating their fellow Baptists like a puppeteer pulling a marionette’s strings.⁵⁴ The Hassells hinted that missionaries might be tied to a Masonic plot or that they were in the grips of Catholic “priestcraft.”⁵⁵

This is the language of conspiracy. Sinister enemies, dark dealings, betrayal, and a people dispossessed. When crafting the tale of their origins, this was the Primitives’ chosen lexicon. They operated in what Richard Hofstadter famously described as “the paranoid style,” a cultural posture at once warped and buttressed by the fantastical claims and overheated rhetoric that are its hallmarks.⁵⁶ But the Primitives’ story of their origins was

⁵⁰ Ibid. The Hassells pointedly noted that missions proponents revivalists’ norms (See Hassell and Hassell, *History of the Church of God*, 722).

⁵¹ Hassell and Hassell, *History of the Church of God*, 738.

⁵² Ibid., 754.

⁵³ Ibid., 722, 723.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 744. “Wire-worker” was Victorian-era slang for a scheming politician. See Richard H. Thornton, and Louise Hanley, *An American Glossary: Being an Attempt to Illustrate Certain Americanisms Upon Historical Principles* (London: Francis, 1900), 949.

⁵⁵ Hassell and Hassell, *History of the Church of God*, 735-737, quote on 737.

⁵⁶ Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics, and Other Essays* (New York: Knopf, 1965).

nothing if not coherent, its grand narrative proceeding with a relentless consistency from the betrayal at Gethsemane to the religious treachery of their own time. With clearly delineated characters, it was easy to tell good from evil even as the story implied how difficult such a task was in day-to-day life. In fact, it's easy to see how such a story might bandage the wounds of uncertainty inflicted by the Primitives' Calvinism. And if the reliable narrative and broad-brush types failed their instructional work, there were always the imposing drifts of evidence that accumulated at the reader's door: To cite just one such example, we learn that the Primitive Baptists' proportion of the population in the United States was the same as the proportion of non-idolaters among the ancient Israelites during Ahab's reign.⁵⁷

Stereotype and Baptist Identity

It was those broad-brush types that were the most significant legacy of the Primitive Baptists' origin story. In the Hassells' history, as in all Primitive writing, the missionary loomed, powerful and brazen like an autocrat, and second in importance only to God. The missionary, as we have seen, was emotionally out of control and hitched to a new strain of Protestantism that was, depending upon the writer's mood, either lax or reminiscent of Catholic authoritarianism.⁵⁸ The missionary descended from the North, a "New England rat" sniffed out as early as 1820 by a Kentucky anti-missionary preacher named John Taylor.⁵⁹ The missionary arrived wealthy and yet begged for money, an

⁵⁷ Hassell and Hassell, *History of the Church of God*, 622.

⁵⁸ Occasionally, the Hassells fused these two images, as when they described the specter of "Catholic Arminianism." See *Ibid.*, 582.

⁵⁹ John Taylor, *Thoughts on Missions* (Franklin County, Ken.: n.p., 1820), 6.

itinerant grandee — “stiff, glove-handed, school polished” — who pilfered the plain folk’s meager resources out of a sheer lust for power.⁶⁰ If left unchecked, missionaries, who “verg[ed] close on an aristocracy,” would undermine “Baptist Republican government” and, therefore, send both church and state to ruin.⁶¹ Beside this insidious portrait of their enemies, the Primitives’ cast a monument to themselves that shone like polished steel. Rather than power-hungry upstarts, they were an ancient and humble people. Broken glimpses of the past revealed their existence in spirit long before they took their denominational name. Like God’s chosen people throughout all time, they found themselves subjected to persecution, yet they persevered.⁶² In the current age, they knew themselves to be simple hardworking folk — the “farmers and mechanics of our country,” as the members of the Primitive Baptist church in Tarboro, North Carolina described themselves — the very backbone of Jefferson’s agrarian republic.⁶³

Missionary Baptists were hardly immune to this sort of inflated rhetoric. They, too, steadied themselves against the sturdy railings of a Manichaeian worldview. Missionaries larded their journals and correspondence with unflattering portraits of anti-missionary

⁶⁰ Joshua Lawrence, writing in an 1831 issue of the *Church Advocate*, quoted in Dan B. Wimberly, *Frontier Religion: Elder Daniel Parker, His Religious and Political Life* (Austin: Eakin Press, 2002), 83.

⁶¹ Taylor, *Thoughts on Missions*, 10. Republicanism was ubiquitous among American Protestants. A confluence of republican political ideology, commonsense philosophy, and evangelical Protestantism shaped what Mark Noll has described as the American intellectual synthesis. See Noll, *America’s God*. Primitive Baptists’ self-image could fit comfortably under Noll’s umbrella, but they were considerably more skeptical of the senses than many nineteenth-century Protestants.

⁶² John McClaran Watson, *The Old Baptist Test; or Bible Signs of the Lord’s People* (Nashville: Republican Banner Press, 1855), 55-56.

⁶³ Tarboro Primitive Baptist Church Record Book, 31 October 1829, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University. The Hassells believed the Primitives’ Calvinism made them particularly effective guardians of both civil and religious liberty: “It [predestinarianism] develops the power of self-government and a manly spirit of independence, which fears no man, though seated on a throne, because it fears God, the only real sovereign. Its church-constitutions are popular... and its civil governments are representative or republican.” See Hassell and Hassell, *History of the Church of God*, 333.

Baptists, who they considered backwards, ignorant, unschooled, poor, and rude.

Wandering in Missouri in 1818, the early missionary John Mason Peck bragged that his fundraising efforts received enthusiastic responses even in hardscrabble settlements where money was scarce. But when Peck encountered frontier Baptists who refused his entreaties, he quickly concluded that they were “under the influence of the Evil One. Like the persecutors of Christ, they were blinded and knew not what they did.”⁶⁴ Nearly forty years later, a colporteur traveling in eastern North Carolina on behalf of the American Tract Society grumbled about the “hardshell” Baptists who “were opposed to books[,] Prayer & in a word to all good.” The salesman spilled his frustrations across the pages of his journal: Primitive Baptists, he wrote,

were aided [by] a host of Ignorant & ungodly preachers who are worst than the people themselves...these preachers finding that [an] increase of knowledge & higher Standard of moral is not favorable to them, they do all in their power to arrest its progress & though not possessed with common faith yet gifted & strong in opposing all good hence we find them so successful among their dark & ignorant class as to find them equipped to oppose every effort made to instruct them.⁶⁵

Inflamed observations like these congealed into conventional wisdom as the century wore on. Primitive Baptists were stingy, opposed to “progress,” fatalistic, and, by their stubborn refusal to aid evangelicals’ missionary and benevolent efforts, determined to

⁶⁴ Peck quoted Harry L. Poe, “The History of the Anti-Missionary Baptists,” *The Chronicle* 2, no. 2 (1939): 54.

⁶⁵ John Frederick Mallett, Journal, n.d., John Frederick Mallett Papers, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University.(spelling and punctuation in the original). Mallett’s remarks above appear to be written in early 1854. At about this time, Mallett was shifting his religious identification from Methodist to Campbellite Baptist. His sentiments here reflected widely held missionary Baptist opinions, and, indeed, Mallett found friendly audiences at the missionary Baptist churches in eastern North Carolina.

“lay the axe at the root of Christianity itself.”⁶⁶ Missionary Baptists knew themselves to be Christianity’s guardians against the Primitives’ antediluvian fancies. In this undertaking, they relied upon a new generation of clergy drawn to what the historian Nathan Hatch has called “the allure of respectability,” a centripetal force that pulled insurgent evangelicalism back “toward learning, decorum, professionalism, and social standing.”⁶⁷ To see this force in action all one had to do was stroll the halls at a meeting of the missions-supporting Southern Baptist Convention: the movement’s leaders were not the persecuted outcasts of yesteryear but instead, as one observer noted, “governors, judges, congressmen, and other functionaries of the highest dignity.”⁶⁸

In the Baptist schism, stereotype and the reality it supposedly represented became difficult to distinguish.⁶⁹ There is the obvious: in this case, as in others, stereotype’s imposing scale shadowed whatever cultural life took root beneath its ample boughs. In stereotype’s crepuscular light, individual differences grow faint and the eye can only make out the broad outlines of the group. As the Baptist schism opened up across the early decades of the nineteenth century, Baptists of all stripes learned to spot themselves and

⁶⁶ Missionary Baptist complaints like these were common. On the Primitives’ alleged opposition to progress, see, for example, Benedict, *Fifty Years*, 134; “Circular Letter,” in *Minutes of the Sandy Creek Baptist Association, Convened at Rocky Springs Meeting House, Chatham County, North Carolina, on the 17th, 28th and 29th Days of October, A.D. 1832* (Pittsborough, NC: Henry Ward, 1832), 15. On the Primitives’ alleged threat to Christianity itself, see, for example, “The North Carolina Whig’s Memorial and Remonstrance,” *North Carolina Baptist Interpreter*, 4 January 1834, 12.

⁶⁷ Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 202. The pastorate gave southern evangelicals a rare “avenue of social mobility” in an otherwise rigidly hierarchical agricultural society. See Beth Barton Schweiger, *The Gospel Working Up : Progress and the Pulpit in Nineteenth Century Virginia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 6.

⁶⁸ Francis Wayland quoted in Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 205.

⁶⁹ On the issues of stereotype and cultural durability, I have been guided by Robert Cantwell’s work. See, especially, Robert Cantwell, *Ethnomimesis: Folklife and the Representation of Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 150-184.

their counterparts in this compromised landscape. And it was as if their eyes never quite adjusted to the gray light, as if their enfeebled vision came to seem natural. Certainly in their public pronouncements – the deliberately constructed histories examined here, or even the headlong polemics splashed across the pages of denominational periodicals – combatants on each side resorted to stereotype so regularly it suggests these caricatures were not simply, or even primarily, carefully placed framing devices but became instead embedded, like cataracts, into each side’s way of seeing the world. In this way, stereotype itself became the schism’s most enduring legacy, for long after the social conditions that sparked the conflict died down, stereotype remained. Its fictions became the birthright of new generations of Baptists on both sides of the divide; its longevity and durability increased its purchase on reality. Not only did these types shape each side’s historical imagination in the nineteenth century, modern-day Baptists, both Primitive and missionary, continue to work in this broad-brush style.⁷⁰

The competing sets of stereotypes colluded in this process of cultural infiltration. Inside the caricatures they constructed of their rival, each group secreted the idealized portraits they had drawn of themselves. And these idealized self-portraits were themselves burnished opposites of the caricatures their opponents had constructed of them. So if the Primitives saw the missionaries as money-grubbing, east-coast elitists, the missionaries saw themselves as earnest, respectable, well-educated, Christian soldiers charitably seeking to help both the heathen and their less-enlightened Baptist brethren. Meanwhile, because missionaries painted the Primitives as uncouth, close-minded “hard-shells,” the Primitives

⁷⁰ James L. Peacock and Ruel W. Tyson, *Pilgrims of Paradox: Calvinism and Experience among the Primitive Baptists of the Blue Ridge* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989).

conceived of themselves as humble “mechanicks,” a simple folk defending God and country from encroaching aristocracy. While these types are easily cast as eternal enemies engaged in perpetual warfare, we might more accurately understand them as opposites that nevertheless fed each other on difference. The very intensity of the conflict sustained it.⁷¹

But stereotype’s foothold in the Baptist historical imagination never was entirely secure and the process by which it lodged itself in the public memory of the schism raises just as many questions as answers. Now, stereotype’s omnipresence in the schism’s historical record would seem to belie this contention. Often it seems that the types discussed here sprung to life, Athena-like, at some pivotal but still-obscure point in time. One leafs through church record books, discovers the passage of an anti-missions declaration, and searches in vain for a record of debate or discussion. At times like these, it can seem that Baptists slipped quietly over a border never to look back, occupants of a new country where everything – words, faith, history – no longer held their old meanings. At other times, it is clear that newly declared Primitive Baptists clutched older Baptist tropes, such as the idea of a persecuted remnant church, and fastened them to republican idioms in order to make sense of their novel circumstances. Because stereotype so quickly and deeply embedded itself in the public record of the schism, the process by which it did so has become obscured.

⁷¹ Some Baptists were aware of this process. For example, the minutes from an 1846 meeting of the pro-missions Florida Baptist Association noted that schism seemed to be forcing Baptists on either side of the divide into increasingly severe versions of their positions: “It is unfortunate for the people of God that when they disagree on certain points of doctrine...they become perfect antipodes to each other.” Quoted in John G. Crowley, *Primitive Baptists of the Wiregrass South: 1815 to the Present* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), 79. For similar observation from the Primitive Baptist side of the ledger, see Watson, *Old Baptist Test*, 189-190.

But if we leave behind the official histories each side crafted, we might glimpse something of this process – a process of identity formation and erasure – in the relationship between Gilbert Beebe and Zelotes Grenell, two Baptist preachers tending to churches perched along the western edge of New York’s Hudson Valley. If nothing else, we can, in Beebe and Grenell’s relationship, begin to reckon with the toll public memory exacted from private experience. Born in 1800, Beebe was licensed to preach at the age of eighteen, spent five years as an itinerant, and formally ordained five years later.⁷² In the 1830s Beebe established himself as one of the nation’s leading Primitive Baptist polemicists, a man who regularly took to the pages of the publication he edited, *Signs of the Times*, to lambaste missionary Baptists’ teachings as “vain, delusive, fabulous fictions” and compare missionary Baptists themselves to whores.⁷³ When Beebe more calmly observed in 1862 that “these two kinds of Baptists have become so distinct that neither claim any relationship to the other,” he merely stated a commonplace.⁷⁴ By then, a shared Baptist past seemed a curiosity, if not an impossibility. Beebe himself seemed to have forgotten his fondness for Zelotes Grenell, a fellow elder who had endorsed missions just as Beebe rose to prominence in the anti-missionary cause. As young preachers in the 1820s, Beebe and Grenell lived near each other, were each friendly with the other’s families, and together attended meetings of the Hudson River Association and the Orange County Baptist Society where they often sat next to one another. In 1830, as the churches they pastored began choosing sides in the growing intra-Baptist dispute over missions, benevolent

⁷² “Obituary. Gilbert Beebe,” *New York Times*, May 3, 1881, 5.

⁷³ Gilbert Beebe, “They Will Not Endure Sound Doctrine,” *Signs of the Times*, 1 October 1862, 16.

⁷⁴ Beebe, “Remarks on Religious Revivals,” 4.

societies, theological schools, and the like, Beebe reached out to Grenell in obvious distress. “I have never found a minister of the gospel for whom I felt so much nearness, christian love and fellowship, as yourself,” Beebe wrote. “There are but probably few to be found who are, generally speaking, more united in the doctrine of salvation by grace. I do not know that we differ essentially in regard to the doctrine, discipline, or the ordinances of the House of God. In christian experience, I believe we have both drank of the same fountain. Our difference of views is wholly of a different nature.”⁷⁵ Beebe’s gentle tone, his search for compromise (in his letter he proposed a system of voluntary contributions to support “poor itinerant preachers”), and his stress on the many points of agreement he and Grenell shared reveal a different kind of history than the kind written in the official chronicles that came to dominate each side’s historical imagination. Alas, we do not know if as he grew older Beebe forgot his friendship with Grenell, if he purposely ignored it, or if he unconsciously repressed it. But we sense here the fraternity that preceded the split, the ambivalence that accompanied it, and the pain that followed in its wake. Stereotype, embodied in the histories crafted by each side’s preacher-historians, obscured such ties in favor of drawing coherent, durable group identities.

The split itself was no fiction. From the 1820s through the 1840s, Baptist churches cracked apart over the question of missions and other benevolent enterprises. The dividing line between Beebe’s Primitives and Grenell’s missionaries was real, but stereotype’s legacy was to make what was for years, an open doorway, an easily scaled fence, a hastily drawn line in the sand, into a chasm. It is no exaggeration to say that the broad-brush group

⁷⁴ Gilbert Beebe, to Zelotes Grenell, 27 December 1830, in Levi Osborn Grenelle, *Life and Labors of Elder Zelotes Grenell : For Sixty-Four Years an Eminently Successful Baptist Minister, 1818-1882* ([New Jersey?]: North Jersey Baptist Association, 1885), 184 (punctuation in the original).

identities birthed during those years have proven far more durable than the social and theological differences that first gave rise to them. Those identities propelled the split in its early years and preserved it as the nineteenth century wore on. In our own time, these two contrary group identities, laden with stereotype and encrusted with more than a century's worth of unexamined assumptions, still color our interpretations of this crucial moment in Baptist history.⁷⁶ And all of this was cradled by the early historical narratives crafted by each side. Those histories told the story of the schism, widening the gulf even as they chronicled it.

⁷⁶ For a detailed discussion of this issue, see the historiography in the dissertation's introduction.

CHAPTER TWO

“DOUBTS STILL ASSAIL ME”: UNCERTAINTY AND THE MAKING OF THE PRIMITIVE BAPTIST SELF

Introduction

In 1794, twenty-seven year-old Thomas Hill dug the butt of his rifle into the earth and buried its muzzle in his chin. For years Hill had felt himself to be “a stranger in a strange place,” a man “standing on a narrow point of time” whose next step threatened to plunge him into eternal ruin. After a sleepless night, he finally determined to “end his mortal existence.” As Hill walked to the place where he would take his life, the devil walked with him, goading him on. “God and me never could live together,” Hill thought, “and the sooner that I was dead and damned the better.” Hill did not pull the trigger that day. He waited, instead, for what he knew would be God’s swift judgment.

But Thomas Hill’s travails were not fleeting. For years, he labored under what evangelical Protestants termed “conviction,” the process by which God made Hill and others like him aware of their abiding sinfulness. Hill’s near-suicide was only the most dramatic moment in his years-long journey from unbelief to devotion and back again, from Methodist meeting houses to the Primitive Baptist order where he at last found a home.

Like the devil on that awful day, turmoil stalked Hill all through these years. While collecting firewood one day, Hill heard a voice urging him to kill his newborn child. Months later Hill found himself paralyzed by the thought that nature itself would rise up against him: tree limbs would become menacing snakes, trees trunks would explode, and neighbors' dogs would tear him to pieces. Even during his baptism, Hill remained convinced that the muddy river would send a piece of driftwood to pierce him through. Hill's spiritual tempests occasionally slackened, replaced either by periods of calm or even delight in those moments when he felt God's grace. More frequently, however, Hill lived with a gnawing uncertainty about both his ultimate fate and a persistent frustration with what he described as his insincerity or hypocrisy. During his odyssey, Hill tried at various times to square his heart with his mind, his soul with God, and his feelings with social expectations. In nearly all of these efforts, Hill failed.¹

The arc of Thomas Hill's spiritual journey was familiar to evangelicals in the old South. And in our own time, secular scholars also have become well acquainted with evangelical conversion narratives, discovering in them a basic morphology that guides the convert's welter of experience like a system of canals and sluices harnesses a raging river.² Seen from a distance, Hill and other converts flowed from one stage of the process to the next, from conviction to conversion to assurance (the point at which the convert believes he is saved). A Primitive Baptist like Hill followed the same basic path as a missionary

¹ Thomas Hill, Sr., letter to the editor, *Primitive Baptist*, 23 October 1841, 313-16; Hill, letter to the editor, *Primitive Baptist*, 13 November 1841, 332-5; and Hill, letter to the editor, *Primitive Baptist*, 27 November 1841, 341-2.

² "Conversion morphology" was Edmund Morgan's coinage. See Edmund Sears Morgan, *Visible Saints; the History of a Puritan Idea* (New York: New York University Press, 1963).

Baptist, and the journeys described by both types of Baptists hit landmarks passed by members of other evangelical denominations during their spiritual progress. There were the frivolities of youth, such as horse racing, gambling, and dancing; the pungent discovery of one's sinful nature; the subsequent fear of eternal condemnation; a frightening struggle with Satan or one of his wily representatives; and finally an awesome encounter with God's grace. All of this was deeply patterned, which has made the conversion narrative an attractive source for scholarly investigation.

Seen from a closer vantage point, however, the rough patterns that matched Primitive Baptists with evangelical Protestants remain, but their precise symmetries appear crippled. For instance, there is good reason to believe that for Primitive Baptists, the period of conviction lasted longer, was more convoluted, and perhaps more acutely felt.³ In particular, a feeling of uncertainty dominated Primitive life. These doubts appear to be the unmistakable offspring of the Primitives' Calvinist theology but in practice they coexisted with an array of inquiries with much looser theological moorings. Questions about perception itself, about the relationship between subjective experience and objective truth, and about the possibilities and limits of self-knowledge strode alongside potential converts and full-fledged church members during their religious peregrinations. For many Primitive Baptists, their questioning — especially their experience of persistent doubt — set them apart from missionary Baptists, other evangelical denominations, and even sweeping cultural trends that located a rational, purposeful self at the center of human history.

³ James Rhett Mathis, "Can Two Walk Together Unless They Be Agreed?": The Origins of the Primitive Baptists, 1800-1840" (Ph.D. diss., University of Florida, 1997), 168-205.

It is true that Primitive Baptists lit upon any number of certainties in their lives. No sect of even moderate size can exist for very long while its members stare endlessly into a yawning void of uncertainty. But it seems apparent that the uncertainty that colored Primitive Baptist selfhood motivated believers rather than paralyzed them. It propelled them towards a community of like-minded souls, and it stirred those souls to action as a more ardent brand of evangelical Protestantism crowded church pews. Still, Primitive Baptist experience was not uniform. Many Primitives reached a state of assurance not unlike the many evangelicals with whom they differed over missions and so much else. But for most Primitives – certainly for those given to documenting their experiences – either a lurking ambivalence or a strident dualism came to dominate their lives. This chapter examines those experiences.

The Watched Self

Sarah Ann Hollister felt in need of supervision. Only a year earlier her church had broken apart over the question of missions, and like a running wound, the pain of the division refused to subside. Hollister watched as parents turned against their children and neighbor against neighbor. “Perilous times have come,” she thought. That the division arrived on the heels of a season of revival, a time when God’s spirit had regenerated the hearts of so many sinners, including Hollister herself, only sharpened the pain. In the split’s aftermath, Hollister worried that she, too, might be tempted to leave the church. “O I find need of watching, to see whether I am ‘in the faith’,” she wrote. “We need to watch and pray daily.” Hollister believed that self-scrutiny might stave off sin’s siren song and

perhaps help her discern whether her recent vision of Jesus floating in the clouds above her farm was a divine visitation or just further evidence of her frothy imagination.⁴

Hollister's plea for "watching" was a reminder to herself of right thought and a signal to her church of right behavior. It was a common enough injunction among Primitive Baptists, who often heard preachers tell their flocks that the "true believer" had "a witness in himself."⁵ Primitive congregations, of course, carried on the social surveillance typical of Protestant churches, describing new members as being under the church's "watch care" and sanctioning or even ex-communicating members whose behavior slipped beyond the bounds of decency.⁶ Yet Hollister's words recall the extent to which surveillance became an internal occupation. This was not prayer per se but rather a companion practice.⁷ One petitioned God, as Hollister did, and then one turned inwards. Watching was a search. Primitives like Hollister scanned themselves for evidence, for "a hope," as they put it, that they were true believers counted among God's elect. The search often ended quickly and with a happy enough result.⁸

⁴ Sarah Ann Hollister, "From Sister Hollister to Sister Mather, after Reading Her Experience, as Published in a Late Number of the Monitor," *Christian Doctrinal Advocate and Spiritual Monitor* 3 (1840): 266-269, quotes from 267.

⁵ John McClaran Watson, *The Old Baptist Test; or Bible Signs of the Lord's People* (Nashville: Republican Banner Press, 1855), 21. Watson's phrase comes from 1 Jn 5:10 KJV.

⁶ Lick Fork Primitive Baptist Church Record Book, January 1824, North Carolina Baptist Historical Collection, Wake Forest University; Peter L. Branstetter, "The Life of Elder Peter Branstetter — Experience and Call to the Ministry," 9 June 1887, Primitive Baptist Online. <http://primitivebaptist.info/mambo//content/view/936/36/>.

⁷ The distinction between prayer and watching was a common one. See, for instance, Martha A. Walker, letter to the editor, letter to the editor, *Primitive Baptist*, 28 August 1840, 298-299.

⁸ This seems the intended result. Though Primitive Baptists would disavow the language of intent, would deny that they had any ability to influence their otherworldly fate, the practice of watching seems to have been designed to catch sin before it metastasized or even to prevent its growth in the first place.

But watching was an unstable practice and it often cultivated the very doubts it was designed, in part, to police. By watching herself closely, the diligent believer, like Hollister, might catch herself before sinning. And in case she did sin, her watchfulness allowed her to spot her error and then correct it. But here is where Hollister and her fellow Primitive Baptists ran into an intractable dilemma, where the believer's internal vigilance led unintentionally but inexorably to creeping uncertainty. Now, Primitive Baptists knew they were sinners, that sinning was inevitable, and that trespass hardly vanished from life after baptism. As a practical matter, however, doctrinal truths like these failed to assuage a day-to-day guilt among Primitives that we might dismiss as mere angst if its consequences for the afflicted were not so momentous. It was not just that by watching themselves for transgressions Primitives inevitably discovered what they hoped not to find. In deed if not in creed, many Old School Baptists shared the sentiments of one of their frontier preachers who, during a sermon on "watch-care," insisted that just as "a cracked jar never afterwards rang clear; so with the Christian who gives over to the flesh and falls a victim to false doctrine or bad habit. While they may see their error and turn from it, yet full confidence is seldom, if ever, restored."⁹ Under conditions like these, confidence, let alone "full confidence," suffered grievously. At its most sinister, the process seemingly entailed that as Primitives understood themselves more and more, they ought to trust themselves less and less. Certainly, the elder Joshua Lawrence found himself trapped in this situation. "[T]he more I study and think of my state, the more I doubt," he wrote, "until I doubt almost

⁹ S. A. Elkins, "The Life and Writings of Elder Peter Branstetter: Character Sketch," December 1891, Primitive Baptist Online. <http://primitivebaptist.info/mambo//content/view/937/36/>.

every thing, and can believe nothing concerning myself, but what is bad.”¹⁰ Still, Primitives watched, internal eyes peeled, knowing they would see their sin uncoiling before them and knowing, too, that their efforts to right themselves would at some point fail. That awful sight, of all things, was a certainty. Under the pressure of that relentless gaze, is it any wonder that Primitive Baptists like Hollister learned to doubt themselves? Hollister, for example, often remembered her vision of Jesus in the clouds above her family farm. Each time she recalled the vision, skepticism, like an over-eager valet, followed in tow. Had she seen her Savior and did she, therefore, have a hope? Or had she let her sight be claimed by Satan? She cried out in frustration, “[I]s this the Lord or no?” Hollister did not know who or what to trust. With no resolution in sight, she vowed to try to keep the memories out of her mind entirely, depriving herself of the beautiful vision and sparing herself, she hoped, from fears that she had been deceived.¹¹

Experiences such as Hollister’s – experiences marked at once by an emotional flux and a spiritual stalemate – found themselves articulated in the hymnody that characterized Primitive Baptist worship and in the poetry that lined the pages of the sect’s many periodicals. Here the watched-self became poeticized, its emotional turbulence and frustrating spiritual uncertainty transformed into an existential enigma. “I’m in mine own and others [sic] eyes / A labyrinth of mysteries,” wrote an anonymous poet. “I’m something that from nothing came, / Yet sure it is, I nothing am.”¹² Hymnody, much more than poetry, was a vehicle for collective expression. An emphasis on the text

¹⁰ Joshua Lawrence, “Victorious Grace: Being a Mere Glance of His Experience,” *Primitive Baptist*, 23 October 1841, 311.

¹¹ Hollister, “From Sister Hollister,” 268.

¹² “The Mystery of Faith,” *Primitive Baptist*, 13 February 1836, 48.

remained (quite often hymnals included no musical notation and texts could be paired with a handful of different tunes as the congregation saw fit), yet it was the congregational nature of the singing and the lack of harmony that identified the practice as a collective enterprise. In the singing that began each church meeting, believers might have sung out: “I am a stranger here below, / And what I am ’tis hard to know.”¹³

For individuals, such looming uncertainty was more difficult to manage than these couplets might indicate. Anxiety and self-doubt, rather than mystery, became the prevailing responses. Rather than a labyrinth of mysteries, the watched self seemed a warren of confusion or, even worse, a den of iniquity. The apotheosis of such watchfulness appeared in Wilson Thompson’s autobiography, one of the key memoirs of Primitive Baptist faith and selfhood. Thompson was born in 1788 in Hillsborough, Kentucky, to parents who had recently migrated from North Carolina. After Thompson’s father twice failed to secure land for farming, the family set out for the Northwest Territory but stopped just short, deciding to settle instead at the mouth of the Licking River in northern Kentucky. Shortly after the move, when Thompson was nearing thirteen years of age, revivals – echoes of the Great Revival less than one hundred miles south at Cane Ridge – spread through the settlement. Roughly a year earlier, Thompson had found himself deluged by fears of death and judgment. As a remedy to his travails, Thompson had begun a strict regimen of prayer, but within a year his devotions subsided. Now, though, as he witnessed the startling conversions of friends and neighbors, his old fears returned and

¹³ Gilbert Beebe, *The Baptist Hymn Book: Comprising a Choice Collection of Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs Adapted to the Faith and Order of the Old School, or Primitive Baptists in the United States of America*, 2nd stereotype ed. (Middletown, NY: Office of the “Signs of the Times,” 1859).

intensified. He began, as he put it, to “examine my religion,” a process that “hung heavily on [his] mind” and left him “tortured and perplexed.”¹⁴

Thompson’s self-scrutiny soon took a dramatic turn. He continued to watch himself but more and more he felt as if he were being observed by the outside world. At a baptism, he sensed the gathering frowning at him because they somehow knew he was a condemned man. Retreating to the woods for solace and privacy, Thompson instead found that nature itself had turned against him. “The trees, the birds, all around, seemed to look accusingly upon me,” he wrote. These mute things “espoused the cause of their Creator,” who, Thompson thought, would soon execute him in an act of divine justice. At the pit of his despair, the watchful Thompson nearly went blind. The midday sun poured through the forest’s canopy, but Thompson “could scarcely see anything around” him:

Something that my natural eyes could not behold seemed now to come down, obliquely or slanting from above, like a dark vapor or stream of smoke, ranging backward and upward. The further end was rising higher and higher, until I could perceive no end; but the lower extremity seemed to rest between my shoulders, oppressing my heart with a burden of guilt. This, in my mind’s view, and the feelings of my heart, I then thought was a token of God’s justice in my condemnation, as a sinner and a rebel, for whom there was no pardon or mercy, but rather that justice was ready to excuse me as a guilty culprit.¹⁵

The scene’s Pauline echoes reverberate crisply, but also consider, for a moment, Thompson’s blindness in the woods as an imaginative counterpoint to one of the canonical scenes in American literature, Ralph Waldo Emerson’s visionary description of the “Universal Being” in *Nature*: “Standing on the bare ground, — my head bathed by the

¹⁴ Wilson Thompson, *The Autobiography of Elder Wilson Thompson Embracing a Sketch of His Life, Travels, & Ministerial Labors, in Which Is Included a Concise History of the Old Order of Regular Baptist Churches* (Cincinnati: Moore, Wiltach & Baldwin, 1867; reprint, Conley, GA: Old School Hymnal Co., 1978), 22 (all citations are to the reprint edition).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, quotes 27, 28, 24.

blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, — all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.”¹⁶ In Emerson’s wooded clearing, reason and faith reigned, and calamity vanished. Man became one with Nature and God, signified by the famous metaphor of the transparent eyeball, which at once sees everything and dissolves seamlessly into the natural and supernatural worlds. Thompson, by contrast, found himself alienated from both nature and God. There is a claustrophobic air to Thompson’s description of the darkened woods, which conspire against him and witness God’s dark spirit pressing against his back. Emerson, meanwhile, floated freely.

The Unmanageable Self

“Who can fathom or control the human mind?” asked Rebecca Phillips. “I cannot.” Phillips posed her question in her spiritual autobiography, which she titled, appropriately enough, *Led By a Way I Knew Not*. And if her account proved more didactic and less circuitous than its title implied, that did not prevent Phillips’s story from becoming one of the more popular in its genre. Born in 1832 to Primitive Baptist parents, Rebecca Phillips nonetheless spent the first eight years after her baptism within the embrace of missionary Baptist churches before returning, prodigal-like, to the Primitive fold. Her first published explanation for this turn of events appeared in pamphlet form in 1875.¹⁷ Some twenty-five years later, she finally “yielded to solicitations” and expanded her

¹⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature,” in *Nature* (Boston: James Munroe & Company, 1849), 8.

¹⁷ Rebecca Anna Phillips, *The Experience of R. Anna Phillips, of Rome, Georgia, and Her Reasons for Uniting with the Primitive Baptists* (Wilson, NC: P.D. Gold, 1875).

earlier work into a book-length narrative.¹⁸ With chapters denouncing Sunday schools and theological seminaries, *Led By a Way I Knew Not* was very much another volley in the ongoing war between Primitive and missionary Baptists. But in its brief summation of the vicissitudes of its author's emotional life, Phillips's book succinctly captured one of the essential experiences of Primitive Baptist life, namely failure.

This was not a record of failure in life's conventional pursuits, the kinds of things that dot most any biography — finding a mate, earning a livelihood, raising a family, and so on. There is ample evidence that Primitive Baptists, men and women, did just fine in that regard, and in the South, there is a record of slaveholding that belies that Primitives' reputation as hardscrabble backcountry folk. Rather, Primitives failed most often and spectacularly in their interior lives, in their efforts to manage — to control, as Rebecca Phillips put it — their thoughts and feelings.¹⁹ These failures were not entirely atypical. Placed within the bounds of a broader evangelical culture, which, at least among southern whites, often had the effect of breaking down the sinner before building him back up

¹⁸ Rebecca Anna Phillips, *Led by a Way I Knew Not: Being the Christian Experience, and Reasons for Leaving the Missionary Baptists, and Uniting with the Primitive Baptists, with an Exposition of the Issues Dividing Them...Together with Supplementary Articles on Scriptural Subjects* (Pulaski City, VA: Hurst, 1901).

¹⁹ Some of the sociological and anthropological literature on emotional management and “emotion work” informs this chapter. I think in particular of Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); Unni Wikan, “Managing the Heart to Brighten the Face and Soul: Emotions in Balinese Morality and Health Care,” *American Ethnologist* 16 (1989): 294-312; and Douglas W. Hollan, “Emotion Work and the Value of Emotional Equanimity Among the Toraja,” *Ethnology* 31 (1992): 45-56. William Reddy's concept of emotives, which extends and revises the above literature, also helped me think more deeply about Primitive Baptists' emotional lives. I do not directly adopt any of the quite elegant theories sketched out by these scholars. Instead, I have tried to draw on the central implication of their researches: that life is an effortful and often-failed attempt to maintain emotional equilibrium in relation to cultural norms (or cultural discourses or practices, if you prefer), which can shape but never predictably or entirely determine the self.

again, the Primitive Baptist experience, at the first blush, hardly appears unusual.²⁰ But for Primitive Baptists, that process of reconstruction was never complete and always crumbling.

The shaky joists and trusses of the Primitive Baptist self contrast with the sturdy edifice of evangelical selfhood erected in a handful of recent studies. On the one hand, several historians argue that, at least in the South, evangelicalism's spread was accompanied by – indeed, enabled by – its adoption of the region's dominant social mores. In these books, which, not entirely unreasonably, place Primitive Baptists under evangelicalism's generous canopy, the religious insurgents of the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries find themselves replaced by sturdy patriarchs, Bible-thumping slave masters, and subordinated women.²¹ On the other hand, other scholars contend that the Primitive Baptist revolt ought to be understood as a patriarchal reaction against the forces of a burgeoning, feminized evangelicalism.²² These two groups of scholars reach different conclusions, but in both cases Primitive Baptists find themselves cast as a patriarchal force and often as a self-conscious one. If anything, however, the Primitives reveal how fragile were the underpinnings of the patriarchal processes identified by other scholars. Moreover, in a time when mastery of self and others was seen as inextricably linked to manhood and political citizenship, the Primitive Baptist experience raises questions about what was unfolding beneath the veneer of the conventional signs of cultural power. The next

²⁰ Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 215. Mathews contrasts southern whites' experience of being "broken down" under preaching with southern blacks' experience of being lifted up.

²¹ Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (New York: Knopf, 1997); Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

²² Sandra D. Hayslette, "Missions, Markets, and Men: A Baptist Contest of Values in Tarboro, North Carolina, 1800-1835," M.A. thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1995.

chapter looks more closely at how the psychological profiles analyzed here engaged issues of gender and power in the public sphere. For now, it is important simply to see how unwieldy the Primitive Baptist experience could be.

As their doubts mounted, would-be Primitive Baptists redoubled their efforts to master them. Thomas Hill's case is exemplary. At about twenty years of age, Hill left his native Virginia for a fresh start in the mountains of what would later become western Tennessee. During childhood he had flirted with the Methodist and Baptist churches, but soon after his move Hill's frustration with hypocritical Presbyterian neighbors as well a stint as a soldier on the western frontier, "where the bullets flew thick" and landed indiscriminately, convinced him "that there was no reality in religion." In time, however, Hill's thoughts turned back towards religious contemplation. He worried that his dismissal of the religious life would leave him "in a bad fix" should heaven and hell prove, in fact, to be real. Less than a year after marrying, Hill abruptly left his pregnant wife to travel three hundred miles on a religious errand. He intended to bury his skepticism once and for all by observing his father, a Christian, for any signs of doubt or lapses in behavior. "[A]ll the way I went, I thought I would watch him," Hill wrote. "[I]f I could see any thing through his conduct that I did not think was a Christian, then the matter would be decided." What Hill watched awed him. His father's rectitude convinced him of God's existence. Hill quickly set about matching his father's behavior, but within a few days he was left with only broken promises and a renewed skepticism. Hill ran into similar difficulties when he turned his attentions inward. His mind wandered during prayer, and despite prodigious efforts to bend his feelings to God's will, he found himself continually unable to do so.

“My heart seemed to me that it could not be sincere,” he wrote. “I wanted to be sorry, but I could not.”²³ Hill’s failure of will left him despondent. It was this consuming sense of his own impotence that drove him one morning to the brink of suicide. Hill suffered alone that morning, but the rough pattern of his life became one of the defining features of the Primitive Baptist self.

This pattern was one of effort and failure. These same rhythms sound over and over again in Primitive Baptist conversion narratives, spiritual autobiographies, and private correspondence.²⁴ Many, like Hill, strove to cultivate the sense of guilt they believed they deserved, a sense of guilt they craved (however unwilling they may have been to admit it) because such guilt, they knew, inevitably accompanied the Holy Spirit’s efforts to regenerate a corrupt soul. And so in Frankfort, Kentucky, a youthful merchant already feeling the first pangs of conviction, taught himself to draw pictures of hell in his mind’s eye while imagining the “torments of the damned” echoing inside his skull. He sought out preachers who shouted about hell and damnation, fire and brimstone, because that was, he said, “the sort of preacher I ought to hear.” For two years, this young man carried on his mental exercises and churchly excursions until, alone in bed one night, he decided that he was damned, that his initial experiences of conviction must have been a mirage, because all

²³ Hill, letter to the editor, 23 October 1841, quotes from 314, 314, 316; Hill, letter to the editor, 13 November 1841, quote from 333.

²⁴ See, for example, William Scarborough’s letter to his brother, Daniel, who expressed astonishment that William had joined the Primitive Baptists. William Scarborough wrote: “I Read the Scripture prayfully and attentively and knowing from my own feelings if I am a child of god it is free grace alone and unmerited favor on my part for I tryed my own strength till I thought every other man on earth had a better chance for heaven then myself.” William Scarborough to Daniel Scarborough, December 7, 1839, Private Collection # 906, North Carolina State Archive, Raleigh, North Carolina.

that fervid preaching, all that time spent diligently reconstructing hell's agonies, left his heart unmoved.²⁵

Still others worked to turn their minds toward thoughts more serene. A young Joshua Lawrence, for example, immersed himself in thrice-daily devotions and, like a manic monk, would at various times each day chant "bless God, bless God, as fast as [he] could speak, perhaps for half and hour." No matter. For each blessing he recited, a companion curse echoed inside him: Curse God and die, curse God and die. "It was constant in my mind," Lawrence wrote. "[I]t came as fast as I could have thoughts, curse God and die."²⁶ The internal rumblings menaced him for more than three years, during which time he faithfully attended church meetings and intensified his devotions, the result of which, more often than not, was a hardening despair. If only to rid himself of these unbidden thoughts, Lawrence wished he could somehow be transformed into one of the unthinking animals grazing in his fields or stalking the nearby forest.²⁷ Well after his conversion, Lawrence continued to find himself pushed and pulled by cosmic forces much stronger than himself. Neighbors described seeing him darting aimlessly through the woods for several days at a time before winding up rolling around on the ground wailing. "The devil had got me and gone off with me," Lawrence offered by way of explanation. At other times, God's spirit

²⁵ J. Taylor Moore, *A Biography of the Late Elder Thos. P. Dudley* (Occoquan, VA.: Printed at The Sectarian Printing Office by Wm. M. Smoot?, 1891), quotes on 24 ("torments"), 25 ("preacher"). Moore was quoting from Dudley's 1851 letters to *The Signs of the Times*.

²⁶ Joshua Lawrence, "Victorious Grace: Being a Mere Glance of His Experience," *Primitive Baptist*, 9 October 1841, quotes on 299 ("constant") and 301 ("bless God" and "curse God").

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 302.

possessed him and he had nothing to do but hold open his mouth as words of supplication poured out for an hour straight without interruption.²⁸

Brief Primitive Baptist conversion narratives as well as longer spiritual autobiographies brim with trials like those outlined here. Evidence of these lost struggles for control of the human mind and, at times, body, is strewn all about the pitted landscape of conviction. Indeed, in many, if not most, of the Primitive Baptist narratives, the bulk of the action pulsates to the familiar cadence of struggle and failure. And, as in Lawrence's case, such turmoil often continued well past the Primitive Baptist's period of conviction.²⁹ Many of these episodes — the near-suicides, the visitations by the devil, etc. — are so tangibly described that they reach beyond the didactic and reveal something more primal. Similarly, these are, of course, Calvinist narratives, and yet they speak to an experience often apart from, and prior to, doctrine. "I was as ignorant of the doctrine and order of the church as a negro," wrote one believer in a typical and unfortunate comment about his familiarity — pre- and immediately post-baptism — with the intricacies of John Calvin's theology.

If nothing else, the insistent tracing of these rhythms constituted a noteworthy collective literary choice. It was a choice to emphasize a kind of emotional powerlessness over and above the moment of conversion, baptism, the reaching of the state of assurance, or any of the other key moments that dot any conversion narrative. But if, as several recent

²⁸ Lawrence, "Victorious Grace: Being a Mere Glance of His Experience," *Primitive Baptist*, 23 October 1841, 340.

²⁹ Often Primitives writing about their conversion experiences described feeling the same doubts and enduring the same struggles as they did during conviction. In addition to Lawrence, see, for example, Moore, *Biography*; and John R. Respass, "The Experience of a Sinner," which was published originally in the *Gospel Messenger* in 1892 and 1893 and is now available online: <http://primitivebaptist.info/mambo//content/view/701/36/>

studies have argued, the conversion narrative itself somehow creates rather than merely represents experience, then we might be able to glimpse, in the publication and dissemination of these narratives – narratives which were, after all, one of the principal components of the Primitives’ fleet of quarterly and bi-weekly periodicals – the invention or, at the very least, the re-inscription of the Primitive Baptist self.³⁰ We can imagine the writers of these narratives reliving their conversions as they set them down in words, and we can further envision readers connecting these published accounts with their own experiences and perhaps even giving shape to what were previously inchoate feelings.

It would hardly surprise us, then, if Lawrence and Hill and our young merchant would answer Rebecca Phillips’s question about the human mind in the same way she did. “Who can control or fathom the human mind?” “I cannot,” we can imagine them saying in unison.

The Insincere Self

Even while casually leafing through Primitive writings, one quickly notices how often the phrase “if I be not deceived” (or some close variation) hitches itself to the end of sentences. So ubiquitous is its presence in Primitive Baptist discourse that the phrase, which initially calls attention to itself, soon fades into the surrounding text the way that once-novel landmarks, after one has lived near them for some time, eventually melt into the landscape. The utterance seems to be a Calvinist reflex forged from the particular conditions prevailing inside the walls of sixteenth-century Geneva but bequeathed to

³⁰ Rodger M. Payne, *The Self and the Sacred: Conversion and Autobiography in Early American Protestantism* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1998); Peter G. Stromberg, *Language and Self-Transformation: A Study of the Christian Conversion Narrative* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

subsequent generations of Calvinists living in other parts of Europe and the Americas. Antebellum Primitive Baptists found the phrase useful even in conveying uncertainty over seemingly banal issues. In 1837, a believer named Arthur Bolch devoured the first several issues a new Primitive periodical. He wrote to the editors to applaud their efforts. Bolch reckoned that Old School Baptists had found in the *Christian Doctrinal Advocate and Monitor* a much-needed champion of their cause. That is, he added, “if I am not deceived.”³¹

But it was in the discussion of obviously consequential matters, such as conversion, where this Calvinistic reflex was most often triggered. The elder Joshua Lawrence, for example, asked readers of his autobiography to “tell me what you think of it? Does it [his conversion experience] amount to being born again, or not? For I yet am afraid I am deceived.” Eyewitnesses reported that on his deathbed more than forty years later, Lawrence shuddered with similar fears.³²

Or consider J.H. Purifoy, a doctor from Snow Hill, Alabama, who endured the travails of conviction for ten years before experiencing in a moment, after a spring morning spent plowing his field, the fullness of God’s grace only to be seared hours later by withering self-doubt. “What is all this about?” he asked himself later that spring afternoon. It would be the first question in a self-interrogation that lasted the rest of his life. “You think this is religion, but it is a mistake,” Purifoy said to himself. “[I]t is nothing but the mere imagination of your own mind.” He worried that the regeneration of his soul had been a delusion. “I may be deceived,” he thought. He begged God to “undeceive [him] if

³¹ Arnold Bolch Jr., letter to the editor, *Christian Doctrinal Advocate and Spiritual Monitor*, 1 (1837): 151.

³² R.D. Hart, “Biography of Elder Joshua Lawrence,” *Primitive Baptist*, 28 October 28, 1843, 312-316.

[he] was deceived.” So uncertain was Purifoy that he refused to tell anyone about his seeming moment of pardon or his subsequent doubts. For two years, Purifoy struggled to make sense of what had happened to him. “I was deceived sure enough,” he finally concluded. Soon, though, an irresistible longing to be baptized possessed him. Uncertain and confused, but desperate for relief, Purifoy yielded to his desire, related the exercises of his mind to his church, and was baptized.

Baptism, as Purifoy knew, was a moment of great joy and fellowship. It was the central rite of his church. His baptism linked him to his Savior and to the men and women of his beloved community who stood on the riverbank as their preacher lowered him into the watery grave and lifted him up. By accepting him as a member of their church, they had ratified, as much as mere men and women could, Purifoy’s experience of grace. For two years, Purifoy had wondered whether he had been deceived. His church answered, “No.” But instead of relief, Purifoy felt “oppressed and burdened with some inexpressible something.” It would be bad enough if he had deceived himself but the thought that he also may have deceived others left him anguished. After the baptism, he fled the meetinghouse for the nearby woods where he buried his face in the earth and begged God once again to undeceive him if he had been deceived. God remained silent. “Many are the times that I have prayed that prayer,” Purifoy explained thirty years later, “and I cannot say now that I have ever received a positive answer to it...So from the day of my baptism on I have not been free from burdens...Doubts still assail me.”³³

³³ J.H. Purifoy, “Autobiography,” August 1888. Primitive Baptist Online. <http://primitivebaptist.info/mambo//content/view/117/56/>. Purifoy’s “Autobiography” was originally published in the *Gospel Messenger* in 1888.

Behind worries about deception lay a companion concern, an obsession even, with the problem of sincerity. Purifoy described himself as a “miserable hypocrite.” Thomas Hill, as we have seen, wondered why he could not be sincere. The stoic Kentucky merchant, who found himself unable to repent, decided that his prayers were counterfeit. And in 1900, in a kind of coda to a century’s worth of Primitive Baptist contemplation and self-condemnation, an elderly preacher, bedridden for nearly a month, prayed for God’s mercy, and then interrogated himself: “Am I sincere even in that?”³⁴

Questions such as these naturally arise in a world stalked by that chief artificer, Satan. The devil’s powers of deception, mimicry, and disguise threatened to warp even the most mundane of observations into harrowing investigations of truth which were inevitably undermined at every turn by a seemingly inexhaustible amount of suspicion. Like the crazed and possessed Joshua Lawrence, Primitive Baptists often discerned Satan’s cloaked hand and gravelly voice behind encounters both ordinary and extraordinary. And in their own time, the nineteenth century, Primitives knew that the always diligent Arch Fiend had developed newer, cleverer, and more successful tactics.³⁵ But Primitive Baptists so often directed their questions about sincerity at themselves. Satan might play his part, but these men and women found themselves preoccupied by their own deceptions, their own hypocrisy. Why had they turned on themselves?

That question and its answer might make more sense if we tended to them while rooted in the sensorium of the evangelical world, for, like internal exiles, Primitives found

³⁴ Silas Durand, “Fragments: Thoughts in Sickness,” May 25, 1900. Primitive Baptist Online. <http://primitivebaptist.info/mambo//content/view/439/56/>.

³⁵ James Osbourn, *A Religious Devil Detected; or, Apollyon's Soliloquies Overheard by a Listener, and the Depths of Satan Exposed* (Baltimore: Toy, 1834).

themselves both of this world and estranged from it. It is a truism that evangelicalism, especially as embodied in the Second Great Awakening, narrowed the gap between the human and the divine, between the believer and her God. This was not just the case in the realm of formal theology where John Wesley could argue, for example, that believers might attain “Christian Perfection” – that is, they could find “deliverance from inward as well as outward sin”³⁶ In church pews, along the slat benches of the camp meeting, and in the privacy of their own homes, American evangelicals were living, by the early-nineteenth century, in a world where the whispers of the Holy Ghost and visions of Jesus were commonplace. In this world – the world of popular belief and practice – emotional expression, because it was so intimately connected with the divine, was prized, seen as natural and good, a force for personal and even, perhaps, political change. Prayer was an intimate conversation with God the Father or, more often, His Son. And it was these experiential connections that were so assiduously cultivated, consciously and unconsciously, by evangelicals during prayer, revival, conversations, and even sleep. There was, as the historian Leigh Eric Schmidt has argued, an evangelical “metaphysics of the senses” centered around cultivating an intimate relationship with Jesus specifically by educating the bodily senses to become spiritual ones.³⁷ One might also describe Schmidt’s “metaphysics of the senses” as a cultural or emotional style with its own norms and unspoken rules. Whatever the terminology, it is clear that this emotional style valued the encounter with the divine, understood it as relatively unproblematic, and prized the

³⁶ Wesley quoted in Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 335.

³⁷ Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 38-77, quote on 47.

subjective emotional experience of the believer because such experience was natural. In this context, a revival, for instance, can be seen as a way to enhance the approved emotions or approved experiences (these tended to overlap) to a higher and higher intensity. Perhaps John Corrigan, a student of religion and emotion, put it best: “The pursuit of revival, a virtually constant theme in nineteenth-century Protestantism, was part of a larger cultural phenomenon, the pursuit of feeling.”³⁸

Primitive Baptists bathed in feeling, but they largely disdained its pursuit. They chastised evangelicals for “firing...the natural passions” and indulging in manipulative preaching that veered from the treacly to the alarmist.³⁹ When the theologian Edward Beecher (brother of Harriet, Henry, and Catharine; son of Lyman; and, as such, a member of the nation’s Calvinist elite) pleaded with Christians to embrace a higher standard of personal holiness because God wanted “his holy kingdom to feel on this subject as he does,” Primitive Baptists recoiled.⁴⁰ “The sensations and emotions of the Deity [are an] unsearchable...mystery,” thundered Mark Bennett, a Primitive Baptist from Tarborough, North Carolina who would have been at best bemused at the Calvinist credentials held by Edward or any of his more famous relations.⁴¹

Quite often the Primitives’ critique of evangelicals’ emotive culture closely tracked the assessments proffered by Enlightenment-influenced skeptics: by Deists, who dismissed

³⁸ John Corrigan, *Business of the Heart: Religion and Emotion in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 81.

³⁹ Joseph Biggs, letter to the editor, *Primitive Baptist*, 9 January 1836, 10.

⁴⁰ Edward Beecher, “The Nature, Importance, and Means of Eminent Holiness Throughout the Church,” *American National Preacher* 10, no. 1 and 2 (1835): 222.

⁴¹ Mark Bennett, letter to the editor, *Primitive Baptist*, 13 February 1836, 42.

the possibility of evangelicals' running conversation with God, and by rationalists, who reduced the dramas of revival to something quite like what modern-day sociologists term peer pressure. But the Primitives had more in common with the evangelicals with whom they had recently split than with these apostles of the Enlightenment. Instead, the Primitive Baptist critique of evangelicals' emotive culture sprang from a deep well of Calvinist restraint that simultaneously acknowledged frequent and authentic experiences of the divine and cautioned against mistaking enthusiasm for genuine religious affections. Though one is hard-pressed to find in Primitive Baptist writings more than a passing reference to Jonathan Edwards, it was the eighteenth-century New Englander's words that would have spoken directly to Thomas Hill or J.H. Purifoy: "How great...the resemblance be," Edwards wrote in his *Treatise on Religious Affections*, "as to all outward expressions and appearances, between an hypocrite and a true saint!"⁴²

More immediate, though, than their theological heritage were Primitives' persistent frustrations during private and public devotions. Thomas Hill, for one, knew full well the broken link between outward appearances and inward reality. He had spent years attending church meetings, offering prayers to God, repenting of his sins, and bringing his behavior in line with Christian expectations. His efforts largely proved futile. If he occasionally felt the joy other believers described, it inevitably dissolved several days or even hours later. On the eve of his brush with suicide, Hill watched from afar as his neighbors in the small settlement along the Little Pigeon River testified publicly about their private ecstasy: "Though at that time there was great excitement amongst the people," he wrote,

⁴² Edwards quoted in George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 287.

“and many going forward to be prayed for, I never did, thinking it may be would wear off, as I had had so many shocks and I hated to appear as a hypocrite.” Experiences like Hill’s were common among the first generation of Primitive Baptists. These were people who, like Hill, stood inside evangelicals’ emotional world but struggled to cultivate that world’s normative emotional and spiritual experiences. And so they saw themselves as hypocrites, as insincere, as impostors — people who went through the motions of prayer and revival and whatever else passed for Christian behavior (e.g., abstaining from drink or dancing) but whose pursuit of feeling, to use John Corrigan’s apt phrase, felt to them perpetually stymied. Primitive Baptists would go on to develop a thorough-going critique of evangelicalism that tied its theological betrayals to its emotional demands, but all that came later, in the 1820s and 1830s. First came experience itself. In their youth, during the 1790s and early 1800s, the first generation of Primitive Baptists lived through the great upsurge of evangelical sects in the young republic. They were, it is true, children of the revival. But as they described it — as they felt it — they were the Awakening’s orphans, watching alone from the edge of the scene, like Thomas Hill, as their brothers and sisters in Christ celebrated a connection they failed to make.

The Divided Self

How, then, can we reconcile the Primitives’ uncertainty with their evident success in organizing and maintaining a coherent resistance to the juggernaut of evangelical Protestantism? One possible solution lies in the Primitives’ penchant for dualistic thinking. The same doubt-saturated believers who lived in an uncertain world could,

especially in moments of crisis, pipe their ambiguous experience into two clear categories. The uncertain self found a home in Primitive Baptist meeting houses, but dualistic thinking took shelter there too. This dualism was everywhere: in hymns and poems, diaries and autobiographies. The anonymous poet quoted above elsewhere concluded that “My life’s a pleasure and a pain / A real loss, a real gain; / A glorious paradise of joys, / A grievous prison of annoys.” The epitome of such thinking might be found in the person of the Primitive Baptist elder and polemicist Joshua Lawrence, who discovered, as he put it, that there were “two armies” inside him, “a contrariety of passions, and spirits in me... warring one against the other...by day and night.” Lawrence ended his autobiography with a mammoth catalogue of these contending forces, arrayed on the page in two columns like so:

The devil.	Christ.
Angels of the devil	The angels of Christ.
Unbelief	Faith.
Despair	Hope.
The desire of the flesh	The desire of the soul.
Lying	Truth.
Strife	Fellowship.
Fornication	Lawfulness. ⁴³

Lawrence identified ninety pairs of warring principles inside himself. He said their combat was eternal and irreconcilable.

Lawrence carried on his spiritual combat alone but not in isolation. Many Primitive Baptists fought nearly identical wars within themselves. They were, as they put it, “half saint, and sinner half.” For many, eternal conflict became a sign of a renewed heart,

⁴³ Joshua Lawrence, “Victorious Grace,” *Primitive Baptist*, 11 December 1841, 357. This was the final part of Lawrence’s autobiography, which was serialized over five issues of the *Primitive Baptist*. The original manuscript can be found at the Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

the struggle an indication that at least Satan found himself having to fight for one's soul rather than being able to easily claim it.⁴⁴ That hardly meant the tumult would end or that those torn by strife would earn a respite. Those who found themselves at ease were, in fact, considered suspect. "The christian's life abounds with contrarities," wrote John Watson, who, like Lawrence, catalogued a list of opposing forces. "There is no...escape from these conflicts in this life."⁴⁵ But even a conflict so cleanly divided between good and evil did not completely escape the Primitives' penchant for skepticism. Each side "may be so nicely counterfeited," warned one believer, "that the fraud shall hardly be detected."⁴⁶ While there is abundant evidence that such spiritual combat could lead to despair and stalemate, there is, too, the sense that in the split subjectivity of the ordinary Primitive Baptist, one side or the other often had the upper hand at any one moment. In this way, the Primitive Baptist could and did avoid stalemate and would not wallow in open-ended doubt.

Daniel Parker took Lawrence's dualism one step further, espousing a "Two-Seeds" doctrine that seemed to make Satan and God co-equals. Parker had come of age along the Georgia frontier where he witnessed the aftershocks of the Great Revival and, in 1802, at the age of twenty-one, was baptized. In subsequent years, Parker found work, variously, as a preacher, a farmer, a land-speculator, and a politician. But the pulpit was his calling. Contemporaries described him as an archetypal frontiersman: rough-hewn, a man "of the gipsy type," poorly educated, and possessed of coarse manners and an indomitable will.

⁴⁴ Watson, *Old Baptist Test*, 20.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 195.

⁴⁶ Amans Veritatis, "A Difference between the Spirit of Christ and Mere Party Zeal," *Christian Doctrinal Advocate and Spiritual Monitor* 1 (1837): 6.

That obstinacy sometimes seemed in need of enemies, and Parker soon found them in the horseback Methodist circuit riders who preached an Arminian doctrine at odds with Parker's predestinarianism. By the 1820s, Parker had escalated his battle against Arminianism. Not only Methodists, but all those who supported missionary schemes drew his ire. Two Seedism became Parker's attempt to justify his anti-missionary Calvinism and explain the growing presence of “devil sent” missionaries among the Old Baptist faithful.⁴⁷

Two Seedism held that God had implanted the divine seed of Christ in Adam while Satan had implanted his seed in Eve. Adam's descendants, therefore, composed the True Church, which had existed since the Creation. They were the elect. The non-elect, meanwhile, were the literal children of Satan. After their time on earth, the descendants of each seed would meet with their respective makers. As theology, Two Seedism was, to say the least, glib. But it did grapple, however hamfistedly, with the problem faced by all religions, namely how to reconcile a benevolent God with the presence of evil in the world. Parker's solution to this hoary dilemma was to explain that all evil emanated not from God but from the Devil, who was God's eternal opposite.⁴⁸ The point was to somehow separate God from responsibility for evil and for the creation of the damned.

Two Seedism attracted scads of critics, not least among them many of Parker's fellow Primitive Baptists who worried that he was making a mockery of their predestinarianism. Parker's own church fractured over Two Seedism, and quite a few

⁴⁷ Dan B. Wimberly, *Frontier Religion: Elder Daniel Parker, His Religious and Political Life* (Austin: Eakin Press, 2002), vii-xvii, 1-25, quote from 15; Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 178.

⁴⁸ Parker first outlined his thoughts on Two Seedism in 1826 in a pair of pamphlets, *Views on the Two Seeds* and *A Supplement or Explanation of My Views on the Two Seeds*.

Primitive Baptist polemicists, momentarily tired of lambasting missionaries, directed their ire towards “the author of American Manichaeism.”⁴⁹ Critics quickly latched on to the fact that Parker’s scheme elevated Satan from one of God’s fallen angels to a co-eternal and seemingly co-equal presence. Many Primitive Baptists were particularly bothered by Two Seedism’s apparent disavowal of Adam’s original sin. If Adam had not fallen, then man’s desperate need to have his corrupt soul regenerated by the Holy Spirit seemed to have passed by the wayside. This was “nonsense in the extreme,” fumed one Old School Baptist elder, while another wondered if Parker might be compelled to remove himself to the Rockies where he “could scatter [his] two seeds among the Mustangs and wild Ass.”⁵⁰

Yet denunciations like these failed to prevent a string of churches — many in Parker’s stronghold of southern Illinois but still others in Indiana, Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas — from embracing “Parkerism,” as the homespun theology came to be called. Meanwhile, the memberships of many other Old Baptist churches, without explicitly adopting Two Seedism, had no difficulty identifying Parkerism and its adherents as kin. Parker’s Old Baptists along the frontier were, after all, Calvinists engaged in the fight against missions and other assorted ills afflicting modern-day Baptists.

Over time Two-Seeds-in-the-Spirit Baptists became little more than a curiosity. By the late-nineteenth century, the vast majority of Primitive Baptist churches had disavowed Parkerism.⁵¹ Modern-day Primitive Baptists, if they address Two Seedism at all, consider it

⁴⁹ The epithet was Alexander Campbell’s, but it was a sentiment shared by Parker’s Primitive Baptist critics. Campbell quoted in Wimberly 151.

⁵⁰ G.M. Thompson to Jesse C. Knight, 16 November 1857, B.F. Knight Papers, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University; unnamed Parker critic quoted in Wimberly, 136.

⁵¹ Jeffrey Wayne Taylor, “Self-Definition in the Formation of the Primitive Baptist Movement as Expressed in Their Three Major Periodicals, 1832-1848” (Ph.D diss., Baylor University, 2000), 114.

something of an embarrassment, a moment of doctrinal inconsistency and exuberance that emerged from an otherwise estimable Baptist elder. Meanwhile, missionary Baptists have been inclined to tar all Primitive Baptists with Parker's stain. In their eyes, Two Seedism was nothing but a more candid version of the Primitives' "hyper-Calvinism," a theology they already considered absurd.⁵²

In these somewhat abstruse theological debates, the cultural context surrounding the birth and early growth of Two Seedism has been neglected. If it remained a distinctly minority taste, Two Seedism nonetheless distilled a strain of popular theology scattered among Old School Baptists along the frontier. Parker freely admitted he did not invent the theology but rather had heard it circulating in his churches as early as 1812.⁵³ For theologians, it may be worthwhile to label Two Seedism a heresy, but for cultural and religious historians it may be more useful to see Two Seedism as part of a continuum of dualistic thought that flourished among Primitive Baptists. The eternal war raging in Joshua Lawrence's soul found external expression in Daniel Parker's homegrown theology. In Parker's world, it became especially clear who were the children of God and who were Satan's offspring. Primitive Baptists like Parker and his followers claimed descent from the apostolic church, and they explained that all other Christian sects had gone astray somewhere along the line. In Parker's glib theology, it was but a short step from this claim to an even more explosive one: that Two Seed churches were the elect and their opponents — missionaries, Methodists, Arminians of all stripes — were literally children of the Devil.

⁵² See, for example, William W. Sweet, *The Baptists, 1783-1830: A Collection of Source Material* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1964).

⁵³ Wimberly, 73.

American Manichaeism such as Parker's or Lawrence's shadowed the uncertain Primitive Baptist self, offering it in moments of crisis or weakness a sturdy defense from the doubts that might otherwise bedevil it.

The Assured Self

There were other refuges, too. Dualism's fortress may have arrested uncertainty's advance, but it left Calvinism's dignity and majesty slumped outside its walls. Beyond those walls, Primitives found that their faith might still shelter them, while giving them a measure of esteem that supposedly could no more be found in a doctrine so austere and harrowing. That Primitive Baptists testified abundantly to their faith's beauty and comfort left their critics flummoxed, if not incensed. These critics equated the Primitives' predestinarianism with abject fatalism and considered the Old Baptists' belief in particular election (the idea that God had preordained the salvation of only a select portion of humanity) to be nothing but obeisance to a God who was, in Charles Finney's words, "an infinite tyrant."⁵⁴ It is not difficult to see how Finney and the others came to their conclusions. For when they were not lashing out at missionaries, individual Primitive Baptists spent a good portion of their time — in print, at least — sighing over mankind's depravity and, especially, their own personal fallenness. As we have seen, the variations on Primitive Baptist uncertainty often left believers feeling low, disconnected from God, and even debased. And this is surely why so many outsiders considered their faith bleak.

⁵⁴ Charles Grandison Finney quoted in Mark Noll, *America's God*, 307.

But those depths were labyrinthine, offering the Primitive Baptist believer various routes of spiritual progress, many of them, at least to those outside the faith, unlikely. One finds, for instance, that Primitives regularly referred to themselves as worms, a self-description that is painful to read even at this great distance. But that self-abnegating, if not self-floathing, comparison is revealing, for the same words were spoken by the psalmist who declared, "I am a worm, and no man."⁵⁵ And it is the first line of this same psalm — psalm 22 — that Jesus cried out while bleeding on the cross: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"⁵⁶ So when Wilson Thompson or Joshua Lawrence or any Primitive Baptist described himself as a worm, he was, at once, demonstrating his distance and closeness to God. He was debasing himself even as he connected himself to God by adopting his Savior's voice. For Primitive Baptists, these two seemingly opposite emotional vectors — one of estrangement, the other affinity — traveled hand in hand.⁵⁷

Doubt, too, could be strangely comforting. It had brought many of them together, after all. Among other Christians, they felt isolated, "alone in every sense of the word," as a man named Lee Hanks put it. "They told me they had no doubts and fears," Hanks wrote about the people he later learned to call Arminians. "[B]ut I never could get to the place where I had no doubts and fears." An anxious Hanks shared his concerns with his employer, a Methodist with whom he often discussed religious issues. Hanks told the

⁵⁵ Ps 22:6 KJV.

⁵⁶ Ps 22:1 KJV.

⁵⁷ It is this kind of double action that makes me skeptical of Bertram Wyatt-Brown's claim that the Primitives' focus on human depravity and inability indicates that they were more concerned with justice than with love. It seems to me that these two categories were, as they say, inextricably linked. Primitives craved God's love precisely because they knew He was just to condemn them. See Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *The Shaping of Southern Culture: Honor, Grace, and War, 1760s-1890s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 126.

Methodist man that he felt an instant kinship with the local Primitive Baptists whom he had just met. The Methodist man shrugged. Primitives were “demoralizing,” he said. But for Hanks and people like him, the affinity they felt for Primitive Baptists was not only immediate but uplifting. Hanks reported that the first Old Baptists he met “told my experience better than I could...they could tell my feelings so well.”⁵⁸ “Like one alone I seem to be / Oh! is there any one like me?” they sang, in a hymn directed not at God but at each other. The answer echoed in the massed voices of the church. Yes, *there are others like me*. “Thus filled with doubts, I ask to know / Come, tell me, is it thus with you?” Questions sung in unison: this was what Lee Hanks had searched for.

Even when the answers to the ultimate questions never arrived (and they rarely did), Primitives could live patiently with ambiguity. The tolerance for a measure of uncertainty was there in their formal theological expositions, such as when John Watson described the belief in election as “one of the deep, unsearchable things of God, which no man has fully comprehended.”⁵⁹ And it also was present, if in characteristically more anxious fashion, when Primitives described their inner experiences. When Joshua Lawrence, for instance, nervously asked his readers whether or not he was saved, his question also left room for contemplation, for bubbling mystery.

Primitives found these hints of assurance and followed them when possible. I have dwelled on uncertainty because the Primitives did and because, as we will see in the next chapter, it spurred them to action. But of course many believers testified to an awesome

⁵⁸ Lee Hanks, “The Conflicts of an Orphan,” Primitive Baptist Online, <http://primitivebaptist.info/mambo//content/view/124/36/>. Hanks originally published this account in 1886 in the *Primitive Monitor*.

⁵⁹ John Watson, *The Old Baptist Test*, 57.

and lasting encounter with Jesus. It is no secret that a belief in the absolute predestination of all things could efficiently soothe anxiety rather than activate it. It is simply the case that the Primitives' legacy is that their experiences — their selves — were more often in flux, representative of an older style of Protestantism that was quickly losing favor among Christians in antebellum America.

Conclusion

Even when Primitive Baptists found themselves engaged in clear-cut spiritual warfare, they did not channel their energy outward in the way other Protestants in antebellum America did. They did not, for instance, set out to subdue evil in the world as did missionary Baptists and other evangelicals fired by millennialism. Instead, even the dualistic strain of Primitive Baptist thinking could turn itself inward where the battle seemed to be about perception itself, where sincerity and deception warred eternally for control over the believer's mind. And yet this internal conflict did ultimately find itself ranging out into the outside world. Instead of reforming drunkards or working earnestly to deliver the gospel to the heathens or doing any of the other things that came to be identified with evangelical Protestantism before the Civil War, Primitive Baptists channelled their energies into fighting missionaries. Missionaries' key activity, of course, was raising money and thus they were inevitably connected to the marketplace, a realm of (secular) uncertainty. As the Primitives described them, missionaries were frauds, impostors, wolves in sheep's clothing, spies, spiders spinning webs of entrapment, people hiding "behind the curtain," as Joshua Lawrence said. Or they were lustful, out of control,

reckless, in need of supervision. Of course, all of these descriptions of missionaries were descriptions Primitives had provided about themselves. The Primitives' inner turmoil had provided them with a built-in vocabulary for describing and categorizing the outside world, including the missionaries they found so loathsome. They projected their uncertain selves onto their enemies.

And what about us? Where do these lives of old believers lead us? Or, put another way, why should we care, or, perhaps, why do we care? In our rich histories of American religion, the studies of antebellum Protestantism stand out for their verve, their rigor, and their historiographical ingenuity. But as these scholarly treasures have been brought down from the attic, polished, and put on display in the academy's front parlor, the Primitive Baptists remained wedged in an anteroom, still dusty and cobwebbed.⁶⁰ If nothing else, I have sought in this chapter to dust off the history of a fascinating sect of believers sometimes lost in the throng of American evangelicalism.

But I also have sought to do more, to capture something of "the relentless unforeseen"—that welter of experience and feeling which constitute life but which when seen retrospectively (as we must) can too easily harden into "History," "Theology," "Class," or "Fate."⁶¹ And in recapturing the flux of Primitive Baptist believers' lives, we begin to sense what catalyzed their movement. It was not exactly the high theology of John Calvin. Nor was it identity, per se. It was something far more fluid and nebulous, an emotional experience believers described as uncertainty, doubt, and insincerity. As so many of them

⁶⁰ I borrow the metaphor of the attic and the front parlor from Henry F. May, "The Recovery of American Religious History" *American Historical Review*, 70 (October 1964), 79-92.

⁶¹ Both the phrase and concept are Philip Roth's. He puts it all much better than I do, of course. See *The Plot Against America* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2004), 113-114.

pointed out, they knew little, if anything, of Calvinist doctrine nor were they members of the church when doubt entered their lives and refused to leave. Theology itself was not prior to emotional experience. Emotional experience informed the theology even as the theology eventually did its part to channel the flux of experience.

The Primitives' Calvinism often ratified their emotional experiences. But perhaps more importantly, their Calvinism served as a balm that alleviated, if only temporarily, the unforeseen doubt and uncertainty that suffused these predestined lives.

CHAPTER THREE

**MONEY, MISSIONARIES, AND THE MARKET
IN THE PRIMITIVE BAPTIST IMAGINATION**

Introduction

On September 24, 1834, C.B. Hassell, a merchant in Williamston, North Carolina saw that supplies were running low. On that early fall day, the hard-to-come-by item was something at once more ephemeral and more substantive than Hassell's usual stock of dry goods. Christianity, the merchant noted, was "scarce in market and in little demand if we may use the terms."¹ Hassell need not have bothered with the politesse. For years, he and his fellow Primitive Baptists had been using the language of the marketplace to discuss their religious affairs. The metaphors arrived easily enough. Centuries worth of English usage linked money and salvation; in the language of the King James Bible, God had "bought" the souls of those He saved, and Christ had come "to give his life a ransom for many."² The old usages took on added freight and gained new companions as the antebellum market revolution, panics and all, pulled Jefferson's agrarian republic into the modern age while bequeathing to generations of Americans a new vocabulary for making sense of their

¹ C.B. Hassell, letter to the editor, *Signs of the Times*, September 24, 1834, 308.

² 2 Pt 2:1 KJV; Mt 20:28 KJV.

circumstances, economic and otherwise. From their pulpits, preachers encouraged thrift and industry before thundering against mammon, whose evil influence sometimes seemed to spread as rapidly as the new networks of canals and turnpikes crawling along the nation's skin.³

But for the Primitive Baptists, the market — its sprawling lines of communication and the capital that coursed through them like blood — triggered an acute crisis. Money, in some broad sense, had brought them into being. Money had pushed them out of their familiar Baptist churches and into new meetinghouses that they adorned with old-time names. They loathed the missionaries — the beggars, as they called them — the young men scouring the countryside for funds, the Bible-toting thieves who “had the same taste for money that the horse leech has for blood.”⁴ In the 1810s and 1820s, when Baptist churches began soliciting these “beggars” and choosing to collect money for their new missionary and benevolent crusades, the people who would become Primitives decided that greed had corrupted their companions and that the boards, conventions, societies, and organizations that controlled the missionaries would enslave them, too, if they did not soon leave. It was in this sense, then, that money created and re-created the Primitive Baptists, for the issue never did go away. In 1835, for instance, when the editors of the *Primitive Baptist*, an epistolary biweekly devoted to Calvinist theology and the anti-missionary cause, included in their inaugural issue a table listing by name and amount what they saw as the exorbitant salaries paid to evangelical missionaries, the list so inflamed the already partisan

³ Kenneth Moore Startup, *The Root of All Evil: The Protestant Clergy and the Economic Mind of the Old South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997).

⁴ John Taylor, *Thoughts on Missions* (Franklin County, KY :n.p., 1820), 4.

readership that the next issue featured an editorial plea to readers to please refrain from outright ridicule and abuse when writing letters exposing missionaries' errors.⁵ Appeals like this had little, if any, effect. Denunciations of missionaries' avarice and celebrations of Primitive Baptists' self-abnegation were staples of the early-nineteenth century Old School Baptist cause.

Yet Primitive Baptist meetinghouses were not filled with paupers and ascetics. There were believers like C.B. Hassell, men of little means who had become men of middling means who, eventually, became men of wealth; men buffeted by the economy's sudden swings; and men in the South, certainly, who presided over a family both black and white. Indeed, the only study to attempt anything like a systematic investigation of the socio-economic profiles of Baptists involved in the missionary schism found that, in the North Carolina piedmont at least, members on each side of the conflict possessed similar demographic profiles. If anything, the regional anti-missionary faction tended to be somewhat older and own slightly more slaves.⁶ The numbers remained similarly aligned at the smaller, congregational level where the fight over missions played out most dramatically. Census, marriage, and estate records show, for instance, that members of the pro-missionary and anti-missionary factions in the Tarboro Baptist Church – the flash

⁵ Editorial, *Primitive Baptist*, 9 January 1836, 8.

⁶ Keith Robert Burich, "The Primitive Baptist Schism in North Carolina: A Study of the Professionalization of the Baptist Ministry" (M.A. thesis, 1973).

point of the schism in North Carolina — were economically comparable.⁷ A majority on either side of the divide appear to have been members of yeoman households — that is, households headed by self-working farmers who sometimes owned slaves.⁸

The history of Primitive men and women such as these, and the larger history of the sect's relationship to the antebellum marketplace, have long been overshadowed by the searing rhetoric Primitive Baptists used to attack missionaries. As a result, historians have interpreted the Primitives' disdain for the evangelicals' "taste for money" as a sure sign of the Primitives' poverty and, therefore, evidence of the economic origins of an apparently religious movement.⁹ In these tellings, anti-missionary sentiment — and the predestinarian Calvinism that, in the Primitives' case, undergirded it — becomes a makeshift refuge thrown together by poor Baptists shaken by the rumblings of the market's boom-and-bust cycle and embittered by the success of their social betters. In some instances, these impoverished, intransigent, and yet honorable Primitives become emblems of an antique

⁷ I cross-referenced names in the Tarboro Church record book with information gleaned from census schedules, abstracts of wills, and marriage records. Tarboro Primitive Baptist Church Record Book, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University; David B. Gammon, ed., *Abstracts of Wills of Edgecombe County, North Carolina*, vols. 3-4 (Raleigh: D.B. Gammon, 1993); Ruth Smith Williams, ed., *Marriages of Early Edgecombe County, North Carolina, 1773-1868* (Rocky Mount, NC: Dixie Letter Service, 1959); Stephen E. Bradley, Jr., ed., *The 1800 and 1810 Federal Censuses: Edgecombe County, North Carolina* (South Boston, VA: S.E. Bradley, 1989) and *The 1830 Federal Census: Edgecombe County, North Carolina* (South Boston, VA: S.E. Bradley, 1987); Dorothy Williams Potter, ed., *1820 Federal Census of North Carolina*, vol. 19 (Tullahoma, TN: Dorothy Williams Potter, 1972).

⁸ The definition of yeoman farmer household comes from Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 47-55.

⁹ Ira Durwood Hudgins, "The Anti-Missionary Controversy Among Baptists," *The Chronicle* 14 (Oct. 1951), 147-63; Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "The Antimission Movement in the Jacksonian South: A Study in Regional Folk Culture," *Journal of Southern History* 36 (1970), 501-29; Wyatt-Brown, *The Shaping of Southern Culture: Honor, Grace, and War, 1760s-1890s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); T. Scott Miyakawa, *Protestants and Pioneers: Individualism and Conformity on the American Frontier* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964); William W. Sweet, ed., *The Baptists: 1783-1830: A Collection of Source Material* (New York: Cooper Square, 1964); John G. Crowley, *Primitive Baptists of the Wiregrass South: 1815 to the Present* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998).

South, of “the persistent Southern struggle to preserve old values in an alien, changing, and often self-righteous world.”¹⁰ (All that is missing, really, from such accounts are the colorful details: pitchforks and muskets, or, in later eras, a sawed-off shotgun, overalls, and a steely gaze into the black-and-white camera’s lens.)

This has all been too tidy. The Primitive Baptists’ position in the antebellum class structure and the relationship between their Calvinism and the capitalist marketplace were far more complex than either the Primitives, their opponents, or their scholarly chroniclers have supposed. The Primitives relationship to money and the class system was a patched together affair in which the language of the market and the Christian rhetoric of poverty both coexisted and clashed. Primitives quarried the Scriptures for symbols that would help explain the fluctuations of the nation’s nascent market economy. In turn, Primitives found the marketplace to be a useful metaphor for describing their place in a fractious religious world. It was in this sense, then, that “class” and its assorted sociological and historical squires — money, the “market revolution,” economic development, financial panics, and so on — found themselves connected to the Primitives’ revolt: they inevitably entered the lists, but they had not initiated the combat.

For the Primitives, the market is perhaps best understood as a cultural resource, though one they were not always conscious of mining. Consider Cushing Biggs Hassell, the Williamston merchant and Primitive Baptist elder who noted that true Christianity was in short supply. He raged against the modern age’s infatuation with money while insisting that the ample profits from his mercantile operation proved God’s beneficent foresight. Or

¹⁰ Wyatt-Brown, *The Shaping of Southern Culture*, 134-135.

consider Joshua Lawrence, the foremost Primitive Baptist polemicist whose patriarchal attacks on money-hungry missionaries carried deep within them, like contraband, problematic affinities with motherhood and dependence. Neither Hassell nor Lawrence were typical Primitive Baptists. But neither were they anomalous figures within an Old School Baptist world filled with fellow believers who heard their preaching and read their published words. Studying them closely suggests some ways that uncertain Primitive Baptist selves like those examined in chapter two mediated theological and economic concerns – predestinarianism and anti-missionism, on the one hand, and market fluctuations and missionaries’ money-raising, on the other – and thereby created meaning and shaped action.

Christian Scarcity, or Calvinism in Tough Times

It is true that some Primitive thought consciously exhibited Manichaeian tendencies that certainly would have been congenial to people who found themselves on the losing end of the market revolution. Drawing on the Scottish Free Church theologian W.G. Blaikie, C.B. Hassell, for example, divided the world into “Sethite” and “Cainite” lineages. The Sethites were “the sons of God”: foolish and sinful, like all men, but preachers of righteousness and God-fearing. The Cainite lineage, on the other hand, had been responsible for most of the practical and aesthetic advances in human history. They had invented musical instruments and blacksmithing, for example. But the Cainites were the bearers of evil; like their ancestor, they were cursed.¹¹ To Hassell and other Primitives, the

¹¹ Cushing Biggs Hassell and Sylvester Hassell, *History of the Church of God, From the Creation to A.D. 1885; Including Especially the History of the Kehukee Primitive Baptist Association* (Middletown, NY: Gilbert Beebe’s Sons, 1886; reprint, Conley, GA: Old School Hymnal, 1973), 55 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

meaning of this exercise in theological genealogy was clear: all manner of human improvements and progress unaided by faith in the one true God were nothing. This sort of bifurcation, at times, looked like a zero-sum game. “While, therefore, the stars of human art and pharisaical enchantments are in the ascendant, the light of heavenly truth appears to be seen nearing the horizon,” Hassell wrote. “[T]he more dazzling the former, the more obscure the latter.”¹²

This was a deeply pessimistic worldview. It confirmed for the Primitives that their anti-missionary convictions placed them in an inevitable conflict not only with the religious changes in their churches but with the economic and technological innovations transforming American society. Here market and church fused into a new kind of dangerous wage-labor technology. Missionaries were “hired men,” “religion became a trade,” and churches decided “who should work the machine.”¹³ And the machine was mesmerizing. As if transported by rail cars or shipped aboard a river-bound vessel, evangelicals were “imagining themselves going to heaven as it were by steam.”¹⁴ Indeed, the revolutions in transportation and communication that marked the Jacksonian era and rapidly expanded the nation’s commerce often appeared as fiendish co-conspirators with the Primitives’ evangelical opponents. Like toll collectors on one of the early republic’s

¹² W. Garrard and C. B. Hassell, *Friendly Greetings Across the Water, or the Love Letters of Elders Garrard & Hassell* (New York: Chatterton & Crist, 1847), 18.

¹³ “Close Communion,” *Primitive Baptist*, 9 January 1836, 14. This article was a reprint of the 1834 circular letter from the Little River Association.

¹⁴ C.B. Hassell, “The Salvation of the Righteous is of the Lord,” *Primitive Baptist*, 26 March 1836, 85. This image, a common one in Old Baptist circles and, perhaps, in the culture at large, appeared a few years later in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s 1843 allegory, “The Celestial Railroad,” in which naive pilgrims eagerly let Mr. Smooth-it-away lead them by train and steamboat to their doom. Hassell and his son Sylvester were fond of Hawthorne’s satirization of what they saw as modern religion’s foolish optimism. The story appears at the end of the Hassells’ *History of the Church of God*, serving as aesthetic coda to the larger work’s symphony of facts, narrative streams, and arguments.

new plank roads, missionary agents wished “death for all who dare to go to heaven by any other turnpike road and not pay toll at their gate.”¹⁵ Antebellum America’s banking and currency debates also filtered into Primitive discourse. Benevolent enterprises and national missionary societies could easily be compared with the “monster” Bank of the United States, making the differences between evangelicals and Primitives as stark as those between “bank notes and love.”¹⁶

But the market’s language, categories, and assumptions also nested comfortably in the Primitives’ Calvinist theology. Indebtedness became the ruling metaphor. A church clerk, for instance, reminded his fellows of their helplessness in the face of divine judgment: “the debt hang[s] over us,” he wrote, “ready to crush us to everlasting ruin, ourselves being unable to cancel the most minute particle of our indebtedness.” Meanwhile, “justice” cried “in tones of thunder, pay me what thou owest.” In the traditional version of this scenario, Jesus became the atonement. But in the church clerk’s hands, Christ also became “our surety,” as if Jesus were bailing his believers out of the poorhouse.¹⁷ In the religious verse that graced the back pages of the Primitives’ many periodicals, this relationship was succinctly put: “He paid out for a bankrupt crew / The debt that to himself was due.”¹⁸

¹⁵ Joshua Lawrence, letter to the editor, *Primitive Baptist*, 27 February 1836, 50.

¹⁶ Lawrence, letter to the editor, *Primitive Baptist*, 9 January 1836, 4.

¹⁷ S. W. [?] Outterbridge, Spring Green Church (Flat Swamp, Martin Co., NC), to the Kehukee Association, 21 August 1869. Bryant Bennett Papers, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University.

¹⁸ “Mystery of Faith,” *Primitive Baptist*, 14 May 1836, 144. For similar sentiments about the crucifixion-as-debt-payment, see, for example, hymn 342 in James Osbourn, ed., *North Carolina Sonnets, or a Selection of Choice Hymns, for the Use of the Old School Baptists; Compiled by the Recommendation of the Kehukee Association* (Baltimore: John D. Toy, 1844), 197.

The Primitives' problem, then, was not the simple fact that religion could be found in the antebellum marketplace, but that so little of the true stuff could be found in the stalls. "[P]rimitive theology is a very scarce commodity in our market," lamented one Old Baptist.¹⁹ Meanwhile, evangelicals' missionary societies flooded the market with, as another Primitive put it, religious "artifice."²⁰ But distinguishing between truth and falsity proved difficult. As any antebellum Protestant knew, Satan worked tirelessly to ensnare the gullible in his demonic traps. And as good Calvinists, the Primitives also knew that mankind – fallen, stained by sin, yet proud – was especially susceptible to self-deception. In this loamy theological soil, the language of the market blossomed. Truth and falsity, after all, were categories whose utility had secular as well as religious applications. In the Primitive Baptists' religious marketplace, the sinner's "promises and promissory notes are nothing worth," wrote the preacher W. Garrard to his friend Hassell. "God puts no trust in them." These false notes circulated among the deluded, and they were accepted, of course, by their benighted churches ("free-will [...] banking companies," as Garrard acidly described them). But one bank issued paper notes guaranteed to never lose their value. The "high bank of heaven" run by "the great bankers, the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost" made sure that anyone who held their notes would "receive payment in full."²¹

But this heavenly bank chose its customers. Indeed, the constant theme of this kind of Primitive rhetoric, was that free will – the ability, if you will, to choose to conduct transactions at the "high bank of heaven" – was, at best, an historical anachronism. What,

¹⁹ John Clark, letter to the editor, *Primitive Baptist*, 14 May 1836, 135.

²⁰ Joshua Lawrence, letter to the editor, *Primitive Baptist*, 23 January 1836, 17.

²¹ Garrard and Hassell, *Friendly Greetings*, 8.

after all, was God's covenant with Israel but a contract properly understood? And what was the Christian covenant of grace but a new contract to replace the old Mosaic one? In the "bargain" struck in Sinai's shadows, God promised the Israelites temporal rewards and punishments based upon the Israelites' ability to follow the legal compact delivered to Moses. "Man was a party" to this "contract," as the *Primitive Baptist* bi-weekly explained. But man – inherently depraved and, therefore, unable to fulfill all the obligations of the Mosaic law – was consigned to damnation under the very covenant to which he had agreed. This awful Mosaic law, however, had been dispatched in blood and thorns at Calvary. Jesus' sacrifice initiated a new covenant. Here the Primitives made a crucial distinction. Whereas "man was a party" – "a contractor" – at Sinai, he was merely a bystander to the transaction at Golgotha. "Christ was the purchaser, and God's people the thing purchased," as the *Primitive Baptist* put it. Man was the subject of this deal between various parts of the Godhead. But precisely because fallen man's redemption was at stake, he could not be allowed to actively participate in the transaction.²² Of course, these were terms of the Primitives' Calvinism: God was exalted, man was scorned. By removing man from an active role in the deal, theological exercises like this one seem to attack the ideological underpinnings of the capitalist marketplace. In fact, they suggest how liberating a predestinarian faith could be. That was, at first, how it worked for C.B. Hassell.

For Hassell, the absolute predestination of all things quelled life's chaos. "Were things otherwise," he confided in his unpublished autobiography, "all would be uncertainty

²² "The Two Covenants," *Primitive Baptist*, 3 October 1835, 5-8. For a similar account of this wholly "divine transaction," see Trust, "The Final Salvation of the Redeemed Not Doubtful, But Certain," *Christian Doctrinal Advocate and Spiritual Monitor* 1 (1837): 114-17.

and confusion.”²³ His father’s untimely death, struggles with his mercantile trade, personal slights: these troubles stemmed not from happenstance (he did “not believe in the existence of such a thing as ‘luck’ or ‘chance’ anyway”²⁴), not from the mundane uncertainties that loosen even the most securely tethered lives, and not, ultimately, from market forces or political developments. Rather, God’s hand — “Divine Providence,” as Hassell capitalized it — moved all; it leveled the ridges and furrows of Hassell’s life. Writing in his characteristic third-person limited narrative style Hassell announced: “[T]he omnipotence of this doctrine reconciles to his mind the result of all matters whether apparently adverse or prosperous.” One detects here how a seemingly fearsome predestinarian theology could, in fact, liberate the very people it appeared to shackle.²⁵ “He is such a strong believer in predestination that he views all his own actions ever to have been for the best,” Hassell wrote.²⁶ How could they not be? God, who was good, predestined them. And in prosperous circumstances, such conclusions were irresistible. “And how could he doubt it,” Hassell continued, “when he reflected that the Lord had taken him while a penniless orphan boy, & from that moment to manhood & maturer age had never let him go, but had unceasingly given him & his through him a sufficiency of the necessities of this life?”²⁷

²³ Cushing Biggs Hassell, *Auto-Biography of C. B. Hassell* (n.p.: 1840?), 23-24, Cushing Biggs Hassell Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

²⁵ For similar sentiments (God’s involvement in everything as being a happy fact) from another Primitive believer, see, for instance, “A Conversation on the Question,” *Christian Doctrinal Advocate and Spiritual Monitor* 1 (1837): 81-4. The motivational force of Calvinism was, of course, one of Max Weber’s primary concerns in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Scribner, 1958).

²⁶ Hassell, *Auto-Biography*, 47.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 58.

Hassell called himself “an exception to the general rule” – the “general rule” being the inability of Primitive Baptist preachers to combine religious and secular labors. Many elders were too devoted to spiritual matters to engage in other work. Most, however, tried their hands at “domestic employments” but were, as Hassell pointedly noted, “generally... unsuccessful” and, therefore, forced to rely upon their flocks’ donations for sustenance.²⁸ Hassell worked hard, and he eventually met with success. He espoused a business ethic of steadiness and caution (“Slow & sure should be the rule through life in all pecuniary matters,” he believed). Now, he also believed that such caution almost invariably “will prove in the end to be the most profitable plan.”²⁹ He weathered the Panic of 1837, a bad mercantile partnership at about the same time, and the economic downturn of 1840. By the mid-1840s, flush times had arrived. His dry goods business was netting him about \$15,000 per year, and he continued to collect a salary as the clerk and master in equity of the Martin County court. His increased wealth went hand in hand with his growing civic presence. As the county court’s master in equity, he administered the estates of locals who died without descendants who had reached the age of majority. He was not only a member of the board of trustees for the Williamston male and female academies but styled himself “the principal management of both” and “chiefly instrumental in keeping the school[s] going.” He was the treasurer of the Williamston Library Association (in private, he described himself as “the first mover in the business”), bought all of the library’s books,

²⁸ Hassell, *Auto-Biography*, 58. As the years wore on, a few Primitive Baptist preachers, with a dampened sense of irony, openly grumbled about what they believed were their close-fisted flocks. See John M. Watson, *The Old Baptist Test; or Bible Signs of the Lord's People* (Nashville: Republican Banner Press, 1855), 51-53; P.D. Gold, *A Treatise on the Book of Joshua* (Wilson, NC: Zion's Landmark, 1889), 116.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 49. Hassell, unsurprisingly, admired Benjamin Franklin. See Hassell’s undated notebook, MS 51, Hassell Family Papers, Z. Smith Reynolds Library Special Collections and Archives, Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

and housed them in a glass case in his counting room.³⁰ In 1847, he made a note in his diary that his family consisted of about forty people. Included in his tally were a new fleet of slaves Hassell had bought a few months before to build his new dwelling house.³¹ A year later, the North Carolina state legislature appointed him a trustee of the University of North Carolina. C.B. Hassell was a big man in a small town. He was an exception, and he was proud of it.

Hassell claimed that God had blessed him with a comfortable living “as a reward for his labour in business of various kinds of a secular nature & chiefly that of merchandising.”³² When Hassell wrote those words, he had been preaching for more than fifteen years and had been an ordained for the last four. Yet it was Hassell’s work behind the counter that so pleased God. God blessed him with wealth not because he was a faithful preacher but because he was a diligent salesman. Hassell’s God was no mercenary; He was simply pragmatic, like His storekeeping servant. For it was Hassell’s industriousness in business that made it possible for him to preach without monetary compensation. It was Hassell’s secular labors that made his spiritual labor more purely charitable since not one of Hassell’s congregants needed to reach further into his own pockets to feed their preacher.

What was profitable in his mercantile trade could be similarly valuable in the religious realm. Hassell believed that he was called to be both a merchant and a preacher.

³⁰ C.B. Hassell, Appendix to Diary, December 1853-June 1859, n.p. Vol. 20, Folder 22, Box 2 in the C.B. Hassell Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

³¹ Hassell, Diary, 24 April 1847, 103.

³² Hassell, *Auto-Biography*, 57-58.

As Hassell saw it, “the chief object of his life was to be serviceable to others; and that he could take a wider range of usefulness, by combining secular with spiritual labours than by confining himself to spiritual labours alone.”³³ Thinking along these lines had deep roots in Protestant experience, both in Europe and America.³⁴ But these were Hassell’s official pronouncements. They have the booming ring of dogma.

Time and again, though, Hassell’s mercantile trade made being “serviceable” – in business and in the church – a difficult proposition. During national economic panics and local commercial slowdowns, during tussles with county commissioners and embarrassing feuds with business partners, Hassell’s business trials strained the bonds he had forged between faith and work. Eventually, Hassell’s worsening economic circumstances helped persuade him to modify some of his earlier beliefs about the role of money in the church. He made these changes fitfully and not without a certain amount of shame. Because his worldly success enabled his ministerial career, economic downturns could have a doubly painful effect. A bad business cycle meant financial discomfort, debt, and embarrassment. But it was always more than that for Hassell. It was a cosmic sign but one whose genesis he was nevertheless loath to connect to God. Instead, the frustrated Hassell, beset by debts, fearful of financial ruin, turned his wrath outward towards his neighbors.

In the mid-1830s, Hassell faced his first financial crisis. Burdened with \$4,000 in debt, he entered a hasty partnership that became the “most unfortunate step” he had ever made. The deal immediately erased his debt, but over the next three years the bad

³³ Ibid., 59.

³⁴ Weber, *Protestant Ethic*; Daniel T. Rogers, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America: 1850-1920* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

partnership, helped along by the Panic of 1837, led to further losses and much “mortification and misery.” Traumatized by his failed venture, Hassell finally dissolved his partnership and moved to a cash-only business. This episode’s economic details are interesting, but its religious repercussions are more compelling, for the episode seems to have bolstered Hassell’s predestinarian faith rather than undermined it. As he weathered another economic downturn in 1840, Hassell recounted his failed partnership in the first draft of his unpublished autobiography. He brought both stories — his botched partnership, on the one hand, and his as-yet-unfinished life story, on the other — to a close with a declaration of his Calvinist principles described earlier.³⁵ It was not an unusual ending for a Calvinist narrative where God’s sovereignty was to be celebrated even or, especially, during tough times.

But when a second, larger crisis struck a decade later, Hassell’s Calvinistic didacticism struggled to contain his distress. He once again read his ledger books with religious principles in mind, but the stakes were higher. His much-expanded family — nine children now — needed care and sustenance. He also needed to safeguard his increased role in Williamston’s civic life. Finally, he had been formally ordained and now tended to several nearby churches. A failed business might lead to bankruptcy, but it would inevitably lead to humiliation, both of himself and the Primitive Baptist order he represented.

³⁵ Hassell, *Auto-Biography*, 39 (“most unfortunate step”), 41 (“mortification and misery”), 46-47, and 49. Hassell’s decision, albeit a temporary one, to eliminate his reliance on credit was a common one for antebellum entrepreneurs scarred by steep losses or business failure. See Edward J. Balleisen, *Navigating Failure: Bankruptcy and Commercial Society in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 16, 200-201.

This second crisis began, as one might expect, in Hassell's counting room where, in the fall of 1849, he calculated his mounting debts. They rose higher than ever before. Hassell felt himself "wearing away" under their weight. I am "more oppressed & borne down with business than at any other time of [my] life," he wrote.³⁶ The pressure had been building for months. Earlier that spring he scratched out a diary entry: "...mind very barren in religious things — having a desire to wean away from the world & no ability to do so."³⁷ By the fall, Hassell's frustrations pointed in the opposite direction as his pastoral duties insistently called him away from what he described as "urgent & important" business.³⁸

As he sank deeper into a financial morass, Hassell's immediate response was a psychological one. He promised to turn his mind away from its habitual concern with secular matters. He vowed to write less — both in his diary and his correspondence — about business concerns. He would, instead, meditate upon God's charity. Soon he began telling himself comforting white lies in the way that anxious people often do. He assured himself that, in fact, he had rarely wasted space in his diary contemplating business, and, in any case, he would write even less about such trivia in the future. The diary's pages, inked with an assortment of tallies, told a different story.³⁹ His public efforts, too, became a kind of masquerade. He would carry on as usual, he decided. He worked — and it must have been hard work, indeed — to take "all things cheerfully & calmly as though nothing had

³⁶ Hassell, *Diary*, 27 October 1849, 317.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 15 May 1849, 275. In a similar entry from May 2, 1849, Hassell linked his "barrenness of soul" to his "close connection with the world of secular matters."

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 27 May 1849, 317.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 12 July 1849, 292.

happened & as though nothing whatever troubled him, so that others around him supposed he saw no trouble, but lived at ease. [A]nd poor foolish things actually envied his condition in life.”⁴⁰

Sometime between 1850 and 1852, Hassell began accepting money for his preaching. He had made the decision in the fall of 1849, but “much mortified” over his financial condition and devoted to keeping up appearances, Hassell delayed the implementation of his plan for at least six months.⁴¹ The mortification, of course, stemmed only partly from pecuniary matters. Or, more accurately, Hassell's pecuniary matters were themselves rooted in religious, if not quite theological, concerns. For Hassell, like all Primitive preachers, inveighed against a salaried ministry, in particular, and against the influence of money in the church, more generally. Now, Hassell had not decided to take a salary. But he would be accepting — even soliciting — donations. And while, in Primitive precincts, individual donations made unprompted by individual believers were, officially speaking, not suspect, the solicitor of those donations certainly would be. That was the anguish of Hassell's situation: the money he accepted for preaching became both the glue that held his life together and the solvent that tore it apart.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 27 October 1849, 317.

⁴¹ Ibid., 14 June 1850, 358. In a January 1852 church meeting, Hassell identified himself as “poor” and “now made public” his opinion that preachers ought to accept donations and that churches should contemplate establishing a separate fund as a “gift” (he refused to call it a salary) to their minister. But according to Hassell's own records, he had started accepting donations for his preaching in May 1850. It is difficult to resolve this discrepancy. It may be, however, that Hassell did, in fact, begin accepting donations in May 1850 for most of his preaching but that he refused to do so at his home church of Skewarkey where he was ordained and had “avowed his intention of receiving nothing as a pecuniary compensation” when he first took charge of the church. During these years, Hassell regularly preached at several Primitive Baptist churches near his home in Williamston, North Carolina. He also embarked on preaching tours through the state's eastern and central counties. For records of donations made to Hassell, see his booklet “Ordinations, Baptisms, Donations,” box 3, volume 26, folder 28 of the Cushing Biggs Hassell Papers at the Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

The unfolding anguish became particularly dramatic as Hassell's business continued its decline while Methodists increased their presence in Hassell's hometown. The two trends, Hassell realized, must be linked. There were, at first, the empty pews in one of the churches Hassell pastored. Much of his flock had decided to attend a nearby Methodist revival during the fall of 1850.⁴² Earlier that summer, Hassell had become the subject of public denunciation in Williamston when he spoke out against the presence in town of a Methodist preacher sponsored by the Sons of Temperance.⁴³ And later that winter, Hassell wrote in his diary that more and more townsfolk were angry at him because he opposed the fundraising being carried out by local Methodists to support a bell raising. By the spring, the situation had deteriorated further. Methodists held a two-week revival in Williamston, Hassell's cousin Asa and his wife had apparently fallen under their spell, and it had become "fashionable" in town to denounce Hassell, who, when he did his books that June, came to the unfortunate conclusion that his economic situation was worse than ever.⁴⁴ Three years earlier he had worried that he would soon die, leaving his family debt-ridden and destitute. One year earlier he watched his debts rise from \$9,000 to \$12,000 as spring became summer. Now he calculated his debts at \$15,000. He begged God to deliver him from this "embarrassing condition."⁴⁵

By the fall of 1851, God had yet to take action so Hassell acted in His stead. One year after attendance at weekly church meetings began declining, Hassell fired one of his

⁴² Hassell, Diary, 14 June 1850, 358.

⁴³ Ibid., 4 July 1850, 363.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 10 April 1851, 414 (revival); 11 April 1851, 414 (cousin Asa); 21 June 1851, 429 ("fashionable"); 11 June 1851, 426-427 (economic situation).

⁴⁵ Ibid., 12 March 1850, 341; 14 June 1850, 358; 11 June 1851, 426-427 ("embarrassing condition").

long-time clerks whom he accused of wasting thousands of dollars before embezzling thousands more. The clerk's perfidy, Hassell concluded, accounted for last year's losses.⁴⁶ He told his hollowed-out church that he would be spending less time with them because he needed to devote more time to resuscitating his ailing mercantile outfit.⁴⁷ Only one month later, however, Hassell stood before his flock bearing a different message. Describing himself as a member of "the other poor," he pleaded like a lowly missionary for the church to establish a fund to pay him regularly. (Church members said they would go home and think about it.)⁴⁸ Finally, desperate and overworked, Hassell enlisted his wife and one of his daughters to take on his paperwork as clerk and master in equity of the Martin County court. It was an awful turnabout. God had called him to be serviceable, but circumstances or, perhaps, God Himself had intervened. Proprietor of an ailing business, shepherd of a withered flock, he now depended upon his former dependents — the church, his wife, his daughter — for support.

By then Hassell had pinpointed the cause of his downfall. A cabal of traitorous clerks, local Methodists, and rival businessmen had organized a "very great opposition" to him, his Old School Baptist church, and his business.⁴⁹ They were ruining him. And

⁴⁶ Ibid., 6 November 1851, 454. The historian Frank J. Byrne argues that "sentiment" and a "spirit of camaraderie" characterized relationships between merchants and their clerks in the old South. See Byrne, *Becoming Bourgeois: Merchant Culture in the South, 1820–1850* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 38. C.B. Hassell's counting room, however, proved an unusually inhospitable place, for suspicion and blame stained Hassell's relationships with the men he employed. He pointed his finger at his clerk when his business soured in the mid-1830s. He fired a second clerk who enjoyed himself too much after hours. When business declined again in the early 1850s, he fired a long-time clerk and accused him of wasting and then embezzling thousands of dollars.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 27 December 1851, 462.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 10 January 1852, 465.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 11 May 1852, 847.

though this struggle appeared to be taking place in Hassell's riverside hometown, it actually unfolded on a much larger stage. It was a cosmic conflict, Hassell concluded: "Man was against him," he wrote in his diary, "but...God was for him."⁵⁰

Hassell did finally right his business. As early as June 1852, he noted an increase in his sales and a decrease in his debts, and by that winter he determined that a minor uptick in his yearly sales totals nevertheless meant that he had staved off the "clique" that had tried to reduce him to bankruptcy.⁵¹ There would be more ups and downs. The Civil War proved especially disruptive as Hassell retreated inland, leaving behind both business and family when Union forces landed in Williamston. As a munitions supplier to the Confederacy, he feared that remaining in town would lead to his capture, imprisonment, or worse.

If there is an end to Hassell's story, it came not at his death in 1880 at the age of seventy-one, but six years later with the eventual publication of his mammoth *History of the Church of God*. That book wrought the scraps of Hassell's life into polished historical narrative. In the *History*, Primitive Baptists find themselves, like Hassell, beset by religious rivals — missionary Baptists, Methodists, revivalists, temperance activists — who seek to destroy them while growing rich on new religious schemes and entertainments.

But even that ending was a false one. Or, at least, a partial one, for it never accounted for the discrepancy between Hassell's sunny creed and his turbulent life, between his call to be serviceable and his actual dependence. There, in that gap between ideology and practice, life unfolded. In that breach, Hassell scrambled to make sense of his

⁵⁰ Ibid. 17 June 1852, 854.

⁵¹ Ibid., 17 June 1852, 854; 31 December 1852, 889 ("clique").

world. The market, as always, functioned not only as network of commercial exchange but as a venue imbued with religious significance.

How might this have worked? Hassell believed God had rewarded him for his *secular* work, for his “merchandising,” as he put it. The wealth Hassell gained from being serviceable behind the counter allowed him to be serviceable to his flock. He had been called to both pursuits. This kind of practical Calvinism worked fine during flush times. Indeed, prosperity appeared to ratify Hassell’s religious creed. Hardship, however, put these principles under significant strain. Hassell’s own religious logic dictated that God lay behind his financial difficulties, but holding God accountable proved either unthinkable or too painful.

Instead, Hassell found others to blame. He railed against the Methodist preachers’ “charlatanism” and sneered at the “poor deluded souls” captivated by revivalistic trickery.⁵² But Hassell himself was guilty of a similar sort of masquerade. Recall that he confided to his diary that he pitied the “poor foolish things” in his congregation who were misled by his serene public demeanor while internally he crumbled and sunk deeper into sin. Recall, too, Hassell’s anger with the means of Methodists’ fundraising. As his own debts climbed, he accused his Methodist rivals of holding not revivals but fairs where they charged admission, hired well-paid entertainers, and made sure that their preachers were handed a healthy balance for their treasury. But Hassell, too, asked for preaching fees, began taking donations, and suggested to his home church that they pay him regularly. Unable or unwilling to hold God accountable, he displaced anger onto more convenient targets.

⁵² Ibid., 6 May 1852, 486 (“charlatanism”); Ibid., 3 May 1852, 485 (“poor deluded souls”).

Incapable of blaming himself for his infirm mercantile outfit and fearful of reckoning completely with his decision to accept payment for his preaching, he projected his guilt onto duplicitous clerks, scheming townspeople, and Methodist fraudsters.

At his nadir in early 1852, Hassell attended Sunday services at Williamston's Episcopal chapel. "It was all a dry breast," he wrote. Later that night he attended a prayer meeting at a Primitive Baptist brother's home. He stood to preach and the text that came to mind was from Revelation: "Come out of her, my people that ye be not partakers of her sins & that ye receive not of her plagues."⁵³ The text was a Primitive Baptist staple, and after that morning's dryness and the months of growing despair it may have looked to his besieged mind like an escape route. He could find other Old School Baptists trodding the same path out from the confines of a feminized evangelicalism. At times, however, that path forked and then doubled-back on itself, a fact that tells us much about the gendered dimensions of the Primitives' predicament and, more generally, suggests some new ways to think about patriarchy in the religion of the Old South.

"Come Out of Her, My People"

In a farmhouse, in eastern North Carolina, in or around the year 1808, Jesus Christ visited Joshua Lawrence. The Son of God stood "face to face" with the awestruck farmer-preacher, gazed "wishfully" at him, and spoke: "Feed my wife," he implored. "Feed my children." Jesus vanished. Joshua Lawrence crumbled. The sublime visitation left him bathed in tears, struggling for breath, laboring under what he described as "the groans of death." Yet the sight of his Savior's face also had buoyed Lawrence. Humbled, but filled

⁵³ Ibid., 4 January 1852, 464; Rv 18:4 KJV.

with “infinite joy,” he quickly set about the task of interpretation. Who was Jesus’ wife? And where to find his children?⁵⁴

The answers to these questions arrived quickly. By his “wife,” Lawrence supposed, Jesus had referred to the converted and the baptized. Jesus’ “children” also could be found within the church’s embrace, but many more of them, Lawrence realized, remained estranged from the church’s beloved family. Both groups needed Lawrence’s paternal care. As both a faithful preacher and a sturdy patriarch, Lawrence vowed to nourish his churchly family with gospel truth while working tirelessly to bring more “children” into the fold. Such were the happy prospects for Lawrence’s “family religion.”⁵⁵

Soon, though, Joshua Lawrence’s religious family was torn asunder. Jesus had called Lawrence to protect and guide his spiritual family, but enemies lurked in the very pews and pulpits Lawrence sought to shelter. These enemies were evangelical missionaries, newly organized emissaries dispatched by the boards and societies that controlled the new

⁵⁴ Joshua Lawrence, “Victorious Grace: Being a Mere Glance of His Experience,” *Primitive Baptist*, 27 November 1841, 337. This is one of several visions Lawrence related in his spiritual autobiography. Though this vision came upon him while he was asleep, Lawrence did not consider it a dream. A mere “wandering of the thoughts,” dreams left “but little impression on the mind, or feelings.” Visions, by contrast, permanently shaped subsequent experience. For Lawrence’s complete discussion of the differences between visions and dreams, see the third published installment of his spiritual autobiography: “Victorious Grace: Being a Mere Glance of His Experience,” *Primitive Baptist*, 13 November 1841, 324. The *Primitive Baptist* serialized Lawrence’s autobiography over five issues. Lawrence wrote the original manuscript in 1812; it resides in the Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Many thanks to Sandra Hayslette, whose master’s thesis broached the question of the gendered dimensions of the Primitive Baptist movement. I follow Hayslette in describing Joshua Lawrence’s patriarchal bent, but we differ significantly in our conclusions. Hayslette sees Lawrence’s patriarchal rhetoric as a self-conscious “strategic” choice to masculinize the church. This chapter, however, argues that Lawrence’s patriarchy was deeply compromised, ambivalent, streaked with doubt, and only partially conscious. See Hayslette, “Missions, Markets, and Men: A Baptist Contest of Values in Tarboro, North Carolina, 1800-1835,” M.A. thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1995.

⁵⁵ Lawrence, “Victorious Grace,” 27 November 1841, 338. The phrase “family religion” comes from Donald Mathews, who used it to describe evangelicals’ particular emphasis on the family as the center of religious life. I, too, use it in that sense, but I also want to emphasize the extent to which evangelicals and Primitive Baptists saw the church itself as a family. Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 44-5, 97-101.

Benevolent Empire. To Lawrence and his fellows – people who first described themselves as Reformed Baptists and then as Primitive or Old School Baptists – the missionaries’ zealous search for new funds and new converts corrupted their old-time Baptist faith. The rot was visible. They watched as missionaries’ money-raising transformed country churches into ecclesiastical banks. Meanwhile, these missionary intruders’ insistence on evangelism and their penchant for the drama of mass conversions marked them as arrogant upstarts eager to seize the power of saving grace from God Himself. Beginning in the teens and blossoming in the 1820s and 1830s, the Primitive Baptists undertook a massive campaign to resist this evangelical juggernaut. These decades-long fights between Lawrence’s Primitive Baptists and the missionaries’ evangelistic faith were disputes about doctrine, the influence of money in the church, ministerial authority, the efficacy of God’s sovereign grace, and the role of Christianity in an expanding nation. For Joshua Lawrence, the battles against the missionary advance became something more and something less than this. They became, in essence, a family quarrel. Missionaries, Lawrence argued, seduced daughters, stole wives, and undermined patriarchal authority. The missionaries had broken his church family and Lawrence – the steady patriarch and devoted preacher – vowed to repair the damage.

That Lawrence envisioned his church as a family, Jesus as a patriarch, and himself as Jesus’ fatherly proxy should not surprise us. Hierarchy saturated southern life. White over black, man over woman. Plantation owners and well-to-do farmers – those, like Lawrence, who owned slaves – could preside over a family (that, in fact, was the word they used) that included not only a wife and children but also assorted other dependents who the patriarch

held in chains. Even lowly subsistence farmers wielded patriarchal authority, ruling over family members who doubled as laborers on the family land. Baptists, such as Lawrence, saw themselves as part of a beloved community, a spiritual family set apart from the vanity of the secular world. But patriarchy intruded there, too. Within the church, men and women might address each other as “brother” and “sister,” and preachers might refuse the honorific “reverend” in favor of the more homely and familial title, “elder.” But in the Baptists’ Calvinist theology, God often appeared as a stern, if loving, father. Men held all church offices. Only men voted on matters of church business, and only men led the congregation in prayer.⁵⁶ As for women, Joshua Lawrence advised them to “[b]e content to wear the petticoat, and never, no never, jirk [sic] the breeches out of your husband’s hands.”⁵⁷

At first, missionaries posed little threat to these gender conventions, and, indeed, Lawrence’s earliest anti-missionary broadside skewered missionaries as money-hunting hirelings, not home-wreckers. Dispatched by massive ecclesiastical bureaucracies, paid in wages, and bereft of true gospel feeling, missionaries wandered the countryside searching for funds. That search, Lawrence argued, took the missionaries not to the South’s poor and destitute but to the wealthy and the comfortable. “Believe me,” he wrote, “these

⁵⁶ Stephanie McCurry has written about patriarchy in the yeoman farms of the South. See McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). A similar dynamic held sway in frontier farming families elsewhere. See Mary Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 31-43. For patriarchy on the South’s plantations, see Stephen M. Stowe, *Intimacy and Power in the Old South: Ritual in the Lives of the Planters* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987). For, perhaps, the paradigmatic case of patriarchy, or paternalism, on a southern plantation, see Drew Gilpin Faust, *James Henry Hammond and the Old South: A Design for Mastery* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982). And of course, town-based merchants, such as Cushing Biggs Hassell, might easily see themselves as patriarch, too.

⁵⁷ Joshua Lawrence, letter to the editor, *Primitive Baptist*, 27 February 1836, 55.

hirelings like to be fed on better fare than the poor can give them — they like the houses of colonels, [and] squires, and to have very rich and fat tables.” As the missionaries ignored the needy and fêted the wealthy, Lawrence concluded that their claim to be seeking converts for Christ was nothing but a ruse. The missionaries, he reckoned, pocketed the money they raised. How else to explain their cloaks of “the finest black and blue broad cloth,” their “fur hats,” “silk jackets,” and “silver tipped bridles”?⁵⁸ The entire missionary enterprise, Lawrence and his fellow Primitive Baptists concluded, amounted to nothing more than a series of “religious schemes to pick men’s pockets.”⁵⁹

But the pockets of a man were never as enticing as the purse strings of a lady, or so Joshua Lawrence thought. Time and time again, Lawrence argued that the missionaries specifically sought women’s donations, encouraged women’s fiscal irresponsibility, and tempted women’s lax morals. Women, Lawrence reasoned, were especially susceptible to missionary trickery. The Bible said as much. Satan deceived women first. Satan fooled Eve, convinced the wives and concubines of King Solomon to lead him astray, and persuaded Delilah to shear Samson’s locks.⁶⁰ Lawrence found more examples. He

⁵⁸ Joshua Lawrence, *The American Telescope, by a Clodhopper of North Carolina* (Philadelphia: n.p., 1825), 6, 8.

⁵⁹ Joshua Lawrence, letter to the editor, *Primitive Baptist*, 13 February 1836, 35. That missionaries personally profited from their endeavors was a persistent theme of Primitive Baptist writing. The specimen issue of the *Primitive Baptist*, for instance, featured a table purporting to show the considerable salaries and fees paid to the agents of the North Carolina Baptist Society for Foreign and Domestic Missions. See *Primitive Baptist*, 3 October 1835, 3. The conventions of the anti-missionary polemic usually did not allow for distinctions to be drawn between missionaries and missions-supporting clergy. But we can do what they chose not to do. We can see that the Primitives’ notion of the wealthy circuit rider was off-base. In 1840, for instance, Methodist circuit riders had a yearly income of \$400 plus payment for “traveling and table” expenses. But the Primitives’ habitual concern with well-do-preachers was not unfounded. In southern towns, at least, pastors by 1860 boasted an average wealth of \$10,600 as opposed to \$2,500 nationwide average for free adult men. There were, however, key denominational trends, with Episcopalians and Presbyterians near the top of the ranks and Baptists and Methodists towards the bottom. See E. Brooks Holifield, *The Gentlemen Theologians: American Theology in Southern Culture, 1795-1860* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1978), 28-3.

⁶⁰ Lawrence in the *Primitive Baptist*, 27 February 1836, 53. The relevant Bible passages are: Gn 3:1-19 KJV; 1 Kgs 11:3-13 KJV; and Jgs 16:4-20 KJV.

repeated the apostle Paul's warning that one sign of the last days would be the presence of those who "creep into houses, and lead captive silly women."⁶¹ The book of Exodus, too, furnished suggestions, for like the Hebrew women at the foot of Mt. Sinai, southern women were willing accomplices in the fashioning of an idol. "There is as great begging by the priests of the ladies for money and bracelets, as there was by priest Aaron," Lawrence wrote while pondering what seemed to him the golden calf that was the modern missionary system.⁶²

The mischief started with the young, single, male missionary whose grounding in the gospel only disguised his expertise in the "gallanting" of women. Using his "smooth pathetic tongue and enticing words," the missionary convinced women to part with their husband's or father's money. But the real prize, according to Lawrence, was the woman herself. "If it was not for getting a rich wife ... preachers would be scarce," he observed. "Hunting a rich wife, [and] begging money" went hand-in-hand.⁶³ Even married women remained vulnerable. Missionaries "often take the advantage to beg the woman when the husband is from home," he noted.⁶⁴ Though women remained, for Lawrence, the weaker sex, he feared their influence over their husbands and fathers. Missionaries, he knew,

⁶¹ Paul's warning comes from 2 Tm 3:6 KJV. For an example of Lawrence's use of this passage while attacking missionaries, see Joshua Lawrence, "Teeth to Teeth: Tom Thumb Tugging With the Wolves for the Sheepskin," *Primitive Baptist*, 27 May 1837, 148. The "silly women" image circulated widely in Primitive Baptist circles. See, for example, the following anonymous article: "Reasons for Roundly Asserting That the Popular Institutions Are Anti-Christian," *Primitive Baptist*, 3 October 1835, 12.

⁶² Joshua Lawrence, letter to the editor, *Primitive Baptist*, 27 February 1836, 53. Lawrence gave a selective reading to the relevant passages from Exodus. The Bible hardly singles out women in the golden calf episode. All of "the people" are implicated. See Ex 32:1-35 KJV.

⁶³ Joshua Lawrence, "Teeth to Teeth: Tom Thumb Tugging With the Wolves for the Sheepskin," *Primitive Baptist*, 28 January 1837, 21-2; Lawrence, *American Telescope*, 9. For similar accusations made by others, see Kemuel C. Gilbert, letter to the editor, *Primitive Baptist*, 26 March 1836, 82.

⁶⁴ Joshua Lawrence, "Teeth to Teeth," 27 May 1837, 150.

“have got hold of the right handle,” that is the wives and daughters in each southern household. “They have got hold of the women and led them captive, and be sure the men will follow,” he noted bitterly, “for this is a thing of course.”⁶⁵

Lawrence was not alone in worrying about women’s importance to the missionary cause. Across the South, changes in religious practice and organization threatened to modify, if not overturn, conventional gender hierarchies. The most important of these changes were demographic. By the early nineteenth century, women outnumbered men in Protestant southern churches, perhaps by as many as two to one.⁶⁶ Numbers, though, only tell part of the story. Evangelicals and their missionary allies were transforming women’s place in church and society. Responding to women’s increased presence in the church, evangelicals and missionaries increasingly idealized feminine spirituality and lauded women as the guardians of family morality. In a society where most women remained confined to the domestic sphere, evangelical churches thus became “the chief means of establishing a public life for women” in the antebellum South.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ See Ryan, esp. 75-104, on the women’s presence and influence in evangelical churches. Mathews, 47, estimated that the ratio of women to men in southern evangelical churches was 65 to 35. For additional information about women’s majority presence in evangelical churches in the early nineteenth century, see Heyrman, *Southern Cross*, especially 311-312 n.13. McCurry conducted a systematic analysis of gender ratios in evangelical churches in antebellum-era lowcountry South Carolina. In McCurry’s sample of ten evangelical Baptist churches, women composed 59.4% of the total membership. McCurry looked at one Primitive Baptist church, which had only a one-woman majority. See McCurry, 162-1633.

⁶⁷ Mathews, 111. See McCurry, especially 171-207, for a more skeptical view about the place of southern evangelical women. McCurry insists that southern evangelical women, unlike their northern counterparts, never developed a positive, public identity. Instead, secular gender norms and hierarchies continually triumphed over any egalitarian tendencies within the churches or their theologies. McCurry sees her research as, in part, a corrective to the scholarship on northern evangelical women – scholarship which, she argues, has too often been interpreted as having national, rather than regional, implications. Heyrman argues that, after 1800, southern evangelicals’ gradually tempered and even erased the egalitarian aspects of church life in order “to cultivate the South’s masters.” See Heyrman, 117-205.

Joshua Lawrence and the Primitive Baptists resisted these changes. This resistance is palpable in Lawrence's anti-missionary invective where evangelical missionaries metamorphosed into seducers and the women who listened to them were castigated as dupes. It would not be inaccurate to describe the Primitives as a patriarchal reaction to the feminizing influence of evangelical Protestantism.⁶⁸ But this interpretation is too easy and it would stop our story short. Recall the vision with which we began. Jesus had called Joshua Lawrence to feed his wife and children — had called him to be a patriarch — and Lawrence had heeded Christ's call. But soon, as missionaries fanned out across the South and more and more women filled the church pews, Lawrence described himself in different terms. Joshua Lawrence became a mother.

This wrinkle in Lawrence's thinking emerged as he contemplated those features that firmly distinguished the false-speaking missionaries from his truth-preaching Primitives. Elders, he pleaded, should "preach as freely as a mother suckles her child."⁶⁹ Here the converted and the unchurched remained children, but instead of paternal guidance they needed maternal care. Only by nursing the congregation on what Lawrence described as "the milk of the word" — only by offering up what he called the "warm paps of a preached gospel" — could the faithful preacher answer his call. He imagined the ideal preacher "like a full breasted mother," swollen with the milk of the word and ready to give

⁶⁸ Ann Douglas's research is most readily identified with the thesis of a feminizing Protestantism. See Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1977).

⁶⁹ Joshua Lawrence, letter to the editor, *Primitive Baptist*, 23 January 1836, 18.

of it freely. Only then, after parting with the milk, would the “pain in the breast [be] relieved and the hunger of the child ... satisfied.”⁷⁰

By contrast, missionaries and evangelical preachers starved their spiritual children and denied them their breast. Surveying his missionary opponents, Lawrence detected not real preacher-mothers but, once again, hirelings. They “are hired nurses,” he seethed. “They have no milk in their breast for God’s children, they serve for pay and so feed God’s children on the pot-liquor of morality and self doings [sic], on which all God’s children will starve.”⁷¹ Hired nurses — impostor mothers, if you will — were not the only problem. A salaried preacher or a paid missionary essentially charged his own children for milk from his breast. “Would you not think that woman a brute, who would charge the son of her womb for sucking her breast, that the God of nature has freely bestowed and filled for the nourishment of her children? Yes, sir, such a woman is worse than the brutes — so is such a minister of God.”⁷²

Joshua Lawrence and his fellow Primitive Baptist preachers no doubt refused to consider themselves brutes, but why and how would these preacher-patriarchs envision themselves as breast-feeding mothers? The answer lies in a shifting mix of theology, economy, and psychology.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 18. Wilson Thompson, another Primitive Baptist elder, also described an early-nineteenth century congregation as feeding on the “sincere milk of the word.” See Thompson, *The Autobiography of Elder Wilson Thompson: His Life, Travels, and Ministerial Labors* (Cincinnati: Moore, Wiltach & Baldwin, 1867; Conley, GA: Old School Hymnal, 1978), 100.

⁷¹ Lawrence in the *Primitive Baptist*, 23 January 1836, 18. As we have seen, Hassell used a similar metaphor — the dry breast — to describe Episcopal preaching.

⁷² Ibid.

Theology and economy first. Primitive preachers refused to take a salary. God's call – and God's call alone – beckoned them towards the pulpit. A salary, a speaking fee: these could only mean that a preacher had been called not by God but by greed, by the devil. Hence the Primitives' anger at evangelicals, who had introduced a professional, salaried ministry and paid itinerancy. Without a salary, however, Primitive preachers were thrown onto the mercy of their congregations for monetary support. A lucky few balanced small farming or a trade with their ministerial duties. But for the vast majority, only voluntary donations from the laity prevented them from a stay in the poor house.⁷³ In theory, this system guaranteed the purity of the Primitives' gospel message and fostered a mutuality between preacher and congregation that could, in fact, be likened to that between a mother and her child. Called by God to preach, filled by God with the milk of the word, the preacher was, as Joshua Lawrence put it, "like a woman who has a young child and full breast, she is under the necessity of suckling it for her own ease and not for pay." Meanwhile, "the churches are as freely to support him, as obedient children."⁷⁴

In practice, though, this fantasy of mutuality – this wish for an organic relationship between the preacher-mother and the congregation-child – faltered. How could it not? At its worst, the system simply broke down. Some Primitive preachers, for instance, complained that their flocks had decided that giving any money at all to their minister violated Jesus' gospel of poverty.⁷⁵ Most situations never became this grave.

⁷³ Hassell, *Auto-Biography*, 58.

⁷⁴ Lawrence in the *Primitive Baptist*, 23 January 1836, 18. An early article in the *Primitive Baptist* directly addressed the issue of ministerial salaries and made a point similar to Lawrence's. The article argued the relationship between a preacher and his congregation was based not on contract but on mutual support. See "Ministerial Support," *Primitive Baptist*, 3 October 1835, 4-5.

⁷⁵ Gold, *Treatise*, 116; Watson, *Old Baptist Test*, 51-53.

But this should not distract us from the bind in which Primitive preachers found themselves. Even while pastoring a generous congregation – perhaps, especially while pastoring a generous congregation – the Primitive Baptist preacher realized that he depended on others for his sustenance. In the antebellum South, in Joshua Lawrence’s world, to be a dependent was to be a child, a woman, or a slave. White men, on the other hand, claimed independence. White men were patriarchs. No self-respecting white man – and, needless to say, every preacher was a white man – could be deemed a worthy member of society if he were a dependent. But this was precisely the position in which the unsalaried Primitive Baptist preacher found himself: a patriarch by presumption, a dependent in fact.

Even a financially secure preacher could feel these pressures. Though Lawrence was acknowledged in his own day as something of a spokesman for the Primitive Baptist cause, he was, like Hassell, one of the few Primitive preachers who boasted accumulated wealth. Even so, it is worth considering

This was a peculiar position and its psychological implications were vast and complex. The preachers’ split status – part caretaker, part cared-for – had deep affinities with women’s roles as mothers in male-dominated households. Even a financially secure preacher, such as Lawrence, seems to have felt something of this bind.⁷⁶ His slaves saved him from outright dependence, and he often larded his prose with patriarchal invective.

⁷⁶ Lawrence first inherited wealth. His father left him two male slaves and several tracts of land. Lawrence’s marriage brought him an additional pair of slaves. By 1841 Lawrence held land in three North Carolina counties, oversaw a workforce of at least twenty slaves, and supplemented his plantation’s profits from cotton, corn, and pork with large catches of shad from the nearby creek. See David B. Gammon, *Abstracts of Wills Edgecombe County, North Carolina* (Raleigh: D.B. Gammon, 1992); Stephen E. Bradley, *The 1800 and 1810 Federal Censuses, Edgecombe County, North Carolina*. (South Boston, VA: S.E. Bradley, 1989).

Still, Lawrence felt that as a preacher he was a caretaker, a nurse, and, like a breast-feeding mother, a provider of sustenance. But in a patriarchal society, such as the antebellum South, these affinities with motherhood had to be blunted or controlled. It comes as no surprise, then, that Primitive Baptists wielded the language of patriarchy far more often than they summoned the images of maternity. The Primitives' maternal images, nevertheless, offer us a clue as to the causes and consequences of their fight with evangelical missionaries. Consider, once again, Joshua Lawrence. Lawrence's rhetoric split his fantasy of the preacher-mother in two. In classic fashion, Lawrence's split-image allowed him to control his worrisome identification with motherhood. On the one hand, Lawrence offered his followers an idealized picture of the Primitive-Baptist-preacher-as-nourishing-mother. Against this romanticized portrait, Lawrence propped up the diametrically opposed image of the withholding- or impostor-mother. Lawrence and his fellow Primitive Baptists attributed this latter image to their missionary opponents. But we know, both from historical data and logical inference, that the Primitive preachers glimpsed something of themselves in this awful portrait. Were they, too, frauds and impostors? Lawrence often wondered about his own motives for preaching: "I did it [i.e., preaching]

only to get applause and a great name,” he admitted. “I could see a principle in me coveting applause...I find it in me at times to this day.”⁷⁷

While some doubts, such as these, crept through to consciousness, others found different outlets. Many of the Primitives’ accusations against the missionaries – that they were seducers and wife-hunters, for instance – had their genesis in the Primitive preachers’ own seldom-acknowledged sense of dependence – a sense of dependence that was, as you will recall, distinctly uncomfortable for supposed preacher-patriarchs in the Old South. But because Primitive Baptist theology mandated an unsalaried ministry – because, in a sense, God Himself had decreed such austerity – the Primitive Baptist preacher had few conscious avenues along which to channel his anxieties. Rather than abandoning their posts or condemning God’s law, Primitive preachers projected their own anxieties onto the young missionaries seeping into their churches and communities. In Primitive Baptist rhetoric, we see a stunningly accurate transposition of the Primitives’ worries about their own peculiar, compromised form of patriarchy. According to Lawrence, young male missionaries sought out rich women, both for their fortunes and their beds. With a well-to-

⁷⁷ Joshua Lawrence, “Victorious Grace: Being a Mere Glance of His Experience,” *Primitive Baptist*, 3 October 1841, 312. Lawrence might have had other reasons to worry about being an impostor. Lawrence’s early ministry coincided with a series of spectacular revivals sweeping the South, and his preaching met with similar success. He was ordained in 1801 by two leading lights of the revival in the Kehukee Association, Lemuel Burkitt and Jesse Read. Within two years, Lawrence’s efforts added more than one hundred names to the rolls at the Baptist church near the falls of the Tar River. At that time, the revivals in the Kehukee Association featured techniques that Lawrence and his fellow Primitives would later find abhorrent. Preachers, for instance, asked sinners eager for salvation to leave their seats and come towards the pulpit where they became a focus of intensified preaching. See Lemuel Burkitt and Jesse Read, *A Concise History of the Kehukee Baptist Association: From Its Original Rise to the Present Time* (Halifax, NC: A. Hodge, 1803), 146. Lawrence, too, backed the Kehukee Association’s early involvement with missions, a fact he never acknowledged during his years leading the Primitives’ anti-missionary efforts. Lawrence’s enemies, in addition to noting his blistering rhetoric, sometimes made this connection, though they often got some of the details wrong. One missionary Baptist, for example, suggested that Lawrence’s “envenomed vituperation” probably stemmed from the fact that Lawrence had once been aligned with the missionary cause but because he “lost preferment in that line,” he turned against it. See Obadiah Echols, “Controversial Record,” *Christian Index* 7, no. 13 (1832): 198.

do wife — one with property and slaves — a missionary could settle down, earn a healthy income from his wife's assets, and assume the pastorship of a church just as he assumed his patriarchal prerogatives. In the Primitives' eyes, such a plan exposed not only the deceit undergirding the missionary's cause but also the fraudulence of his claim to be a southern patriarch. After all, the missionary depended on his new wife's fortune to secure his manly status. This made him a dependent, an impostor patriarch. These same worries, of course, rattled Primitive Baptist preachers. As unsalaried ministers, they depended on the church for sustenance just as the missionary depended on his stolen wife for riches. Jesus had called on Joshua Lawrence to feed his wife and children, but the task proved complicated. The fact remained, though seldom acknowledged, that for many Primitive preachers it was the church herself who fed them. And Lawrence's ambivalent descriptions of his role as preacher remind us that in the task of feeding his wife and children — that most fundamental expression of what it meant to be a man in the Old South — he found himself transformed — momentarily, imaginatively — into a mother. For Lawrence and his fellow Primitives, theirs was a complicated patriarchy, indeed.

Borrowing the language of John's Revelation, Lawrence urged believers in the primitive way to "come out of her," to leave the precincts of a feminized evangelicalism whose innovations in doctrine and practice only promised chaos.⁷⁸ But Lawrence and the Primitives never did completely escape "her." Haunted by their own compromised

⁷⁸ The slogan "Come out of her, my people" (taken from Revelation 18:4) emblazoned the masthead of each issue of the *Primitive Baptist*, the Tarborough, North Carolina-based bi-weekly where Lawrence's writings most frequently appeared. The magazine's readers wrote approvingly of its motto and echoed its language. See, for instance, Gray Haggard, letter to the editor, *Primitive Baptist*, 27 February 1836, 61, and Rowell Reese, letter to the editor, *Primitive Baptist*, 27 February 1836, 63. Also see the circular letter, "Close Communion."

patriarchy, worried by their affinities with mothers and other dependents, Lawrence and his fellow Primitives fortified their old faith by fighting some very familiar enemies.

* * *

If the era of the Baptist schism was also the era of the market revolution, it was, too, the age of confidence and confidence men, the age of deceptions both artful and criminal.⁷⁹ (Oftentimes Americans struggled to see the difference.) Indeed, the antebellum marketplace often seemed to its participants to be a realm of confusion where one weathered unpredictable panics, negotiated deals with strangers, and tangled oneself in lines of credit. Americans braced themselves against the market's gales by lashing themselves to a variety of steadying institutions and ideologies. Primitive Baptists watched in anger as their Protestant contemporaries bolstered themselves with an increasingly Arminianized faith that celebrated men and women's ability to, if not quite save themselves, then to choose to receive God's grace. Arminianized Protestantism (dismissed by Primitives as mere "will-worship"⁸⁰) ratified an emergent culture of control where rationality, self-reliance, and discipline promised to subdue chance and tame the

⁷⁹ James W. Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2001). There is a distinct possibility that Barnum and Joshua Lawrence met. The story is one of just an historical bauble, but why not tell it. In his autobiography, Barnum writes of visiting a Baptist church at "Rocky Mount Falls, North Carolina" on a Sunday morning in November 1836. Barnum does not mention Lawrence, but Lawrence pastored a church there. And it was his home church. As Barnum tells it, he—Barnum—entertained a post-service crowd of about three hundred with a forty-five minute stemwinder. And what was his subject? "The outside show of things is of very small account. We must look to realities and not to appearances." Barnum apparently knew his audience. See *Struggles and Triumphs: Or, Forty Years' Recollections of P.T. Barnum* (Harford: J.B. Burr, 1869), 88-89.

⁸⁰ Garnett Jones, letter to the editor, *Signs of the Times*, 12 November 1834, 359.

marketplace's caprice.⁸¹ The culture of control was not entirely foreign to the Calvinistic Primitives, but they defended themselves against the market's volatility by reiterating their faith in predestination and an inscrutable God even as they identified enemies who, they claimed, were the real cause of their troubles. For as uncertain as the antebellum marketplace was, as labyrinthine were its credit networks, as slippery were its commercial relations, the market — for Primitives, at least — objectified the unidentifiable. The market's uncertainty paralleled the Primitive's Calvinist uncertainty. But even the unpredictable market provided a kind of solidity that Calvinism and Primitive Baptist traditions could not. It presented them with their cash-bearing enemies. C.B. Hassell spied them wandering Williamston's streets, soliciting funds for temperance campaigns and foreign missions and driving away his customers and his congregation. From his perch in the burgeoning commercial center of Tarboro, Joshua Lawrence found similar enemies. The young, itinerant missionaries threatened to replace a sovereign God with a pliable one and the Old South's patriarchal rule with gender disorder. That each man cast his enemies from his deepest fears and that each did so with only partial awareness tells us much, of course, about them and, I think, something about Primitive Baptists more generally. Hassell's and Lawrence's predicaments suggest, at the very least, how Primitives mediated the various social forces that surrounded them. In a broader sense, these portraits suggest how a history that hovers close to believers' subjective experiences can deepen the categories we use to make sense of antebellum life — that the market could be both a social

⁸¹ T. J. Jackson Lears, *Something for Nothing: Luck in America* (New York: Viking, 2003). The phrase "culture of control" is Lears's coinage.

force and a personal resource and that patriarchy's edifice might still stand but its walls, we should note, were deeply compromised by doubt and ambivalence.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE LONESOME SOUND:
OLD BAPTIST ECHOES IN MODERN AMERICA

Introduction

There is a story historians tell about the long decline of Calvinism in the West: that its militant rigidities, which had served it so well during the Reformation, were out of place in an increasingly cosmopolitan world; that Enlightenment rationality pushed it aside; and that various strains of Protestantism either more moderate or more pliant came to warm the Christian soul. It is a true story, and though its details often change depending upon each particular historian's predispositions, the essential fact that Calvinist orthodoxies exert less influence than they once did seems incontrovertible.

The American scenes of this epic seem always to unfold in Massachusetts, but there is no good reason to exclude action in the South, the Appalachians, and along the western frontier, where the Primitive Baptists made their stand. Now, one could argue with some justification that the Primitives' efflorescence was merely a sign of their irrelevance – that

their fulminations against Arminianism were just the last violent shudderings of a dying beast. Perhaps that is their role in the story.¹

We might consult the numbers. They tell a story of decline, for even at their peak – approximately 138,000 members and 3,700 churches in 1906 – Primitive Baptists’ ranks remained modest.² By 1995, only about 72,000 members were left.³

We might also turn to church and association records. There we can watch an always-fractionious sect turn upon itself, splitting into ever more discrete units even as their overall numbers plunged. Even that 1906 high-water mark disguised intra-Primitive fissures that formed in the late-nineteenth century before rupturing in the twentieth. Divisions arose between so-called absoluters (those who believed that God predestined every act) and

¹ Daniel Walker Howe, “The Decline of Calvinism: An Approach to Its Study,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 14, no. 3 (1972). Howe’s essay provides a good transnational overview of the subject. Calvinist decline shadows nearly all historical syntheses of American Protestantism. For a recent comprehensive survey, see Mark A. Noll, *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). For the specific case of southern Baptists, see Paul Harvey, *Redeeming the South: Religious Cultures and Racial Identities Among Southern Baptists, 1865-1925* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 152-154.

² Harry L. Poe, “The History of the Anti-Missionary Baptists,” *The Chronicle* 2, no. 2 (1939): 64. Poe, who drew his data from the United States Census, divided the Primitives into three groups, Two-Seed-In-The-Spirit Predestinarian Baptists, Colored Primitive Baptists, and Primitive Baptists, by which he meant white Primitive Baptists.

³ Frank S. Mead and Samuel S. Hill, eds., *Handbook of Denominations in the United States*, 11th ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001). Here numbers and nomenclature can become confusing. Mead and Hill estimate that these 72,000 Primitive Baptists were spread across about 1,000 churches in 1995. They estimate another 300-400 Reformed or Sovereign Grace Baptists churches, though they provide no membership estimates. Reformed or Sovereign Grace Baptists hold to orthodox Calvinistic doctrines, just as Primitives do, though they do not consider themselves Primitive Baptists. Finally, Mead and Hill report that the National Primitive Baptist Convention (NPBC), the umbrella organization of independent black Primitive Baptist churches, boasts a membership of approximately one million members and 1,530 churches. These numbers seem improbably high. In 1980, the NPBC claimed 250,000 members, according to the eighth edition of Mead and Hill’s book. This estimate also seems too large, though at least it has the virtue of possessing a small measure of plausibility. More accurate numbers appear in Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies, Glenmary Research Center, *Religious Congregations & Membership in the United States 2000: An Enumeration by Region, State and County Based on Data Reported for 149 Religious Bodies* (Nashville: Glenmary Research Center, 2002). This study found 547 NPBC churches with 53,630 members and an estimated 66,452 adherents. This study’s membership numbers for other Primitive Baptist subdenominations are incomplete.

the vast majority of Primitives who held that God's predestinary powers applied only to the selection of the elect. In 1907, African American believers, who had established their own churches after emancipation, cleaved in two after a breakaway faction met in Huntsville, Alabama to form the National Primitive Baptist Convention, which, as their name suggests, embraced organizational practices, such as the founding of seminaries and Sunday schools, more commonly associated with missionary Baptists. As with black Primitives, so with their white counterparts, some whom began in 1909 to identify themselves as *Progressive* Primitive Baptists because they incorporated instrumental music into worship, held protracted meetings, and established Sunday schools. Two decades later, a clutch of central Appalachian churches married their Calvinist heritage to the doctrines of Universalism. (An unlikely match, to be sure.) Told from an "authentic" Primitive point of view, this story reads like a nightmare of fragmentation and disintegration, as small blocks of the true church began worshipping in ways increasingly similar to other Protestants.

Even if we expand our circle to include the entire sweep of what contemporary scholars call the "Old-Time Baptists" – the Regulars and Old Regulars, the Separates and Uniteds – the story remains largely the same.⁴ Like the Separate Baptists, these factions either shed Calvinistic doctrines long ago or, like the Old Regulars, retained both their Calvinistic roots and small church memberships as the twentieth century wore on. It is hard, then, to escape the confines of the declension narrative.

⁴ Howard Dorgan has used the "Old-Time Baptist" category to distinguish several Central Appalachian Baptist subdenominations from their "mainline" counterparts. On the criteria used for the "Old-Time Baptist" designation, see Dorgan, *In the Hands of a Happy God: The "No-Hellers" of Central Appalachia* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997), 8-11. Also see Dorgan's earlier books, *The Old Regular Baptists of Central Appalachia: Brothers and Sisters in Hope* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989); and *Giving Glory to God in Appalachia: Worship Practices of Six Baptist Subdenominations* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987).

This chapter tells a different story about both the Primitive Baptists and their Old-Time Baptist brethren, and it is a story, strangely enough, about influence, about how something like an Old Baptist spirit seeped into American popular culture during the twentieth century even as Calvinist doctrines were disappearing. As such, it is in some roundabout way a response to W.J. Cash's contention that a Calvinist "feeling" came to dominate the southern mind. In *The Mind of the South*, Cash described how besieged southerners took refuge beneath a makeshift Calvinism and its omnipotent God.

The South would have a Baptist Church, a Presbyterian Church, a Methodist Church of its own.

But this Southern Methodist Church would be one which was not strictly Methodist any more. For as the pressure of the Yankee increased, the whole South, including the Methodists, would move toward a position of thoroughgoing Calvinism in feeling if not in formal theology...everybody did come increasingly, and without regard for his traditional creed, to think and speak of Him as being primarily the imperious master of a puppet-show. Every man was in his place because He had set him there. Everything was as it was because He had ordained it so.⁵

Like much of Cash, this passage managed to be at once immoderate and insufficient. This was Calvinism disguised as fatalism, and Cash's "everybody" referred only to white southerners since it was only they, presumably, who, forced by "the pressure of the Yankee," sought justification for the South's racial caste system in the inscrutable doings of their "imperious master." Despite such flaws, Cash proves useful to think "with" and not just think against. I began to wonder if something like a Calvinist feeling had, in fact, seeped into the South's cultural life, and, if so, where I could find it. Would it be possible to write

⁵ W.J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Knopf, 1941; reprint, New York: Vintage, 1991), 81 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

that history if it existed? How would I describe religious changes that were not necessarily reflected in creedal statements and denominational demographics?

In just about the most mundane way possible, I found the answers to my questions. They echoed from the speakers in my Volkswagen. I was listening to the elderly bluegrass musician, Ralph Stanley, chant out the deathbed plea, “O Death,” a performance that won Stanley a 2002 Grammy Award for best male country vocal and, at last count, had sold a stupefying total of more than eight million copies. Fans and critics alike rhapsodized about Stanley’s voice. (They still do.) It was haunting and ghostly and otherworldly, they said over and over again. And, above all, it was *real*. But the enthusiasm for Stanley’s prowess substituted for elucidation of it. Something similar, though on a much smaller scale, had happened a generation earlier when an until then unknown singer from eastern Kentucky, Roscoe Holcomb, made a splash among folk revival audiences. Both Stanley and Holcomb were raised in Old-Time Baptist homes – Stanley as a Primitive Baptist and Holcomb as an Old Regular Baptist. It is this chapter’s conceit that Holcomb and Stanley’s popularity marked the eruption into American popular culture – on LPs, in movies, and through a car stereo’s speakers – of a Calvinist “feeling,” a lonesome sound, that had, by all rights, been buried at least a century before.

Now, Calvinism had not exactly vanished by, say, the time of the Civil War, but increasing numbers of Americans had concluded that they could not abide notions such as original sin or human depravity. Or, as Catharine Beecher succinctly put it, “There [was]

some *dreadful mistake somewhere*” when it came to consigning obviously good people to hell simply because they had died – accidentally, no less – in an unregenerate state.⁶

In the lonesome sounds of Stanley and Holcomb we hear the return of older voices who thought the mistake lay not with religious doctrine but inside themselves. Thomas Hill felt himself to be “a stranger in a strange place,” a man “standing on a narrow point of time.”⁷ Lee Hanks was “alone in every sense of the word.”⁸ Others sensed a hope of grace, but worried that they were deceived. Stanley and Holcomb brought these voices back to life, and their audiences sensed that an exhumation was taking place even if they remained blind to the details. In this regard, Stanley and Holcomb’s singing marked Calvinism’s strange return and its inevitable transformation. No longer hardened doctrine or the subject of contention in a fight over evangelicalism’s future, Calvinism was free to become a feeling, a mood – a lonesome sound whose echoes connected audiences to the past even while signaling their distance from it.

The Real Article: Holcomb’s Emergence

It was as if they'd met a ghost. Or a prophet. For sure, though, the man was a “visionary” and his appearance before them something “miraculous.” He spoke softly, his speech unfurling like lines of poetry. He spoke about the meaning of life, of raw “experience,” of violence and poverty and loneliness, too. And then he walked away,

⁶ Catharine E. Beecher, *Common Sense Applied to Religion; Or, the Bible and the People* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1857), xxvi (italics in original)

⁷ Thomas Hill, Sr., letter to the editor, *Primitive Baptist*, 13 November 1841, 332-5.

⁸ Lee Hanks, “The Conflicts of an Orphan,” *Primitive Baptist Online*, <http://primitivebaptist.info/mambo//content/view/124/36/>. Hanks originally published this account in 1886 in the *Primitive Monitor*.

leaving them to ponder his greatness. He had come to them, they knew, from a better place, “from a time and place before the race of Americans had fallen.”⁹ There would be other visitations: in basements and college hallways, outside East Village cafes and backstage in Bremen, Germany. A notable one – a “spiritual experience” was how the young folksinger later described it – took place in a New York City loft. That was when Bob Dylan met Roscoe Holcomb.¹⁰

That these awesome encounters were with a fifty-something year-old unemployed construction worker from the mountains of eastern Kentucky may at first seem strange, but something in Holcomb – a bony, retiring man who, when he was away from his Kentucky home, as he invariably was during these meetings, wore horn-rimmed glasses, a beige fedora atop his thinning hair, a neat suit with a thin tie, and had about him the appearance, if not quite the temperament, of an old encyclopedia salesman – provoked raptures. To 1960s folk festival audiences and to the handful of musicians, producers, and fans who met him, Holcomb and his sound – for they were fused together – seemed to be everything: ancient yet not bound by time, a specimen of Appalachian poverty and a universal symbol of struggle, the embodiment of yellowing tradition and an avatar of the future.

And Holcomb’s sound? It, too, was a kind of miracle, a collection of opposites without contradictions. “So archaic, and so abstractly avant garde” was how the folk music enthusiast John Pankake put it after hearing Holcomb perform at the 1961 University of

⁹ John Pankake and Paul Nelson, *Little Sandy Review*, No. 12 (1961). Pankake and Nelson met Holcomb at that year’s University of Chicago Folk Festival. Another attendee at the early-1960s folk festivals in Hyde Park recalled that Holcomb “was like nothing I’d ever heard before” and his performance left him “speechless.” See Art Thielme, “RE: A Quote From Roscoe Holcomb,” <http://www.mudcat.org/thread.cfm?threadid=69113>.

¹⁰ Bob Dylan, *Chronicles: Volume One* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 72.

Chicago Folk Festival.¹¹ Bob Dylan heard in Holcomb's voice "a certain untamed sense of control."¹² The fiddler Howard Armstrong also heard categorical and temporal distinctions crumble under the pressure of Holcomb's sound. "Roscoe only plays the music itself," Armstrong said. "The rest of us — Beethoven, Bach, Louis Armstrong — put in our decorations and ornaments. Roscoe just plays the music straight without any of that other stuff."¹³ Praise like this fell upon Holcomb like a vitalizing rain, showering him with encomiums that singled out his music's naked power and heralded its unique status as an art of both wisdom and guilelessness.

In the past decade, as Holcomb's music migrated belatedly onto compact disc, listeners heard and felt much as they had more than a generation earlier. The music was "intense, raw."¹⁴ It "pushe[d] the envelope — not to the next step, but back to the foundations, way back in time."¹⁵ It "was radical, and avant-garde, as well as being hard core and rock bottom."¹⁶ It was "Shakespeare without the comic relief...an opportunity to experience the very depths of another person's being, undisguised by artifice but

¹¹ Pankake and Nelson, *Little Sandy Review*, No. 12 (1961).

¹² Quoted in John Cohen, Notes to *An Untamed Sense of Control*, Smithsonian Folkways, SFW CD 40144, 2003.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Rev. of *Shady Grove: Old Time Music from North Carolina, Kentucky, and Virginia*, *Sing Out!* 43, no. 2 (1998): 162.

¹⁵ Al Riess, "Recordings: Roscoe Holcomb — 'An Untamed Sense of Control'," *Dirty Linen*, October-November 2003, 56.

¹⁶ Cohen, Notes to *An Untamed Sense of Control*.

nevertheless great art.”¹⁷ The man himself was “a living archetype” of a nearly vanished Appalachian past.¹⁸ He was practically the undead.

In all the critical and popular commentary surrounding Holcomb, it has been the word “lonesome,” above all others, that has come to signify his sound. It was there already in those first dispatches in *Sing Out!* about an unnamed Kentucky folksinger and the “wild and lonesome sound he gets.”¹⁹ John Cohen, the young folk revivalist who wrote that early report after he “discovered” Holcomb deep in a Kentucky holler, soon coined the phrase “the high lonesome sound” to encapsulate Holcomb’s style. Within a few years, the coinage gave its name to a Cohen documentary, a Holcomb album, and eventually, an entire genre of music, bluegrass, that Holcomb never played.

The high lonesome sound. That once-ripe phrase spoiled long ago, reduced to a cliché summoned to describe nearly any kind of string band music played by white people. But that expression – the high, lonesome sound – still has much to tell us, as do the billows of repetitive but ardent reactions to Holcomb’s music cited above. They signal listeners’ fascination with Holcomb’s person and sound – a fascination that could at times seem like the aural equivalent of gawking but more often signified either a deep longing for, or a fleeting yet sincere identification with, the yearning and struggle in Holcomb’s voice. Listeners have heard something of themselves in Holcomb, or at least something worthy of aspiration. In their fascination with Holcomb’s drawn visage and, especially, his

¹⁷ “Off the Beaten Track,” Rev. of *The High Lonesome Sound*, *Sing Out!* 43, no. 1 (1998): 126.

¹⁸ Ted Anthony, *Chasing the Rising Sun: The Journey of an American Song* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007), 96.

¹⁹ John Cohen, “Field Trip - Kentucky.” *Sing Out!* 10, no. 2 (1960): 13-15.

piercing voice — those attributes of his that made him seem a relic and sound so raw — listeners have somehow, even as they remained largely unaware of the historical and cultural particulars, imaginatively connected with sources of Holcomb's sound which lay in the dispositions and beliefs of dissenting Protestants reaching back to the seventeenth century. In this admittedly enigmatic way, Holcomb's singing smuggled into postwar America's college campuses, cafes, and folk festivals a Calvinistic sense of longing, struggle, and defiance that had largely vanished from the American landscape. But listeners, ignorant for the most part of the abstruse particulars of Calvinist history and the development of what late-eighteenth-century critics were already describing as the "old way" of singing, were free to hear instead a more abstract or existential loneliness, a lonesomeness that fit their era even if it was summoned from another.

The Discovery

By the time anyone outside of eastern Kentucky encountered Roscoe Holcomb and his music, they also had met, whether they knew it or not, John Cohen. In 1959 Cohen became Holcomb's discoverer and, after a fashion, his manager. He arranged Holcomb's recording sessions, booked his stage appearances, and produced his albums. He shot the documentary-style photographs of Holcomb that adorned his records' covers, and he wrote the studious liner notes tucked inside. Cohen was a musician, too. He played guitar in the New Lost City Ramblers, organized hootenannies during his undergraduate years at Yale, and gathered with the other young "folkniks" at the Sunday sings in Washington Square Park. John Cohen was a folk revivalist. He also was, to use the historian Benjamin Filene's

apt term, a “cultural middleman” whose tastes and choices — of whom to document, record, and publicize — inevitably shaped the folk traditions he sought to preserve.²⁰ It is in this sense, then, that Holcomb became Cohen’s discovery and creation. Their meeting happened by accident outside the lumber camp of Daisy, Kentucky during the summer of 1959. Cohen was scavenging East Kentucky’s hills for Depression-era songs that he and his bandmates could include on an upcoming album. Having exhausted his list of local musicians, Cohen, on a whim, pointed his car down a dirt road, ran into a man he had recorded the night before, and decided to listen to him play again. After awhile, “a little guy,” Cohen said, wandered in. It was Holcomb, and he offered up a song.²¹ The Roscoe Holcomb of the folk revival — the iconic Holcomb, the one with the etched face and gnarled hands, the man holding his



Figure 1. Holcomb as talisman. Photo by John Cohen.

²⁰ Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

²¹ *Remembering the High Lonesome*, prod. and dir. Tom Davenport and Barry Dornfeld, 27 min., Tom Davenport, 2003, MiniDV.

banjo in front of a wooden shed and staring into the camera, the one whose image became emblematic of Appalachia – only appeared a year later. Cohen was right by his side.

It was then that Cohen's Kentucky field recordings, including a half-dozen made on Holcomb's front porch, found their way onto *Mountain Music of Kentucky*, a Folkways Records release that set the terms for Holcomb's public reception. Cohen conceived of the LP as

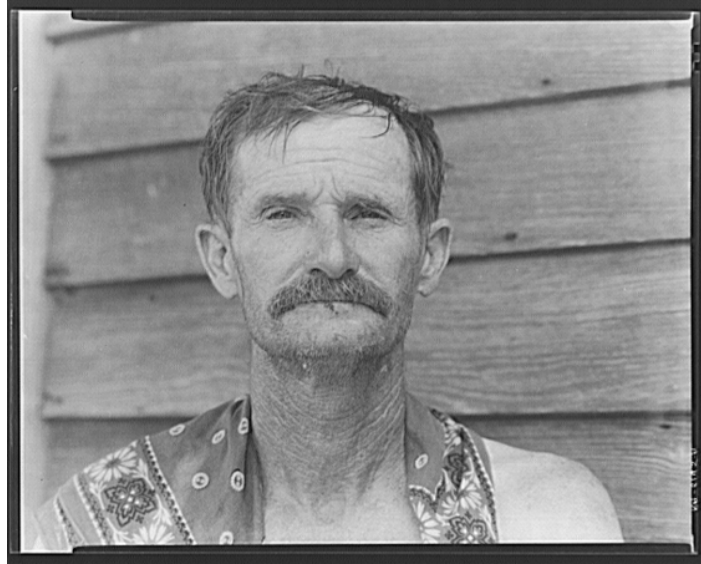


Figure 2. Bud Fields, cotton sharecropper. Hale County, Alabama. Photo by Walker Evans.

what we would now call a multi-media experience, in which a collection of music, text, and images would immerse listeners in the culture and history of eastern Kentucky. The record came packaged with a suitably grave booklet that upon first glance looked like something from the photographic arm of Franklin D. Roosevelt's Farm Security Administration. After Cohen's introductory notes and transcriptions of the song texts, there were fifteen pages black-and-white prints with spare titles (usually just the place name where the photograph was taken) and no commentary. Cohen's photographs amplified his liner notes (overshadowed them, really) and, taken together, portrayed Hazard County, Kentucky as a place of empty spaces and grueling labor. Meanwhile, Cohen's notes grounded the music in eastern Kentucky's cultural traditions and longstanding poverty. The music, he noted, was homemade and raw, recorded on front porches and in kitchens and living

rooms. There were no second takes. The musicians were tradition-bearers. Cohen described them holding the old styles close, nurturing them, even modifying them occasionally while jukeboxes and and rock 'n roll radio stations cawed in the background. "I did not sense that this old musical tradition in Kentucky is a dying one," he wrote. "Rather it is changing and continuing while maintaining much of its earlier character." The musicians were skilled, but not too skilled. The most supple of them had left to seek riches elsewhere. "[A]s soon as they get good," Cohen wrote, "they move out to the big cities to try to earn a living with their music if possible."²²

As for Holcomb in particular, Cohen created what he later described as a "talisman image."²³ Included in the photograph collection and also emblazoned on the album's cover was the now-iconic picture of Holcomb: the rutted face with black-framed glasses, the sleeves of his work shirt rolled up above his elbows, his muscular arms reaching toward the five-string banjo slung over his shoulder, the stiff pose in front of the clapboard shack, and, most powerfully, the steady, interrogatory gaze that seemed to make Holcomb a cousin to the Alabama sharecropping family Walker Evans had famously photographed more than twenty years earlier.²⁴ In his notes, Cohen described Holcomb in ways that would soon become familiar: Holcomb "makes his living with hands" and, though little appreciated by his neighbors, his "music has become a deeper means towards a lonely and passionate artistic expression."²⁵ Here, then, were the basic terms upon which Holcomb would be

²² John Cohen, Notes to *Mountain Music of Kentucky*, Folkways, FA 2317, 1960.

²³ John Cohen, "There Is No Eye: A Photo Essay." *Sing Out!*, 45, no. 4 (2001): 30.

²⁴ James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men: Three Tenant Families* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1941).

²⁵ John Cohen, Notes to *Mountain Music of Kentucky*.

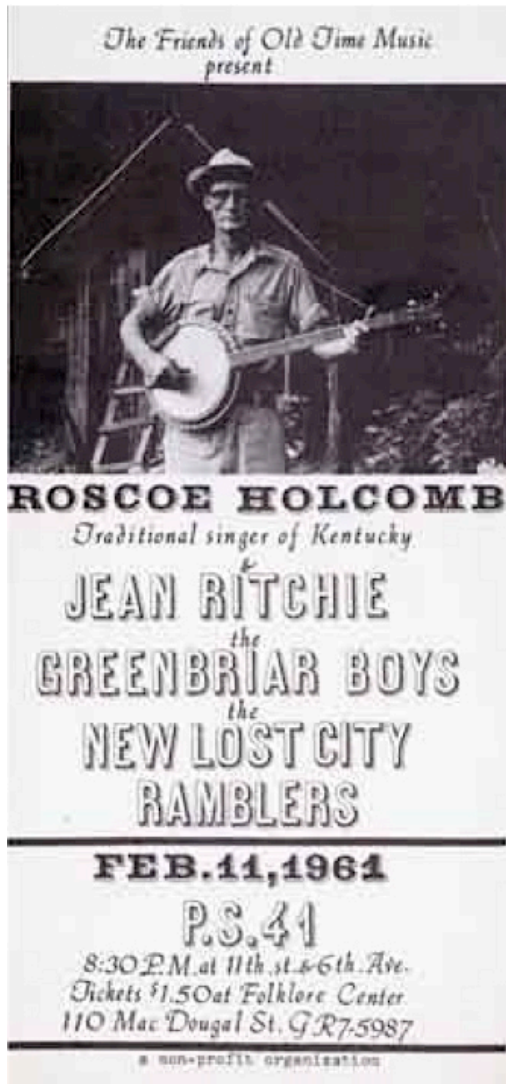


Figure 3. Headlining the first FOTM concert.

understood by revival audiences. He was an outcast, a symbol of Appalachian poverty and defiance, and an ancient craftsman. “Like it or not,” Cohen explained, “my task was to shape Roscoe's image.”²⁶

Cohen's image-making continued when Holcomb took the stage to perform for audiences in the urban North. Along with Ralph Rinzler and Israel Young, Cohen founded The Friends of Old Time Music (FOTM), an organization dedicated to introducing traditional southern musicians to New York City's folk music enthusiasts. Holcomb, they decided, would top the bill at their first concert in February 1961. That first concert, like the

thirteen others that followed over the next four years, was something more than a musical exhibition. It was both refuge and celebration, a place that would, as Rinzler observed, “satisfy both the capacity of the performer and the appetite of the audience” by honoring the “real article” – the authentic artist – rather than their commercial imitators.²⁷ But Cohen and his fellow organizers conceived the FOTM concerts not only as a bulwark against the lacquered tones of commercial folk musicians such as Harry Belafonte and the

²⁶ Cohen, Notes to *An Untamed Sense of Control*.

²⁷ Richard Rinzler, Notes to *Friends of Old Time Music*, Folkways, FA 2390, 1964.

Kingston Trio but also a means to differentiate themselves from two older factions in the folksong movement: the politically motivated bloc most closely identified with Pete Seeger and tied ideologically to the Popular Front of the 1930s, and the collectors of folksong-as-artsong who, like John Jacob Niles, might sing “John Henry” with an opera-house vibrato. The modern folksong movement, Cohen wrote in 1959, dwelled “no longer on social reform” but was instead “focused more on a search for real and human values.” “We are looking within ourselves,” he continued, and not “for someone to lead us.”²⁸

Holcomb was ideally suited to meet the goals of the FOTM and, by extension, the northern, urban folk audience who bought his records and attended his concerts. His very life qualified him. He hailed from Appalachia, was poor, looked even older than his fifty-some-odd years, and his body was compromised from years spent in the mines and lumber mill where he had broken his back. He sang about murdered lovers, moonshining, orphans, and graveyards. He was someone revival audiences could believe in. He was the “real article,” as Rinzler put it. Which is another way of saying that Holcomb was transparently sincere (not an ideologue or a commercial showman) and therefore the ideal vehicle for legitimizing Cohen’s modern folksong movement. “Sincerity,” wrote Pierre Bourdieu in his discussion of how artistic value is created, “is only possible – and only achieved – where there is a perfect and immediate harmony between the expectations inscribed in the position occupied (in a less consecrated universe, one would say ‘the job

²⁸ Cohen quoted in Philip F. Gura, “Southern Roots and Branches: Forty Years of the New Lost City Ramblers,” *Southern Cultures* 6, no. 4 (2000): 6-7.

description') and the dispositions of the occupant."²⁹ Holcomb, as Cohen quickly realized, fit the job description perfectly: "1959 was a time when the 'vision' of the urban Folk Revival was in need of 'revision,' and Roscoe's music presented me with the weapon to achieve a change in that perception."³⁰

It is difficult to know for certain, but it seems that Holcomb consented, if not collaborated, in Cohen's image-making. One thing we do know: Holcomb's wife, Ethel, and many of his neighbors loathed Cohen's now-ubiquitous photo of Holcomb standing in front of his shed. As far they were concerned, it was a naked piece of exploitation.

Holcomb himself was unfazed:

[Y]ou see, we live in these old mountains here and we've been raised up pretty rough and a lot of them does the best they can and they take it as if you take the worst you can find to make a picture to take back to New York to show the people. That's the way a lot them feel about it. *Course it don't matter with me.*³¹

None of this was sinister. Cohen wanted to close the gap between traditional southern musicians and their

ART OF FOLK SONG IN FESTIVAL FORM

By ROBERT SHELTON

THE season of the folk-music festival will soon be with us again. Musicians will be gathering in informal amateur groups or in professional squadrons to sing, discuss and exchange traditional songs.

Among the leading events planned in the East are the Indian Neck Folk Music Festival, to be held May 6 to 8 at Branford, Conn., the twenty-fourth annual National Folk Festival, listed for Washington on June 1 to 4, and the second annual Newport Folk Festival, scheduled June 24 to 26. Recordings of two of last year's "festivals," a word more overworked than descriptive, are on hand. They provide Monday morning quarterbacking a field day for hindsight and re-evaluation.

Folk Song Festival at Carnegie Hall (United Artists) is a portion of an important concert put on last April by Alan Lomax, the collector, author and stormy petrel of folk music.



BANJO PLAYER ON DISK—Roscoe Holcomb, who is heard in recording devoted to Kentucky mountain music.

George Pegram from the Asheville (N. C.) Festival, or the salty balladry and fiddling of Grant Rogers, who has played for years in the Catskill Folk Festivals?

Nor are the cities devoid of new talent that should be encouraged and developed: Logan English, Kentucky-born actor with a warm-voiced, emotionally moving manner and a disarming yet sincere "country-boy" directness in his presentation; Jacques Memahem, a singer and guitarist as much at home in flamenco or the French songs of George Brasseur as he is in Greek and Israeli material; Theodore Alevizos, who can be heard on a richly lyric new recording, "Songs of Greece" (Tradition), or the lovely children's games and songlore of Molly Scott, a fresh-faced, beautiful city newcomer of whom we should be hearing a great deal in the future.

These are just a few of the names that spring to mind. The Newport Folk Festival can continue to add to the musical

Figure 4. In an early report from the New York Times.

²⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, "The Production of Belief: Contribution to an Economy of Symbolic Goods" in *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 95. I first came across this passage and these ideas in Julia S. Ardery's endlessly fascinating and insightful book on folk art. See Ardery, *The Temptation: Edgar Tolson and the Genesis of Twentieth-Century Folk Art* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

³⁰ Cohen, Notes to *An Untamed Sense of Control*.

³¹ Quoted in Cohen, Notes to *The High Lonesome Sound*, Folkways FA 2368, 1965 (my emphasis).

urban, northern audiences. He offered himself up — naively, idealistically — as the bridge.³² In doing so, he of course participated in the longstanding western cultural dialectic between country and city of which the postwar folk revival was but one instance. That the stink of exploitation often rose from this cultural traffic between city and country — between, in this case, rural Appalachia and urban America — is not in doubt. But the back and forth also could be imaginatively productive, if not always well mannered.³³ In this instance, the key point is that the context of Holcomb's presentation enhanced, rather than swamped his sound. Listeners were prepared to hear in Holcomb something deeply unfamiliar and yet powerfully magnetic, something that came from without yet reflected their deepest selves. The question was, "Would he deliver?"

Really Lonesome: Holcomb's Sound

Roscoe Holcomb played the blues, frailed his banjo at square dances, picked his guitar to a lyric about Cincinnati's Coney Isle amusement park, bent notes on his mouth harp, set British broadside ballads to musical accompaniment, learned tunes first cut on 78 rpm records by Ida Cox and Bessie Smith, worshipped at a Holiness church, and sang the old lined-out hymns he first heard as a child in Old Regular Baptist meeting houses. He

³² Cohen, of course, was hardly the only one to do this. Pete Seeger and his half-brother Mike, who started playing with Cohen in the late 1950s, did it too. John and Alan Lomax did it before them, and before the Lomaxes, ballad hunters such as Cecil Sharp performed a similar service. See Filene's *Romancing the Folk* for the particulars.

³³ The literature on this subject — the construction of the folk and the meanings attached to this enterprise — is beyond vast. Some of the works that have been most useful to me are the following: Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973); David E. Whisnant, *All That Is Native & Fine: The Politics of Culture in an American Region* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983); Robert Cantwell, *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996); W.T. Lhamon, *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

even on occasion scraped a fiddle. Leafing through such a diverse repertoire, one is tempted to describe Holcomb as a songster, a jack of all musical trades. But the label does not quite fit. Holcomb demonstrated neither the showmanship of an old-time songster such as Uncle Dave Macon or the studied professionalism of his contemporary on the folk festival circuit, Doc Watson. Without these presentational tools at his disposal, Holcomb might have had only a short-lived stint on revival stages. Instead, he performed for nearly twenty years, and his music found its way onto a handful of solo albums and several compilations.

Holcomb's voice carried him and drew listeners towards him. That voice was a singular instrument: reedy and compressed, its tones pooling deep in his chest but ringing out as if they had been ejected directly from the back of his throat or deflected, laser-like, off his hard palate. And as observers never failed to point out, Holcomb pitched his voice high. This piercing combination of timbre and pitch defined Holcomb's singing.

In his early conversations with Cohen, Holcomb regularly described his sound as lonesome. Cohen took the musician's cue when he hit upon the phrase "the high lonesome sound" to describe Holcomb's music. According to the bluegrass historian Neil Rosenberg, Cohen used the word "high" as a synonym for "very" or "extremely," and not — or, at least, not only — as a descriptor of pitch:

Cohen had heard the title of a song, 'High Lonesome,' an obscure early recording by the Country Gentlemen. Though there was no mountain or aural image in the song — composer John Duffey had used the word *high* as a synonym for a more common intensifier, *really* — the unusual combination of words appealed to Cohen.³⁴

³⁴ Neil V. Rosenberg, *Bluegrass: A History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 174 (emphasis in original).

It is, of course, Bill Monroe's music, not Holcomb's, that is most often defined as "the high, lonesome sound." Indeed, for many fans and critics, the phrase signifies bluegrass music itself and calls up in an instant all of the music's totemic images – the little cabin on the hill, the old mountain church, blue moons, rocky tops, and happy valleys. And why not? Those keening vocal harmonies are as important to bluegrass music as are its breakneck banjo rolls and rapid-fire mandolin lines.

But Monroe's lonesomeness was not Holcomb's. They were different by kind and degree. Consider, first, that listeners heard them differently. Monroe's voice has been analogized to an oboe, a pearl, an air horn, and fresh cream, while Holcomb's whine most often elicited comparisons to dark moods, not things: eerie, taut, deathly, chilling.³⁵ Monroe's voice was polished (like that pearl), finely tuned (like that oboe), powerful, and necessarily capable of the fierce precision demanded of the bluegrass singer. Bluegrass music, said Monroe, was like "putting a motor together."³⁶

The weeping wail in a Blue Grass Boys song was fundamentally sentimental, rooted in the traditions of the hillbilly "heart song," which was itself tied to the tenderhearted Victorian parlor song. Here parted lovers pine for each other in waltz time:

No answer to my love letter
To soothe my aching heart
Why did God ever permit
True love like ours to part³⁷

Or the singer, exiled from domestic bliss, can only sit home alone and wonder:

³⁵ Robert Cantwell, *Bluegrass Breakdown: The Making of the Old Southern Sound* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984; reprint, New York: Da Capo Press, 1992), 242 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

³⁶ Quoted in Cantwell, *Bluegrass Breakdown*, 165.

³⁷ Bill Monroe and His Blue Grass Boys, "No Letter in the Mail," *The Father of Bluegrass Music*, RCA Camden, CAL 719, 1962.

What is a home without a baby?
To love and to tease and adore?
What is a home without a sweet wife?
To kiss you each night at the door?
What is a home without sunshine?
To spread its bright rays from above?
You can have wealth and its pleasures
But what is a home without love?³⁸

Or the widower struggles to take comfort in the memories of his lost love:

It seems I'll never more see you
Till we meet in Heaven it seems
But I hold you close to my heart love
In my beautiful memories and dreams³⁹

Often when the singer's situation grows more grave, such as in "Roane County Prison," where the townspeople shun him before the jury declares him guilty, he still finds comfort in family:

When the train pulled out poor mother stood weepin'
And sister she sat all alone with a sigh
And the last words I heard was "Willy God bless you"
Was "Willy God bless you, God bless you, goodbye"⁴⁰

These lyrical themes echoed in the rising and falling action of Monroe's singing voice. In his discussion of Monroe's vocal technique, Robert Cantwell explains that the texture of Monroe's voice evoked "a sweet bereavement, a kind of homesickness" as it scaled sonic heights and then, like a receding siren, sailed away.

What Monroe is doing is cleaving his voice to certain *terrestrial* laws, at once overcoming and being overcome by them...and thereby provoking an inestimable

³⁸ Bill Monroe and His Blue Grass Boys, "What is a Home Without Love?" *All the Classic Releases: 1937-1949*, JSP 7712, 2003.

³⁹ Bill Monroe and His Bluegrass Boys, "Come Back to Me in My Dreams," *The Essential Bill Monroe and His Bluegrass Boys: 1945-1949*, Columbia/Legacy C2K 52478, 1992.

⁴⁰ Bill Monroe, "Roane County Prison," *The Best of Bill Monroe*, MCA MCA2-4090, 1975.

sensation of loss of the summit to which we have become emotionally and musically, deeply committed.⁴¹

This was Monroe's high, lonesome sound: a sonic drama of achievement and loss that mimicked the sentimental dramas played out in the lyrics of his songs.

Then again, how lonely really is the bluegrass singer? Even when the meter speeds up the singer seems only to exist as an isolated traveler in a decaying landscape —

I'm on my way back to the old home
The road winds on up the hill
But there's no light in the window
That shined long ago where I live

— his loneliness is tethered, for bluegrass music is an ensemble sound and the singer performs his lonesomeness within the embrace of his band. Alan Lomax deemed bluegrass an orchestral music, and those who saw the Blue Grass Boys perform would agree, I think, that Monroe's presence — standing at center stage costumed like a southern planter and driving his band with his mandolin — bespoke authority much like a tuxedoed conductor poised, baton in hand, before his armada of woodwinds, strings, and brass.

Holcomb, by contrast, seemed the embodiment of solitary struggle. It was not just his gaunt appearance or the fact that he, a man of average height, reported his weight in 1964 as one hundred and sixteen pounds.⁴² Those who perused Cohen's liner notes knew that Holcomb's biography read like an inventory of hardships. He had loaded coal in the mines, broken his back working in a lumber mill, picked up highway construction jobs when he could find them, and was, by the time they saw him perform, unable to work because his body would not allow it: "I thought I was getting better but it was just a

⁴¹ Cantwell, *Bluegrass Breakdown*, 243.

⁴² Cohen, Notes to *An Untamed Sense of Control*.

thought. I wasn't. That's what got me worried. If I's to get a job I couldn't hold it — be more worries. Man just as soon have his brains shot out as to be in that condition, the way I feel.”⁴³ Religious crisis also gripped him. He had at one point spent ten years away from his banjo and guitar because the Old Regular Baptist church in which he was raised despised musical instruments for their associations with frivolity and iniquity. Finally, after a decade away from his instruments, Holcomb began attending the nearby Holiness church, where he could play guitar. It proved difficult, however, to shed his guilt. In the early 1960s, he told Cohen that he continued to “get disgusted and think sometimes I'll quit [playing music] anyway.”⁴⁴

Holcomb's singing voice amplified his biography so that even those listeners unfamiliar with the details of life would nevertheless hear an aural representation of it. Holcomb chose, as Cohen has pointed out, to pitch his songs at the very top of his vocal register, ensuring that he needed to strain to hit his notes. Even the unbearably shrill notes of “In the Pines” were not reached by using a falsetto. There was, then, in his songs a built-in yearning — sonically encoded — no matter the topic. Many bluegrass musicians achieve a similar effect. Some of Monroe's former sidemen tell stories of their erstwhile boss practicing songs before a performance by pitching them a half-tone higher than he had sung them just the night before.⁴⁵ But the successful bluegrass singer always hits his notes even as he preserves a dramatic tension between the notes sung and his ability to reach them. In bluegrass singing, then, to hit the wrong notes or to hit them too easily constitute

⁴³ Quoted in Cohen, *Notes to The High Lonesome Sound*

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Cantwell, *Bluegrass Breakdown*, 209.

failure. A Holcomb performance was far more elastic. In the first place, Holcomb's vocal phrasing, as on "Little Maggie," was malleable, with vowels smeared across the staff while his fingers traced an insistent rhythm on banjo. Here, as with many of his performances, the meter was tied more to Holcomb's breath than to a consistent beat. So pinched were his tones and so stretched were his phrasings that some critics complained they could not understand a word of what he was singing. Holcomb replied that the sound mattered more than the individual lyric: "The music is saying just the same as I am saying, otherwise what good is it?"⁴⁶ It is, perhaps, an obvious point but one still worth emphasizing: Holcomb's approach foregrounded the voice, even creating the illusion of untethering it — for a few beats here and few phrases there — from the instrumental accompaniment. The combined effect is one of momentary aural dislocation, or, rather, a series of such moments: a man singing impossibly high, lyrics that seem disconnected from standard phrasing, a sense of vocal and instrumental lines moving not only to different pulses but on entirely different plains. One hears this most dramatically on Holcomb's "Across the Rocky Mountain," in which with each breath he stretched vowels over several bars atop buzzing guitar:

Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaacross the rocky mountain, I walked for miles and miiiiiiiiles,
Across the rocky mountaiiiiiiiin, I walked for miles and miles.

Here Holcomb used an unusual open G tuning in which he tuned his lowest string up to G so that the same note rang out from both his fifth and sixth strings. As his thumb rained down on the top string a drone swelled up from the persistent thump-thump and

⁴⁶ Quoted in John Cohen, Notes to *The Music of Roscoe Holcomb & Wade Ward*, Folkways FA 2363, 1962.

Holcomb's voice rose even above that before breaking off, like a balloon floating in the air and then bursting.⁴⁷

That taut soaring voice possessed a history. It was always Holcomb's own but it was, too, an inheritance collected during childhood while attending Old Regular Baptist church services. The Old Regular Baptists sang hymns in high voice like other Old-Time Baptist sects. In the 1920s, for example, an early song collector in the Appalachians noted the "weird effect" achieved by Primitive Baptists singers, especially women, who "pitch[ed] the air an octave too high."⁴⁸ One can still find a similar style of high-pitched hymn singing among the Calvinistic, Gaelic-speaking residents of the Hebrides.⁴⁹ Both the southern highlanders and the Scotch islanders were the inheritors of a style of unaccompanied psalm singing rooted in the reformed Protestant sects of the seventeenth century and stubbornly preserved through the years, often along Calvinist principles. High pitch, however, was only one of several key features in a style that early-eighteenth century psalm books already referred to the "Old Way." Slow tempos, nearly imperceptible rhythms, nasality, the addition of extra pitches or so-called ornaments, a precentor whose job it was to "line out" the hymn to his illiterate congregation before they sang it back to him — these were all Old-Way singing traits found in, say, a seventeenth-century Scottish parish church and an Old Regular Baptist meeting house in eastern Kentucky just after the

⁴⁷ Roscoe Holcomb, "Across the Rocky Mountain," *Mountain Music of Kentucky*.

⁴⁸ Josiah Henry Combs, *Folk-Songs of the Southern United States (Folk-Songs Du Midi Des Etats-Unis)*, ed. by D.K. Wilgus (Austin: Published for the American Folklore Society by the University of Texas Press, 1967), 88.

⁴⁹ *Gaelic Psalm Tunes from Lewis*, Tangent TNGM 120, 1975.

First World War.⁵⁰ Conventional harmony was rare as congregations sang as one but with individual voices falling in and out of phase depending on each singer's breath or taste.

The folk singer Jean Ritchie, who grew up attending an Old Regular Baptist church not far from where Holcomb lived, recalled hymn singing "that rose and crashed with the majesty and immensity of great mountainous waves on the ocean," a description that might equally apply both to the complex monophony of Old Way singing and to Holcomb's high lonesome sound.⁵¹

In the nineteenth century, the Old Regulars and their Primitive cousins preserved the Old Way of Singing as waves of trained singing masters (think of them as musical missionaries) traveled the nation preaching a gospel of part harmony, note reading (including shapenotes), "purity and fullness" of tone, and ear-catching melodies.⁵² A century earlier, Anglican and Congregational reformers had introduced organs and trained choirs to codify "regular" psalm singing, which used the conventions of art music to "improve" worship and, it was thought, create a more pleasing sound for God's ear. The musicologist Nicholas Temperley has found that musical reforms such as these were linked, in both England and America, with a retreat from Calvinistic theology.⁵³ The Old Baptists

⁵⁰ Nicholas Temperley, "The Old Way of Singing: Its Origins and Development," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 34, no. 3 (1981): 511-544; Temperley, "The Old Way of Singing," *The Musical Times* 120, no. 1641 (November 1979): 943-947.

⁵¹ Jean Ritchie, *Folk Songs of the Southern Appalachians as Sung by Jean Ritchie*, 2nd ed. (Lexington, Ky: University Press of Kentucky, 1997), 44. On Old Way singing among the Old Regular Baptists, see William H. Tallmadge, "Baptist Monophonic and Heterophonic Hymnody in Southern Appalachia," *Anuario Interamericano de Investigacion Musical* 11 (1975): 106-136.

⁵² Quoted in Sammie Ann Wicks, "A Belated Salute to the 'Old Way' of 'Snaking' the Voice on Its (ca) 345th Birthday," *Popular Music* 8, no. 1 (1989): 59-96. Wicks's article provides a brilliant historical summary and analysis of the vocal style underpinning Primitive Baptist and Old Regular Baptist singing. This article helped me listen to Holcomb and Stanley with a fresh appreciation of their musics' roots in centuries-old musical and religious folkways.

⁵³ Temperley, "Origins and Development," 537

resisted these changes just as they refused to support missions, Sunday schools, and Bible tract societies, and their musical intransigence ought to be seen as one aspect of their overall hostility to the sweeping changes affecting nineteenth-century American Protestantism, especially those that they believed threatened the autonomy of the individual church at the expense of larger ecclesiastical or benevolent networks.

A Holcomb performance recapitulated this history and became, in its own way, a kind of public worship. “In its own way” because a Holcomb performance decontextualized Old Baptist history, stripping it of denominational politics and doctrinal wranglings, even as it preserved – in condensed form – its ethos. Holcomb began each show much like a sinner relating his conversion experience to the church. He told audience members of his limitations. He assured them he would do the best he could. Or, as he wrote to Cohen in 1963: “It takes a long time to make a musician...me especially. I ain’t never made it yet.”⁵⁴ Then, too, reports abound of Holcomb visibly suffering during performances. Singing so loudly at such a high pitch would often leave him exhausted after only two or three songs.⁵⁵ Ritchie remembered performances that ended mid-show because Holcomb’s voice had reached its breaking point.⁵⁶ If a song is a compressed drama, then a Holcomb performance – with its yearning and regular failings, its split-but-simultaneously-executed meters – seemed an musical enactment the persistent failures and a dogged duality of the psychological dramas described in chapter two.

⁵⁴ Quoted in Cohen, *Notes to An Untamed Sense of Control*.

⁵⁵ Cohen, *Notes to Roscoe Holcomb & Wade Ward*.

⁵⁶ I have this from Robert Cantwell.

Holcomb's banjo and guitar work thrilled audiences, but it was his acapella singing that most dramatically represented an Old Baptist feeling. He often sang hymns directly from the Old Regular Baptist hymn book he carried with him, but some of his most effective performances were those in which he adapted traditional material to fit his acapella Old Baptist style. In "Man of Constant Sorrow," for example, he took the Stanley Brothers' loping bluegrass melody, brought it inside the meeting house, stripped it of everything except its lyric, and turned it into a quavering first-person testimonial. The song, Holcomb said, was "too true" and it took him several tries in the studio before he could get through an entire take without breaking down.⁵⁷

Holcomb, then, was hardly a Calvinistic stoic. Many of his songs, like Monroe's, were moistened by the teary themes of the sentimental tradition. One of Holcomb's favorite tunes, "Wandering Boy," veered between the perspective of the misty-eyed "boy" — now clearly a man — and his seemingly dead mother, who nonetheless prayed that her boy not succumb to dissipation:

As I travel this wide world over
Friends I find wherever I roam,
But to me there's none like Mother
None like Mother dear at home.
[...]
Oh God wilt thou have mercy
On my darling precious boy,
Save, protect him Lord I pray thee
Let not sin destroy his soul.

Like so many Appalachian songs, the lyrics flirted dangerously with bathos. But sung acapella in the Old Way style, the song, like "Man of Constant Sorrow," became a

⁵⁷ Cohen, Notes to *Roscoe Holcomb & Wade Ward*.

powerful lament, a prayer of sorts that regularly drove Holcomb to tears. Stunned audiences simply applauded.⁵⁸ John Cohen's 1963 documentary, *The High Lonesome Sound*, closes with Holcomb singing "Wandering Boy" unaccompanied, lining it out in the Old Regular Baptist hymn style (The tune can actually be found in *The Old Baptist Songbook* that Holcomb often carried with him.).⁵⁹ As Holcomb chants the tune's opening lines, Cohen's camera creeps inside the singer's empty house, catching a picture of Jesus tacked to the wall in a room illuminated by a bare lightbulb. The camera ensconces Holcomb in shadows and dwells on his thick-veined hands. He is alone in the house, singing the hymn as if he were a member of a church of one.

Holcomb understood his unaccompanied singing as something beyond musical performance. Even as he drew closer to the Holiness Church, Holcomb retained the Old Regulars' lexicon by which music-making was confined to sounds produced using instruments. Unaccompanied singing, as Holcomb and other Old Regulars pointed out, was not, in this sense, music. It was, instead, the medium used to approach the Almighty. Old Regular believers talk about "being *tuned up* with the grace of God and His Holy Spirit."⁶⁰ Old Regulars believe that singing "illuminates the soul of the singer" and "glorifies God."⁶¹ All of this has led an ethnographer of Old Regular Baptists to conclude

⁵⁸ John Cohen, Notes to *Close to Home*, Folkways FA 2374, 1975.

⁵⁹ *The High Lonesome Sound*, prod. and dir. John Cohen, 30 min., Audio-Brandon Films, 1963, 16 mm.

⁶⁰ Quoted in Jeff Todd Titon, Notes to *Old Regular Baptists: Lined-Out Hymnody from Southeastern Kentucky*, Smithsonian Folkways, SF CD 40106, 1997.

⁶¹ Wicks, "Life and Meaning," 173.

that their hymn singing “carries the full weight of both the mundane and ineffable meanings of Old Regular beliefs.”⁶²

By 1966, Holcomb was, in the words of the *New York Times*’ Robert Shelton, “something of a rural star.”⁶³ That was about as famous as Holcomb ever became. That

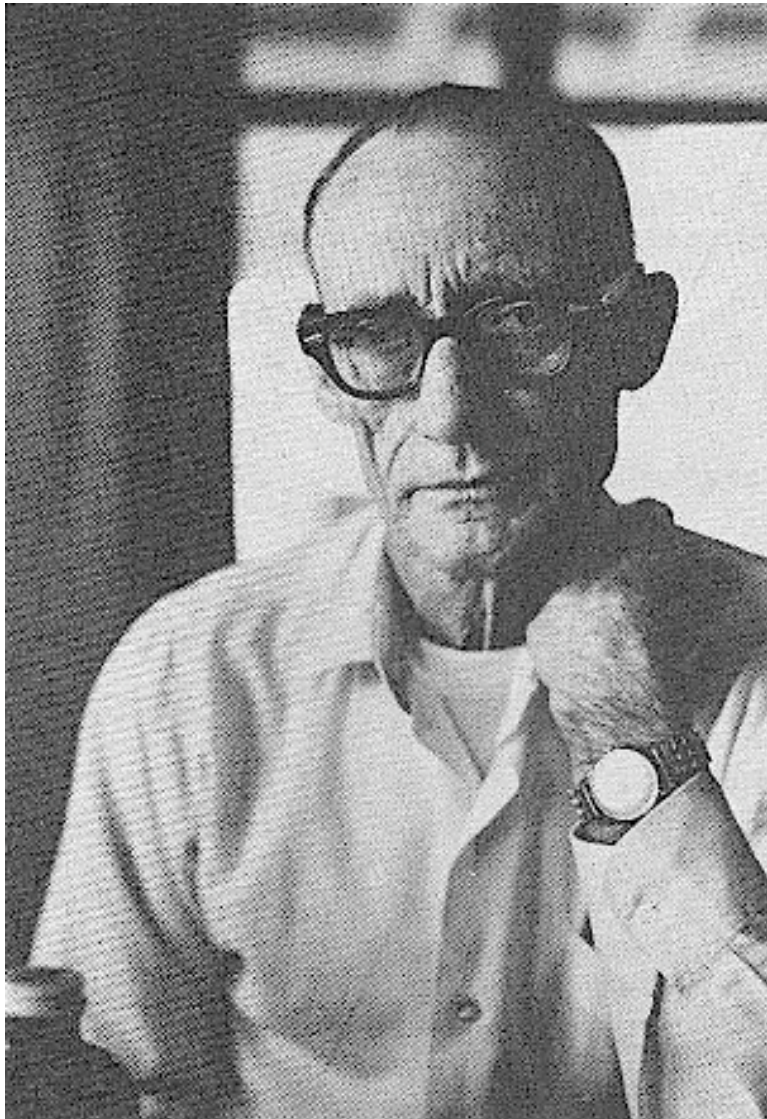


Figure 5. Holcomb at home (ca. 1975). Photo by Carol Reck.

year his

album, *The High Lonesome Sound*, earned a Grammy nomination in the category of “Best

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Robert Shelton, “Folk Singers From the 'Source',” *New York Times*, April 24, 1966, 22.

Folk Recording.” A few years later, a song of his would wedge its way between Pink Floyd and the Grateful Dead on the soundtrack to Antonioni’s *Zabriskie Point*. He died in 1981 at the age of seventy, but his presence has continued to hover on the edges of popular culture: Charles Frazier, for instance, claims Holcomb’s music as an influence on his best-selling novel, *Cold Mountain*.⁶⁴ It would be Holcomb’s younger contemporary, the bluegrass singer and banjo player Ralph Stanley, who popularized the lonesome sound.

Ralph Stanley’s Conversation With Death

Listening to Ralph Stanley’s music is like crawling into a crypt. Dark, dank, and moss-covered, this musical sepulcher summons the past’s ghosts, conjures up visions of the afterlife, and leaves us — its intruders — with memories haunted by our encounter. In truth, this is only one way of hearing Ralph Stanley. But it has been a popular way to listen. “Haunting,” “ghostly,” “sepulchral,” “otherworldly” — these words bounce around the written discussions of Stanley’s music as if in some kind of literary echo chamber. And like reverberations in such a chamber, these depictions of Stanley’s grim strangeness float

⁶⁴ See John Cohen, Notes to *Back Roads to Cold Mountain*, Smithsonian Folkways, SFW40149, 2004.

on the air, the source that generated them long since obscured by the fog of repetition and decay.⁶⁵

The apotheosis (or, depending upon one's point of view, the nadir) of this way of listening occurred in the months and years after the release in late 2000 of the movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and its accompanying soundtrack. In the movie theaters, Stanley's voice echoed from behind a Ku Klux Klan mask as the white-sheeted hordes gathered for a lynching. On the album, listeners heard Stanley sing the old ballad, "O Death," impersonating both a dying man and the Grim Reaper collecting his quarry:

O, Death
O, Death
Won't you spare me over til another year
Well what is this that I can't see
With ice cold hands takin' hold of me
Well I am death, none can excel
I'll open the door to heaven or hell
O, death someone would pray
Could you wait to call me another day
The children prayed, the preacher preached
Time and mercy is out of your reach
I'll fix your feet til you can't walk
I'll lock your jaw til you can't talk

⁶⁵ What follows is but a sampling of such description. One reviewer claimed that the Stanley Brothers' sound "was the very embodiment of haunting mountain sorrow" and that Ralph's voice was "positively otherworldly." In a different piece, this same reviewer explained that Ralph's tenor "lends an appropriately ghostly quality to old and new songs of loneliness, despair, and fundamental religious faith." Country music historian Bill Malone has written of Ralph's "haunting, almost sepulchral voice." A writer in the 1970s reflected on Stanley's "haunting" lead vocals and also imagined that an a cappella rendition of "Village Church Yard" had "moss hanging all over it." The liner notes to the best-selling *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* soundtrack picked up all these cues. There, Robert Oermann hailed the Stanley Brothers' "haunting 1955 version of 'Angel Band,'" and Ralph Stanley's capsule biography noted that "his haunting tenor voice" had been described as "otherworldly" by the *New York Times*. Mark Greenberg, "Off the Beaten Track," Rev. of *Ralph Stanley and the Clinch Mountain Boys, 1971-1973, Sing Out!* 40, no. 4 (1996): 132. Bill C. Malone quoted in John Wright, *Traveling the High Way Home: Ralph Stanley and the World of Traditional Bluegrass Music* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 15. Walter V. Saunders, Notes to *Ralph Stanley and the Clinch Mountain Boys, 1971-1973*, Rebel REB-4001, 1995; Robert K. Oermann, Notes to *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, Mercury 088 170-069-2, 2000. Note that Walter V. Saunders's contributions above originally appeared as record reviews in *Bluegrass Unlimited* during the mid-1970s.

I'll close your eyes so you can't see
This very air, come and go with me
Death—I come to take the soul
Leave the body and leave it cold
To draw the flesh off of the frame
Dirt and worm both have a claim

Stanley's turn as Death himself caught the popular imagination. The film managed modest box office returns, but the soundtrack, with Stanley's harrowing performance at its heart, quickly lodged itself in a host of Billboard charts, sold more than five million copies by the end of 2002, earned Stanley a Grammy award, and spawned a series of concert tours featuring the collection's musicians. From the moment the soundtrack's sales took off, critics have wondered what lay behind the public's enthusiasm for a collection largely ignored by modern country radio and filled with obscure field recordings, classic bluegrass tunes, and some more current renditions of old blues songs performed in traditional styles.⁶⁶

The question here — What is the source of Stanley's musical power? — is a subset of that larger question, and its answer lies hidden in plain view. We find it in the contours of Stanley's biography and the folkways of his Primitive Baptist faith. What we find there, if we would only look for it, and what we hear there, if we would simply listen for it, is nothing less than a drama of death and resurrection, a drama of loss and life that undergirds Stanley's music the way Jesus' trial on the cross powers Christianity. Nowhere is this drama more urgently represented than in Stanley's voice. It is, after all, Ralph

⁶⁶ Christopher Gray, "O Brother: Down from the mountain and into Wal-Mart," *Austin Chronicle*, July 19, 2002, <http://www.austinchronicle.com/gyrobase/Issue/story?oid=oid%3A97586>; Aaron A. Fox, "'Alternative' to What? O Brother, September 11, and the Politics of Country Music," in *Country Music Goes to War*, ed. by Charles K. Wolfe and James E. Akenson (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 164-191. Fox's essay is the keenest of the bunch, pulling together old threads to make something new.

Stanley's voice that has led to the steady accretion of ominous adjectives I listed above. But those disembodied descriptions drift above the historical, cultural, and theological roots of Stanley's sound. As of this writing, Ralph Stanley is eighty-one years old, but his voice is nearly three centuries older than that. It is the voice of dissenting Protestantism, a Calvinist voice whose quavers and slides dramatize a lonely soul's search for grace in a fallen world.

In early promotional photos, Ralph Stanley looked more like a television cowboy than a frontier preacher. Record companies presented Stanley and his brother Carter as a conventional brother duo, much like the Blue Sky Boys, or Jim and Jesse McReynolds, and poured these bluegrass musicians into the same cowboy mold used to market country and western singers.

Ralph Stanley's metamorphosis from youthful banjo-playing cowboy to mature mountain preacher began in the early 1970s as he switched record labels and began to head his own band several years after his brother's death. During these years, Stanley emphasized the religious character of his repertoire and so his record label posed Stanley and his band like reverent soldiers in front of a mammoth cross or stood them solemnly in front of the plain white siding of a mountain church. These band photos almost invariably presented Stanley as the literal or figurative minister while The Clinch Mountain Boys served, alternately, as his choir, congregation, or band of pilgrims. Stanley's iconography gradually changed over the ensuing decades, but both the solemnity of the 1970s-era images as well as his outward, off-camera gaze became hallmarks of Stanley's presentational style.



Figures 6, 7, and 8. From left to right: The Louvin Brothers; Jim & Jesse McReynolds in 1964; and The Stanley Brothers (Ralph on banjo)

The biggest changes in Stanley's photographic representation have occurred in the last decade as he has been recognized as bluegrass music's foremost elder statesman and his music has gained a popular audience with its inclusion on the *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* soundtrack. The more recent images have continued to emphasize the sobriety of the earlier band portraits, but the band itself has vanished. Instead, Stanley appears alone, often set in vast empty spaces that serve to reinforce his isolation. His gaze, too, has shifted. No longer does he look heavenward like a supplicant. Instead, he peers at an unseen point past the viewer or, like Roscoe Holcomb, stares directly at the camera's lens with a look that alternates between impassive and imposing. Death, too, intrudes. In a series of portraits taken for Stanley's eponymous 2002 release, the photographer Mary

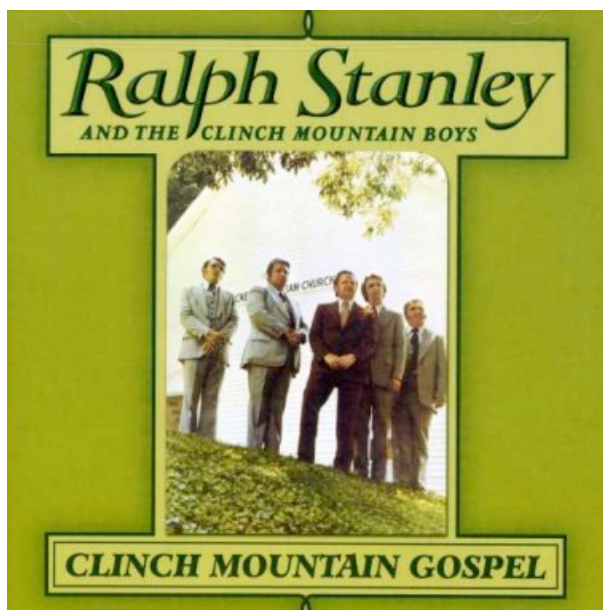


Figure 9. Stanley as preacher and The Clinch Mountain Boys as his band of pilgrims, from the cover of *Clinch Mountain Gospel* (Rebel Records, REB-1571, 1977).



Figures 10, 11, and 12. From top to bottom: The cover of *Cry From the Cross* (Rebel Records, REB-1499, 1971); seeing the heavenly light (photo by Jim McGuire, 1998); and a recent edition of *The Clinch Mountain Boys* (ca. 2000).

Ellen Mark posed the elderly singer in front of his own grave. The increasing grimness of Stanley's photographic representation seems a calculated response to the success of his acapella version of "O Death," but it also embraces his long-term critical portrayal as the creator of "ghostly" and "haunting" bluegrass music.

And what about bluegrass?

It is a music that prizes instrumental virtuosity above all else. Try to imagine the music without Earl Scruggs's nimble three-fingered banjo rolls or Bill Monroe's quicksilver mandolin runs. You can't. Bluegrass, as Alan Lomax famously put it, is "folk music in overdrive," a frenzied ensemble sound held



Figures 13 & 14. Stanley inside (above) and outside (below) the old mountain church. These photos by Mary Ellen Mark appeared in the booklet to Stanley's 2002 self-titled album, which was released in the wake of Stanley's Grammy-winning efforts on the soundtrack to O Brother, Where Art Thou?





Figure 15. Sitting in front of his own grave. Photo by Mary Ellen Mark.

together — precariously, beautifully, and masterfully — by the instrumentalists’ dexterity.⁶⁷

Such dexterity has hardly been absent from Ralph Stanley’s art, but he has consistently downplayed it.⁶⁸ His bands, he insists, play “old-time mountain music,” not bluegrass.⁶⁹ And he especially enjoys featuring clawhammer banjo playing, the older, slower, clanging, down-stroking manner of playing that dominated southern folk music until shortly before bluegrass’s birth.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Alan Lomax, “Bluegrass Background: Folk Music With Overdrive,” *Esquire*, October 1959, 108.

⁶⁸ In terms of instrumental virtuosity and the Stanley sound, one immediately thinks of guitarist George Shuffler’s innovative cross-picking technique featured in the 1960s editions of the Stanley Brothers’ bands.

⁶⁹ Wright, 74.

⁷⁰ Stanley began featuring clawhammer playing on his records not long after his brother Carter died. See, for example, his 1973 Rebel Records album, *A Man and His Music*, whose first six cuts feature clawhammer banjo. Stanley continues to demonstrate his clawhammer technique at each of his concerts.

Rather than the banjo or the mandolin or the fiddle, the bellwether of Stanley's music has been the voice, especially his own. "Singing," Stanley explains, "is the weak spot in bluegrass. Now, I feature singing more than I do instruments. I've always liked it better. If I sing a song I think people want to hear the song. Course, it's good to have some music to take a break, but the song is what they're interested in. *The instruments are there to bolster up the singing.*"⁷¹

This voice-based approach to bluegrass, I want to suggest, stems not just from Stanley's personal preference but also from a deep cultural and religious wellspring in the Primitive Baptist church. Stanley is a Primitive Baptist; he has been since a child. Primitive Baptist worship revolves around the voice — not only in the lengthy sermons which elders spin out in a kind of speak-chant but, even more importantly, in the unaccompanied congregational singing that is the hallmark of any Primitive service. Like Old Regular Baptists, Primitives sing in the Old Way. They do not allow instruments in their churches. Nor does the congregation engage in any kind of spoken prayer or responsive readings during Sunday meetings. Without these common accoutrements of Protestant worship, Primitive Baptist congregations rely solely on their singing voices to carry their praise to God. They sing loudly and slowly. Harmonies are rare. Everyone sings lead. Vocal ornaments — quavers, slides, passing notes — mark each performance. The oldest hymns unfurl in minor keys, and to my ears, at least, Primitive singing skillfully combines the volume of open-throated singing with the pinched tones of sounds pushed either through a clenched throat or into the nasal cavity. These features are ubiquitous,

⁷¹ Wright, 70 (my emphasis).

but one might hear them most clearly in a version of, say, “Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah” or one of the other hymns recorded by members of a Primitive Baptist church in Sparta, North Carolina during the 1960s.⁷²

Even the early editions of the Stanley Brothers’ bands featured a density of vocal material that set them apart from their contemporaries. A comparison with Bill Monroe’s Blue Grass Boys proves useful. Monroe’s bands paired a lead vocal with a tenor harmony part. The Stanley Brothers, by contrast, introduced a third part – what observers have dubbed a “high baritone” – to the vocal mix. To be sure, this was not Primitive Baptist singing per se, but rather the leading edge of a cultural disposition towards vocal display that would continue to make its presence felt as Stanley’s career unfolded.

That presence hovers especially around the music Stanley made shortly after his brother and bandleader, Carter, passed away in 1966. Ralph’s voice, already a powerful instrument, dominated his recordings like never before. To his ears, his banjo became but an extension of his voice as he did his “best to make them strings sound just exactly like I’m a-saying it. Like I’m singing it.”⁷³ More revealing, perhaps, is the way that even Stanley’s harmony vocals – what bluegrass musicians refer to as the tenor part – took on the character of the ensemble’s lead voice. “I just about lead the lead singer with my tenor,” he explained to one interviewer. “There’s not many tenor singers that does that...I

⁷² *Old Hymns Lined and Led* by Elder Walter Evans, Sovereign Grace, 6057 & 6058, 196? Sovereign Grace Recordings, based in Cincinnati, Ohio, also issued a second album of hymns sung by Evans and his congregation at the Little River Primitive Baptist Church in Sparta, North Carolina. The Little River Primitive Baptist Church has been one of a dwindling number of Primitive Baptist churches still singing in the Old Way. During the twentieth century, many churches adopted the part-singing style of shape note singing. It is also worth noting that in many of the Primitive churches that use shape-note part-singing one finds singers “embroidering” their notated parts with the shakings of Old Way singing. See Wicks, 66-67.

⁷³ Wright, 71. Also see similar comments by Stanley quoted in Nicholas Dawidoff, *In the Country of Country: A Journey to the Roots of American Music* (New York: Pantheon, 1997; Vintage, 1998), 93.

don't listen to the lead; I just sing it and they're usually in with me."⁷⁴ Recall that one of the defining features of Primitive Baptist singing is the lack of harmony parts. In the meeting house, everyone sings in unison. Everyone sings lead. In Stanley's comments, we hear precisely these sentiments. And in Stanley's music from this period, we hear how his Primitive Baptist singing style uncannily undid bluegrass harmony parts even as he sang them. On tunes such as "You're Drifting On" from 1971's *Cry From the Cross*, one hears Stanley's quavering harmony part periodically bubble up and over the lead and baritone vocals.⁷⁵

The most significant change in Ralph Stanley's music at this time came from what both he and his fans identified as his return to an archaic aesthetic. The hallmark of this turn towards the antique became the unaccompanied, lined-out hymns that punctuated each Stanley performance.⁷⁶ Stanley often drew these hymns from the Primitive and Old Regular Baptist repertoires, but, as on the 1972 performance of "Village Church Yard," he

⁷⁴ Wright, 69.

⁷⁵ Ralph Stanley and the Clinch Mountain Boys, "You're Drifting On," *Cry From the Cross*, Rebel SLP-1499, 1971.

⁷⁶ Ralph Stanley and The Clinch Mountain Boys, "Village Church Yard," *Old Country Church*, Rebel SLP-1508, 1972. Stanley has remarked that the a cappella singing he introduced on his early 1970s Rebel Records albums was "the same singing we learned to do in church." The only change he noted – and he seemed to think it a minor one – was the introduction of harmony parts. See Wright, 45-6. Reviewers quickly seized on the unaccompanied quartet pieces as innovations in bluegrass performance style that drew their strength precisely from their ability to resurrect older, authentic mountain traditions. In *Muleskinner News*, Fred Bartenstein advised readers to put "Village Church Yard" "on the turntable and wander back through your childhood and through the ages." Walter V. Saunders, writing in *Bluegrass Unlimited*, also thought the music was timeless: "To hear this is to hear music as it has always been sung, way back up the creek." These comments and other like them are reproduced in Saunders, Notes to *Ralph Stanley and the Clinch Mountain Boys*, 1971-1973.

arranged them for four-part harmony even as he preserved the Old Baptists' trademark vocal quavers and grace notes.⁷⁷

The Clinch Mountain Boys' rendition of "Village Church Yard" sounds only distantly like the Primitive hymn we heard earlier. Harmony, as I noted then, appears only occasionally in Primitive singing and when it does, it is not nearly as elaborate as what you have just heard. But this is beside the point. "Village Church Yard" is not a replica but a representation. It is a fantasy, an imagining, of an Old-Time Baptist meeting house. Here Stanley is the song leader, chanting out lines that his congregation, the Clinch Mountain Boys, sing back in that loud-and-slow, ornamented style. Reverb saturates the recording, fabricating not only the meeting house space but also a congregation of electronic echoes.

Stanley's music, in fact, does more than just imaginatively reconstitute the old mountain church. It recalls an entire history of Calvinist-inspired Protestant dissent. Stanley has often described his style as the "lonesome sound." "Me, I like it just as lonesome as you can get it," he has said. "Something that'll bring tears, sweat, this that and another."⁷⁸ He has repeatedly used the same term — lonesome — to describe his father's voice ("My father had just an old-time lonesome voice, down to earth like he dug it right

⁷⁷ In 1961, the Stanley Brothers recorded "Village Church Yard" in a rollicking bluegrass style. See *Old Time Camp Meeting*, King 750, 1961. The Stanleys may have borrowed the text, though not the dancing mandolin figures, from the text-only *The New Baptist Songbook* that Roscoe Holcomb habitually carried with him. Holcomb and the Stanleys met in early 1961 at the University of Chicago Folk Festival. See Cohen, Notes to *Roscoe Holcomb & Wade Ward*. Despite its title *The New Baptist Songbook* was and is a staple of Old Regular Baptist churches. Stanley's Grammy-winning version of "O Death" owes much to the acapella version of "Village Church Yard." Before *O Brother*, Stanley had recorded several versions of "O Death" — all of them with a full-band and generally taken at a loping tempo. Obviously, the national acclaim that greeted Stanley's acapella "O Death" was orders of magnitude greater than the acclaim within the bluegrass community for turn towards an "antique" hymn-singing style. But in both cases, the acapella versions are the ones that have caught the audiences' imaginations. Many thanks to Dan Patterson for pointing me towards the Old Regular Baptists' use of "Village Church Yard."

⁷⁸ Wright, 70.

out of one of these mountains.”⁷⁹) and to mark what differentiated his style from his late brother’s (“Carter didn’t like them as lonesome as I did, I guess. He always wanted to experiment.”⁸⁰). In the two ethnographies of Primitive Baptist hymnody, we find believers using precisely the same term — lonesome — to describe the distinctive sound of their slow, quavering, ornamented, congregational singing.⁸¹ And of course, we know already about Roscoe Holcomb’s self-described lonesome sound rooted in Old Regular Baptist folkways that very closely align with those of the Primitives.

Why so lonesome? The answer lies in theology. They are, theologically speaking, men and women of constant sorrow, lonely pilgrims whose hopes of a heavenly reward are tempered by the most severe doubts about their own worthiness. Consider again the core tenets of the Primitive Baptists’ faith: their predestinarianism, their sense of an inscrutable and obdurate God whose clemency they crave, their knowledge of their own fallenness. Without claiming that contemporary Primitive Baptists live in a world apart, it is still possible to recognize that they remain an order removed from the sort of sunnily pragmatic Christianity that, in H. Richard Niebuhr’s words, turned the faith “into a utilitarian device

⁷⁹ Dawidoff, 90. Elsewhere, Stanley has made similar comments: “My daddy was a great singer. He had a voice. He had a lonesome voice.” See Wright, 45.

⁸⁰ Wright, 70.

⁸¹ Beverly Bush Patterson, *The Sound of the Dove: Singing in Appalachian Primitive Baptist Churches* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 33, 166, 197. It is important to note that Patterson’s informants also referred to their music as “the joyful sound.” In his work with white and black Primitive congregations, Brett Sutton notes that members described their hymns as “lonesome and sad.” Brett Sutton, *Notes to Primitive Baptist Hymns of the Blue Ridge*, University of North Carolina Press 39088, 1982, 8. This is an extensive booklet that accompanies the album of the same name that Sutton and Pete Hartman recorded. Reels of Primitive Baptist hymn singing recorded in the field reside in the Brett Sutton and Peter Hartman Collection, Southern Folklife Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

for the attainment of personal prosperity or public peace” wherein “some imagined idol called by his name takes the place of Jesus Christ the Lord.”⁸²

When Ralph Stanley describes his work as the “lonesomer sound,” he indexes something more than musical style. He invokes a cultural disposition that is itself reflected in musical practice. This disposition is that of the lonely Calvinist pilgrim longing for God’s grace but always unsure of receiving it. Realizing that his unknowable fate turns on the whims of an all-powerful God, the Calvinist scours the landscape in search of a sign — any sign — that might indicate his salvation. Stanley’s ancestors, for example, prized the nasality of their singing. For these dissenting Baptists in England, the summoning of the nasal sound marked the presence of the Holy Spirit, and they referred to it as the “nose of the saint.”⁸³ That nasality — that hint of the Holy Spirit — resounds in Stanley’s voice as well, though it is not its most characteristic trait.⁸⁴ That remains his vocal ornaments, his quavers, the way he affords each syllable of a lyric two or three notes of melody, the way that tones shiver in Stanley’s throat. The quavering uncertainty of this style mimics the Calvinist pilgrim’s uncertainty in the face of his unknowable fate. That Stanley always hits his notes should not bother us. Like ritual crying, Stanley’s quavering is an elaborate cultural performance — scripted, in a sense, but nevertheless indicative of deep emotion.⁸⁵

⁸² H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), 68.

⁸³ Wicks, “A Belated Salute,” 67.

⁸⁴ Holcomb, for example, has a more pronounced high nasal whine. Holcomb and the Stanley Brothers performed unaccompanied Old Way Baptist hymns together during a tour of Germany in the mid-1960s. Holcomb and Ralph Stanley also regularly sang these hymns together on the performers’ tour bus. See *American Folk & Country Music Festival*, Bear Family, BCD 16849 BK, 2006.

⁸⁵ Greg Urban, “Ritual Wailing in Amerindian Brazil,” *American Anthropologist* 90 (1988): 385-400; Steven Feld, “Wept Thoughts: The Voicing of Kaluli Memories,” in *South Pacific Oral Traditions*, ed. Ruth Finnegan and Margaret Orben (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 85-108.

But how can we call Stanley a Calvinist pilgrim beset by doubt when his song catalogue brims with tunes proclaiming the certainty of a heavenly reward? “Death is only a dream,” he sings. “Bear me away ...to my immortal home.” “I’ll meet you on God’s golden shore.” “I’ll not be a stranger when I get to that city / I’m acquainted with folks over there.” “I hold a clear title to a mansion / that Jesus has gone to prepare.”⁸⁶ Similar lyrics abound. How, then, can we square Stanley’s lyrical certainty with his dramatic vocal performances of uncertainty?

Stanley is, indeed, a Primitive Baptist, but he belongs to a specific subdenomination of the faith. His church describes itself as a Primitive Baptist Universalist congregation.⁸⁷ Outsiders call them the “no-hellers.”⁸⁸ The Primitive Baptist Universalists do, in fact, believe in hell, but they locate it here on earth, in this world. Heaven, on the other hand, remains open to all – not just God’s elect – in the next life. This amounts to a stunning reorientation of Calvinist doctrine, though not an erasure of it. The Calvinist drama lingers, but the “no-hellers” confine such tension to earthly existence. Life itself remains a vale of tears. Men of constant sorrow still roam the hills. But death, as Ralph Stanley sings, remains only a dream.

⁸⁶ These excerpts of lyrics come, respectively, from the songs “Death is Only a Dream”, “Angel Band”, “Man of Constant Sorrow”, “I’ll Not Be a Stranger”, and “I Hold a Clear Title.”

⁸⁷ Stanley belongs to the Hale Creek Primitive Baptist Church just outside Grundy, Virginia. See David Gates, “Constant Sorrow: The Long Road of Ralph Stanley,” *New Yorker*, August 20, 2001. Gates does not mention that Hale Creek is a Universalist church. Wright refers to Stanley’s “Old Regular Baptist heritage,” but nowhere have I found Stanley describing himself as an Old Regular. He has consistently described himself and his parents as Primitive Baptists. The evidence for Stanley’s membership in a Universalist congregation comes from his website. Dr. Ralph Stanley Biography, <http://drralphstanley.com/biography/ralphstanley.shtml>.

⁸⁸ Dorgan, *In the Hands of a Happy God*.

Death, of course, pervades Stanley's music, as it does much of bluegrass. But Ralph Stanley is no grim reaper. In Stanley's music, death — in classic “no-heller” fashion — is figured most often as a happy family reunion, a longed-for gathering in the gracious presence of the Lord. Death ends earthly suffering. Just as Jesus died on the cross so that humanity might receive the gift of a new birth, the Primitive Baptist no-heller sees his or her own death as redemption from the pain of this world. Stanley's voice dramatizes that pain even as his lyrics promise deliverance from it.

Conclusion: “As one that is born out of due time”

Calvinism's long eclipse is not in dispute. Historians, in their various bailiwicks, continue to bicker about more finely tailored questions of periodicity and causation, but the idea that orthodox Calvinist doctrines, whatever their import to varieties of American Protestantism from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries, had by the twentieth century given way to other sets of formal and informal Protestant theologies is not a controversial one. A few Ralph Stanley tunes and some Roscoe Holcomb records do not change the grand narrative. Maybe the two old mountain musicians are just bit players in the Calvinism's final scene. Holcomb after all was an Old Regular Baptist who in the end opted to attend the local Holiness Church. And Stanley counts himself a member of a Baptist subdenomination so small (just under six hundred members at last count) and bearing a theology so unlikely that they seem to have taken literally the Pauline injunction to be a “a peculiar people.”⁸⁹

⁸⁹ 1 Pt 2:9 KJV.

But I think there is another way to think about Calvinism's presence in modern American culture. It is a will-o'-the-wisp presence, flickering here and there, fluttering on the periphery, disappearing sometimes when approached directly. It is difficult to measure, except perhaps by a fan's ardor or the sudden popularity of a deathbed chant in those unsteady months after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. At certain moments — perhaps especially those moments of national crisis like the folk revival's Vietnam-scarred 1960s or our own time's preoccupation with terrorism— popular audiences have inclined toward “the folk.” And among those audiences, some have found their worries mirrored and even relieved in the lonesome quavering of Old-Baptist singing. In the spring of 2002, *Newsweek* magazine, for instance, pondered what it called “an esthetic national emergency,” a companion crisis, one imagines, to the global tumult engaging the United States at the same time. The magazine sulked about the country's dismal pop music — its blandness and naked commercialism. As *Newsweek* saw it, the national emergency could be contained — even rolled back — by the “mountain-pure” Ralph Stanley and the other *O Brother* performers who were “about as far from industry product as you could get” but had garnered the admiration of millions by making music “with nothing going for it but authenticity: no hype, no radio, no MTV.”⁹⁰

The ironies here lie atop each other like the seams of coal in the mountains where Roscoe Holcomb used to work. A mass-market publication hyping a product by claiming it has no hype, for instance. Or, even better, the idea of a music soaked in Calvinist folkways appearing as a solution to a crisis in popular culture. Disjunctures such as these have

⁹⁰ Lorraine Ali and David Gates. “Looking Grim at the Grammys: Ralph Stanley's performance of 'O Death' Wasn't the Only Ominous Note. This may have been the swan song for the music industry as we know it. But does anybody care?” *Newsweek*, March 11, 2002, 60.

caused some critics to dismiss the concurrent Stanley and *O Brother* booms as little more than episodes of postmodern minstrelsy in which white, well-to-do listeners of National Public Radio dress up in “real” country outfits instead of degrading themselves by donning Nashville’s rhinestone-studded wares.⁹¹

We do not need to dismiss such perceptive critiques entirely to note that they are overdrawn, that they too easily shrug off the impassioned (authentic?) responses to the singing of Stanley, Holcomb, or other folk artists. I wonder, for example, if Americans’ fascination with Stanley’s acapella rendition of “O Death” had more to do with the aesthetic and moral power of his performance than with its putative whiteness. In the song, Stanley inhabits two characters, a dying figure and Death itself. “Won’t you spare me over for till another year?” he begs before answering, “Time and mercy is out of your reach.” Stanley oscillates between the two characters, and it is a measure of his prowess that he thoroughly convinces in each role. But even this dramatic metaphor does not quite convey the burden of the performance. What one hears when listening to “O Death” is not, firstly, Stanley jumping between parts but rather these two voices – one withered and fearful, the other violent and unrelenting – speaking through him almost at once. The dialogue is internal and existential. It unfolds in that liminal space between life and death. It is a song of grief and fear, of a fallen man stained by sin, seeking reprieve, and realizing he may not get it – that he may not deserve it. And this is what makes the performance harrowing and spectral and all-those-other-adjectives-used-to-describe-Stanley’s-sound. It is

⁹¹ Fox, “‘Alternative’ to What?,” 184-188. Whatever one thinks of Stanley as symbol of whiteness, it is worth noting that “O Death” exists in both black and white church traditions. In 1959, Bessie Jones, an African American singer from the Georgia Sea Islands, recorded an acapella version that offers a full portion of gospel swing in place of Stanley’s twistings. See *Georgia Sea Islands, Volume I*, Prestige INT-DS-25001, 1961.

what makes it lonesome. Even if we consider Death in this song not be an internal voice but instead a metonym for Satan, the performance loses none of its power. For, again, the effect in performance is not of Stanley playing Satan but of Satan speaking through Stanley. It is a presence felt but not seen (“Well, what is this that I can't see? / With ice cold hands taking hold of me.”). Stanley’s performance offered, then, a private counterpoint to the kind of Satan being offered up in the nation’s political discourse at roughly the same time. That more public Satan was a familiar one: a wholly external evil, one located in foreign lands and foreign ideologies, one that needed to be subdued and then stamped out. In the Calvinist mood of Stanley’s “O Death” a far more intimate evil lurks. The song’s stark text and the fierce trembling of Stanley’s voice evokes an evil that hovers nearby or, like original sin, resides within.⁹²

“I am neither company for the living nor the dead, but as one that is born out of due time, without a heart for any thing as I could wish,” wrote an anonymous Primitive Baptist in 1834.⁹³ Stanley’s “O Death” is that letter’s postscript. It is conjecture, I know, to say this is what Americans heard in Stanley’s singing or that members of an earlier generation were drawn to Roscoe Holcomb’s voice for similar reasons. In suggesting that something like this has taken place, I have been guided, of course, by listeners’ fascination with these musicians’ beguiling sounds. I have also been prompted by the musicologist Nicholas Temperley, who has done so much to excavate the history of the Old Way of

⁹² This drama is even more vivid in other versions of the song in which the singer, after pleading for more time on earth “to fix my heart, to change my mind” is told by Death, who speaks like God with predestinary powers, that “your heart is fixed, your mind is bound. The singer at last admits that “As long as God in heaven shall dwell / My soul, my soul, shall scream in hell.” See, for example, Hazel Dickens, David Patrick Kelly, and Bobby McMillen, “Conversation with Death,” *Songcatcher: Music From and Inspired by the Motion Picture*, Vanguard 79586-2, 2001.

⁹³ An Out-Cast, Letter to the Editor, *Signs of the Times*, November 12, 1834, 356.

singing. Temperley has not exactly found Cash's Calvinist feeling but he has discovered that the slow keening sounds of the Old Way have a stubborn persistence:

In places where congregations are left to sing hymns without musical direction for long periods, a characteristic style of singing tends to develop. The tempo becomes extremely slow; the sense of rhythm is weakened; extraneous pitches appear, sometimes coinciding with those of the hymn tune, sometimes inserted between them; the total effect may be dissonant.⁹⁴

Another scholar argues that the Old Way of singing has flourished among Old Colony Mennonites. Others hear similarities between the Old Way and sounds heard in Indonesia and East Africa.⁹⁵ That is, when left alone, people seem to sing in a way not entirely unlike the Old-Time Baptists. Perhaps those strange old sounds aren't so unusual after all.

⁹⁴ Temperley, "Origins and Development," 511.

⁹⁵ Wesley Berg, "Hymns of the Old Colony Mennonites and the Old Way of Singing." *The Musical Quarterly* 80, no. 1 (1996): 77-117.

CONCLUSION

FINDING THE PRIMITIVE BAPTIST SELF

This project is an accident. A happy one, to be sure, but an accident nonetheless.

I never intended to write a dissertation about religion in the Old South, much less one focused intently on a group of little-known Baptists. I had come to graduate school at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill to study American cultural history and, in particular, to explore my interest in the music of the American South. Which is how I found myself writing a master's thesis about the imaginative power of hillbilly music among southern textile mill workers during the 1920s and how, eventually, I found part-time work at the university's Southern Folklife Collection (SFC) where I had conducted the research for that thesis. I spent summers at the SFC helping to catalog the collection's vast store of LPs (more than 15,000 of them) that at the time lay beyond the reach of an easily searchable electronic database. It was at the SFC that I found the Primitive Baptists.

I heard them first. The long, sonorous swells, the modal melodies, the hymns sung so slowly as to melt their texts into an amalgam of chant-speech that sounded to me like people calling up spirits. It stopped me dead. I had never heard anything like it. It reminded me of the twisting cantorial lines I heard sung in shul as a boy. Or a feverish

qawwali ghazal transformed somehow to smoldering ash. The sound itself seemed funereal and luminous all at once. It was beautiful.

The label on the cassette said the singers were Primitive Baptists. They hailed from a church in the North Carolina mountains. I made myself a copy and kept listening. As I listened, I formed questions. Who were the Primitive Baptists? What made them “primitive”? Why did they sing like this? I read up on them. I found out they were Calvinists, that they opposed missionaries, and that they had split acrimoniously from their fellow Baptists in the nineteenth century. These bare facts only raised more questions. Evangelicals opposed to missions? Predestinarian Calvinists in the come-to-Jesus South? And while I have tried my best to answer these and other questions in the pages you have just read, I still find myself puzzling over these believers.

It is difficult, I think, even for the trained observer to keep the Primitive Baptists in focus. At one moment they seem so finely carved, their differences impossible to miss even in the busy scenes of southern evangelicalism. At other times, though, they seem flattened out, like a worn bas-relief whose figures have been reclaimed by the surrounding rock. The bleary-eyed ought to be forgiven.

One is always measuring the Primitives against their evangelical adversaries but in doing so one realizes the extent to which these adversaries were so much alike. Consider an example. The chief accomplishment of American evangelicals in the nineteenth century was, as Beth Barton Schweiger has recently reminded us, not temperance nor antislavery but instead their ability “to organize the country into a set of denominations that endures

to this day.”¹ Among many other developments, it was the organization of these vast networks that so troubled the Primitives, for the organizing could not and did not stop at the denominational level (troubling enough, as the Primitives saw it) but instead extended across ecclesiastical lines in the formation of inter-denominational benevolent efforts with tiered bureaucracies and worldwide reach. Over-suspicious though they could be, the Primitives realized quickly – more quickly than most – that awakening and organization went hand in hand. To slow this process and, they hoped, to roll it back, the Primitives organized themselves into regional church associations that might remind their fellows to search “for the old paths.” Schweiger sees this as ironic, though to me it seems only practical. In any case, the Primitives’ associations were, organizationally speaking, slack affairs. More than anything else, they were networks of fellowship, offering believers from across a large swath of territory the opportunity to meet together annually for several days at a time in order to sing their old hymns and hear preached the doctrine of election, total depravity, particular redemption, effectual calling, and the final perseverance of the saints. In their broadsheets, the Primitives extended the bounds of fellowship across the nation as believers writing from, say, Pennsylvania, Alabama, North Carolina, and Maryland could fill any one issue. And, pace Schweiger, all this meeting and corresponding can look very much like the various organizational processes put in motion in the more evangelistic evangelical denominations.

¹ Beth Barton Schweiger, “Max Weber in Mt. Airy, Or, Revivals and Social Theory in the Early South,” in *Religion in the American South: Protestants and Others in History and Culture*, eds. Beth Barton Schweiger and Donald G. Mathews (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 54. On this point, Schweiger, as she acknowledges, echoes the conclusions found in Donald G. Mathews, “The Second Great Awakening as an Organizing Process, 1780-1830: An Hypothesis,” *American Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (Spring 1969): 23-43.

The resemblances are important — they mark Primitives as evangelicals — but they also are superficial. From afar, the annual associational meetings could look like protracted revivals or, perhaps, state denominational conventions, but there were no anxious benches or frenzied crowds or budgeting meetings. The pages of the *Primitive Baptist* or *Signs of the Times* showed that the Old School Baptists were just as adept as their New School brethren in using printing press and railroad to communicate over great distances. But the Primitives' periodicals were filled almost entirely with first-person testimonies — with believers relating their hope of grace — and not larded, as many evangelical publications were, with dispatches about the progress of the gospel in Burma or instructions on child-rearing.

Another reason one sometimes loses sight of the Primitives has to do with the timing of their birth during the Second Great Awakening. On the one hand, historians, overwhelmed by the sheer variety of popular religious movements, may have understandably overlooked a small sect like the Primitives whose historical moment seemed to be slipping away from them almost as soon as it began. Even when viewed within the bounds of the Baptist movement, the Primitives might be seen as just one of many subdenominations in a movement notoriously schismatic, and therefore they could be easily overlooked. But this observation returns us to the original problem — namely, Primitives awkward relationship to their fellow Baptists, in particular, and their fellow evangelicals in general. In fact, it has been historians' thematic preoccupations rather than any counting problems that have primarily accounted for the Primitives' here-and-there existence in the historiography of American Protestantism. Unlike the modern-day

televangelist whom we view through narrowed eyes or the enthusiasts of the First Great Awakening (an era described memorably by one historian as an “interpretive fiction”), “revivalism between the Revolution and the Civil War,” writes James Bratt, “has gone untouched as a success story of popular Protestantism defeating all comers to bring evangelical Christianity to its apogee of influence in American history.”² From these historiographic heights, the Primitives seem small indeed, which has been, I think, why the chief historiographic response to their presence has been either to ignore them, to see them as anachronistic, or simply to fold them into a much larger evangelical movement when, in fact, they represent a rupture in that movement.

This dissertation has attempted to crawl inside the Awakening’s organizing processes — to see them from the inside out, as it were — by focusing first on believers’ experiences. In this regard, the project complements Schweiger’s insight rather than overturns it. The “person-centered” approach used in chapters two and three, for instance, takes account not only of believers’ inner worlds but of how those inner worlds interacted with some of the impersonal forces structuring them. In the case of antebellum Primitive Baptists, these structuring forces were the processes of denominational consolidation Schweiger mentions, the tumult of the antebellum market, and the formal theology of Calvinism. To examine these processes from the believer’s point of view is not to slip into endless psychologizing or the hoarding of biographical trivia. Nor is it to laud the religious believer as an autonomous agent, hail her as an intuitive resister of power, or unmask her

² James D. Bratt, “Religious Anti-Revivalism in Antebellum America,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 24, no. 1 (2004): 68.

as nothing more than a passive receptacle of cultural meaning.³ It is, instead, to find the Primitive Baptist self in the endless interaction between subjective experience and socio-cultural context, and it is also to suggest that a similar approach might profitably be taken with other believers.

This approach, moreover, shares similarities with the Primitives' struggle against what they saw as modern evangelicalism's reification of faith's mysteries. On this count, the Primitives were right or, at least, partially so. Revivals often did become rehearsed, and the various arms of the Benevolent Empire often did want to wrest a measure of control away from the whims of individual churches. And certainly evangelical enthusiasm often became an end in itself.

But because Primitives' fury could itself harden into a granitic monument I have tried not only to follow George Santayana's advice that "the feeling of reverence should itself be treated with reverence" but also to be properly critical.⁴ For the Primitive's rage had a watchman's eye, seeing threatening figures where there were none at all. While the consequences of their anger were felt most often and directly in the fight against the "machine-made Baptists" of the missionary movement, the Primitives' were fully capable of turning their rage inward.⁵ And so it was that after the missions schism had fractured

³ Too often histories, by default, fall into one of these approaches. In the context of religion in the South, a relentless focus on power has been both understandable and necessary. But oftentimes the individual in these accounts seems to be typed as either an accommodationist or a resister. The best studies of slave religion, however, have avoided falling into this kind of dichotomizing, but consider the general historiographic representation of white evangelicals in the South as eighteenth-century resisters who at some point in the nineteenth-century become avatars of slave power. As a *general* account, there is, of course, much truth here. But there remains ample room to delve further into these "types," unpack them, take note of their lacunae, and, thereby, discover more about precisely when and how southern white evangelicals made this transition.

⁴ George Santayana, *The Life of Reason: Or, The Phases of Human Progress* (Scribner's, 1905), 13.

⁵ Gilbert Beebe, "Remarks on Religious Revivals." *Signs of the Times*, June 1, 1862, 4.

Baptist churches from Florida to Illinois, many Primitives turned upon each other, arguing that even preaching about the saving power of the gospel amounted to a kind of idolatry. In 1860, during a dramatic but hardly atypical meeting of the Alabama River Association in southeastern Georgia, one man rose, held the Bible aloft, and addressed his fellow Primitives: “You have been told that this is the word of God; do you believe it? I say it is not, it is ink and paper.” The man continued: “[T]he gospel had no saving efficacy in it to the awakening of sinners; it was only for the feeding of the flock.”⁶

In the South, where the scapegoating of the enslaved was a rite, the Primitives proved that there could be other scapegoats, too: missionaries, of course, but also fellow Primitive Baptists and even themselves.⁷ And this, too, is why the Primitives have been so difficult to explain: they fought a protean enemy. It was, at one moment, Arminianism, broadly construed.. At another, it was the Methodist circuit rider or the neighbor who fed him. It could be the seminary-trained preacher, the missionary dispatched to India, the woman who told the church “that she had been letting her light shine in a dark place...and that it made no difference where a person belonged if they were Christian for there was nothing in the name.”⁸ It could be as close as one’s own clerk or as distant as the Bank of the United States. But, above all, the guilty party was oneself — a sinner, a deceiver and the deceived, someone in need of constant watching. An uncertain self, a stranger below surrounded by enemies and in need of God’s grace.

⁶ Quoted in John G. Crowley, *Primitive Baptists of the Wiregrass South: 1815 to the Present* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), 114. The “means” controversy simmered in Primitive associations nationwide in the mid- to late-nineteenth century.

⁷ Donald G. Mathews, “The Southern Rite of Human Sacrifice.” *Journal of Southern Religion* 3 (2000): <http://jsr.fsu.edu/mathews.htm>.

⁸ Brush Creek Meeting House Record Book, 30 April 1853, Primitive Baptist Library, Elon, North Carolina.

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